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Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 4, Number 4 • Fall 1995

The Role of Singing in the Life and Worship of the Church

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The people of God have always been and will always be a people of song. If the enjoyment of song is gone, that is a symptom of far greater disease. A congregation's singing is not an absolute thermometer of their spiritual temperature, but it is one indicator. As Luther said way back in the Reformation days of the 16th century, "If any would not sing and talk of what Christ has wrought for us, he shows thereby that he does not really believe..."¹

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What is the role of singing in the life and worship of the church? According to most "church growth" experts a church's approach to music is a key factor in its potential for numerical growth. A large cement company in our area has its motto emblazoned on its trucks, "Find a need and fill it." If our motto was "Find the seeker's desire and fill it," then opinion polls on the role of music in the life and worship of the church would be crucial. But our motto must be, "Find the Seeker's desire and fulfill it" (Luke 19:10).

Christ has revealed His design for singing in the life of the church. We are not left to our own preferences and prejudices when it comes to the basic principles. In Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 Paul gives a brief, pointed and clear exhortation to the church regarding the role of singing.

By taking the words of these two epistles at face value we learn that both were written by Paul at approximately the same time, to very similar audiences and regarding similar issues. It is no surprise, therefore that Paul speaks to some common issues and even uses the same phrases in doing so.

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father (Eph. 5:18-20).

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father (Col. 3:16-17).

In both epistles Paul's words about singing come in the midst of a series of exhortations to live lives worthy of their new identity in Christ. He appeals to the Colossians based upon their having been raised up with Christ (Col. 3:1) and to the Ephesians on the basis of their having become the beloved children of God (Eph. 5:1). In both contexts the series of exhortations form a strong contrast between life in Christ and life without Christ. In Colossians the contrast is between their life before regeneration and their life after regeneration. In Ephesians the contrast is between those who are children of light and those who are children of darkness.

Together these two passages give us a full and rich picture of the role of singing in the life and worship of the church. Seven principles are evident.

Singing Is to Be a Manifestation of the Fullness of the Spirit

There can be no God-honoring singing in the congregation of the saints apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The command to be singing to one another and to the Lord in Ephesians 5:19 is subordinate to the command to be filled with the Holy Spirit in verse 18.²

In Ephesians five the apostle is pointing out the very real difference between those who are in Christ and those who are not. In sexual morality they are as different as darkness and light (1-14). In lifestyle they are as different as folly and wisdom (15-20). Paul shows that wise living is Spirit-filled living. There are three exhortations in verses 15-20. Each of these exhortations is given in the form of a contrast between negative and positive behavior.

Negative Behavior to Avoid

15-16 Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men,

17 So then do **not** be foolish,

18-20 And do **not** get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation,

Positive Behavior to Cultivate

but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.

but understand what the will of the Lord is.

but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father.

First, Paul urges the readers to be careful that they live as wise people instead of unwise. Wise living will be characterized by having a wise attitude toward time. We must not squander the time given to us but instead make the most of the opportunities to do good. This is the one and only way we can counteract the evil climate of this present evil age.

Second, he contrasts foolishness with acquiring a practical knowledge of what the Lord requires of us.

Third, he contrasts the folly of getting drunk with wine and the wisdom of being filled with the Spirit. Drunkenness is a fool's method of pursuing joy because it involves squandering³ all the good things God has provided to be enjoyed (1 Tim. 6:17) in order to produce an artificial joyful feeling.

The Psalmist said to God, "In Thy presence is fulness of joy; in Thy right hand there are pleasures forever" (Ps. 16:11). Since God's heavenly residence is characterized by joy and

pleasures and since the church is the “holy temple of the Lord” and the “dwelling of God in the Spirit” it is to be expected that God wants the atmosphere in the local church to be joyful. But the joyful celebration that should characterize our individual and corporate lives will not come from getting drunk on wine. It will come instead from a “deep drinking”⁴ of the Holy Spirit of God.

Paul has already spoken of the church being “the fullness of Him (i.e., Jesus Christ)” (Eph. 1:23), and he has prayed that they would be “filled up to all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19). Now the third member of the Trinity is mentioned as the one who will fill them so full they will overflow⁵ with expressions of gratitude, joy and worship in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”⁶

Living under the influence of the Spirit will manifest itself in our corporate life and worship. Spirit-filled fellowship and worship will be characterized by our speaking to one another and edifying one another with all types of Spirit-prompted songs as we sing praises to Christ from the heart and as we offer thanksgiving to our God for all that He is for us in Christ.

Paul describes this joyful celebration in worship in verses 19-20 in three clauses: (1) speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; (2) singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; (3) always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father.

The effects of being filled with the Spirit include Christ-centered, Spirit-produced, God-honoring worship in the church. Singing in the church is to be a manifestation of being filled with the Spirit.

Singing Is to Be an Overflow of the Word of Christ

In Colossians 3:16 singing in the church is a manifestation of the word of Christ being “abundantly poured into your memories, and coming out largely in your language.”⁷

In chapter three the Colossians are admonished to make radical changes in their attitudes and life patterns that correspond to the radical changes that God had accomplished in them when He raised them up with Christ. The change that Paul now demands of them is pictured as a stripping off of an old garment and the putting on of a new. The language reminds one of the account of Lazarus being raised from the dead. When Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus and gave the order, “Remove the stone,” Martha protested, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days” (John 11:39). Because Martha loved her brother she wanted to shield from the sight of others the corrupting effects of death on his lifeless body. Jesus calmed her with the assurance that what she was about to see was not the desecration of her brother’s body but the glory of God. When Jesus shouted His command, “Lazarus, come forth,” Lazarus did not hesitate. John describes it very simply, “He who had died⁸ came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings; and his face was wrapped around with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go’” (John 11:44). Although the text does not give us the details we can safely assume that they not only removed the grave clothes but replaced them with an appropriate garment. In the next chapter we encounter Lazarus again and he is reclining at table with Jesus. Now he is wearing a garment fit for a dinner with his Lord and his friends. How inappropriate it would have been for Lazarus to show up at the dinner table in his grave clothes!

Like Lazarus, the Colossians had been raised up with Christ and now Paul wants them to know that the old grave clothes that carry the smell of spiritual death must be replaced by new garments which are fitting for us to “celebrate the feast.” For that is what life and worship in the church really are (1 Cor. 5:8). The old garments are the attitudes and life patterns of the old self⁹ and they are totally out of place in the new situation. So Paul insists that they strip off the clothing of the old man

and put on the clothing of the new man. This means two things: First, they must put away the old attitudes and pattern of living that characterized the old self that was in the process of personal (3:5-7) and relational (3:7-9) corruption; and second, they must put on a new set of attitudes and pattern of living that are fitting for the new self which is being renewed to a true knowledge of God (3:10-14).

It is in this context that Paul exhorts the Colossian believers regarding the atmosphere in the church. Singing is a fitting and necessary part of a healthy church atmosphere. Christ designed the local church to be the place where His people, who have been raised from spiritual death, could experience spiritual health and growth. The three imperatives found in verses 15-17 reveal the characteristics of a healthy spiritual atmosphere. The atmosphere of the church must be ruled by the peace of Christ (v. 15), filled with the word of Christ (v. 16) and motivated in all it does by the name of Christ (i.e., doing everything they do for the glory, honor and reputation of Christ) (v. 17).

The role and importance of singing in the church flows directly from the second imperative: "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you." Paul uses this unique title for the Word of God to emphasize the fact that the source and subject of the word we believe is Christ.¹⁰ In a sermon on this passage Spurgeon appeals to his people,

Remember, dear friends, that Christ Himself is the Word of God, and recollect also that the Scriptures are the word of the Lord. They are "the word of Christ." I think that they will be all the sweeter to you if you realize that they speak to you of Christ, that he is the sum and substance of them, that they direct you to Christ, in fact, as John says of his Gospel, that they were "written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."

Remember, also, that the Scriptures do, in effect, come to us from Christ. Every promise of this blessed Book is a promise of Christ, "for all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us;" they all come to us through Christ, God speaks them to us through him as the Mediator. Indeed, we may regard the whole of Sacred Scriptures, from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, as being "the word of Christ."¹¹

But Paul's main point here is to tell the Colossians how to treat the word of Christ and how to profit by it. Paul exhorts, "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."

One day I noticed a neighbor moving out of his home. I had been talking with him for several months about his need of Christ and he hadn't mentioned to me that he was moving. He had been very troubled about many things but especially about the situation in his home. He and his brother had purchased the house together. He was a bachelor and his brother was going through a divorce. For two single men the house they had purchased together was quite spacious. But recently there had been a reconciliation and the brother's wife and two children had moved in. Now after a couple of months of attempting to "make things work" my friend was moving out. As I talked with him he began to pour out his bitter feelings toward his sister-in-law and brother. "They have squeezed me out of my own house. There just isn't any room for me anymore."

Paul's appeal is to let the word of Christ "inhabit you as if you were the house and home of this Word, let it do this in a rich way by filling every nook and corner of your being with its blessed, spiritual wisdom."¹² Earlier in this letter Paul confessed, "We have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God"

(Col. 1:9-10). Now Paul is exhorting them to let the word be deeply implanted within them so that it controls their thinking. This would happen when “they paid heed to what they heard, bowed to its authority, assimilated its lessons and translated them into daily living.”¹³

The prerequisite for singing that truly edifies the church and glorifies the Lord is the rich dwelling of the word of Christ in the hearts of His people. Jesus said, “the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matt. 12:34). When it is the word of Christ that fills the heart the mouth will not only speak, it will also sing.

Singing Is to Be an Exercise in Mutual Edification

In Ephesians 5:19 we learn that the most immediate expression of Spirit-filling is singing. Spirit-filling enables us understand our Lord’s will (v. 17). Singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is a means of teaching and reinforcing the knowledge of that will. Singing is to make a significant contribution to our wise living in the world. Paul pictures the church as speaking to itself through the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.¹⁴

When Paul refers to our singing as “speaking” he is emphasizing its function as *verbal communication*.¹⁵ Hearts that are full of the word of Christ cannot be silent.¹⁶

This singing is certainly to be a part of the regular worship meetings of the church, but the context does not limit this singing to those meetings. “The reference in the text is not solely or chiefly to public worship as such. Clement of Alexandria treats it as applying to social gatherings; and again Tertullian writes of such singing as the *agape*, and of the society of husband and wife.”¹⁷

A congregation that is being filled with the Spirit and has the word of Christ dwelling richly in it will be a singing church. Its gatherings—scheduled and impromptu, large and small, formal and informal—will be marked by songs that communicate

spiritual realities.

Drunkenness can also loosen the tongue. But there is a great difference in the quality and effects of the sounds. Drunkenness is manifested most clearly in abusive, corrupting and blasphemous speech. The drunk makes sounds that are offensive and irritating to the hearers as well as dishonoring to God. Spirit-filling is manifested in melodious sounds of grace that edify the hearers and glorify God.

Colossians 3:16 reveals how singing is to edify the church: by teaching and admonishing. This describes the manner and effects of the word of Christ dwelling in us richly.

Unless the word of Christ dwelt richly within them, they could not fulfill this duty; for they could not teach and admonish unless they knew what lessons to impart, and in what spirit to communicate them; but the lessons and the spirit alike were to be found in the gospel. Mutual exhortation must depend for its fitness and utility on mutual knowledge of the Christian doctrine. Sparing acquaintance with Divine revelation would lead to scanty counsel and ineffective tuition.¹⁸

Singing is one of the ways in which the church instructs itself and thus exercises “the true use of Christ’s word.”¹⁹ In 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul says that the word of God is profitable for teaching, admonition, correction and training in righteousness. When the singing of the church is a manifestation of the rich dwelling of the word of Christ, that singing will admonish as well as instruct. The singing will confront the minds of the congregation about those things in their lives that need to change. This phrase is used by Paul in Colossians 1:28 to describe his own ministry of preaching Christ. There, he says the goal of “admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom” is to “present every man complete in Christ.” The implication seems clear that singing in the life and worship of the church should lead to spiritual maturity in the lives

of her members.

This teaching and admonishing through singing must be done "in all wisdom." Wisdom has been an important issue in the epistle to the Colossians.²⁰ It is vital for the ministry of music in the church. Listen to the music that plays on Christian radio and television for a week and you will become convinced that much that passes for "Christian music" neither instructs nor admonishes. Using wisdom in song selection is vital. Among the questions we must ask are: "Does this song manifest a rich dwelling of the word of Christ in our midst?" and "Does this song instruct and admonish?"

Singing with wisdom also implies a wise use of singing in our meetings. Not only must the words of the songs we sing reflect the truth of Scripture but the manner in which we include them in our meetings is important. It is apparent that at least some of the meetings of the early church were quite spontaneous (1 Cor. 14). For this reason Paul gives several guidelines to guard against communication in speaking and singing that would not edify the body and glorify her Head (1 Cor. 14:26ff). Music is a powerful tool. It must be used with spiritual wisdom.

It would be difficult to overstate the power of the musical language. It has emotional-mental stimulation unmatched by any other means of communication. Words alone can be and often are very strong, but couple them with the "right" music and they can be burned into the mind and consciousness indelibly An idea (either good or bad) set to a good melody, given rhythmic intensity and harmonic consistency, can really work its way into our minds. Science tells us we are what we eat; the Bible tells us we are what we think. The devil has made such use of music that one could almost come to the conclusion that it is the music which is evil. The fact is, that it is the heart which is deceived and the mind polluted. The devil simply knows what God has always known, that music is a powerful way to get his ideas implanted and affect the behavior of mankind.²¹

Like every other powerful tool music must be used with wisdom, but it surely ought to be used for the good of the church and the glory of God. Singing is one of the best means of extolling God for who He is and what He has done. It allows us, with one voice, to say something of real importance to and about God. According to the Word of God it is an effective way to teach biblical truth. "God's word, both directly and conceptually set to music, can penetrate the mind and heart and stay there. What we sing, we remember, because we have combined the power of intellect with emotion."²²

Singing Is to Be a Rich Variety of Expression

The edifying communication that comes from the fullness of the Spirit and the rich dwelling of the word of Christ in the assembly is to be done by means of²³ "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." After looking at more than thirty sources I became convinced that no one knows for sure what the distinctions are between these different forms of musical expression. Some think the author is simply "piling up synonyms"²⁴ rather than referring to three different kinds of songs. These are the most common terms in the LXX for religious songs and they are used somewhat interchangeably in the titles of the psalms.

According to Trench Paul had no intention of classifying the different forms of Christian poetry,

but neither, on the other hand, would he have used, where there is evidently no temptation to rhetorical amplification, three words, if one would have equally served his turn. It may fairly be questioned whether we can trace very accurately the lines of demarcation between the "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" of which the Apostle makes mention, or whether he traced these lines for himself with a perfect accuracy. Still each must have had a meaning which belonged to it more, and be a better right, than it belonged to either of the others; and this it may be possible to seize,

even while it is quite impossible with perfect strictness to distribute under these three heads Christian poetry as it existed in the Apostolic age.²⁵

One thing seems clear: in the early church there was not any one particular, approved style, but rather there was great diversity in the songs they sang. They sang some psalms, some hymns and some spiritual songs. Stop and think about the tremendous diversity of musical expression the churches around the world “continually offer up” as “a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (Heb. 13:15).

On the day of Pentecost we have a vivid picture of the ultimate result of the work of the Gospel in the world. One hundred and twenty were waiting in an upper room in Jerusalem for “what the Father had promised” (Acts 1:4). Suddenly a noise filled the room where they were and what appeared to be tongues like fire rested on each one of them. “And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (Acts 2:4). Through the supernatural enablement of the Spirit these disciples began to speak “the mighty deeds of God” in the languages of the nations of the world (Acts 2:11). This was a prophetic picture of the scene we find in Revelation 5 where a hymn of praise to the Lamb of God is sung by a truly international chorus of believer-priests from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Rev. 5:9-10).

The true worshipping congregation of God has a variety of musical styles that blend together as a great chorus of worship to God.

*Psalms*²⁶ refer primarily to the Old Testament psalms. These have “supplied a chief vehicle for Christian praise from primitive times.”²⁷ It may also refer to regular poems modeled on the Psalms of the Old Testament (cf. the songs in the first chapter of Luke and the book of Revelation). This may be the meaning of the term in 1 Corinthians 14:16. Jesus and His

disciples used the Psalms at the Feast of Tabernacles and at the Passover. Many of the greatest composers in history have taken the Psalms and set them to music, and they continue to be used to the honor and glory and praise of God today.

*Hymns*²⁸ are songs of praise addressed to God. In classical Greek a hymn was a festive lyric in praise of a god or hero. In Colossians 3:16 the singing is addressed to God the Father and in Ephesians 5:19 it is addressed to the Lord Jesus. Hymns “would more appropriately designate those hymns of praise which were composed by the Christians themselves on distinctly Christian themes, being either set forms of words or spontaneous effusions of the moment.”²⁹

For Christians in the early church these were new expressions that talked about the teachings of Christ. They taught New Testament doctrines and they were applied to the Christian life and faith. Some believe the hymn in Revelation 4:11 was a previously written Christian hymn that John incorporated into his book. For us the most familiar hymns are those written since New Testament times.

Edward Paronet came to faith through the ministry of John Wesley and grew very rapidly in his faith. He became so overwhelmed with the reality of Jesus as the King of the universe that he wrote, “All hail the power of Jesus name. Let angels prostrate fall; bring forth the royal diadem, and crown Him Lord of all.”

John Newton almost lost his life in a terrible storm off the northwest coast of Ireland. In the midst of the storm he cried out to God for mercy and help. God delivered him, and as he later reflected on the grace and mercy of the Lord he wrote, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

*Spiritual Songs*³⁰ “denotes the natural outburst of an excited bosom ... prompted by the Spirit which filled them.”³¹ An *Ode* is an expression of deep feelings. It is obvious from the description given in 1 Corinthians 14 that the early church

service was very spontaneous. Although there is some overlap in the field of meaning covered by these three terms it seems clear that “spiritual songs” would correspond to much of what we would call “praise and worship music.”

In a message delivered to the Trinity School of Divinity, Dr. John Piper began with these comments:

In the last twenty years or so there has been a phenomenal explosion of worship singing that is good.... Hundreds of worship songs that if I were to start singing them right now you could all finish them. *Thou Art Worthy ... Father I Adore You ... Open Our Eyes Lord ... We Worship and Adore You ... Thou O Lord Art a Shield About Me ... You Are Lord.*

I could start twenty five songs right now and every person in this room could finish them with me. And not only here but all around the world. It is a phenomenal thing.

Some of the songs are poetically, grammatically, musically deplorable, which we should not make too much of if we grew up on “Do Lord.”

One thing is unmistakable as a trend in these songs. They are Godward ... addressed directly to God. Not sung about God in His presence but to God in each other’s presence. And therefore these worship songs force the issue of authentic worship. Are you right now engaging in a spiritual, authentic, genuine, real way with the Living God? That’s what those songs force as an issue on Sunday morning in a way that many of the old choruses that my parents and I sang did not force.

Added to this, the tunes that are being written today are very, very engaging tunes. They have a way of awakening the affections. They’re not excessively complex by and large, or intellectual or demanding. But they catch up the emotions and the spirit in their mood. So two things are happening in the best worship songs.... The mind is being brought with God-centered lyrics in an amazing way into engagement with

God and the heart stirred by these contemporary tunes is being engaged with tenderness, devotion and enjoyment. At least for millions of people this is true even if not for a lot of musical classicists. So I look at this worship awakening and what stands out above all things to me and strikes me and makes me ask questions is its God-centered lyrics.... God is exalted, He is Lord, He is risen from the dead, He is majestic, He is mighty, He is Holy, He has conquered the power of death, He is a shield, He is glory, He is the Lifter of our heads, He is great, He is wonderful, He is a Rock, He is a Fortress, He is a Deliverer, He is the coming King, Redeemer, Name above all names, Messiah, Lamb of God, Holy One, He is God and Our God reigns.... If you don’t like the drums, if you don’t like the guitars, if you don’t like electricity, if you don’t like platforms all cluttered with black microphones and boxes and everything and T-shirts—if you don’t like that you still have to admit that by and large the lyrics of this phenomenon are Godward. They are almost pure Scripture again and again and again, even if clumsily set to the music. And the hoped for effect is a relentless addressing of God directly for the engagement of the heart.³²

Although some brethren argue that we should sing only the inspired words of Scripture in the church³³ it seems clear from this expression (“with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”) that along with the singing of the songs of Scripture there is to be a continuing flow of new and fresh expressions of musical praise and worship that faithfully teaches and admonishes the church as we sing to our Lord and God.³⁴ What is important is that God’s people worship Him through a variegated expression of music in the form of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. You may prefer one more than the other, but a wonderful thing happens when the people of God use all the means He has given them to minister to one another with singing as they worship Him.

Singing Is to Be a Response to God’s Grace

The expression translated “with thanksgiving” (NASB) in

Colossians 3:16 is literally “in the grace.” The heart is moved to sing in response to all that God has done in His loving kindness. This grace is greater than circumstances. This grace enables believers to sing even when they are suffering pain or indignity, as Paul and Silas did at Philippi (Acts 16:25).

My earliest memories are filled with the sounds of the saints singing about the sweetness of fellowship with Jesus and the life-dominating hope of seeing Him someday. Most of those dear old saints were very poor and lived in hard circumstances (and with no therapist to feel their pain!), but they could fill the atmosphere with the sweetest sounds I have ever heard.

Fanny Crosby was totally blind by the time she reached her sixth birthday. But God gave her spiritual sight through the new birth and she was so overwhelmed at the greatness of God that she wrote, “To God be the glory, great things he hath done.” In one of her most popular songs she wrote, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine. Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of His Spirit, washed in His blood. This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.” She wrote 8,000 hymns and songs in her lifetime.

The grace of God will be the sphere in which the worshiper moves. His singing will be the outward expression of his inner experience of God’s grace—he will sing “in the grace.”

Singing Is to Be Accompanied by the Heart

Our singing must be accompanied by a well-tuned instrument. That instrument is to be the heart, and in the context, a heart filled with the Spirit. When Paul adds “singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19) he is explaining how they were to be “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”³⁵ The singing commanded in the expression “speaking to one another in psalms” emphasizes a horizontal and corporate dimension. This sec-

ond clause, “singing and making melody in your hearts,” reveals that it also has a vertical and individual focus.

The voice is used in singing and the heart is the instrument that is accompanying it. The words “making melody” are a translation of the verb *psallo*. The word means “to pluck a string” and therefore “to play a lyre or harp” and then “to play any instrument as an accompaniment to the voice.” So Paul is picturing the heart as a musical instrument that accompanies the voice as it sings psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. He is not speaking of two different types of singing here but rather one singing that is audible, musical and with an engaged heart.

Our singing should express the true aspirations of our hearts, and the truths we sing require an inner reflection and assent. The Spirit was poured out so that God would not have to say to us as He did to Israel, “This people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote” (Isa. 29:13).

Singing Is to Be a Sacrifice Offered to the Father and the Son

New-covenant worship is essentially the engagement with God that He has made possible through the revelation of himself in Jesus Christ and the life he has made available through the Holy Spirit.... The important practical consequence of all this is the need for Christian teaching and preaching to centre on the person and work of Jesus Christ.³⁶

When Christians sing they are “speaking to one another” by “teaching and admonishing one another” and at the same time singing “to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19) and “to God” (Col. 3:16). According to Pliny, Christians in his day “recited to one another in turns a hymn to Christ as to God.”³⁷ A church that is characterized by the fullness of the Spirit and the rich dwelling of the word of Christ will delight to sing the praise of Christ. We must be sure that when we sing we “offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give

thanks to His name... for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Heb. 13:15-16).

"Beyond a doubt, God is not impressed with the musical sounds which strike human ears in a worship experience. The true measure of our sacrifice of praise, then, is the sincerity with which we offer our best adoration to God."³⁸ Singing is edifying, but we must not imagine that is its chief function. Its primary reference is Godward and its edifying work is an outcome. If our singing is not worship it will not be edification. The more we keep its Godward aspect in view, the more we'll be built up as our minds and hearts are drawn towards Him.

Conclusion

During the middle ages the "laity" were not allowed to sing. Since the average church member didn't have the ability to read, let alone interpret, the Scriptures, they were not allowed to sing. Only small groups of professionals were allowed to sing in the church. Martin Luther changed that. He believed that the people must be allowed not only to read the Scriptures but to sing in the worship of the church. He said, "Let God speak directly to His people through the Scriptures and let His people respond with grateful songs of praise." Based upon this conviction he wrote thirty-seven hymns. He called music "God's greatest gift."

As Jesus approached Jerusalem near the descent of the Mount of Olives,

the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles which they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord; Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" And some of the Pharisees in the multitude said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." And He answered and said, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" (Luke 19:37-40).

May the chorus of praise that rises up from His church around the world be such a sweet, sweet sound in His ear that the stones never have to cry out.

Endnotes

- 1 Allen, Ronald, and Gordon Borrer. *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, 165.
- 2 The four present active participles (*speaking, singing, making melody, and giving thanks*) in verses 19-20 modify and are dependent upon the imperative "be filled." They demand and describe the ongoing effects of Spirit-filling in the church.
- 3 The expression, "for that is dissipation" (*en ho estin asotia*), quite literally means, "in which is dissipation." To become drunk involves one in an action which is characteristic of a dissipated life. *Asotia* (dissipation) describes the condition of one who appears to be past salvation. "It describes the condition when mind and body are dragged down so as to be incapable of spiritual functions" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians*, 618).
- 4 "The exhortation, *be filled*, alludes to deep drinking, with which it is indirectly contrasted" (John Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 315).
- 5 When the passive form of *pleroo* (to fill) is used elsewhere in the New Testament the thing by or with which the filling takes place is expressed by something other than the preposition *en* and a dative object. In Acts 13:52 and 1 Timothy 1:4 the genitive is used. In Philippians 1:11 and Colossians 1:9 the accusative is used. The construction here is somewhat unusual. Alford and Ellicott suggest that Paul chose this construction in order to convey the fact that the Holy Spirit is not only the instrument by which the Christian is filled, but that also in which he is so filled. Eadie says it implies the element as well as the instrument. He comments, "Not only were they to possess the Spirit, but they were to be filled in the Spirit, as

vessels filled to overflowing with the Holy Ghost. Men are intoxicated with wine, and they attempt to 'fill' themselves with it; but they cannot. The exhilaration which they covet can only be felt periodically, and again and again must they drain the wine cup to relieve themselves of despondency. But Christians are 'filled' in or with the Spirit, whose influences are not only powerful, but replete with satisfaction to the heart of man Ps 36:8; Acts 2:15, 16. It is a sensation of want—a desire to fly from himself, a craving after something which is felt to be out of reach, eager and restless thirst to enjoy, if at all possible, some happiness and enlargement of the heart—that usually leads to intemperance. But the Spirit fills Christians, and gives them all the elements of cheerfulness and peace; genuine elevation and mental freedom; superiority to all depressing influences; and refined and permanent enjoyment. Of course, if they are so filled with the Spirit, they feel no appetite for debasing and material stimulants." (John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, 398). It is clear that the filling described here is a work of the Holy Spirit and that this work results in a fullness of spirit that is seen in a person's words and actions.

6 Lenski argues that Paul would not compare the Holy Spirit with wine and therefore *pneuma* here cannot be a reference to the Holy Spirit but the human spirit. He takes the *en pneumat*i as locative rather than instrumental. But he goes on to say, "Our spirit is ever to be filled so that it overflows with spiritual expressions. The fact that these expressions are due to the Holy Spirit is self-evident, for this spirit is the new life in us, which is to be full of spiritual emotions that press for utterance. Yet, here there is a contrast between base physical stimulation and noble spiritual stimulation. The worldling descends to his body, the Christian ascends to his spirit" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to Galatians, to the Ephesians and to the Philippians*, 619). However, "The shift from the notion of drunkenness to that of being filled with

the Spirit is not as abrupt as it may appear at first sight. The former represents folly; the latter is the prerequisite for wisdom. Both involve the self coming under the control of an external power, and the states of alcoholic and of religious intoxication were often compared (cf. Acts 2:4, 13, 15)" (Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 42, Ephesians*, 344).

7 Moule, H.C.G. *Colossians and Philemon Studies*, 225.

8 The perfect passive participle emphasizes the reality and completion of Lazarus' death. Martha was correct in her fear that by this time "there will be a stench." No doubt by this time the process of corruption was well on its way.

9 Literally, "the old man with his practices"—*ton palaion anthron sun tais praxessin autou*.

10 There is some disagreement among the commentators regarding the kind of genitive "Christ" is in the phrase "the word of Christ." The subjective genitive would emphasize the fact that Christ is the source of the word, "the word proclaimed by Christ." The objective genitive would emphasize the fact that Christ is the subject of the word, "the word about Christ" But it is probably not necessary to make such a fine distinction. The genitive describes this word that must richly dwell in the church as being "of Christ." Eadie is probably right when he writes, "'The word of Christ' is the gospel, the doctrine of Christ, or the truth which has Christ for its subject. Christ is both the giver of the oracle and its theme" (John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, 250).

11 Spurgeon, Charles H. "Christ's Indwelling Word" in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 46:277.

12 Lenski, R.C.H. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*, 177.

13 Bruce, F.F. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians*, 283.

14 Even though the reflexive pronoun *eautous* (yourselves) is

used rather than the reciprocal pronoun *allelous* (one another), Paul does not mean that the word of Christ ought to be of benefit merely to individuals, that they may teach themselves, “but he requires mutual teaching and admonition” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians*, 217). “We speak as one body with this body present. The reflexive pronoun is correct. Think how rich our hymns are in doctrine. Thus they teach and instruct in a most beautiful form, in a form that is readily memorized and thus easily retained. Psalms and hymns are full of imperatives such as: ‘O bless the Lord, my soul!’ This is self-admonition” (*Op. Cit.*, Lenski, 177-78).

15 The present participle *laleo* (speaking) “has general signification of ‘using the voice,’ and is specifically different from *eipein* and *legein*, for it is used of the sounds of animals and musical instruments” (Eadie, *Ephesians*, 399).

16 *Laleo* “is the opposite of to keep still” (Lenski, *Ephesians*, 619).

17 Lightfoot, J.B. *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 225.

18 Eadie, *Colossians*, 251-52.

19 Calvin, *Colossians*, 217.

20 Note the use of this phrase in Colossians:

- 1:9 Paul prays that they might be filled with a knowledge of God’s will and the perception of that will consist in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

- 1:28 The apostolic ministry of admonition and teaching is done “in all wisdom.”

- 2:3 In Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge have been stored up, while by contrast the taboos which the false teachers propounded were merely human inventions having only the appearance of wisdom (2:23, *logon... sophias*).

- 4:5 “Wisdom” has to do with practical and realistic behavior in Christians’ dealings with those outside the congregation. At the same time this true wisdom, for which Paul had previously prayed, shows itself in a practical way: the teach-

ing and admonition through singing are to be given in a thoughtful and tactful manner.

21 Allen, Ronald, and Gordon Borrer. *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, 162.

22 Allen, *Worship*, 163.

23 The three datives, *psalmois*, *humnois* and *odais* (psalms, hymns and spiritual songs), define the means to be used in the teaching and admonishing.

24 *Op. Cit.*, Lincoln, 346.

25 Trench, R.C. *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 276-81.

26 Based upon etymology some have limited *psalmos* to mean a song sung to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument (psaltery or lute), the strings of which were plucked by the hand. But “while such plucking of the strings is the original sense of *psallo* (found in the parallel passage in Eph. 5:19), it is used in NT with the meaning ‘to sing psalms’ (1 Cor. 14:15; James 5:13 so too, probably, in the LXX quotation in Rom. 15:9)” *Op. Cit.*, Bruce, 284, footnote 118.

27 *Op. Cit.*, Bruce, 284. “John Calvin insisted that “only God’s word is worthy to be sung in God’s praise”; hymns of human composition were forbidden. The first book published in the New World was the *Bay Psalm Book*, and early Christian settlers sang primarily psalms until the mid-eighteenth century” (*Op. Cit.*, Allen, 166-67).

28 *Humnos* originally had a strong pagan flavor, for it was used to designate the songs of praise that were addressed to heathen divinities or to deified men. Paul uses this word twice, the verb appears in Matthew 26:30 and in Acts 16:25. A hymn in the Christian sense of the term is thus an uninspired poetical composition in praise of God or Christ that is intended to be sung. Our present use extends the force of the word beyond the idea of praise” (Lenski, *Ephesians*, 620).

29 *Op. Cit.*, Lightfoot, 225.

30 *Odais pneumatikais* is literally “spiritual odes.” “This epithet thus applied to these ‘songs’ does not affirm that they

were divinely inspired, any more than the *aner pneumatikos* (spiritual man) is an inspired man (1 Cor. 3:1; Gal. 6:1); but only that they were such as were composed by spiritual men, and moved in the sphere of spiritual things" (*Op. Cit.*, Trench, 280).

31 Eadie, *Ephesians*, 400.

32 Piper, John, from a recorded sermon titled, "Worship That Comes by the Word, Satisfaction in the Greatness of God."

33 Smith, Frank J., and David C. Lachman, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 193-226.

34 "If the heart of the composer/performer of musical expression is set on God and bringing Him praise and honor, then he will be bound to offer a sacrifice of integrity. He will seek a text which is biblically sound and set it to music which helps communicate that text in an artistic, relevant way. And we can evaluate those words in the light of biblical truth. In Christian expression the music must always be the servant of the text—it must help make it meaningful and communicative" (*Op. Cit.*, Allen, 167).

35 The participle *lalountes* (speaking) is general; these next two participles *didaskontes* and *nouthetountes* specify and define the speaking. The way you are to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is by "singing and making melody with your heart."

36 Peterson, David. *Engaging with God, A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 100, 102.

37 *Op. Cit.*, Lincoln, 346.

38 Hustad, Donald P. *Jubilate, Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition*, 92.

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