

"Singing"

Ephesians 5:17-20

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Introduction:

I think we might agree that we as a society have a deep appreciation for the art of music, and yet at the same time it is also true that our culture has basically stopped singing. This might seem like a contradiction, and yet I can remember riding in someone's car several years ago, and the driver pointed out that the children were watching a DVD and each child had his or her own wireless headphones—it was amazing! So peaceful! And yet this is so different from the way it was only 20 or 30 years ago. As I was growing up, at least, we had an AM radio in the car, and yet even the radio was not used very much. It was common for families to sing together on long trips. Now, however, headphones, video games, Mp3 players, and even DVD players have replaced the interaction that families often experienced on long trips in the summer. This is not all bad! There is a reason why both of our children have Game Boys!

Even in the religious world, however, there has also been a similar movement in our generation—away from the value of singing, and toward what we might describe as spectator worship. Even among some congregations of the Lord's people, choirs, and solos, and small groups, and even instrumental accompaniment have slowly turned worship from a personal experience into a spectator activity—changing it from worship to entertainment. Since I last preached on this subject back in January 2005, several more churches of Christ have added instrumental music to their worship—including the largest congregation of God's people in the United States—the Richland Hills congregation in San Antonio, Texas. Another huge congregation in Oklahoma City (Quail Springs) just made the transition four weeks ago, and I would imagine that there will be more and more over the coming years, including here in Wisconsin. I would suggest that if we allow this trend to continue, then Satan will have stolen the voices (and ultimately the souls) of the next generation.

This morning, then, I would like for us to go back and reconsider the importance of singing as a part of our worship offered to God. We know that God's people have been singing for thousands of years. We know, for example, that the longest book in the Bible, the book of Psalms, is basically a song book. That right there should tell us something about the importance of singing in God's plan.

We can fast-forward to the end of the First Century, and even among the pagans, God's people were known as singers. We have an interesting statement made by a Roman writer by the name of Pliny. Pliny was writing to the Roman Emperor Trajan,

and he described Christians as those who, **"...were accustomed on a fixed day to gather before daybreak and to sing antiphonally a hymn to Christ as to a god."** To sing antiphonally is to sing back and forth. Sometimes at camp the boys used to sing, "O girls do you love Jesus?" And the girls would reply, "Oh yes we love Jesus," and so on. That is antiphonal singing. And so this Roman historian (looking in from the outside) somehow knew that the early Christians were in the habit of singing songs of worship to Jesus Christ.

As we think about the practice of singing, I would like for us to consider together this morning one of the most comprehensive passages on the subject, and it is found in **Ephesians 5**. If you will, please turn with me to **Ephesians 5**, and for the rest of our time together this morning we will keep our attention focused on **verses 17-20**. The passage was written by the apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus. We looked at the parallel passage in **Colossians 3** the last time we studied this subject (three years ago), but this morning we will focus our attention on Ephesians. ****PPT****
Ephesians 5:17-20...

So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 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.

As we look at these four verses, and as we continue in our series on the five acts of worship (having covered public prayer two weeks ago), I would like for us to focus in on several instructions concerning the singing that we do together as a congregation.

I. And one of the first things we notice is that OUR SINGING IS TO BE DONE TO ONE ANOTHER. **PPT******

Paul says that we are to be, ***"...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."*** In other words, this is not a command that we can obey in private. Certainly we can sing by ourselves and be pleasing to God, but as far as this passage is concerned, singing is something we do together as a group.

We notice that Paul tells us to sing ***"psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."*** It is a little difficult to make any clear distinctions here, but generally speaking, the ***"psalms"*** most likely refer to the psalms from the Old Testament, including the many songs written by King David and recorded for us in the book of Psalms. Even today, we sing "The Lord is My Shepherd," based on **Psalms 23**. We sing "Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah," based on **Psalms 148**—almost word-for-word, along with many others, including one that has been written by one of our own members—a song based on **Psalms 5**, written by Jen Chester. And so we sing the psalms, even today. Paul also refers to ***"hymns"***—most likely with reference to songs of praise. We sing "Our God, He is Alive." We sing "Holy, Holy, Holy," praising God. And then we see

that Paul refers to "**spiritual songs**," perhaps a reference to songs that are meant to encourage, admonish, or uplift the congregation.

We find in the parallel passage in **Colossians 3** that teaching is one of the main reasons for singing these songs to one another. In **Colossians 3:16**, Paul says, "**Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.**" And so one main reason for singing together as a congregation is so that we can teach and admonish one another. I think all of us understand the importance of singing as a way of learning. How did we learn our ABC's? How did we learn the books of the Bible? How did we learn the names of the twelve apostles? Most of us were probably taught by singing songs containing that information. I would even suggest that someone could learn the entire plan of salvation simply by listening to the songs here at this congregation. Even without a copy of the Scriptures, someone could conceivably listen to our songs and figure out the necessity of belief, repentance, baptism, and Christian living.

Think about the valuable lessons that our children learn from their singing—"Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so; Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong." Think about how important it is for our children to learn those lessons—that Jesus loves them, that we read about Jesus in the Bible, that they belong to Jesus, that Jesus is stronger than we are. We learn, then, that even our simple songs are able to teach. We sing these songs to one another.

As we sing, and as we teach these important lessons as a congregation, there is another benefit of doing it together, and that is, it promotes unity within the congregation. We are singing the same message at the same time—we are affirming our common belief in the word of God.

We think of going to a ball game and singing the national anthem. At a typical Mallard's game, there might be 6,000 people, and in so many ways we are incredibly different from one another—different levels of income, different racial backgrounds, different educational accomplishments, various levels of physical fitness—we are incredibly different. But when we sing the national anthem, we are affirming one of the few things that almost all of us have in common. In the same way, our singing reinforces the unity that we have as a congregation.

And so the apostle Paul tells us, first of all, that our singing is to be done to "**one another.**" Singing is not something that we watch the choir do, it is not something we merely observe, but singing is something that all of us participate in together, at the same time.

II. As we look back at Ephesians 5, we notice a second lesson, as we find in verse 19 that OUR SINGING IS TO COME FROM THE HEART. **PPT******

Our singing expresses emotions that we cannot express in any other way. A few minutes ago, I referred to singing the national anthem. Can you imagine going to a

ballgame and hearing someone simply read the words to the national anthem? We can hardly imagine someone starting a ballgame by saying, "Repeat after me: O say can you see, by the dawn's early light," and so on. It seems that our hearts can be more clearly expressed through singing. God is so great that simply talking about God is not able to communicate what we need to communicate. When we sing, we stir up feelings of love, and feelings of relief over forgiveness, and feelings of respect for God over the possibility of coming judgment, and feelings of great happiness when we think about meeting Jesus for the very first time.

And so when Paul says that we must be involved in ***"singing and making melody with our hearts,"*** he was telling us that our music is to be heart-felt. We are to value God in our hearts. Singing communicates emotion in a way that mere words will never be able to do. We sing because we mean it. We sing because we feel it.

Unfortunately, some people have looked at **verse 19**, and they have twisted it by making a rather unusual appeal to a single Greek word. I have heard it several times over the past few years—including just a few months ago from one of our visitors. The argument goes back to the word ***"PSALLO,"*** translated here as ***"making melody."*** According to some, the idea is that this single word refers to plucking or striking a string, and therefore we should be using instruments in our worship.

If you are interested in learning more, I have placed several copies of an article by Wayne Jackson on top of the cubbyholes this morning. The article is available on-line and is entitled, ***"Psallo and the Instrumental Music Controversy."*** Brother Jackson goes into great detail about the meaning of the word, but for the sake of our study this morning, let us ask ourselves a question: If the word refers to plucking an instrument, exactly what instrument is to be plucked? Paul has already answered the question in **verse 19**, when he says that we are to be, ***"...singing and making melody with your heart."*** The heart is the instrument!

There is something else to consider here. If Paul is telling us to praise God by plucking a literal string, then every single member would need his or her own personal instrument! In fact, it would be impossible to praise God acceptably without an instrument. Ridiculous! The heart is the instrument!

In fact, the evidence concerning what type of music God wants in worship is quite simple. As far as I can tell, there are only eight verses in the entire New Testament that directly address singing in the Christian age, and here they are:

Acts 16:25

"But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."

Romans 15:9

"...and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, 'THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME.'"

- 1 Corinthians 14:15** ***"What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also."***
- Ephesians 5:19** ***"...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord."***
- Colossians 3:16** ***"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."***
- Hebrews 2:12** ***"...I WILL PROCLAIM YOUR NAME TO MY BRETHREN, IN THE MIDST OF THE CONGREGATION I WILL SING YOUR PRAISE."***
- Hebrews 13:15** ***"Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."***
- James 5:13** ***"Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises."***

That is it, and the use of instrumental music is completely absent from these eight passages.

Sometimes we refer to our singing as being "a cappella." That word itself has a rather interesting history. When you look it up in a dictionary, you find that it is an Italian word, and it literally means, "in the style of the church." In other words, a long, long time ago, when people wanted a term to describe singing without instruments, they started using the term "a cappella," realizing that the early church (for hundreds of years) practiced congregational singing without the use of any instruments whatsoever.

From time to time, I have referred to the **Catholic Encyclopedia**. It is available on-line, and even the on-line version includes the official seal of the Catholic Church. Therefore, everything in there is officially recognized by the Catholic Church as being accurate. With that in mind, I would like to share several paragraphs from their own encyclopedia—written by their own leaders and scholars. I shared this with you almost six years ago, but I'd like to share it again. From the Catholic Church itself, this is what they admit:

For almost a thousand years Gregorian chant, without any instrumental or harmonic addition, was the only music used in connection with the liturgy.

The Church has never encouraged, and at most only tolerated, the use of instruments.... She holds up as her ideal the unaccompanied chant and polyphonic, a cappella, style. The Sistine Chapel has not even an organ. [I can now personally testify that this is true. We were in the Sistine Chapel less than two months ago—the most famous, the most sacred chapel of the Catholic Church, the room where new popes are elected. There is no organ in the Sistine Chapel—a great ceiling, but no organ!]

The present trend is, however, decidedly away from the instrumental idea and back to the purely vocal style. And it is recognized, and in many places acted upon, that the new version of the liturgical chant, proposed to the Catholic world by Pius X, gains its full beauty and effectiveness only when sung without instrumental accompaniment of any kind.

Although Josephus tells of the wonderful effects produced in the Temple by the use of instruments, the first Christians were of too spiritual a fibre to substitute lifeless instruments for or to use them to accompany the human voice. Clement of Alexandria severely condemns the use of instruments even at Christian banquets.

To the human voice, the immediate vehicle of the sacred word, belongs the first place in the churches, and not to instrumental additions or the trivial scraping found in most of the church's pieces today. Catholic Church music can regain its former purity only by a return to the purely vocal style.

That vocal music is in general more expressive than the mechanically produced tones of instruments is undeniable. Religious feeling finds its most natural expression in vocal utterance, for the human heart is the source of both devotion and song.

As I read these various articles from the Catholic Church, I was amazed! They will freely admit that the church's singing was not accompanied by instrumental music for at least a thousand years. Not only that, but their leaders—their scholars who are highly trained and respected both in music and in church history—are recommending a return to a cappella music in the church! We would certainly encourage them to continue on that path and remove one of the divisions that has taken place in the religious world over the past 2000 years. Several years ago, we attended a Catholic funeral, and all of the music was a cappella! I have heard similar stories from some of you here this morning. And again, we hope and pray that they will continue in that direction.

Some people are surprised that most modern denominations at one time used to agree both with us and the Catholic scholars on this issue. We could start with the Methodist church. One of their leading scholars was a man by the name of Adam Clarke. His commentaries can be found in most religious libraries. I'd like to read his comments on **2 Chronicles 29:25**, in answer to the question of whether this verse

required the use of instruments in "**Christian worship.**" Please remember that he was a Methodist. This is his answer:

No: the whole spirit, soul, and genius of the Christian religion are against this [the use of instrumental music]: and those who know the Church of God best, and what constitutes its genuine spiritual state, know that these things have been introduced as a substitute for the life and power of religion; and that where they prevail most, there is least of the power of Christianity. Away with such portentous baubles from the worship of that infinite Spirit who requires his followers to worship him in spirit and in truth, for to no such worship are those instruments friendly.

I'd also like to read Adam Clarke's comments on **Amos 6:5** concerning instruments in worship:

I am an old man, and an old minister: and I here declare that I never knew them productive of any real good in the worship of God: and have had reason to believe that they were productive of much evil. Music, as a science, I esteem and admire: but instruments of music in the house of God I abominate and abhor. This is the abuse of music; and here I register my protest against all such corruptions in the worship of the Author of Christianity.

I also found a quote from John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church. Wesley once said, "***I have no objections to instruments of music in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen.***"

Some of you might also be familiar with John Calvin. Historians generally agree that he was the founder of Presbyterianism. In his commentary on **Psalms 33**, in his comments on Christians and musical instruments, this is what he writes:

...when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to him. Paul allows us to bless God in the public assembly of the saints only in a known tongue (1 Corinthians 14:26).

We could also consider the writings of Charles Spurgeon, a leading Baptist preacher in the late 1800's—and a man still highly regarded in the religious world and in the Baptist church in particular. Spurgeon preached at the Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle in London, and many people do not realize that instrumental music was never used in the services at that facility. Many of Spurgeon's sermons and commentaries are available on-line, even today. I'd like to read Spurgeon's

comments on **Psalm 42**. Notice especially his comments on instrumental music in worship:

What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettinesses of a quartet, the refined niceties of a choir, or the blowing off of wind from inanimate bellows and pipes! We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it.

We can see, therefore, that in the history of the religious world—in the Catholic Church as well as in nearly all of the modern denominations, it was standard practice at one time to reject the use of instrumental music in worship as a sinful and unattractive addition to the word of God. In our worship, our singing is to come from the heart.

III. Before we close, I would like for us to at least briefly notice one final lesson, and that is, OUR SINGING IS TO BE ADDRESSED TO THE LORD.

****PPT****

In **verse 19**, Paul says that these praises are to be offered, ***"...to the Lord."*** In the parallel passage in **Colossians 3:16**, Paul says that we should be, ***"...singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."*** And so there is an aspect of our singing that is horizontal (back and forth to encourage one another), but the primary focus of our singing is to be vertical. We are to sing, ***"...to the Lord."***

Singing, therefore, is extremely important. Singing is not just filler between the opening and closing prayers, but singing is an act of worship that we offer ***"...to the Lord."*** As an offering of praise to God, our worship is to be offered according to the divine pattern. Most of us are probably aware that God has actually killed people for worshiping in the wrong way. You might remember the account of Nadab and Abihu, the two priests in **Leviticus 10** who dared to tamper with God's plan for worship. After they did that, fire came down from heaven and consumed them. Do you want to hear God's response? After these two men were burned alive, as their smoking corpses are laying there in front of the altar, God gave a one-sentence explanation. Please listen very carefully, because those who saw it happen certainly listened very carefully. God said, ***"By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored."*** That's it! After offering fire that they did not have God's permission to offer, ***"By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored."***

Conclusion & Invitation:

****PPT**** As we close this morning, and as we study our singing as an act of worship, we need to...

- Realize that our singing is to be done to one another.
- Understand that our singing is to come from the heart.
- Respect the fact that our singing is to be addressed to the Lord.

I am thankful for your kind attention as we have studied singing as an act of worship. Lord willing, we will be able to continue in this series of lessons as we come back together next Sunday morning.

If you are not yet a Christian, we would invite you to consider what the Bible teaches. In response to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the Bible tells us to turn away from sin and then we are to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, we would love to study with you sometime soon, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org