

CHURCH MUSIC IN EPHESIANS/COLOSSIANS

Part 3

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Theology of Singing

Most of the affirmations in the New Testament about the doctrinal significance of Christian song may be found in Colossians 3:15-17 and Ephesians 5:18-20 (Ferguson, Church 268-273).

Christian songs are directed to God the Father (Col. 3:16, 17; Eph. 5:20). They are expressions of worship, praise, and petition to him who is Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all (Eph. 4:6). This gives a sense of reverence and awe that should characterize all activities in the assembly.

Singing is also directed to Christ as the one Lord and Savior (Eph. 5:19). It is done in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17), that is, as an act of worship to him, with reference to his saving work for us, and by his authority. Christ provides the motivation and essential content of Christian songs.

The songs Christians sing spring from being filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and so are spiritual in nature (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). As derived from the Spirit and his indwelling, songs are to express the spiritual nature of human beings, created with the capacity for rational, spiritual worship (Rm. 12:1). Christian enthusiasm comes not from artificial stimulation but from the presence of the Holy Spirit, who through the word of

Christ makes us realize the greatness of God and the greatness of our salvation in Christ.

The predominant note in Christian song is thanksgiving (Col. 3:15, 16, 17; Eph. 5:20). This is because Christians know God as Father, have received salvation in Christ, and have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, there is a deep underlying spiritual joy expressed in song, a joy that can be thankful to God for other people and thankful in all circumstances.

Christian song expresses one purpose of the assembly, namely mutual edification. In song we speak to one another (Eph. 5:19). Song results from the active presence of the word of the Lord in the gathering of God's people (Col. 3:16). Hence, the singing involves intelligible words. It will support the teaching and admonishing expressed in the delivery of the word of Christ. The word of Christ will control the content of the songs.

Singing both expresses unity and contributes to unity (cf. Rm. 15:6). Christians meet as called by God into one body, where peace rules (Col. 3:15). Singing is a unifying activity.

Christian song proceeds from the heart (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). It expresses concentration and intention. It is not mere words; it is not pretty melodies. It comes from the center of our beings and is concerned with basic spiritual truths.

My friend and former student Jeff Childers writes of a conversation he and a group of students while they were studying in Oxford had with bishop Kallistos of the Greek Orthodox Church that included a discussion of why the Orthodox church did not use musical instruments in worship. "[The bishop] didn't merely

stresss the fact that this [a cappella] was the way the first Christians sang in worship. He also connected it to other things, including early Christian views of creation, their sense of our having been made by God's hands as the ideal worship instrument. He connected it to the Orthodox emphasis on unity as expressed in univocal singing and he stressed the priority of focusing solely on God in worship, without mechanical distractions. He referred to early Christian teachers on the subject." (Crux, pp. 205-206.)

The historical evidence is quite strong and conclusive for a cappella singing in Christian meetings (some of which we touched on in lessons 2 of this series). Nevertheless, I have become convinced that, in addition to this historical argument, we need to say more about the doctrinal reasons for this practice. Hence, I have stressed the doctrinal aspects of Christian song to be found in Colossians 3 and Eph. 5.

Vocal music accomplishes these things that we have outlined. Instrumental music cannot do these things. And even as an accompaniment may work against these spiritual purposes.

Instruments are a distraction, or an actual intereference, to accomplishing the purposes of song in the assembly. I remember thinking as I heard the singing of Christians at the Nigerian Christian Bible College lectureship last year and then later in the year the singing of African Christian congregations in Zimbabwe how out of place or even detrimental the sound of an instrument would have been. An instrument would have taken away from the power of the vocal expressions. And, of course, we have

experienced the same power of congregational singing in our gatherings in the U. S.

Such good a cappella music is strong argument for its use; even so poor singing has been a major concern in the introduction of instruments or special singing groups. Many religious people are rediscovering a cappella music; now is not the time for us to give up on it.

Observations on Contemporary Practice

The teachings of Colossians 3:15-17 and Ephesians 5:18-20 have a practical application to our singing today. The instructions were addressed to the whole church and presuppose that all participate. Some practices ostensibly intended to improve the singing may actually work against congregational participation. Any practice that calls attention to certain singers, either visually or in volume, makes others want to watch or listen to them rather than to participate themselves.

Pianos, organs, and choruses were sometimes justified as aids to improve singing. The experience of most groups is that as often as not the addition of instruments and choral groups have not supported the intended outcome of improving the singing. They have often worked against congregational singing, so that fewer people sing and many come in order to listen. Moreover, many churches now have gone beyond these instruments to have bands and other musical groups corresponding to the types of musical expression found in settings designed for entertainment. The participation that these ensembles generate is the emotional excitement of concerts that have nothing to do with Biblical

edification. I am told that some conservative Christians churches are having internal tensions because of the introduction of drums, guitars, and bands into their services and the consequent change in musical styles that go with them. Of course, the long-standing advocacy of the acceptability of instruments leaves them with no defense other than personal preference against these further innovations.

Elaborations of the music that emphasize the musical quality at the expense of the words easily focus attention on the wrong thing and enhance aesthetics at the expense of instruction and edification. Melody is useful in deepening the impression of the words, making them memorable, and adding to their emotional impact, but the melody should not detract from the message and direct attention to itself and away from the words. The melody is subordinate to and supports the words, not the other way around.

The singing of rounds is particularly subject to this criticism, for they are destructive of communication and instruction of one another. I think especially of the now popular and beautiful, "The Greatest Commands." Would we permit four men in the congregation to read simultaneously four different passages of scripture? The words would be scriptural, but would intelligible communication take place? Setting those words to beautiful music does not mean edification occurs. 1 Cor. 14:27 requires that even those with the Spirit-inspired gift of speaking in tongues bring one message at a time and have an interpreter so that edification may take place.

Making this point leads me to comment on an argument sometimes made for playing an instrument or having special groups to sing. The argument is that "I have this gift, and I should be able to exercise it in church." One should use his or her gifts, but not necessarily in the meetings of the church. If someone has a great gift for running track, does this mean we should build a track and stage a display of the person's ability to run fast as part of our church meetings? We could no doubt generate a lot of emotional excitement if we make a competition with the team from the neighboring Baptist Church! The tongue speakers at Corinth could have made the same argument that they had a gift and should exercise it in church, and with more justification. They had a gift inspired by the Holy Spirit, but this did not give them the right to exercise it in the assembly. Theirs was a speech addressed to God (1 Cor. 14:2, 27), but even speech addressed to God had to be intelligible to the congregation for it to have a place in the assembly of the church.

There is a fine religious music that is appropriate in other settings and for other purposes. Handel's "Messiah" is great religious music, but it belongs in the concert hall or a church that does not expect participation by those in attendance. The quality of the music calls as much attention to aesthetics as to the religious content. In combination they have a powerful impact, but rare indeed would be the congregation that could perform the "Hallelujah Chorus"--and the operative word there is "perform," for performance is what it would be and not meaningful congregational praise.

"I Come to the Garden Alone" is a popular song that I judge inappropriate for the assembly of the church, since it is too individual, private, and sentimental in its expressions, as meaningful as they may be on a personal level. "The Church in the Vale" does nothing more than evoke a vague sentimentality and does nothing to express the purposes of song in the assembly.

Clapping to the accompaniment of a song does not support the purposes of the words but serves the same purpose that a drum or another instrument would in emphasizing the beat. Some defend clapping on the grounds that the spirit is leading them to express their joy and praise in this way, but it seems odd to me that the spirit only prompts this reaction on certain songs and at certain places in those songs, hardly a matter of supposed spontaneity. Clapping, by promoting a change in the style of music, changes the character of the song service. While in Africa this past year I was told of how Christian Church missionaries used clapping as a step to introducing instrumental music into previously a cappella congregations. Perhaps someone can instruct me better, but I fail to see how one can justify clapping and not at the same time the use of instrumental accompaniment.

The verbal content is primary in the texts of Ephesians and Colossians, both from what is expressly said and from the larger contexts of the verses studied. For something to be vocal does not necessarily mean that it corresponds to the teaching of these verses. Of course, instrumental sounds cannot do the things described in these verses. But neither do non-verbal sounds made

by the voice or other parts of the body--only words that are rational, intelligible, and spiritual.

As a concluding observation, I would suggest that in the so-called "worship wars" more is at stake than "styles of worship." More is at stake than "traditional" versus "contemporary" songs (some of both are good and some of both are bad). More is at stake than personal preferences. More is at stake than the use of technology (I assume it will be used; the question is how it will be used and what images and uses are appropriate). What I mean is that there is a major shift occurring from the classic, historic center of the assembly in the supper and the sermon to music as the focus of the assembly and the principal bearer of worship. Music formerly was subordinate to prayer and scripture reading. Now it is viewed by many as the principal activity, and other things like the sermon, the supper, prayer, and scripture reading are made to fit around the theme of the songs.

Our speech betrays us: song leaders are now worship leaders, either planning the whole service or subsuming worship into song. We have seen the narrowing of the Biblical meaning of worship down to what takes place in the assembly, and now worship is being further narrowed to refer to the song service.

The shift is further evident in the songs that we sing. They say more about what we feel and what we do than about who God is and what he does.

Worship committees typically (and this is true of my home congregation) do not include persons with education in Biblical doctrine and worship, so they cannot bring standards other than

what appeals to them or what others are doing to their task of planning services.

Ephesians, Colossians, and the rest of the New Testament can call us back to what pleases God and give us guidance in our service to him.