

THE DIVINE COMMAND OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TO SING

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The theme: “Music in New Testament Worship.” is most appropriate. The distinctiveness of the Lord’s orders for proper worship must be upheld by all of His church (Jno. 4:24). Our great brotherhood will profit tremendously with the addition of this anticipated volume. The materials contained herein will put honest readers in remembrance of the essentials for pleasing and worshipping God.

The topic assigned is “The Divine Command of the New Testament to Sing.” The word “sing,” in one of its forms, appears approximately 150 times in the Bible. There was no characteristic more prominent than the boundless joy of being a Christian. Joy in the new life naturally pours forth in singing. Singing in worship for every Christian is an authoritative matter of conviction. For the child of God, the New Testament Scriptures is a prolific witness to the singing of Redemption’s great Song:

Matt. 26:30 - “And when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives.”

Acts 16:25 - “But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns unto God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”

Rom. 15:9 - “And that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, therefore will I give praise unto thee among the Gentiles and sing unto thy name.”

I Cor. 14:15 - “What is it then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.”

Eph. 5:19 - “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart unto the Lord.”

Col. 3:16 - “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

Heb. 13: 15 - “By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name.”

Jas. 5:13 - “Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms.”

Of the New Testament passages cited above, a strong case for singing as a specific requirement should be obvious to the honest student of Scripture. Jesus sang in the upper room (Matt. 26:30), and Paul and Silas sang in the prison (Acts 16:25). Romans 15:9 stresses singing in the sense of glorifying God and confessing His name. The text of I Corinthians 14:15 describes singing with the Spirit and with the understanding, which only vocal singing can fulfill. Ephesians 5:19 emphasizes “speaking to yourselves” as a result of being filled with the Spirit. Colossians 3:16 commands “teaching and admonishing one another” as a result of Christ’s Word indwelling richly in all wisdom. James 5:13 parallels singing with praying, thus stressing on the spoken or vocal praise to our Creator. Such praise is described in Hebrews 13:15 as the continual sacrifice of praise, which is described as “the fruit of our lips.”¹

Of the texts listed, Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 will be primarily addressed. The other passages of citation show that first century disciples readily complied with the command to sing. Faithful Christians never needed mechanical instruments of music to express their joy of salvation and thanksgiving to the Father. These passages form an unbroken chain of authority for Christian worship to the Father through singing without any additions or subtractions (Rev. 22:18-19). The Divine command of the New Testament to sing will be detailed in: precept, purpose, and pattern.

THE DIVINE PRECEPT

In Ephesians 5:19 the apostle Paul stated, “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” In the Colossian letter (3:16) the Spirit instructs: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

In the first text, (Eph. 5:19) “speaking,” Comes from *laleo*, which means to “talk, tell, or utter.” Speech involves pronunciation, or the giving of the correct vowel and consonant sounds. Speech involves enunciation, or the projecting of these correct sounds. Speech involves articulation, or the correct joining of the syllables into words and phrases. In both texts, “singing,” comes from *ado*, which is always indicative of praise to God. The term ‘music,’ which appears in neither text is defined as a rhythmical succession of pleasing tones.

Singing is a specific kind of music, vocal music. It is not merely vocal music that pleases God however. Persons may sing notations or tones, which constitute vocal music. The kind of singing which God prescribes in Christian worship involves speaking, or the pronunciation, enunciation, and articulation of words. The singing is directed toward two objects, God and mankind. In the second text, (Col. 3:16) Paul defines that which is directed toward mankind as “teaching” from *didasko*, which means to “give instruction,” and “admonishing,” from *noutheteo*, which means to “warn.” In both texts it may be observed that singing, as worship, is directed to God, while in the second text it may be additionally noted that “grace,” from “*charis*,” expressive of graciousness or thanksgiving is directed toward God. The term “yourselves” in the first text and the phrase “one another” in the second text, come from *heautou*, which is a reciprocal pronoun, denoting the fact that mutual action or a cross relationship is involved in the singing. It involves a reciprocity or a mutual and cooperative exchange. It

means that when one sings, he instructs and warns himself and worships and expresses graciousness to God, and at the same time, he does likewise to the other worshipers. The other worshipers, in turn, reciprocate or do likewise to the one singing. Since Christians cannot engage in the other items of worship by proxy, one should not think that worship in song is any different. Of course, there are exceptions. Those who cannot speak, or those who are otherwise physically disabled, are obviously exempt.²

The Ephesians 5:19 term “psallo” is used in a figurative sense with reference to the word “play.” While this figurative use is the only occurrence of “psallo” (to play) in the New Testament, the meaning of “play” refers to the instrument as none other than that of the HUMAN HEART (emphasis mine GIH). Every other use of the term “psallo” in the New Testament refers to sing, psalm, or song. When the language experts (?) use the etymology of psallo to justify mechanical instrumental music, they ignore a basic truth that language is dynamic.³

When N.B. Hardeman, representing the churches of Christ, met Ira M. Boswell, representing the Christian churches, Boswell argued that “psallo,” as found in Eph. 5:19 means to sing with the accompaniment of a mechanical instrument of music. Brother Hardeman pointed out that “psallo” does involve an instrument which every saint accompanies his singing, but it was not mechanical. Hardeman pointed out that the instrument is named in the very passage where it is found with the word singing. It is the heart. Boswell admitted that it was the heart, but tried to add the mechanical instrument. He failed in his efforts, since the instrument God desires in worship to Him has been put in the passage of God Himself.

In this matter of Divine precept regarding authority in singing, one should remember the words of the late brother C.R. Nichol: “No question is settled till it is settled right, and no question is settled right till it is settled according to the proper authority. The proper authority

to settle all religious questions today is the New Testament. It is not a question of what I think or what you think, of what I like or what you like, but what does the New Testament teach?"⁵ In worship we must respect the Lord's name. Singing, which is a specific act, can be done "in the name of the Lord" (Col. 3:16-17). Playing a mechanical instrument of music, a different act from singing, cannot be done in the Lord's name. Ephesians 5:19 makes the instrument "the heart" and parallels Colossians 3:16: "singing with grace in your hearts." Since God has specified the instrument as the human heart, no alternative is allowed. According to the divine precept, God specified "singing and making melody with one's heart to the Lord."

The Divine Purpose

There is a heavenly purpose behind God's precept for vocal singing. Singing in worship is a means of spiritual development. Worship never transpires by accident; it is the conscious purpose of the individual, deliberately presenting himself to God in this relationship. Our God is, and always is, God of order and organization, (I Cor. 14:33; 40). By gleaning through the Scriptures one can find at least four purposes behind God's precept for the Christians in New Testament singing: expressive, educational, edification and exaltation.

Expressive (Heb. 13:15)

Singing is to be expressive in communicating ideals that will bring men back to the Father, (Jno. 12:32). When the Christian expresses through song the ideals of hope, joy, peace, love, salvation and watchfulness-the world listens. This is a part of being "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14-16). God intends for our heart strings to be touched when we come before Him and one another with joyous expressions of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. There are various feelings of the heart that can only be expressed through singing. Paul and Silas expressed the feelings of their hearts when they were beaten and cast into the prison (Acts 16:19-

26). In verse twenty-five, the Bible states that “at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God...” This is what makes Redemption’s Song so wonderful for the true child of God (Jas. 5:13). Brother David Lipscomb remarked: “The human voice is the most complicated, delicate, and perfect musical instrument known to man. It is the perfection of the Maker’s handiwork as a musical instrument, and is capable of more musical combinations and harmonies far sweeter and more varied than any and all instruments of human make, even than those ‘invented by David.’”⁶

Educational (Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 16:25; Col. 3:16)

The divine precept of singing is not only expressive, but it is also educational. In teaching the lost and encouraging the saved, the Father’s plan for unity in Christ can be realized (I Cor. 1:10). Singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs truly reflects a sermon in song. The value of this type of singing to instruct should never be minimized. Singing is a genuine application of the great commission. It is significant that when Paul and Silas “sang praises unto God,” the Bible continues by declaring “**and the prisoners heard them**” (Acts 16:25). One could listen to music for a life time and not learn anything of God or heaven (Matt. 4:4). There is no praise or understanding of God in music alone. Audible words that convey/teach thoughts must be used. This requires Christians to think about what we sing. Education comes through understanding (I Cor. 14:15; 2 Tim. 2:15). This is why every Christian is commanded to sing because we are all a part of the great commission to teach the lost. For those who are physically able, singing is part of this teaching process.

Edification (I Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16)

In addition to educating the lost, singing allows God’s children to “admonish one another.” The edifying nature of the Christian song service is to be distinctive and reverent.

When Christians sing and understand the admonitions and exhortations to faithfulness, they will appreciate the precept to sing. Brother Gary Colley correctly observes: “Faithfulness to the cause of Christ will be the difference between Heaven and Hell. Singing has the power to bring our thoughts to the proper place, remove our doubts, and re-establish our lives.”⁷

We should sing songs of challenge which encourages us to be about our work in the Master’s vineyard; songs of confession asking that sins be forgiven; songs of petition asking for God’s continued blessings; songs of thanksgiving for blessings received; Songs of praise recognizing God’s great power, knowledge and presence; Songs of conquest urging all Christians to wage war against wickedness thus winning the lost.⁸

Exaltation (Rom. 15:9; Heb. 13:15)

What more glorious means does a Christian have of exalting the God of Heaven than through the beauty and expressive nature of the Songs of Zion? Is there a more expressive form of talking with God than through a beautiful prayer song? We joyously sing because of God’s supreme sacrifice of His Only Begotten (Jno. 3:16; Heb. 2:9). We sing because God demands and desires our praises (Rom. 15:9). Faithful Christians are singing Christians. They exalt the Father because of the spiritual blessings to be had only in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:3). Christians find purpose in singing because of God’s mindfulness to provide (Matt. 6:25-33). Let us remember that in worship God is the audience for praise and the congregation is the audience for edification. Every child of God should count it an honor and a privilege to sing in worship of the God of Heaven (Jno. 4:24). Singing in exalting the Creator, for the saved, must be a perpetual “sacrifice of praise.”

It is in complete accord with the Divine purpose that Christian singing be expressive of the highest ideals of the heart. Vocal singing is backed by the Divine intent that it be

educational, in leading lost souls back to the Father. A distinctive part of the educational characteristic behind our singing is that of edification. For the wayward soul who needs admonishing, warning or edification, singing finds value and purpose. Every Christian exalting the Father through the worship of Song without respect to one's singing ability is a part of the Divine purpose and precept of God's overall will.

THE DIVINE PATTERN

Because of the Divine precept and purpose for singing, the church of our Lord has a clear and distinctive pattern that we should expect in carrying out God's will. Just as the great lawgiver Moses has a Divine pattern for building the tabernacle (Heb. 8:5), Christians who obey God's precept for vocal singing in worship will observe the Divine pattern (I Pet. 4:11). In addition to the texts cited for singing, please note the following passages that bear on this topic:

I Cor. 3:9-11 - "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth there upon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Eph. 2:19-22 - "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

The aforementioned passages teach that every member has a place in the Lord's body and each part of the body, whether in membership or worship, constitutes a part of the overall Divine pattern. When God commanded singing He also gave us the "perfect law of liberty" (Jas. 1:25) to enable us to check our actions in worship (singing) against His expectations for us (Matt. 4:10; Jno. 4:24). Because of the Divine pattern and God's expectation for the saved, we ought to "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly

dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Some characteristics of this Divine pattern are; understanding, uniformity, unity and undenominational.

Understanding (Jno. 8:32; I Cor. 14:15)

Where there is precept and purpose, a pattern can be discovered. This pattern is intelligible because it is from God rather than men (Gal. 1:6-12). To pray or sing with the understanding implies that we must know what the words mean and we must follow the meaning as we repeat the words. If we utilize words without thinking what they mean they are empty of value in worship. If one does not fully understand what the author has in mind, one should study the words until we do comprehend the ideas which they represent. Singing from the heart involves careful consideration of the entire message.

While there are voices that decry a change in the Divine pattern, may God help us to remember, we “must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29). The words of brother Andy T. Ritchie are so appropriate for the present generation:

“Singing lends itself to abuse more easily than other ‘items’ of worship. Prayer is definitely a ‘religious’ activity, and the most irreverent would hardly make unhallowed use of the Lord’s Supper. But singing is used in almost every conceivable setting. While there certainly is danger of carelessness, indifference, and a subtle lack of discernment in all of our worship or service to God, the causes are not the same. If there is prayer in a secular situation, it is still recognized as being addressed to God. There is no other use for it. But with singing there is every kind of song for every kind of purpose. Music reaches no further than the sensuous, the superficial, and the transitory propensities of man. Since music belongs in the church, theater, nursery, concert hall, cafe, living room, and, in fact, wherever men may be, it is very difficult to separate the sheep from the goats even in the so-called sacred categories. While some of the more sedate religious groups do not have as severe problems as those with ‘free’ worship, with thousands of people it is not too extreme to imagine as unimaginable thing—that their favorite ‘gospel’ song would be heard on Saturday night on a radio, television, or ‘live’ program advertising tobacco, and with all the trimmings (Jazz piano, hot guitar, yelling, jesting whistling, screaming, an ‘artist’ intoxicated on something other than the spirit of God), and that the same song would be heard next in church. Recent years have intensified the problem of discriminate and unhallowed use of ‘sacred’ songs.”⁹

Understanding the difference between the sacred and profane will either cause one to follow God's pattern, or substitute one's own pattern (Gal. 6:7-8). One brother has already advocated substituting God's pattern by stating: "Contemporary music must be used to tell the gospel message, for it is the language of this generation (Emphasis mine GIH)."¹⁰ Unfortunately this brother, in this statement, has disregarded God's pattern for this generation (2 Jno. 9)! Again, brother Ritchie's comments seem so appropriate:

"The problem of 'concertizing' has been one of major importance with some for a long time. With those of us who have congregational singing exclusively, the matter of a heavy, recital stage type of music sung by professional musicians does not exist, but with all there are real dangers of missing the point of worship in song. Unworshipful music, exploitation of one sort or another, singing of 'favorite songs' to satisfy the 'fans,' music just for dignity and artistic embellishment, and music to 'fill in' and 'cover up' are problems which face us all. **So, first and foremost, we must clarify our conceptions. Singing in the worship should be thought of definitely and unequivocally as a medium of worship, and all that is not suitable to the ends of worship and specifically devoted thereto should be weeded out**"¹¹ (Emphasis mine GIH).

Unity (I Pet. 4:11)

Every Christian should assume his part of the responsibility for the congregational singing without respect to ability. God truly looks upon the heart, not upon musicianship or fine voice quality. All can sing sufficiently to praise God and to admonish one another. To say that every member of the Lord's church should sing is stating the case mildly: every child of God in response to God's love is so created that he must sing. When a Christian fully recognizes the beauty of God's precept and purpose-he can't help but render praises to His name. This characteristic is what makes the song services of the Lord's church so distinctively different from all other religious bodies. In addition to speaking the same thing in word and deed, uniters trademark for the church is stamped upon worship in song also.

Undenominational (Jno. 12:48; Heb. 10:23; I Pet. 4:11)

The church of Christ has never sought to waver from God's unchanging word. By this same word we shall be judged. In singing, the Christian simply finds contentment in following the Savior (I Pet. 2:21). The denominational trends of our present generation have always been a reflection of those who have endeavored to waver from the precept, purpose and pattern of God's teachings. Presumptuousness and a disrespect for authority lies at the base of every denomination. Can one afford to believe that he is entitled to do whatever he pleases in worship and expect to please the Father? Innovations and additions to the song service such as contemporary music, different formats such as solos, choirs, choral groups instead of congregational singing, special choral music while partaking of the Lord's Supper, etc., are not from God's precepts. Nor is it in the purpose of Divinity to allow such to confuse the pattern that God has given to those that love Him. Everything about our singing should be spiritually discernible as we look to God and His Word for determining our destiny (I Cor. 14:15; I Pet. 4:11). God has clearly disclosed His Divine command to His creation on the subject of worship in song.

When we practice undenominational Christianity which includes singing, God's pattern will allow us a foundation to:

1. Build upon (I Cor. 3:9-11; Eph. 2:19-22). We can accomplish this through singing.
2. United in the same mind and judgment (I Cor. 1:10). We can accomplish this through singing.
3. Please God through speaking the same thing (I Cor. 1:10:21). we can accomplish this through singing.
4. "Speak as the oracles of God..." (I Pet. 4:11). We can accomplish this through singing.
5. Worship the Father in "spirit and truth" (Jno. 4:24). We can accomplish this through singing.

Let the reader be reminded that no denomination can replicate the above actions-only God's people can accomplish such! The important implications that are carried in the Divine precept to sing are far reaching. May God help us to respect and obey Him in all things.

References

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- 11 Ritchie, Ibid, P. 114.