

THE **A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today** CHURCH *of* CHRIST



Pages 268-273 of this book provide very encouraging insights into why God is pleased with a cappella singing in worship and why it is so uplifting to us as Christians who worship Him and build up and teach one another.

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needs: the kingdom and will of God, deliverance from temptation and sin. The model prayer, however, does not neglect physical needs — the basic necessity of “daily food.” Included in supplications will be petitions for the welfare of others, intercessions (1 Tim. 2:1).⁹² This dimension especially keeps to the forefront the community dimension of prayer.

Singing⁹³

Singing was closely related to prayer in ancient times (cf. 1 Cor. 14:15; James 5:13) and so belongs to the daily religious life as well as to the assembly. The same elements of prayer noted above are applicable to singing. The distinctiveness of Christian song is that it, like prayer, is done “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:19; cf. Col. 3:16-17), that is, with reference to him and in worship of him. Although Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, which provide rich sources for the discussion of early Christian singing, have as their literary context the Christian life in a larger sense, the statements are drawn from practices in church.⁹⁴ The practice of the assembly is to influence the entire Christian life. Other texts make clear the presence of song as a congregational activity (Matt. 26:30; 1 Cor. 14:15, 26).

92. G. P. Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

93. Lucien Deiss, *Hymnes et prières des premiers siècles* (Paris: Fleurus, 1963), Part I; Gottfried Schille, *Frühchristliche Hymnen* (Berlin, 1965); Reinhard Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit: Untersuchungen zu Form, Sprache, und Stil der frühchristlichen Hymnen* (Göttingen, 1967); G. Delling, *Worship in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962), pp. 82-91; G. Delling, “Hymnos et al.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 489-503; Martin Hengel, “Hymns and Christology,” *Between Jesus and Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 78-96.

94. As in 1 Cor. 14, the assembly is the literary setting but something from outside the assembly is used to reinforce the teaching (vv. 7-11), so in Eph. 5 and Col. 3, although the literary setting is the Christian life, something from the assembly (singing) is used to reinforce the point. I have hereby consciously made a minimal claim for these verses. Many commentaries see evidence from the context that these texts refer to the assembly; e.g., Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), pp. 149-153; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), pp. 237-238.

A Note on Terminology

Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 refer to "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." Since these words have different etymological backgrounds — Psalms of the Old Testament, formal praise, and general song — efforts have been made to identify different types of songs from these words. These efforts, however, are misguided. Usage in the Septuagint and other Greek Jewish writings near New Testament times show that the terms were used interchangeably.⁹⁵ No precise distinctions can be made between the words. The combination had its precedent in these contemporary sources, and the full manner of expression was intended to give comprehensiveness to the statement.

*A Theology of Singing*⁹⁶

The biblical passages about singing offer a rich doctrinal content to this activity.

(1) Song is a way of *preaching* Christ. Christ is both the ground and the content of Christian song. Christians sing about Christ. If they sing about God, it is especially what God has done through Christ; if about the Holy Spirit, it is the Holy Spirit as the gift of Christ; if about instruction to one another, it is the life in Christ. The early Christian hymns that have been identified in the New Testament (e.g., Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 3:16) have Christ as their content.⁹⁷ The characteristic feature of the earliest Christian hymns is that they were songs of praise to Christ. He is the standard for the content of songs in the assembly that meets in his name.

(2) Song is a *confession of faith* made by the lips. Hebrews 13:15

95. H. Schlier, "Ado," and G. Delling, "Hymnos et al.," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964 and 1972), Vol. 1, p. 164 and Vol. 8, p. 499; A. A. R. Bastiaesen, "Psalmi, hymni, and cantica in Early Jewish-Christian Tradition," *Studia Patristica* 21 (1989): 15-26.

96. Oskar Söhngen, "Theologische Grundlagen der Kirchenmusik," *Leiturgia* IV (Kassel, 1961), pp. 2-15.

97. A. M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), chap. 4; Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns; Their Historical Religious Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Ralph P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii.5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Martin Hengel, "Hymns and Christology," *Between Jesus and Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 78-96.

employs a word (*homologeō*) that can be translated "confess," "acknowledge," or "praise," and that is often brought into connection with the word "sing" in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 18:49, quoted in Rom. 15:9; 138:1). Singing is a way of acknowledging God — praising him and confessing faith in him. This is done by praising and expressing gratitude. Song is to be with thankfulness (Eph. 5:19-20; Col. 3:16). Thanksgiving acknowledges God as the source of blessings.

(3) Song expresses the *indwelling Spirit* and *word of Christ*. The preceding points about the spiritual nature of Christian song and the confession of faith that is made "through him" (Christ) leads to this description. Ephesians 5:18-19 associates singing with being filled with the Spirit; Colossians 3:16 parallels singing with the teaching and admonishing that express the indwelling word of Christ. Singing is the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit and of possessing the word of Christ. The Spirit and the word belong together, and vocal praise is a consequence of their presence. The singing, therefore, will be spiritual in nature and will accord with the word of Christ. The knowledge of salvation in Christ, the acceptance of God's grace, and the receiving of the Holy Spirit as the firstfruits of redemption — these lead to song.

(4) Song as praise is a *spiritual sacrifice* (Heb. 13:15). The Old Testament had presented thanksgiving as accompanying sacrifice (Ps. 26:6), the equivalent of sacrifice (Jon. 2:9; Ps. 141:2), and a substitute for sacrifice (Ps. 50:14, 23). The New Testament connects singing with the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:15) and speaks of "spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). The singing of the church is a spiritual activity. It is one of the offerings that replaces for Christians the sacrifices of the Mosaic law; it is a sacrifice which is *continually* available.

(5) In song there is sharing in *heavenly, eschatological* praise. The heavenly beings are constantly singing praise to God — Revelation 4:8, 10-11; 5:8-12; 14:2-3; 15:2-3.⁹⁸ The church by its song joins this heavenly chorus. The barriers between earth and heaven, time and eternity, are temporarily lowered. Christian song is a heavenly activity, an anticipation of the activities of the end time.

(6) Song is for *mutual edification*. The singing in the assembly is not only directed to God in praise but also is directed to one another

98. The hymns in Revelation, however, are not actual congregational hymns: "Though containing many traditional elements, they are not derived from early Christian liturgy but are literary creations of the author" — David Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), p. 243.

for teaching and admonition. Ephesians 5:19, in addition to "singing and making melody to the Lord," refers to "speaking to one another" ("singing among yourselves" — NRSV). 1 Corinthians 14:26 enjoins that the psalms in the assembly, as everything else there, is to be for communal edification. Since edification requires understanding of what is said (1 Cor. 14:9, 16-17, 19), melody is secondary to the words (cf. 1 Cor. 14:15 for singing "with the mind"). The melody must support and deepen the message and not obscure it. Teaching occurs through song (cf. Col. 3:16, where "teaching and admonishing" may be distinct from the "singing," but are closely parallel to it).⁹⁹ This purpose of edification provides another criterion to which songs in the assembly are to conform. The praise, confession, and proclamation through song contribute to community edification.

(7) Song exemplifies the *unity of the church*. "So that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:6). Singing together symbolizes and expresses the unity of the church. The harmony in which all participate is a beautiful and specific way of showing that the members of the one body are united to the Lord and to one another. Singing not only expresses unity but also helps to effect unity. It has a unifying function in giving a sense of common identity and creating solidarity. The corporate or body life of the church finds expression in the blending of voices in song.

(8) Song involves the *whole person*. The passages already cited emphasize wholeness: spirit and mind (1 Cor. 14:15); words with the heart (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) and the lips (Heb. 13:15). There is an Old Testament background for linking the lips and the soul in passages like Psalm 71:23. Singing engages the mind, heart, and the organs of speech; the intellect, the emotions, and the physical self are involved. The tongue is the instrument on which God is praised, and this is done from the heart, and intelligibly.

(9) Song expresses *deep religious emotion*. "Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise" (James 5:13). The musical aspects add to the emotional impact of what is expressed in song, and this is so for

99. The "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" may be construed with the "singing," making the "teaching and admonishing" a separate expression of the indwelling word of Christ (so the NRSV); or "the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" may be construed with the "teaching and admonishing," thus taking the "singing with grace in your hearts" as a supplementary description. The parallel in Eph. 5:19 favors the latter interpretation, and it is argued for by Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 79.

corporate as well as individual singing. Nevertheless, singing in church is not for the sake of the beauty of the music. The quality of the music is to enhance all the doctrinal elements mentioned, not to call attention to itself.

Instrumental Music ¹⁰⁰

Musical instruments occur in the New Testament as part of everyday life (Matt. 9:23; 11:17; Rev. 18:22) and as illustrations (1 Cor. 13:1; 14:7-8),¹⁰¹ but they are never mentioned as part of the assemblies of the church or accompanying Christian religious music. Their only appearance in a worship context is in the book of Revelation, where, drawing on the imagery of the temple, the voices of the heavenly singers are compared to stringed instruments (Rev. 14:2-3); the instruments symbolize singing (cf. Rev. 15:2-3) in the same way that incense does prayer (Rev. 5:8-9). The testimony of early Christian literature is expressly to the absence of instruments from the church for approximately the first thousand years of Christian history.¹⁰²

The doctrinal aspects of music listed above are applicable to vocal music. Although instrumental music could be seen as satisfying some of these doctrinal points, it does not meet the criteria of edifying, instructive, spiritual, and rational worship. The voice is much more a matter of the self than any other gift of praise, and it brings an understandable content to the participants.

The arguments advanced in support of instrumental music fail to carry the case:

(1) It was used in the Old Testament. There it was an accompaniment of the sacrificial cultus (e.g., 1 Chron. 23:5; 2 Chron. 29:20-36), the abolition of which would have eliminated its accompaniments. The presence of something in Old Testament worship would legitimate many things in the church that no Christian group would want to practice.

100. Everett Ferguson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988); Jimmy Jividen, *Worship in Song* (Fort Worth: Star: 1987); Jack P. Lewis, "New Testament Authority for Music in Worship," *The Instrumental Music Issue* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1987), pp. 14-59; Rubel Shelly, *Sing His Praise: A Case for A Cappella Music as Worship Today* (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1987).

101. W. S. Smith, *Musical Aspects of the New Testament* (Amsterdam, 1962).

102. J. W. McKinnon, "The Church Fathers and Musical Instruments" (Dissertation, Columbia University, 1965).

(2) It is included in the words "psalm" and "make melody" (*psallō*). This is true of one stage in the history of the usage of these words but not of late Jewish and of Christian usage, where a vocal expression is all that can be affirmed (so clearly in 1 Cor. 14:15; James 5:13).¹⁰³ Actual word usage and context determine word meanings in given passages, not etymology. If an instrument were included in the meaning of the words, then it would seem that an instrument is required, but few are willing to go so far as to say that one must be used. As an alternative, "make melody" (*psallō*) in Ephesians 5:19 might be taken as a generic command covering any type of music, but this is untrue to actual Christian usage of the word in the early centuries.

(3) Its absence in the early church was a cultural matter, due to the associations of instrumental music with idolatry and immorality. The cultural explanation is an assertion lacking in proof. It is true that instruments were associated with idolatry and immorality, but this cannot be said of Jewish temple music. Moreover, these associations applied to vocal music as well, and singing was not rejected in the early church. Religious instrumental music was available to the early Christians if they had wanted to employ it.

(4) It is an aid to singing. It certainly may serve this use. However, this contention contradicts argument (1), for playing instruments was an act of worship in the Old Testament (Psalm 150 and many of the Psalms where praise or worship is done with an instrument). This argument not only makes the weakest case for the use of instruments, but the assertion also is often untrue, for in practice instruments (and the same is true for special choruses) frequently discourage or even replace congregational singing.

Giving¹⁰⁴

The readiness to give is a constant feature of the individual Christian life (Rom. 12:13; James 2:14-17). Giving is also done corporately through

103. See my *A Cappella Music*, pp. 1-27, the lexica, and especially H. Schlier, "Ado," and G. Delling, "Hymnos et al.," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, 1972), Vol. 1, p. 164 and Vol. 8, p. 499.

104. Jouette M. Bassler, *God and Mammon: Asking for Money in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).