

WORSHIP IN SONG

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On the night in which Jesus was betrayed just a few hours before he was to be crucified, he ate the Passover with his disciples for the last time and inaugurated the Lord's Supper. At the end of this memorable meeting the scriptures tell us, "And when they had sung a hymn they went out into the Mount of Olives." (Matt. 26:30). In reading this I have sometimes wondered what hymn they sang, and who was the one who began the singing. Did Jesus himself begin to sing with the apostles following. Or did our Lord call upon Peter, or John, or one of the lesser-known apostles to lead the hymn? The answers to these questions we shall never know, but we do know that our Lord and his apostles sang.

Many years later the apostle Paul was a prisoner in Philippi. At midnight he and Silas were bound solidly in the stocks in this Roman prison. Undoubtedly many of the other prisoners were asleep when "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises unto God." (Acts 16:25). Again, I have often wondered the reaction of those who heard. In this darkened dungeon what did the other prisoners think as they heard the strains of Christian hymns at midnight?

At a later time Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "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." (I Cor. 14:15). He also wrote to the church at Ephesus, "Speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." (Eph. 5:19). It is generally agreed that "psalms" refer to the actual psalms which he find in the Old Testament. "Hymns" are thought to be songs that are directed to God and Christ in praise and devotion. "Spiritual songs" are thought to be songs that are directed to fellow-Christians.

In his short epistle James, the Lord's brother, taught, "Is any among you suffering, let him pray. Is any among you cheerful, let him sing praise." (James 5:13). All of these passages indicate that the early Christians were a singing people. They sang as they walked on their journeys between the small towns of their ancient land. As they did their work, when circumstances permitted, they lifted their voices in song. In their assemblies they sang, as well as in small devotionals in homes and in caves. Singing was an important part of Christian worship.

At still another time the apostle Paul wrote, "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 unto God." (Col. 3:16). Singing was one of the five avenues of Christian worship which were taught Christians in the beginning of the church era. These avenues were: (1) prayer, (2) eating the Lord's Supper, (3) giving of one's means, (4) hearing the word of God expounded, and (5) singing. The silence of the scriptures, or as we sometimes speak of it "the law of exclusion," permits no other acts of worship. For this reason we have no lighting of candles, no burning of incense, nor any other act of Christian worship today. We are pledged to do only that for which we find authority in the scriptures and this means that we must confine our acts of worship to the five avenues commanded and exemplified in the New Testament. I might also mention that the "law of exclusion" does not permit the use of mechanical instruments. This is the reason--the only real reason--that we do not use instrumental music in our worship. We are authorized to sing, but not to play. This was the universal

practice in the early church and for half a dozen centuries after its beginning, according to the unanimous voice of church music historians.

It is obvious from a reading of the scriptures that Christians are to be a singing people. Great blessings come to God's children as they engage in this act of worship. We recognize that the singing was never meaningless nor perfunctory, nor merely habit. The early Christians sang meaningfully and worshipfully, or to borrow the apostle Paul's expression, "with the spirit...and with the understanding also." There was always purpose behind their singing. Let us note some of the purposes behind the singing of our Christian hymns today.

Teaching

One of the primary purposes for singing is teaching. As an example we might refer to that gem of a statement of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount, which has been so beautifully set to music "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." The message of this beautiful hymn is designed to encourage the Christian to believe that God will take care of him. He need not worry, he need not become a materialist, for God will provide.

Here is an example of a song which teaches basic fundamentals concerning the church.

"The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.
She is His new creation by water and the word;
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.

Elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation: one Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses with every grace endued."

Admonition and Exhortation

Other songs we sing admonish and encourage those who are Christians to do what they already know they should do. Here is an example,

"Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord;
Abide in Him always, and feed on His word;
Make friends of God's children; help those who are weak;
Forgetting in nothing His blessings to seek.

Take time to be holy, the world rushes on;
Spend much time in secret with Jesus alone;
By looking to Jesus, like Him thou shalt be;
Thy friends in thy conduct His likeness shall see."

Another song of exhortation says,

"Work for the night is coming,
Work through the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling,
Work 'mid springing flowers.
Work when the day grows brighter,
Work in the glowing sun;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man's work is done."

How needed this admonition is in a day when so many other things crowd out the doing of the Lord's work. Hardly a Lord's Day passes but that we need to encourage each other to work while we have life and opportunity. Life is so fleeting and our opportunities are soon gone.

Yet another type of admonition song is the invitation. We often sing such words as,

"While Jesus whispers to you...
While we are praying for you...
Now is the time to own Him...
Now is the time to know Him,
Come sinner, come!"

The effect of many voices saying these or similar words has led many a person outside of Christ to decide to respond to the Lord's invitation. There is definitely a place in our singing for songs whose purpose is admonition, encouragement, and exhortation.

Praise, Adoration And Thanksgiving

Yet another type of song is that in which we lift our voices in praise and adoration to God himself, or to Christ our Lord. One of the most meaningful is

"Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty!
Early in the morning our songs shall rise to Thee;
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! Tho' the darkness hide Thee,
Tho' the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see,
Only Thou art holy; There is none beside Thee,
Perfect in power, in love, and purity."

This is sheer praise and adoration. Another praise song has the words,

"Fairest Lord Jesus! Ruler of all nature!
O Thou of God and man the Son!
Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor,
Thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown.

Fair are the meadows, fairer still the woodlands,
Robed in the blooming garb of spring;
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer,
Who makes the woeful heart to sing."

Such songs of praise, adoration and thanksgiving satisfy the inner urge to pay just tribute to the Creator of our universe and the Savior of our souls.

Personal Dedication

Other songs afford us an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to Christ and to rededicate our lives to his Cause. One such song has the words,

"Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Thou art the potter; I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Another favorite of submission to the Lord's will is,

"I am Thine, O Lord; I have heard Thy voice,
And it told Thy love to me,
But I long to rise in the arms of faith,
And be closer drawn to Thee.

Consecrate me now to Thy service, Lord,
By the power of grace divine;
Let my soul look up with a steadfast hope,
And my will be lost in Thine."

Petition to God and Christ

One final category is that of intimate, personal petition to God and Christ for strength and help. We often sing such words as,
"Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise."

Then, there is the beloved hymn,

"Be with me Lord,--I cannot live without Thee,
I dare not try to take one step alone,
I cannot bear the loads of life unaided,
I need Thy strength to lean myself upon.

Be with me, Lord, when loneliness o'ertakes me,
When I must weep amid the fires of pain,
And when shall come the hour of my departure
For worlds unknown, O Lord, be with me then,"

In this last hymn we are thinking about the time when life shall have run its course and we are getting ready to depart for the world beyond. How important it is to be with the Lord throughout life in order that he will be with us then.

Conclusion

As we have looked back we have seen that the early Christians often sang hymns or admonition to each other and of praise to God. Let us hope that we have come to feel a deeper meaningfulness in the hymns that we sing. Every Christian is commanded to sing. He must enter into this part of the worship even though he is not a skilled or expert musician. There are great blessings to be had in singing, which none of us must permit himself to miss. We need to think of the meaning of each song and to meditate on its message before we begin our singing. We need to tune our minds so that when a song is announced we are in the proper spirit and frame of mind to sing it for its intended purpose. We must enter into the singing with feeling and enthusiasm.

In a sense we often "sing above our present achievements" so far as our Christian lives are concerned. We say things in song that are more spiritual and more Christian than we may yet feel in our hearts, but by saying them in song we stand a bit taller spiritually and come a step nearer to making these sentiments a reality in our lives. Singing is one of God's ways of lifting us to a higher plane of devotion. Let us pray and let us work that our worship in song may be a blessing to us and an acceptable offering to our Father in heaven.
