

Building Up the Church through Singing

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Introduction

Many characteristics distinguish mankind from all the lower forms of animal life. Among the most notable of these peculiarities are the size and capability of the human brain (which makes us superior to all other life forms) and the human voice. These two faculties, working in tandem, enable us to think, reason, and arrive at conclusions and then convert these thoughts and ideas into words, respectively. Our voices, in concert with our tongues and lips, articulate these words, with which we can intelligently communicate with others.

One of the unique functions of the human voice is not only that of talking, but of producing the beautiful sounds called “music” – singing, to be specific. Our voices are by no means the only source of musical sounds. Beginning with Jubal (Gen. 4:21), almost from the dawn of history men have continued to invent a plethora of instruments upon which to produce a wide variety of musical tones and sounds. However, as pleasing as the utterances from such instruments may be, many judge none of these mechanical/electronic devices, even when played by musical geniuses, equal to the loveliness of sounds of which our God-created instruments are capable.

God created men to serve and glorify Him. Isaiah declared of God’s people that He formed them “that they might set forth my praise” (Isa. 43:20–21). Paul wrote that the Father summed up all things in Christ, “to the end that we should be unto the praise of his glory, we who had before hoped in Christ” (Eph. 1:10–12). The very life-purpose of right-thinking persons is to “fear God and keep his commandments” (Ecc. 12:13). Would we not be greatly surprised if God had given us the faculty of speech and song and not expected us to employ these in offering up “a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to his name” (Heb. 13:15)?

Worshiping God in Song

Singing in the Old Testament

The practice of praising God in song goes back at least to Israel’s singing “the song of Moses” following the miraculous escape from Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea:

Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto Jehovah, and spake, saying, I will sing unto Jehovah, for he hath triumphed gloriously: The horse and his rider hath he thrown

into the sea. Jehovah is my strength and song, And he is become my salvation: This is my God, and I will praise him; My father's God, and I will exalt him (Exo. 15:1-2).

Bible students are well aware that the vast book of Psalms, most of which the inspired David wrote a millennium before Christ, is the hymnbook of the Hebrews. One does not read many of the Psalms without understanding why the Bible describes him as "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam. 23:1). Upon the completion of the first temple, Solomon appointed musicians for the temple service, among whom were "singers" (2 Chr. 5:12).

Singing in the New Testament

The Lord lived and died under the law of Moses. His custom was to attend synagogue worship on the sabbath (Luke 4:16). According to Alfred Edersheim, "There was no service of 'praise' in the synagogues," which implies that they did not sing hymns in synagogue worship (2). However, singing hymns of praise was not something with which the Lord and the apostles were unfamiliar. They engaged in such at least once – before departing from the upper room in Jerusalem, immediately after the Lord instituted His memorial supper and before they crossed Kidron to the Garden of Gethsemane (Mat. 26:30).

The authority of the Old Testament, with all its trappings of sacrifices, feast days, worship, and other elements peculiar to it – including the Ten Commandments – was "taken...out of the way" when Jesus was nailed to His cross (Col. 2:14). The Lord promised to build His church (Mat. 16:18), which He accomplished through the preaching of the Gospel on the Pentecost following His ascension (Acts 2:37-47). We soon learn that these earliest Christians met on the first, rather than the seventh, day of the week for worship (20:7). When we begin reading the epistles written to various congregations, we discover that one of the acts of worship in which they engaged when they assembled – under the direct tutelage of the apostles – was singing. The Corinthians were reminded to sing "with the spirit" and "with the understanding also" (1 Cor. 14:15), and this directive related specifically to their worship assembly (v. 23).

Paul commanded the saints in Ephesus to speak "one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19). He addressed a similar instruction to the Colossian Christians: "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). The apostle immediately followed this instruction with the admonition: "And whatsoever ye do, in word or

in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (v. 17). The force of this statement, relative to the singing of verse 16, is as follows: Just as engaging in singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in their worship assemblies was by the authority of Christ, so all their words and deeds were to be by His authority.

What do Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 teach us about singing in Christian worship?

- **The only music authorized by the Lord for His church is singing.** Neither of these passages (nor any others in the New Testament) refers in any way to playing, but to singing only. It matters not that various instruments were employed under the inferior Old Testament system of worship, because Jesus took "away the first, that he may establish the second" (Heb 10:9). A wide variety of instruments was available when our Lord established His church, but He intentionally left every one of them out of its worship. Just as there is no Scriptural authority for worshiping with instruments, there is no authority for mimicking the sounds of instruments with the human voice. Though one does such with only the voice, it is mere "sound-making" and does not constitute singing by any measure. Regardless of any claims to the contrary, any music besides authorized singing will not build up the church of the Lord.
- **Our singing in worship involves "speaking," "teaching," and "admonishing" others.** It is immediately obvious that no instrument of music fashioned by the hands of men is capable of "speaking" in any sense other than making sounds. Paul manifestly had more in mind by using this term than mere noise- or sound-making. No devised musical instrument can teach any spiritual lesson or admonish anyone to live righteously. No mere musical sounds such as humming or elongating a syllable such as "Ahhhhhh" can fulfill what God requires. Only by employing the voices and tongues the Lord has given us in **singing** "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" can we obey these commands. In these words, we see that our worship in song has the dual purpose of glorifying and praising God and His Son and edifying the church. Regardless of claims to the contrary, any music besides singing that speaks, teaches, and admonishes, will not build up the Lord's church.
- **Our singing in worship involves congregational participation.** The pronouns, *one to another* (to yourselves, KJV) (Eph. 5:19) and *one another* (Col. 3:16) so indicate. The pronouns in both passages are reflexive in their force. Wayne Jackson's comment is incisive on this point concerning Ephesians 5:19:
 - The grammar of the verse indicates that the entire congregation is to participate in the singing.
 - The pronoun *heautois* ("one to another") is a reciprocal, reflexive term, representing an interchange of action on the part of the singers.
 - Congregational singing is clearly authorized in the New Testament; authority for choirs and solos is conspicuously absent from the divine record (*Divine Pattern*).

What Jackson said concerning *heautois* is no less true concerning *heautos* in Colossians 3:16. Jesus sternly warned against “performance-oriented” practices in the name of worship (Mat. 6:1–18), and one, a few, or a large choir’s singing to the remainder of an assemblage tends heavily to that concept. The singing God authorizes in our worship assemblies involves everyone’s singing simultaneously to one another. Regardless of claims to the contrary, any music besides singing in which every congregant participates simultaneously – congregational singing – will not build up the Lord’s church.

- **Our singing in worship involves the heart.** In the Ephesian passage, we are to sing and make melody “with the heart.” Paul instructed the Colossian saints to sing “with grace in your hearts to God.” These statements indicate that our singing must be more than merely “going through the motions” or mouthing memorized verses while our thoughts run elsewhere. If we do not take care, we can be guilty of “vain repetition” when we sing as well as when we pray (Mat. 6:7). Many a brother or sister who loudly sings, “I Want To Be a Worker for the Lord” in a worship assembly is found to be a shirker instead of a worker when it comes time for a door-knocking campaign, teaching in the Bible school program, grading and mailing correspondence courses, publicizing a Gospel meeting, or any number of other things. Some who sing this song with verve choose not even to return for worship on Sunday night, casting doubt on whether or not they sang “with the heart” earlier in the day.

When we sing songs of praise to God and to the Christ, let us think seriously of their wondrous power, majesty, and greatness that transcends our ability to comprehend fully. When we sing of grace and mercy, we should be reminded of our own unworthiness and of the marvelous love and pity our Creator had and has for mankind. We should soberly sing the songs about the Lord’s return in Judgment, reflecting on the fact that we must “all be made manifest” before His judgment-seat (2 Cor. 5:10). We may safely conclude that heartless singing constitutes vain worship. When saints sing from and with the heart, truly entering into the thoughts of the songs, the church is edified. Regardless of claims to the contrary, singing that is not heartfelt – regardless of how beautiful it may sound to human ears – will not build up the Lord’s church.

In summary, regardless of how pleased men are with the additions, substitutions, and alterations men have made relative to music in worship, God is not glorified, and the church is not edified unless we offer him in song only what He has authorized.

Principles Governing Our Singing

The New Testament enunciates certain principles that must govern all our avenues of worship, including singing, if they are to be acceptable. Jesus’ words to the woman at Jacob’s Well provide a pivotal statement in this regard: “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). Besides including the only correct and allowable

object of worship – Deity, God Almighty, the Creator – the Lord includes two governing rules: Worship of God must be (1) “in spirit” and (2) “in truth.”

Worshipping “in Spirit”

What does it mean to “worship in spirit”? To answer this question, we must determine the meaning of *spirit* in this passage. In the Open Forum of the 2003 Freed-Hardeman University Lectures, Todd Deaver (son of Mac Deaver) proposed that Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit. He said, in part:

John 4:24 refers to worshipping in the spirit. I believe that’s the Holy Spirit there. He is in the Christian (1 Cor. 6:19–20), helping us in our worship. He is interceding for us within our hearts (Romans, chapter 8). And so, possibly, how that’s supposed to be looked at in the New Testament is that the Holy Spirit is not in Heaven receiving our worship but is in our hearts helping us to offer the worship (transcribed tape).

This interpretation evinces two immediate responses: (1) This is such an unusual exegesis among seasoned Bible students as to earn the rank of “exceptional”; (2) Did Todd Deaver hold this view before his father began touting his direct-operation-of-the-Holy Spirit doctrine in 1994? This unorthodox view certainly fits well with what has come to be known as the “Deaver doctrine”: by virtue of the Holy Spirit’s dwelling in the Christian, He gives special **direct** help and strength to us in our daily lives in addition to what He provides through His Word. Todd Deaver’s position applies the same **direct**-help assertion to our worship.

The almost unanimous view of brethren (and that of numerous denominational commentators as well [e.g., Reynolds, 17:169; Barnes, Luke-John, 218; Hendriksen, John, 1:167; Bruce, 1:728; Vincent, 2:121; et al.]) is that *spirit* here refers to the engagement of the human spirit and mind in rational, sincere devotion to God. The reference is to the heartfelt attitude we are to possess as we approach God in worship. In an excellent article in response to Deaver’s offbeat exegesis, Gary Summers addressed the assertion that the Holy Spirit “helps us to offer the worship”:

Do we sing better because the Spirit is with us? If He is helping us, we all ought to be Anthony Kearnses [of Irish Tenors fame] or Pavarottis [famed Italian tenor]. Is the brother who sings off-key a false teacher? Are our prayers of a higher quality with the Spirit’s help? They ought to be. Can those proclaiming the Gospel preach better? Do members give more money? Does Jesus’ death for our sins become more vivid during the Lord’s Supper with the Spirit’s help? ¹

God has provided the information in His Word (“the Truth”) by which we learn what pleases Him in worship and in every other area of our lives. We are able to understand what He

has revealed, else the “revelation” is no revelation at all (Acts 17:11; Eph 3:3–4; 2 Tim. 2:2; et al.). God has always required His people to enter into his service and/or worship with the whole heart (Deu. 6:5; Jos. 24:14; 1 Sam. 12:24; Isa. 29:13; Mat. 15:8; 22:37; Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 5:8; et al.). Such is the meaning of worshiping “in spirit” in John 4:24.

Meaning What We Sing

When we apply this principle to our singing, it implies that we sincerely mean what we sing. This puts all of us to the test. Do we sing, “I Love To Tell the Story” and then rarely or never tell it? Do we sing, “O How I Love Jesus” on Sunday morning and then forget we so sang when it is time to assemble for worship Sunday night? Do the words, “I will work, I will pray, I will labor every day,” make hypocrites of us when we sing them? Can I sincerely sing “I Surrender All”? Am I really “satisfied with just a cottage below, A little silver and a little gold,” or am I so busy pursuing a greater abundance of things that I have no time or energy to lay up eternal treasures? Can I sing “More About Jesus” and never open my Bible between Lord’s days? How many are presently compromising the Truth of God’s Word, while they loudly sing, “I’ll Never Forsake My Lord”? To sing “in spirit” implies that we sincerely synchronize our hearts with the words we are singing – that we genuinely mean those words.

Understanding What We Sing

Obviously, we cannot sincerely **mean** what we sing if we do not **understand** the words of the songs.² I am convinced that many brethren regularly sing words that they do not understand. Such misunderstandings are caused by several factors, including (1) figures of speech, (2) archaic terms, (3) seldom used words, (4) failure to read words correctly, and (5) ignorance of the Bible teaching or fact that may be alluded to in the song.

Many people through the years have asked me questions about the words of various songs with which we worship God and teach and admonish each other. In interest of helping us to sing with more meaning and understanding (thus more “in spirit”), I offer the following comments on the terminology in some of our songs.

- In “**Higher Ground**” we sing of “heaven’s table-land,” but to what does this refer? A table-land is a broad, level area, such as a plateau. “Heaven’s table-land” is a poetic way of describing the bliss of Heaven where we will be on a plateau above all the temptations, cares, and trials of this world.
- We sing of the “sweetest note in seraph song” in “**The Great Physician.**” “Seraph” is an abbreviated term for *seraphim*, a word describing angels of high rank (Isa. 6:2, 6). Thus the name of Jesus is the most precious name even the highest-ranking angels can sing.

- The “**Rose of Sharon**” does not refer to a thorny-stemmed flower that belongs to a girl named Sharon. Rather, *Sharon* is from a Hebrew word (*saron*), which means “level place” or “plain.” It is the name of the fertile plain along the Mediterranean Seacoast of old Canaan (modern Israel), generally described as stretching southward from Mt. Carmel to Joppa. The “rose of Sharon” is a reference to a beautiful wild flower that still grows there. “Jesus, Rose of Sharon,” is based on the poetic language found in Song of Solomon 2:1: “I am a rose of Sharon, A lily of the valleys.” It is intended figuratively to convey the beauty and attractiveness of our Lord.
- “**Did You Think To Pray?**” asks a question in verse 4: “When your soul was bowed in sorrow, Balm of Gilead did you borrow?” *Balm of Gilead* is from Jeremiah’s lament over the religious and moral corruption of Judah, not long before God gave the nation up to Babylonian captivity: “Is there no balm in Gilead? is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?” (Jer. 8:22). Gilead, the territory on the east side of the Jordan River from Canaan, was famous for producing a balm that was greatly valued as a medicine. The prophet, by his question, is admitting that there is no remedy left for the apostasy of his people – not even the celebrated balm of Gilead could heal them. The song uses *balm of Gilead* as a figurative expression for comfort and healing of the burdened heart, which is a fit subject of our prayers.
- If one shouts and sings glad “hosannas” to Christ (“**Just Over in the Gloryland**”), just what will he or she be shouting and singing? “Hosanna” is actually a Greek word spelled in English letters (transliterated), meaning, “Save, we pray!” While originally a plea for help, it evolved into an exclamation of praise. This cry of acclamation went up from the multitudes that thronged the Lord upon His “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem shortly before His arrest, trials, and death (Mat. 21:9). That shouting of “hosannas” was only typical of the extent of the glory and praise in which we will be privileged to participate in “gloryland.”
- A prophet whose pillow was a stone is mentioned in “**Mansion Over the Hilltop**.” This “prophet” was actually Jacob, who, when fleeing from the wrath of his twin brother, Esau, pillowed his head on a stone at Luz/Bethel, on his way to another land (Gen. 28:10–19). Jacob “prophesied” when, on his deathbed, he called his sons to him, saying: “That I may tell you that which shall befall you in the last days” (49:1). The point of mentioning Jacob’s stone pillow in the song is to remind us that the discomforts of this life should not matter because we are here only a short while before we arrive at our permanent dwelling of comfort and rest.
- We sing a song entitled, “**In Vain in High and Holy Lays**” (more commonly called, “Wonderful Love of Jesus”). What is meant by the “lays” we raise to the wonderful love of Jesus? *Lay* is an archaic term for *song*; thus, this hymn speaks of our feeble attempts to praise adequately and worthily the Christ in spiritual songs.
- When we sing “**Ivory Palaces**,” we say in the second verse that “aloes had a part” in Jesus’ life. This statement is a reference to the aloes provided by Nicodemus to prepare the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:39). An expensive ingredient used in first-century embalming was extracted from the pulp of the aloe leaf, a member of the lily family. Thus “aloes” was

directly related to death. The poetic language of the song reminds us that Jesus' coming to earth not only meant that he gave up his "ivory palace" of Heaven, but that He gave up His life as well – "aloes had a part."

- If someone told you to raise your "Ebenezer," what would you raise? Do we sing, "Here I raise my Ebenezer" ("**O Thou Fount of Every Blessing**") without knowing what it means? *Ebenezer* means "the stone of help," and it refers to a stone the prophet/priest/judge Samuel erected as a memorial to God's miraculous help for Israel in routing the Philistines (1 Sam. 7:10-12). When I "raise my Ebenezer" I am figuratively saying that I acknowledge God's blessing and care.
- In "**Give Me the Bible**," we sing of "the glory gilding Jordan's wave" (I have heard some misread it as "the glory gliding Jordan's wave"). That which is gilded (gilt) is overlaid with gold. "Jordan's wave" is a figurative expression for death. As Israel of old had to cross the Jordan River literally to enter the Promised Land, so all of God's spiritual Israel (the church) must cross the figurative "Jordan River" of death to gain Heaven. Death generally holds men in fear, but the promises and comforts of God's Word make even this attractive (as though gilded) for the faithful saint.
- If you won a "guerdon" ("**Beautiful Isle of Somewhere**"), would you know what you had won? A guerdon is a reward, and it refers to the promise of God to reward His children with Heaven, that poetic "beautiful isle of somewhere."
- "**'Tis Midnight, and on Olive's Brow**" has two expressions that some may miss. "Olive's brow" does not refer to the forehead of Popeye's sweetheart. Just east of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, is the Mount of Olives ("Olivet"), upon whose side ("brow") is the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus often went there (Luke 22:39; John 18:2), and He retired there with the eleven and prayed His prayers of agony on the eve of the crucifixion (Mat. 26:36). This song is about the events that transpired in Gethsemane before the Judas-led mob arrested Jesus. The second expression that some may not understand is in the last verse of the song. It speaks of the "ether [not "either"] plains," a figurative reference to the vast regions of space or of Heaven (*ether* refers to upper regions, as opposed to *nether*, lower regions). This figure calls attention to the comfort and strength the Lord found in His thrice-repeated prayer to His Father as He faced the cross.
- What (or who) is "Ebon Pinion" in "**Night, With Ebon Pinion**"? *Ebon* refers to the color, black (as related to ebony). A "pinion" is a bird's wing. The setting of this song, as in the one above, is the Lord's great agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. This series of events was so dark and somber that it was as though a great black bird, bearing doom, had cast its shadow over the Lord as He knelt to pray in the garden.
- To what does the word *rapture* refer in various songs (e.g., "**Face to Face**," "**A Wonderful Savior**," "**Blessed Assurance**," "**At Calvary**," et al.)? Some are reluctant to sing any song in which *rapture* appears because of its identity with the "rapture" heresy of dispensational premillennial theology. However, I have not found a single song in the books we commonly use in which *rapture* is so used. Likely, all the songs in which it appears were written before the "rapture" doctrine was ever invented, certainly before it attained its current widespread

acceptance. The *rapture* in our songs is a reference to the great joy and ecstasy that await the faithful when we at last realize the glory of Heaven.

- The “cloven skies” of **“It Came upon the Midnight Clear”** do not refer to skies with a spicy aroma. *Cloven* is an archaic term related to *cleave*, meaning to split or divide (thus the heavy-duty kitchen knife is a “meat cleaver”). Under the law of Moses, clean animals were those which not only “cheweth the cud,” but that also “parteth the hoof, and hath the hoof cloven in two” (Deu. 14:6). The “cloven skies” poetically describes the “opening” or “dividing” of the skies through which the angels descended and ascended at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:13–15).
- **“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”** mentions “Lord Sabaoth” in verse 2. *Sabaoth* is frequently misread (and mis-sung) as “Sabbath,” but these words have no relation to each other (although somewhat surprisingly, such classical authors as Spencer, Bacon, Johnson, and Scott have thus confused them in some of their works). *Lord of Sabaoth* is found twice in the Bible (Rom. 9:29; Jam. 5:4). *Sabaoth* is an anglicized Greek word (i.e., a Greek word converted directly to an English word) which means “armies” or “hosts.” Its Old Testament equivalent is *Jehovah [Lord, KJV] of hosts*, which occurs 260 times, mostly in connection with the armies of God’s people. However, it came eventually, even in the prophets, to be another reverent title for God. Hence, to attribute *Lord Sabaoth* to Christ (as Martin Luther did in his hymn) is to attribute to Him Deity.
- If you needed to locate “The Syrian Sea” on a map, could you find it? The beautiful prayer/hymn, **“Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,”** refers to this sea. We have a clue in the word *Syrian*, but even so, Syria is a large area (with sometimes indistinct borders) on the Biblical map. As far as I know, there is no body of water actually named “The Syrian Sea.” Rather, this is a poetic/figurative name for the Sea of Galilee, which even today is very near the modern nation of Syria. The song verse simply retells the Lord’s call of the Galilean fishermen to be His disciples. As an interesting sidelight, the Sea of Galilee is also known in the Old Testament as “The Sea of Chinnereth” (Num. 34:11) and “Chinneroth” (Jos. 12:3) and in the New Testament as “The Lake of Genneserat” (Luke 5:1) and “The Sea of Tiberias” (John 21:1).
- **“Beneath the Cross of Jesus”** contains at least two words that we do not use every day, plus reference to an Old Testament character and occurrence that some may not understand. The first verse has the expression, *I fain would take my stand*. My computer’s MS Word spell-checker does not recognize *fain*, which indicates that it is either extremely uncommon or archaic—or both. The latter, archaic, is true of *fain*. This archaic (and thus uncommon) word means to do something willingly or happily. Therefore, as we sing this song, we are saying in effect that we willingly, gladly, place ourselves under the benefits of that which the Lord accomplished in His death. The second verse refers to the cross with the compound word, *trysting-place*. *Tryst* originally meant an agreement to meet and then came to mean a meeting place—its meaning in this song: The cross is the place where God’s love and justice meet.
- Another song about the cross, **“In the Cross of Christ I Glory,”** has the word *bane* in verse 4. This word is pregnant with ideas of harm and hurt. In its history it has variously meant

“poison,” “death,” and “destruction.” However, its more recent usage relates to a source of harm or ruin or a curse, which is its meaning in the song. Thus, *bane and blessing* means something like “bad times and good times,” answering to the song’s immediately following phrase, *pain and pleasure* — the cross sanctifies both.

- Have you ever puzzled over the meaning of *sometimes where Eden’s bowers bloom* in verse 2 of the familiar song, “**He Leadeth Me**”? The “Eden” part is an obvious reference to the primitive Garden of Eden, which was the paradise home God made for Adam and Eve. But what are the “blooming bowers”? One of the meanings of *bower* is a garden shelter made of intertwined tree limbs or vines, what we might call an “arbor.” The song phrase poetically places such an arbor in Eden, and it is a living structure, indicated by the fact that it is blooming. The blooming bowers of Eden are contrasted in the verse with “scenes of deepest gloom.” Hence the phrase *where Eden’s bowers bloom* is a figurative, poetic way of referring to experiences that are blissful, happy, and joyous as though we were in a dwelling in paradise surrounded by life. The idea in the verse is that we must trust and follow God’s leadership at all times, both in the bad and the good times.³
- Although “**Break Thou the Bread of Life**” is listed as a “communion song” in the Topical Index of some of the hymnbooks, the song does not relate to the Lord’s supper at all. Probably, because it begins with a reference to “breaking bread,” many assume without warrant that it relates to Jesus’ breaking the bread as He instituted His supper (Mat. 26:26). Even a casual attention to the words indicates otherwise. The setting alluded to in the song is not the upper room in Jerusalem, but “beside the sea” (v. 1) and “by Galilee” (v. 2). The “loaves” He broke “beside the Sea” refers to physical food for the apostles’ breakfast. The bread to be broken is not the unleavened bread of the supper, but the “bread of life,” a figurative reference to “the Sacred page” — God’s Word. This is a song that exalts the Word of God and its power, and it has no connection with the Lord’s supper.

By no means does the foregoing list exhaust all the words or phrases in our songs that bear some commentary and explanation. Some of these “song mysteries” can be easily solved by consulting a standard English dictionary, which I encourage readers to do when they encounter an unfamiliar word.

Worshipping “in Truth”

To worship “**in truth**” is equivalent to worshipping **according to** truth. There is no source or standard of truth apart from the revelation God has given mankind in the Bible. As Jesus prayed to His Father, He declared, “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17b). He had promised the apostles shortly before, speaking of the Holy Spirit Whom He would send to them:

Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth: for he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, *these* shall he speak: and he shall declare unto you the things that are to come” (John 16:13).

I emphasize that the Son of God promised that, before the last apostle died, the Holy Spirit would reveal to them not a little, not some, or much, but “**all** the truth.” The New Testament contains all that any human being knows or can know about what pleases God in worship. There is no other source because there has been and there will be no further revelation from God.

Earlier I set forth the pattern for worship in the New Testament as it relates to music. Scripturally authorized music in the church consists of singing various kinds of songs on spiritual and Scriptural themes that glorify God and that teach and admonish us as we all sing together from the heart. This statement summarizes the teaching of the Truth relative to the only music God authorizes and allows as an avenue of worship for His church.

However, not only must we observe the aforementioned pattern relating to our worship in song. To sing “in truth” requires that the thoughts, words, and messages of the songs we sing must convey only the Truth and/or be in complete harmony with the Truth. Singing “in truth” does not allow us to sing whatever words will please us or others, nor does it allow us to ignore words that teach error because we are so enamored with the tune or rhythm of the song. As previously noted (Col. 3:16), besides hymns of praise to God, we are to sing spiritual songs whereby we teach one another. The teaching in the Bible classroom and the preaching from the pulpit must be only the Truth with no intermingled error. The Scriptural urgings to abide in the Truth and in the sound doctrine and the warnings against error and those who teach it are so replete in the New Testament as to need no documentation. We are obligated to take as much care to teach **only the Truth** in the words we sing as we are in the words we utter in preaching and teaching.

Some song leaders (and even elders) seem to operate on the assumption that if a song is in one of the song books that the Lord’s congregations commonly use, we can assume that it is safe to sing. However, such is far from the truth. Many seem unaware or to have forgotten that denominational people wrote most of the songs in our books, and the words of their songs often reflect their theology. Many of us have come to superimpose somewhat “automatically” Scriptural concepts over what originally were erroneous theological tenets imbedded in various songs. Without attempting an exhaustive list, perhaps a few illustrations will spur us to be more aware of the words of the songs we sing in worship.

Calvinistic theology: Many of the songwriters were Calvinists or other products of the sixteenth-century Reformation. In “Amazing Grace,” God’s grace is said to appear “the hour I

first believed.” If one understands that *belief* in the New Testament includes the entire plan of salvation, whereupon God bestows His grace, these words are not a problem. However, the songwriter, John Newton, very likely believed and preached salvation by faith only. There is a similar theme in the chorus of “Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed,” in which at the cross one is said to “see the light,” have his burdens “rolled away,” and there “by faith” to have received his “sight.” Isaac Watts was almost certainly preaching the doctrine of faith-only salvation in these words, but, again, as long as we override them with Scriptural concepts in our minds, we can sing them truthfully.

“Just a Little Talk with Jesus” has so many Calvinistic and denominational concepts in it that its errors are insuperable. According to its words, if one will just “have a little talk with Jesus” he will be filled with light from Heaven, have his heart bathed in love, and have his name written above – all figurative references to salvation. The final verse of “The Solid Rock” (aka “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less” in some books) states of the saved at the Lord’s coming: “Dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.” Of course, no one can be saved without being washed in the perfect, pure, righteous blood of Christ, but we must also be found to have lived “soberly and righteously and godly in this present world” to receive His grace (Tit. 2:11-12). The song’s author, Edward Mote, appears to be expressing in these words the Calvinistic dogma of “imputed righteousness” or “transferred righteousness.” According to this doctrine, God “transfers the **personal perfection of the righteous life** of Christ to sinners when they believe so that **His righteousness becomes theirs**” (McClish, 486). Of course, transference of personal righteousness and innocence from one person to another is as impossible as transference of personal sin and guilt (Eze. 18:20b). If one sings these words, he should have in mind the Scriptural concept that apart from the sinless life and pure blood of Christ none could not stand before His throne justified.

Premillennial theology: The Song, “Jesus Is Coming Soon,” is notorious for its second verse, especially:

Love of so many cold, losing their home of gold, This in God’s Word is told, evils abound.
When these signs come to pass, nearing the end at last, it will come very fast, trumpets will sound.

It is objectionable enough to predict that “Jesus is coming soon,” when He repeatedly stated that no one can determine the time of His coming, whether soon or late (Mat. 24:36,39, 42, 44) and Paul and Peter add that His coming will be as “a thief in the night” (1 The. 5:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:9-10). R.E. Winsett promulgates egregious error in mistaking the “signs” of the destruction of

Jerusalem for “signs” of the Lord’s return (Mat. 24), as his second verse does. This error is standard in all premillennialists. It is beyond me how some continue leading and singing such heresy and give no more than a wave of the hand to those who call attention to its gross error. My strong suspicion is that some are so carried away with the catchy rhythm and tune of this song, that their sensual pleasure in singing it outweighs their concern for the Truth it abuses.

Another song containing premillennial error is “Living by Faith.” I find nothing erroneous in the first three verses of this song, and there is very much to praise in it. However, verse 4 states that “Our Lord will return to this earth some sweet day,” which is contrary to Scripture. The nearest the New Testament has Jesus to being **on the earth** when He returns is **in the clouds**, from whence He will call the redeemed to meet Him and be with Him forever (1 The. 4:16–17). Premillennial theology demands that the Lord come back to the earth, per the words of verse 4, to establish His alleged earthly millennial kingdom. An interesting fact about this song is that James Wells, author of verses 1–3, did not write verse 4. None other than R.E. Winsett, author of “Jesus Is Coming Soon,” wrote this verse, obviously for the purpose of injecting his premillennial dogma into an otherwise worthy Gospel song.

Praying to Jesus: With some songs, there is somewhat of a fine line between songs that praise Jesus and songs that explicitly or implicitly teach that we should directly address Jesus in prayer. In some cases, the individual conscience will have to determine whether one can sing a given song. Some of the more obviously objectionable “praying-to-Jesus” songs are “Tell It to Jesus,” “I Must Tell Jesus,” “’Tis the Blessed Hour of Prayer,” “Jesus, Hold My Hand,” and “Just a Little Talk with Jesus.” There are several others relating to prayer in which a degree of “poetic license” must be applied for them to be Scriptural.

Holy Spirit errors: The second verse of “Come Thou Almighty King” includes a petition for special and direct operation by the Holy Spirit: “Spirit of holiness, On us descend.” The Holy Spirit “descended” on the apostles on Pentecost and then on the household of Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts. 2:1–4; 11:15). Jesus sent Him to the apostles to reveal through them all of the Truth (John 16:13). The Lord sent Him to Cornelius to convince the Jewish Christians that God included the Gentiles in His scheme of redemption (Acts 11:17–18). In the first century He did not fall upon any of those named above in response to their prayers. Those who pray for such today pray in vain, and we should not encourage such vain and erroneous concepts as we sing. None would deny that we all need to pray more and that it is good to sing about that need. “Did You Think To Pray?” helps remind us of the power of prayer. However, in verse 2, the

song suggests an erroneous idea concerning the Holy Spirit: “By His [Christ’s] dying love and merit, Did you claim the Holy Spirit As your guide and stay?” The author apparently has in mind praying for direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, which is an unscriptural concept. If we “translate” these words into a reminder to study the Spirit’s Word more diligently and then employ His Word to make Him our “guide and stay,” I suppose that will work. It might be better just to omit verse 2.

Some of the verses of invitation songs we commonly sing contain very questionable verbiage at best. The first verse of “Almost Persuaded” is at least suspect in this regard: “Seems now some soul to say, “‘Go, Spirit, go Thy way’.” The implication is that the Holy Spirit is within this person who is “almost persuaded” to believe and to “receive Christ.” Verse 4 of “Prepare To Meet Thy God” contains words with a similar idea: “If you spurn the invitation Till the Spirit shall depart, Then you’ll see your sad condition, Unprepared to meet thy God.” Verse 3 of “Why Do You Wait?” conveys the same concept” “Do you not feel, dear brother, His Spirit now striving within?” The Holy Spirit dwells in none but those who have already believed and obeyed the Gospel (Acts 5:32; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19; et al.). One of the books used by many congregations contains the song, “Every Time I Feel the Spirit,” the title of which says all that needs to be said about its Pentecostal flavor. Some of the newer song books include the song, “Sweet, Sweet Spirit,” which is blatantly Pentecostal in its implications. Brethren who lead it (or sing it) and similar songs are grossly ignorant, utterly undiscerning, have a “change agent” agenda, or perhaps all three.

Uncategorized errors: The song, “He Lives,” advocates raw subjectivism. This is a wonderful song, in both its words and its music – until one reaches the final words of the chorus: “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.” The Bible teaches no such thing. This claim is no better than that made by the Mormon “elders” for the “prophetic” credentials of Joseph Smith. Their silly and subjective “heartburn evidence” says nothing about what sort of man Joe Smith was. To claim that one “knows” that Jesus lives because He lives in one’s heart is no proof at all. This claim dilutes the meaning of “knowing” anything about Jesus. We **know** that Jesus lives all right, but such knowledge rests upon the incontrovertible evidence presented in the revelation of God and all of the mighty miracles and signs that confirm that revelation (John 20:30–31; Heb. 2:3–4). Let us think about the words and ideas we are singing.

“Faith of Our Fathers” generally does a good job of reminding us of the sacrifices of those who have gone before, and we should be ever thankful for those who have paid such a

high price for the faith and for their faith. However, Frederick W. Faber apparently got “carried away” as he wrote verse 2: “Our fathers chained, chained in prisons dark, were still in heart and conscience free; How sweet would be their children’s fate, If they, like them, could die for thee!” These words state a sentiment never found in Scripture. While our Savior unabashedly calls upon His disciples not only to go to prison, but to die for Him, if necessary (Rev. 2:10), He never suggests that we should **desire** or **seek** martyrdom. This sentiment is closely akin to asceticism, which attributes virtue to suffering for suffering’s sake. The Qur’an may contain such erroneous thinking, as Islamic terrorist tactics of recent years seem to demonstrate, but it is nowhere found in the Bible.

“What a Savior” is a beautiful song that exalts the Christ, but one must go beyond the excuse of “poetic license” to accept the latter part of the first verse: “They searched through heaven and found a Savior.” Those words imply that the choice of our Lord to become our Redeemer was almost accidental and unforeseen. No searching had to occur in Heaven before the Father sent the eternal Word to become God in the flesh. God’s plan of redemption through His Son and through the church was according to His “eternal purpose,” not the result of scouting for a volunteer to come below (Eph. 3:8–12). The suggestion that God had to play heavenly hide and seek to find our Savior is brazenly irreverent and sacrilegious. It suggests that God was not sure if He could find one who was capable of being the Savior of mankind or if He could, who that one would be. It further implies that the eternal Word did not know He was to be that One. Scripture says, however: “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth his Son...” (Gal. 4:4). He knew exactly Whom He was going to send – without any sacred search parties. The Bible also says that our Savior “who existed in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...” (Phi. 2:5–7). He knew He was to be the Savior, and He willingly came when the time was right. Away with the idea that a search party had to be commissioned before a Redeemer could be dispatched.

Occasionally a songwriter makes a simple factual mistake. J.M. Black did so in verse 2 of his familiar song, “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder.” He wrote: “On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise.” However, when the Lord ascended from Olivet, Luke records that “a cloud received him out of their sight,” and the heavenly messengers revealed that He “shall so come in like manner as ye beheld him going into heaven” (Acts 1:9–11). Paul declared that at the Lord’s descent from Heaven He will raise the dead and

then catch the redeemed “up in the clouds” to meet Him in the air (1 The. 4:16–17). John added the following testimony concerning the condition of the skies at the Lord’s return: “Behold, he cometh with the clouds...” (Rev. 1:7). Note the following:

1. The Bible connects the Lord’s return and the resurrection as events immediate to each other in their occurrence.
2. The Lord will return through/with the clouds.
3. Therefore, it is Scripturally inaccurate to describe resurrection day as a “bright and cloudless morning.”

While the statement is inaccurate (and we should always be concerned even with “jot” and “tittle” accuracy), it is a simple factual mistake that poses no threat to the soul, as many of the aforementioned errors potentially pose. The song may be easily corrected by substituting *glorious* for *cloudless*.

We should remember that the Bible specifies “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” for our worship assemblies. Most of the commonly used song books include some songs that do not fit any of these specified types. For example, the well-known “Precious Memories.” As originally written (and as it appears in all but one of the song books I have seen), its three verses are on a completely secular theme, having to do with cherished memories of one’s father, mother, and childhood home. These are all noble thoughts, but this is not a spiritual song in any sense. Ellis J. Crum, publisher of *Sacred Selections* (and notorious for changing the words of numerous songs), rewrote the original second verse and added a third verse to give it some religious flavor. Another interesting song that is totally deficient as a song for worship is “There’s a Church in the Valley.” This song lauds “the little brown church in the vale” and the writer’s pleasant memories connected therewith. One wonders if William S. Pitts may have been commissioned by the little brown church’s homecoming committee to write this song. It has little more merit than for some such purpose.

Some songs blend patriotism and religion. Katherine Lee Bates’s “America the Beautiful,” is such a song, which is in most of the books from which we sing. While all believers desire God’s blessings upon our nation and mourn that she is no longer worthy in so many ways of His blessings, this song tends heavily toward patriotism more than toward praise and edification.

Two or three of the more recent hymnbooks published by our brethren contain numerous songs of rather recent vintage. Some of these are worthy and beautiful songs, but

many of them are of the “contemporary” genre, and their use is somewhat disquieting and worrisome. Considerable musical knowledge and ability nearing performance level are required to sing some of them, which disenfranchises most members of most congregations. Several such songs are of the “Kumbaya” variety that seem better suited for adolescents singing around a campfire than for an orderly worship assembly. Many of the newer songs seem geared far more to a “touchy-feely” approach to worship than we find in most of the grand old hymns and time-tested spiritual songs.

I will not judge the motives of the writers or compilers of these songs, but the effect of publishing them has been to create a separation between the younger generation (who generally favor these songs) and the older generation (who generally are unable and/or unwilling to sing them) in various congregations. Just by the selection of such songs in these newer books, a congregation can almost be divided along the lines of those who might favor, given their choice, “contemporary” worship approaches over “traditional” worship approaches. A few years ago, liberal churches began offering two Sunday morning worship assemblies, labeling one “contemporary” (read “liberal”) and the other “traditional” (read “conservative”). This tactic has become one of the hallmarks of the change agents in their revolutionary efforts to overturn and replace almost everything long practiced among the saints. These “contemporary” worship assemblies thrive on such “contemporary” songs as led by the “praise team” performers that choreograph and lead them. Some of the newer songs contain blatant false doctrine (e.g., “Sweet, Sweet Spirit,” referenced above).

Having said all the above, one can go to an extreme in analyzing and excluding songs. One brother has written an entire book on this subject that, if followed, would greatly shrink our hymnbooks. Several years ago, one of the elders where I was preaching was a song leader and was responsible for selecting others to lead singing in our worship assemblies. He and his wife took it upon themselves to study the words of every one of the 700 plus songs in the book we were using. They came up with 120 plus songs they believed we should not sing. I know of congregations that have divided relative to such severe song editing. Brethren who go to such extremes seem to make no allowances at all for figurative language or poetic license. While it is incumbent upon us to carefully study the words we sing and to avoid the verses of the songs that teach error (which will require exclusion of entire songs in some cases), we should also avoid irrationally editing our song books.

Conclusion

As in all things, the Lord knew exactly what He was doing when He authorized and commanded us to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in our worship assemblies. The teaching and admonishing we do through our songs, if done “in spirit and in truth,” will exalt the Father and His Son and build up the church.

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Endnotes

1. Paul instructed the Corinthians to “sing with the spirit” and “sing with the understanding also” (1 Cor. 14:15). This passage is frequently interpreted to mean that we must understand what we sing. While none can gainsay this dictum, as argued above (how can one sincerely sing words he does not understand?), this is not the apostle’s point here. While we deny that Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit’s involvement in worship in some direct fashion in John 4:24, this passage indicates the occurrence of that very phenomenon in this Corinthian assembly. The setting of this statement pertains to a gathering in which brethren were exercising miraculous spiritual gifts (i.e., prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues) (vv. 1–5). He warned them not to speak in tongues unless an interpreter was present, for a message in a tongue known only to the speaker would be profitless to the hearers, and they should be concerned with doing only such things as would edify the church (vv. 6–13). Apparently, the Spirit inspired the prayers and the songs of some of these brethren, which some of them were leading in tongues. But Paul warned that those thus endowed should not only be concerned with praying and singing “with the spirit” (i.e., by inspiration), but “with the understanding also” (so as to be understood by those assembled) (vv. 14–15). Context indicates that *pray/sing with the spirit* refers to the one **leading** the inspired prayer or song. Therefore, *pray/sing with the understanding* must likewise refer to the inspired prayer or song **leader**, rather than the hearers. Thus, he continues: “Else if thou bless [pray, DM] with the spirit, how shall he that filleth the place of

the unlearned [ASV fn.: Or, him that is without gifts] say the Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he knoweth not what thou sayest" (v. 16). David Lipscomb's paraphrase captures the essence of Paul's thought regarding singing "with the understanding also": "I will sing as the Spirit directs or inspires, and I will sing in a language that those who hear can understand" (208). Burton Coffman adds: "The quotation of these verses in the sense of people singing and praying in he public services 'with the spirit and the understanding' is based upon an incorrect discernment of their meaning. It is not the subjective understanding of the participant that is meant, but the objective purpose of conveying understanding to others." (231). In effect, Paul is telling them not to pray or sing in a tongue that conveys no meaning (i.e., "understanding") to the others assembled. His statement in verse 16 appears to confirm this exegesis.

Does the aforementioned interpretation lend any weight to Deaver's assertion that the Holy Spirit directly helps us in our worship? Can he say with any credence, "The fact that the Spirit directly helped the Corinthians in their worship indicates that the Lord had in mind the Spirit's help for **our** worship in John 4:24"? Not at all, unless he wants to affirm that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit are still available to us (which his direct-operation-of-the-Holy Spirit doctrine in effect affirms).

Furthermore, Paul's description shows us what occurred in the infantile church when Christians were receiving direct, Holy Spirit help in their worship: They produced inspired messages, prayers, and songs. If the Spirit were directly helping us in our worship today, some among us would surely be uttering inspired messages and prayers and producing infallibly correct psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

2. I originally wrote this commentary on the terminology of various songs in a slightly different and abbreviated form and published it in two issues of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL* (April, June 2002), of which I was Editor at the time.

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