

MUSIC IN WORSHIP

Violations of God's Revealed Pattern

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Most of what has been said and written about perversions of God's pattern with reference to music in worship has centered around the use of the instrument. While that issue is far from dead, I do not believe it would be wise to use the short time I have today to talk about the question of the instrument. Most of us here are agreed on that matter, and are familiar with the arguments.

I plan to spend the major portion of my time on the matter of what some refer to as "special music," meaning solos, duets, trios, quartets, choirs, and the like. This seems to be the thing most of the discussion about music among us is all about.

But before we get into that matter, let us briefly consider two other questions. The first has to do with whether or not we should sing while we are eating the Lord's Supper. I can think of at least three reasons why such should not be practiced. In the first place, it is without Scriptural precedent. One cannot follow the example of Jesus and His apostles if he sings during the Lord's Supper. Jesus and His apostles ate the Supper, and then they sang (Mt. 26:30). Jesus obviously did not believe singing during the Lord's Supper was the thing to do, or else He would have said, "Now, let us all sing while we eat." The fact He could have done it, but obviously did not think it was the thing to do, causes me to believe it is not the thing to do. I wonder if those who practice singing during the Supper picture Jesus in their minds as observing their actions, and saying, "Now, why didn't I think of that?" The other two reasons I will mention are secondary. But the fact that there is no Scriptural precedent for a practice is reason enough to leave it off.

In the second place, singing during the Lord's Supper, or during the collection, seems to detract from the importance of those two items of worship. If they are legitimate acts of worship to God, why do we need something to go along with them to make them more effective? I believe such a practice is an indictment of the wisdom of God in stipulating the Lord's Supper and the

contribution as acts of worship.

In the third place, such a practice does not promote unity among brethren. We all agree that it is in harmony with the will of God to eat the Lord's Supper and contribute of our means without any accompaniment. Such being the case, why do it some other way?

A second question has to do with humming instead of singing, or with making vocal sounds that imitate a mechanical instrument. I want it understood that we are not here discussing what one person or a group of people might do for enjoyment or for their own edification or the edification of others. We are here discussing the matter of music in worship.

There is as much authority for playing a bass fiddle in worship as there is for humming or making sounds like a bass fiddle. Such sounds in worship are not only without Scriptural authority, but are without the ability to teach and admonish (Col. 3:16). Concerning this also it can be said that it does not contribute to "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

Now we will move to the question of "special music." Does the New Testament authorize choirs and solos? Very little has been written on this subject by our brethren, and up until the late eighties, practically nothing had been written on the subject. I suppose the reason is that we have all understood that our singing is to be congregational, and the question of choirs and solos just never came up. Some would say this is proof that mere tradition is the only reason some of us hold to congregational singing as the only acceptable kind. But could it be that this position was never questioned by our brethren for so many years because our brethren have generally been content to follow the leading of the New Testament, and the New Testament simply did not lead them to use choirs and solos?

Before I begin to examine some passages that deal with the subject, I want to make you aware of something quite significant, and that is this: many of those who are in the forefront of the battle to bring acceptability to special music are men who do not subscribe to the view that what we do in religion must be authorized by the New Testament. Let me give you some examples. Rubel

Shelly wrote in the bulletin of the Woodmont Hills church in Nashville (July 19, 1989): "The New Testament precedent is actually clearer for solo or small-group singing than for congregational singing." This suggests that the scriptural precedent for congregational singing is not very clear, yet brother Shelly believes congregational singing is all right. In other words, he believes we do not have to have very clear scriptural precedent for what we do in worship.

Howard Norton wrote in the *Christian Chronicle* (January 1990) an editorial in which he talked about choir and solo performances during worship. He is clearly in favor of such, but referred to some who oppose such, and then asked, "Why? Because the Bible says it is wrong?" He then answered his own question by saying, "No, because we have not done it traditionally." Look at the implication: if the Bible does not say it is wrong, then no man should oppose it. Does this not suggest that a thing does not have to be authorized, just so long as the Bible does not say it is wrong? The same logic would prove there is nothing wrong with instrumental music in worship. Brother Norton's entire article was reprinted in several church bulletins, including the one from the Homewood church in Birmingham. Also brother Norton's argument from that article was quoted here in Montgomery by brother David Slater in a sermon he preached September 4, 1994, and in that sermon he was trying to make a case for special group singing in worship.

In that same sermon, brother Slater said, "So we make a good case for a cappella music. But if you want me to make the case that anybody that doesn't see it that way is going to hell, I won't make that case." Now, I wonder if brother Slater believes instrumental music in worship is sinful?

Those who are following the lead of certain well-known brethren insisting there is nothing wrong with solos and quartets in our worship assemblies have a right to know that the commitment to the authority of the Scriptures on the part of those leaders is somewhat questionable, as is seen by these statements.

Now let us approach the question. Has God authorized choir singing and solo singing in Christian worship? If so, such authority will be found in Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25;

Romans 15:9; First Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; or James 5:13. These are the only verses in the New Testament that mention our singing. If it is not authorized in them, it is not authorized.

Let us look first at Ephesians 5:18-19: "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." Now, the subject of this sentence is "You" (understood), and the verb is "be filled." This is a plural verb admonishing all the saints at Ephesus to "be filled with the Spirit." And then in verses 19-21 there are five participles which modify the verb: λαλουντες `speaking,' αδοντες `singing,' ψαλλοντες `making melody,' ευχαριστουντες `giving thanks,' and υποτασσομενοι `submitting.'

What is commanded here is commanded to all those saints at Ephesus. The words "to yourselves" (AV) are rendered "one to another" in the American Standard Version. The Greek word from which this phrase is translated is said to be used "to denote that the agent and the person acted on are the same..." (Thayer). Thayer also says the word is frequently used in the plural for the reciprocal pronoun, and then he gives the meaning when it is used in this sense: "reciprocally, mutually, one another." In other words all are told to sing and all are told to be sung to. That is exactly what is taking place when we have congregational singing, and it is only by means of congregational singing that both singing and being sung to is taking place. Who is to do the singing? All the saints at Ephesus. To whom is the singing to be done? All the saints at Ephesus. What did Thayer say about the Greek pronoun here used? He said it denotes that the agent and the person acted on are the same, that is, the persons doing the singing and the persons being sung to are the same ones. That is congregational singing.

Brother Bill Long has written a paper entitled, "Is Anyone Happy? Let Him Sing..." In that paper he makes the statement, "God teaches singing, but does not specify a mode or means..." Brother Long is in error with that statement. Ephesians 5:19 does get very specific about the kind of

singing God requires. It is the kind where the ones doing the singing are the ones being sung to. Our dear brother also cited several passages which contain the same pronoun as Ephesians 5:19, and he tried to show that a pronoun of that nature does not demand that the whole group be involved in what is being done, but he failed. In all the examples he cited he did not cite one which denoted that one or a few in a group acted upon the rest of the group embraced by that pronoun. If he could have found a case of such, he would have produced it. In a review I wrote I showed that not one of those verses teaches what he needed it to teach in order to justify what he was trying to justify. In fact, they teach the very opposite.

Colossians 3:16 has the same word, and the meaning is the same. The King James Version has it this way: "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." Who is to do the teaching and admonishing? The Colossians. To whom was the teaching and admonishing to be done? The Colossians.

Unless some passage can be shown to authorize some kind of singing other than the kind here authorized, then there is no authority for any other kind. Let us examine the other seven verses in the New Testament that mention singing in our worship and see if any of them authorize a different kind of singing.

Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14: 26 are identical, and both of them say, "And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives." Who was present on that occasion? Jesus and His apostles. Who did the singing? Jesus and His apostles. There are no solos and choirs in those verses.

The next verse that mentions singing is Acts 16:25: "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them." How many Christians were present on this occasion? Two. How many sang? Two. There is no authority in this verse for solo singing. If it was ever going to happen, this would be the place for it to happen. But it didn't happen, did it?

Those seeking to find authority for solo singing in the worship assemblies will have to look elsewhere.

Singing is next mentioned in Romans 15:9: "And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name." This is a quotation from Psalms 18:49, which refers to the fact that the psalmist would sing praises unto the Lord, even when surrounded by unbelievers. Paul, the writer of Romans, quotes this verse in showing that the gospel is to be preached to Gentiles as well as Jews. There is certainly nothing in this verse to lead one to believe he is to sing a solo in the assembly of the saints.

First Corinthians 14:15, the next verse in the New Testament to mention singing, says, "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." This statement is in a context where speaking in tongues is being discussed. The thing being emphasized in this passage is that our singing and praying should be understood by those who hear us. This fits in perfectly with "speaking to yourselves" (Eph. 5:19), and "teaching and admonishing one another" (Col 3:16). There is nothing to indicate that the singing referred to here is any different from that authorized in Ephesians and Colossians, that is, congregational singing.

Hebrews 2:12, which is quoted from Psalms 22:22, says, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee." Instead of "church" the psalm has "congregation." Those of us who sing as the rest of the congregation sings are doing exactly what the passage says. There is certainly no reason to think any other kind of singing is under consideration.

The ninth and last verse in the New Testament which mentions our singing is James 5:13: "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms." There is nothing here to suggest that one should sing a solo in the assembly. If this passage is talking about singing in the assembly at all, it certainly does not authorize a different kind of singing from that referred to in the

other passages we have noted.

We have noticed every verse in the New Testament which mentions our singing as worship, and we have shown that none of them authorize a different kind of singing from that authorized in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, which is congregational singing. It must be the case, then, that there is no New Testament authority for any other kind of singing.

From time to time someone will assert that First Corinthians 14:26 proves the church at Corinth had solos sung in its assemblies. But there is a great deal of difference between asserting a thing to be true and proving it to be true. The passage says, "How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying."

The argument goes something like this: "Every one of you" is singular. That means only one person. And so there were occasions in the assemblies at Corinth when only one person sang to the others.

But does it follow that if a psalm was revealed to one individual, that individual had to sing a solo? Suppose the Holy Spirit wanted to reveal a song to be sung by the congregation, to how many people would He reveal it? Is it possible He might just reveal it to one man, and then that one man lead the congregation in learning and singing it? In fact, is it not probable that it would be done exactly that way? Such being true, First Corinthians 14:26 says exactly the words we would expect in the event the Holy Spirit revealed a song to be sung by the congregation. There is no argument at all in the verse for solo singing.

Dr. James Macknight, commenting on First Corinthians 14:26, on page 195 of his commentary, says,

The inspired psalms of which the apostle speaks, were not metrical compositions, but compositions which were distinguished from prose, by the sublimity of the sentiments, and the strength, beauty, and aptness of the expressions. Such was the inspired psalm which Mary our Lord's mother uttered, Luke i.46. and the inspired

thanksgiving and prayer which the disciples jointly sang upon the deliverance of Peter and John from the council, recorded Acts iv.24-30. And since it is said, ver. 24. that the whole company 'lifted up their voice...with one accord,' it is evident that Peter, to whom that psalm was given, must have delivered it by two or three sentences at a time, (as St Paul directed the Corinthians to do in the like cases,) that all the company might join in it.

It is also worthy of notice that the text says it was a psalm, and not a hymn, that was revealed. Yes, I know the NIV uses the word "hymn," but the Greek word is ψαλμος 'psalm,' not υμνος 'hymn.' A psalm does not even have to be sung; it might be recited or read.

Brethren, I believe it is easy to see that a practice which rests for its justification on such a weak argument as these brethren make on First Corinthians 14:26 is a practice which cannot be justified by the Word of God. If they have something stronger than this, they have not yet presented it. Let them do so.

Before concluding this discussion, I want to make mention of one or two matters that really need to be considered by brethren insisting on having special groups or solos to sing in their worship assemblies. I realize that even those things totally in harmony with the Scriptures might be perverted and turned into something wrong and sinful. But there is more than just the possibility that the things we are here discussing will become nothing but entertainment. All one need do to confirm this fact is to observe what has happened in the denominational world. This may be done by watching religious programs on television or by attending a denominational service, even a funeral service.

I am certainly not saying that those who listen to a solo cannot be encouraged or uplifted by so doing. But those doing the singing are putting on a show, pure and simple. Furthermore, I find it difficult to believe that one can sing a solo to a congregation without concentrating more on how well he is rounding out the tones than on the

message of his song.

There is also another matter. What role do women play when congregations begin having solos sung in their worship assemblies? Are those advocating this practice ready to say that men can sing solos to the congregation, but women cannot? Mark my word: those who keep on insisting there is nothing wrong with choirs and solos in the worship assemblies will soon have women in leadership roles in public worship. In many cases it has already happened.

There is more involved in this issue than the kind of singing we should have in our worship assemblies. The real issue is whether the church of our Lord will follow the Bible and maintain its distinctive nature, or whether it will forsake the old paths and become what some among us already claim it is, a denomination among denominations.