

## **“Singing”**

**Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands!**

**Serve the LORD with gladness;  
Come before His presence with singing.**

**Know that the LORD, He is God;  
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;  
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.**

**Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,  
And into His courts with praise.  
Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.**

**For the LORD is good;  
His mercy is everlasting,  
And His truth endures to all generations.**

*Psalm 100*

**...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns  
and spiritual songs, singing and making melody  
in your heart to the Lord.**

*Ephesians 5 v 19*

*Bible Study Material Notes  
setting out the policy of Castlefields Church  
regarding singing in public worship*

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## 1: Establishing the New Testament terms concerning singing

**Ephesians 5 v 19** ...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.

- **The context of singing** - the Christian living a “Spirit filled life” worked out in the practicalities of: singing (v19) thanksgiving (v20) and submission (v21ff)
- **The definition of singing** comes from the Greek word which includes the use of a stringed instrument – singing is, “words put to music”
- **The direction of singing** is both “vertical” (to God) and “horizontal” (to one another). Words are to be God centred and also soul feeding.
- **Words used in connection with singing** in this verse are defined from the original Greek in Vines Greek Dictionary as:

<i>Psalms</i>	“sacred song set to music” (chiefly the OT Psalms)
<i>Hymns</i>	“songs of praise to God”
<i>Spiritual Songs</i>	“a poem set to music”
<i>Making melody</i>	“to twang with a stringed instrument”

These terms are used in various verses throughout the NT. Note that Paul used four separate words & expressions to show the diversity of singing that is permissible for the Christian in order to praise and worship God.

- **The importance of the words in singing** – clearly the verse implies that the Christian engages the mind to sing. The truth of the words in the mind and the indwelling Spirit of God in the heart are closely related together.
- **Understanding what we sing** - After the days of the early church this important truth was gradually lost and it was only at the Reformation that the singing of words understood by the ordinary Christian was restored. (*“The most revolutionary aspect of the Reformation!”* – Dr Nick Needham)

When we examine the Psalms of the Old Testament it is noticeable that the words and expressions are profound but readily understood! We are not to sing words that are not in accordance with the truth of God’s Word, or that are unduly complex or anachronistic.

## 2: The Importance of Singing to the Christian

**Singing is a natural expression of the heart of man** when he is moved with thoughts of joy and gladness (and other emotions too!). It is an evidence of the uniqueness of man, “made in the image of God”.

Even though God has given man the ability to sing and play music, Solomon reflects in Ecclesiastes 2 v 8 that such singing is empty and meaningless unless we know God and we can sing His praise.

**There is something wonderful and glorious about singing the praise of God:-**

- The angels sang at the creation of the world (Job 38 v 7).
- In Zeph 3 v 14 – 17 we see that the people of God are encouraged by the Prophet to sing His praise but we also see that God rejoices over us with singing!
- In Matt 26 v 30 we find that Jesus sang a hymn with His Disciples.
- Paul and Silas sang hymns of praise to God while in the prison with their feet in the stocks (Acts 16 v 25)
- In Psalm 100, the Psalmist calls us to, “...come before His presence with singing” – God loves to hear his people sing!

We must be careful that our love of preaching and its central place in our worship services does not cause us to lose the right love of singing God’s praise and the realisation that it brings pleasure and glory to God.

## 3: Lessons from the First Reference to Singing in the Bible (Exodus 15)

Exodus 15 provides us with the first reference to the corporate singing of the praise of God. This was led by Moses after the amazing events in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. The key word in v1 is “then”. This was truly a matter of “salvation” (see v11) and all the glory was to God alone.

In a similar way, the great matters of our salvation should prompt our corporate sung praise. Psalm 100 is a classic example of such material and many great hymns in our hymn books follow this pattern.

#### **4: Singing God's Praise – its variety of moods illustrated by the Psalms**

The Book of Psalms shows us that not all singing is filled with praise alone.

Other Psalms are full of a whole variety of differing emotions and spiritual experiences. eg.

- personal reflection (Ps 137 / Ps 139)
- repentance (Ps 51)
- accounts of God's dealings with His people (Ps 105) etc

Traditional hymnbooks have followed similar divisions. Hymns such as, "*God moves in a mysterious way*", "*I asked the Lord that I might grow*", "*Nearer, still nearer*", "*O God our help in ages past*" etc are all valid expressions for us to sing corporately.

Such hymns remind us of a whole range of matters which affect our lives and can be very helpful in preparation for (or reflection after) the preaching of the Word of God.

#### **5: Tunes do matter!**

Clearly the words are the most important part to the singing of the praise of God, but word singing is "transported" by the tune. It should neither dominate nor detract. Words can easily be lost or spoiled by a bad tune or a bad instrumentalist! The tune keeps the individual members singing together in unison.

A tune is like a picture frame – all-important for displaying the picture so that it is best appreciated, but it should never be so ornate as to distract from the picture itself.

We need to be careful in this area because our tastes are different, we have particular likes and dislikes – "one man's meat is another man's poison" as far as some hymn tunes go!

The OT helps us to appreciate that tunes do matter. For example; Psalms 51 – 62 (& others) carry instructions to, "The Chief Musician". Psalms 56 - 60 prescribe the name of the required tune and Psalms 57 - 59 are even set to the same tune!

Other parts of the OT were clearly written to be sung, as instructions are given to this end. For example Habbakuk 3 v1 refers to "Shigionoth" which is an erratic staggering tune that suits the word content that follows. Verses 17 – 19 in the same chapter refer to "the Chief Musician on my stringed instruments". (Note the NKJV heading, "A hymn of faith").

We need to ensure today that the words and the tune "fit" together. A congregation singing great words set to a poor tune easily lose the good of the hymn. Conversely, a set of poor words can be made to feel "good" by a rousing or moving tune played by a skilled set of musicians!

Great care needs to be taken so that the congregation can sing with understanding and helped by a suitable tune. The preacher is not the only person who needs to prepare their part in the service well; the instrumentalist should do too.

#### **6: Lessons from the last reference in the Bible - Singing in heaven!**

Rev 15 v 3 makes it quite clear that one of the things that we will do in glory is sing! This last reference to singing in the Bible is remarkable in that it refers back to the first (in Exodus 15) but it adds a further dimension. Not only will we sing with reference to the God of the OT but also to the praise of the "Lamb of God" as revealed in the NT. The complete plan & works of God in both creation and salvation will fill our glorified minds and hearts with song for ever.

If singing will be so important in heaven, surely it should be of great importance to every Christian here on earth. It is sad when Christians forget this vital truth.

## 7: Singing today – Some practical matters to consider

- The importance of the Psalms should not be underestimated. Some recently published hymnbooks have compiled the first 150 (or more) hymns in the book to coincide with the Psalms. (We respect the views of those who firmly believe that we should only sing the Psalms in worship but we believe that other hymns and songs are also acceptable).
- All other additional “hymns” and “spiritual songs” should be carefully selected with a consistent standard of approach:-

### WORDS

Either actual words of Scripture or Biblical truth expressed in a reverent & God honouring way & which the singer can fully understand and sing with meaning.

### TUNE

Suitable to transport the words and sentiments being expressed. Not so dominant, irregular or sensuous so that the words are lost or spoilt. “Singable”, memorable and played well with a feeling for the words being sung.

In the *Sword & Trowel Magazine* (1999/3) Peter Masters establishes seven standards for a worthy hymn. These are helpful for us to review:

1. *It should reflect the example and method of the Psalms: their intellectual level, their dignity, their reverence, their weighty character, their style of worship, and their balance of doctrines.*
2. *It will edify the worshipper: throw light on scriptural truths, cater for some definite aspect of spiritual experience, something good, solid, worthy, soul-elevating.*
3. *It will be reverent. It will address the mighty God, be intelligent*
4. *It must be doctrinally clear. It will not be ambiguous or vague.*
5. *It will be clear in its expression. It should not be either too high or too low in its intellectual level.*
6. *It will have a good structure and sensible rhyming. Poorer hymns often jump around so much there is an unconnected fresh theme in every line.*
7. *There should be no mystical statements in it.*

- We must be careful of an inconsistent or prejudiced approach to singing :-  
*“It is important to distinguish between principles, preferences and prejudices.”* (Alan Pibworth)  
Eg We may have an “historical blockage” – some Christians cannot bring themselves to sing hymns written after a certain “cut off date”.  
Eg We may have a past background of Christian experience that judges some hymns from a particular standpoint – We may be a “fan “(or not!) of Gadsby or maybe Sankey!
- Not all writers of hymns that we sing will “tick our theological boxes”. Luther remained in the Catholic Church, Faber and Caswall & Bridges joined it! Zinzendorf was a Moravian, Wesley had “perfectionist” leanings and so on. Our hymnbooks have hymns written by a whole variety of men and women with a spectrum of theological and ecclesiological views. What matters is that their words and expressions are Biblical and meet an acceptable standard in all other areas (see above).
- The identity of the author was not the principal guiding factor in the hymnbooks of the past. Christian Hymns, Grace Hymns etc followed in the tradition of C H Spurgeon’s *“Our Own Hymn Book”* ensuring that the words and expressions used were the key to inclusion or exclusion
- Not all that is old is good and all that is new is bad (or vice versa!). We easily forget that every hymn that we sing today was once “new”. The advent of hymns in the days of Watts & Dodderidge, when previously only Psalms were sung, caused great consternation at the time but today we naturally include their hymns in our services.
- Stephen Rees (Banner of Truth – What Shall We Sing?) says, *“It is clear that our singing should be full of content. Paul says we are to speak to one another in our singing. He says we are to teach and admonish one another – that means content!”*
- Some hymns written in recent years have excellent content and will clearly stand the test of time. As we select what hymns we use in our services, we need to avoid what Peter Masters calls, *“vague, empty choruses and hymns... they lead people to partially switch off so that they worship with only half their minds or only half their sincerity and earnestness.”*
- All hymn writers are fallible men and women and their expressions will never always be perfect – many verses of some well known hymns are omitted in today’s hymnbooks as they were unsound or simply bad poetry. Some still remain!

- Some antiquated expressions in otherwise acceptable hymns (eg guerdon / gay / sages etc ) can sometimes be updated. But some words, lines and rhymes are so tortuous or outdated we will need to let some hymns go altogether. The compilers of recent new hymn books have struggled with this issue with varying degrees of success and failure!
- We must never dumb down important Bible words or grand and glorious expressions - these often simply need some explanation by the preacher as the hymn is announced, but surely every Christian surely needs to understand what Redemption, Adoption, Justification, Sanctification, and other key Bible words & doctrines mean!
- *“Worship is intended to stir the senses or feelings as the chief objective. The great emphasis in traditional worship is, “meaning”. It is about the mind inspiring the heart”.* (Peter Masters – Sword & Trowel 1998/3)

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