

Why Sing?

By Brent Helming

Why sing? I'm not asking, "Why do we worship?" Its probably safe to assume that if you are perusing this web site and reading this article, you already understand that we were created to be testimonies of God's glory (Is. 43:6-7). In other words, we worship because God created us to worship.

No, my question is not "Why worship?" I'm posing the question, "Why sing?" Why do we, as the church, engage in singing as one of our primary forms of worship? It's true that worship is far more than music and singing. Worship includes every activity of life (Romans 12:1). Yet, it is also true that the church, especially the contemporary church, spends a large portion of time singing together during our corporate worship.

Why do we do this?

First, let me "tip my hand" right up front. I am very much in favor of singing as a form of worship. As a worship leader and song writer, I am glad that singing is a large part of the dynamic of corporate and personal worship. So my question is not a negative one. I'm asking more from the point of view, "do we know and understand the biblical/theological reasons behind the validity of singing songs as worship?"

I believe that singing is a special gift from God. I'm not talking about the *quality of singing*, as of course, an incredible singing voice is certainly a heavenly gift. I mean that the actual *act of singing* is one of the most effective and divinely inspired ways to help us deepen our understanding of God and to grow spiritually.

Singing and God's Word

An important verse on topic of singing is Colossians 3:16 (NIV);

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another, with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

This verse explicitly links the word of Christ as it richly dwells within us with the activity of singing. Thus, singing is shown here as a God given way to connect with His word and His truth.

Consider also what the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5: 17-20(NIV);

"Therefore do not be foolish but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In these verses, the connection is shown between being filled with the Holy Spirit and singing songs, hymns and spiritual songs. This connection is more clearly seen in the King James where translators more accurately place a semi-colon between verses 18 and 19 making them one continuous thought. Also, the first word of verse 19, “Speak” is more accurately translated with the present tense continuous verb “speaking”. In other words, Ephesians is telling us that our singing (speaking) is the result and/or overflow of the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Some of you may be asking, “Where is the connection between singing and the Word of God in Ephesians 5?” To see this connection more clearly, we need to look in the Gospel of John for some helpful commentary on the role of Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. John 6:63 and John 16:13-14 speak of the Holy Spirit as being one who gives life and makes known to us the life and words of Jesus. These verses show that one of the main roles of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the work and words of God to us and in us. Do you see the connection? When the word of God richly dwells within us one of the results is singing and just as when (as Ephesians notes) the Holy Spirit fills us (with revelation of Jesus and His words) we are inspired to sing.

Our infinitely wise creator God has made it so that there is a direct connection between Himself, His Word, the Holy Spirit and singing. I have counted over 200 references to Praising God through out the Psalms and many of those include singing. There are also quite a few of these verses where the language is structured as a command for us to sing (Psalm 47:6; 81:1; 96:1, 2; 98:1). The question then that begs to be asked is, “why?” “What is so special or unique about the act of singing?”

There are probably dozens of reasons why singing is such a powerful gift when it comes to worshipping God. However, I want to just touch on a few.

The Act of Remembrance

One of the most obvious strengths of hearing melodies and singing songs is their ability to be remembered. Have you noticed that the right words set to the right melody are almost impossible to get out of your head? We remember even the simplest “ditties” from years ago. How about this one? “Oh.. I wish I were an Oscar Myer” Now be honest. You could finish that song without even thinking about it! Or how about, “Jesus loves me this I” Can you finish that Sunday school favorite? Of course you can! However, how many of you can remember the main sermon points to your pastor’s sermon from two weeks ago?

The point here is not to “bash” sermons or make a case that they are subservient to the act of singing. The point is to show the incredible ability of “remembrance” inherent in the singing of songs. There are technical reasons for how and why lyrics set to melodies interact with our conscience and sub-conscience. Similarly, there are specific reasons why the act of singing these melodies triggers the synapses of our brain to fire in unique ways so as to connect with specific pathways for remembrance. But guess what? We don’t need to understand all the physiology. It’s just the way that God created us and he created us this way on purpose. God placed in us an incredible ability to absorb music and lyrics into the very fiber of our beings. I believe that one of the specific purposes for

this was so that we could more fully engage in relationship with our creator and with His word.

Look at this interesting text in Deuteronomy 31:21 through chapter 32:47. God instructs Moses to write down a specific song and teach it to the nation of Israel. The reason for this instruction was so that the specific message (Word of God) of the song would not be forgotten by the future generations. Specifically, Deuteronomy says that the words of the song (as they remember and sing) will be life giving for their children. This text is an example of how God has intends for our singing to be a vehicle by which we remember his Words, His deeds, and the very nature of who He is.

Another example of singing as a vehicle for the remembrance of God and his deeds is Exodus 15 where Moses and Miriam lead a song of worship declaring God's mighty act of deliverance from Pharaoh.

Declaring the Glory and Truth of God

Intricately tied to the reality that singing helps to facilitate a greater remembrance of who God is and what He's done, is the further realization that singing is a powerful way to extol the glory and truth of God. In his writings on the glory of God, Pastor and Author, John Piper describes the reason for singing as, "...we sing because there are depths and heights and intensities and kinds of emotions that will not be satisfactorily expressed by mere prosaic forms, or even poetic readings. There are realities that demand to break out of prose into poetry and some demand that poetry be stretched into song." Have you felt what Piper is describing? He is describing the times when we reach those places where spoken words seem to fall short and the reality that we are experiencing or trying to describe demands more... demands... singing. Sometimes the realities of beauty (namely God for our discussion) require the fullness and depth of human expression that comes with abandonment in singing.

Understanding this aspect of singing as a functional avenue of expressing God's glory and truth will go a long way in opening up the richness of many of the Psalms; such as Psalm 66:1-2; Psalm 98 and Psalm 113. These Psalms encourage us (actually command) to sing about the glory and truth of God.

To further tie together these threads of thought concerning singing and God's truth, look again at an aspect of Ephesians 5:18-19 that I touched on earlier. Ephesians 5 shows that singing can result from the filling of the Spirit. Keeping this in mind, look at what John 16:13-14 (NIV) says:

"But when he, the Spirit of truth (Holy Spirit), comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me (Jesus) by taking from what is mine and making it known to you."

The Holy Spirit brings glory to Jesus by making known God's truth to those He fills. Put this understanding together with Eph. 5:18-19 and we can see that when we are filled by the Holy Spirit, he reveals to us the life and truth of Jesus. The result of this filling often spills over in signing songs, hymn and spiritual songs, the type of which will be full of truth and knowledge about God. Worship Leader and Author, Bob Kauflin has

commented that one reason why we often sense God's presence in a more pronounced way when we gather to sing God's praises is that the Holy Spirit is in our midst inspiring our songs. I whole heartedly agree.

More Fully Connected through Singing

I want to leave you with a final thought on why we should view singing as a viable expression for worship. God created music and the act of singing in such a way that it engages our emotions and intellect simultaneously. When this occurs, I am convinced that we are able to connect with God more fully than if we only used intellect or emotions apart from the other.

Through the years the church, as a whole, has moved away from encouraging emotional expressions or connections to God, choosing instead to value the intellect as more valid. However, this was not the understanding of one of the greatest Theologians in recent history. In his book, "The End for which God created the World", Jonathan Edwards writes, "*God Glorifies himself toward his creature in two ways: 1.) by appearing to their understanding, 2.) by communicating himself to their hearts and in their rejoicing and delighting in and enjoying the manifestations that He makes of himself. God is glorified not only by His glory being seen but also by His glory being rejoiced in. When those that see it, delight in it; then God is more glorified then if they only see it. His glory is then received by the whole soul both by understanding and by the heart.*"

Edward's thesis here is that we were created to worship God with both our intellect and our emotions. When this happens God is most glorified. This point of view also happens to be the scriptural view as well. Let's look, yet again, at Ephesians 5. However, this time we need to back up and start at verse 17, "*Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.*" Right up front, Paul stirs us with the intellect; "*...do not be foolish... understand what the Lord's will is.*" He's stirring our intellect; engaging us to think. Paul then explains that the Lord's will involves being filled with the Holy Spirit in such a way that that the result is "*... speaking (singing) to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs... singing and making music in your heart (not just your head) to the Lord,...*". To top it off the suggested attitude with which to sing is by "*...always giving thanks to God the Father for everything...*" Obviously, Paul had in mind the total person, intellect and emotions.

This thread of the intellect plus emotion is also echoed in Colossians 3:17-18. In these verses we are to "*Let the word of Christ richly dwell...*" with in us as we teach and admonish one another in wisdom. This is clearly a call to sober and diligent intellectual pursuits. Then Paul adds, "*... as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*" It is the marriage of intellect (teaching, meditating, admonishing) combined with emotion (singing with gratitude) that captures the whole of Paul's instruction to us.

Let me be clear that I am not trying to draw an line of division that would say that the intellect is devoid of emotion or that signing is only emotional and devoid of intellect. This is clearly not the case. My aim is to show that we are clearly encouraged to pursue and connect with God while using both.

However, I also think that it is fair to say that our emotions find an easier expression through the medium of singing. This is why James 5:13 asks. "... *Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.*" There are also many Psalms (Psalm 31:7; 68:3-4; 100:1-2; 107:22 just to name a few) that connect singing and/or praising with expressing joy to God. Clearly, singing is intertwined to the deep emotional resources of our being.

So Why Sing?

So the question remains; "why sing?" Why spend upwards of half of our congregational meeting time signing together? Why sing songs of praise in the shower or as you drive to work? Why teach and sing songs about God to your children during the day or before the fall asleep at night?

We sing because God loves it. It's hard to read any portion of the Book of Revelations and not notice the numerous verses that hi-light the amazing singing that we'll be doing around God's throne for all of eternity. God loves signing and has ordained us to join with Angles for all of eternity in song to the King. Also, did you know that God sings over you? (Zephaniah 3:17)

We sing because God commands it. (Psalm 47:6)

We sing because singing songs of worship connect us to God and to His word through the aide of the Holy Spirit and help us to remember all of His incredible attributes and achievements. (Ephesians 5:18-19; Col. 3:16-17)

We sing as a way to worship God with our whole person as fully as we possibly can through both our intellect and our emotions.

Hopefully, the next time you step onto the platform to lead worship or enter into the sanctuary to join in worship, you'll understand that singing (especially congregational singing) is more than just a time worn tradition handed down through the ages. It is the gift of God for our nourishment and edification unto His glorification.

Brent Helming has been involved in Pastoral and Worship Ministry for over 16 years. He has traveled both nationally and internationally leading worship and teaching at Churches and conferences. He has written numerous worship songs such as "Your Beloved", Jesus Lead On" and "God of All Splendor", along with an interactive work book titled "Hot Tips for Worship Leaders". Brent is currently developing a Coaching and Consulting Ministry for Worship Ministries and Leaders (WorshipDevelopment.com) and lives with his son in Escondido, CA.