

# VIEW

"THE COMMANDMENT OF THE LORD IS PURE,  
ENLIGHTENING THE EYES." PSALM 19:8

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## When Our Singing Is "Out of Tune"

While we often focus on how our singing sounds to our ears, we know God's concern is whether our attitude is correct while we sing. When is one's singing out of tune with God's word? When might our singing become a curse instead of a blessing?

We'll look only at the two "classic" texts in the New Testament that directly address music in our assemblies: Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16. Let's identify actions and/or attitudes that could cause us to violate the spirit of these passages.

In Eph. 5:19, Paul says, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart." Col. 3:16 adds, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

The context of Eph. 5:19 (Eph. 5:17-21) suggests that singing is a means of giving thanks to God, through Christ, and that when we sing, as in everything else, we submit to one another out of reference for Christ (vv. 20-21).

So the text that authorizes us to sing requires that we do it (a) in reverence to Christ and (b) with respect for others in the assembly. Failure, then, to sing with reverence and respect and with a heart of thanksgiving makes our singing "discordant" in the ears of God, no matter how beautiful the voice or how pure the four-part harmony.

The context of Col. 3:16 (3:12-17) is that of church unity and peace. God's people are to be compassionate, forbearing and forgiving toward

each other, reflecting the Lord's attitude toward us (3:12-13). Above all, we are to put on love, which produces perfect harmony in the body (v. 14). Love causes peace to rule in the hearts of those called to be one body (v. 15). So Paul's concern in Colossians, like that of Ephesians, is the formation of a solid fellowship of like-minded, loving believers who gather with a spirit of thankfulness to God in their hearts. Where these features of fellowship do not exist, singing becomes discordant to God; what is meant to be a blessing becomes sin.

Specifically, in Eph. 5:19, Paul commands that we "address one another" (ESV). Other versions render it "speak to one another." In Col. 3:16, Paul says we teach and admonish each other in our singing, reflecting a heart in which the word of Christ dwells. When our singing

becomes a means of exalting ourselves, "we have our reward," but we do not achieve the end God intends. We cannot judge the hearts of others. A fellow Christian with a beautiful voice may sing at the top of her lungs, and be singing with a pure heart and for the right purpose. Though we may wish she would seek to blend a bit more there is nothing inherently wrong with singing loudly. But that singer needs to ask herself whether she is singing to impress or to fulfill the purpose of singing. We are speaking to one another for the purpose of teaching, not practicing for an audition on American Idol.

Notice that there is no reference in our texts to numbers. Over the years, I have heard Christians talk about how "moved" they are when in a huge congregation, as if there is something more spiritual about 2000 singers compared to 50. But as someone once said, "the more we need from the

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outside, the less we have on the inside. The worst thing that can happen is for the non-worshipper to *feel* he is worshipping when he is doing nothing of the sort."

Since singing, according to these texts, is primarily for the purpose of teaching and admonishing, then most of the songs we choose to sing should have instruction and/or warning in them. At the risk of sounding like an old geezer, I'll just say that some of the songs that brethren like to sing these days are bereft of biblical content. There are songs that are not much more instructive to a Christian than "Row, Row, Row Your Boat..." These are famously, if not always fairly, referred to as "camp songs" (however, many so-called "camp songs" are scriptural and instructive).

Then again, I know brethren who seem to believe that any song written within the last 25-30 years is suspect just because it's new. One can only surmise what some brethren thought many years ago when some of the upbeat Stamps-Baxter songs emerged. What did they think of some of Albert Brumley's songs, such as "Jesus Hold My Hand." These songs were the new songs 60-70 years ago but are now favored even by some brethren who criticize newer songs.

Determining the worth of a song because of its age is silly. Some great songs have been penned by men and women over the last few years and are worthy of frequent use in our assemblies. Many of these songs are instructive and moving at the same time. Don Alexander's "Mended and Whole" and Jay Conner's "I Close My Eyes" are just two examples, among many, of outstanding hymns written in the last few years. We have benefitted by the talent and hard work of these hymn writers, who have written songs that are spiritual and scriptural and motivating. We should not ignore them because they are "new."

Having said that, we must remember that every song, old and new, is a product of men's thinking and creativity (with the exception of verbatim Psalms set to music, of course). That means every song should be examined for spiritual content and scriptural accuracy. Though the editors of the songbooks we use are careful, there still may be songs that are unclear or even dubious in their teaching. How can I sing a song properly unless I know what the words mean? If I don't know what "ebon pinion" is or if I have no idea

what I'm raising when I "raise my Ebenezer," how can my singing meet the tests imposed by Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16?

Then there are the songs that ascribe "interesting" roles to angels that may be impossible for some to sing with a clear conscience. Are we really going to "invite the archangel as guest"? One of our older members used to cringe at that line, and I can't say I disagree with her. One might ascribe it to "poetic license," but who is in charge of issuing these licenses anyway?

Each must examine his own heart when singing — or refraining from singing — these songs. There is nothing sacred about them, since they are the product of human minds and one must not violate his conscience (Rom. 14:23).

One other important point can be stated simply: *it is just as wrong to sing a lie as to tell one.* The nature of a hymn is that the force of its message, couched as it is in a pleasing melody, may be missed. It is easy to fall into the trap of blithely singing "Purer in heart, O God, help me to be" and then go out that evening and watch an R-rated movie, unaware of the disconnect. Or we sing, "Love one another, thus saith the Savior, children obey the Father's blest command" yet continue to harbor a 20-year old grudge against a brother. We lie when we sang what we have no intention of applying and "all liars have their place in the lake of fire" (Rev. 21:8).

Our singing can only please God when we come into the assembly with a love for our brethren, and a desire to teach and admonish them through the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs that we choose to sing. Our singing pleases God only when it represents our own beliefs and the intentions of our hearts. Our singing, regardless of the quality of the sound, becomes discordant when we fail to focus on God and others. It also fails to meet the test when we do not understand or refuse to apply what we are singing.

Perhaps the warning of the preacher in Ecclesiastes is a good reminder: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools... be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth..." (Eccl. 5:1-2).

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