

Singing As a Means of Grace

By Matt Foreman

Introduction

Growing up, I was very into music. I studied classical piano and voice and composition. I taught myself guitar. Like so many people, music in many ways became an obsession and an idol - too much part of my identity and pride. But then God got ahold of my life in college - and humbled me and revealed himself to me in various ways. And one of the things God used was music. There was one Christian group on campus whose music was different. I'd never been a fan of Christian music. But this group sang songs with deep theological, thought-provoking lyrics...and they sang - really sang. They were sincere. Their hearts were engaged. They weren't singing to perform; they weren't singing to impress one another; they were singing to someone who was unseen with conviction. There was a reality to their singing that I had, as a musician, never seen before. I'd never seen people my own age having this *reality* of worship. It made a powerful impression on me. And pretty soon, *what* was being sung made an even more powerful impression on me. And I began to sing and sense and worship someone unseen.

In short, for me personally and experientially, God used spiritual singing as a *means of grace* in my life.

When Reformed Christians talk about the ‘means of grace’, they usually are referring to the corporate practices of the church - like prayer, Bible reading, preaching, Lord’s Supper and Baptism - that God has revealed as means and practices that lead to spiritual growth. They are the channels that God promises to use through the Spirit to build up and nourish God’s people. *I want to argue that Christians need to recognize the place of spiritual singing as an important and Biblical means of grace.*

Colossians 3:16 says,

“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.” (KJV)

Some translations end vs.16 with “singing with *thankfulness* in your hearts to God”. But Paul mentions “giving thanks” (*eucharisteo*) in the next verse, 3:17. In 3:16, the word is simply “grace” (*charis*).

Gordon Fee writes, “The focus is not so much on our attitude toward God as we sing, but on our awareness of his attitude towards us...our standing in grace that makes such singing come from the heart.” Paul is saying, true spiritual singing requires an awareness of God’s grace. In the context of the verse, singing is one way of letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly, letting it sink into the experience of your heart. Therefore, clearly singing is a means of grace, of expressing grace in the heart and getting grace into your heart.

In the next few posts, we are going to explore why and how to use singing as a means of grace...

Why Do We Sing?

Thinking broadly - music is a form of expression, of communication. For some reason, humanity has been designed to be affected by the mathematics of pitch and melody and harmony in such a way that meaning and emotion attaches to it. Music has the ability to communicate to and from the heart, to capture and to express emotion, to inspire and stir emotion. Something about music resonates not just in our hearing, but in our hearts. And it becomes a form of communication. Like speech - music has pitch, timbre, rhythm.

So when music gets attached to ‘words’, it has an exponential power to enhance meaning, to interpret words emotively in the moment. Some people talk with their hands - using their hands to enhance the meaning and expressiveness of what they are saying. So singing, you could say, is speaking with melody - to enhance meaning and expressiveness.

Poetry has some of the same effect. Poetry communicates vividness and memorability - therefore making words more powerful, driving them into our heads and hearts so they become precious to us.

Music does that even more. That’s why, in Deuteronomy 31:19-22, God himself commands Moses, “*Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths... And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring)... So Moses wrote this song the same day and taught it to the people of Israel.*” It wasn’t enough that God revealed the words to Moses to give to the people. God wanted them to sing it - get it into their mouths and hearts so that they would remember it.

Singing has a way of locking things into your head. Studies have shown that Alzheimers and dementia patients - when they can’t remember anything else - they still remember songs. (So one day, when you have Alzheimers or dementia, what do you want to be able to have still in *your head?*)

Of course, all of this is reflective that God himself in a mystery reveals himself to be musical. Zeph.3:17, “*The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exalt over you with loud singing.*” In Heb.2:12, it tells us that Jesus himself sings to us about the greatness of God. We sing because singing reflects the heart of God himself. God speaks. And sometimes when God is really expressive, God sings.

I used to sing in acapella groups. Sometimes in a small acapella choir, you reach a certain chord and, if you’re perfectly in pitch, you can hear—not just the pitches people are actually singing—

but other pitches: overtones. And it's literally like there's somebody else singing with you! Now there's scientific reason for that. But I believe there's also theological reason for that!

We have so many reasons to sing. At great moments of redemptive history, people don't just talk - they sing. They pour out their hearts in expressions of music. It's not without reason that at the center of the Bible we have a book of songs. And the command to sing occurs more than 100x just in the Psalms. The book of Revelation tells us we're going to be singing in eternity. Our singing here reflects the songs of heaven.

So that's the big picture of why we sing. But Colossians 3:16 gives us four specific lessons about singing as a means of grace.

Singing is a Ministry of the Word

First, Colossians 3:16 tells us that spiritual singing is actually part of the ministry of the Word - "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...as you teach and admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.*" The primary means of God's grace in our lives is from the Word. The emphasis in worship is - God speaking to us. To receive God's grace, you've got to know the God of grace. Life begins with truth. The more God's Word sinks into our lives, the more grace he communicates to our lives, the more we are transformed into his likeness. The emphasis of the NT always begins with the Word: We sing the word, pray the word, preach the word, exhort and encourage with the word. Word plays the primary role. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of Christ.

But Colossians 3:16 implies that spiritual singing is really a subset of the Ministry of the Word. *Singing is a means of grace when it is a ministry of the Word.* Singing along to U2 is not a promised means of grace. Singing Justin Bieber is definitely not a means of grace (pardon the thought). Singing spiritual songs filled with Biblical truth is a means of grace.

So true spiritual singing is not just about a melody we like. It's not about "consumeristic preferences" or "personal tastes". It's about letting the Word dwell in you richly.

That affects *what* we sing. In church, we don't just sing songs because we like the melody. Content must be the primary criterion. So we must be purposefully selective in what we sing. There are many songs that have a great melody, but when you examine the words, the words don't say much. So you have to ask: What's really affecting you - the music or the words? Music is certainly designed to affect you, but in worship, our music is to be a ministry of the Word. If the melody is affecting me more than the words are affecting me, then there's likely an imbalance. I would rather sing a really good melody with really good words. So we have to ask questions like: What does the song say? Is it Biblical? Is it helpful? What does the song do? Why is this song needed? Is the style driven by the content or does the style make more impact than the lyrics? Will it be helpful in worship?

Singing should reflect the theology of the church. Reggie Kidd says, “A theology that cannot be sung is not worth having either. Authentic Christian faith is not merely believed. Nor is it merely acted upon. It is sung—with utter joy sometimes, in uncontrollable tears sometimes, but it is sung.”

Because of the effectiveness of music and singing, the songs we sing have a great ability to teach us. While preaching is a central and essential means of grace that sanctifies you, you’re unlikely to remember all that your preacher says to you on a specific Sunday. You are more likely to remember the words to the songs you sang. Singing then becomes a great way to teach you theology, to teach you the truths about God. If we’re going to sing something, then let’s sing something that is worthwhile, that will fill our hearts and minds with what is best - with the truth of God’s Word.

We Need to Sing Corporately

Second, Colossians 3:16 encourages us to sing corporately - “*Let the Word of Christ dwell in y'all richly, in all wisdom as you teach and admonish one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.*” Singing can be a private activity and a private means of grace. But Colossians 3:16 emphasizes singings as a public activity and a corporate means of grace, a corporate means of ministering the Word to “one another”. Singing is an outflow of the grace of the Word in the lives of God’s people and particularly to one another.

As Richard Lovelace notes, “Protestant doctrine defined the ‘means of grace’ as the Word, prayer and the sacraments, and these were usually understood as channels leading directly to the individual Christian, not as streams of grace which necessarily linked him to others. But every once of us can remember times when other believers served as essential channels of grace in delivering us from some agonizing spiritual problem which would never have been handled by our individual use of Scripture and prayer... [The Bible asserts] that grace is conveyed through the body of Christ along horizontal channels as well as through the vertical relationship of each believer to God.”

Singing then is one aspect of this corporate ministry of grace. In a Sunday service, you could be tempted to think that the singing is about ‘you and God’. It’s not just about ‘you and God’. It’s about ‘you and God and one another’. The reason you should sing - is not just to stir your hearts to God, but to stir other people’s hearts to God.

Mike Cosper writes, One “way the Word dwells richly among us is by our teaching and admonishing one another with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs.” Again, “Singing itself is creational gift with formation effects. When people sing together, they literally unite their breath. They unite their words. In certain situations, they’ll unite their physical gestures too—clapping and raising hands.”

You come to corporate worship on Sundays ‘to be sung to’. But you come ‘to sing to others’ as well.

That freaks some people out - the thought that they are ‘singing to others’. People who are self-conscious about their singing can think - that’s not a good thing; people don’t want to hear that from me! But the Bible implies - people do want to hear that!

I had a friend years ago who literally was tone deaf - couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket. But he didn’t care. I remember I used to hear him go and sit on the front step and have private devotion time and he would sing...and it was awful! But he was making a joyful noise and it ministered to my heart. No matter how bad it was, it was beautiful. His heart was full and it ministered to me.

The collective corporate singing of the congregation is a powerful ministry to one another. Alternatively, it is discouraging to be in corporate worship and people around you aren’t singing. Corporate singing is not a time to ‘hear the band’. It’s not a time to only listen to the good singers. It’s time to join your voices and your hearts together in singing truth to one another for the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 14:24-25 talks about an unbeliever entering the corporate worship of the church, where “*he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.*” That’s what we want in our corporate worship - for people to be struck with the presence and reality of God. When does this happen? One of the things Paul goes on to talk about in the very next verse is the church coming together and people having “*a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, an interpretation*” (14:26). Singing is one of the corporate activities of the church where people can be exposed to God! The corporate singing of the church is one of the ways people can be ‘convicted, called to account, having the secrets of their hearts exposed, and sense that God is really present in the worship of the people.’ That happened to me!

So it’s crucial for Christians to sing. “Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings. It is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings. When comforts are declining, he grants the soul again a season of pure shining to cheer it after rain.”

As a side note: it’s important to teach and model spiritual singing to our children. If singing is a powerful means of grace, a way to hide the word in the heart, and a way to minister to one another - our children need to be taught to sing. In fact, even children can minister corporately in song. There is nothing more encouraging than hearing children singing in the worship service. Isn’t that a beautiful thing, when you sing a song in worship that the children know - to see them and hear them singing at the top of their little voices? When my son was in pre-school, he had certain favorite hymns. I remember one time in particular, we sang one of his favorite songs on a Sunday morning, and he began to belt it out at the top of his lungs (he didn’t have a very good

indoor voice). You could actually hear him above the whole congregation. It gave everyone a good laugh, but it was also a joy and ministry to the congregation.

We need to make a joyful noise and sing corporately to one another.

We Need to Sing Different Types of Songs

Third, Col.3:16 tells us we need to sing different types of songs - “singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”. Some people in history have tried to make very specific definitions of those three words - asserting that these were different divisions of the psalter. There is very little historical evidence for that view. I think he’s just saying - sing different kinds of songs.

Obviously, the Psalms were meant to be sung. Jesus and the disciples, growing up in Jewish society, sang Psalms regularly as part of their worship. We need to glean from and sing the Psalms.

But when Paul says, “Let the Word *of Christ* dwell in you richly...singing with *grace* in your hearts”, I believe that implies singing songs also in light of Christ and the grace revealed in the Gospel. In fact, there are examples in the New Testament of verses with a metrical flavor that may have actually been early Christian hymns. (Scholars point to 1 Tim.3:16, 1 Tim.6:15-16, 2 Tim.2:11-13, and Philippians 2:6-11 as the most likely. But the list also may include Col. 1:15-20, Titus 3:4-7, and Heb.1:3-4. Certainly, there are examples in the book of Revelation.) Also, there are clear examples in the early church of hymns based on the New Testament work of Christ. The Christians were writing and singing new songs as part of their worship.

But “different types of songs” should also include the content of the songs, the mood and expression of the songs. If we need to be taught the whole counsel of God in his Word, we need to sing the entire range of songs needed by God’s people. So our repertoire needs to be more nuanced than some of the ‘happy-clappy’ songs that are sometimes the staple in churches today. Dr. Carl Trueman wrote a (now famous) article several years ago entitled, “What Do Sad Christians Sing?” - pointing out that many popular Christians songs don’t express the kinds of lamentations you sometimes see in Scripture and that believers can certainly experience. The Psalms are sometimes very raw and honest. Believers need those types of songs, that express truths about our experience in this fallen world.

Sometimes this diversity is best reflected in the liturgy itself. ‘Liturgy’ just means the order of your service. Christian churches for centuries have often practiced a liturgy that follows a certain order of thought - such as: Adoration (beginning with praise to God), Confession (confession of sin, confession of need for God), Assurance (detailing the promises of the Gospel, objectively what God has done to forgive us of our sins), Commitment (exhortations to live lives pleasing to God). This order can be reflected and practiced in the songs that are sung. Another way of thinking about it is that Christian liturgy has often been a recapitulation of Biblical

history: of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. God created the world (we praise him), man fell (we confess our sins), Christ brought redemption (through the Gospel), and now we try to live our lives pleasing to him. Our worship services, I believe, both in the readings and the songs we sing, should follow something of that order, as a re-expression of the Gospel every week - and expressing the diversity that Christians need. We need to adore him, we need to confess our sins and weaknesses and griefs and sorrows, we need to assure ourselves of his love in Christ, and we need to compel ourselves to live for him.

The idea of “different types of songs” can also impact the style of songs. Sometimes people struggle with the idea that style is attuned to cultural preferences and traditions that are not strictly Biblical. But musicologists can demonstrate how musical style develops over regions and over time and can be compared to ‘different musical dialects’. The music that was sung in the New Testament era and in the early church would have sounded very different and alien to our ears. The music that has been sung by Christians over the centuries has been as diverse as the cultures that have been impacted by the Gospel. It can be appropriate then to think about the musical ‘vernacular’ of our church and culture (as a ‘circumstance of worship’). It can also be appropriate to express some musical diversity in our corporate singing, especially if our churches begin to reflect the ethnic diversity of the body of Christ, which we long to be expressed.

We Need to Sing with Grace in Our Hearts

Fourth, Colossians 3:16 says, we need to sing “*with grace in our hearts...*”

In the NT, grace is practically a “thing”. Paul says repeatedly in his letters, “Grace to you...” Grace is God’s undeserved, unmerited love and favor. To draw an important distinction between mercy and grace: Mercy is God forgiving you, wiping the slate clean, canceling your debt. If you’ve got a big debt to God, mercy is a good thing; you want your debt cancelled. But if your debts are just cancelled, you still have a problem: you’re still broke, you’re just not in debt anymore. Grace is not just God canceling your debt; grace is God giving you his riches and favor. He doesn’t just wipe the slate clean; he invites you into his adopted family as a prince of the kingdom, makes you his son and daughter, covers you with robes of righteousness, adopts you. That’s grace!

So, Paul says, We’re to sing with grace in our hearts! Our singing is meant to be a response and a meditation of all of God’s grace poured out on us through the blood of Christ. In Colossians 3:12, Paul had said, “*Put on as God’s chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience...*” He was saying: Live in light of the riches of grace. Remember that you are chosen and dearly loved. Live in light of that grace you have received. He then said in 3:16, “*Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.*” It’s a Word about Christ, about the grace of Christ: That’s why we sing!

It's why we sing: "*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.*" To hear the "sweetness" of the sound, sometimes we need to sing it!

Titus 2:11 says, "*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people...*" Titus 3:4-7 echoes, "*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*"

Grace from God "*appeared*" in history in the Person of Jesus Christ. But then Jesus "*appears*" to us by the Spirit through the ministry of the Word (2 Cor. 4:6, 2 Tim.1:9-11).

Has grace "*appeared*" to you? It disappears from our minds all the time. That's one reason why you need to sing! —to have grace appear, to remind yourself: the goodness and lovingkindness of God has appeared! When we meditate on that, we should start to sing. There should be a movement in our heart to sing that!

At great moments of redemption, people sang. When the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea and reached on the other side - they sang! When God did great things for David - he sang! When God did great things for Hannah - she sang...for Mary - she sang...for Zechariah - he sang. Has God done great things for you? Have you started to sing?

Psalm 40:1-3 says, "*I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.*" Did you catch that last part? "Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord" ...*when I sing* of what he's done for me.

My life goes on in endless song, above earth's lamentations.
I hear the real, though far-off hymn, that hails a new creation.
Above the tumult and the strife, I hear its music ringing.
It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

When tyrants tremble, sick with fear, and hear their death-knell ringing,
When friends rejoice both far and near, how can I keep from singing?
In prison cell and dungeon vile our thoughts to them are winging.
When friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing?

What though my joys and comforts die, the Lord my Savior liveth.

And though the darkness round me close, songs in the night he giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

The 1742 Philadelphia Confession of Faith parallels the 1689 except that it adds this Article: Chapter 23: We believe that (Acts 16:25, Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16) singing the praises of God, is a holy ordinance of Christ, and not a part of natural religion, or a moral duty only; but that it is brought under divine institution, it being enjoined on the churches of Christ to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; and that the whole church in their public assemblies, as well as private Christians, ought to (Heb. 2:12, Jam. 5:13) sing God's praises according to the best light they have received. Moreover, it was practiced in the great representative church, by (Matt. 26:30, Matt. 14:26) our Lord Jesus Christ with His disciples, after He had instituted and celebrated the sacred ordinance of His Holy Supper, as commemorative token of redeeming love.