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Singing With Purpose

The Scripture tells us that fellowship with the saints is good; it should be encouraged. It's one of the pleasant things that's made even better with a little coffee and banana bread-or whatever-that the ladies serve before the Family Bible Hour. Sometimes conversations that get started at these times need" just a few more minutes. "We've got another 10 minutes before the preaching begins; they're only singing now. The singing will be better without my monotone, anyhow."

Is that familiar? But, honestly, how does it measure up with Scripture? More mention is made of singing then we might think-actually, hundreds of references, including the Psalms, Israel's national hymnbook.

A survey of the Scriptures, suggests two main purposes for congregational singing: praising and teaching.

The first mention of singing is in Exodus 15 where Israel joyfully praises the Lord after their redemption and after seeing the once fearsome Egyptian army drown in the Red Sea. What a marvelous demonstration of God's powerful and caring deliverance. They burst into song, declaring the uniqueness and might of their God, while assuredly anticipating His protection and care as they enter the Promised Land and for millenniums beyond. Miriam and the ladies answered with their own song. They were songs of triumphant praise.

Later, as Moses was close to death, God wrote a song for His people, instructing Moses to teach it to the children of Israel, because, the Lord says, 'When I have brought them to the land... and they have eaten and filled

themselves and grown fat, then they will turn to other gods and serve them... this song will testify against--them...for it will not be forgotten in the mouths of their descendants, for I know the inclination of their behavior..... (Deut.31:20-21) In love God gave them a song that revealed not only His accurate knowledge of their wicked hearts, but also declared His unfailing care guaranteed to continue throughout His entire prophetic program that He planned for them and described in this passage. With this song tucked into their memory Israel would have an inner witness that they and all their future generations could reflect on. When their heart would become estranged from the Lord the words of this song would be there to draw them back to His protective power and blessing. This song was to teach their hearts and therefore mold their lives.

The New Testament reveals this same purpose for singing, that is, praising and teaching. Look at Ephesians 5:19 and its companion verse, Colossians 3:16.

In Eph. 5:19, the well-known "be filled with the Spirit" is followed immediately by the charge to sing. When a saint is controlled by the Holy Spirit, the first response stated here is to sing-surprised to realize that God puts this priority on singing? Heart-singing requires neither lessons nor fine voice! Isn't that good news? We learn also that our singing is speaking to one another-"speaking to yourselves" (KJV), not to go into a corner alone and talk to yourself, but to the others ("speaking to one another", NKJV). In addition to bringing praise to the Lord, singing also expresses to others your personal joy in the Lord, in His grand salvation, and in His never-ending blessing-blessing that

you're enjoying as you're singing with others in your assembly. You are in effect teaching them. That praise to the Lord does not only please Him but also encourages fellow saints. What a privileged ministry we can have if we're there!

In Colossians we're told in many ways of the preeminence of Christ and of the believer's organic link with Him. We're challenged to set our mind on things above and to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. This is followed immediately by the directive to sing so as to teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16). Just as the Holy Spirit produces singing (Eph. 5:19) so does the Word of God. In both cases, it is to be genuine, wholehearted praise to the Lord and helpful teaching to others. Not surprising, the Old and New Testaments agree: the purpose of singing is to praise God and teach His people.

Ephesians and Colossians both insist that the singing must be "in your heart(s) to the Lord." However, Ezekiel 33:32 tells us of those who listen to a song, but regard it only superficially: "... a very lovely song by one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them." To them it was music only for pleasant amusement. How easy for us, sometimes, to skim over the words of a hymn we're singing-or hearing sung-without the words making any significant impression on our hearts. Is singing to be mainly for our entertainment?. No, not if we are to reverently regard the holy Scriptures. Our hearts must be involved actively and honestly. God's Word cannot be trifled with in this or any other issue of life.

The Greek word psallo, translated "making melody" in Ephesians 5:19, is used five places in the New Testament. In Romans 15:9 it is said of Christ "...I will confess to You among the Gentiles, And sing to Your Name." In I Corinthians 14:15 we are told to "sing with the spirit and... sing with the understanding (mind)." In Ephesians 5:19, it is "making melody in your heart to the Lord" and in James 5:13 it is "Let him sing hymns"-the whole person is to sing. New Testament singing is then with the body (implied in the idea of physically singing), mind, spirit, and heart; the whole person is involved.

The kind of songs we are to sing are specified as psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Our songs are to be spiritual, having both the music and the words be such that our sovereign Lord Himself can delight. Music (melody, harmony, and rhythm) alone has an effect (a message) on the person and contributes to the song message; it did for King Saul and still does in our day. Singing must be done with great care and spiritual discernment in these days when entertainment is so highly applauded and spiritual depth and meaning so willingly ignored.

Can we then purpose to sing with a purpose? Sing to praise Him and to teach His people.

So, join the saints at the start of the song session and bring your heart along, even if you're not musically blessed-and even if your coffee is not quite finished!

O for a thousand tongues to sing

My great Redeemer's praise,

The glories of my God and King,

The triumphs of His Grace.