



PSALMS, HYMNS, AND SPIRITUAL SONGS EPHESIANS 5:15-21

SAM STORMS
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You may have heard me or someone else speak of the so-called “*worship wars*.” If you are a new believer or a young one, this language may not only sound new and unfamiliar but also highly irreverent. After all, worship is all about celebrating and exalting God. And, of course, all Christians agree with that. But how can there be a “war” among Christians about worshipping the Lord? I can assure you that it has nothing to do with God. It is altogether the result of people expressing their differences and preferences primarily about three things: (1) the style of music, (2) traditional hymns versus contemporary praise songs, and (3) the way in which people express their praise of God in their physical postures.

There are, of course, other elements in worship over which Christians continue to fight. Things such as: Should we use instruments or sing acapella? What should we anticipate experiencing when we worship? What is the place of emotion in worship? How long should a church worship on a Sunday morning, and where in the order of service should it be placed?

I’m not going to address those questions today. Rather, I want us to dig deeply into what Paul says in Ephesians 5:19-21. We’ve already examined what he meant by being filled with the Spirit. And we spent an entire Sunday focusing on the value and necessity of singing as central to worship. My primary focus today is on what Paul means by “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.”

One more thing to keep in mind. This passage and my message are not designed exclusively for worship leaders. They should certainly pay close attention to what Paul says, but so should we all! Paul is addressing all believers, the very people that he spoke to in vv. 15 and following. In v. 19 he says we are to address “one another” in our singing, the same group he exhorts in v. 21. There he says that we are to submit to “one another” out of reverence for Christ. This paragraph has universal relevance and application.

The Consequential Fruit of Being Filled with the Spirit

This brings us to the *consequential evidence or fruit* of being filled with/by the Holy Spirit. In vv. 18ff. we see several things that are the fruit of this experience.

- a) ***Speaking to one another in ministry*** (one of the initial signs of being filled with the Spirit is mutual fellowship and encouragement). Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs can have a didactic purpose and are designed to instruct believers.
- b) ***Singing to God*** (wholehearted worship in corporate fellowship).
- c) ***Gratitude*** (for all things at all times).
- d) ***Mutual submission*** (as over against being self-assertive and demanding).

This brings us to our primary concern in vv. 19-20:

“addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Clearly, Paul envisions believers communicating truth and knowledge and instruction by means of these various forms of singing. In Colossians 3:16, the parallel passage to Ephesians 5, Paul says that in our singing we are “***teaching and admonishing*** one another in all wisdom.” You may never have thought that your worship of God was directed not only to him but to “one another” in the body of Christ. I’m not saying that we are to worship one another. Heaven forbid! What I’m saying, what Paul is saying, is that when we worship God alone, we simultaneously teach and admonish and instruct and build up others in the church.

But what’s the difference, if any, between “psalms” and “hymns” and “spiritual songs”? Some insist there is no difference between these items. They argue that Paul intends them to be synonymous with one another. But if he meant only one thing, what is the point of employing three different words? More likely Paul had a distinction in mind that’s important for us to note.

"Psalms" most likely refers to those inspired compositions in the OT book of that name. Luke uses the word in this way in his writings (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33) and Paul encouraged Christians to come to corporate worship with a "psalm" to offer (1 Cor. 14:26). The word literally meant "to pluck" or "to strike or twitch the fingers on a string" and thus could possibly refer to singing with instrumental accompaniment (although we shouldn't restrict it to that). There are, as you undoubtedly know, 150 such psalms that are there to be used in our worship. Some churches in the Reformed tradition insist on what is called **exclusive psalmody**. They will only sing psalms put to music, to the exclusion of traditional hymns and contemporary praise songs. I don't see any justification for restricting our worship to the OT psalms.

The word **"hymns"** would be any human composition that focuses on God or Christ. Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 or the Song of Moses in Exodus 15 would qualify, as would Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1. Perhaps the most explicit examples would be the so-called "Christ Hymns" in Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20, and 1 Timothy 3:16.

Why is the third expression of singing designated not simply as "songs" but as **"spiritual songs"** (although some contend that the adjective "spiritual" applies to all three)? Could it be Paul's way of differentiating between those songs that are previously composed as over against those that are **spontaneously evoked** by the Spirit himself? Yes, I think so. In other words, "spiritual songs" are most likely **unrehearsed and improvised**, perhaps short melodies or choruses extolling the beauty of Christ. They aren't prepared in advance but are **prompted by the Spirit** and thus are uniquely and especially appropriate to the occasion or the emphasis of the moment. This isn't to say that psalms and hymns are for that reason less spiritual or of a lower quality. They can be composed under the influence of the Holy Spirit no less so than is the case with "spiritual songs."

The primary difference, then, is that these are probably songs that we sing under **the immediate prompting and infilling of the Holy Spirit**. I have in mind spontaneous songs that break out unexpectedly in the midst of our worship. In other words, there is a difference between those songs that a worship leader rehearses and practices before we gather together (whose words appear on the screen or are found in a hymnbook), and the unplanned melodies and phrases and short choruses that break out spontaneously.

This interpretation strikes many as strange for the simple fact that, outside of charismatic churches, there are virtually no opportunities for expressions of spontaneous praise. The only songs permitted are those listed in the bulletin, the words of which are either in the hymnbook or included in the liturgy. In these churches, singing is highly structured, orchestrated, and carefully controlled (but not for that reason any less godly or edifying). There is typically a distinct beginning and ending, without the possibility of *improvisation or free vocalization*. People are expected to sing what is written in the hymnal or projected on a screen, nothing more and nothing less.

But Paul seems to envision a "singing" in which the individual is given **freedom to vocalize his/her own passions, prayers, and declarations of praise**. Although this may strike some as chaotic and aimless the first time it is heard (it certainly affected me that way!), it can quickly become a beautiful and inspiring experience as the Spirit is given free rein in the hearts of Christ's people. As the instrumentalists play a simple chord progression or perhaps even the melody of a familiar song, the people spontaneously supply whatever words are most appropriate to their state of mind and heart.

I can't bypass the opportunity to tell you about Ann's first exposure to "spiritual songs." I had been attending a number of worship conferences where improvisation and free vocalization took place, but Ann had not. I finally persuaded her to join me and about a half dozen others in our church at a worship night in Dallas. The other six and I were fully engaged and had a wonderful time. Not Ann! On our drive home back to Ardmore, I asked a simple question of everyone in the van. "So, what did you all think of tonight?" Each one gave an enthusiastic endorsement. Not Ann! When it finally came her turn, she simply but quite stubbornly said: "Well, that may be ok with all of you, but I am certainly not going there!" The conversation in the van suddenly died out. But it wasn't long before Ann came to embrace this free expression of singing and dancing and the raising of hands.

Prophetic Singing

On countless occasions I have been blessed and edified by what some have called **"prophetic singing."** It is referred to as "prophetic" singing because it is believed the Spirit reveals something to the person who in turn puts it to music. Typically, an individual who is part of a worship team is led by the Spirit into a spontaneous song that may well evoke another to respond antiphonally. Such "spiritual songs" can last a few seconds or several minutes. Often,

what one person sings will stir up yet another with a similar refrain, which on occasion will lead back into a verse or the chorus of a hymn previously sung.

More important still is the fact that such singing, whether psalms, hymns, or spiritual songs, are designed not simply to extol God but to educate his people. By means of them we “teach” and “admonish” one another. Clearly Paul envisioned songs that were biblically grounded and theologically substantive, songs that both communicated truth and called for heartfelt consecration, repentance, and devotion to the Lord. Let’s not forget that Paul is describing a situation far in advance of the printing press and hymnbooks. Thus, these various expressions of singing were an invaluable means for transmitting and inculcating Christian truth.

Although many today may never experience a worship service that incorporates these elements in the way I described, the educational and convicting power in music and song cannot be denied. My suspicion is that when you leave our Sunday service, it isn’t anything Michael or I have said in our sermon that is on your lips, but rather the lyrics from one of the songs we sang during the time of worship! And I’m perfectly ok with that.

Several years ago, one of the men in our church approached me with a concern. He was slightly uncomfortable with the way in which one of our worship leaders would spontaneously deviate from the song list and engage in free vocalization. Actually, he was more than slightly uncomfortable. He was downright perturbed. His objection wasn’t theological in nature. He had no qualms about what was being sung, as if it were unbiblical, but only that it was being sung while he perceived others to have disengaged. “They don’t know what to do,” he said. “So many of them just sit down.” The incorporation of such “spiritual songs” in our time of corporate praise was obviously unsettling to him. He asked: “Why can’t he do that when he’s in his car or somewhere other than in front of hundreds of people who are attempting to follow his lead?”

That’s not an illegitimate question. I suspect that not a few others were wondering the same thing. So at the first opportunity I seized the moment to instruct our people on what one should do when worship takes this unexpected turn. I told them that one must resist disengaging, on the false assumption that this expression of praise is only for the benefit of the person singing and has nothing to do with anyone else. Instead, I provided several suggestions.

Listen and learn! Note again Ephesians 5:19a – “addressing one another” in “spiritual songs.” Meditate on what is being sung. Focus on the words. Turn them over again and again in your mind. Ask the Spirit to quicken in your own heart the truth of what is being sung and to stir your affections with joy and love. Be open to being taught in those times of prophetic worship. The Spirit may well have prepared something uniquely and especially for you!

Sing the same song. Listen for recurring phrases and the melody line and if it lasts long enough, join the singer in whatever “spiritual song” he/she is singing.

Sing your own spiritual song. Take whatever truth about God or Jesus the Spirit has awakened in your heart and put it in your own words, adapting it to the melody of the leader. It may be a short, simple phrase of praise or thanksgiving or proclamation or prayer. Those, such as yours truly, who possess the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, will often take advantage of such times to sing in tongues. This is surely what Paul had in mind when he made known his resolve to “sing praise with my spirit” (1 Cor. 14:15; see also Acts 2:11; 10:46).

Pray. Use the time to intercede for yourself or others. Or perhaps take the truth of what is being sung and let that shape and form the content of your prayers. Turn their “spiritual song” into your own personal intercession!

Give thanks (v. 20)! Spend time thanking God (either in prayer or in song) for all that he has done.

But why do I refer to the singing of “spiritual songs” as ***prophetic*** worship? Those who believe the revelatory gifts of prophecy and word of knowledge are no longer being given to the church by the Holy Spirit will obviously object to my use of the word “prophetic.” If one does not believe that the Holy Spirit can still communicate to our hearts beyond (but never, ever contrary to) what is already written in Scripture, any notion of prophetic singing is dismissed out of hand. But if the Spirit continues to impart revelatory insights or significant spiritual impressions on our hearts, then we may be drawing close to understanding what Paul is saying in this passage.

All genuine, Christ-exalting, Christ-enjoying worship is in or through or by means of the Holy Spirit. This is what Paul meant when he said: “For we are the [true] circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). This is also why Paul encourages us to be “filled with the Spirit.” His

point is that the Spirit evokes worship; he directs our hearts and minds to Christ in worship; he reminds us of all the right reasons for worship, and empowers and energizes us for worship.

Some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit is active in our worship would include:

- Spirit-prompted prayer in the selection of a set list
- Spirit-empowered rehearsal or practice
- Spirit-sustained unity among the band members
- Spirit-awakened expectations of what God might do during the course of worship
- Spirit-spoken direction in the atmosphere of Christ-exalting praise (Acts 13:2)

So what, then, is *prophetic* worship and how does it differ from the ordinary or routine expressions of praise and honor and gratitude that we read of in Scripture?

The most important point to draw from this passage is that Paul understands ***Christ-exalting worship to be the fruit of having been filled with the Holy Spirit***. Apart from the Spirit's empowering presence in us there can be no Christ-exalting singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. There may be singing, but little will be of value if not the result of being filled with the Spirit. This is why I referred last Sunday to worship or singing to God as ***supernatural***. Likewise, our giving of thanks to the Father in the name of Jesus must be the product of the Spirit's work in our hearts. Simply put, all worship, and not just what we call "prophetic" worship, together with addressing one another in edifying ways, as well as expressions of gratitude to God in the name of Jesus, must flow out of the overflow of the Spirit's presence in our lives.

In prophetic worship I'm proposing that just as a "revelation" may be granted spontaneously to a person who then communicates it to the congregation as a whole (1 Cor. 14:29-32), the Spirit may likewise reveal something to a member of the worship band who in turn communicates this by means of singing. If this is the case, the same guidelines that apply to the *spoken* prophetic word (judging, weighing, etc.) would apply to the *sung* word.

Additional Thoughts on Prophetic Singing

Perhaps the most common form of prophetic worship occurs when the worship leader senses the Spirit indicating the need to pause and reflect more deeply on something in the lyrics of a song, whether that be prayer or the specific application of some biblical principle to the people as a whole, etc.

The Holy Spirit can often speak or reveal something to a worship leader well in advance of the service. As he/she is praying over a potential set list, the Spirit can provide guidance and impress upon their heart something perhaps only tangentially related to what is contained in the song itself. This truth or emphasis may then be carried by the singer in his/her heart for days before Sunday arrives. They meditate upon it during the course of the week, pray it back to God, and ask for additional guidance on whether and when and how to introduce it into the worship set.

I would suspect that many who are worship leaders have often sensed God giving them a prophetic song days in advance of Sunday worship. They find themselves humming a melody or a specific lyric all through the week. That may be the Spirit's way of prepping them to sing it on Sunday.

One worship leader told me that as he was preparing his worship set earlier in the week that God began to highlight a particular biblical text. It was Revelation 22:4 where John says that in the new heaven and new earth, ***we will "see his face."*** When Sunday came around, we were singing "O Praise the Name," one line of which reads: "And I will rise among the saints, my gaze transfixed on Jesus' face". This led him to sing this truth in a moment of spontaneous praise. He broke from the song and began to celebrate the fact that one day we all will look into the eyes of the One who has loved us beyond our wildest imagination, and he will in turn look into our eyes as well." It led to a time of meditation and prayer on that glorious truth.

Prophetic worship may also be the fruit of writing songs under the influence of the Spirit. I'm not claiming infallible inspiration for a song, any more than I claim such when I write a book. But in both composing a song and in writing a book one can often sense the Spirit's leading, together with suggestions of a particular word or image to employ.

Can prophetic worship be both horizontal and vertical in its focus? Yes. A horizontal focus means that the intent of the "song" or chorus is to communicate something directly to God's people. In Colossians 3:16 Paul envisions this

sort of worship as “teaching and admonishing” others in the body of Christ. A vertical focus means that its primary orientation is toward God in the form of explicit praise or adoration. But most often a prophetic song is a delicate combination of both.

What is the role of *musical instrumentation* in prophetic worship? We saw in our examination of 1 Samuel 16 that music has more than simply a psychological or emotional effect on people. It also has the power to drive away, frustrate, and defeat demonic forces:

“And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him” (1 Samuel 16:23).

David’s music had this effect for only one reason: “the Lord is with him” (1 Sam. 16:18b). Don’t miss the point: *music played or sung by those who love God and are filled with God’s Spirit and who devote their talents to the glory of God irritates and agitates the enemy!* We read in 2 Samuel 22:1 that “David spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul.” It would appear then that *David prophesied through singing*.

One essential key to prophetic singing is familiarity with the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit will on occasion during the course of a worship service quicken in the mind of the leader a particular passage of Scripture that has relevance to what is happening in the service. The leader will then weave that text into the melody of whatever song they are singing. Perhaps Romans 8:1 is awakened in the heart of a leader during the time of congregational singing. The reality that there is no longer any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus lights a flame in the leader’s heart, or in the heart of one of the other singers, that leads into a time of singing that truth over one’s own life.

Absolutely essential to effective prophetic singing is humble prayer in advance, asking God to sensitize your heart and open your eyes and ears to be alert to his voice and leading. Otherwise, you will end up being led by the flesh, perhaps with selfish, competitive, and ambitious motives. It is critical that worship leaders are consistently cultivating friendship and intimacy with the Holy Spirit. They must not only know his voice but listen to his voice. Those who lead us in worship must be careful never to appeal to prophetic singing to manipulate the congregation. It is not a time to show off one’s musical skills but a moment in which everyone can be led ever more deeply into the joy and freedom of knowing the truth of the Gospel.

The most effective prophetic songs are those that flow naturally out of what the congregation has just sung. One should in most instances resist the temptation to create a diversion from the focus of the set. It is somewhat jolting and unedifying to move instantly out of sweet melodies about God’s love into loud and energetic declarations of wrath and judgment. The content or focus of prophetic songs might conceivably cover a wide range of topics, such as:

- Gratitude
- A challenge to God’s people to respond
- A prayer of intercession based on the truth of something just sung by all
- A reaffirmation or pressing into the truth of something just sung
- Joyful celebration
- Encouragement
- A cry for mercy
- A call for repentance

Singing in Tongues as an act of Worship

Finally, there is what Paul referred to in 1 Corinthians 14:14-15 as singing “with my spirit.” This undoubtedly refers to his regular practice of singing in tongues. Since tongues, whether in spoken words or in song, is the result of the Spirit’s empowering presence (“the Spirit gives utterance,” Acts 2:4), it has the potential to be prophetic. In any case, it must be subject to interpretation in the same way that a spoken word in tongues would be. And once a song in tongues is interpreted, it is also to be judged or weighed in accordance with the instructions we find in 1 Cor. 14:29 and 1 Thess. 5:19-22.

There is a strong likelihood, however, that Paul primarily has in view his regular practice of singing in tongues during times of private devotional prayer and praise. In such cases, since no one else is present, no interpretation is needed.

Even though Paul confesses that he does not understand what he is saying/singing (i.e., his “mind is unfruitful”), he is nevertheless determined to continue this spiritual exercise.

There are a number of texts that lead me to believe that the gift of tongues can be used in worship. We see this from a description of what happened on the Day of Pentecost. There the disciples spoke exuberantly in human languages they had not previously learned and in doing so were heard declaring “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11b). To proclaim the many miraculous and merciful deeds that God has done is to worship him; it is to make known his gracious acts in delivering his people and in preserving them in times of trouble. The psalmist exhorts us to “sing to him, sing praises to him; [and to] tell of all his wondrous works!” (Ps. 105:2). “We recount your wondrous deeds,” declares Asaph (Ps. 75:1), and speaks for himself in saying, “I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds” (Ps. 77:12). Such expressions of praise and honor are found throughout the psalter.

This is what we also encounter in Acts 10 when Cornelius and his Gentile companions spoke in tongues. Whether or not they were “extolling God” (Acts 10:46) in tongues or merely did so in conjunction with their tongues speech is unimportant. What we see consistently in these texts is that often when one makes use of his/her gift, either the content or consequence of it is the praise and worship of God.

When Paul tells us that the one who speaks in tongues addresses God, not man (1 Cor. 14:2), this may well include more than prayer. Praise is, after all, no less God-oriented speech than is petitionary prayer. But there can be no mistake about the role of tongues as worship when we come to Paul’s description of his own personal practice. When he states his resolve to make use of tongues in spite of the fact that his mind doesn’t grasp what is being said, he includes this affirmation: “***I will sing praise with my spirit***” (1 Cor. 14:15). The word translated “sing praise” is from the verb *psallō*, which means to touch or strike the strings or chords of a musical instrument. Others render it “to play on a stringed instrument” such as a lyre (or in our day, a guitar) or “to sing with musical accompaniment.”

Clearly, Paul’s gift of tongues took on more than one formal expression. He didn’t merely “speak” in tongues but often would “sing” in tongues as well. What he might say in the course of his prayers he could as easily set to music and worship God in a more melodious and perhaps even poetic manner. There is, then, no escaping the fact that Paul viewed tongues as one way to sing his praises to God.

Gratitude!

In conclusion, we must not overlook Paul’s exhortation in v. 20 to give thanks ***always and for everything*** to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. His point is that thanksgiving is appropriate all the time and for every blessing.

So, *before you ask God for something new, thank him for something old.* Thanksgiving is here connected with our Spirit-empowered praise of God. When we sing, we must do it with an attitude of gratitude. But you might wonder, as I do, why Paul would include thanksgiving as an essential part of our worship?

First, it is hard to be bitter in the presence of God when our minds and mouths are filled with what God has done for us in the past. When you are thankful you realize that everything you have is of grace and that you deserve nothing but death. Furthermore, it is difficult to doubt God and his promise to answer us when you are thanking him for the blessings he has already bestowed! If you think I’m making this up, try it. For example: “But God, I’m not sure you can . . . Oh, yeah, o.k., yes, I remember when you did something similar before. O.k., thanks.” Or again, “But God, I have no reason to think you are either able or willing to step into this situation and make things right. Oh, yeah, o.k., yes, I remember now how you did this on several occasions earlier. How stupid of me to think you wouldn’t be able or willing to do it again. Thank you, Lord.”

Thanksgiving is also the fuel for future requests. In other words, if your mind is first filled with remembrance of what God has graciously done in the past, it will empower and expand your requests for what you need now and tomorrow. Having seen firsthand what God can do in response to prayer, your prayers grow and intensify. If you’ve received a little in the past, why not ask for a lot in the future?

When you recall God’s goodness and mercy in the past it’s hard to remain burdened in the present. Thanksgiving has a way of alleviating the pressure of the present by reminding us of God’s power at work on our behalf in the past. And by constantly keeping fresh in our minds all that we have to be thankful for, we will be less inclined to disregard others who are less well off.

Finally, as strange as this may sound, *we also need to thank God for saying No*. Why in the world would we do that? Here's why. On some occasions, if God were to grant us the requests we make of him it would bring us harm that we are unable in the present to foresee. Contrary to what you may believe, you and I do not always know what is best for ourselves. We have to pray with confidence that God knows us better than we know ourselves. Just as an earthly father has to deny his five-year-old son's request for a hunting knife, so our heavenly father has to deny certain requests we make of him.

On some occasions, God will say no to a request in the present because he has something far better in store for us in the future. ***Thus, what strikes us as a definitive No is in fact a loving Wait.***

There are actually some prayers to which God says No because unbeknownst to us we are praying at cross purposes with another believer. What happens when a job is open and two or more Christians apply for it? When God answers the prayers of one, he must say no to the other. Or again, when you pray for holiness and happiness, it may be that purity comes only through persecution. Sometimes the only way God can answer your prayer for holiness is by leading you through heartache and persecution and loss.

So, when it comes to our worship, Paul wants us to thank God in every prayer and in every song we sing, whether or not what we ask comes to pass as we hoped it might. If it does, thank him. If it doesn't, thank him for having the wisdom not to give us what we couldn't handle. If it doesn't, thank him for how he will address your needs in a way that is far superior to how you first envisioned.



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