

# “Singing”

COLOSSIANS 3:16

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This morning as we emphasize singing and as we prepare for this afternoon’s class where we hope to learn more about singing and music, I would invite you to think with me about what the Bible has to say about the singing that we do together as a congregation. And as we study, I would invite you to turn with me to one of the most profound passages on singing in the New Testament – the passage is Colossians 3:16 (p. 1844). As we study, I would invite you to keep your Bibles open. The apostle Paul wrote this passage for a reason, and I would like for us to spend the next thirty minutes or so delving into this passage as we study this one verse and what it really means for those of us who continue to worship God, nearly 2,000 years after it was first written. But, thinking about our singing, let us please notice what Paul said – Colossians 3:16,

***Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.***

What a powerful passage! And again, I would like for us to keep our thoughts focused on this one verse. And as study what Paul said here, I would like to put it on the wall up here, and I want us to notice that our singing is to be focused in three directions.

**I. Notice with me here at the beginning that our singing is to be aimed INTERNALLY.**

As Paul said, ***“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you.”*** In other words, one of the first benefits to our singing is that it allows and encourages the word of Christ to live inside of us. Think about some of the songs that we’ve been singing this morning. These songs have allowed the word of God to dwell within us. Some of the songs we sing here, in fact, have come directly from the Scriptures. We will get to this a little bit later, but as I understand it, a ***“psalm”*** is most likely a reference to one of the psalms from the Old Testament book of Psalms, many of them having been written by King David. A ***“hymn”*** is basically an anthem of praise to God. A ***“spiritual song”*** is simply a spiritual idea that has been set to music. But the emphasis here is on the word of God. Often, we simply sing the word of God, ***“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you,”*** (from Matthew 6:33), ***“As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you”*** (from Psalm 42:1), ***“Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul”*** (from the opening verses of Psalm 25), ***“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases”*** (from Lamentations 3:22-23), ***“I am crucified with Christ”*** (from Galatians

2:20), ***“I will call upon the Lord”*** (from Psalm 18:3), ***“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord”*** (from 1 Peter 5:5-6), ***“Be still and know”*** (from Psalm 46:10). Over and over again, some of the most profound and powerful songs in our songbooks have been taken directly from the word of God. And yes, I suppose that we could just read those scriptures together, perhaps one of our men could get up here and just read a few verses, or maybe one of our men could lead us in some kind of group reading of a passage, and yet I think you will agree that there is a special value to SINGING those verses together! Think about going to a ball game. What if somebody got up and just read the Star Spangled Banner? Yes, we could understand the words, but there is a reason why we sing those words. Singing has a way of touching our hearts. Singing allows the word of Christ to richly dwell within us.

Singing God’s word has a way of reminding us that God’s word is ***“living and active”*** – the Bible says so in Hebrews 4:12 – but when we sing it, we experience it! The word is to live or dwell within us, Paul says, and we do that with singing.

We learn, then, that singing is how we invite the word of God to dwell in our hearts. Our music is aimed internally. Our hearts are to be actively involved in our singing. We think of Matthew 15:8 where Jesus condemned the worship of the Scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus quoted Isaiah and said, ***“This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.”*** So, we are not to be like that. Instead, the word of God is to dwell in our hearts because of the songs that we sing. As Paul says in a parallel passage (in Ephesians 5:19), we should be ***“...singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”*** By the way, did you notice the instrument Paul tells us to use over there in the Ephesians passage? We are to make melody ***“with our hearts.”***

Sometimes we refer to our singing as being “a cappella.” That word has an interesting history. When we look it up in a dictionary, we find that the word refers to singing that is done without instrumental accompaniment. And that’s right – that is what the word means. But what is interesting is where that word came from. Most dictionaries will give the history of a word, and when we look at that, we find that “a cappella” is actually an Italian phrase. The Italians love music! I have a feeling that David will be teaching us some Italian words and phrases this afternoon, “pianissimo,” and so on. But the phrase “a cappella” means, “in the style of the chapel or church.” In other words, hundreds of years ago, when people went looking for a term to describe singing without instruments, they said, “When we sing without instruments we are singing like we do in church!” So, just the word “a cappella,” then, is an admission that the early church (for hundreds of years) practiced congregational singing without the use of any instruments whatsoever.

From time to time, I have referred to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. It is available on-line, and even the on-line version includes the official seal of the Catholic Church. That means that everything in there is officially recognized by the Catholic Church as being accurate. It is a scholarly work, well-researched – there are some amazing historians and scholars in the Catholic Church. With that in mind, I would like to share several paragraphs from their own encyclopedia—written by their own leaders and scholars. I shared this with you a little more than six years ago, but I’d like to share it again. From the Catholic Church itself, this is what they say about the history of instrumental music in worship:

For almost a thousand years Gregorian chant, without any instrumental or harmonic addition, was the only music used in connection with the liturgy.

The Church has never encouraged, and at most only tolerated, the use of instruments.... She holds up as her ideal the unaccompanied chant and polyphonic, a cappella, style. The Sistine

Chapel has not even an organ. [I can now personally testify that this is true. We were in the Sistine Chapel back in January 2008. The Sistine Chapel is the most famous, the most sacred chapel of the Catholic Church, the room where new popes are elected. There is no organ in the Sistine Chapel—they have a great ceiling in there, of course, but there is no organ!]

The present trend is, however, decidedly away from the instrumental idea and back to the purely vocal style. And it is recognized, and in many places acted upon, that the new version of the liturgical chant, proposed to the Catholic world by Pius X, gains its full beauty and effectiveness only when sung without instrumental accompaniment of any kind.

Although Josephus tells of the wonderful effects produced in the Temple by the use of instruments, the first Christians were of too spiritual a fibre to substitute lifeless instruments for or to use them to accompany the human voice. Clement of Alexandria severely condemns the use of instruments even at Christian banquets.

To the human voice, the immediate vehicle of the sacred word, belongs the first place in the churches, and not to instrumental additions or the trivial scraping found in most of the church's pieces today. Catholic Church music can regain its former purity only by a return to the purely vocal style.

That vocal music is in general more expressive than the mechanically produced tones of instruments is undeniable. Religious feeling finds its most natural expression in vocal utterance, for the human heart is the source of both devotion and song.

As I read these various quotes from the Catholic Church, I am amazed! They very openly teach that the church's singing was not accompanied by instrumental music for at least a thousand years. Not only that, but their leaders – their scholars who are highly trained and respected both in music and in church history – their leaders are recommending a return to a cappella music in the church! We would certainly encourage them to continue on that path and remove one of the divisions that has taken place in the religious world over the past 2000 years. A number of years ago, we attended a Catholic funeral, and all of the music was a cappella! I have heard similar stories from some of you here this morning. And again, we hope and pray that they will continue in that direction.

Some people are surprised that most modern denominations at one time used to agree both with us and the Catholic scholars on this issue. We could start with the Methodist church. One of their leading scholars was a man by the name of Adam Clarke. His commentaries can be found in most religious libraries. I'd like to read his comments on 2 Chronicles 29:25, in answer to the question of whether this verse required the use of instruments in "Christian worship." Please remember that he was a Methodist. This is his answer:

No: the whole spirit, soul, and genius of the Christian religion are against this [the use of instrumental music]: and those who know the Church of God best, and what constitutes its genuine spiritual state, know that these things have been introduced as a substitute for the life and power of religion; and that where they prevail most, there is least of the power of Christianity. Away with such portentous baubles from the worship of that infinite Spirit who requires his followers to worship him in spirit and in truth, for to no such worship are those instruments friendly.

I have read this quote for many years, and I've always been pretty sure what Mr. Clarke meant by "portentous baubles," but I couldn't sleep last night – I was thinking about this – and I wanted to be sure, so I woke up early this morning and looked it up just to be sure. The word "portentous" refers to something that is ominous or foreboding. A "bauble" is a cheap ornament, a cheap imitation. So, Mr. Clarke was referring to instrumental music in worship as being an ominous and cheap imitation!

I'd also like to read Adam Clarke's comments on Amos 6:5 concerning instruments in worship:

I am an old man, and an old minister: and I here declare that I never knew them productive of any real good in the worship of God: and have had reason to believe that they were productive of much evil. Music, as a science, I esteem and admire: but instruments of music in the house of God I abominate and abhor. This is the abuse of music; and here I register my protest against all such corruptions in the worship of the Author of Christianity.

I also found a quote from John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church. Wesley once said, "I have no objections to instruments of music in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen."

Some of you might also be familiar with John Calvin. Historians generally agree that he was basically a co-founder of Presbyterianism. In his commentary on Psalm 33, in his comments on Christians and musical instruments, this is what he writes:

...when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to him. Paul allows us to bless God in the public assembly of the saints only in a known tongue (1 Corinthians 14:26).

We could also consider the writings of Charles Spurgeon, a leading Baptist preacher in the late 1800's. Mr. Spurgeon is still highly regarded in the religious world and in the Baptist church in particular. Spurgeon preached at the huge Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle in London, and many people do not realize that instrumental music was never used in the services at that facility. Many of Spurgeon's sermons and commentaries are available on-line, even today. I'd like to read Spurgeon's comments on Psalm 42. Notice especially his comments on instrumental music in worship:

What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettinesses of a quartet, the refined niceties of a choir, or the blowing off of wind from inanimate bellows and pipes! We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it.

We can see, therefore, that in the history of the religious world – in the Catholic Church as well as in nearly all of the modern denominations, it was standard practice at one time to reject the use of instrumental music in worship as a sinful and unattractive addition to the word of God. In our worship, our singing is to come from the heart. So first of all, then, our singing is internal. Our singing encourages the word of Christ to live in our hearts.

II. Let us move on to the second direction addressed in this passage, and let us notice that our singing is also directed **HORIZONTALLY**.

Notice how Paul says that ***“with all wisdom”*** we should be ***“teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”*** In other words, our singing is not only internal, but it is also external or horizontal. And so we find here that one huge purpose of our singing is to teach and admonish ***“one another.”*** Our singing is directed outward. The purpose here is to teach.

Most teachers understand the value of singing. How did we learn our ABC’s? How did we first learn the books of the Bible? How did we learn the names of the twelve apostles? Most of us were taught by singing! As we sing, therefore, we are transmitting information. As we sing, we are teaching one another through the words of the songs that we sing. Have we learned anything, have we been encouraged, as a result of singing the songs that we’ve been singing this morning?

- “I was lost, but Jesus found me, found the sheep that went astray.” We need that reminder!
- If we came in this morning feeling blue, if we came in this morning burdened down with the cares of this world (and I know several of you did come in like this today, because you told me so), but for those who came in like this, we needed the reminder that we sang in our second song this morning, “There is a silver lining that shines in that heavenly land.”
- And in our third song, “Sing to me of heaven, let me fondly dream, of it’s golden glory, of its pearly gleam.”

So the answer is YES! We absolutely learn something, we are absolutely encouraged, through the songs that we sing. In fact, I would suggest that if somehow all Bibles were suddenly removed from the face of this earth, I believe it would be possible to teach the plan of salvation just based on the songs that we sing. If we needed to, we could use our songbooks to show what God did for us. We could use our songbooks to show the importance of faith, repentance, and baptism. We could use our songbooks to show the importance of righteous living. Our singing is designed to teach and admonish. Think about the valuable lessons our children learn from their singing, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so! Little ones to Him belong. They are weak, but He is strong!” Think about how important it is for our children to learn those lessons – that Jesus loves them, that we read about Jesus in the Bible, that they belong to Jesus, that Jesus is stronger than we are, and so on. We learn, then, that even the most simple songs in our books are able to teach.

Before we leave this idea of singing as a form of teaching, I want to point out something that the Greek scholars have pointed out about this idea of singing to ***“one another.”*** The scholars tell us that Paul uses a “reciprocal, reflexive pronoun.” The translators explain that it represents an “interchange of action,” emphasizing the idea of “corporate unity.” Just by looking at the word, most of us can figure out what they mean by “corporate unity.” A corpse is a body, a corporation is a body of people who have come together to do business, “corporate unity,” then, refers to the unity we have in the body of Christ. In other words, only when the entire congregation sings together, only when the entire body sings together, can it truly be said that we are singing ***“to one another.”*** If we were to start a choir here at this congregation, if we were to start a praise team, we would not be fulfilling God’s instructions here – the choir or the small group up here would be speaking, and we in the audience would be listening. The choir would be active, and the rest of us would be passive. That is not what Paul is telling us to do. That is why singing is always done here as a congregation. It is something we do together, for the benefit of ***“one another,”*** and this goes all the way back to the beginning. We can look to the end of the First Century, and we have an interesting statement written by a Roman writer by the name of Pliny. Pliny was writing to Emperor Trajan and was trying to explain who these “Christians”

were. He wrote to the emperor and described Christians as those who “...were accustomed on a fixed day to gather before daybreak and to sing antiphonally a hymn to Christ as to a god.” To sing “antiphonally” is to sing back and forth. Sometimes we sing a song here where the men will sing, “Sing hallelujah to the Lord,” and the women will respond, “Sing hallelujah to the Lord,” and the rest of the song is like that – the men and the women singing back and forth to one another. We have a secular record, then, from a pagan writer, that the Christians were known for doing this nearly 2,000 years ago, almost from the very beginning of the Christian faith.

It is interesting that congregational singing was the practice of the early church at least up through the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. In fact, it is interesting that we have the writings of a man from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, the writings of a man named Chrysostom. These are his words, “It was the ancient custom, and it is still with us, for all to come together, and unitedly to join in singing. The young and the old, rich and poor, male and female, bond and free, all join in one song... All worldly distinctions here cease, and the whole congregation form one general chorus.” In other words, even as late as the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, Christians understood the importance of the entire congregation being involved in singing to **“one another,”** and the reason is: They were following the inspired writing of the apostle Paul! They knew that their songs were intended to teach and admonish **“one another.”** Singing is not something we watch the choir do, it is not something we merely observe, singing is not something we assign only to those who are good at it, but singing is something that all of us do toward one another, at the same time. According to the New Testament plan, all of us have a responsibility to teach **“one another.”** So, our singing is not only to be internal (from the heart), but it is also to be horizontal, to **“one another.”**

**III. At this time, let us close by looking at that last little phrase – at the end of Colossians 3:16, we find that we are to sing “with thankfulness in our hearts to God.” In other words, our singing should also be directed VERTICALLY.**

Our singing is to be aimed at God. Our songs are to be offered **“to the Lord,”** as Paul puts it in the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:19. Another way of putting this would be to say that our singing is not to be a performance. The purpose of our singing is not to show off our musical ability, but it is to be a time of worship **“to God,”** as Paul says. We are to sing, **“...with thankfulness in our hearts to God.”** The goal of our singing is to be heard by our Father in Heaven. And in fact, we often sing directly to God, “You are my strength when I am weak, You are the treasure that I seek, You are my all in all, Jesus, Lamb of God!” At other times, we sing about the Lord, “There is beyond the azure blue, a God concealed from human sight. He tinted skies with heavenly hue, and framed the worlds with His great might. There is a God, He is alive, in Him we live, and we survive. From dust our God created man, He is our God, the great I Am.” So, we might sing directly to God or we might sing about God, but whatever we sing, we should always remember that God is listening. We should always remember that God is our audience. We are not here to impress each other, but we are here to please God.

### **Conclusion:**

This morning, then, we have learned from Colossians 3:16 that our singing is to come from the heart, our singing is meant to teach one another, and our singing is designed to honor God. As we close, the question is not: Are we good at singing? Yes, I am looking forward to learning more about the fundamentals of music this afternoon. This is extremely important. We need to have a deeper appreciation for music. If we are commanded to sing to God as an act of worship, we might as well be as good as we can be at it. There is always a need to learn more. There is always a need to improve. Early this morning I was thinking: If God had told us that in order to be saved, we had to climb Mt. Everest, do you know what we would be doing this

afternoon here at this congregation? We would be hosting a class on how to climb a mountain! To go to heaven, do we need to know what an eighth-note is? Absolutely not! But since the Lord has told us to sing, shouldn't we try to learn something about it? Shouldn't we try to do it well? But again, the most important question is not: Are we good at singing? Instead, the most important question is: Do we have a reason to sing? If we are in Christ, the answer is "Yes!" If we are in Christ, our sins have been forgiven. That is a pretty motivating reason to praise God.

This morning, then, if you are still outside of Christ, we would invite you to obey the gospel. If you are outside of Christ, we want you to be inside Christ. In Romans 6:3, the Bible explains that we are baptized "**into Christ.**" The Bible teaches that we must believe in Jesus, we must repent of all sin, and we must then allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. At that point, the Christian life begins, and at that point, our songs have a much deeper meaning. At that point, we have a reason to sing. If you would like to discuss this one-on-one, let us know. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring your concern to the front – we would be honored to go to God on your behalf. But if you are ready to join us in Christ through baptism, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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