



Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs

by Pastor Steve

I recently received an e-mail from a young man who lives in Paraguay, South America. There seemed to be desperation in his words as he wrote, "I believe that God wants his church to worship him. I also believe that worship songs are a good tool to do that. Unfortunately the majority, including the elders of the church, don't think so. They say that there is too much based on feelings (lifting hand's, clapping, closing eyes while singing etc.). Now we have started a praise and worship program that goes on once a month. Many people say that we are charismatic and lost. Pastors have gone as far as to preach against it. Some of our friends have lost their jobs because they participate with us. The pressure is enormous at times."

Sad but true is the fact that in many churches the type of music that is meant for worship becomes a source of division. There are the "all hymns" churches, the "no hymns" churches, the "hymns-other stuff" churches, then you have the "no music-just voices" churches. There are probably some others I don't know about. Who's right? Who's wrong? Who cares? Just Worship!! At least that's how I feel sometimes. Don't get me wrong, I have a preference. However, in the end my preference doesn't count for much because worship is not about me, it's about God. Even with that said we still search for answers. We want to know what is biblically correct.

The Apostle Paul helps us to answer some of our questions in his teachings to the early church. He wrote to the church in Ephesus, *...but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord...* (Ephesians 5:18-19) Paul conveyed the same message to the believers in Colosse when he wrote *...teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.* (Colossians 3:16) In each of these verses Paul gives us three mediums of acceptable worship when believers gather: psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

Before we get into the specifics of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs let's take a look at an important dynamic that takes place during corporate worship. In the verses mentioned above Paul wrote that we should speak to, teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Wait a minute! I thought worship is for God alone. Well it is. Paul did say in both scriptures that the recipient of our singing and making melody is the Lord. However, as we worship the Father we learn about him and we edify one another.

Though we should never get our theology from a song many of the songs we sing are soaked in doctrinal truths. Singing these songs to the Lord in a corporate setting re-affirms our faith not only to him but also to each other. We also draw strength from one another as we approach the throne of God together. We realize that we are not alone in our quest for his presence. In my opinion this concept solidifies the necessity of corporate worship. This is why the writer of Hebrews exhorts us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

To properly define psalms, hymns and spiritual songs we should take a look at their meanings from the original language in which they were written. The Greek word used in the Pauline epistles for psalms is psalmos. Psalmos is defined as a set piece of music, a sacred ode accompanied with the voice, harp or other instruments. There are religious denominations that believe music should not accompany songs in the church. However, the very definition of a psalm refutes that idea. I am not suggesting that the way these denominations worship is unacceptable just that their theology of worship is incomplete. That is great news to all of us minstrels who desire to play our instruments for the glory of God in worship.

Hymns are another acceptable medium for worship. The Greek word used here is humnos. Humnos is defined to celebrate, or one of the psalms, a hymn. When we generally think of hymns great songs like *Amazing Grace, How Great Thou Art*, and many others come to mind. *O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing* is one of my favorites. However, these songs we refer to as hymns are actually psalms. We said a psalm is a set piece of music accompanied by an instrument and voice; so once these "hymns" were recorded they became psalms. In fact all of the recorded worship songs we sing in church are in reality psalms. Since hymns and psalms are different we must conclude that a hymn is a song that has not been recorded. Thus it is a new, spontaneous song.

The third medium of song Paul speaks about is the spiritual song. The phrase spiritual songs in the Greek is 'ode pneumatikos; meaning songs of the breath of God. Spiritual songs are songs sung in or by the Holy Spirit. These songs are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are spontaneous and prophetic in nature. Sometimes spiritual songs are sung by the worshiper to God, and sometimes the song is sung by God through the

worshiper. When God sings through a believer, he prophetically reveals his heart to his people. This is done to bring edification, exhortation and comfort to the church. This type of spiritual song is sung in a language understood by the congregation.

Paul is exhorting the church to sing psalms (songs that have been recorded), hymns (new, spontaneous songs), and spiritual (prophetic) songs.

I believe singing in tongues is another aspect of the spiritual song. Paul, in his teaching on spiritual gifts to the Corinthian church, says this, *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is the result then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.* (1 Corinthians 14:14-15) In this passage Paul equates singing in the spirit with singing in tongues.

A song sung in an unknown tongue in a congregational setting should be interpreted. If there is no interpreter the worshiper should sing only to God. Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians 14:2, *For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God for no one understands him, however in the spirit he speaks mysteries.* God does not speak to man in unknown tongues. Unknown tongues are an avenue for man to speak to God. A song sung in an unknown tongue is sung to God not to man. In that case the interpretation of such a song should be sung to God and not to man.

Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; use them all. Together they make a great recipe for worship.

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