

WHY ASSEMBLE ? No. 6

In our tradition, most all of our Sunday morning assemblies begin with singing and none are conducted without singing. We have stressed that this must be congregational singing without instrumental accompaniment and that each individual is commanded to sing. If the person cannot carry a tune, that is no excuse for not singing; so he is urged to make a joyful noise to the Lord, embarrassing as that may be for a discordant voice to drown out the harmony. Even deaf people sing by sign language. If that is expressive for them, that is great, but if it is to obey a command to sing, it is a pitiful procedure. That applies also to all singing if it is only done to fulfill a supposed command.

Is there any question that at least one of our purposes for assembling is to sing? Our basic texts in support of our claims, which many of you probably can quote, are copied here for reference in this study.

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Eph. 5:15-20).

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:16-17).

For sake of brevity, I did not copy the contexts of these parallel passages. If you are serious in restudying this matter, I ask you to read the “before and after” so as to see what Paul was instructing them to do. And even with your reading these contexts, because of long-time programming of your mind, you may still not recognize that Paul was not instructing believers about assemblies. He simply was not writing about assemblies. If you question that, please read it all again to see that he was giving exhortations about the general conduct of disciples.

Am I saying that it is improper to sing in the assemblies. By no means. Maybe we need more of it -- singing with a message through which we fulfill the purpose of assemblies by teaching, admonishing, and uplifting one another, addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. These heart-felt expressions are to be sung with thankfulness, the kind of heart-melody to which God listens.

These exhortations, however, were about the walk of life. For instance, in social gatherings, instead of making them degrading, drunken parties with lewd singing induced

by liquor or drugs like unbelievers do, being motivated by the Spirit, sing constructive and instructive songs that build up, strengthen, and encourage and give honor to God. Can we rightfully assert that Paul was warning against having drunken parties in the assembly? He extends his exhortation into full-life conduct, urging, "*And whatever you do, in word or deed.*" Then he gives exhortations to wives, husbands, children, fathers, and slaves, and he certainly was not instructing all these persons as to how to conduct themselves "in church." We are so "church house and organized religion" oriented in thinking that our interpretations go that route by default. When Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the time had come when worship would not be in certain locations and Mosaic rituals, he did not point her to new locations and systems for acceptable worship.

Some of you are ancient enough to remember when we were not surrounded by secular music constantly coming from outward sources and drowning out spiritual expression. We sang "church songs" as we worked about the house and in the fields. When families visited, it was common to turn the social into a time of singing. As the family and others rode together on trips, there was singing. As men walked the sidewalk in town, some could be heard whistling tunes of sacred songs. Believers sang to comfort themselves in stressful times as Paul and Silas did in jail. "*Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise*" (James 5:13). In church only? Congregations often had special sessions devoted to singing. For a number of years while I worked in New Iberia, Louisiana, a good number of us met an hour early each Sunday evening for singing.

I am not saying we should try to go back to the "good old days" which would be impractical now but I do think such "extra-church house" practice of singing fits the application of what Paul was urging the Ephesians and Colossians to do. And this practice would only enhance the singing in assemblies.

Without questioning the practice of congregational singing that I learned from mentors, I taught for many years that congregational singing was right and solos or choirs were off limits. Actually, the case for congregational singing only is very weak. Paul wrote, "*When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation*" (1 Cor. 14:26). I always read that mentally as "each one has a hymn to lead," but that is not implied.

The only implication in Scripture of singing in the assembly is the reference above and also v. 15, "*I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.*" Both of those refer to individuals singing. Neither reference is applicable today. Brace yourself!! Both of those are speaking of the exercise of spiritual gifts, the discussion of which began in Chapter 12:1. Nobody today has "a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation" miraculously imparted by the Spirit. Paul was writing to them "*so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ; who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Ch. 1:8-9). Jesus revealed himself at the end of the age in bringing an end to the nation of Israel. If he has not revealed himself and his day has not transpired, the Corinthian

disciples are still over there in Corinth waiting, for they would be sustained to the end according to Paul's promise. Just the facts! Sorry to shake you up. ; -)

Though we still have not made use of choirs (our pulpit areas are not built for them), some of our churches followed the fad of making use of a "praise team" as suggested in Jude 3:13. Hearing them practice "before the worship begins," causes me to wonder. Can we practice praising God, perhaps with some levity, so that thirty minutes later we can sing it as praise and mean it? (Sorry. My old ugly self just broke out of its cage again!)

Yes, we sing in assemblies. That's great. We sing songs of praise, prayer, contrition, confession, gratitude, sympathy, comfort, aspiration, hope, anticipation, instruction, and exhortation. It is not our purpose, however, to meet in an effort to fulfill a command or instruction to sing. We come together to strengthen, upbuild, edify, and lift up each other. Singing is an effective method we can use to accomplish those purposes.

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(Cecil Hook; September 2003) []