

What Is Song Worship?

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Introduction.

- A. I'm certainly not the most athletic of people, but back when I was in first grade or so, I can remember playing on a children's-league soccer team. I, at least, think a soccer game between kids that young is one of the funniest things imaginable. You have this whole big field, you have the two goalies standing alone at either end of it, and then you have the other 20 kids packed as tightly as they can be into a knot around the soccer ball. They know that the object of the game is to kick the ball into the net, so that's what they try to do. The result is called swarmball, and it's obviously not the most efficient way to play soccer.
- B. The problem those kids have is that they understand the goal, but they don't understand the process. They know where they want to go, but they haven't taken the time to think about what they need to do to get there. As they grow older, they come to understand that success depends on the intermediate steps too.
- C. That same pattern of thought, that breaking down and analyzing each step of a process in order to reach a desired goal, is a pattern that we need to employ in our efforts to serve God. We need to understand not just what, but how. We see a perfect example of this in the realm of personal evangelism. We can be totally determined to reach the lost, but until we start paying attention to what the word of God says about the process of evangelism, we aren't ever going to succeed because we don't know how to succeed.
- D. The same thing applies to the worship we offer God in song. This is a very familiar activity. We assemble to sing at least three times a week, so we assume that we're doing it right, and we never really stop to think about it. We don't make that concentrated effort to understand the process of what we're doing when we sing, so too often, we don't ever improve. Our song worship is the spiritual equivalent of swarmball.
- E. In the first half of our meeting together, the three lessons we'll go through today, we're going to take some steps to changing that. We're going to explore the premise that not all hymns in our hymnal are created equal and spend some time determining which hymns are more suitable or less suitable for worship. Before we do that, though, we need to look at what we're trying to accomplish. We need to ask, "What is song worship?"

I. Form.

- A. The answer to this question begins with an analysis of the form of song worship. Basically, we need to understand what an assembly praising God in song should outwardly be doing. Should there be a rock band up on the stage? Should there be a pipe organ in the corner? Or should we be doing something else? Until we have the answer to that question down, it's really pointless to explore the rest of this subject.
- B. We have all the information we need to answer this question in Colossians 3:16. This is a verse we'll be returning to a lot this morning, and for good reason. It's one of the two main verses that defines our worship. The first thing it tells us is that we need to be singing. It doesn't say "playing musical instruments." It doesn't even say "singing and playing musical instruments." It just says "singing." That means, brethren, that in our song worship, we need to be singing, and that's it. If we're doing anything else, we're disobeying God.
- C. The second point here is a little more subtle, but it's one that we need to make today. If you're familiar with the writings of Rick Warren or any of the other modern denominational experts on church growth, one of the things they advise is that congregations shift their musical worship to a performer-audience format. They say that modern Americans are uncomfortable with singing, so if you want them to come back, you have to create an environment where visitors understand that they are just expected to sit back, relax, and enjoy the show.
- D. Now, that may be a wonderful idea according to the wisdom of the world, but it's not something we can do if we want to please God. This passage tells us why. It's not enough in our worship for me to be singing to you, nor is it enough for you to be singing to me. Instead, the text says quite clearly that we are to be teaching and admonishing one another. We don't assemble to watch someone else perform. We assemble to actively participate in the worship, and that's why we don't have choirs or anything else that's a performance.

II. Process.

- A. All right; so now we know that we have to sing, and that we all have to be involved in that singing. There are a lot of folks in the church who believe that's all we have to understand about song worship, that as long as we're a capella and there isn't a choir tucked away somewhere, we're doing what God expects. The problem is that we haven't yet begun to scratch the surface of what the Bible teaches about song worship. Instead, of just being content with understanding the outward form, we need to understand the process of worship too.
- B. As with the form of worship, we can define this process in Scriptural terms. The first passage that speaks to this is 1 Corinthians 14:40. This passage tells us that our worship can't be a chaotic mishmash. It has to be carried out in an orderly fashion, and this in turn requires us to use pre-written **HYMNS** in our services.

- C. Just think for a second what would happen if we didn't have hymns that were prepared beforehand. There is absolutely no way that we could sing together in any kind of harmonious fashion. Everyone would just be singing whatever struck their fancy with no regard for anyone else. The hymns that are printed in our hymnals that we all turn to together are what keep us on the same page, both literally and metaphorically.
- D. We see the next step in this process of song worship set out in Ephesians 5:19. We aren't supposed to sing these hymns lifelessly and mechanically. Instead, they are supposed to stir us up in our **HEARTS**. In many ways, this is a hard concept for us to get our minds around, because there isn't really a good English equivalent to the Greek concept of the heart. In Koine Greek, the word "heart" doesn't just refer to the emotions as we use "heart" today. It's not just an emotional thing. Instead, it refers to the emotions working together with the intellect to produce a response that is both intellectual and emotional. We see a rephrasing of this idea in 1 Corinthians 14:15. Paul tells us here that it's not enough to engage in an emotional spiritual outpouring. Instead, it must be united with the understanding to be fully pleasing to God.
- E. This means, then, that if we are apathetically going through the motions of worship, we are not carrying out God's plan. Similarly, if we are joyfully and enthusiastically singing away, but our minds are not engaged by what we're singing, we aren't carrying out God's plan either. We need to use our whole hearts in worship.
- F. We learn what happens next in our song worship from Colossians 3:16. This passage is important because it defines the two objects of our song worship. In the first place, it tells us that we are singing to **GOD**. This is the worship aspect of our singing. If nothing we sing is directed to God or is about God, we're missing the boat on worship. Likewise, we also need to be singing to the **CHURCH**. Our song can't just be directed vertically to the Creator; it also has to be directed horizontally to one another too. If there aren't hymns in our repertoire that are directed to us, we aren't doing what God wants us to do either.

III. Purpose.

- A. In a nutshell, those are the steps that God wants us to be going through when we sing, but that's not all He wants from us. There's a reason why He expects those things. In our worship, we need to seek to fulfill the purpose of God. We see the first of these purposes for worship defined in the passage that's up on the screen still, Colossians 3:16. Notice that Paul begins by telling us to have a rich indwelling of the word within us.
- B. Here's what it should look like? You ever see one of those videos on YouTube where they take a Mentos mint and drop it into a 2-liter bottle of Diet Coke? I've done it myself. It's pretty cool. The chemicals in the mint start reacting with the Diet Coke, and in less than a second, the entire contents of the bottle erupt in a geyser that's like 10 feet high. Friends, that's the way that the word should be inside us. It should react with our hearts so powerfully that it creates tremendous pressure. We know so much about the word and we care so much about what we know that the truth of the gospel will just explode out of any outlet it is given.
- C. The point of this passage is that our outlet for the word is our singing to one another. It is that rich indwelling of the gospel that causes us to teach and admonish. This, friends, is what we should be getting out of our song worship. We don't sing to make pretty music together. We don't sing to entertain one another. We don't sing to generate mindless, giddy emotion. We sing to teach and be taught.
- D. Similarly, we need to understand the role of our song worship in edification. Just about all of us would agree that our singing, just like any of the other teaching methods we use, is supposed to edify. However, too much of the time, we don't really know what edification is. Too much of the time, we think that edification is that emotional high we experience when we're walking out of the building after a service that raised the rafters.
- E. The Biblical definition of edification is quite different. We find this definition in Ephesians 4:11-13, which is probably the most important Scriptural text on edification. The way that the Greek is grammatically constructed here, Paul is defining edification as the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry. That's what any teacher is to do, even if that teacher is a song leader or an ordinary Christian in the pew. The object of our singing to one another is to give one another the spiritual tools we need to serve God. The verse then continues to say that we need to engage in this edification process until all of us are as useful as Christ.
- F. So . . . what are these tools? Do we equip each other with our own wisdom? With pop psychology? Of course not! Paul tells us quite plainly what it is that edifies in Acts 20:32. It is only the word of God that is able to build us up and make us useful for service in His kingdom. That means, then, that our worship services and the hymns we employ in them must contain the word, and the more they do, the better they are.
- G. However, as important as teaching is, it is not the only purpose of our song worship. Look, for instance, at the heavenly worship described in Revelation 4:10-11. Let's pay attention to what these elders are saying. Because God is the Creator, He deserves to be glorified. It's not like we're doing God a favor when we worship Him, any more than our employers are doing us a favor when they pay us at the end of the week. We owe God our worship just like our employers owe us our wages. When we consider what God has done, and what His actions mean to each one of us personally, we are quite literally compelled to give Him the glory because anything else would be unfair. Our song worship is one of the main avenues for this that God has provided.
- H. Once again, though, notice the connection between the worship of God and the word. We learn a little bit about what God has done from observing the outside world, but mainly, it is the Scripture that reveals Him and His actions to us. Because that is true, any song worship that does not rely upon the inspired record of the

mighty deeds of God is inevitably going to be empty and meaningless. We need the word to worship too.

IV. Importance.

- A. Now that we've figured out the point of song worship, we need to ask ourselves how important it is. Is this something that we can let slide, or is it something that we need to focus our attention on as one of the most significant parts of the assembly? Our song worship is important, brethren, and we need to treat it as such.
- B. Consider, for instance, the judgment pronounced by Hosea in Hosea 4:6. Through the course of history, this is something that has wrecked the Lord's people not once but repeatedly. The Israelites were destroyed over and over again because of their lack of knowledge. The early church fell into apostasy because of its lack of knowledge. Even the big church splits since the Restoration have been for lack of knowledge.
- C. Once we recognize how deadly spiritual ignorance is, we understand how important spiritual teaching is, and song worship teaches us in ways that no other teaching form can. This is true in two main ways. In the first place, our hymns tend to be the way we feed new converts on the milk of the word. When a preacher gets up and preaches on Calvinism, the typical babe in Christ has no idea what he's talking about. For all he knows, Calvinism has something to do with a comic strip. By contrast, though, when that new convert sings about Jesus' love for him, the joy of his salvation, and the need to study God's word, he is learning the basic truths he needs to survive spiritually. If our hymns do a poor job of teaching, those new Christians starve.
- D. Similarly, it is often the hymns that we sing that provide us with the core of our daily spiritual understanding. Most of us are not particularly good at memorizing Bible passages. There might be a couple dozen Scriptures that stick in our minds, but that's about it. By contrast, the Christian who has been faithfully assembling with the saints for the past 20 years or so almost certainly knows hundreds of hymns by heart. There's just something about the combination of music and words with rhythm that locks them into our minds. Not only that, but the average hymn we know by heart is far longer than the average passage we have memorized. Basically, the bulk of the spiritual information we have in our heads comes from our song worship, and it will probably always be that way. It is incredibly important, then, that that information be good information.
- E. Even more than that, though, we need to emphasize our song worship because it is something we are offering to God. Look at God's thoughts about the sacrifices the children of Israel were offering in Malachi 1:7-8. Instead of the unblemished offerings that God's law demanded, these supposed worshipers were sacrificing the sick, the lame, and the blind. God is very clear how He feels about that. He calls these blemished sacrifices evil, and in this context, He continues to express a wish that some righteous man would shut the doors of the temple and end the worship. God would rather have no sacrifice at all than a worthless one.
- F. When we read this passage, we need to understand that the praise we offer to God are our sacrifices. This is the point of Hebrews 13:15. We are the priests of the new covenant, and when we assemble to sing, we carry out our priestly duties. We are approaching the most high God with an offering of song and saying, "Here, God, this is what we think of You." That means that if we aren't offering the very best sacrifices we can, the condemnation of Malachi 1 applies to us. When we don't think about God's purposes for our hymns and come to Him with hymns that are not the very best, it is evil. When we sing to God with apathy and inattention, it is evil. When we don't care about admonishing our brethren in song, and we don't listen to the teaching they are giving us, it is evil. And when we treat the worship of the Holy One as a common thing, it is evil.
- G. The point is, friends, that anything in which we interact with God is something that we need to take thoughtfully and seriously. If we don't, why should we expect God to treat us as we want to be treated? Consider what the Hebrews writer says about this in Hebrews 12:28-29. We live in a world that is convinced that God is just a great big cuddle bear, that no matter what they do, as long as they are basically "good people," whatever that means, then He is going to be pleased with them. Of course, we know that isn't true, but such a pervasive attitude starts to creep into our thinking anyway. We forget that we are dealing with the One who one day, will obliterate absolutely everything we see in the physical realm. We forget that we are dealing with the One whose unswerving sense of justice demands that all who disobey Him be similarly destroyed. We forget that we are dealing with a consuming fire, and so we get sloppy in our worship.
- H. This passage warns us instead that we must offer Him an acceptable service with reverence and awe. Modern Americans don't do awe very well. We don't really recognize that anyone is greater than we are, much less how we should behave in their presence. That's something we need to learn, friends. It is dangerous to take God lightly. Let's treat Him as holy instead, by giving Him the worship that He deserves and asks for.

Conclusion.