

The Healthy Church (3): Worship

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[0 : 00] Ephesians chapter 5, from verse 18 to 20. 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 your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. I'm a Free Church of Scotland minister, born and bred, and I'm going to read now, I'm going to pray now the prayers of a very prominent Free Church minister from the 19th century, Alexander Moody Stewart, before he preached the word.

Awake, O north wind, and calm thou south, and blow upon my garden that the spices thereof may flow out. Amen. The healthy church is a loving church.

It's a partnering church. The healthy church is a singing church. A singing church. Just before Glasgow City went into lockdown in March 2020, we had a Sunday without any singing.

Perhaps some of you remember those services. I do. They were soulless. Because singing praise to God is an essential part of any service of worship.

[1 : 34] We might almost have felt that day like the downcast Israelites in Psalm 137, with no over-60s present at our worship service and us not singing.

How can we sing the Lord's song while we're in a foreign land? The healthy church sings. The kind of church we want to be is a church that sings.

In Ephesians 5, 18 through 20, the spirit-filled church expresses itself in how it sings and makes melody to the Lord.

Whatever else it may be or whatever else it may have, a church which does not sing, despite all appearances, is not healthy.

And so any vision we have to be a fruitful church must address why, what, and how we sing. And as we press on with the free church's collective vision, I believe, given by God to have a healthy church in every community in Scotland, we want to deal with this vitality of congregational singing.

[2 : 46] And we want to do so by interrogating Ephesians 5, 18 through 20 and asking it questions. Five questions. What is singing?

Why do we sing? What do we sing? To whom do we sing? And how do we sing? Now, we may not like some of the answers the text gives us.

Because they most certainly go against the prevailing evangelical grain. This is what the Bible says. And if you want to disagree, then don't take it up with me.

Take it up with the Bible's author, God himself. First of all then, what is singing? As you will have heard, I am not a professional singer.

Even by my own standards, I'm not a very good singer. And yet, from Ephesians 5, 18 through 20, and this being the word of God, which is regulative for our practice as Christians, let me suggest that singing is three things.

[3 : 53] Speaking, making melody, and giving thanks. These are all coordinate participles sitting around that verb to sing. They are speaking, making melody, and giving thanks.

Now, of course, singing is way more than this. But the singing that must be at the heart of a healthy church needs at least these three elements of speech, melody, and thanksgiving.

Or as we'll see, as we'll summarize, understandable words, sympathetic melody, and Godward focus.

First of all then, speaking. Singing is speaking. In verse 19 in our text, in the ESV at least, we read addressing one another. I'm not terribly sure why the ESV translators use the word addressing.

When the more common word speaking, the *Leo*, is more accurate. Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

[4 : 58] Singing is speech. Just like prayer is word in supplication, and preaching is word in speech.

So singing is word in song. We speak when we sing. We communicate when we sing because, first and foremost, speech and words are the means by which we communicate with each other.

When we're singing, therefore, we are communicating truth to ourselves, to others, and to God.

Now, here's the application of this point. It's a really simple application.

We must be able to understand what we're singing. We must be able to understand what we're singing. If we don't understand what we're singing, then no matter how fine the art form, no matter how melodic the sound, we are not worshipping God.

Because, ultimately, singing in a biblical and church sense is the communication of word in song.

So, you might rather like the sound of Gaelic psalms.

[6 : 12] I do. But if you do not understand what is being sung, then even though you may be caught up with the art form and the feeling of the singing, you are not worshipping God.

Because unless you understand what is being communicated, you're not singing in the New Testament sense. One of my go-to writers on the subject of a healthy church, the pastor of First Baptist Church of the Cayman Islands, very impressive African-American pastor called Tabithi Anwabili.

That's his name. And in this wonderful book, *The Life of God and the Soul of the Church*, answers to me in a postcard afterwards as to where the title of this book comes from. He writes these words.

If singing is speaking, then we need to sing with our minds alert, processing, taking in, and digesting the lyrics so we might actually communicate as intended.

We are not strengthened if we do not understand what is being said. So, we're speaking, first of all, when we sing. Second, we're making melody.

[7 : 34] Further on in verse 19, the apostle writes, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord. So, melody, either with musical instruments or otherwise, is a key element of Christian praise.

A spoken word remains spoken until it's put to a melody. Then it becomes a song. Melody or music is vital to the well-being of our singing.

It's recorded in many of the Old Testament superscriptions to the Psalms that they're to be sung to a particular tune using a particular musical instrument.

Melody is important. It's not indifferent. If we want to aspire toward church health, we must not be indifferent to the music we set our words to.

We must not ruin a joyful tune, a joyful psalm, rather, a joyful song, by singing it to a joyless tune. If anything, we must use the medium of music to reinforce the theme of the words.

[8 : 41] For example, let's take the hymn that we love to sing, *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. And we sing it to the tune of *Nettleton*. *Come Thou Fount of that one*.

Right? Cheerful. Joyful. Upbeat. The music reinforces the words. Again, let's take Psalm 130, which we normally sing to the tune, *Martyrdom*.

Lord from the depths. It's poignant. It's minor. It's serious. The music reinforces the theme. The melody and instruments we choose to accompany our speech and song must act as reinforcement.

And then thirdly, singing is about giving thanks. These three coordinate terms accompanying singing in our text are speaking, making melody, giving thanks.

We're going to come back to this in a little while, but this is the distinctive of church singing as opposed to any other kind of singing. Literally, it is our Eucharist, our thanksgiving.

[9 : 51] We speak in song. We make melody in a church setting, not primarily to indulge in an art form, not primarily to please our own tastes and senses, but to give thanks to God.

Now, you'll appreciate, I'm not coming at this from the perspective of a musician, because as you can tell, I can't sing.

I'm coming at this from the perspective of a biblical expositor. And singing according to the New Testament sense must be composed of these three elements. Understandable words, sympathetic melody, Godward focus.

If any of these three are missing, we may still be singing, but not in the biblical sense. So, three o'clock today, Rangers are playing a team at Ibrox, I don't know, I don't care.

You're going to hear lots and lots of singing. But it's not church worship, because not only can't Rangers fans sing, but they're missing the final element, Godward focus.

[10:59] No football team can sing, surely. And so, from a biblical point of view, I'm saying that healthy churches observe these three conditions of singing. Understandable words, sympathetic melody, Godward focus.

Okay, second question. Why do we sing? Why do we sing? You know, you don't need to be Heidi and Matthias, professional musicians, to get to grips with why we sing as a church.

All you need to be as a Christian. The motive for our collective singing is found in the grace of God in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Just like we don't pray to be seen by men, to use the Jesus language of the hypocrite in Matthew 6. So, we don't sing to be seen by men. The motive for the praise of the healthy church is that we have experienced the grace of God in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And here in these verses, in Ephesians 5, 18 through 20, this grace is expressed in two ways. We sing, first of all, because we are filled with the Spirit. We sing because we've received salvation.

[12:13] We sing because we're filled with the Spirit. Our passage begins, be filled with the Spirit. For the eager Bible students among us, let me direct you to the wonderful sermons, or lectures rather, of Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones on this verse entitled, Life in the Spirit.

If you are a Christian, the Holy Spirit lives within you. The Holy Spirit, this glorious third person of the Godhead, points us to Jesus.

He opens our understanding. He strengthens our wills. He opens our heart to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. The Spirit sings to us about Jesus.

The ears of our hearts and our minds are filled with the sound of the Spirit's praises. He sings to us of the glory of who Jesus is. He sings to us about the wonder of the cross and the power of the resurrection.

He sings within us. He sings. He sings. He sings. He sings. And we sing because we're filled with him. Some of the older folks among us, myself included, will remember pressure cookers.

[13:24] My parents used them all the time to make soup and stews. The pressure cooker was composed of a very sturdy pan with a tightly fitting screw top lid.

You put your ingredients in the pan together with some water. You screwed tight the lid and then placed it on the cooker. As the water heated, it was converted into ultra-hot steam, which cooked your food quicker and more thoroughly.

But there'd be times when the pressure would get too great in that pressure cooker. And at times like that, a small release valve at the top of the lid would start whistling as steam began to escape, like an old-fashioned keck in a hob.

And you watched the steam coming out of the valve and you stood well clear. You didn't want to get scalded. Our spirit-filled hearts are the pressure cooker of our praise.

And our mouths are the release valves. If we didn't sin, we'd blow up. If we didn't give expression to the spirit's joy within us, we'd explode.

[14:39] We sing because we can't not sing. Our singing is the whistling of the release valve of our hearts. These are the words and the melodies of the Holy Spirit within us, exploding forth in the praises of our lips.

We're filled with the spirit. Second reason we sing, because we have received salvation. We have received salvation. The passage ends with the words, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. These words summarize for us the totality of our Christian salvation. All God has done for us in, by, and through Jesus Christ.

And of course, time's too short for any of us today to delve into the depths of what this means. I'd like to think that week upon week, through the preaching of the Word of God here, we're building up some kind of cumulative picture of all God has done for us to the death, the resurrection of his Son. Yes, and so much more even. The hymn writer Isaac Watts penned these words, the immortal words. When I surveyed the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, My riches gained I count but loss and poor contempt on all my pride.

[15:58] Where the whole realm of nature mine, that be an offering far too small, Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.

Our singing reacts to the cross and the empty tomb. It responds to the crown of thorns and the crown of gold. If you need to ask the question today, Why should I sing?

You're in dangerous territory. In the light of all God has done for you in Christ Jesus, How can you keep yourself from singing praises to him? The motive for the praises of a healthy church is that we

have seen and experienced for ourselves The grace of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Why do we sing? Third question. What do we sing? What do we sing? Of all the clauses in our passage, This one has caused the most controversy.

Rather than being vexed by Christless motives or by godless praise, We get ourselves tied up in knots over this disputable form of words, Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

[17 : 19] One almost cannot believe that disagreement in this area Should have prompted a blasphemous division in the church. But it did.

And I speak as an ethnic free church minister. Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. What does this phrase mean?

Now some want to insist that this phrase corresponds to different types of psalms. Others want to insist that the psalms refer to the psalms of David, And hymns and spiritual songs correspond to words of human composition.

Some point to the hymns of the New Testament. The Carmen Christi in Philippians 2, for example, Who being in very nature of God in some way. Now here's the question I've got for you. You really think this argument has a definitive answer?

Really? Whatever view you hold on this, don't you think that if it was of primary importance, God would have made it crystal clear in the scriptures to us, As he has with issues of faith and salvation.

[18 : 34] His word. As far as I'm concerned, we must respect each other's views on this issue. As for me, I once believed, loosely, These three terms corresponded to different kinds of psalm.

But on biblical theological grounds, I no longer do. That is why I wholeheartedly embrace and endorse an inclusive psalmary position.

We must sing psalms. But we must also sing songs of redemption. That's what I think. It doesn't mean to say you have to think that. That doesn't stop me respecting those of you who don't think that way.

As I would hope you respect my sincerely held, Biblically grounded and theologically respectable view. However, there is an issue at point here, Which is not negotiable.

Namely, what do we sing? What do we sing? As word-based Christians, We should be primarily concerned with the lyrical content.

[19 : 40] With what is being communicated in our singing. Let me quote again from Tabiti. I'm not going to say a second name. As we sing with understanding the truth of the gospel, The truth about Jesus Christ, The word lives and rules in us.

Christian singing and music are designed for that purpose. So the lyrics we sing must serve it. We must be specific.

Listen to this. And use this as the framework by which you judge any hymn we sing. We must be specific and accurate about the cross work of Christ.

And any other biblical theme we choose. The lyrics are of primary importance, Followed by the reinforcement of the musical accompaniment. Nothing must take away from the word we sing. Likewise, we should be careful about overindulging in the eyes of praise. Let me quote again from Tabiti. Because we're singing to the Lord, We want to be sure the songs are really about Him.

[20 : 51] It is surprising how many Christian songs seem to have very little to do with God, But a great deal to do with us. So a song dominated by the word I, Is a song we should be wary of.

So what we're saying is, The singing of a healthy church is to be dominated by the theology and words of the Bible. Filled with Jesus and His salvation. Filled with the glory of God and the cross and resurrection of His Son.

Our church may sing beautifully, And it does. But if we're not singing of God's greatness and love in the face of Jesus Christ, We're not singing in the New Testament sense.

Okay, fourth. Nerdy done. To whom do we sing? To whom do we sing? Rather pointless question, don't you think, when it comes to our singing? But actually, sometimes pointless questions highlight obvious failings.

And this is the most glaring. According to our text here, Ephesians 5, 18 through 20, To whom do we sing when we're engaging in worship? The answer is twofold.

[22 : 02] First, each other. Second, God. First, each other. We read that our singing is defined by these words, Speaking to one another. Or addressing one another.

Speaking to who? To one another. In other words, singing a church is not about me, myself, and I. It's about each other. It is the collective church in song.

The second half of the book of Ephesians, as you know, is Paul's descriptions of the life of the church at large. It's how you apply salvation in the life of a church.

It is the practical outworking of that wonderful phrase we find in Ephesians 4, 3. The unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. When you sing, you are communicating to me.

And when I sing, I'm communicating to you. You are telling me that God is my refuge and my strength and ever-present help in trouble, and he can be mine as well.

[23 : 08] And I'm telling you that in Christ alone, my help is found, and your hope can be found in him alone also. Singing is the musical expression of our oneness in Christ Jesus.

Or to use old-fashioned words, our spiritual communion. And that's why we don't really do solos in church. Listen again to Pastor Tabiti. Our conception of Christian faith has become too privatized. Too many Christians think that the public gathering of the church is basically a couple of hundred people having their personal quiet time in the same place at the same time.

We tend to think that what matters is how we individually engage with God. That's to privatize a Christian faith.

Is that you? Is that me? Am I too individualistic in my singing? Or by what we sing and how we sing it, are we communicating to one another the joy and strength we find in Christ?

[24 : 12] The love and union we have for them with each other in the spirit. Healthy churches don't sing for performance's sake, but for participation's sake, or partnership in worship.

And then secondly, of course, we sing to God, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father. You know, I never hear, I never tired of hearing this description of a church.

Oh, the worship's really good there. Oh, the worship's really bad there. To be fair, it tends to be younger, less mature Christians who use phrases like these to describe church life.

But my whole heart recoils against such descriptions or judgments. Because I want to ask them the question, who are you to make such a judgment?

Who are you to say that the worship in this church is good or bad? Let me tell you, I strongly believe in consumer-driven worship.

[25 : 17] Except from the text in front of us, I want to insist that the consumer who drives our worship is not the punted in the pew, and is not the world around us, but the God to whom we sing.

He gets the final say in what's good and bad worship. Now, of course, that doesn't mean that the quality of our singing is indifferent to Him. Devotion to Him will express itself in playing our instruments with skill.

Either of those instruments only happen to be our vocal cords. We must prize excellence in form and genre, but because we prize salvation in Christ Jesus. It's because our hearts are fixed Godward.

It's in that direction we're singing. It consists in our reaction to the cross and the resurrection. It comprises our response to the glory of the love of God, to the beauty of our adoption, us as beloved children.

Don't be tricked by appearances. Whilst pursuing excellence, as we must, our priority is to please God by our singing in praise.

[26 : 23] We must resist any compromise in these two audiences, each other and God. For whom are we singing?

Not for myself. Singing for the person in the pew next to you or the chair next to you. I'm singing for God. Last question.

How do we sing? How do we sing? When I'm told that people today don't like to sing, but it's totally alien to them, I laugh on the inside because it's just not true.

The 9th of October 2021 goes down in Scottish history. On that night, a packed Hamden Stadium, in a packed Hamden Stadium, the Scotland football team beat Israel 3-2.

And 51,000 of our countrymen sang at the top of their voices, Yes, sir, I can boogie. Yesterday at Murrayfield, another 50,000 Scots and Vernon singing Flour of Scotland at the top of their voices.

[27 : 33] To say that we don't like to sing is rubbish. Because if we feel deeply enough about something, we'll sing. Singing comes from the heart.

That's one reason the Apostle Paul speaks about singing and making melody with your heart. Don't just sing with your mind or with your mouth. Sing in and from and with your heart.

If we can sing ourselves hoarse watching Partick Thistle or watching Glasgow Warriors, surely we can praise God for Christ's victory over sin and death.

I can't see your heart and you can't see my heart, but the God the God who sees us takes pleasure in heartfelt praise. However poor the voice he gives us might be, but he frowns upon the insincerity of mouth-only singing, even if it's masterful.

Now one last thing, something which should really go without saying, something without saying, I suppose. When we're talking about the healthy church singing, we're talking about collective, corporate, together singing.

[28 : 50] With all your heart is singular that though many may be singing, they are singing as one. It's not about me in my small corner sitting and singing, it's about us.

In other words, the healthy church prioritises participation over performance and communion over concert. Within these boundaries, we have great freedom to express ourselves in praise.

And for sure, the healthy church is faithful in worship, fertile in praise, and fruitful in singing. Church music is so at its best and so less at its worst.

Filled by the Holy Spirit, excited by the joy of Christian salvation through Christ. We're going to join with the psalmist as he says, sing to the Lord a new song.

And filled with the wonder of Jesus Christ, we'll only wish, we'll only wish that all of us had a thousand tongues to sing the praises of his glorious name.

[30 : 08] Let us pray. Lord, we confess to you how often our singing is half-hearted.

and we're far more interested in the art form or in self-expression than we are in the words that we're singing and the response of our hearts to you.

Father, forgive us for individualizing worship, making it about me, myself, and I. Forgive us for our selfishness in this area. Replace it, O Lord, with this great desire that together as one man, as one people in Christ Jesus, we shall help each other by the way in which we speak to one another in Psalm, hymn, and spiritual song.

And Lord, we pray that everything we sing here may give glory to the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, we love you. And we want to express that love in what we sing.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[31 : 29] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.