

## The *Praying in the Spirit* Series

# Singing in the Spirit

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Not long ago I had in my office on separate events two ministers from different churches. One was a minister of music, the other a senior pastor. Each one of them told me of a woman in his church who could not, as the saying goes, carry a tune in a bucket. Pastor William Sipes of North Mesquite Assembly of God in Texas spoke very candidly of having stood next to his parishioner and having painfully experienced her attempted singing. “She would sing off-key with a very broken and cracked voice,” he remembered. There is, of course, nothing new about this. But Reverend Sipes testifies that something incredible happened when this woman *sang in the Spirit*. A once broken, cacophonous voice became a velvet, melodious one. Reverend Claude Plunk’s story is identical to this. In addition, he noted a visible change as well: “her face seemed to radiate the joy of the Lord.”

I, too, have heard Christians who were not known for their singing ability break into glossolalic singing that far surpassed the quality of their normal and natural voices. This is not to say that all glossolalic singing will be better than native singing. In fact, if it is, it may be the exception rather than rule. But singing in tongues is certainly scriptural. Paul calls it singing in the Spirit as opposed to singing with the mind. It is right out of 1 Corinthians 14: “So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; *I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind*” (verse 15; emphasis added). Unfortunately, this is all that Paul had to say about singing in the Spirit. As a matter of fact, this is all the entire Bible has to say about singing in the Spirit. It only seems logical, though, that if one can speak and sing in his native language and one can speak in tongues, he should be able also to sing in tongues. If one can speak, one can sing. (Incidentally, since Paul may have meant singing in the human spirit, some may question my calling it singing in the Spirit, upper-case. I feel, however, given its context, that it is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit and results from a mixture the human and the divine. Therefore, it is at once singing in the spirit and singing in the Spirit.)

There is a problem, however. If the Church is going to practice singing in Spirit and if the Bible says so little about it, how is the Church to use such singing? The answer, we know, must come from Scripture. And it seems to me that the best approach is to apply what the Bible has to say about (1) music in general, (2) singing in general, and (3) speaking in tongues. I do not believe that the practice of singing in the Spirit will be misused if handled in this manner. Not only can we draw principles of structure through this approach, but we can perhaps get a better idea of the meaningfulness of the glossolalic utterance.

All but two religions have divorced music from worship. It is true that many religions have their melancholy and even macabre chants and dirges, but only Judaism and Christianity have developed music to a high degree of proficiency and integrated it into divine and *joyful* worship (McCommon, p. 5). In light of the importance of music in Christianity (someone has said that there has been no great revival that was not closely linked to song), it is not difficult to understand the old adage “Music is a handmaiden of religion.” Music, as a servant, waits upon its master. Music turns men’s minds toward God—this is its purpose in the Church, not to entertain but, through the emotions, to deepen man’s relationship with God and to intensify his yearning, as lowly creature, to worship the High Creator (Alford, pp. 19-20).

Music loosens us from the rationalism that can constrict the mind and spirit. Sometimes, as I have suggested, our minds can actually come between us and God; the same anchor that saves a vessel from beaching and thus destruction may also serve to fasten it to the bottom of the sea when it should be racing towards its destination. Music loosens the spirit from its earthly moorings, from the rivets of rationalism and strictures of the cerebral. Music takes us beyond word intelligibility in its attempt to express the inexpressible (Johannson, pp. 96-100).

Music takes us to the mystery, the wonder, the awe of God. We cannot follow the gray-nerve road of the cortex and get all the way there. At some point we must leap from the stationary platform onto the mystical transportation music provides. As has been said, music can indeed take us into another world and “unveil heights and depths in life not otherwise accessible to our observation” (Hunter, ed. pp. 34-35).

Has the similarity between glossolalia and music occurred to you? It seems that one could build an apologetic for glossolalia upon the analogy of music. Both are articulate, but neither expresses explicit meaning. Both use the creativity of the individual as it is inspired by the Spirit. Both bypass propositional statements in order to take the worshiper beyond the earthly to the Mystery of the Other. And both are universally accessible.

Furthermore, music is charismatic in more than the general ways mentioned. In 1 Samuel 10:1-6, the anointing of Saul is recorded. Samuel poured oil on his head and gave him instructions that would lead him to a group of men prophesying while enjoying the playing of musical instruments: “As you approach the town,” Samuel told him, “you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying.” Samuel continues, “The Spirit of the Lord will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person.” Obviously, music is no stranger to charismatic activity. It may even be said that one enhances the other. In 1930, Presbyterian Alexander McCall, commenting on Saul’s charismatic experience, said, “This is one of the several instances in Scripture in which music furnishes the atmosphere which makes divine power effective” (Hunter, ed. p. 131).

The writer of 2 Chronicles records a scene around the ark of the covenant “All the Levites who were musicians . . . stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets . . . Then the temple of Lord was filled with a cloud, and priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God” (5:12-14). The New American Standard Bible says that “the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud . . .” (verse 14). In other words, the priests were involuntarily prostrated, so powerful was the divine presence in that musical assembly.

I mentioned earlier the melancholy dirges of other religions. Judaism and Christianity provide a striking contrast to this kind of worship. All references to music in the Scriptures are in the context of joy and happiness (Topp, p. 16). In fact, Scripture suggests music ceases when joy ceases (Psalm 137; Amos 8:3,10). Singing in the Spirit works very much the same way. It, too, is a result a life overflowing with joy. This is apparent from the very expressions on the faces of those singing in the Spirit. Glossolalic singing is one way of following James’ command: “Is anyone happy? Let him sing psalms of praise” (5: 13). It may even be said that the use of the prayer language in singing may actually replace anxiety and mourning with peace and joy. Even as the music from David’s harp eased Saul’s discomfort (1 Samuel 16: 23), so the charismatic experience of singing in the Spirit may bring comfort to the singer.

I am amazed by the many statements non-charismatics make about music that are remarkably applicable to glossolalic singing. For example, as you read the following quotations, substitute *singing in the Spirit* for *music* and see if the statements do not retain their meaningfulness:

Music . . . endeavors . . . to express that which is too luminous, too high, too holy for the ordinary language of public address. [And it] . . . came into being as man’s effort to express the ineffable qualities he feels in nature, in humanity, and in the realm of the Spirit. . . . The ordinary language of ordinary day cannot express our most exalted thoughts, and we grasp for a symbol more adequately thus to do. (Hunter, ed. p. 228)

Thus far, I have been discussing instrumental music as it affects worship and its kinship to glossolalic singing. There is, of course, another side of music, the vocal side. The way in which the writers of Scripture address the use of songs is, I believe, a telling commentary of their appreciation of song (and regard for the Creator) and their opinion of its appropriateness to link man’s spirit with the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah wrote, “Sing for joy, O heavens . . . shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and your trees. . . .” (44:23). The poet of 1 Chronicles said, “Let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them! Then the trees of the forest will sing, they will sing for joy before Lord . . .” (16:32-33). If it may be said to inanimate objects, “Praise the Lord,” how much more should the only creatures with God-consciousness praise the Lord? Jesus hints of this praise mandate in His hyperbole to the Pharisees who had told Him to rebuke the followers who were offering up honor and praise upon Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem. “I tell you,” Jesus said, “if they keep quiet, the stones

will cry out” (Luke 19:40). It will be a sad day indeed when the Church of the Lord Jesus takes a second seat to rocks!

There are hundreds of other references in the Scriptures. In fact, the longest book of Bibles is a song book—the Psalms. Since a thoroughgoing theology of singing in the Spirit based upon explicit statements of Scripture is impossible, we must turn to what the Bible says about singing in general. The Scriptures provide several important principles the we might apply to singing in the Spirit.

Before it is thought that I am building assumption upon assumption, it might be wise to show that there are some explicit statements about singing in the Spirit that warrant comparing it to singing in one’s native language. In the Scriptures, singing may be divided into three types: (1) praise, (2) petition, (3) thanksgiving. The term “praise,” it seems, may be broad enough to include “thanksgiving.” We can distinguish songs of praise from songs of thanksgiving, by the reason behind the song. The reason for *praise* would be the *nature* of God. “Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army saying: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, for his love endures forever’” (2 Chronicles 20:21). On the other hand, the reason for giving thanks is the *activity* of God. For example, the Israelites sang a song of thanksgiving to God for their deliverance from the armies of Pharaoh: “Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea” (Exodus 15:21). The familiar words of the psalmist, “He leadeth me . . . he restoreth me . . .,” are words of thanksgiving for the *activity* of God in the life of the psalmist.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14 that glossolalic singing is for *praise* and *thanksgiving*: “I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. If you are *praising* God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say ‘Amen’ to your *thanksgiving*, since he does not know what you all are saying? You may be *giving thanks* well enough, but the other man is not edified” (verses 15-17, emphasis added).

In addition to offering praise and thanks unto the Lord, songs may be used to petition the Lord. The Psalms are full of petitions: “Help me, O Lord my God; save me in accordance with your love” (109:26); “Teach me your way, O Lord. . . Turn to me and have mercy on me; grant your strength to your servant . . .” (86:11, 16); “Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer” (61:1); “I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands . . .” (77:1-2). Certainly, we can petition Lord with singing. Too often we forget this. And Romans 8:26-27 suggests that we may also present to God our *petitions* in a language of the Spirit: “We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.”

In my study of singing in the Spirit and singing in general, three important truths emerge. Naturally, a song of praise, thanksgiving, or petition is going to be addressed to God, not to man. Therefore the interpretation of the glossolalic song should be in the person and direction of man to God and not God to man. This principal also fund support Paul’s words about tongues -speaking. We have no Scripture indicating that tongues -speaking is a “message” from God to man, such as prophecy. To the contrary, Paul says that when a man speaks in tongues, he speaks *to God* (1 Corinthians 14:2). Some may not consider this Scripture alone as conclusive proof that tongues are not to be addressed to man. It may simply mean, they would say, that no man understands glossolalia, but an omniscient God understands all things. The use of the song, as described in Scripture, may settle the question. Throughout the Bible, the song is sung to God. “I will sing a new song to you, O God . . .” (Psalms 144:9); “Sing to the Lord a new song” (Psalm 96:1); “I will sing to the Lord” (Judges 5:3). Although the song is indeed addressed to the Lord, it should be noted that it is also for the ears of man. “I will give thanks to Thee, O Lord, among the people; I will sing praises to Thee among the nations” (Psalm 57:9, NASB). The very fact that the Psalms are part of the Scriptures proves that they, though sung to God, were meant for man. Therefore, it would seem that glossolalic utterances for congregational edification, whether spoken or sung, should be interpreted as words from man to God, as praise and thanks and petition, and should be edifying to man although addressed to God.

Another important principal is that of universality of the song of praise. The psalmist said, “Sing to the Lord, you saints of his; praise his holy name” (30:4). The Scriptures do not say that only those with beautiful voices are to sing to the Lord. All may sing praises unto God with a heavenly language, a language from the heart. I would not want this experience if it were not also from my other brothers and sisters in Christ, and I would question my concept of a God who would ordain that only a select few could have this experience. Instead, all of God’s people have this heart language with which to speak to Him. We need only desire to communicate with God those deep feelings that cannot find expression through the

cortex of the brain. Those feelings are most intense when the Christian is filled with God's Holy Spirit: "Do not get drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5: 18-20). The thanksgiving melodies of our heart are to God (verse 20) but also speak to our brothers and sisters. What opportunity for ministry! To God, to others, to ourselves.

The final noteworthy principal resulting from the study of singing with our understanding and singing in the Spirit is the picture we have of symphonic singing. There are Scriptures that describe and endorse congregational singing: "May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy" (Psalm 67:3-4); "In front are the singers, after them the musicians; with them are the maidens playing tambourines. Praise God in the great congregation; praise the Lord in the assembly of Israel" (Psalm 68:25-26). This provides us with a model for singing in the Spirit. Most singing in the Spirit in the church should, I believe, be congregational, as we lift our voices in one accord unto God. This is not to outlaw or depreciate solo singing in the Spirit at all. But the regulations of solo singing must not come from what the Scripture say about singing in general but what the Scriptures say about speaking in tongues to the edification of the assembly.

Since a solo in a prayer language may be enjoyed and may be meaningful even if it is not understood by the listener, the obvious question is, *Does it need to be interpreted?* I think that it does. If a glossolalic song is performed for the edification of the average congregation, an interpretation is warranted, and should also be in the form of a song.

Some of you may be wondering what I have done with the Scripture that says, "So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?" (1 Corinthians 14: 23). In my thinking, Paul is not addressing the matter of congregational singing in the Spirit. As I said before, a song need not be understood to be meaningful. Cadence, rhythm, and melody carry their own meaning and beauty. What I believe Paul is talking about here is a situation where tongues are spoken for the congregation's edification too often and without interpretation. *Solo* glossolalic songs addressing a congregation would, however, fall under the force of this verse. It should be remembered that Paul is speaking to a particular situation, and it is conceivable that his suggested advice here would not apply to a *dissimilar* situation. We must be careful not to force biblical injunctions into situations that do not repeat the biblical scenario.

Where has this discussion about music, singing, and speaking in tongues led us? In regard to music, we have learned a phenomenon need not be intelligible to be meaningful. It need not communicate through propositional statements of facts, logic, and opinion to have value. In fact, it is contrary to the very nature of Mystery to be susceptible to verbal encapsulation. By faith, glossolalia, like music, bears witness to the Mystery. In regard to singing with the understanding, we have seen that the purpose of the glossolalic song is no different from the purpose of the non-glossolalic song. Each is offered to God as praise, petition, or thanksgiving. Each addresses God but can be beneficial to any listener. In regard to speaking in tongues, we have concluded that the relevant guidelines that Paul laid down for tongues-speaking are also applicable to solo singing in the Spirit. By formulating a theology of singing in the Spirit from these three areas, we have built a biblical foundation for this charismatic expression in the Church.

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