

# Being Subject as We Sing

BY RANDY COOPER

**Singing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” is a political act that challenges all human categories and divisions. It can be a means of grace that unifies, that brings us into the life of the triune God as we learn submission to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

---

*Ephesians 5:18-6:9*

**T**hough I have serenaded my beloved wife on more than one occasion in our thirty-two years of marriage, to be quite candid, she has never been swept off her feet by my singing to her. Yet this passage in Ephesians directs husbands and wives and other household members to sing to one another as we sing to God. When in worship we sing together and thus join our praises with the praises of the Son to the Father through the Holy Spirit, we participate in a weekly means of unifying grace. Or so the Apostle Paul seems to say.<sup>1</sup>

The first instruction is “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery” (5:18a). Do not empty a twenty-five dollar bottle of California wine, says Paul, and mistakenly think the buzz we feel is evidence of the presence of God. Rather than being filled with wine, we are to “be filled with the Spirit as [we] sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (5:18b-19a).<sup>2</sup> For Christians, worship is an intoxicating activity in which we enter the life of God through the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, our worship will include certain ongoing practices: “singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:19b-20). There is one additional ongoing practice that Paul associates with worship and singing, that of “[being] subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). You may notice that any recent Bible ver-

sion translates this verse as an imperative, “Be subject to one another....” These newer versions give the impression that Paul is changing the discussion as he moves from worship to household relationships. But the older King James Version is more accurate in translating the Greek participle as “submitting yourselves to one another.”

When we hold these opening verses together, they actually comprise one long sentence: “We are to be filled with the Spirit not through the intoxication of wine but the intoxication of worship, which involves the communal practices of singing to each other and to God, of singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, of making melody to the Lord, of giving thanks to God, and of *submitting to one another*” (5:18-21, my translation).

Suddenly the rest of our text takes on new meaning. Paul is painting a picture of wives and husbands, fathers and children, and masters and slaves learning how to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ as they worship and sing together. The foundational setting for embodying faithful household relationships is not the household itself, but the assembly that gathers for worship. If husbands and wives can sing together in worship, they may learn how to live together at home. The same for parents and children: let them sing together week after week and in their worship find a mutual love and respect. And despite our reactions to slavery, we can at least note Paul’s assumption that slaves and masters will worship together and in their singing learn something of mutual submission out of reverence for Christ.

It is quite a picture: the members of a household—including the young and the enslaved—singing together in worship and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

#### **A SHARE IN GOD’S ETERNAL “SINGING”**

Singing is more than making a joyful noise. God has given us singing and worshiping to break down categories of gender and age and race and class. In singing and worshiping, we enter the life of God through the Holy Spirit. If God’s Triune life is indeed one of mutual submission and love among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then as we become one body in Christ we share in God’s eternal “singing.”

How tragic when a congregation experiences conflict over music or singing! Many of the so-called “worship wars” are waged over the very practices of singing and music that God has given to the church to bring unity and peace. I recall the worried mother who attended a large congregation that offered multiple worship services every weekend. Her son and his family were members of the same church but attended one of the other services. The mother said in sorrow, “We don’t sing the same songs anymore.” One can only wonder what will happen to this family as the years of segregated worship mount. Their dilemma reminds us that some of the most vicious arguments in a church can take place over music and singing.

We all bear guilt for failures of imagination and love when such conflicts arise in our congregations.

But hear the gospel: it does not have to be that way. Music and singing can be a means of grace that makes the Body one.

There is one fellow pastor who has been a continual burr in my side. He and I have never seen eye-to-eye. When we have discussed the church

---

**We all bear guilt for failures of imagination and love when conflicts over music arise in our congregations. It does not have to be that way. Singing can be a means of grace that makes the Body one.**

---

and the gospel, we have never agreed. But I must say that he has a truly beautiful bass singing voice. On many occasions when we have worshiped together, I have sat beside him. When I have heard him sing, not only was he singing to God, he was singing to me. And, of course, I was singing to

him as well as to God. On these occasions our disagreements have seemed unimportant when we were singing and offering our prayers and praise to God. Singing emptied him and singing emptied me.

Do you think that Republicans and Democrats can at least sing together in worship? What about those who support the war in Iraq and those who don't—can they do the hard, yet joyful, work of singing together and emptying themselves in worship? Is it possible for Sunday School class members who cannot see eye-to-eye to gather in the sanctuary in order to submit themselves to each other as they submit to God?

Husbands and wives—singing to one another, standing shoulder to shoulder week after week, and serenading one another other as they sing to God. What might this practice mean for their home if they can sing as God intends?

Parents and children—the Apostle Paul dreams of teenagers holding one side of a hymnal and parents holding the other. Let them empty themselves before God Sunday after Sunday. Let them see what such a practice means over the course of eighteen years.

And, finally, masters and slaves. In our country, of course, they hardly ever worshiped together, and when they did, the slaves were forced to sit by themselves in the church balcony. We can only wonder if slavery in America would have ended sooner, or if its damage to our culture would have been less, if slaves and masters had worshiped together side by side, singing to one another. We know of Thomas Jefferson and his slave, Sally Hemings, who bore children by him. Do you suppose they ever sang psalms and hymns and spiritual songs together? All to say, true gospel singing is a political act that challenges all human categories and divisions.

### **A GLIMPSE OF HEAVEN**

The gospel word is that singing and music can be a means of grace that unifies, that brings us into the life of the triune God as we learn submission to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Jonathan Edwards, the early American philosopher and revivalist preacher, imagined life in heaven this way: "When I would form an idea of a society in the highest degree happy, I think of them...sweetly singing to each other."<sup>3</sup> Edwards enjoyed the happy hope that the heavenly community created by God will be filled with the sweet sound of people singing to one another.

We do not have to wait for the Final Day to enjoy a taste of heaven. Our worship is a foretaste of the heavenly life. If we sing as God intends, we will empty ourselves before God, and through the Holy Spirit we will enter the singing life of God. As we bow before God in submission, we will see that we have bowed to one another.

In the name of the Father. Amen.

### **NOTES**

1 Let not a sermon be the arena for debating the authorship of the letter to the Ephesians.

2 "Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" indicates a rich diversity of music and singing in the worship life of the Ephesian church. The implications for the present malpractice of segregating worship according to music styles and tastes are profound.

3 Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 188.

---



**RANDY COOPER**

*is Pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Ripley, Tennessee.*