

## Singing with Grace in our Hearts

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An amazing prophecy is recorded in Zephaniah 3:17. Normally, the Israelites performed their songs of praise to the Lord in his presence at the temple in Jerusalem. These songs of praise were either addressed to God or sung about God. But this prophecy announced that in the age to come, the Lord himself would be the singer of praise in Zion. He would, in fact, rejoice over his people and exult in them with loud songs of praise.

This prophecy is confirmed by the record of the New Testament. It identifies Jesus as the messianic singer of the psalms and the leader of the congregation in its praises. Thus in Hebrews 2:12 Jesus is said to praise his heavenly Father in the midst of the congregation (cf. Rom 15:9-12). He does not just proclaim his Father's name to them but also leads them in their praises. The church then joins with Jesus in his praise of God the Father. It offers thanksgiving (Rom 1:8; Col 3:17; Eph 5:20), praise (Heb 13:15) and glory (Rom 16:27; 1 Pet 4:11) to God the Father together with Jesus and through him as the Messiah. Just as David performed the service of praise through the Levitical choir at the temple in Jerusalem, so Christ has appointed the church as his choir in the heavenly sanctuary.

The church has, as St Paul declares in Eph 1:12, been given its allotted place in the heavenly realm and its allotted task as the choir that exists for the praise of God's glory. In union with Christ it stands together with the angels in Father's presence and praises him together with them. So the church does not sing its own song. The song which it sings has been given to it. It is the song of David, the Psalter. It is the song of the Lamb, which is also the song of Moses (Rev 15:3-4). In that song Jesus not only proclaims the gospel to the world; he also helps us earthlings to respond to the gospel. So then, Jesus leads the congregation its hymns of praise, just as he leads it in its petitions and intercessions (Heb 7:25).

Now this would all remain rather theoretical and abstract if the teaching of the New Testament ended here. But St Paul goes on to explain how this is actually to be enacted in public worship. In Colossians 3:16-17 he says that through his word Christ actually moves and prompts us to teach each other with Spirit-inspired, Spirit-filled psalms and hymns and songs as we give thanks to God the Father together with him. His word brings God's grace into our hearts, the grace that produces gratitude and thanksgiving. Thus, the word of Christ which dwells in the congregation, produces its song, even as it is the content of that song. Christ did not just give us his word to be preached and taught but also to be used in prayer and in songs of praise. It governs and empowers our singing. For that reason we Lutherans have rightly insisted that the language and content of liturgical song should be scriptural and evangelical. We hold that hymns are meant to speak the gospel, the word of Christ to us, in us, and through us to each other and to God the Father. They are meant to sing the grace of God into our hearts.

According to St Paul in Ephesians 5:18-20, Jesus also gives us his Holy Spirit to empower us to praise God the Father in the name of Jesus. The Holy Spirit produces praise in us. As the Holy Spirit fills us, the Spirit moves us to sing songs of praise which are spoken to each other, to ourselves, and to God the Father. The Spirit attunes our hearts to Jesus with melody and song. For this reason our ancestors used to sing this hymn of Bartholomäus Crassellius (TLH 21, sts. 1, 3 alt.):

Almighty God, let me adore you;

There is no other God like you!  
With joyful songs I come before you;  
Oh, let your Spirit teach my heart anew  
to praise you in his name through whom alone  
our songs can please you, Jesus Christ your Son.

Grant that your Spirit prompt my praises,  
then will my singing surely please your ear;  
sweet are the sounds my heart then raises,  
my prayer in spirit and in truth you hear.  
Then will your Spirit raise my heart on high  
to sing you psalms with all the heavenly choir.

Christ does not just teach us what to sing through his word but actually empowers us to sing that song by the gift of his Holy Spirit. Both the word and the Spirit work together here. The Spirit who moves us to praise God, cannot be separated from God's word, as sometimes happens in some popular modern songs. The words of Christ give us the content of our song. And even more than that! They are spirit and life (John 6:63). They bring the joy-giving, praise-raising Holy Spirit into the hearts of those who hear them. On the other hand, the word which we sing must also not be divorced from the Spirit, as sometimes happens in traditional circles such as ours, for it is the Holy Spirit who is at work in that word, who sings that word in our hearts and sets them singing.

Like worship itself, the performance of the Lord's song is a supernatural activity. It is without analogy in any culture. On the face of it, each congregation seems to be praising God separately in his absence here on earth in many different languages and many different social settings. And yet the song of praise is sung by the whole church together with the angels in the heavenly realm. It is not only performed in the presence of the Triune God but also involves the three persons of the Holy Trinity. It is an alien, counter-cultural activity, which is at home in no particular cultural setting here on earth. Rather, it is heavenly in its origin and orientation, for it involves our participation with the angels in the heavenly liturgy.

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