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## "Help, I can't Sing" (Articles from Abundant Life)

1. Honestly, how well do you think you sing?
2. Honestly, how much do you think it really matters in worship?
3. How much do you know about music? Do you wish you knew more?

### **What Song Leaders Wish Congregations Knew**

Steve Garrett

I was standing in the auditorium after directing a rousing worship in song in Concord North Carolina when the mother of the cutest set of ten-year old twin boys I had ever seen approached me. With tears in her eyes, she handed me a visitor's card which one of her boys had taken from the back of a pew and on which he had scrawled a note to me. The mother said, "I have never seen this kind of reaction from him during worship - no coloring, no falling asleep, just eyes glued to the podium and mouth wide open, making melody to the Lord!" The message read: "Good Job up there! Your Singer Bradley!"

Singing praises can have that effect. This is probably what song leaders wish people knew more than anything else: ***how important singing is because of all it can do!*** When we "sing with the spirit and sing with the mind" (I Cor. 14-15), we are moved to proper affections and emotions and godly, courageous living. We are engaged in an activity that is not only God-honoring, it is "therapy for what ails us." It is not about the quality of our voice; it is about the caliber of our heart. When I think of singing "with the spirit and with the mind," I think of Wicky Poarch, who illustrates this truth for me and others who know her. Sitting erect in the pew, her shoes off, toes curled, both hands clinched, eyes closed, and voice quivering with emotional praise, she offers her best to the Lord. No one could look at Wicky and wonder what she is doing or if she will feel strengthened when she is finished!

Another benefit of singing praises is that it teaches and admonishes others (Col. 3:16). It is an evangelistic tool that can prepare or condition the heart to receive the word of God and move it to obedience. It can help make a place in the heart for God's word to dwell. I have seen this work in my own life. Up until I was about six years old, we lived in a little two-bedroom house next to my Great Grandmother. She was a native East Texan with a "green thumb" and a rich alto voice. She would set me on her lap, peel us a piece of fruit, and as the juices dripped from my chin, she would rock me to the words of

such old-time hymns as "I'll Fly Away," "We Shall See the King Someday," and "Paradise Valley." Her teaching stuck! It burrowed deep in me, set me on a biblical path, and helped to foster my spiritual development. Thanks be to God for His music teachers!

Additionally, effective congregational singing benefits from an acoustically-sound building and cooperative brethren. It is unfortunate that for a long time, concern for acoustics has given way to the popular vaulted ceilings in meeting-house construction. These ceilings, though admittedly beautiful, swallow our heartfelt acappella music and prevent us from hearing anyone but ourselves sing. (Only the roar of a pipe organ could fill such a cavity!) In most cases this problem, of course, cannot be rectified. Therefore, we must do the best we can with the limitations we have. We must move to the front of the auditorium and sit close together. I know brethren are territorial and we have "our pew," but sitting close together in the front of the auditorium, with a mind to sit up and sing out enthusiastically, goes a long way in lessening the problem of poor building acoustics.

I have observed that it is only when we acknowledge that singing hymns is as important in our worship as praying, that we give singing the attention it deserves. In places where brethren consider worship in song a priority, it is an honor to be invited to direct them because such singing has heavenly significance. It is a precursor of joys unspeakable.

*[Editor's Note: brother Garrett leads singing schools and singings all over the country, as well as preaching for the Columbus, TX church. He is too modest to say so but I would add to this list that congregations should be reminded how difficult leading singing really is. It is so easy to carp and complain about pitch and speed and song selection -- especially when you don't ever have to show that you can do better! I have often noted that in preaching I can do what I plan to do regardless of audience participation or interest. Yet if the congregation doesn't wish to sing the song leader can only do so much, and then everyone goes home and comments on how poor a job the song leader did! Let us appreciate and pray for the men who lead us in this important part of our worship. --mdr]*

## **What Congregations Wish Song Leaders Knew**

Sewell Hall

Of course, congregations differ. A majority in some congregations just want to have fun. Given the opportunity to choose songs, they choose those with the most moving parts, the strongest beat or after-beat and the opportunity for showcasing their vocal talent with leads and obbligatos. They judge the

quality of singing by how loud and fast it is. This determines what they want their song leaders to know. Our concern is not with such preferences as these.

Thankfully, there are congregations whose members assemble to worship God. They have two concerns. The first is to “offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *[their]* lips, giving thanks to His name” (Heb. 13:15). The second is that the singing, as all other “things be done for edification” (I Cor. 14:26). This determines what they want song leaders to know.

**1. Song leaders should know the importance of their role.** They are leading the congregation in worship. It is difficult for the congregation to rise above the standard they set. God has always expected those who lead in worship to give it their best effort. It is not a time for jokes and levity. The punishment of Nadab and Abihu must have been as much for their carelessness as for their substitution of strange fire (Lev. 10:1-2). Following their death, the Lord’s message to Aaron, their father was: *“By those who come near Me, I must be regarded as holy; And before all the people, I must be glorified”* (Lev. 10:3).

Whether assembled Christians truly worship God in song and edify one another depends to a great degree on the man who leads the songs.

**2. Song leaders should know the importance of careful song selection.** The words of a song are more important than the music. We understand that what a preacher says is far more important than how eloquently or haltingly he may say it, and the same is true of songs. Good music enhances the words, but the words determine whether God is truly praised or whether the saints teach and admonish one another effectively. This is one thing the song leader alone determines. The congregation has no choice but to accept his selections. This being true, much thought should be given to the selections for each service. It is good that songs of praise and teaching be included. Care should also be given to singing a variety of songs, not the same ones each time a leader leads; keeping a record of songs led is a good practice. And above all, sentiments of the songs must be scriptural; it is as serious to sing error as to preach error.

**3. Song leaders should know how to pitch and set the proper tempo of a song.** Again, it is hard for a congregation to worship if a song is too high or low, or too fast or slow. Such variations from what is proper are distracting and difficult to overcome. If a man does not know how to do this properly, there is usually someone in the congregation who knows music well enough to teach him. If he is not willing to make the effort to learn how to lead correctly, he has no right to expect to lead at all. Not every man can lead singing, and if one cannot learn to do so he should just acknowledge that fact and exercise

what talents he does have for the glory of God.

#### **4. Song leaders should know the importance of specific preparation.**

All song leaders will lead more effectively if they have spent time selecting their songs and practicing them. Marginally qualified leaders need to be sure they know a song and can pitch it. One brother we knew, who had to lead because no one else could do it, would telephone an experienced song leader on Saturday nights and go over his songs for the Lord's Day to be sure he had them correct. Even the most qualified leaders need to look through songs in advance. The proper tempo of a song is determined by its message and a good leader thinks through the words in advance to determine how it should be led. This helps him decide what stanzas to lead, and increases his understanding of the message of the song so he can help the congregation to sing with understanding. Being familiar with the words will also allow him to look at the audience rather than having his head buried in a book.

Even more than what the congregation wishes, a song leader must be concerned about what God wants him to know. He leads for God's glory, not his own. This awareness will help him lead the congregation not simply in singing, but in worship.

#### **Help! I Can't Sing!**

Ed Whittlesey

What comes to mind when you think of singing? We have all probably known or observed someone who does not do a very good job of actively joining in the song service during worship. A majority of the time, the phrase "Help! I can't sing" really translates into "I sing out of tune," or "I cannot read music." While those might be valid reasons in our secular world for not singing, they do not excuse our responsibility to sing in worship. In the same way, we might not be very good offering prayer, but does that mean we stop praying? If this becomes our collective approach, then the singing, or worship for that matter, is unacceptable. God deserves our best. We must not lose focus and allow selfishness and pride to supercede our purpose for singing. Let's consider a few things regarding our purpose and duty to sing, as well as ways to improve our singing to the Lord.

Above all, the most important reason we sing is to offer God our expressions of praise, thanksgiving, hope, and dependence. David displays such great determination to sing and praise God in Psalm 146:2, "While I live I will praise the Lord; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being." While in prison, Paul and Silas convey their dependence on God through praying and

singing hymns to Him, while prisoners were listening, Acts 16:25. We should regard our singing as speaking directly to God, and the words, therefore, should be spoken in sincerity and awe. Together in song, we pour our hearts out to the Lord. Then our voices, united in praise, are sweet and beautiful to Him.

Another purpose for singing is to edify one another, and thereby promote purity of heart. Several of the songs we sing were written to help us in this regard. In the context of Ephesians 5:19, it is the will of the Lord that we “be filled with the Spirit by speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to Him.” In so doing, we strengthen and encourage each other to walk wisely. Having been enriched by the word of Christ, we are able to teach and admonish each other in song, and express thanksgiving in our hearts to the Lord, Colossians 3:16. What an invaluable blessing and opportunity Christians of all ages have to be able to teach, admonish, encourage and edify each other by singing together.

In terms of improving our singing in worship, whether we sing “in tune” or “read music” is not of utmost importance. What is more important to God is singing from our hearts. Again, David serves as a wonderful example saying, “I will praise You with my whole heart...I will sing praises to You,” Psalm 138:1. The Lord knows our hearts, 1 Samuel 16:7, and understands that our musical abilities differ. Sometimes too much emphasis is placed on how our singing sounds. While we certainly do not want to discount the quality of our singing, **it must be remembered that everyone can sing in a way which pleases God.** When we sing with understanding, 1 Corinthians 14:15, and emotion, God appreciates our efforts. Focusing on pleasing God will go a long way toward improving our singing.

With this purpose in mind, we can work toward enhancing our singing by sitting close together or beside somebody who knows music and can sing well. Another suggestion is to hold the songbook in such a position that allows for an easier view of the song and the song leader. As a result, we’ll be able to follow the song leader’s direction and not get ahead of or behind the tempo which has been established. Furthermore, we should take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about the mechanics of music. Listening to CD’s of hymns and attending singings serve as great methods by which we can do so. Singing is like most other activities, the more we put into it, the more we get out of it.

In conclusion, much of the “Help! I can’t sing” business stems from too much emphasis on the music or sound alone. Instead, our purpose should be that of singing and praising God from the heart. By doing so, we also teach and encourage our fellow brothers and sisters to live according to His will. Singing

in worship is not about talent or musical ability; it's about trying to please God. The desire to please God comes from within the heart. With this as our purpose, we can be content knowing that we offered God our best effort to praise and adore Him as we worship in song.

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. What can a good song service do to help prepare hearts to hear the word of God? Can an equally poor, un-emotional song service do the opposite? Please explain your answer? (You might ask a preacher what they think).
2. How can my / your singing teach or admonish my brethren that hear me? Should they be able to hear me?
3. What can we do to help poor acoustics? Would this help even in a building with good acoustics?
4. What five things would like your songs leaders to know?
5. How can you improve in your singing?
6. How might we focus less on the music, and more on the heart when we sing?

## "I SING THE MIGHTY POWER OF GOD"

I sing the mighty power of God That made the mountains rise, That spread  
the flowing seas abroad, And built the lofty skies.

I sing the wisdom that ordained The sun to rule the day; The moon shines full  
at His command, And all the stars obey."

"I sing the goodness of the Lord That filled the earth with food; He  
formed the creatures with His word And then pronounced them good.  
Lord, how Thy wonders are displayed Where'er I turn my eye, If I survey the  
ground I tread Or gaze upon the sky."

In heaven He shines with beams of love, With wrath in hell beneath; 'Tis on  
His earth I stand or move, And 'tis His air I breathe.  
His hand is my perpetual guard, He keeps me with His eye; Why should I then  
forget the Lord Who is forever nigh?"

"There's not a plant nor flower below But makes Thy glories known; And  
clouds arise and tempest blow By order from Thy throne.

"Creatures--as numerous as they be--Are subject to Thy care; There's not a  
place where we can flee But God is present there."

1. What text would you say this is based on?
2. What is the first verse encouraging me to think about? (Psa 65: 5-6;  
Gen 1:6-10; 14-18)
3. What is the second verse encouraging me to think about? (Acts 14:17;  
Gen 1:31; Psa 19:1; 107:23-24)
4. What is the third verse encouraging me to think about? (Psa 103:8-14;  
24:1; 32:8; 33:18)
5. What is the fourth verse encouraging me to think about? (Matt 6:28-30;  
1 Pet 5:7; Psa 139:7-12)