

Ephesians 5:19 in the Navajo Bible

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Áádóó ałch'í' yádaałti'go Diyin God bizaad biyi'dóó sin, áádóó sin bee Diyin God baa ha'niihii, índa Níłch'i Diyinii bits'áádéé' sin nihijéí t'áá át'é bee Bóhólníihii baa dahohniihgo bich'í' dahootaał. (Ephesians 5:19)¹

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, (Ephesians 5:19)²

Introduction

God gave us music because He knew we would want to praise Him. This is what music is for. Some Christian denominations feel that they should sing only Scripture songs. I think Ephesians 5:19 speaks against feeling that such a restriction is necessary.

Paul's Three Terms

Psalms

Notice that Paul does not use only one term. He does not just say "psalms," and neither should we. Instead, he uses three terms. The first is "psalms," which first and foremost is a reference to the Old Testament book of Psalms, with its 150 individual pieces of text. The book of Psalms was the hymn book of ancient Israel. Setting the psalms to music and singing them is good. We should do this.

There is another possible meaning of the word "psalm." The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts – law, prophets, and psalms (or writings). So "psalm" could refer to any of the books in the third division of the Old Testament, which would include Esther, Ruth, the Song of Songs, the book of Proverbs, and so on. Thus, Paul's term, "psalm," comes close to what we mean today when we speak of Scripture songs, i.e., songs based on the text of Scripture. The Navajo has it exactly – *Diyin God bizaad biyi'dóó sin* ("songs from God's word").

Hymns

What are hymns? I had a professor once who said that hymns are Christ-centered songs. Hymns talk about Him. So that's one point. Another is that, whatever a hymn is, it's not quite the same as a psalm. They are two different things – not widely different, but not entirely the same. Both are spiritual. Both can be used to praise God, but hymns are not psalms. One

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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way to bring out the difference is that, if "psalm" in this context means Scripture song, and if "hymn" is different from this, then a hymn would be something that is not a Scripture song. It could be a spiritually uplifting song that expresses our own thoughts, rather than quoting words from the Bible.

Spiritual songs

I like the way the Navajo translates this third term – *Nítch'i Diyinii bits'ááđéé' sin* ("songs that come from the Holy Spirit"). Did the Holy Spirit stop speaking to people when the last psalm was written? I hope not. According to Acts 2 the Holy Spirit had more work to do in the years after Christ. Otherwise that was Pentecost all about? I'm glad the Holy Spirit was willing to speak to those who wrote the psalms, but I'm glad that after all these years He's also willing to speak to us.

Singing songs other than psalms is not the same as adding to Scripture. And it's not in the same category as making up new doctrines. It simply means that we also have thoughts that we want to express, and music is a way God has given us of expressing them. There's nothing wrong in doing this, i.e., in bring our own thoughts to God through the music we sing. After all, this is what music is for. It is the primary reason why God gave it to us.

Discussion

There is another way people bring their own thoughts to God, and this is through prayer. So there is a comparison to make between singing and praying. Praising God in music is similar to praising God in prayer. When we pray, do we insist on offering no prayer that we can't find written down in the Bible? Do we refuse to express our own thoughts in prayer? When we understand what prayer is, that knowledge will help us understand what spiritual songs are. As one Christian writer puts it, "Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend."³ Spiritual songs do this too. We have thoughts that we want to express to God and He's always glad to hear them, whether we bring them to Him in prayer or in song.

Instruments

Ephesians 5:19 doesn't say anything about using instruments in music, but what it does say can give us important guidance in this matter. Our songs can be from God's word (*Diyin God bizaad biyi'dóó sin*); they can praise God (*sin bee Diyin God baa ha'niihii*); and they can come from the Holy Spirit (*Nítch'i Diyinii bits'ááđéé' sin*). What they can't be is irreverent.

Above I suggested that "psalm" might mean "song." Actually this is not the case. In English the word "song" is related to the word "sing." Singing is something that involves using the voice. The English word "psalm," on the other hand, comes from the Greek word *psallō* (or *psallein*) and that word means to "pluck." Thus, what *psallō* really refers to is the soft plucking or strumming of a harp or lyre that ancient Greeks would use to accompany their recitations of poetry.

³ Ellen White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 257.

It's interesting that the word "psalm," which some people appeal to in order to exclude all instrumental music from worship, carries within it a reference to the use of instruments. David himself – the best known of those who wrote psalms – played the harp (or lyre) and undoubtedly accompanied his own singing of the psalms with such an instrument (see 1 Samuel 16:16-18). Nor was David the only one who played a harp.

As for Jeduthun, from his sons: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiiah, Shimei, Hashabiah and Mattithiah, six in all, under the supervision of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the LORD. (1 Chronicles 25:3)

This does not mean that we can use any instruments we like, or play them in any way we like, and offer that to God. Our songs can be accompanied by instruments, but the result must be worshipful.

Conclusion

We should use music as well as prayer to open our hearts to God as to a Friend. It is not necessary for us to open to Him only the thoughts of psalmists and other biblical writers who lived long ago, even though they were God's friends and even though what they wrote was inspired. Scripture songs can be a meaningful part of worship. We should use them. But we need not feel bound to them.

Using instruments in worship is perfectly acceptable, if we play them acceptably. There is room for abuse here, because it is possible to use musical instruments in ways God never intended. But if there are ways to do this wrong, there are also ways to do it right. There is middle ground between using our instruments offensively and not using them at all. Instrumental music can be used in a way that is reverent, uplifting, and worshipful.

Our God is a holy God and we should serve Him in a holy manner. We need not confine ourselves to reminding Him how others in the past once praised Him. We can praise Him too. It is not wrong to use Bible quotations in our songs, but it is not necessary either. God wants to have a relationship with us, just as He wanted to have a relationship with those who wrote the beautiful songs that we find in Scripture.