

ON SINGING AND MUSIC

by Society of Friends

A testimony of the Society of Friends (Quakers) on the nature of spiritual worship as it relates to singing and music. The work expresses the Quaker concern for worship that is truly led by the Spirit rather than by outward forms.

2 Chapters

Table of Contents

- 0. On Singing And Music
- 1. On Singing and Music.

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We have been brought under a feeling of religious concern that the ancient testimony of the Society of Friends to the true nature of spiritual worship may be fully maintained by all who claim that name; and that they may be watchful against the introduction of practices which will undermine the support of this testimony, and thus lead those who profess to be the children of the Light, back into a dependence upon forms, out of which their forefathers in the Truth were brought by that remarkable outpouring of grace and spiritual power which marked the rise of Friends as a distinct people. The fundamental doctrine declared by our Saviour, when He said, "It is the Spirit that quickeneth, the flesh profiteth nothing," was steadily kept in view by George Fox and his fellow laborers. They clearly saw that Christ had ended the Jewish law, with its outward and ceremonial observances, and had introduced a spiritual dispensation, under which He, by his heavenly and eternal Light or Spirit, was to be the Leader, Guide and Helper of his people; that all was now to be done in and by Him; and that this was especially true of religious worship, which depends upon the enlightening, quickening power of his Holy Spirit. All confidence in the flesh, -- in the natural abilities of man, -- was removed; and they were taught to distinguish between that which is of man and that which is of God, -- between that stirring up of the natural feelings which can be produced by the skilful use of outward means, such as music, pictorial representations and architectural grace and grandeur; and that solemn covering of the heart which is a fruit and an evidence of the extension of Divine help and power. Hence these divinely enlightened men and women laid aside the forms in which they had been educated, and which many of them had sincerely and zealously practised, and, in their private retirements before the Lord, and when they assembled for the performance of public worship, they sat in silence before Him, seeking to draw near in spirit, in living exercise of mind, that they might feel the arising of his power, and be enabled to offer acceptable worship. As that power arose in any, and under its influence, they were led to utter words of prayer or praise to the Almighty, or exhortation to their fellow believers; they were comforted or edified in proportion as they could feel the Spirit bearing witness to the life that accompanied the vocal expressions. Thus their dependence was not placed on man, but on the Spirit that quickeneth. There was no desire to limit the operation of the Spirit, or to lay down any rule which would prohibit in times of worship any act which truly proceeded from its motions; but there was a jealous care that none of these outward things should be done as formal matters; that people should not look upon them as essential to the holding of meetings for worship, and that they should not in any manner be led away from their dependence on the fresh extension of Divine life and light to their souls, as the very foundation of true worship. The writings of the early members of our Society abound in evidences of their watchful care in this respect. Among them, one of the most earnest and effective laborers for the spread of the Gospel, was Edward Burrough, whose efforts in London were blessed to a large number. Over the converts in that city he watched with anxious love; and, when absent in the service of his Master in other parts, frequently visited them by epistles, in which he gave much sound and practical advice. From these epistles are taken the following passages, referring to the manner in which these meetings for worship were to be held. "We charge and command you in the presence of the Lord, whose power

is dreadful, that you meet together in silence, and wait, and none to speak a word but what he is moved to speak, a word from the Lord." -- E. Burrough's Works, Ed.1672, p.70. "We charge by the Lord that none speak without eternal [Divine] motion; for if you do, the false prophet speaks, and his words eat as a canker, and darken and veil them that hearken to it." -- Id., p.71. The nature of this spiritual worship is clearly portrayed by Robert Barclay; see the 11th Proposition of his Apology, particularly in Sections 6 and 7, to which we desire the reader to refer. * * * * We have viewed with much concern the gradual creeping into the meetings of Friends, in some parts of the country, of latter years, of reading the Scriptures, and of singing, practices which, until within a few years, were almost unknown amongst us. We believe that these changes are an evidence of a departure from that dependence on the Lord for ability to worship Him aright, which was so conspicuous a testimony of this Society; and that they are connected with a shrinking from patient waiting upon the Lord, and from the humbling exercise of mind which is often felt in endeavoring to draw near in spirit to Him. Friends do not assemble in their meetings for Divine worship for the sake of listening to any outward performances. If this principle is once departed from, there is no tenable ground to prevent a gradual lapse into a full adoption of those forms out of which our Society was brought in the beginning. If the Scriptures are to be read in our meetings, how easy is it to conclude that a careful selection, such as is provided in the liturgies of some religious bodies, would be preferable to the choice likely to be made by persons of less education, or who have given less time and thought to the subject. If singing by tune is to be practised, why should not the highest style of art, aided by musical instruments, be made use of, so as more effectively to stimulate the emotions of the listeners? If preaching is essential to the proper holding of a meeting, it may be asked, would it not be better to employ persons of marked ability, who have been regularly trained to such an employment, and who may reasonably be supposed to be better prepared than others to interest and instruct an audience? If vocal prayer is always in place, without regard to the immediate promptings of Him who only knows the conditions and needs of those assembled, it might be asked, why not use some of those beautiful and comprehensive forms which are found in the prayer-books of other societies? Thus, there is reason to fear, the language of the prophet might become applicable to our Society. "I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed; how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?" * * * * We think the danger we have endeavored to point out is peculiarly great as respects music and singing, owing to the power over the natural sensibilities, which sweet sounds possess; and it is easy to mistake the emotions thus produced for the tenderness of mind and the softening influence of "the Spirit that quickeneth." The distinction between these is very clearly pointed out by the late Thomas Chalmers, a distinguished clergyman of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, a man eminent for his abilities, and whose position gave him abundant opportunities for observing that of which he speaks. He says: "You easily understand how a taste for music is one thing, and a real submission to the influence of religion is another; how the ear may be regaled by the melody of sound, and the heart may utterly refuse the proper impression of the sense that is conveyed by it; how the sons and daughters of the world may, with their every affection devoted to its perishable vanities, inhale all the delights of enthusiasm, as they sit in crowded assemblage, around the deep and solemn oratorio." "It is a very possible thing, that the moral and the rational and the active man, may have given no entrance into his bosom for any of the sentiments, and yet so overpowered may he be by the charm of vocal conveyance through which they are addressed to him, that he may be made to feel with such an emotion, and to weep with such a tenderness,

and to kindle with such a transport, and to glow with such an elevation, as may one and all carry upon them the semblance of sacredness." -- Chalmers' Works, Phila., 1830, p.107-8. In speaking of the connection between music and worship, another person, not a member of the Society of Friends, observes: "I firmly believe" "that if we seek to affect the mind by the aid of architecture, painting or music, the impression produced by these adjuncts is just so much subtracted from the worship of the unseen Jehovah. If the outward eye is taken up with material splendor, or forms of external beauty, the mind sees but little of Him who is invisible; the ear that is entranced with the melody of sweet sounds, listens not to the still small voice by which the Lord makes his presence known." "True spiritual access unto God," says another writer, "is not at all furthered by the excitement of the animal or intellectual frame. It is most commonly known, where in abstraction from outward things, the mind, in awful quietude, finds itself gathered into a sense of the presence of Infinite Purity." "By the power of imagination; by the influence of eloquent words; by a stirring swell of elevated music, the mind may be excited; the feelings may be tendered, and we may pour forth verbal supplication, whilst the heart is unchanged." Edward Burrough thus instructively describes the changes which followed the declension of the primitive church from its original state of life and purity. "When the gift of the ministry through the Holy Ghost was lost and no more received, men began to make ministers by learning arts and languages and human policy. They began to study from books and writings what to preach, not having the Holy Ghost, without which none are the ministers of Christ." "Having lost the sense of God's true worship, which is in spirit and in truth, they began to worship in outward observances, which is not the worship of God, but superstitious and idolatrous." "When singing in the spirit and with the understanding ceased, then people began to introduce the form of singing David's experiences, in rhyme and metre; and thus, in the apostacy, the form grew as a substitute for that which the saints had enjoyed in power; shadows were set up instead of the substance, and death instead of life." The same writer in an appeal to the professors of his day to test their religious profession by the Scriptures, says: "Likewise you sing and give to sing David's psalms in rhyme and metre, professing it is to the glory and honor of God. Ye practise this as an ordinance of God, as a part of his worship, and as a part of your religion; but this practice and profession also are manifest not to be according to the Scriptures; because it was never commanded; neither is there any precedent for this practice in the Scriptures in gospel times." Robert Barclay says, "We confess this [singing of Psalms] to be a part of God's worship, and very sweet and refreshing when it proceeds from a true sense of God's love in the heart, and arises from the Divine influence of the spirit." But he condemns "the formal, customary way of singing," which was practised by professors in his day, and has been continued down to the present time, as having "no foundation in Scripture, nor any ground in true Christianity." He concludes his remarks on this subject in the following words: "As to their artificial music, either by organs or other instruments, or voice, we have neither example nor precept for it in the New Testament." * * * * "Independently of that harmony of sound which is the result of musical skill, there is a modulation of the voice which is an index of the feelings of the mind. Where the heart is melted under a sense of Divine goodness and love, and thanksgiving to the Author of all our blessings flows from it, true melody is often shown in the tones of the voice; and this is sometimes apparent even when no words are distinctly uttered. It is to such a state of mind we understand the Apostle Paul to refer when he speaks to the Ephesians, of "making melody in your heart to the Lord." When an outward harmony, depending upon "invented tunes, such as please the carnal mind," and upon words which have been committed to memory in order to be sung

therewith, takes the place of that expression which comes from the heart and is uttered under a sense of the Divine requiring, then those who take part therein fall into that "formal," "customary," "artificial" way of singing, against which the Society of Friends has borne a steady testimony from its rise.* * * * *These observations apply to vocal religious exercises in the family as well as in more public gatherings.* * * * *We believe the tendency of this artificial music on the mind, even when attuned to the expression of religious sentiment, and accompanied by the language of Divine worship, is to "lead the soul almost insensibly to substitute a pleasing emotion which ends in self, for those spiritual sacrifices which are acceptable to God by Jesus Christ, even a broken and contrite heart, and that communion with the Father and the Son which results from loving God and keeping his commandments."* * * * *In congregational singing, there is an added inconsistency. For, it is in the highest degree improbable that those assembled on such occasions will be in such a frame of mind as will fit them properly and truthfully to join in the offering of the prayers or praises expressed in the hymns which may be given out to be sung. This objection is pointed out by Barclay in his Apology, where, after stating that "the formal customary way of singing hath no foundation in Scripture, nor any ground in true Christianity," he adds, "all manner of wicked, profane persons take upon them to personate the experiences and conditions of blessed David; which are not only false as to them, but also to some of more sobriety, who utter them forth." "Such singing doth more please the carnal ears of men, than the pure ears of the Lord, who abhors all lying and hypocrisy." (Prop. XI, sect.26.)This difficulty has been felt by many sincere persons who were not members of our Society, and has prevented some of them from joining in such performances. John Spalding, while still a member of the established Church of England, was so convinced of its inconsistency, that he addressed a letter to those who met at the place of worship which he was accustomed to attend, in which he says: "I appeal to the witness of God in every heart, considering the variety of conditions, the different subjects of praise, adoration, confession, petitioning, &c., contained in every collection of hymns, whether in the fear of the Lord any one, in whatever state or condition he may be at the time, can with propriety be ready to sing whatever may be given out."John Spalding further testifies as to the effect of formal singing in worship. "From my own experience I can say it has a tendency to divert the mind from solemn, serious reflections. I am now speaking more particularly concerning those, who have attained to a measure of the grace of God. Ask yourselves, is outward singing intended or calculated to please the carnal ears of men, or a holy God? Why such anxiety about tunes, voices, and music? Is the Lord to be pleased with such poor things? Oh, no, you cannot suppose it. Consider from what root it springs; from the old man or the new; and remember the axe is laid to the root to destroy all that is of the earth, of our fleshly nature. I have considered those passages in the New Testament where the subject is mentioned, and am confirmed by them in my opinion of the inconsistency of public singing. The apostle speaks of singing with grace in the heart; of making melody in the heart to the Lord, not making a noise with the tongue, unless that proceeds from the heart."In a Memorial concerning Edward Cobb of Maine, issued by Falmouth Monthly Meeting, there is preserved some account of his religious experience before he became a member of the Society of Friends, which took place in 1797. In this he states:"When quite young, I learned the rules and was very fond of what is called sacred music, sparing no pains to attend schools for that purpose; and the prayer of my heart to be directed aright regarding worship, seemed to receive the first intelligible answer by the way of reproof in this exercise; and when, at the head of a choir of singers, words have occurred that, through the enlightening influence of heavenly goodness,

(which had long been operating on my mind), appeared evidently inconsistent with my own state, I have often, to be unobserved by the company, kept the tune along; while I feared that taking the words into my mouth, and uttering them as worship to Him who requires worship of his creature man in spirit and in truth, could be nothing short of solemn mockery from that mind which had been so far enlightened as to believe that nothing could be acceptable worship to Almighty God but what came from Him, and, through the medium of his own Spirit, was breathed out to Him again as that Spirit should dictate, whether in prayer or in praises to his great name."In confirmation of the fact that those who were convinced of the principles of Friends, when they joined in membership, were constrained to lay aside their former practices of reading and singing in meetings for Divine worship, it may be mentioned, that although the writings of those who were mainly instrumental in gathering the Society at the time of its rise, contain many advices, cautions and encouragements to its members, as to the exercise of the ministry, and as to worship, yet they are almost totally silent as to these practices.* * * * *In expressing these views, our object is to guard our own members from sliding into the adoption of views and practices which are inconsistent with, and lead away from the standard of spiritual religion and worship believed in by us, and thus cause us to lose that post in his militant church which was assigned us by its Holy Head.* * * * *We have been concerned also at the increase of instruments of music and the practice of singing in the families of our members, as a means of amusement. Even under the Jewish dispensation a woe was pronounced upon those who in a wanton and unconcerned state of mind invented unto themselves instruments of music like David, but who were not grieved for the afflictions of Joseph -- that is, for the exercises and sufferings of the righteous seed.George Fox declares that he was led to cry out against all sorts of music; and the advices of our Society down to modern times have been uniformly in the same direction. It has been felt that the time required to become a proficient in its practice was improperly taken from more important uses; that the emotions it produces have no tendency to strengthen the intellectual or moral character; that the most melodious sounds that human instruments can make have no power to implant principles, give strength to resist temptation or eradicate selfishness; that the love of music often leads into associations which are corrupting in their character, as is shown by its use in promoting the frivolity of the ball-room, and the dissipation of the drinking-saloon, and especially in exciting the passions and drowning the sensibilities of those engaged in the awful conflicts of the battle-field; and that it is often resorted to to dispel the feelings of sadness and inquietude which are spread over the mind at times by the Holy Spirit, and are the merciful visitations of our compassionate Redeemer, designed to draw the thoughts away from earthly things, and to fix them upon the alone Source of never ending happiness. Instead of quietly and patiently abiding under these dispensations, with the mind stayed on the Lord, in order to experience their full benefit, if any of these visited ones should resort to instruments of music and other means of dissipating the impressions on their minds, it will be likely to mar the blessing designed by this extension of the mercy of God to their souls. The same kind of reasoning, which would defend the use of music and singing as amusements, may also be urged in support of dancing, attending theatrical exhibitions, and other indulgences, which, in the aggregate, distinguish the man of the world from the self-denying follower of Christ.We desire, therefore, renewedly to call the attention of Friends to this subject; and to caution them against indulging themselves or their families in any practice, however pleasing to the natural taste, which will weaken their hands in supporting in its purity our ancient testimony to the nature of spiritual worship; or which will have the effect of

retarding their own progress in the self-denying path that leads to the kingdom of heaven.

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