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Bridgeway Church
Life in the Spirit #8

Sermon Summary #8

Worship in the Spirit Ephesians 5:18-20

*Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father **in spirit and truth**, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship **in spirit and truth**” (John 4:21-24).*

*Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; **I will sing praise with my spirit [more literally, “in the spirit”]**, but I will sing with my mind also (1 Corinthians 14:13-15).*

*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be **filled with the Spirit**, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and **spiritual songs**, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:18-20).*

*For we are the circumcision, who **worship by the Spirit of God** and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3).*

*And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all **filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness** (Acts 4:31).*

*While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because **the gift of the Holy Spirit** was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and **extolling God** (Acts 10:44-46a).*

*While they were **worshipping the Lord** and fasting, **the Holy Spirit said**, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2).*

Were it not for the fact that the story was first reported by the Chicago Tribune and later confirmed by other reliable sources, I would have sworn that someone just made it up as a practical joke. The article told the story of a woman in New Mexico who was frying tortillas . . .

“when she noticed that the skillet burns on one of her tortillas resembled the face of Jesus. Excited, she showed it to her husband and neighbors, and they all agreed that there was a face etched on the tortilla and that it truly bore a resemblance to Jesus. So the woman went to her priest to have the tortilla blessed. She testified that the tortilla had changed her life, and her husband agreed that she had been a more peaceful, happy, submissive wife since the tortilla had arrived. The priest, not accustomed to blessing tortillas, was somewhat reluctant but agreed to do it. The woman took the tortilla home, put it in a glass case with piles of cotton to make it look like it was floating on clouds, built a special altar for it, and opened the little shrine to visitors. Within a few months, more than eight thousand people came to the shrine of the Jesus of the Tortilla, and all of them agreed that the face in the burn marks on the tortilla was the face of Jesus (except for one reporter who said he thought it looked more like former heavyweight boxing champion Leon Spinks!).”

Worship Wars

People either start or stop attending certain churches for a variety of reasons. For some, it is the preaching of the Word or the absence of it that determines their decision. For others, it is the availability of parking or the children's ministry or friendliness of the people that governs where they ultimately land. Believe it or not, it's the brand of coffee they serve in their Café!

But in the past 30 or so years, the one factor that has probably been the decisive factor more than any other is **the style of worship** that a church displays.

The sad fact is that the church in the west has been ripped apart in many instances over such debates as:

- Should our worship be long or short?
- Should our worship be formal or free?
- Should our worship use acoustic guitars or a Baldwin piano?
- Should we use hymns or contemporary songs?
- Should we have praise teams or robed choirs?
- Should our worship be characterized more by the fear of God or the enjoyment of God?

And the list of choices could go on seemingly without end. Often times, though, the divide is along the lines of Word and Spirit which we noted in our first study in this series. Word oriented churches that are often cessationist in their theology take one particular approach, while Spirit oriented churches that practice spiritual gifts take yet another approach.

What both groups share in common is their conviction that worship must be *theocentric*: it is concerned with glorifying God. Where they differ is on the ways and means. Cessationists believe God is most glorified when biblical truths about him are accurately and passionately proclaimed in song, liturgy, and recitation of Scripture. The focus of worship is to *understand* God and to represent him faithfully in corporate declaration. Worship is thus primarily didactic and theological and *their greatest fear is emotionalism*.

Charismatics, on the other hand, believe God is most glorified not only when he is accurately portrayed in song but when he is experienced in personal encounter. Charismatic worship does not downplay understanding God but insists that he is truly honored when he is *enjoyed*. Worship is thus emotional and relational in nature and *their greatest fear is intellectualism*.

Admittedly this is perhaps a bit too tidy. Cessationists would no doubt agree that God is to be enjoyed, but they see this as primarily a cognitive experience. Charismatics contend for a more holistic enjoyment. God is not merely to be grasped with the mind but felt in the depths of one's soul. The mind is expanded but the affections are also stirred (and the body may well move!).

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this difference is the way both groups think of God's *presence* in times of corporate praise. Think of it this way. When you gather in corporate assembly with God's people, whether on a Sunday morning or in a small group during the week, what are your expectations with regard to God? Do you view God's presence as a theological doctrine to be extolled and explained or do you think of it as a tangible reality to be felt. Those hymns that are more traditional in their focus stress divine transcendence. God is "out there," beyond us, above us, and we sing **about** him. The songs you hear in a more charismatic setting stress divine immanence. God is "down here," very near us, close to us, and we sing **to** him.

It follows from this that cessationists tend to fear excessive familiarity with God. They're concerned lest we get too chummy with God. Charismatics, on the other hand, tend to fear relational distance. They want nothing to do with an impersonal religion that relegates God to a remote and deistic heaven. Their longing is for the "nearness and now-ness" of God.

The spiritual atmosphere cessationists cultivate is characterized more by **fear and reverence** when compared to the charismatic desire for **joy and love**. Again, the former prizes form, the latter freedom. A cessationist service is somewhat controlled, both in terms of what is regarded as acceptable physical posture and the length of time devoted to corporate singing. Charismatic worship is emotionally free and physically expressive, with the characteristic lifting of hands and dancing.

There is a humble solemnity in most cessationist services versus the exuberant celebration among charismatics. This invariably elicits criticism from both sides. The cessationist is offended by what appears to be an overly casual, if not presumptuous, approach to God. Is not our God a consuming fire, holy and righteous? The charismatic sees in cessationist worship an excessively formal, if not lifeless, approach to God, if they dare approach him at all. And without denying that God is holy, the charismatic is emboldened by what he believes is God's own passionate longing for relational intimacy.

The Holy Spirit and How we Worship

As you can see from the biblical texts that we read a moment ago, there is a very clear and direct relationship between the ministry of the Holy Spirit and proclamation and praise. Our worship is certainly to be grounded in God's Word and to be an accurate theological reflection of the truth of Scripture. But true worship must also be characterized by the presence and power of the Spirit. On several occasions in these texts we see that when people are filled with the Spirit they break out spontaneously in praise and celebration and occasionally during those times the Spirit speaks and imparts spiritual gifts and perhaps even brings healing to those in need.

We could spend several weeks exploring this subject. There are so many questions that come up when the ministry of the HS and worship are looked at together. But time will only allow me to focus today on **two primary themes**. Both of these themes are **related to how we worship here at Bridgeway**. I know that many of you are new and often wonder why we do what we do in the way that we do it. I can't answer all the questions you have, but I do want to concentrate on two very practical issues related to the way we have chosen to express our love and adoration for God.

Ephesians 5:18-20

The first thing we need to observe is the relationship between being "filled with the Spirit" and worship or singing. A few observations are in order.

First, being filled with the HS is contrasted with being drunk with wine. The issue here is one of influence, control, or power. If you insist on getting drunk, be inebriated with the HS! Please note, however, that the force of this exhortation is not that Christians should stagger and slur their speech as those drunk with wine do. The influence of the infilling Spirit is *moral* in nature, the results and tangible evidence of which is the *spiritual and relational fruit* that Paul describes in Galatians 5. Paul envisions a community of people (the church) whose lives are so totally given over to the Spirit "that the life and deeds of the Spirit are as obvious in their case as the effects of too much wine are obvious in the other" (Fee, 721).

Second, notice that Paul does not say, "be full of the Spirit," as though one were full of the Spirit in the same way one is full of wine. He says, "be filled by/with the Spirit." The emphasis is on being filled to the full by the Spirit's presence. Cf. Eph. 3:19 where Paul speaks of being "filled unto the fullness of God," i.e., of being filled up with God himself.

Does Paul mean we are to be filled "with" the Spirit, as if the Spirit is himself the content with which we are filled? Or does he mean we are to be filled "by" the Spirit, the content of which is not clearly specified? We can't be certain, but my sense is that it is the Spirit himself who fills us or empowers us.

Third, you need to know that the verb, "be filled," is imperative; i.e., it is a *command*. This is not a suggestion or a mild recommendation or a polite piece of advice. Being filled with the HS is not optional. It is obligatory.

Fourth, the verb is also plural. “The fullness of the Holy Spirit is emphatically not a privilege reserved for some, but a duty resting on all” (Stott/60).

The exhortation has primarily to do with **community life**, i.e., the need for God's people to be so collectively full of God's presence that their worship is transformed, their relationships are transformed, and their lives as a totality are transformed.

[I realize this sounds like a high school grammar lesson, but it's important. So bear with me.]

Fifth, the verb is present tense, indicating that Paul envisions a **continuous, on-going experience**. This is not so much a dramatic or decisive experience that settles things for good, but a daily appropriation. This command is relevant to all Christians throughout the course of their lives. Short of death itself, we are to continually seek the filling and empower of the Spirit!

Sixth, the mere fact that we are *commanded* to be *filled* implies that a Christian faces the danger of being “low” (but never empty!). We are always in need of refreshing and renewal. Therefore, in view of this command, we should cease speaking of the “second” blessing and begin to seek God for a “third” and a “fourth” and a “fifth” and . . .

Seventh, and finally, be careful to note what Paul says is the *consequential evidence* of being filled with/by the Holy Spirit? In other words, what happens when one is filled with the Spirit? What indication is there that this has actually happened? The answer is found in vv. 18ff.

- a) *Speaking to one another in ministry*
- b) *Singing to God* (wholehearted worship in corporate fellowship).
- c) *Gratitude* (for all things at all times).
- d) *Mutual submission* (as over against being self-assertive and demanding).

Our concern is with vv. 19-20 - *addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .*

Clearly, Paul envisions believers communicating truth and knowledge and instruction by means of these various forms of singing.

But what's the difference, if any, between “psalms” and “hymns” and “spiritual songs”? Some insist there is no difference between these items. But if he meant only one thing, what is the point of employing three different words? More likely Paul had a distinction in mind that's important for us to note.

“**Psalms**” most likely refers to those inspired compositions in the OT book of that name. Luke uses the word in this way in his writings (20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33) and Paul encouraged Christians to come to corporate worship with a “psalm” to offer (1 Cor. 14:26). The word literally meant “to pluck” or “to strike or twitch the fingers on a string” and thus could possibly refer to singing with instrumental accompaniment (although we shouldn't restrict it to that).

The word “**hymns**” would be any human composition that focuses on God or Christ. Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 or the Song of Moses in Exodus 15 would qualify, as would Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1. Perhaps the most explicit examples would be the so-called “Christ Hymns” in Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20, and 1 Timothy 3:16.

Why is the third expression of singing designated not simply as “songs” but as “**spiritual songs**” (although some contend that this adjective applies to all three)? Could it be Paul's way of differentiating between those songs that are *previously composed* as over against those that are *spontaneously evoked* by the Spirit

himself? Yes, I think so. In other words, “spiritual songs” are most likely *unrehearsed and improvised*, perhaps short melodies or choruses extolling the beauty of Christ. They aren’t prepared in advance but are *prompted by the Spirit* and thus are uniquely and especially appropriate to the occasion or the emphasis of the moment.

These are probably songs that we sing under the immediate prompting and infilling of the HS! Paul probably has in mind spontaneous songs that break out unexpectedly in the midst of our worship.

Example: the difference here at Bridgeway between those songs that our worship leaders rehearse and practice before we gather together, those songs whose words appear on the screen, versus the spontaneous melodies and phrases and short choruses that break out spontaneously, unplanned . . .

This interpretation strikes many as strange for the simple fact that, outside of charismatic churches, there are virtually no opportunities for expressions of spontaneous praise. The only songs permitted are those listed in the bulletin, the words of which are either in the hymnbook or in liturgy. In these churches, singing is highly structured, orchestrated, and carefully controlled (but not for that reason any less godly or edifying). There is typically a distinct beginning and ending without the possibility of *improvisation or free vocalization*. People are expected to sing what is written in the hymnal or projected on a screen, nothing more and nothing less.

But Paul seems to envision a “singing” in which the individual is given *freedom to vocalize his/her own passions, prayers, and declarations of praise*. Although this may strike some as chaotic and aimless the first time it is heard (it certainly did me!), it can quickly become a beautiful and inspiring experience as the Spirit is given free rein in the hearts of Christ’s people. As the instrumentalists play a simple chord progression or perhaps even the melody of a familiar song, the people spontaneously supply whatever words are most appropriate to their state of mind and heart.

Illustration: Ann’s first exposure to “free lance” singing . . . !

On countless occasions I have been blessed and edified by what some have called “**prophetic singing**” (so called because it is believed **the Spirit reveals** something to the person who in turn puts it to music). Typically an individual who is part of a worship team is led by the Spirit into a spontaneous song that may well evoke another to respond antiphonally. Such “spiritual songs” can last a few seconds or several minutes. Often, what one person sings will stir up yet another with a similar refrain, which on occasion will lead back into a verse or the chorus of a hymn previously sung.

More important still is the fact that such singing, whether psalms, hymns, or spiritual songs, are designed not simply to extol God but to educate his people. By means of them we “teach” and “admonish” one another. Clearly Paul envisioned songs that were biblically grounded and theologically substantive, songs that both communicated truth and called for heartfelt consecration, repentance, and devotion to the Lord. Let’s not forget that Paul is describing a situation far in advance of the printing press and hymnbooks. Thus these various expressions of singing were an invaluable means for transmitting and inculcating Christian truth.

Although many today may never experience a worship service that incorporates these elements in the way I described, the educational and convicting power in music and song cannot be denied. In his book, *Real Worship*, Warren Wiersbe wrote:

“I am convinced that congregations learn more theology (good and bad) from the songs they sing than from the sermons they hear. Many sermons are doctrinally sound and contain a fair amount of biblical information, but they lack that necessary emotional content that gets hold of the listener’s heart. Music, however, reaches the mind and the heart at the same time. It has power to touch and move the emotions, and for that reason can become a wonderful tool in the hands of the Spirit or a terrible weapon in the hands of the Adversary” (137).

But what should you and I do when someone leading our worship launches out into a “spiritual song”? What are we to do when “prophetic singing” occurs? How do we keep ourselves from *disengaging*, thinking that this is only for the benefit of the person singing and has nothing to do with me?

(1) Listen and Learn! Note v. 19a – “addressing one another” . . . in “spiritual songs.” Meditate on what is being sung. Focus on the words. Ask the Spirit to quicken in your own heart and mind the truth of what is being sung. Be open to being taught in those times of prophetic worship. The Spirit may well have prepared something uniquely and especially for you!

(2) Sing the same song. Listen for recurring phrases and the melody line and if it lasts long enough, join the singer in whatever “spiritual song” he/she is singing.

(3) Sing your own “spiritual song”. Take whatever truth about God or Jesus the Spirit has awakened in your heart and put it in your own words, adapting it to the melody of the leader. It may be a short, simple phrase of praise or thanksgiving or proclamation or prayer.

(4) Pray. Use the time to intercede for yourself or others. Or perhaps take the truth of what is being sung and let that shape and form the content of your prayers. *Turn their “spiritual song” into personal intercession!*

(5) Give thanks (v. 20)! Spend time thanking God (either in prayer or in song) for all that he has done.

Postures of Praise

There are numerous other issues we could address, but I want to talk about the one most visibly relevant: physical posture.

If you’ve been at Bridgeway for any length of time you know that we freely and frequently lift our hands when we worship. Some people kneel down. Some sit. Some just stand. Some even dance.

On more than one occasion I’ve been asked: “Sam, why do you lift your hands when you worship?” My answer is two-fold.

First, I raise my hands when I pray and praise because I have *explicit biblical precedent* for doing so. I don’t know if I’ve found all biblical instances of it, but consider this smattering of texts.

“So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands” (Psalm 63:4).

“To you, O LORD, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit. Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help, when I lift up my hands toward your most holy sanctuary” (Psalm 28:1).

“Every day I call upon you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you” (Psalm 88:9).

“I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes” (Psalm 119:48).

“Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the LORD!” (Psalm 134:2).

“O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you! Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!” (Psalm 141:1-2).

“I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land” (Psalm 143:6).

“Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands. Solomon had made a bronze platform five cubits long, five cubits wide, and three cubits high, and had set it in the court, and he stood on it. Then he knelt on his knees in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven” (2 Chronicles 6:12-13).

“And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God” (Ezra 9:5).

“And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground” (Nehemiah 8:6).

“Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven” (Lamentations 3:41).

“I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling” (1 Timothy 2:8).

If someone should object and say that few of these texts speak of worship (see Pss. 63:4; 134:2), but only of prayer (as if a rigid distinction can even be made between the two; indeed, I can’t recall ever worshipping God without praying to him; and prayer is itself a form of worship), my question is simply this:

Why do you *assume* that the appropriate place for your hands is at your side and you need an explicit biblical warrant for raising them? Wouldn’t it be just as reasonable to assume that the appropriate place for one’s hands is raised toward heaven, calling for an explicit biblical warrant (other than gravity or physical exhaustion) to keep them low?

The second answer I give to the question, “Why do you lift your hands when you worship?” is: “*Because I’m not a Gnostic!*” Gnosticism, both in its ancient and modern forms, disparages the body. Among other things, it endorses a hyper-spirituality that minimizes the goodness of physical reality. Gnostics focus almost exclusively on the non-material or “spiritual” dimensions of human existence and experience. The body is evil and corrupt. The body must be controlled and suppressed and kept in check lest it defile the pure praise of one’s spirit. The body, they say, is little more than a temporary prison for the soul that longs to escape into a pure, ethereal, altogether spiritual mode of being. Nonsense!

In one particular wedding ceremony I performed, the woman was from England and asked that I include in the vows one particular part that goes as follows:

“With my body I thee honor.
My body will adore you,
and your body alone will I cherish.
I will with my body, declare your worth.”

But biblical Christianity celebrates God’s creation of physical reality (after all, he did pronounce it “good” in Genesis 1). We are more than immaterial creatures. We are embodied souls, and are to worship God with our whole being. Paul couldn’t have been more to the point when he exhorted us to present our “*bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,” which is our “spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

By all means, we must worship with understanding. We must think rightly of God and love him with our heart and soul and mind (see Mt. 22:37). But we are not, for that reason, any less physical beings. We will have glorified bodies forever in which to honor and adore our great God. If we are commanded to dance, kneel, sing and speak when we worship, what possible reason could there be for not engaging our hands as well?

The human hand gives **visible expression** to so many of our beliefs, feelings, and intentions. When I taught homiletics (how to preach), one of the most difficult tasks was getting young preachers to use their hands

properly. Either from embarrassment or fear, they would keep them stuffed in their pockets, hidden from sight behind their backs, or nervously twiddle them in a variety of annoying ways.

Our hands speak loudly. When angry, we clench our fists, threatening harm to others. When guilty, we hide our hands or hold incriminating evidence from view. When uneasy, we sit on them to obscure our inner selves. When worried, we wring them. When afraid, we use them to cover our face or hold tightly to someone for protection. When desperate or frustrated, we throw them wildly in the air, perhaps also in resignation or dismay. When confused, we extend them in bewilderment, as if asking for advice and direction. When hospitable, we use them to warmly receive those in our presence. When suspicious, we use them to keep someone at bay, or perhaps point an accusing finger in their direction.

Does it not seem wholly appropriate, therefore, to raise them to God when we seek him in prayer or celebrate him with praise? So again, why do I worship with hands raised?

Because like one who *surrenders* to a higher authority, I yield to God's will and ways and submit to his guidance and power and purpose in my life. It is my way of saying, "God, I am yours to do with as you please."

Because like one who expresses utter *vulnerability*, I say to the Lord: "I have nothing to hide. I come to you open handed, concealing nothing. My life is yours to search and sanctify. I'm holding nothing back. My heart, soul, spirit, body and will are an open book to you."

Because like one who needs help, I confess my utter *dependence* on God for everything. I cry out: "O God, I entrust my life to you. If you don't take hold and uplift me, I will surely sink into the abyss of sin and death. I rely on your strength alone. Preserve me. Sustain me. Deliver me."

Because like one who happily and expectantly *receives* a gift from another, I declare to the Lord: "Father, I gratefully embrace all you want to give. I'm a spiritual beggar. I have nothing to offer other than my need of all that you are for me in Jesus. So glorify yourself by satisfying me wholly with you alone."

Because like one who aspires to direct *attention* away from self to the Savior, I say: "O God, yours is the glory; yours is the power; yours is the majesty alone!"

Because as the *beloved* of God, I say tenderly and intimately to the Lover of my soul: "Abba, hold me. Protect me. Reveal your heart to me. I am yours! You are mine! Draw near and enable me to know and feel the affection in your heart for this one sinful soul."

For those many years when I kept my hands rigidly at my side or safely tucked away in the pockets of my pants, I knew that no one would take notice of my praise of God or my prayers of desperation. No one would dare mistake me for a fanatic! I felt in control, dignified, sophisticated, and above all else, safe. These matter no more to me.

Please understand: these are not words of condemnation but confession. I know no one's heart but my own. I judge no one's motives but mine. I'm not telling you how to worship, but simply sharing how I do and why. I'm at that point in life where I honestly couldn't care less what the immovable evangelical is thinking or the crazy charismatic is feeling. What matters to me is that God have my all: my mind, will, feet, eyes, ears, tongue, heart, affections, and yes, my hands.

No, you need not raise your hands to worship God. But why wouldn't you want to?