

Glad Tidings

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

Vol. XXI

June 26, 2011

No. 26

Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs

(Jerry Fite)

There is a specific characteristic of songs which we sing “when we are happy” and when we gather for “teaching”. They are “psalms”, “hymns”, and “spiritual songs” (*James 5:13, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16*). They are all emphasizing praise unto God.

“Psalms” are sacred songs of praise, like the 150 we have preserved in the Old Testament book of Psalms. “Hymns” are songs of praise addressed to God. “Spiritual songs” are songs highlighting the spiritual gratitude we have in our heart for God.

Because they are all characterized as praise unto God, spiritual songs are sung as worship unto God. Worship is not confined to a place like Jerusalem or Samaria’s Mt. Gerizim, but occurs at the heart in spirit and in truth (*John 4:20-24*) regardless where the person singing might be.

The worshipper following the authority of the New Testament honors God’s specification to “sing” these songs. Happiness and gratitude unto God fill our hearts as we “sing praises” (psal-

lo) (*James 5:13*). When together, our singing is characterized as “*speaking one to another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart unto God*” (*Ephesians 5:19*).

The word “psallo” in the Old Testament designated songs that were sung with mechanical instrumental accompaniment.

“*Give thanks unto Jehovah with the harp; sing praises unto him with the psaltery of ten strings. Sing unto him a new song; play skillfully with a loud noise*” (*Psalms 33:1-3*). Notice the Old Testament’s distinction between “singing” and “playing”.

When playing, it was a “loud noise”. The word “psallo” means “to strike” like the strings of an instrument, but striking the strings of a mechanical instrument is not inherent in the word. Paul, using the word *psallo* specifies what is to be struck – “*making melody with your heart,*” which occurs as one sings and speaks words one to another. God has not commanded His worshippers today to “sing and play”, but He has commanded us to “sing”. A true worshipper

honor God’s authority, and refusing to be presumptuous, does what God commands. He or she sings, not taking away from the New Testament, or sinfully adding to it (*I Corinthians 4:6, Revelation 22:18-19*).

Our young people are tested early when they face singing spiritual songs or hymns in school choirs at seasonal concerts. Some will say, we will not sing these songs with a piano or organ when we are “at church”, but we can do it “at a concert”. Why? Does the hymn cease to be worship in a concert? Worship is not segregated to place, but is a matter of the heart.

The question we should first answer is “is this a psalm, hymn or spiritual song?” When it is, then by definition, it is worship regardless where we are singing. Determining it as a spiritual song of praise unto God, we then honor God and His word by “singing” it with God’s specified accompaniment - “making melody with the heart.” Be not ashamed to stand up in word and deed for how God wants us to sing spiritual songs.