

Should We Sing During the Lord’s Supper?

There is a growing trend for Christians to leave the **old paths** and worship in such a way that is more emotionally satisfying to members and visitors. Opinions on the subject differ all the way from we cannot change anything ever to we must change everything now. One example is the desire for the congregations to sing while partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Is this acceptable to God? Elders must decide on the issue by looking into God’s revealed truth. Many say that since the Bible does not say we cannot do it then we are free to do as we wish. *Is this true?*

The worship of the Lord’s church is governed by the principles taught in the New Testament. Jesus Himself established the basis for our offerings to God by noting that “*God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth*” (John 4:24). This means that our worship must be offered with the right heart, motive and intent, and it must be based on love (I Corinthians 13:1-8) according to His Word as Truth (John 17:17). If we truly love God, we will keep His commands (John 14:15) and recognize that since our worship is directed to God, He alone has the right to specify what is acceptable in His sight.

This principle has been true from the beginning of creation. By faith (Hebrews 11:4), Abel brought to God an acceptable offering of the firstborn of his flock (Genesis 4:4) and was called righteous (I John 3:12). In contrast, Cain offered from the fruit of the ground (Genesis 4:3) for which God had no respect (Genesis 4:5). In so doing, Cain’s actions were called evil (I John 3:12). The difference between these two offerings is the fact that one was chosen according to the will of God. The other was

chosen according to the desire of man. Since whatever does not come from faith is sin (Romans 14:23), and faith comes from hearing the word of Christ (Romans 10:17), we conclude that our worship must be offered in faith according to what God has authorized. Nadab and Abihu failed to recognize this important fact in offering profane fire before the Lord, which God had not commanded, and it cost them their lives (Leviticus 10:2). Why? By not offering what God had said and choosing instead to follow their own desires, these men dishonored God and did not treat Him as Holy (Leviticus 10:3). These examples teach us two principles. **First**, we always must submit to God, accepting that His thoughts and ways are not the same as ours (Isaiah 55:8) and **second**, whatever we do in word or deed should be by the authority of God (Colossians 3:17).

Having established the proper considerations for our worship, how do we determine whether singing in the assembly during the Lord’s Supper is authorized by God? The truth can be found in Scripture in different ways. **One**, we can look for instructions through the teachings of Jesus or from the inspired writers of the New Testament. **Two**, we can follow the examples of worship conducted under the leadership of the Apostles in the faithful, first century church. And **third**, we can examine corrective teaching where the Apostles have identified and addressed problems in the worship assembly to see what and why certain practices are unacceptable. From these, we gain valuable spiritual insight that can be applied to our worship today. If we are committed to applying the principles learned from this approach, we avoid the sins of selfish pride and are assured of properly honoring God.

Teachings on the Lord’s Supper are plentiful. It was instituted by Jesus (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20) in memory of the sacrifice that was being made on behalf of all men under the New Covenant (Luke 22:19-20). The unleavened bread and fruit of the vine represent the body and blood of Jesus. The importance of the Lord’s Supper was made clear by the Apostle Paul who emphasized four distinct purposes for its observance. **One**, it is a communion (or sharing) in the body and blood of Jesus in which we who are many are one body (I Corinthians 10:16-

17). **Two**, it is a memorial where we remember the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (I Corinthians 11:24-25). **Three**, it is a proclamation whereby we profess to all the world the Lord’s death until He comes again (I Corinthians 11:26). And **four**, it is a personal time of self-examination (I Corinthians 11:28) when Christians individually consider the price that was paid for their sins. To partake of the emblems as God intended, we must give due regard to all four aspects of the Lord’s Supper. Anything less is to partake in an unworthy manner and to sin (I Corinthians 11:27).

There also are many New Testament passages that provide teaching and examples of singing praises to God (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; I Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12, 13:15; James 5:13). Besides being vocal music (that is, distinctly spoken without the use of instruments), Scripture describes the act of singing as a means of speaking to, teaching and admonishing one another (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). It involves a thoughtful consideration and sincere expression from the heart, as well as attentiveness to the voices of others. As such, singing requires the use of both spirit and mind (I Corinthians 14:15) and touches the lives of those who hear it (Acts 16:25). From these passages we see that there are two aspects to our singing in the worship assembly. We give praises and honor to Almighty God and we edify each other as we listen and speak to one another in song.

The Bible clearly authorizes Christians to sing and partake of the Lord’s Supper in separate acts during the worship assembly on the first day of the week. However, where do we find the authority to combine the two together as offerings to God? Following our proposed approach, we search the Scriptures looking for three things. **One**, specific teaching from Jesus or the inspired authors of the New Testament endorsing the practice. **Two**, examples approved by the Apostles of singing during the Lord’s Supper offered by faithful Christians. Or **three**, some insight and basic approval provided by an Apostle’s discussion or corrective teaching dealing with related issues of worship.

What do we find in Scripture? First of all, there is no teaching either from Jesus or the Apostles

supporting the practice of singing while partaking of the Lord’s Supper. Furthermore, there are no biblical examples of Christians doing so in the worship assembly. It is true that Jesus and the Apostles did sing before departing to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30), but this took place *after* they had eaten the bread and partaken of the fruit of the vine (Matthew 26:26-30). I Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:17-34 and Acts 20:7 all refer to the Lord’s Supper, but none of the passages says anything about singing. Looking elsewhere, a full examination of the verses dealing with singing uncovers no mention of the Lord’s Supper. Since the Scriptures are silent, we can appeal to neither the direct teachings of Jesus and the Apostles, nor to examples of approved worship as a means to authorize and justify the practice. Can we draw any conclusions from the discussion and corrective teachings found in the Epistles? Yes, we can! **First** of all, we learn that it is possible to partake of the Lord’s Supper in an unacceptable manner. In I Corinthians 11:17-34, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for their neglect of fellow Christians and their failure to give due attention to the importance of the Lord’s Supper as they turned it into an ordinary feast. In fact, this was the problem that led to his teaching on the important aspects of remembrance, proclamation and self-examination that were being neglected. **Secondly**, we know from I Corinthians 14 that there are other ways by which men can conduct themselves improperly in the assembly. The entire chapter deals with Paul’s efforts to restore proper order to their worship. Specifically, those with the miraculous gift of speaking in tongues (foreign languages) were doing so publicly without an interpreter. This lifeless message was without profit (I Corinthians 14:6-11) and indeed thought to be the speech of one who is out of his mind by those visitors who could hear but not understand (I Corinthians 14:23). In rebuking the practice, Paul cited the importance of speaking to men for edification, exhortation and consolation (I Corinthians 14:2-3). Hence, the value of prophecy (that is, inspired teaching in

their language) was emphasized so the Lord's Church could grow spiritually and be edified (I Corinthians 14:12). Paul continues teaching that both spirit and mind must be actively engaged in worship, be it through praying, singing or instructing others (I Corinthians 14:13-19). His objective was to eliminate confusion in the assembly and to build up the body by restoring purpose and value to their worship through the clarity of a meaningful message understandable by all. Paul concluded with several directives.

- All things offered in the assembly should be for edification (I Corinthians 14:26).
- No more than two or three people should speak in tongues and then only if an interpreter is present.
- Moreover, each must speak in turn, that is, one at a time (I Corinthians 14:27-28).
- Similarly, the prophets were told to keep silent while another is prophesying so that all may hear, learn and be exhorted (I Corinthians 14:29-31).

The two guiding principles in context are that God is not a God of confusion but of peace (I Corinthians 14:33), and all things must be done in an orderly manner (I Corinthians 14:40).

So what does I Corinthians 14 have to do with the issue of singing while partaking of the Lord's Supper? If we are speaking to, teaching and admonishing one another (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16) when we sing, then we must be listening and concentrating on the words. *"I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also"* [or mind] (I Corinthians 14:15). However, when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we are to be communing with Jesus and having a period of individual, personal self-examination (I Corinthians 11:28) during this special time of remembrance and proclamation. ***It is simply impossible for an individual to properly execute both acts of worship at the same time since they have different requirements.*** While it may be possible to select a meaningful song that centers

on the death of Jesus, being only human, we cannot give due attention to all these activities at once. We cannot carry a tune, sing the written words of the song, listen to what the members around you are singing, acknowledge the sins in your life along with the price that has been paid for your redemption, assess your attitude, have appreciation and awareness of just what Jesus has done for you personally, etc. Similarly, if we are properly attentive to the conduct of the Lord's Supper, then we must be neglecting the singing. So what are our choices? **One**, we can sing in spirit and mind and neglect certain aspects of the Lord's Supper, that is, partaking in any unworthy manner, and thereby sin (I Corinthians 11:27) or, **Two**, we can partake of the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner and neglect certain aspects of the singing, that is, not singing in mind and spirit, and thereby sin (I Corinthians 14:15). But, these are not real choices for they both lead us to sin. Moreover, it is even worse than this for the following reasons:

1. If we sing while others are partaking of the Lord's Supper, then we are willfully obstructing those who are trying to follow the safe path, that is, choosing not to sing and instead to focus properly on all aspects of the Lord's Supper.
2. If we combine worship activities, we are violating the intent of Paul's directive to do things one by one, in turn, in order (I Corinthians 14:27, 31), since we have some people speaking to others who are trying to examine themselves.
3. By having communion (giving due attention to all its aspects) while singing together, we are promoting confusion which is in direct conflict with I Corinthians 14:33.
4. If we partake and sing at the same time, we are not doing things properly and in an orderly manner. This violates I Corinthians 14:40.
5. If we accept this practice of combining things, we establish a precedent and bind the tradition of men on all in the worship assembly, like it or not, contrary to the teaching of Matthew 15:1-10.
6. Requiring this of everyone will deny some faithful brethren the opportunity to partake of the Lord's Supper in the assembly as they must simply refuse to participate.

7. Requiring this of everyone will force some to sin as they participate in violation of their conscience and feeling guilty because *"whatsoever is not of faith is sin"* (Romans 14:23).

These considerations show that it is not acceptable to combine singing with partaking of the Lord's Supper. There is no indication that the first century Christians either taught or practiced such. Moreover, lacking the spiritual authority for doing so, there is simply no justification for placing souls at risk. In light of the teaching, what would motivate people to promote such things? Is our worship designed to please men or to please God (Galatians 1:10)? Are we unwilling to submit to God's will? Is it a matter of pride? If the congregation is not satisfied with partaking of the Lord's Supper during a period of thoughtful meditation in silence, then the problem and solution do not reside with the ears but rather with the heart (Matthew 15:19). May God help us to grow and always seek out and yield to His will in all things.



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