

REVERENCE IN SONG

(Discourse by B. M. Rice, 1916 Convention Report, page 50.)

In view of the fact that our dear brother's discourse of this morning so thoroughly stirred up our mind on the subject of reverence, I shall use the short time at my disposal in making a few suggestions that may help us as Bible Students to be more reverent particularly in our service in song.

It must surely be the desire of us all as new creatures to "sing forth the honor of His name, and to make His praise glorious." (Psa. 66:2.)

The propriety of doing so is at once apparent to us, and as we contemplate the surpassing loveliness, sublimity and majesty of the divine character and become lost in wonder, love and praise—we long for some other means of expression than our mere words. So our service in song, or musical part of our gatherings may well receive our careful consideration to this end.

I am quite sure we all intend to be reverent in our singing, as we realize our own unworthiness to receive the least of God's mercies or the wondrous truth he hath showed us. And we may be sure God is pleased with our good intentions—and our efforts in this direction, but now dear friends let us see that we do not fall short in doing our best, because even our best seems so little to offer to him.

In our musical sense, knowledge of musical notation, power of voice, etc., we differ widely. Some are gifted and skilled, while some have so little voice, or so little knowledge, that they express great regret and feel that they can add nothing to this part of the service, but I think that every one can do something to increase the value of the service of song as an opportunity of offering our reverent praise and worship to God, and its effects upon our hearts as a consequence of this exercise as a means of grace.

Let us look at the matter closely now to find wherein our intentions to be truly reverent, have not been fully carried out,—and right here it might help us to remember that the New Creature is responsible for the acts of the old man, the same as one is responsible for his dog, or his horse. The human mechanism or rather organism should be made to do service according to the "mind of the spirit" but the mind of the flesh is contrary and has many bad habits, some of which we hardly know exist, hence, just as when we do not watch our horse, he is "prone to wander" into some one else's garden, so our human organism, unless watched will be doing something we are not conscious of, but which may hinder the reverent worship of others, quite the reverse of what we would want to do if we were conscious of it.

It quite often happens that where the friends gather in homes, rocking chairs are made use of in order that all may have seats. In fact I have suspected that some very much prefer rocking chairs, and it is quite proper that those not strong, and older people should be comfortable and thereby get more good out of the service, and so even a rocking chair may be indirectly a means of grace—but when there are, as I have seen, four of them rocking back and forth at once—during the singing of hymns, well, I am sure you will agree with me that greater reverence would be manifested and also be felt if all rocking chairs were kept motionless and fanning at least temporarily discontinued during the singing as well as during prayer or other parts of the service. Indeed it would be much better for all to stand during their singing if rocking could not be discontinued otherwise.

Then there is sometimes the dear enthusiastic brother that beats time loudly with his foot upon the floor—perhaps he thinks he has to do so to keep time but if he has to make a noise with his foot in order to sing, he is too unskilled to beat time correctly, so unknowingly with probably good intentions, he hinders and distracts all the others—or at least many.

Then there are those who enter late. We might think that it would be necessary to sometimes be late, but I have noticed that it is almost always the same ones who are late, and some almost never come in late. They would not think of entering the service during prayer, but it has not occurred to us as it should, that careless interruptions during the singing tend strongly toward irreverence, for the reason that while engaging in the act of singing we are peculiarly susceptible to sense suggestions, distractions and noises. Much *more so from without or from others*, and *less so from within or from ourselves*. Study over this a little and see if it is not so. I am sure that the result will be greater watchfulness as to the things we should refrain from doing, in quite a certain sense the doings of the flesh. In Eph. 5:18, 19 we are admonished to “Be filled with the spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts unto the Lord.”

There is nothing in this text that suggests that we should use a few hymns for the purpose of getting quieted down or for giving notice to the friends outside that the meeting inside “has started,” or as you would use a gong to call the people to dinner or give a child something to “keep him quiet” we are *first* to “*be filled with the spirit*” and approach the beginning of the service in the spirit of reverence.

It is sometimes remarked that it is much nicer to have meetings in homes because it is less formal—yes, by all means let us keep far away from a formal, perfunctory service, at the same time watching, lest in becoming less formal, we become less reverent.

So far, dear friends, we have been discussing the negative side of this matter, that is some things we should not do, or that we should cease doing, that more reverence might be

expressed in our service of song, more reverence toward God and thus more spiritual profit to each one thus engaged. I think we would do well to remember, as we consider these things to be avoided, what has been recently pointed out by our dear Pastor in the Watch Tower, that fallen human nature objects to being sacrificed, and to have its liberties curtailed, so when a suggestion comes to our minds, that carefulness and quietness would be a bondage or be unpleasant let us at once recognize the source of such suggestion and deal with it in the spirit of love and devotion to our blessed Lord.

Whatever we do or do not do, we must not consider it a bondage but a delightful privilege.

Now after the admonition “to be filled with the spirit,” the apostle says further, “speaking to yourselves with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” The Emphatic Diaglott gives it, “speaking to others” or “speaking to one another”; thus we see that we have the privilege of using tune, rhythm or accent, and taste or shading the voice, in combination with, or as a vehicle for our, words, by which to express the sentiments of our hearts to God and to each other and to ourselves.

Now, I hear someone say, we cannot all become skilled musicians. No, perhaps not, the question is what *can* we do, what *ought* we to do. Well in the first place we ought to see and understand our privilege, we would soon have a greater appreciation of this wonderful means of expression—which undoubtedly God has given to us with which to worship him. The apostle seems to suggest that it would be very proper for us to have enough knowledge to enable us to make use of Psalms and Hymns.

How are those who have little or no knowledge, to acquire enough to enable them to intelligently participate?

I would suggest in reply, that very few are tone deaf, some are, that is, they cannot distinguish pitches or musical tones, for such to try to sing would be as impossible as to try to use an unknown language. Such usually know they cannot, sing and would do well to take a book and follow the song with a reverent prayerful mind, and by so doing would show appreciation of the singing of others, which would be a *distinct help to the service*. Please mark this point. They would thus have a real part in the service. A good listener is always appreciated and often a great blessing—inattention or pre-occupation in any service *strongly tends toward irreverence*.

Only a comparative few are tone deaf as already referred to, but many lack confidence because of little ability or because of lack of knowledge of music notation. To these it may be suggested that it is not difficult to acquire a sufficient knowledge of notation to enable one to sing Hymns with considerable accuracy, and we think the time would be well employed. If it is impossible to give the time, then careful watching and careful

listening will accomplish much. Much can be gained by absorption. Many sing out of tune because they do not listen carefully. We must become more susceptible to shades of pitch and tone as we engage in singing or we deaden our sense of appreciation and become more inaccurate, in fact we are doing one or the other always as we sing and to a degree when we listen, just the same as in other spiritual exercises, we cannot remain stationary. Much depends upon the use we make of every opportunity. Let us not get the idea that what has just been suggested is purely mechanical and that it has nothing to do with reverence, but that we are considering how we may use the human organism, the better to make use of the Apostle Paul's admonition not as an obligation, but as a voluntary, reverent, and loving service.

The suggestions given with respect to time, will also apply to rhythm when all do not keep together it is because the rhythm has not been sensed. More persons sing out of rhythm than out of tune, with the result that all feel something to be wrong, but may not know the reason.

The matter of accent or stress of voice must be carefully observed or music becomes listless. Let us notice the dotted notes in number 105 in our hymnal accenting the second word in each stanza of the beautiful hymn.

I have observed that these are sometimes sung without being held, with the result that the musical phrase and the thought in the line, are insipid and lifeless as compared to the proper rendering with the notes held and emphasis given. A very little quiet, patient study and care would greatly augment the beauty of both musical and logical expression and the hymn would thus answer its purpose, in other words without proper syncopation and accent music would become monotonous and irreverent.

Let us consider the apostle's words further—"Singing and making melody in your hearts unto the Lord." This assures us that the important thing in singing is the heart condition, being in harmonious relations with the Father and the son, as melody is successive harmony, but I think this scripture also explains that the tone or color of the voice expresses or reflects the sentiment of our hearts.

We can tell by the voice, when one is sad or mirthful, very serious or much in earnest, by its sound, really by the presence of overtones. Strangely enough the throat cavity varies in shape and size with every varying emotion. So we express by the tone of our voices, aside from our words, either reverence or some other condition of heart and mind.

That is we may do so, and in doing so, that which is expressed reacts upon us and deepens the sentiments. Or we may become habitually indifferent to the sound of our voices or by being pre-occupied in mind, fail to lend ourselves to the exercise of song and praise to be truly reverent. Failure to sense the meaning of the words of a hymn, could

not be otherwise than irreverent. The apostle Paul again calls attention to this in 1 Cor. 14:15, by saying, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also."

Now friends how can we render due reverence in our service of song unless we use all reasonable means to do so with the understanding?

I do not desire to unduly emphasize the importance of correct musical performance to a point where it might have the effect of making any of the Lord's dear ones self conscious. I would not want you to forget that the Lord will not fail to appreciate our best intentions and efforts, consistent with our opportunities, but rather to point out that the musical sense is given to us by God, with which to praise and worship him, and that he has arranged all the laws pertaining to the use of this beautiful means of expression and I believe that we are softened and tendered as we come into harmony with those laws in his service.

It is sad to note that music and musical performers are almost worshipped and the Creator and giver of all precious gifts merely forgotten, and we sometimes feel that to study music seriously and extensively would be placing one's self in the way of temptation, and perhaps too we may properly conclude that at the present time the Lord would be pleased to have us use our time otherwise than in much technical study of music. This is my conviction, so I have suggested only the using of easily available means and opportunities believing that if this is seriously and persistently done "in the spirit" of love and prayer and devotion to God, results, pleasing to God and helpful to all would be very soon apparent and a greater degree of reverence manifested in our service of song.

Now let us remember dearly beloved that we hope soon to be ushered into the presence of the king.

How glad we shall be then, of any work of preparation going on now which will enable us to come into His presence with rejoicing,—so I will say, let us not fail to sing with all our hearts and ransomed powers unto the Lord, no matter what our work of preparation may have been.

He will appreciate our best, only let us make it a little better every day, as we have opportunity.

A word about our song book, it is far the best collection of songs and hymns I have ever seen after long experience, in fact it is in a class all by itself. Read it. Know it so when we come together to sing his praise—its sweet influence may be used to the utmost, that those who sing and those who listen may make melody in their hearts unto the Lord.

The stars of heaven are shining on,

Though these frail eyes are dimmed with tears;
The hopes of earth indeed are gone,
But are not ours the eternal years.