

3-Dimensional Praise

My family and I recently went to see the movie "Avatar". Perhaps you have heard of it? Apart from the struggles that I had with the movie's subject, there was no doubt that it was technologically stunning. It has set new standards for movie making in the area of 3-D technology. We watched the movie with 3-D glasses and there was truly a sense of depth to the images we were seeing. This is not your father's 3-D movie of the 1950's which relied often on the illusion of monsters jumping off the screen to achieve its effect. No, the texture of this movie was immersive and spectacular. I am sure that watching it now in a normal format that is 2-dimensional will be somewhat of a letdown.

In our experience of the world around us, we typically depend on a 3-dimensional appraisal of our surroundings: the world has height and width and depth in our perception of it. Movies are typically 2-dimensional, that is they can only portray height and width, perhaps through clever camera work suggesting a sense of depth, but somehow the experience just doesn't ring true. This is why the burgeoning technology of 3-D has such promise for reinvigorating the movie industry. As the technology has improved, a 3-D movie's ability to give a much more realistic sense of depth has improved with it. We have a much more immersive and satisfying, even realistic experience, some would say.

So it must be with our praise. Our praise needs to be 3-Dimensional or it is lacking depth, substance, and will be ultimately unpleasing to God.

As a 3-D movie exists in the sphere of a theater, so 3-Dimensional praise exists in the sphere of the Holy Spirit. That is, for 3-Dimensional praise to happen, we must be in the Spirit. Paul says that we are to be filled with the Spirit.

When we are filled with the Spirit, there will be 3 dimensions to our praise:

1. a horizontal dimension to praise
2. a vertical dimension to praise
3. a continual dimension to praise

When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, our praise will be demonstrated in all three of these dimensions.

Let's look at the text:

Eph. 5: 18-20

"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."

The command in verse 18 to be "filled with the Spirit" is illustrated in a series of participles beginning in v. 19: "addressing", "making", "giving", and in v. 21 "submitting". Each of these participles gives illustration of the outworking of being filled with the Spirit. In verses 19 & 20, the particular focus seems to be worship, while in v. 21 and following, the focus is on relationships.

Some commentators think that these participles carry the weight of commands. Whether they are imperatives in themselves or not, there is no doubt that they should be expressions of the Spirit's fullness in our lives. What is of particular interest to us today is that the first 3 deal with praise. So it is on these 3 dimensions of praise that we will focus our attention.

1. The Horizontal Dimension of Praise

Verse 19a says “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”. The verb that is translated “addressing” is not just confined to normal conversation but indeed covers utterance of any kind, so it works perfectly well when conveying the sense of “uttering” music in the form of songs. We will see that all of verse 19 pertains to music and song, so the emphasis of this “addressing” is on the *content* particularly and not exclusively the *mode* of communication.

This idea of addressing can be one of using words in order to declare one’s mind and disclose one’s thoughts. A similar word is found earlier in Eph. 4:15, “Rather, speaking the truth in love...” Also in chapter 4 verse 25, “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor.” So if we are filled with the Holy Spirit, if the Spirit is filling our mind and thought, our addressing is declaring that to others.

The “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” listed here all refer generally to songs of praise. They are not so much a specific list of specific types of songs as they are multiple examples of songs that are God-oriented and truth-filled. They thus continue the New Testament pattern of giving generalized instruction to form and content, breaking away from old covenant forms that were incredibly specific in detailing form and content.

There is a directive here of purposefully addressing each other with these songs. It is not just a mindless, disconnected “singing”. We sing so that God is praised, yes, but also that believers will be built up, encouraged, exhorted and even reproofed in the song. In the parallel passage in Colossians 3:16, Paul is even more specific with the idea of exhortation and even reproof. There it says: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in

all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."

For other believers, our "addressing" in song comes for the purpose of exhortation, encouragement, reminding, and instructing all of who God is and what He has done. The content of God-honoring songs can fill believers' minds with truth.

Thus we see that there is a **horizontal** element to our worship. We are gathered with other believers in worship. What is our concern for them? What is our concern for the others in our midst? While there will always be a personal dimension to our worship...a sense of "just me and the Lord", there is the presence of others that we must be aware of and deal with. There is indeed an "audience of One", but we are gathered with a congregation of many. How do we deal with the others who are around us?

Paul gives us some part of the answer when he says we are to address them in "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs". In the context of our worship given to God, we are to be encouraging and edifying others. This concern for what is on our lips, what comes from our mouths is a great concern to Paul. See how in chapter 4 in two different verses he urges us to "speak the truth" to each other. In verse 15 "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ," And again in verse 25 "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another." We are to speak the truth to each other for the building up of the body into Christ. See also in verse 29, where he says "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." Speech, words, and songs that build up are to be normative for us as Christians, especially in our worship.

Historically, the idea of "addressing one another" may come from the early church practice of singing antiphons. These are songs in which one part of the group would sing part of a phrase of music and then the other part of the group would sing a response. We still do that in our singing, don't we? Just a few weeks ago, we sang the song "You Are Holy". The men begin with a phrase and the women answer. That is something like what is mentioned here. And though the context here is music and singing, we also do some of this "addressing one another" when we do responsive readings, don't we? In both of these examples, God is the focus, ultimately, of our worship, but we are singing and reading in a corporate context in which we can encourage and build each other up.

How can you engage other believers during worship so that you are "addressing" them with your "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"?

1. Open your eyes during worship from time to time and look around! Smile at another person while you are singing a song of praise. Share that moment with them! This works particularly well with up-beat songs.
2. When you are finishing a song, look around. This again is a great time to encourage someone, to acknowledge that you have been worshiping the same God together in that time.
3. If a particular song's lyrics have sparked a love for God in you or stirred holy feelings in you, mention that to someone after the service. This doesn't have to be the main focus of your conversation. Hopefully the sermon would be the main point of your conversation. There can, though, be a benefit to saying to someone, "I love how that song says 'our God is mighty to save', isn't that true! He was mighty to save me, and I'm so thankful."

So here, then is the horizontal dimension to our worship. When we are filled with the Spirit, we will have a desire to encourage other believers with the truth that

fills us. When we care about others in our worship, we are demonstrating that we have been filled with the Spirit.

2. The Vertical Dimension of Praise

As verse 19 continues, Paul exhorts us to sing and make melody to the Lord with our heart. This is the heart of the vertical dimension of praise. Other believers are the joyful participants with us in whole-hearted praise, but our focal point is the Lord Jesus. We have the Spirit to fill us with all the fullness of God in our praise.

We have the *content* of our praise in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. We have the *object* of our praise in our Lord Jesus. We have the *origin* of our praise in our hearts.

To “sing” means to make melody with the vocal chords. The verb “to make music” is *psallo*, from which our word “psalm” is derived. It can mean playing a stringed instrument or singing praise to the accompaniment of a musical instrument. The Lord here specifically means the Lord Jesus. It is the word *kurios*, which is used in the New Testament in reference to Jesus. These are pretty straightforward and easy to understand. Cognitively we can understand that we are to make a melody with our vocal chords, perhaps with the accompaniment of a musical instrument, and that we sing that melody to Jesus, our Lord.

But what does it mean to sing and make music “with your heart”? “Heart”, as it is referred to here, means the areas of the inner self, including: the volition, the mind, the desires, etc., including the faculty of the intellect. Jesus, speaking in

Luke 6:45 said "the good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." According to Strong's lexicon the heart is the "centre and seat of spiritual life. It is the fountain and seat of the thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, and endeavors. It is the center of the understanding. It is the faculty and seat of the intelligence".

So there is certainly in Paul's mind the exhortation to give everything we've got when we sing to the Lord. When he says "singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart", he is referring to everything in us, our whole being. We are to leave nothing behind in our worship to Him. We bring Him all that we are.

In Psalm 62 verse 8 we read "trust in Him at all times, o people, pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us." In Psalm 86:12 it says "I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever." And again, in Psalm 105, verse 3 we find this, "Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice!" We bring our Spirit-filled heart to God and pour out praise at His feet.

Woe to us if we are not heart-engaged in our praise and worship of God the Father and God the Son! Remember the chilling words of Jesus in Matt. 15:8? "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me."

It seems clear from this that lip-service worship, empty-hearted worship, vain worship is not spirit-filled worship. A heart filled with the Holy Spirit is a heart full of praise. While that praise will sometimes be quiet and may not have outward expression in song, it will most often be a demonstrated praise.

We can't divide verse 19 into two separate parts. There is not the idea that we address *each other* with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, but then in some

separate way we "sing and make melody" to the Lord. The whole verse refers to the worship context of singing. We sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. We sing them with our whole hearts to God. We sing them with each other, so that we may all be encouraged and built up.

In our worship together it is both horizontal and vertical. Our praise is God-ward, vertical praise, but it is done in the midst of horizontal relationships. There is a sense then, that our heart is engaged directly with the Lord while our voice, being in the presence of other humans is the means by which we engage with them.

Here is an example of that "both-and" relationship, the horizontal and vertical dimensions in a familiar song. We sing "O worship the King all glorious above, and gratefully sing His wonderful love. Our shield and defender the ancient of days, pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise." Those words are definitely a call to worship! We are singing to each other, exhorting each other to worship our King.

But what is the heart-worship going on here? What can be the heart-originated worship going on here? What is the "melody and song of the heart" when we use words that seem horizontal in their direction?

When I sing this song, lead this song, I am indeed exhorting the congregation to "worship the King". And to support my case for the exhortation, I list in song attributes that are worthy of praise: his glory, his wonderful love, his eternity, etc. But at the same time, in my heart-song to him I am *praising* Him directly for those same attributes. "Lord, Ancient of Days, I praise you that you are a glorious King. I am thankful for your wondrous love. I sing with a grateful heart for your wonderful love. You are my shield and my defender. You are in heaven in your glory and all the saints and angels of heaven sing your praise."

Heart-engaged worship that blesses the Lord and encourages others involves all of our being: our mind, our heart, our body, and our spirit, which is led by and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Here are beneficial habits to increase your capacity for whole-hearted praise.

1. Before you come into the presence of the Lord to praise Him, confess your sins. You are coming into the presence of a Holy God, the Holy of Holies is his dwelling place. Don't be casual in your approach to God. Even if your body is wearing blue jeans, your heart attitude towards sin can never be casual.
2. Praise Him in the quiet of your heart before you come to the corporate gathering. My time with the Lord on Sunday morning, usually beginning around 5 a.m. is one of the sweetest of the week because I know that very soon I will be gathered with His people to praise Him. My heart is engaged with him quietly in that moment, but the anticipation of bursting forth in song is so propelling to my praise. (Maybe that's why I jump around so much!)
3. Hum a little, sing a little, then sing a lot. Singing is a directed activity of the voice and doesn't just happen automatically. Hum a little tune in the morning, sing a little song later, then be ready to burst forth with song when you gather with the saints.

We have seen that Spirit-filled praise has a horizontal dimension in our exhortation and encouragement of other believers. This horizontal-ness can only take place, though, in the context of vertical-dimension worship. A heart that is disengaged from God worships in vain and is of no benefit to other believers.

What is the third dimension of praise? What is that dimension that gives it depth and life? *Thankfulness*

3. The Continual Dimension of Praise

In verse 20, we are told to give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How can we underestimate the necessity of a thankful heart in praise? How can a heart that is filled with the Holy Spirit be *un-thankful*?

Before turning to the positive exhortations towards thankfulness that are so numerous in Scripture, let's look one of the most frightening descriptions of a *non-worshiper*. Look at Romans 1. In verse 18 it says "for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." In verse 21 we find that these ungodly and unrighteous men "knew God, but did not honor him as God or give thanks to him..."

In 2 Tim. 3:2 in the list of the attributes of godlessness we again find ingratitude: "For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy" etc.

An ungrateful heart is not a worshiping heart. An ungrateful, unthankful person is not a worshiper of God. Remember again the words of Jesus, "this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me." So you can sing praises with your lips, but if your heart is not thankful, your heart is far from the Lord. Your "worship", if you can call it worship, is in vain.

When we think of thanking someone for something, it is generally because of gratitude for personal benefits that we have received. So we can instantly turn thankfulness back to selfishness as the focus comes back to us and not God. Paul's intent in this thanksgiving, though, is more rightly understood as praise.

Thankfulness becomes selfishness if we do not immediately reflect the glory back to the giver of the benefit received. We enjoy the gift, yes. We delight in the gift, yes. But biblical, God-honoring thankfulness immediately and continually turns the focus back to God.

We can perhaps more easily grasp this concept when we think of the frequent pairing together of "praise" and "thanksgiving" in Scripture. Psalm 100 says "enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!". Psalm 69:30 reads "I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify Him with thanksgiving." Another picture of praise and thanksgiving being joined together is in Ezra chapter 3, at the celebration of the foundation-laying of the temple. "And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, 'For He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever'. (Did you happen to notice all three dimensions of praise there? They sang "responsively", thus addressing one another. They sang praise to the Lord. Their praise resounded with thanksgiving.)

I am not saying that this attitude of thanks is limited to the event of corporate praise. That is not what Paul is saying either. We are to give thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of Jesus our Lord. It is God's will for us to be a thankful people. Remember 1 Thess. 5:16-18? "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." The NASB says "in everything give thanks". Both senses are included here in Ephesians: give thanks always and for everything.

I am saying, though, that praise without thanksgiving is not praise. Thankfulness is the expression of a humble heart. Only in humility is our praise acceptable to God. Remember and learn from the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:
⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."¹

How can you cultivate an attitude, a heart of continual thankfulness?

1. Remember the blessings you have in Christ. Just within the book of Ephesians there are numerous passages that should spark thankfulness in us. In chapter 1 we see that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ; we have been chosen by God; we have redemption, forgiveness, riches of grace; we have an inheritance in Christ; we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit. And all of that just in the first part of chapter 1!! I haven't even mentioned our hope in Christ, the immeasurable greatness of God's power that works within us, and so on. Just the beginning of chapter 2 should cause a bursting forth of tears of gratitude and thankfulness and praise!
2. Make a list of all the practical blessings that you have right now. This could start with your spouse, if you are married, your children, if you have

¹ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Lk 18:9–14). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

children, the friends that you have, the brothers and sisters in the Lord who love you and encourage you, your church and your ministry. You could also list tangible blessings, such as your house, your car, your clothes, food to eat, and so on. Remember the old hymn? "Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your blessings, see what God has done."

3. Make a point of being verbally thankful several times each day to someone you encounter. Again, those words of thanks should start at home. Start by telling your spouse how much you appreciate things that they do. There are many benefits you receive from your spouse. Make the opportunity to thank them. You receive the benefit, but they receive the glory. If you are not married express thankfulness to those around you who are in your life: friends, co-workers, co-laborers in ministry. Thankfulness is a flower that blooms in the garden of habit, and the garden only prospers through the cultivation of discipline.

So we see that the dimension of continual thankfulness is the third dimension to our praise. This continual thankfulness gives our praise depth and meaning beyond the words that we sing, even if we are attempting to sing them with earnestness, even if we are attempting to sing them for the benefit of others.

But lest our humility in thankfulness become a false humility, look at what Paul says in verse 20. "Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*". We come with our praise and thanksgiving to God through the merit and mediation of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus, and only through Jesus, that we can even come into the presence of God. Only through Christ's finished work on the cross can we "enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise."

O sinner, there is no merit in your praise to God today apart from Christ. You may enjoy the songs, even feel your spirit lifted and refreshed as you sing. Such is the nature of music that it can minister to us in this way. But you are not bringing God-honoring praise apart from Christ. Others will not benefit from your words of praise to God, your statements of truth about him, your encouraging expressions and so on, except that they be offered through the merit and mediation of Jesus. Come to Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, for new life, for a new heart that can truly worship God through the completed work of Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.

Three-dimensional praise is ultimately Trinitarian praise, isn't it? Our horizontal dimension of praise that is an encouragement and exhortation to other believers; our vertical dimension of praise to the Lord from our heart; our continual dimension of praise to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ are all done through the continual filling of the Holy Spirit. May he fill us afresh today, for His glory and our good.