

How Should We Sing?

Hercules Collins (d. 1702)

Carefully updated for modern readers.

1. ***With understanding*** (1Co 14:15). As we must pray, so we must sing. We must be guided not only by the tune, but by the words of the psalm—the matter more than the manner. Otherwise, this would be more the work of a professional singer than a Christian. Regarding this, one cries out, “Away with the bellowing of the Papists [Roman Catholics], who sing in an unknown tongue.” God will not understand us in this service when we understand it not ourselves.
2. We must sing ***with zeal and affection***. Love is the fulfilling of the law. It is a notable saying of Augustine: “It is not crying sounds, but loving sounds in the ears of God, that makes the music” (see Isa 5:1).
3. We must sing ***with grace*** (Col 3:16). It is grace, not nature, that sweetens the music. One well notes that grace is the root of true devotion. God will not hear sinners when they pray, no, nor when they sing. They make a noise like a cracked string of a lute or viol. The raven only croaks; it is the nightingale that sings. The singing of wicked men is but disturbance, not obedience. The saints above sing their hallelujahs in glory, the saints below must sing their psalms with grace.
4. We must sing ***with spiritual joy***. Singing is the triumphant gladness of a gracious heart. We must sing, as David danced before the Ark, with shouting and rejoicing (2Sa 6:13).
5. We must sing ***with faith***. Faith puts a pleasantness upon every duty (Heb 4:2). We must bring faith always to Christ’s table, or else as Augustine says, “If faith be asleep, Christ is asleep.” Faith carries on this ordinance of singing in such a way that it may be accepted of God.
6. We must sing ***with excited grace*** [stimulated to full exercise]—not only grace habitual, but excited and active. We must stir up the grace in us (1Ti 4:14) and cry out as David, “Awake, love; awake, delight” (see Psa 57:8). The [weights on a] clock must be pulled up before it can guide our

time. God loveth active grace in duty, that the soul should be ready trimmed when it presents itself to Christ in any worship.

7. We must sing *in the Spirit*, as well as pray in the Spirit (1Co 14:15-16; Jude 1:20). The Spirit must breathe as well as grace act. One says they are called “spiritual songs” in relation to their origin [from the Spirit]. The Spirit excites and completes the soul to this holy service. Thus in Ephesians 5:18, he exhorts to be filled with the Spirit, and so calls us to sing spiritual songs as the effect of this fullness. This wind must fill our organs before we can make any music. [The Spirit] is called [wind] in John 3:8.

8. We must take great care to *keep our hearts* while about this work. One observes, “Without this we may please men with the artificial smoothness of the voice, and displease God with the odious impurity of the heart.”

9. Neglect not *preparatory prayer* for singing, as well as for other duties. Jehovah is the great Harmonist, Who must put every heart in tune, screw up every peg of affection, and strain every string of meditation (Pro 16:1).

10. Labor to *see your interest in Christ* clearly, when you go about this work. If we are not in Christ, we are certainly out of tune. It is Christ Who must make this service acceptable as well as all others. Here the altar must sanctify the gift. Christ perfumes the prayers of saints (Rev 5:8), and He must articulate [give distinct expression to] their singing. Though we have Esau’s garments, He can give us Jacob’s voice. If we are in Him, He can raise our hearts to a pleasing elevation.

11. Let us sometimes raise our hearts into *holy contemplations*. Let us think of the music of the Bride Chamber. There shall be no cracked strings, displeasing sounds, harsh voices—nothing to abate our melody. There shall be no willows to hang our harps upon (Psa 137:2). In the Bride Chamber, there shall be no sorrow to interfere. When we sing the Song of the Lamb, there shall be no grief to jar the harmony—for which Day let us all pray.

