

# Is Singing a Spiritual Gift?

Tim Conway | *illbehonest.com*

## Question:

**Tim:** So, she asks: "Is singing mentioned as a spiritual gift in the Bible?" And then she goes on: "Why are some singers regarded highly among people? I can understand that they sing perfect and sweet, but instead of being directed to Christ..." And she's saying this from her vantage point. Instead of these singers directing me to Christ, she says, "They make me feel so inadequate - listening to and watching Christian music artists, maybe because I'm not as perfect a singer as they are. If Christ is someone's motivation, why would they want to shoot a video of themselves and upload it to YouTube and get appreciated and all, all in the name of glorifying Christ? Aren't they glorifying themselves instead of glorifying Christ in doing so? Or am I just jealous?"

## Discussion

That's hard for me to know what somebody else's heart is, but I do think that there's some revealing things that she puts forth in this. And one of the things here is this has to do with music. And music can be sensitive. Music can be a big issue. Music has been a big issue with certain people in our church and I know that it can become an issue because you get churches where that's the focus. You get churches where there's performances. You get people that do desire attention for themselves. And then of course, you get the problem with bad music, bad lyrics. Anyways, it can be really a sensitive area.

But let's hit on music from some of the standpoints from which she is asking questions. What do you think? Is singing a spiritual gift?

**(from the room)** No, but it could be a variation of the gift of encouragement perhaps.

**Tim:** Does everybody agree with that answer that no it's not a spiritual gift? Well, let's even do this. What is a spiritual gift? Take a shot. It's a tool.

**(from the room)** It builds up the body.

**Tim:** It builds up the body. So, what's one of the things we can say right off about a gift? What is a gift?

**(from the room)** God-given.

**Tim:** Right, something God gives you. Okay, so it's a God-given tool that is used for the upbuilding of the church. And here's the thing about gifts, you don't expect everybody in the church to have it. And yet, would you not agree with this? There are some gifts specifically called out in Scripture that all Christians are expected to manifest. Can you think of any?

**(from the room)** Love.

**Tim:** Where do you see "love" ever identified as a spiritual gift? Well, here's the thing. Four primary passages in Scripture where we get gifts described. Can you think of where those are? It's chapter 4's and two chapter 12's. Romans 12. 1 Corinthians 12. 1 Peter 4 and Ephesians 4. Now, love is never one of them. Love is a fruit of the Spirit. But it's never stated to be specifically a spiritual gift. The ones I'm thinking of would be like this: Mercy. Is there a special gift of mercy? Yes, there is. Is there a special gift of faith? There is, and yet, would we be expected - blessed are the merciful - I mean, mercy seems like it's a general description of Christians as well as a particular gift. So there are some things in the Christian life that we would say - and I'm saying all this because we're thinking about singing. I'm just wondering, because none of these passages really gives an exhaustive list of gifts and I don't think that God ever intends 1 Corinthians 12 to be an extensive list of every single gift. I would just wonder this: is it possible that some people have a gift of singing and yet we're all commanded to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to one another.

But what would be that thing that would be most difficult to separate over against spiritual gifts? What is the thing that might get confused for a spiritual gift? A talent. An ability. A natural ability. But see, even there, that's difficult because you know what? You could find a guy that was a teacher and was a great teacher, and then he gets saved and now he's a great teacher in the church. And it's like, okay, was that just a natural ability? Or did that become a God-given gift? Sometimes that can be hard to discern that. I would ask this question: Was somebody like Charles Wesley specifically gifted and very much a gift to the church of God and used as a tool or a channel to funnel God's grace to God's people? Or the Gettys? I mean, most of the time, these prolific songwriters and hymn writers, they also were musical. They were musically talented. I remember reading about the First Great Awakening in that biography of George Whitefield and I believe it was that volume - maybe it was another one I read - but they were talking about those early days after Wesley wrote "And Can It Be," and they were talking about all those guys that were young and coming to the Lord and they were all excited and on fire, and Wesley had written that song and they'd talk about them being out on the roads and singing that song.

So here's the thing. Let's think biblically. One of the places I would go is back into the days of David. And you may remember David appointed some singers. You remember those guys? There were some that were appointed very specifically. Somebody look at 1 Chronicles 25. I'm going to have you read 3 different passages from there. Just while you're looking for it, I think it's safe to say that probably where Pedro's coming from is okay, singing is not a spiritual gift, and if I were to ask him why, he likely would have responded with: Well, because it's not found in any of those four passages that I referenced as being the primary points of reference in the New Testament where we're going to find spiritual gifts described. And that would be true. It's not there. But I also don't believe that any of those are necessarily extensive lists of spiritual gifts. So I don't think that the fact that singing isn't there doesn't automatically rule it out.

But here's something that's interesting: When you go back into the Old Testament - somebody read 1 Chronicles 25:1.

**(from the room)** "David, together with the commanders of the army, set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals."

**Tim:** Okay, now there's three men who are named there. Do you recognize those names? Asaph, Jeduthun, and what was the other one? Heman. Do you recognize those from anywhere? Yeah, those three names are found in the introductions to various Psalms. Now, Asaph more than the other two, but the other two are mentioned too in the introduction to some of the Psalms. Now, these guys - it's very interesting - they prophesied with the lyre. Now we would not argue that prophesying is one of the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament. And these guys prophesied with the lyre.

Now if you're still there in 1 Chronicles, somebody read verse 3. Anybody have it?

**(from the room)** 25:3? **Tim:** Yeah. "As for Jeduthun, from his sons: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiah, Shimei, Hashabiah and Mattithiah, six in all..."

**Tim:** Don't worry about those so much. It's what they did. Keep going.

**(from the room)** "...under the supervision of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the Lord."

**Tim:** They prophesied and they did what?

**James:** They praised the Lord.

**Tim:** This is very interesting. These are the guys that are appointed to - even the idea of what prophesying means in its entirety, that's been really wrestled with by lots of people - the meaning of prophesying. This is very interesting. And in all my own studies and thoughts of prophesying, I don't think I've really considered how it fits into singing.

But okay, now go down to v. 7. Somebody read v. 7. "Along with their relatives all of them trained and skilled in music for the Lord they numbered 288."

**Tim:** Now look, there were special people who were trained and skilled in music. Now here's the thing: They were skilled. I recognize you could ask the question: does skill sound more like a talent and an ability? Or does it sound like a spiritual gift? But you have to remember what they're doing. They're doing service in and around the temple. This is singing that has to do with the worship and praise of the living God. These are guys that David is appointing. And yes, they

have this skill, but there are certain men that are very particularly skilled to do this. And I guess here's the thing, whether it is an ability, a skill, a talent, or it's something we might more distinctly put into the realm of a spiritual gift, don't they all come from the Lord?

And I would say this, you have a parable of the talents. Now we recognize in Matthew 25, the parable of the talents - talent is not being used like we were just using it. Talent, ability, skill. That's not what it means there. Talent there has to do with a measure of weight specifically used in weighing precious metals. But, what does it represent? Okay, you've got these servants. And you have these talents bestowed by their master. And so, so much is given to one. You have 10 given to one. You have 5 given to one. You have 1 given to one. What does that represent? Would you say: It only can represent spiritual gifts? You remember, what the one guy has, he buries in the sand. It's that which should have been invested to bring his master a return. Now look, are any of us going to say: That can't have to do with something we would simply identify as a talent or a skill. If He's given me a skill to do something, shouldn't I use that so that He gets a return? Even if I have an ability - what are natural abilities that somebody could have and use when they become a Christian? I mean, if somebody's a mechanic and they want to work on Christian's cars and do it for free, (incomplete thought). Now you could perhaps ascribe some spiritual gifts to that. You could say they have the gift of service. Right? That's one of them. But again, you're kind of melding together. So I don't know that we always want to be so specific in trying to make a division between these two.

I would say this. Okay, consider music. Do we just throw anybody over there at the piano? No. Because the reality is if you threw me over there, our singing time would be wretched. I mean, I would not do it. It wouldn't be good. It would be bad because I wouldn't do anything because I can't do anything. I mean, I could probably plunk out Amazing Grace with two fingers, but that would not be good. And so you can call that what you want to call it, like having a songwriter's or a hymn writer's ability. For somebody to come along in history like an Isaac Watts, a man like that has a gift. We could wrestle all day long. What do you call it? Do you call it a spiritual gift? Do you call it not a spiritual gift? I think the thing we have to recognize is just like in David's days when you had these three men that were specifically picked and their sons, these men were specifically said to be skillful in this. So I think we have to recognize that reality. Since we are called to sing songs, hymns, and spiritual songs in the church, then unless you're going to take - and I don't believe that there's any biblical reason to take this position... Charles Spurgeon - do you all know the position he took on instruments? None. Nada. Not at all. (incomplete thought) I think maybe it had to do perhaps with some excesses in his day. But, he doesn't get that from Scripture. When you hear him try to argue it if you read some of his writings, it's not really convincing. And I think one of the big problems is that the New Testament doesn't really get into instruments, but the Old Testament certainly does. You have lots of different instruments that were used to praise the Lord in the Old Testament. In fact, right there, those three men. They were praising the Lord. They were prophesying as they strummed their lyre. I believe that's a stringed instrument. So, I don't believe Spurgeon's position on that was right.

And the reality is I like to have instrumental accompaniment when we sing. I think it's helpful. I think it's helpful to keep us in time. I think it's helpful especially when the truth is we have a lot of first-generation Christians. (incomplete thought) Our singing is joyful. Our singing is joyful, but the reality is we don't have the most skilled singers. Right? Maybe people in our church don't even recognize that. I love worshiping at our church. I think it's joyful. I think there's lots of heart in it. But if you've ever been in a church - like Kyle White is a singer, and he grew up with a big family. I forget how many children they had in it, but they would harmonize the songs. So Kyle brings some of that to the singing out at Community, which we don't do that. Every once in a while, we'll be singing and my father-in-law - very musically inclined - he's over there doing this harmonization. Sometimes Ruby will do it. So I hear it out of my right ear as I'm singing. (incomplete thought)

So you get people that are skillful. That's my whole point. Whether you want to call it a spiritual gift or not, I'll tell you what, to be able to write hymns like Charles Wesley wrote, that's a gift.

**James:** Real fast, to make a distinction, are you saying the actual writing of the music or playing an instrument?

**Tim:** Well, a lot of times those guys - the guys that wrote music did play instruments or they at least could come up with melodies because it seems like when Wesley penned "And Can It Be?" he either found a tune or he put together a tune. And I don't know if it's the same one we sing it by. I mean, this far removed, who knows? Probably they had a different tune. But a lot of times, like you find with the Gettys, a lot of those songs that they write are original with them and they write the music to it and they sing it as well. So a lot of times you get guys like Mozart and Beethoven and they typically wrote the music and they played the piano. But I'm just saying, look, however you want to categorize this, you know that when it comes to music, some people whether you want to call it a skill, an ability, or a spiritual gift - if you simply take the base definition of what a spiritual gift is and you're looking at something, a capacity, a God-given capacity to impart grace to others, to have God's grace channel through you, again, I would go back to the teaching thing. (incomplete thought)

It's kind of like Craig. Before Craig was saved or even after he was, he kind of had this voice where he would do sports announcing. He told me when he was growing up he'd be playing around throwing the football in the yard and he'd be like announcing. He actually has announced football games. Then you've got Jeff. He's a radio announcer. Well, then you save these guys and now they're standing in the pulpit speaking. So are you going to say what is that? Is that a spiritual gift? You would say yes. Well, did they have an ability, a skill before? Some people - like me - I was not a public speaker. This all came when I became a Christian. You know, maybe somebody could say that's more obviously a spiritual gift. It's not something I had when I was lost, or at least not something I exercised and had no desire to exercise and was scared to death of public communication. Anyway, the reality is we recognize some people do have greater capacities when it comes to music. And the reality is that those people can be a

real blessing to the church. And grace can flow through them whether they're song writing or playing an instrument or they've got a voice that they're able to sing really well.

**(from the room)** Are you correlating that the talents are different measures (unintelligible)?

**Tim:** Well, I think the talent is really anything that God gives to us. Whether you want to call it an ability or a spiritual gift or money or whatever it is. It's everything that God has given to us. Who we are, the health we have, the longevity of years that we have. Everything. The home we have, the vehicle we have, the amount of money, the kind of job, the places He allows us to go, the people He puts us in contact with. Every single thing in our life that might be used to bring a return to the Lord. And what's the return He's looking for? Well, obviously, we're to do our works in front of this onlooking world to bring glory to our God. I think that's it. He's given us these things to bring glory to Him. And we need to be mindful of how we use every last thing. Everything is surrendered to Him. The clothes on our back - everything. How we use them. So if you have two tunics, what do you do? You're supposed to give one to the person that doesn't have any. It comes right down to our clothing.

**(from the room)** Have you, I don't know, James 1:17 - I notice that it says "every good and perfect gift..." And then in the Holman Christian it says "every generous act..."

**Tim:** Yeah, that doesn't necessarily mean what we might call a spiritual gift. I think it's everything that God grants us with.

**(from the room)** I was just wondering if there was any difference between good gift and perfect gift? Like those two.

**Tim:** So, you guys can wrestle about what category you really think that this falls into. But, here's the thing, this sister is saying - her big thing is that she's saying when she hears singers who are regarded highly among people, those people make her feel inadequate. See, I would say that when she asks at the bottom: Am I just jealous? When she says that it makes her feel inadequate, I would say yes. She probably is feeling some kind of bad feeling. Whether it's jealousy - if that's the precise word you want to put on it. But here's the thing, if I lament every time I hear a good preacher, not because I'm convicted. When I hear him preach, I get convicted of sin and I need to go repent before the Lord. That's not why I feel bad. I feel bad because he makes me feel inadequate. Now, I think that there is an inadequacy that you can feel that's coupled with a great desire to hear that preacher again. And then there can be an inadequacy that's coupled with a jealousy where I don't want to hear him again. Because there have been certain messages I've heard or certain preachers that I've heard where it was like that was so powerful, that was so overwhelming to me, that was so well done in my estimation that I have walked away thinking why do I even preach? Like when there's guys out there that can preach like that, why should I? Could I want to preach like that? (incomplete thought)

Did you ever see Geoff Thomas on "Logic on Fire" when he's talking about how he just wishes after hearing Lloyd-Jones preach all those years, he says you get done on the Lord's Day and he said, yes, your doctrine was right and everything, but you're missing that something that Lloyd-Jones had. Well, I feel that all the time. I want that life, that power. But see that doesn't lead me to despise Lloyd-Jones. That only makes me want to hear him all the more. When I hear a really powerful message by Paul Washer or John Piper... I don't get done and say: Oh, I despise those guys because they're such good preachers. It's actually like: No, don't stop - when you really get that sense. So I think there's a good and there's a bad.

See, I think the same thing that applies to singers could be applied to preachers. Why would any preacher want to be on the Internet? Who could be applauded and attention could be given to them? I think the same thing works for singers as it does for preachers. Could somebody desire in a very worldly fashion, a very selfish fashion, desire to get prominence? This happens all the time whether preachers or songwriters, people are looking for prominence.

One of the problems with music can be the fact that it seems like in the New Testament the purpose for singing is that the people collectively are speaking to one another and teaching one another through doctrinally rich songs. And I don't see anything even when you had Old Testament guys that were appointed to lead in the singing, I don't believe that in Scripture you find anywhere where God's people simply are sitting being performed to. See, I hate that. I don't think that's any good. Now I recognize if you hear somebody that's up there, that doesn't mean that I've never gone to anything where I've watched somebody perform. But when it comes to worship in the church, I guess that's one of the things I'm afraid of is this performance mindset. And we as a church, we as leaders in the church, have sought to steer away from that all the time. We don't even have a song leader that stands up front. And we try to put our instruments off to the side so that when we're singing, our eyes are basically on the truth. They're on the words. That's whether you have a songbook or whether you have it projected on an overhead. But I've been to these big conferences where they have a leadership team, a praise and worship team - see I hate that too because you get that mindset in the church. Well, we're really only worshipping when we're singing. So you get churches that their singing becomes longer and longer and their preaching becomes shorter and shorter. One of the things any time you see that there's revival is the preeminence of the Word. It takes center stage. That was one of the big things during the Reformation. All the pulpits in the Catholic churches - and they're still like that, they're off to the side. The Reformers and the Puritans brought that pulpit back to the center. Why? Not to put a man in the center. To put this in the center. That was the big issue. It wasn't to pump up Calvin or Luther. It was to bring back the Word to center stage.

So those are some of the things I guess about music. I've had a pastor friend say to me, he said if you look in churches where they have ministers of music, he just pointed out those guys fall into sin - as much as we have a problem with pastors falling into sin, he was just making the observation those guys fall into sin far more. What was the point of that? What conclusion do you draw from such a thing? I guess what I would draw from it is probably most churches are putting guys in position because of their ability rather than their moral caliber. And I think that's

problematic. That has been one of the things that's been a concern to us as a church is not just what abilities do the people have, but what is their moral caliber as well.

**(from the room)** What is a moral caliber?

**Tim:** Where they're at in their purity. Where they're at in their Christlikeness. What you don't want to do is take - we saw this down in (redacted). Their song leader - they had a guy that was very gifted. But you know he had to be removed because there was just gross sin in his life. That's the big problem. You're putting people who can play an instrument really well, or they've got a voice that they can sing like an angel, but their life is more like the devil. So you put these guys into position and inevitably - especially if you have worship teams that are full of men and women, so they're spending lots of time together and they're practicing together. You end up with something a whole lot like the world where you've got bands that are coming together and they're practicing, and you've got men and women. There's just all manner of debauchery.

**(from the room)** It makes me think do the elder do that with our church?

**Tim:** Hm?

**(from the room)** I said did our elders do that with our church group that plays every third Sunday?

**Tim:** Well, we have basically as far as that little ensemble over there is concerned, what we have definitely made a point with them is that these people need to be members of the church. We're not going to have lost children and non-members over there. If people are in our church in good standing... but they're typically running those people by us. They added Alex on bass guitar. That was run by us.

The thing about music too is it really triggers emotions. Now, I know speakers, preachers can really deal with people's emotions too. Singing really has that capacity. You get these churches that they sing the same choruses over and over and over.

I remember when I was first saved and I went to this Bible church up in Kalamazoo. It's like they'd always get to the end of the sermon and some guy would begin to turn the knob and start putting the music in. Like the guy's getting ready for this call to come to Christ and the music would just begin to creep in and slowly come up. And he'd get these real soft, enchanted tones. "Only believe, only believe..." I remember that. I remember just being so ready to explode. I just wanted to yell: No!! Repent and believe! But anyway. (unintelligible)

So, I guess one of the things about whether it's a gift or whatever it is, it certainly is one of those things that every one of us is called to. And I would just say this, Christianity ought to turn everyone into a singer. The reality is you have Colossians and Ephesians that are saying we should be singing to each other. But the reality is what is singing? Singing is breaking out in



praising the Lord. If we're saved and we're gripped by that reality that our sins have been forgiven and what God has done for us, if that doesn't turn a person into a singer, what possibly can? If there's anything - anything - that I have said to churches, sometimes people will ask: when we start a church, what are some of the things that we really ought to give ourselves to? So I put together a whole list of things that I really think biblically when you start a church - you have a new church plant - things that you ought to give yourselves to. And one of the things I have on there is you remember how in Malachi it says they were offering their blind and their defective offerings. And there's a place there in the first chapter of Malachi where God says: Oh, that there were a man who would shut the doors! Just shut the doors on the temple. Just stop this. And I think the same thing in the church. We need men who are going to stand up and say enough of poor, pathetic singing. If you sang more vigorously to Van Halen when you were lost than you do over the Gospel, then there's something wrong. And so I hate that when you have Christians just mumble when they sing. That is pathetic! That is horrible! What's that?

**(from the room)** Maybe they're not saved?

**Tim:** Well, that could be. But I remember coming down here when I was first working on the AlamoDome and I met John Sytsma and I went to some meetings at Community Baptist Church. And the people sang! I remember going home and telling Craig: Man, they sing! I remember calling him after I moved down here. "Craig, people get saved here!" Up in Michigan, it was so hyper-Calvinistic and dead. It's like the singing just blew me away. That was one of the things I asked leaving Community is: Lord, please allow the singing at Community to follow us. Especially the way it was in the early days when we were in the old building and Pat was pastoring down there. It was overwhelming at times. It was glorious. And I really wanted that to follow us. And I think largely it has. I'm thankful to the Lord for that. But we don't want to sing half-hearted and pathetic to the Lord. So whether you think you have the gift or not, I think even the worst of singers can make a joyful noise unto the Lord. And we're not so out of harmony or off key. And thankfully, all of our musicians drop. Have any of you gone to other churches and tried to sing? Maybe for you ladies it's not that hard, but at a lot of other churches, the songs are so high that I don't know how you guys sing. But it wants to stretch my vocal chords beyond their capacity.

**James:** It's like I can't even sing. (unintelligible)

**Tim:** Yeah, it's really difficult. Anyway. Okay, here's the next one. What time do we have?