

United we sing: Music and community

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In a course on theology and beauty, I ask my students why music has been such a persistent feature of Christian worship across history and cultures. In essay after essay, they tell me that this is because music moves us emotionally. Of course this is true. Music engages our emotions and in this way enriches our worship.

Early Christian writers also recognized music's affective power. Just as often, however, they commended music for its powers of harmony—in both the musical and extramusical sense of that word. Music seemed to them a sounding image of rightly ordered relationships. Ignatius of Antioch writes: "In your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung. . . . [So] become a choir, that being harmonious in love, and taking up the song of God in unison, ye may with one voice sing to the Father through Jesus Christ." For Ignatius, the harmony of believers is not simply a good organizational principle, or even a right behavior to be encouraged. Rather, the harmony of the church is a theological statement. When the church is "in concord," then "Jesus Christ is sung"—the person and character of Jesus are declared. For Ignatius, the church's unity has both a doxological function—it manifests God's glory—and a pedagogical function—it teaches.

This same conviction stands behind Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians:

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (5:18-21)

These references to song come at a climactic moment in the letter. In particular, the command to "be filled with the Spirit" sums up one of the major themes of Ephesians. Throughout the letter Paul urges the community of Christians to embrace their identity as "a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Eph. 2:21-22). In saying this, Paul likens the new community of the church to the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple (and before it the tabernacle) was at the center of the Jewish universe. This was the place on earth where God had chosen to make his dwelling, the place that would be filled with his glory. Paul makes the remarkable claim that the people of God are now the temple—the place on earth filled with God's presence and glory. The multiethnic church, composed of Jew and gentile, is being "built together spiritually" into the dwelling place of God's Holy Spirit. The command to "be filled with the Spirit," then, is not simply an exhortation to individual piety. It is connected to Paul's charge to be "joined together" as the people of God—to be the temple.

It's remarkable how closely Paul connects music to this vital command. The command to "be filled with the Spirit" is bound to five activities that fill out the dimensions of this exhortation: *speaking* to one another in songs, hymns and spiritual songs; *singing*; *making music*; *giving thanks* to the Lord; and *submitting* to one another. Three of the five activities have to do with music, which is extraordinary if we think of singing only in terms of emotion. But if singing is a sounding image of the unified church, the connection makes a great deal of sense. The unified church is—like Jesus—the temple of the Holy Spirit, the place on earth filled with God's glory.

The wonder of the church's unity is that it draws together those who were formerly adversaries and warring parties. The cross of Christ abolishes the hostility that once existed, not only between humanity and God but between human communities. The church bears witness to the Lord who blessed those who cursed him and loved those who were his enemies.

This reconciled community, Paul declares, is the creation of a new humanity. "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it" (Eph. 2:14-16).

The God who created all things (Eph. 3:9) has now created a new humanity (Eph. 2:15) according to the likeness of God (Eph. 4:24). These references to the Genesis creation account reveal the horizon against which Paul understands the church. From Jew and gentile—and in Christ and through the Spirit—God has made a new humanity created in God's likeness. This restored image is a declaration of God's character and glory. Paul writes that it is "through the church" that "the wisdom of God in its rich variety [is] now made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). The unity of the church is a theological statement—a declaration of the wisdom and purposes of God.

Why should Paul associate all of this with singing? First, as I've already suggested, singing together is one way of enacting the unity of the church. As Jew and gentile sang together, the "one body" of the church was no longer an abstraction but became a reality that could be heard.

Second, in its congregational song one could hear the gathered church as a church of Jew and gentile with all of its various regional accents, all the distinctive pronunciations of aristocrats, slaves and free people—male and female voices, young and old, all perceived at once in a single melody. This congregational song is not a metaphor of the socially and ethnically diverse church; it is this church, this body's voice, this body made audible. The church's song is one way that the church and the Spirit announce this unity to one another and to the wider world.

Singing not only enacts the church's unity; it also manifests the distinctive shape of that unity. The new humanity is created out of many; there is indeed "one body and one Spirit" (Eph. 4:3-4). This "one Spirit," however, is the giver of diverse roles and gifts: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Eph. 4:11). Thus the unity in the new humanity maintains the distinctiveness of its members.

Music provides a compelling sounding image of this differentiated unity. Philosopher Roger Scruton observes that when we sing together we hear "simultaneous voices

which are nevertheless also one voice." We might also say that when we sing together we hear one voice that is nevertheless the voice of many. When I sing among others, I hear a voice that is both mine and not mine, a voice that is both in and outside of me. I hear my voice and your voice and this third thing—our voices together.

Singing together also gives us a picture of submission, but one that is winsome rather than oppressive. We have already seen that the command to "be filled with the Holy Spirit" is elaborated by five activities, the first three of which have to do with singing and making music. The fifth is "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." Those who are filled with the Spirit both sing to one another and submit to one another, and within this passage the phrase "submitting to one another" is informed and conditioned by "singing to one another." What a difference it might make if we were to take music as the model of mutual submission between husband, wives, parents, children, slaves and masters—if song were the school we attended to learn this kind of submission!

What kind of mutual submission happens in song? Singers submit themselves to a common tempo, a common musical structure and rhythm. In addition, those who sing surrender to the constraints of a particular melody and harmony, a common key and tonal hierarchy. But these are not oppressive limits. They are limits that facilitate rather than frustrate the participants' intention to sing.

Musical submission also involves genuine participation. It is not and cannot be the silencing of the weaker by a dominant voice. The chorus is a society whose life depends on its members contributing their voices. In a multivoiced harmony, privileging some voices and excluding others does not mean that the louder voices "win." Rather, the harmony as a whole fails.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, music may help us to understand what it means to listen and respond to others. The character of sin is that it is *incurvatus in se*—turned in upon itself. Conversely, living as children of light means attending to and responding to others.

At the most basic level singing together reminds us that there are others in the room—that the people seated to my right and left have voices. In song I participate in the experience of using my voice alongside and in concert with the voices of others. We have all attended musical performances where one poor soul in the choir

makes the shift from fortissimo to pianissimo one note too late. When singing in a group we instinctively avoid such embarrassing moments. If the others in the room are singing softly and slowly, I do so as well. Unremarkable though this may seem, in these instances we indwell a kind of sensitivity and responsiveness to others. And if we have ears to hear, we are reminded that the new humanity in Christ includes voices other than our own—voices of different quality, timbre and register to which we must tune our own song.

Do these descriptions of music bear any meaningful relation to our actual experience of church music? It's one thing to talk about music as the "sounding image of the new humanity," but what about the more mundane—and more contentious—world of choir rehearsals, music committees and choosing songs for Sunday morning? Music seems to split churches more often than it unifies them. Where then is this musical enactment of unity we have been describing?

First, we might note that we could ask similar questions concerning most of the practices of the church. Preaching, the reading of scripture, the sacraments—all of these are good gifts given to the church for its life and health. None, however, infallibly bring about the good for which they are intended. The Lord's Supper is also meant to embody the unity of the church, but like music it has been the source of disunity, debates and divisions. Such failures simply bear witness to the fact—sad but uncontroversial—that we often misuse God's good gifts. That music should be the source of discord is ironic, but it is not an irony unique to music.

Despite this, there are still instances in which music functions within the church in the ways I have described. I'll mention one small example from my own experience—a small example, but one that has stayed with me.

For several years I worked as a minister of music. One of the churches I served during this time had suffered through a series of particularly difficult disagreements about music. I chaired the church's music committee and sat through week after week of tense and unproductive meetings.

One week, feeling as if I had nothing to lose, I suggested that we begin our meeting by singing a couple of hymns together a cappella. After we finished, we went on to have the same discussions, the same disagreements and the same stalemates. But the conversation seemed a little more gracious, the atmosphere a bit more open. Encouraged, I began the next week's meeting with several minutes of singing, and

did so again the following week and the next—each week through the rest of the committee's tenure. No one will be surprised to hear that our problems were not immediately resolved. There was, however, a noticeable change. Our meetings warmed considerably. There was a greater sense of camaraderie, and we became better at listening to one another. We compromised and made slow, steady progress on our disagreements. We came to enjoy our time together and—remarkably—over several months even began to resemble something like a Christian community. No doubt part of the change simply came about as we got to know one another better. Certainly, there were people praying for us, and I believe those prayers were effective. But it seemed to me (and to others on the committee, when we discussed it later) that our singing also had played an important part in bringing about a change. The singing had been not so much "moving" or "inspiring" as instructive.

It is safe to assume that all of the members of that music committee had previously heard Paul's description of the church as the body of Christ. No doubt, if pressed, any of us could have offered a few helpful thoughts on the unity of the church. But as we sang together, we came to understand what unity that might mean and sound like in this room, in the midst of these issues, among these people with these voices. We all would have affirmed the wisdom of Paul's command: "Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ." But with each week's opening hymns, we were forced to rehearse this mutual submission. The truths we had previously understood we began to indwell. Harsh and irritable tones of voice were more quickly revealed as such when set immediately alongside our four-part singing. We seemed to remember more readily that each one around the table had a voice, and that it was best for the whole group if each voice were heard. We discovered that the sound of all of our voices together could be beautiful, not just frustrating. Our singing modeled the kind of community to which God was calling us, and we declared the glory of God a little more faithfully for having listened to the wisdom of song.

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