

## SINGING, IN THE BODY AND IN THE SPIRIT

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### I. WHY SING?

Christians in every era of Church history, in every culture, in every social setting, in every major liturgical tradition have adorned their gatherings with song. In a liturgical universe of extraordinary diversity, music is one of the handful of practices which has been and remains an almost universal feature of Christian worship. One author observes that “three acts, corporate prayer, public reading and corporate singing, form the basic building blocks of corporate worship in all of the traditions.”<sup>1</sup>

Prayer, scripture, and song—at first glance these seem obvious things for Christians to do when they gather together. It seems obvious that worshipping people should address God in prayer. It seems plain that they should attend to the words of God in Scripture. But the special contribution of song is less clear.

“Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous,” writes the psalmist, “it is fitting for the upright to praise him” (Ps 33:1).<sup>2</sup> But why should the people of God be urged to engage in *this particular* activity? Why not, “Dig ditches you saints of his, for the LORD is good!”? Why not, “Do beadwork, you righteous!”; or “Mime to him joyfully O Israel!”? Why, in other words, have so many, in so many cultures and traditions agreed with the psalm writer’s assessment, and found music an especially fitting vehicle for praise?

### II. REASONS *NOT* TO SING

A well-known answer to this question, and one which still finds widespread currency, can be found in Augustine’s *Confessions*. Augustine observes that when sacred words are joined to pleasant music, “our souls [*animos*] are moved and are more religiously and with a warmer devotion kindled to piety than if they are not so sung.”<sup>3</sup> He can bear witness to this power of music in his own life:

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 116.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, scriptural citations are from the NIV.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, X, xxxiii (49) (trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 207.

When I remember the tears which I poured out at the time when I was first recovering my faith, and that now I am moved not by the chant but by the words being sung, when they are sung with a clear voice and entirely appropriate modulation, then again I recognize the great utility of music in worship.<sup>4</sup>

Music moves us. It engages one's soul (Augustine says), or our emotions (we might say). When Christians sing, their hearts are "kindled to piety" with a "warmer devotion" than they otherwise would be. Music may even stir the Christian to tears, as it did Augustine.

However true this may be, it does not take us very far in understanding the distinctive contribution of music. At best, it only pushes our question back one step. Why should music or song "kindle one's soul to piety"? Moreover, we might observe that many things kindle our souls, or arouse and engage our emotions—an embrace, for example, or a favorite meal, or watching a sunrise. Certainly words themselves can move, warm, and stir us (as Augustine the Professor of Rhetoric would have known well). So while music does move us, this alone does not explain the ubiquity of music in Christian worship. Augustine identifies one of those things we value about song. He does not however, tell us why Christians sing.

What is more, at the same time that he commends music, Augustine also suggests reasons why Christians should perhaps not sing. Augustine worries that when he listens to music, "my physical delight [*delectatio carnis*], which has to be checked from enervating the mind [*mentem*], often deceives me when the perception of the senses [*sensus*] is unaccompanied by reason [*rationem*], and is not patiently content to be in a subordinate place."<sup>5</sup> So, he concludes,

I fluctuate between the danger of pleasure and the experience of the beneficent effect, and I am more led to put forward the opinion (not as an irrevocable view) that the custom of singing in Church is to be approved, so that through the delights of the ear the weaker mind may rise up towards the devotion of worship. Yet when it happens to me that the music moves me more than the subject of the song, I confess myself to commit a sin deserving punishment, and then I would prefer not to have heard the singer.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine's ambivalence is profound and sincere. He enjoys music immensely, and has experienced real benefit from it in his Christian life. At the same time, he has two very serious concerns about music, both of which arise from the way in which music appeals to the bodily senses. The first concern is that by appealing to the senses, music might lead one toward sensuality. By pleasing our senses through music, we might grow to be the kind of people who are constantly driven to please our sensual appetites. There is a second concern. Augustine believes that human beings should be led by reason rather than by bodily sense. The body is good according to Augustine,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. X, xxxiii (50) tr. 208.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. X, xxxiii (49) tr. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. X, xxxiii (50) tr. 208.

but it is good in its place;<sup>7</sup> and the place of the body is under the leadership of the intellect. When this arrangement is reversed, we fall into ignorance, error, and sin.

In much the same way, other early Christian writers are cautious in their approval of music.<sup>8</sup> Most recognize the usefulness of psalm singing and congregational song (provided it is a *capella*), and these practices are warmly commended. But their value is identified precisely with their usefulness—they teach doctrine and enable Christians to memorize the words of Scripture. The virtue of song is in the text, not the tune. And so writers such as Athanasius caution singing Christians against attending to the “pleasure of the ear.”

Some of the simple ones among us . . . still think that the psalms are sung melodiously for the sake of good sound and the pleasure of the ear. This is not so. Scripture has not sought what is sweet and persuasive; rather this was ordained to benefit the soul. . . .<sup>9</sup>

And again he writes,

To recite the psalms with melody is not done from a desire for pleasing sound, but is a manifestation of harmony among the thoughts of the soul. And melodious reading is a sign of the well-ordered and tranquil condition of the mind.<sup>10</sup>

Music is welcomed into worship, but it is a qualified embrace. The value of music is as a medium of the text.

We find this same qualified acceptance, and the same concerns, centuries later in the writings of Calvin. Calvin’s commendation of congregational song is even stronger than that of Augustine or Athanasius. Music, he says, has the power to stir cold and lifeless ecclesial convention into vibrant and passionate adoration.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in the *Institutes* he urges Christians to sing. And yet, citing Augustine, he issues the same caution about music and the ear that we have already encountered. “We should be very careful,” he writes, “that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words.”<sup>12</sup> Music is a “most holy and salutary practice”

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Augustine makes this point with special reference to music in his treatise, *De Musica*, VI, iv (especially VI, iv [13]). *De Musica* may be found in *Patrologia Cursus Completus*, Series Latina (ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols.; Paris: Garnier, 1844–1904) 32.1081–1194.

<sup>8</sup> For a helpful sourcebook see, James McKinnon, ed., *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge Readings in the Literature of Music; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Athanasius, *Epistula ad Marcellinum de interpretatione psalmorum* 27; PG XXXVII, 37–40. Cited in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* 52–53.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, *Epistula ad Marcellinum de interpretatione psalmorum* 29; PG XXXVII, 40. Cited in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* 53.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Articles of 1537*: “Certainly at present the prayers of the faithful are so cold that we should be greatly ashamed and confused. The psalms can stimulate us to raise our hearts to God and arouse us to an ardor in invoking as well as in exalting with praises the glory of his name.” Cited in Charles Garside, Jr. “The Origins of Calvin’s Theology of Music: 1536–1543,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 69, part 4 (1979) 10.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, XX, 32 (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 895. My emphasis.

when it is entered into properly, but “such songs as have been composed only for sweetness and *delight of the ear* are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest degree.”<sup>13</sup>

Calvin’s strong overall endorsement of music in worship suggests that these words of warning are not an attempt to diminish the importance of music, but rather arise from a legitimate desire to protect the centrality of the Word. In the same way, others have emphasized the subservient role of music in worship—not from a fear of the senses, but because they have believed passionately in the preeminent position of the scriptural text. In his study of worship Peter Brunner writes, “In the reading of Scripture, the musical tone places itself at the feet of the sacred Word, as in a *proskynesis*, with the utmost humility and renunciation of any claim to importance of its own.”<sup>14</sup> Simon Chan cites Brunner approvingly, maintaining that “Singing is not intended to display the artistry of the singer(s) but to let the subject of the Scripture—God—speak clearly *through the words*.”<sup>15</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes the same point in *Life Together*:

All devotion, all attention should be concentrated upon the Word in the hymn. . . . [W]e do not hum a melody; we sing words of praise to God, words of thanksgiving, confession and prayer. Thus the music is completely the servant of the Word.<sup>16</sup>

All of this can be acknowledged, but it still leaves our question unanswered: Why do we sing? In fact, affirming the importance of the words we sing only sharpens the question. If words are the really important thing, then why not just speak rather than sing them? Why risk distracting the community from that which is central? Including music in worship is particularly risky if Augustine’s concerns are valid. Yes, music may stir our souls, but according to Augustine, it also bears within itself an appeal toward sensuality. It can revive cold hearts and enliven feeble worship, but like any powerful remedy it can kill as well as cure. At the same time that it nudges the mind and spirit toward God, music tugs the body toward lust and carnality. This is the concern of an eighteenth-century Puritan author who stands in the same tradition of Christian thought on music.

Cautions are necessary with respect to Musick and Painting; the fancy is often too quick in them, and the Soul too much affected by the Senses. . . . Should

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 896. My emphasis. Garside characterizes Calvin’s theology of music this way: “The text had first priority always, and melodies had to be created, therefore, which were at all times ‘appropriate to the subject.’ In this sense, then, music had always to be subservient to the text, intensifying every word by means of the peculiar gravity and the majesty of its style, so that uppermost in men’s minds while singing was not the music, but the words, ‘what is sung.’” Garside, “The Origins of Calvin’s Theology of Music” 28.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus* (trans. M. H. Bertram; St. Louis: Concordia, 1968) 272. Cited in Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology* 119.

<sup>15</sup> Chan, *Spiritual Theology* 119.

<sup>16</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (trans. John W. Doberstein; London: SCM, 1954) 43. Bonhoeffer advances some other interesting suggestions about music in this passage, to which I shall return.

Christians squander away so many precious Hours in Vanity, or take Pleasure in gratifying a Sense that has so often been a Traitor to Virtue?<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, if a worshipper attends to the musical sound rather than text which is being sung, then music is a distraction. Or worse still (again, according to Augustine), music may lead the singing Christian to sin, if sense and physical experience are given priority over reason and understanding.

Music would seem to be an awfully hazardous business, then—a dangerous mix. It arouses both spirit and body, and so its benefits are always accompanied by hazards. We might say that according to the writers we have surveyed, music is a good thing—to the extent that we are able to get past the *music* of it. Yes, Christians do sing . . . but perhaps they should not. Or at least, they should sing very carefully indeed—attending to the words, not the music itself. This, it would seem, should particularly be the case where there is some tendency toward irrationality, foolishness, sensuality or sexual immorality.

### III. THE COMMAND TO SING, IN CONTEXT

In Eph 5:19 Paul<sup>18</sup> encourages his readers: “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.” Given the concerns about music already outlined, it is worth considering this exhortation and the context in which it is offered.

Throughout Ephesians Paul depicts the spiritual life in cosmic dimensions, contrasting those who are children of light with those who belong to darkness. The darkness from which the children of light have been rescued is first of all a darkness of ignorance. The lives of those in darkness are marked by foolishness, blindness and lack of understanding. So Paul writes: “You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” (4:17–18). The children of light on the other hand have come to know—literally, they *have learned*—Christ (4:20). “You were *taught* the truth that is in Christ,” Paul continues in 4:21, and again in verse 22, “you were *taught*.” The fruit of the light includes all truth, Paul says in 5:10. Therefore the children of light should find out what pleases the Lord. They should not be unwise, but wise (5:15). Nor should they be foolish, but rather, people who understand what the Lord’s will is (5:17).

The darkness of which Paul speaks is also a moral darkness. Those who are trapped in darkness are characterized by lives of sensual indulgence and immorality. They “have given themselves over to *sensuality* so as to indulge

<sup>17</sup> *The Ladies’ Library, written by a Lady*, pub. Richard Steele, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1732. Cited in Quentin Faulkner, *Wiser Than Despair: The Evolution of Ideas in the Relationship of Music and the Christian Church* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood, 1996) 137.

<sup>18</sup> The authorship of Ephesians is not relevant to my argument, and I shall simply refer to the author as Paul.

in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more" (4:19).<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the children of light are to put off the old nature with its "deceitful desires" (4:22) and to put on the new self of righteousness and holiness (4:24). Chapter 4 verse 25 through chapter 5 verse 2 warns against lying, stealing, malicious talk, and bitterness. Chapter 5:3–7 warns against sexual immorality, impurity, and greed. Light and darkness can have no communion, and so Paul does not warn the believers simply to avoid being *excessively* sensual. Rather, he says, among you there "must not be *even a hint* of sexual immorality"<sup>20</sup> (5:3); they are to "have *nothing to do* with the fruitless deeds of darkness." The ethical injunctions continue to verse 18, where Paul warns against drunkenness and debauchery. None of these sensual excesses should characterize the child of light.

Finally, it is worth noting that this is not simply a *condemnation* of moral and rational darkness. It is a *warning*, and it is a sober warning. The very darkness Paul describes is the darkness in which these Christians once lived and which once lived in these Christians. Paul urges them to put away "your former way of life" (4:22). "You must *no longer* live as the Gentiles do"<sup>21</sup> (4:17), he insists—indicating that his readers once shared the same lifestyle he is denouncing, and suggesting that perhaps they are still living as the Gentiles do.

Finally, it is at the climax of these warnings and exhortations that Paul writes: "Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord" (5:18–19). In other words, to a Christian community surrounded by ignorance and immorality; to a people who were themselves prone to the blindness and indulgence of their former way of life; at the conclusion of a passage warning against irrationality and sins of the flesh—Paul urges singing and music making.

The contrast with the first passages we considered could not be more stark. Paul shares the same broad concerns as Augustine and Calvin, but the recommendation emerging from those concerns is entirely different. To put it very crudely, Augustine says: "Irrationality is bad. Sensuality is bad. Therefore, be careful about music." Paul on the other hand says, "Foolishness is bad. Sensuality is bad. Therefore, you had better sing."

#### IV. THE SPIRIT AND SONG

The context of this exhortation to sing suggests that Paul did not share Augustine's concerns about music. But the passage demands that we say far more than this. Paul's view of music is not simply benign. Rather, he sees music as having a role to play in sanctification. One scholar of church music observes that the NT has relatively little to say about music, aside from "a

<sup>19</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> My emphasis.

stray remark in two of the Epistles about the singing of hymns and spiritual songs.”<sup>22</sup> But this is certainly not a stray remark.

Most of Ephesians 4 and all of Ephesians 5 address what it means to live as children of light, or more conventionally, what it means to live holy lives. Paul gives many commands and instructions, but ultimately men and women are made holy by the Spirit who is called Holy. Therefore Paul’s command in Eph 5:18—“Be filled with the Holy Spirit”—is the culmination of these chapters, both rhetorically and theologically. The passive imperative—“be filled”—is followed by four subordinate participial clauses: (1) *speaking* to one another in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs; (2) *singing* and *making music* in your hearts; (3) *giving thanks* to the Lord; (4) *submitting* to one another.<sup>23</sup> These participles are grammatically dependent upon the verb, and they give substance and content to the command to be filled with the Spirit.<sup>24</sup> And remarkably, two of the four clauses—three of the five participles—have to do with making music. Many commentators simply absorb the exhortations to sing into a general exhortation to worship.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, Paul is encouraging his readers to worship. But if he had wanted only to indicate a relation between the filling of the Spirit and worship in general, he could have done so. Instead, he twice over indicates a link between the Spirit and this *particular means* of worship. Whatever explanations for it we might offer, Paul binds together singing and the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

So how *do* we explain this? Why *music* in particular? Why is song an apt response to sensuality? Why should darkened hearts be met by tuneful voices? I shall propose three answers to these questions, but all of them share a common hypothesis, namely: the children of light are singing people, not *despite*, but *because* music engages body and sense.

1. *The embodying Spirit.* To see why this should be so, we must first do a bit of preliminary work. Men and women are brought from darkness to light—they are made holy—by the Holy Spirit. How then, or where in the human person, does the Spirit carry out this sanctifying work? Much of the

<sup>22</sup> Eric Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith* (London: Collins, 1980) 15. Routley is referring to this passage in Ephesians and the parallel passage in Colossians.

<sup>23</sup> All of the analysis that follows has been informed by fruitful conversations with my colleague Timothy G. Gombis. In particular, I have benefited from his article, “Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit: Ephesians 5:18 in its Epistolary Setting,” *TynBul* 53 (2002) 259–72.

<sup>24</sup> There is some disagreement whether these are participles of means (i.e. “be filled with the Spirit, *by means of* . . .”) or effect (i.e. “be filled with the Spirit, *which will result in* . . .”). For further discussion, see Gombis, “Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit.” In either case, we can say that Paul sees a close and vital relation between being filled with the Spirit and the actions mentioned in verses 19 to 21.

<sup>25</sup> So, for instance, one commentator writes of these verses that the filling of the Spirit “manifests itself in several ways. One is in worship.” Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* (NIBC 10; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984) 264. Andrew Lincoln, however, rightly observes that the principal focus of the first participial clause (“speaking to one another in songs, hymns and spiritual songs”) is not the praise of God. Rather, in this clause, the believers are instructed to address *one another* in song. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1990) 345.

theological tradition contends that the work of the Spirit takes place in spite of—or at best, above—our bodies. The classic Christian hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*, begins this way:

CREATOR SPIRIT, by whose aid  
The world's foundations first were laid,  
Come, visit every pious mind;  
Come, pour thy joys on human kind;

The hymn continues,

Refine and purge our earthy parts,  
But O, inflame and fire our hearts,  
Our frailties help, our vice control;  
Submit the senses to the soul,  
And, when rebellious they are grown,  
Then lay thy hand, and hold them down.<sup>26</sup>

The biblical tradition however, does not limit or even focus the redemptive activity of the Holy Spirit on the “mind” (“Come, visit every pious mind”). Rather, the Holy Spirit of God is also revealed as the incarnating Spirit—the One who creates, vivifies, and restores bodies.<sup>27</sup>

In the valley of dry and decaying bones the LORD tells Ezekiel, “I will make *ruach*,”<sup>28</sup> that is, the breath or Spirit of God, “enter you and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put *ruach* in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD” (Ezek 37:5–6). Here is the Spirit of the LORD at work, not delivering humanity from their bodies, but bringing dead and decaying bodies to full and vigorous life—putting living flesh on dry bones.

We see this same incarnating work of the Spirit in the Gospels. Luke tells us that it is by the Spirit that Jesus is made flesh (Luke 1:35). Moreover, the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus is not one by which people are delivered from their bodies, but again and again, one in which broken and decaying bodies are restored and made whole. Similarly, in Romans, Paul says that the Spirit is active in bringing new life, both to Christ's physical body and to the mortal body of the Christian: “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who lives in you” (Rom 8:11).

<sup>26</sup> Attributed to Charlemagne, translated by John Donne. *Hymns of the Christian Church*. Vol. XLV, Part 2. The Harvard Classics (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001), <http://www.bartleby.com/45/2/113.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Thomas A. Small, *Reflected Glory: The Spirit in Christ and Christians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), esp. 119–33; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), esp. 83–98; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), esp. 70–88.

<sup>28</sup> Here and in the rest of the verse, the NIV renders *ruach* as “breath.”



The Augustinian tradition we have considered contends that growth in the spiritual life means directing one's attention away from the body, upward toward the mind and the soul. The biblical tradition however, demonstrates that the Holy Spirit works to bring the whole person, body and soul, to life and wholeness.

I return then to the question previously raised—and the question with which I began: Why music? Why should Paul place such emphasis on the role of music in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit? My first proposal is that music is one way in which the Holy Spirit brings the life of sense and embodied experience from darkness into the light.

2. *Bringing the body to light.* In Ephesians Paul uses not only darkness but metaphors of estrangement to speak of life without Christ. He writes that once, we “were separate from Christ, excluded . . . foreigners. . . . But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” “Consequently,” Paul says “you are no longer foreigners and aliens” (2:12–13, 19) but have access to the Father though the Son, by the Spirit. A sense-denying spirituality leaves at least half of our humanity in the darkness, alienated from God. Not only the mind, but the body and the senses are to be brought out into the light. It would seem then that the sensualist, the one who has abused body and sense, more than anyone needs to have body and sense engaged by the Spirit. In songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, the world of bodily experience is enlisted in praise, re-defined doxologically, and reoriented toward the worship of God and the benefit of the community. The senses are not held down, as in Charlemagne's hymn, but by the Spirit, lifted to God in song.

3. *Learning to respond.* We have said that the Holy Spirit brings life to mortal bodies, making dead and unresponsive flesh sensitive and animate. In his book, *The Giving Gift*, Tom Smail says that humanity has fallen into unresponsiveness, and that the work of the Spirit is to enable people “to relate with sensitivity to the created order” and to one another.<sup>29</sup> This is in fact what we see in Ephesians. In verse 18, Paul says that those in darkness are separated from God and lost in ignorance “*due to the hardening of their hearts.*”<sup>30</sup> He continues in verse 19, “*Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality.*”<sup>31</sup> *Young's Literal Translation* renders the verse: “*who, having ceased to feel, themselves did give up to lasciviousness.*”<sup>32</sup> Sensuality, according to Paul and contrary to Augustine, does not arise from over-active, but from deadened senses. The sensual have, both literally and metaphorically, lost their senses. It is the alcoholic who is least able to appreciate the wine he drinks. It is the lecher, the playboy, who is

<sup>29</sup> Tom Smail, *The Giving Gift: The Holy Spirit in Person* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994) 175.

<sup>30</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> My emphasis.

least able to perceive and respond to the beauty of his lovers. The work of the Spirit, then, is to remake us from *sensual* people into *sensible* people.

*Sensitivity and responsiveness to the created order and to other human beings*—this characterizes the Holy Spirit’s work among the children of light. It is also an apt description of what happens and what is required when we sing and make music well. As we sing together we attend to the activity of our own bodies in making sound, and we regard and respond to our own song as we hear it resonate in the space around us. We hear and attune ourselves to the sound of others’ voices. We respond not only to people, but to the physical qualities of the sound we are creating with others and the physical and acoustical properties of the space in which we sing. Moreover, we submit ourselves together to a tempo, a pattern of melody and rhythm, and we respond dynamically to the shape and movement of our musical interaction. Roger Scruton argues that hearing music *as* music means moving in sympathy with the imagined life in the sounds, hearing a series of musical tones as gesture and movement in phenomenal space. “In responding to a piece of music,” he writes, “we are being led through a series of gestures which gain their significance from the intimation of community.”<sup>33</sup> And again, “through melody, harmony, and rhythm, we enter a world where others exist besides the self.”<sup>34</sup> The American philosopher Kathleen Higgins advances a similar idea, maintaining that “musical hearing . . . makes us aware of the world as a place of encounter and interaction between what is within and what is outside us.”<sup>35</sup>

Paul’s exhortation to sing, then, is bound up with his emphasis throughout the Epistle on the unity of the body of Christ. Music voices the shared life of the church. It is not accidental that the commands to sing in Eph 5:19 lead on to the exhortation in verse 21: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Music is both an image and a means of attaining to this unity. Structurally, the command to sing is the hinge connecting two sections of the epistle. Chapters 4 and 5 urge the Christians to put away the kind of self-gratifying and self-interested behavior that destroys community. The second half of Chapter 5 and the first half of Chapter 6 paint a picture of healthy community life, in which each member *senses* and *responds* to the needs of others.

Significantly, this ability to sense and respond to another’s needs is exactly like our ability to sense and respond to the needs of our own physical bodies. “Husbands ought to love their wives *as they love their own bodies*,” Paul says. “After all, no one ever hated his own body but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body” (5:28–30). In the structure of the argument of Ephesians, the Spirit uses song in leading us from a life of self-absorbed sensuality out into a life of others-oriented sensitivity.

<sup>33</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997) 357.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 502.

<sup>35</sup> Kathleen Marie Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991) 33–34.

Music, of course, does not remake us; the Holy Spirit does. But it seems possible that music may be one means by which the Holy Spirit makes us people who feel and respond. We are brought to our senses. We are drawn out of the darkness of self-absorption and become aware of the world around us, our place within and responsibility to it. In song we move in a dance of sympathy with the others who are singing, and by the body are drawn out of ourselves and into the Body.

4. *The voice of many voices.* Because music sounds out the unity of the Body, Bonhoeffer urges Christians to embrace unison singing above all other musical forms.<sup>36</sup> In song, Christians are able “to speak and pray the same word at the same time . . . ; here, they can unite in the Word. . . . Because it is bound wholly to the Word, the singing of the congregation . . . is essentially singing in unison.”<sup>37</sup> It is this unison singing, he writes, that is most truly “singing from the heart, singing to the Lord, singing the Word; this is singing in unity.”<sup>38</sup>

Bonhoeffer is surely right to identify a connection between congregational singing and the unity of the church. However, his emphasis on unison singing represents a misunderstanding of the distinctive contribution of music to worship. It also points toward an inadequate view of Christian unity.<sup>39</sup> Music provides a compelling sounding image of life together; but it is a shared life in which the distinctive voice of the individual is not negated by communion with the other. In music, we encounter identity which preserves particularity. As we sing together, different sounds—your voice, and mine—occupy the same time and the same space, without obstructing or negating one another. Roger Scruton observes that other activities—dancing, sport—embody orderly and aesthetically pleasing social interaction. Music, however, provides a particularly potent model for life together:

The concerted movements of a dance troupe are embodied in separate performers. Each dancer occupies his own space: the harmony between dancers does not cancel their separation. In music however, movements coalesce and flow together in a single stream. The phenomenal space of music contains no places that are “occupied,” or from which competing gestures are excluded. Moreover, the aural world is transparent: nothing that occurs in it is blocked from view, and all that flows through it is revealed to the ear as flowing. . . .

<sup>36</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* 43–45.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 43.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Moreover, it rests on an inadequate understanding of musical sound. It would take us too far out of the way to elaborate this point. George Steiner is essentially correct, however, when he writes: “The physics of the audible sound, the physiology of its reception entail the emission and audition of overtones and undertones around each note or chord. No natural musical moment is pure unison. Such unison would be a sterile artifice or ‘white light.’ The unstated ambience of extended tonality surrounds, prolongs, tempers each musical fact and form with a sustaining, literally vibrant context. Seas, heard only liminally or subliminally, sound in even the smallest of musical ‘shells.’” George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation. Originating in the Gifford Lectures for 1990* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001) 109.

And,

Why should this confluence contain so great an appeal for us? Here is a suggestion: the coordination of movement in dancing and marching grants a vision of social order. But the movements here combined are seen as apart from one another, each occupying its exclusive space and expressing its distinct agenda. In music, however, all distance between movements is abolished, and we confront a single process in which multiplicity is simultaneously preserved and overridden. No musical event excludes any other, but all coexist in a placeless self-presentation. . . . It is as though these many currents flowed together in a single life, at one with itself.<sup>40</sup>

Bonhoeffer claims that “It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing.”<sup>41</sup> Again, Bonhoeffer has identified something very important about music. From the many voices that sing together, a new entity emerges—the voice of the church; a sound which has qualities and properties which the individual voices of which it is composed do not have. And yet, it is also true that the character of the congregational song is constituted and marked by the character of the individual voices singing. The special power of music is not simply that it allows us to hear “one voice.” Rather, the special power of music is that here we encounter “*simultaneous voices which are nevertheless also one voice.*”<sup>42</sup> One does not hear only “the voice of the Church,” but the voice of the Church, *and* the voice of the other individuals singing, *and* one’s own voice. This, of course, is also the case when individuals speak together, but in song we attend to and enjoy this sounding together as a thing in itself.

There is an analogy of form between the sound of people singing together and the unity to which the church aspires, and for this reason music is a particularly apt vehicle for worship. In Ephesians 5, it is in connection with the command to be filled with the Holy Spirit that Paul urges his readers to sing. Music offers a sounding image of the kind of diversified unity brought about by the Holy Spirit—“*simultaneous voices which are nevertheless also one voice.*”<sup>43</sup> “There are many parts, but one body,” is how Paul expresses the same ideal in 1 Corinthians (12:20). It is by the Spirit that Christians are baptized into one Body (1 Cor 12:13); but it is also the Spirit who gives diverse gifts (1 Cor 12:7–11)—who gives to each part of the body its special function, to each voice its distinct part in the great chorus.

Spirit is that which, far from abolishing, rather maintains and even strengthens particularity. It is not a spirit of merging or assimilation—of homogenization—but of relation in otherness, relation which does not subvert but establishes the other in its true reality.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Scruton, *Aesthetics of Music* 338–39.

<sup>41</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* 45.

<sup>42</sup> Scruton, *Aesthetics of Music* 339.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 182.

This is the point of contact between music and the life of the Church. The unity of the Body of Christ is not a bland, undifferentiated uniformity, but a rich and manifold concord. Music is uniquely equipped to provide an aural image of this kind of community, in which union is not unanimity, nor multiplicity a cacophony. With every resonant sonority, music testifies to the possibility of this sort of life.

For this is a symphony (*symphonia*), when there resounds in the church a united concord (*indiscreta concordia*) of differing ages and abilities as if of diverse strings; the psalm is responded to (*psalmus respondetur*), the amen is said.<sup>45</sup>

## V. SUMMARY

I began by observing that (with the exception of a few traditions) Christians have used music in worship. Why should this be the case? Can we justify this practice theologically?

Augustine suggests that we are drawn to song because it appeals to our senses and our emotions. He also believes that neither sense nor emotion is the highest human faculty.<sup>46</sup> It is the *mind* (*animus*) that must ascend to God in adoration. "The custom of singing in Church is to be approved," he says, "so that through the delights of the ear the weaker mind [*animus*] may rise up towards the devotion of worship."<sup>47</sup> The practice of music is justified, then, as a concession to our lower faculties. It is a stepping stone—necessary, perhaps, but a stepping stone nevertheless—across which one should move as quickly as possible.

Calvin and Bonhoeffer have slightly different concerns, but for them as for Augustine, music is the servant of the Word. Music has no virtue of its own, but properly directs hearts and minds toward the text. This assessment is at once more positive and more problematic than Augustine's. Music's appeal to the senses is not regarded with as much suspicion, but we are left without any real explanation for song. It may make sense to argue that words are more important than music. It does not make sense to argue that the reason Christians should sing is because words are more important than music.

<sup>45</sup> Ambrose, *Expositio euangelii secundum Lucam VII*, in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* 129. McKinnon observes that when music is mentioned by early Christian writers, it is often as a metaphor for right relationship between members of the church (pp. 5–6). So, for example, Ignatius, in his letter to the Ephesians, writes, "Wherefore it is fitting that you concur with the intention of your bishop, as in fact you do. For your most renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is attuned to the bishop as strings to a cithara. Hence it is that Jesus Christ is sung in your unity of mind and concordant love. And to a man you make up a chorus, so that joined together in harmony and having received the godly strain in unison, you might sing in one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father" (*Ephesians* 4:1–2, cited in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* 19).

<sup>46</sup> *Oportet enim animam et regi a superiore, et regere inferiorem. Superior illa solus Deus est, inferior illa solum corpus.* "Indeed, it is proper for the soul (*animam*) to be ruled by the superior and to rule the inferior. God alone is superior to it; the body alone is inferior to it." Augustine, *De Musica*, VI, v (13).

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, X, xxxiii (50).

Drawing on the context of Paul's exhortation to sing in Ephesians 5, I have argued that music makes its own distinctive contribution to Christian life and worship. Whatever support music may offer words, however it may highlight, reinforce or enhance the text, music itself—the *music* of music—is used in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Music is a suitable resource in this work, not despite, but because it engages women and men at the level of body and sense. First of all, music enlists body and sense in the praise of God, re-orienting and re-defining these fundamental human endowments, which may once have been used solely for self-gratification. Secondly, singing together involves sensing and responding to others and one's environment. Throughout Ephesians and elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul likens the church to a body. In Ephesians 5, Paul urges husbands to consider how they sense and respond to the needs of their own bodies, and to use this responsiveness as a model for loving their wives. Corporate song is a sensory experience in which we dynamically respond to others, and so, gives these corporeal analogies greater depth and power. Finally, by virtue of the distinctive properties of musical sound, music offers a powerful aural image of life together. In particular, music articulates a kind of unity in which individual distinctiveness is preserved and even enhanced.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> I am grateful to Oliver Crisp and Timothy Gombis for reading an earlier draft of this paper, and for their helpful suggestions. A draft of this paper was also presented at the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts Postgraduate Research Seminar, University of St. Andrews. I thank the members of that seminar for their questions and comments.