

# Singing Our Lives

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

BAYLOR  
UNIVERSITY

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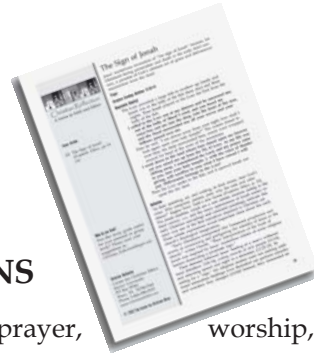




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### WHY WE SING

When we come before God in worship, why do we sing rather than merely think or talk with one another? Singing is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, greatest joys, and most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally.

### NURTURING THE CONGREGATION'S VOICE

Every congregation is an unmatched creation with lessons to learn about its voice—what music it is intended to make and what music is meant for another congregation. These lessons can be learned through the disciplines of hearing, joining, sounding, remembering, and coaching its voice.

### SINGING WITH THE PSALTER

What sets the book of Psalms apart from other Scripture is the sacramental nature of its songs, their ability to mold and transform the believer. Reading or singing the psalms, we lift them to God as our prayers, as though we are speaking our own words rather than recalling an ancient litany.

### GIFTS OF NEW MUSIC

A prophetic song that lifts our hearts to adore God, awakens us to confess the disorder in our lives, or inspires us to share God's love for the hurting world is a wonderful gift. Three new hymns and their stories inspire us to employ our own gifts with words and music to edify the Body of Christ.

### PROPHETIC MUSIC

Prophetic music—songs that raise our critical awareness of the world's needs and call us to responsible action through their holistic gospel message—occurs outside church walls as well as in our worship. How do we discern and encourage the true musical prophets?

### U2: UNEXPECTED PROPHETS

Arguably the most successful rock band in the world, U2 not only cries out against injustice, but also dares to imagine an alternative in light of the Christian vision. The band proclaims with Scripture "the place that has to be believed to be seen." Will we hear them?

# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**When we sing with and to one another in worship, we are molding our moral character. Singing our lives can lift our hearts to adore God, awaken us to confess the disorder in our lives, and inspire us to good work that speaks God's transforming love into the hurting world.**

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**T**he best worship, suggests Ronald Byars, “is, at bottom, a kind of playfulness,” and Marva Dawn mischievously describes worship as “a royal waste of time.” Nevertheless, singing in worship is no mere game, nor should it strike a one-dimensional note of praise. “We engage in music that will...instruct, educate, nurture, cultivate, rebuke, exhort, discipline, warn, delight, enlighten, edify, develop,” writes Dawn. “We waste our time so that others in the Christian community can be more profoundly immersed in the Word, can become more deeply formed, can more thoroughly join us in praise.”

In this issue our contributors explore the complex roles of singing as a personal and communal practice in Christian character formation. Songs can lift our hearts to adore God, awaken us to confess the disorder in our lives, and inspire us to good work that speaks God's transforming love into the hurting world.

“When we come before God in worship, why do we *sing* rather than merely think or talk with one another?” wonders Carolyn Winfrey Gillette in *Why We Sing* (p. 11). Our primary motive, she says, is gratitude for God's wonderful gift of song. Singing enables us to offer praise, express our deepest prayers, grow in the faith, strengthen the community of the Church, and share God's joy with others.

The Psalter has been at the heart of Christian worship for centuries. “What sets the book of Psalms apart from the rest of Scripture,” Michael Morgan claims in *Singing with the Psalter* (p. 19), “is the sacramental nature of its songs, their ability to mold and transform the believer. Reading or



singing the psalms, we lift them to God as our prayers, as though we are speaking our own words rather than recalling an ancient litany." He traces how the psalms, which are ever fresh because they speak to every condition of our lives, were models for the first hymns in English. The visions of worship in the Psalter, of course, have inspired Christian artists in many media over the centuries. For instance, the delightful *Psalm 100* (on the cover) by contemporary Brooklyn artist Laura James offers a Christian reading of the famous psalm. James "has the wonderful ability to invite people of every community to enter the biblical stories, encounter the Church's saints, and see themselves in God's image," Heidi Hornik observes in *Make a Joyful Noise* (p. 36). And in *Exuberant Praise* (p. 38), Hornik recounts how in renaissance Florence, Italy, Luca della Robbia and Donatello famously competed with one another to create cathedral *cantoria*, or choir galleries, to depict the joy of singing expressed in Psalm 150.

Of course, many different types of songs and hymns are sung in worship today, and this is as it should be, David Bolin suggests in *Nurturing the Congregation's Voice* (p. 74). "Every congregation," he believes, "is an unmatched creation with lessons to learn about its voice—what music it is intended to make and what music is meant for another congregation." He urges each congregation to discover and develop its unique corporate voice through the disciplines of hearing, joining, sounding, remembering, and coaching, rather than simply declaring "We're contemporary (or traditional, or blended) in singing style."

For each issue *Christian Reflection* invites writers and composers to create new music for the Church on a challenging ethical theme such as forgiveness, food and hunger, peace and war, cloning, vocation, or mysticism and the moral life. Their music helps us to weave the landscape of Scripture and the fabric of Christian character into the pressing moral issues of our culture. For this issue, we asked three hymn writers not only to contribute new songs on the issue theme, but also to demystify, if they can, the art of hymn writing. A Habitat for Humanity workweek, says Mark Hill, inspired him to write *Fill This Holy Place with Music* (p. 44). Mary Louise Bringle describes her writing process as "word watching," and she illustrates this with the beautiful *We Sing!* (p. 48), for which Jane Marshall has composed new music. Christian musician Kyle Matthews, who contributes the words and music for *Hear Our Hearts, O Lord* (p. 52), explains that he took his lead from our issue theme, "singing our lives." Their stories can inspire us to employ our own gifts with words and music to edify the Body of Christ. The worship service (p. 56) by Bob Kruschwitz includes their new songs, along with wonderful hymns from Scripture and the great tradition of Christian worship, in a festival that celebrates the joy and grace of singing our lives before God.

This grace can bind us into spiritual community, Randy Cooper claims in *Being Subject as We Sing* (p. 66). Exploring a familiar passage, Ephesians

5:18-6:9, in a fresh way, he observes: "Singing 'psalms and hymns and spiritual songs' is a political act that challenges all human categories and divisions," and singing with one another before God "can be a means of grace that unifies, that brings us into the life of the triune God as we learn submission to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Through our singing, Glenna Metcalfe reminds us in *Words of Comfort* (p. 70), we express the "yearnings and joys of the human heart." She shares wonderful testimonies of the power of singing to bring comfort to those who suffer disease, endure despair, or face death, for "music surrounds us with the assurance that God loves, God cares, and God is able."

Sometimes songs, far from being comforting, are very disturbing because they raise our critical awareness of the needs of the world. Nathan Corbitt examines what he calls "prophetic music" – those songs that address "poverty, injustice, degradation of the environment, and other problems in contemporary culture" and call us to responsible action through their holistic gospel message. In *Prophetic Music* (p. 28), he recommends criteria to help us discover true prophecy in the music played outside the church walls as well as in our worship.

Taking up this search for prophecy in popular culture, Steven Harmon examines the music of Bono and the Dublin band U2, perhaps the most successful rock musicians in the world. "U2 not only cries out against injustice, but also dares to imagine an alternative in light of the Christian vision," Harmon writes in *U2: Unexpected Prophets* (p. 81). "The band searchingly examines the distortions of our world and proclaims with Scripture 'the place that has to be believed to be seen' and 'where the streets have no name.'" He ends with a challenge: "Will we hear them?"

"Most Christians would agree that music is an important aspect of their worship and is a vital complement to other spiritual practices," Mark Suderman notes in *Music as a Spiritual Practice* (p. 89). "Yet within our congregations and between them we may disagree strongly about what music to choose for worship and even about its function within the liturgy." He reviews three recent books—Alice Parker's *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church*, J. Nathan Corbitt's *The Sound of the Harvest: Music's Mission in Church and Culture*, and the anthology *Music in Christian Worship: At the Service of the Liturgy* edited by Charlotte Y. Kroeker—that follow different paths to clarifying music's role in Christian worship, particularly in congregational singing. Suderman points out that "while Parker and the contributors in Kroeker's anthology stress the need for music education of the church body, Corbitt...emphasizes that people must be reached in their current milieu." All would agree, however, with Corbitt that "musicians' greatest gift to the kingdom is the critical listening skills to evaluate the present, the prudence to remember the past, and the wisdom to extend the kingdom outside one's own frame of reference." ❖

# Why We Sing

BY CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE

**When we come before God in worship, why do we sing rather than merely think or talk with one another? Singing is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, greatest joys, and most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally.**

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**I**n the aftermath of the devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, our minds are filled with many images drawn from experiencing these catastrophes firsthand, listening to people who suffered through them, or watching their stories on the evening news. A particularly striking image on the news after Katrina involved the medical staff in a New Orleans hospital struggling to care for patients when their medical facility no longer had electricity, water, food, or medicine to offer. In that horrible situation, several medical staff members gathered around a patient's bed. They sang songs of faith and trust in the only One who could be counted on to help them. They shared the hymns that some of them had heard in worship services Sunday after Sunday throughout their lives, until the words and music had become part of their very being. In that storm-damaged hospital during devastation that's been described as "hell on earth," they were singing together, heavenward.

When we come before God in worship, why do we *sing* rather than merely think or talk with one another? We sing because music is a gift from God. It is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, our greatest joys, and our most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally. Like all gifts from God, it is one that God calls us to use with gratitude.

## **MUSIC BECOMES OUR THANKFUL PRAYER**

All the music sung and played here  
is a gift, O God, from you.

For as long as we have prayed here,  
we've been blessed by music, too.  
By your Spirit, each musician  
finds new depths of faith to share.  
Music is a gift you've given  
and becomes our thankful prayer.<sup>1</sup>

In *A Song To Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*, Don Saliers points out that the gift of music is built into the very being of our bodies—our heartbeats, breaths, cries, and movements. Young children love to bang pots and pans together. Children play chanting games as they jump rope together.<sup>2</sup> God has given us gifts of sound and music within our bodies, and it is a short step to carry these gifts into our worship of God. Congregational song is “corporeal,” notes hymn writer Brian Wren. “When we sing from the heart, with full voice, some of us use our bodies more thoroughly, perhaps, than at any other time in worship.”<sup>3</sup>

We sing because music brings us together as a congregation. It brings together generations. Even young children who are part of the worshipping community can find a welcome in the church's singing together. Familiar songs and refrains invite preliterate children to participate. Songs of the church bring together people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Those who share the pews may have vastly different lives, but when they stand and sing, they share the faith that binds them together—God's love expressed in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We sing because our singing is a means by which God strengthens us and helps us to grow as the people of God. In our individual lives, we may say and sing “I.” But the songs of the church invite us to say “we.” They call us to celebrate the faith that we share, and we are reminded of our place in the community of disciples.

We sing because, as those medical staff members in a New Orleans hospital knew, singing is one of many ways that God has given us to cry out in utter despair and in complete trust. Saint Augustine once said that the one who sings “prays twice.”<sup>4</sup> Sometimes our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs become our “thankful prayers” and at other times they become our desperate prayers, prayers of lament, or prayers of trust and commitment.

We sing because singing connects Sunday worship with everyday life. As Thomas G. Long points out:

In the place of worship, we cannot pray or sing faithfully without our words being full of the sorrows and joys of life. Conversely, the words of worship, prayer words, sermon words, hymn words, Bible words, creedal words, words of praise and penitence, protest and pardon—are like stones thrown into the pond; they ripple outward in countless concentric circles, finding ever fresh expression in new places in our lives.<sup>5</sup>

When we sing “Amazing Grace” together on Sunday morning, it changes us and makes us a little more grace-filled throughout the week in ways that are beyond our understanding.

We sing because God calls us to sing! The psalmist proclaims: “O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” (Psalm 95:1). “Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing” (Psalm 100:1). In Colossians, we are instructed, “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Colossians 3:16c).

### **MUSIC HELPS THE CHURCH GROW STRONG**

All creation sings your glory;  
 in the Psalms are pain and praise.  
 Mary sang your saving story  
 in her long, expectant days.  
 Through the years, with great emotion,  
 some have reached to you in song.  
 May we sing with such devotion;  
 music helps your Church grow strong!

One of the ways that our singing strengthens the Church is by helping us to see our place in the Body of Christ, where members are given different gifts to use for the good of all. If all the Church were sopranos, where would the tenors be? If all the Church were a chancel choir, where would the children’s choir be?

When Christians sing together, the blending of our voices bears witness to the fact that we are made one in Christ. The variety of voices—high pitched or low pitched, on-key or off-key, some soaring to the rafters and others barely above a whisper—reminds us of the wonderful diversity in the Church. “For Christians of all levels of musical attain-

ment, there is the unique opportunity to sing in communal worship, where the critical ingredient is the attitude of the heart,” Ed Norman writes.

“There is an interesting metaphor for the church in group music making: working together under leadership to achieve a common goal of harmony and unity.”<sup>6</sup> We are reminded, too, that there is a place in the body of Christ for those who cannot sing or speak, those who are uncomfortable

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singing, those who prefer to listen, and those who offer praise through sign language. God provides a wonderful variety of ways to offer praise.

Songs help us to express what we believe about God; at the same time, through songs our faith is formed. Long ago Plato said, "Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes the laws."<sup>7</sup> His point was rephrased recently in relation to church music: "I don't mind who writes the theological books so long as I can write the hymns."<sup>8</sup> When we struggle to understand Christian beliefs, we often turn to songs that we have learned in worship. Many of us would be at a loss to define "grace" without saying, "That reminds me of one of my favorite hymns, 'Amazing Grace,'..."

The songs we sing do not have to be complex in order for them to be wonderful expressions of what Christ's followers believe. "Jesus Loves Me" is one of the simplest songs and one that many Christian children learn to sing at the earliest age in Church School. Yet its message is profound. Karl Barth was asked once to summarize all his wealth of knowledge about the faith in one sentence, and he is said to have answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."<sup>9</sup>

A few songs are specifically creedal and based on the Church's great statements of faith like the Apostles' Creed.<sup>10</sup> Other songs in more informal ways help us to express what the Church believes in the face of the world's conflicting values. For example, in our workplaces and communities we are bombarded with the idea that the things we own and deeds we accomplish are what make us worthwhile as people. Then we go to church and sing, "Just as I am, without one plea..." The world teaches us that wealth and power are most important, but at church we sing:

You have come up to the lakeshore,  
looking neither for wise nor for wealthy.  
You only wanted that I should follow.  
O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,  
and, while smiling, have called out my name.  
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me,  
now with you I will seek other seas.<sup>11</sup>

While these words are far from those of a traditional creed, they express ideas that are very central to what the Church believes. God's love is not something we earn—it is freely and graciously given—and through this love Jesus calls us to be faithful disciples.

Hymns can express the faith so clearly that they are threatening to those in power. Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat, contains these powerful words:

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.



He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

*Luke 1:51-53*

The message of the Magnificat is so subversive, Elizabeth A. Johnson points out, that for a period during the 1980s the government of Guatemala banned its public recitation.<sup>12</sup> What powerful, rich leaders of nations would want large numbers of poor people to take those words seriously as a statement of belief? Patrick D. Miller Jr. writes, “In a world that assumes...that things have to be the way they are and that we must not assume too much about improving them, the doxologies of God’s people are fundamental indicators that wonders have not ceased, that possibilities not yet dreamt of will happen, and that hope is an authentic stance.”<sup>13</sup> When we sing together as a congregation, we are affirming our faith that God is still active among us.

The songs we sing as a congregation teach us what it means to be the Church, and they connect us to the Church in ways that spoken words cannot easily do. Hymns and songs sung together can remind us that we are not in this alone; we are part of a community of faith. God calls us to live in community. We are not solos; we are part of a choir—a congregation.

My earliest memory of “church” is of standing on a pew so I would be tall enough to share a hymnbook with my parents during the singing of congregational hymns in a Methodist church in Bridgewater, Virginia. I was not even old enough to read the words in that mysterious, heavy, red-covered book of hymns, but I knew that it was the source of the wonderful, loving songs that were being sung by a church full of loving, caring people. In those songs and in the love of those people who sang them, God was present.

This memory reminds us why it is important to encourage children to be in worship with adults from a very young age. There is much in worship that they may not understand intellectually, but there is also much they can learn about *being* the church with others, and some of this learning happens through song.

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**Songs express what the Church believes in  
the face of the world’s conflicting values.**

**The world teaches us that the things we  
own and deeds we accomplish make us  
worthwhile as people. Then we go to church  
and sing, “Just as I am, without one plea.”**

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When have the songs of the church been meaningful to you? Did you sing hymns on the day of a family member's baptism? When you gathered with other Christians for prayer on September 11, 2001? When you went with a handful of Christmas carolers to visit homebound church members? When, on a mission trip, you had opportunities to sing with Christians in another culture? Whether a thousand voices sing together in great harmony, or two or three gathered Christians sing the songs of faith they know by heart, Christ is in their midst and God is glorified in the community of the church.

At their best, congregational songs are inspirational. "When a congregation sings together, the words of the hymn come alive to them and mean more than just a statement of fact," writes Brian Wren. "Worshippers experience the presence of God."<sup>14</sup> Hymns invite us and welcome us into a relationship with God.

#### **FAITH IS FOUND HERE AND REKINDLED**

You give hymns and songs for singing,  
toes for tapping your good news,  
organ sounding, hand bells ringing,  
faithful hearers in the pews.  
With the trumpet and the cymbal,  
with guitar and violin,  
faith is found here and rekindled;  
hearts are lifted, once again.

Finally, we sing because our songs invite others into a closer relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Congregational singing is a way of reaching out to share God's joy with others. Because of this, the Church needs to be willing to sing new songs that will speak to new Christians and to "seekers." There is beauty in many of the traditional hymn texts, but churches need to be open to singing new words on occasion.

One of the best comments I've heard about my hymn texts came from a mother who reported on a conversation with her teenage son. After the worship service one Sunday he said to her, "I liked that middle hymn. I actually understood what the words meant."

Another person told me about a worship service in which the congregation sang a hymn that she hated. Shrugging her shoulders, she decided to sing it joyfully anyway. After worship the woman standing next to her confessed, "I was really feeling discouraged when I came to church. I'm dealing with a lot of personal problems. But when we started singing those hymns and I heard you singing so joyfully next to me, you sounded like you really meant what you were singing. I started thinking about the words of that hymn, and it made me feel better." We sing not only for ourselves, but also out of love for others.



At a workshop on hymns, I asked the question: “What church song has special meaning in your life?” Many participants named Christmas carols they loved or songs they had learned many years earlier at youth rallies. But after the workshop, a woman told me a different story. When her husband, a very dedicated Christian, was dying, she and her grown children gathered around his bedside. Together they sang the hymns and songs of the church that had meant so much to all of them through the years. They sang for hours, sometimes singing from a hymnbook, sometimes remembering pieces of hymns from memory, until it was late and they were tired. One by one, they moved from singing to gentle, holy silence, until only the woman was singing to her husband. After a while she began to sing “What Wondrous Love Is This,” which concludes:

And when from death I'm free,  
I'll sing on, I'll sing on,  
And when from death I'm free,  
I'll sing on;  
And when from death I'm free,  
I'll sing and joyful be,  
And through eternity  
I'll sing on, I'll sing on,  
And through eternity  
I'll sing on.<sup>15</sup>

As she was singing those words, her husband died. She told me that it was in that moment that he became part of the Church Triumphant, and he began to sing praises to God for all eternity, just as the words of the hymn proclaimed.

We sing because God gives us the gift of song—to offer praise, to express our deepest prayers, to help us grow in our faith, to strengthen the Church, and to share with others. Our songs are imperfect now. Many of us cannot carry a tune. Others of us cannot hear, speak, or understand, but we can only feel the rhythm of the music, or sign the words, or experience the presence of God's love as the congregation sings together. Sharing in the Church's song is a Christian practice that prepares all God's people for an eternity of singing praises to God.

Bless the talents we are bringing,  
for we offer you our best.  
If our gifts are not in singing,  
may our joyful noise be blest.  
If our world is ever silent,  
may we sign to you above.  
Touched by grace, may each one present  
offer back your song of love.

**NOTES**

1 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, "All The Music Sung and Played Here." Copyright © 2000 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. This hymn, written to the tune of NETTLETON ("Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"), can express our thanks to God for the gifts of music and singing in worship. I will quote the four stanzas through this article.

2 Don Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song To Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 22.

3 Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 87.

4 Noted by Don E. Saliers in "Singing Our Lives," in Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 183.

5 Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 47.

6 Ed Norman, "Music," in Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, eds., *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: An A-to-Z Guide to Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 674.

7 Quoted in Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Music of Angels: A Listener's Guide to Sacred Music from Chant to Christian Rock* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 1999), 7.

8 David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 192.

9 Quoted by John A. Huffman, Jr., "Jesus Loves Me This I Know" (Christmas Eve sermon from December 24, 2003, available online at [www.standrewspres.org/sermons/serm122403.htm](http://www.standrewspres.org/sermons/serm122403.htm)).

10 For a recent example, see my hymn "I Believe" in Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today's Worship* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000), No. 13.

11 "Tu Has Venido a la Orilla/Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore," by Cesareo Gabarain (1979), translated by Gertrude Suppe, George Lockwood, and Raquel Achon (1988), in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 377.

12 Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary," *U.S. Catholic*, 68:12 (December 2003), 12-17.

13 Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "In Praise and Thanksgiving," *Theology Today* 45.2 (1988), 180-188. The quote is on p. 180. This article is online at [theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1988/v45-2-article3.htm](http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1988/v45-2-article3.htm).

14 Brian Wren, *Praying Twice*, 95.

15 "What Wondrous Love Is This," American Folk Hymn (c. 1811), *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 85.

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# Singing with the Psalter

BY MICHAEL MORGAN

What sets the book of Psalms apart from the rest of Scripture is the sacramental nature of its songs, their ability to mold and transform the believer. Reading or singing the psalms, we lift them to God as our prayers, as though we are speaking our own words rather than recalling an ancient litany.

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When I was a young child, the first book of Scripture I learned to find with ease was the Psalter because it is at the very middle of the Bible. All I had to do was let the Bible fall open at its heart and there it was, ready to “sing” to me of a mighty God, a loving and caring Shepherd, a Lord of righteousness and repentance and redemption. Of course, it took some years of living before I knew that if I opened my own heart as I opened the Bible, the book of Psalms would become a source of personal dialogue between that same faithful God and a grown-up, more complicated me.

What sets the book of Psalms apart from the rest of Scripture is the sacramental nature of its songs, their ability to mold and transform believers. Perhaps it is because they lack the narrative and parable of the historical books and the Gospels, the sermonizing discourses from the books of Law and the Prophets, and the pastoral instruction of the letters from the apostles. Reading Psalms, we do not find ourselves as secondhand recipients of God’s Word, but as one-to-one communicants actively in conversation with God. We lift the psalms to God as our prayers, as though we are speaking our own words rather than recalling an ancient litany.

## **IN GROSSES AND SWEET COMFORTS**

Even when the psalms we sing and pray do not reflect but are in conflict with our own sentiments, we are able to make them our own prayers.

In our praise, they call us to affirm that it is God who creates and sustains us and to whom we owe more thanksgiving than we can ever express. In our lament, we are assured that this same God will strengthen and love us and see us through the trials.

David Dickson, a Scottish Puritan of the seventeenth century, describes the seasons of our lives as a blend of “crosses and sweet comforts.”<sup>1</sup> The psalms reveal every imaginable condition of our human experience, but never without the illumination of who God is and where we stand in relation to that wonderful Presence (23:4):

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

In his eloquent examination of the poetry of Psalms, William Brown underscores this continuing conversation with the Almighty:

If prayer is the stuff of theology, then theology must find its home within the fray of life. Like its sapiential counterpart in Scripture, the Psalter draws from the full range of human experience. From the cry of dereliction to the shout of jubilation, pathos pulses throughout the Psalms. An all-encompassing immediacy, even “facticity,” pertains to the poetry of Psalms that is unmatched elsewhere in Scripture. The Psalms respond viscerally to both the corporate crises of history and the personal traumas of the individual. The interconnection between the community and the individual, between the corporate and the personal, embraces a holistic view of human experience: God is trusted to remain active on all levels of experience and existence.... Through metaphor, the Psalms paint a world of possible impossibility wherein conflict is resolved and shalom reigns, a world in which deliverance is experienced and sustenance is gained.<sup>2</sup>

The fourteenth-century English divine Richard Rolle describes the Psalter with lyrical abandon and vigor in the preface to his own translation of the book:

Psalm singing chases fiends, excites angels to our help, removes sin, pleases God. It shapes perfection, removes and destroys annoyance and anguish of soul. As a lamp lighting our life, healing of a sick heart, honey to a bitter soul, this book is called a garden enclosed, well sealed, a paradise full of apples!<sup>3</sup>

A paradise full of apples indeed! Nourishing morsels in abundance for hun-

gry souls starved for sustenance, security, healing, or assurance. And baskets full of leftovers, like the remnants of the loaves and fish, to return in our worship with gratitude to a bountiful and benevolent God. “The book of Psalms provides the most reliable theological, pastoral, and liturgical resource given us in the biblical tradition. In season and out of season, generation after generation, faithful women and men turn to the Psalms as a most helpful resource for conversation with God about things that matter most,” writes Walter Brueggemann. “In this literature the community of faith has heard and continues to hear the sovereign speech of God, who meets the community in its depths of need and in its heights of celebration. The Psalms draw our entire life under the rule of God, where everything may be submitted to the God of the gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

A master in his observations on the Psalter, Brueggemann continues: “The Psalms, with few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity, gathered over a long period of time; a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks about life the way it really is, for the same issues and possibilities persist in those deeply human dimensions.”<sup>5</sup>

Such a conversation between God and the community of faith underscores the fulfillment of the ancient covenant through which we have become the adopted sons and daughters of God—children who honor and claim the goodness and grace of a loving parent. “I am yours, you are mine,” God has promised. “I am with you always.” It is through our worship, both in our congregations and in our hearts, that we keep the conversation alive.

#### **SINGING NEW SONGS TO GOD**

The Psalmist exhorts us again and again to *sing* a new song to the Lord (cf. Psalm 33:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, and 149:1). Likewise, Paul encourages the Colossian Christians to

“*sing* psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” with gratitude in their hearts (Colossians 3:16, emphasis added). I, too, must confess a natural prejudice for singing the psalms rather than just reading them.

Is there any easier way to involve a congregation in verbalizing Scripture than through the singing of a psalm? Its text may be sung to a harmonic “mantra” as in Anglican chant, performed with a recurring refrain (or antiphon) as a dialogue between cantor and congregation, or paraphrased in verse, as a hymn, and sung to a familiar tune.

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**The psalms reveal every condition of our experience, but never without the illumination of who God is and where we stand in relation to that wonderful Presence.**

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Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the Dissenting minister who in his paraphrase of the book of Psalms “imitated in the language of the New Testament” bridged the gap between psalmody and hymnody, saw this need for continuing dialogue with God and provided for it through his texts. Watts once said that when we read a prose psalm from the Bible, God speaks to us; but when we sing a metrical psalm, we speak to God.

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**Singing a metrical psalm, while it sacrifices literal scriptural fidelity for rhyme and imagination, can be done not only in the company of other believers, but also when we find ourselves alone in the company of God.**

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John Calvin must have observed this same dialogue of faith which Watts saw, for in Reformed worship from its earliest days in Geneva, congregations couched their prayers and praise in the language of the Psalter. It was Calvin’s belief that only those songs given to us by God, namely the biblical psalms, were

worthy for us to return to God. Being a lover of music, Calvin stretched the point a bit to allow metrical paraphrases of the prose psalms, which could be sung to old and new melodies. He recognized the power of music, beyond the inspiration of the words alone, to move the human spirits of those who make the music or hear it.

That is why we *sing* the psalms. They are sublime poetry, with all of the rhythm and imagery we would expect a good poem to have; but they are also song lyrics that, through the vehicle of an equally good melody, fix themselves in our ears, our memory, and our hearts.

We have read from the Bible, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations” (Psalm 90:1), and it always sounds familiar. But what our hearts sing are Isaac Watts’ words, which have become a part of our very being:

Our God, our help in ages past,  
our hope for years to come;  
our shelter from the stormy blast,  
and our eternal home.”<sup>6</sup>

The responsive reading of a psalm is utterly faithful to the biblical text, but it is not a practical option for personal reflection. Rather, the singing of a metrical psalm, while it may sacrifice literal scriptural fidelity for rhyme and imagination, can be done not only in the company of other believers, but also when we find ourselves alone in the company of God.

Metrical psalms—poetic paraphrases with structured rhyme schemes and patterns of syllables and accents—have been sung since the Reformation in all branches of Protestantism. For instance, in the cradle years of the

English-speaking church, the opening verse of Psalm 100, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth," became at the hand of the Scotsman William Kethe,

All people that on earth do dwell,  
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;  
him serve with fear, his praise forth tell,  
come ye before him and rejoice."<sup>7</sup>

Psalm 32:1 rejoices in the promise of forgiveness for the faithful:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.  
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

In the metrical version by contemporary hymn writer Fred R. Anderson, however, these verses sing with a rhythm that starts our hearts to dancing and becomes a real celebration of joy:

How blest are those whose great sin  
has freely been forgiven,  
whose guilt is wholly covered  
before the sight of heaven.  
Blest those to whom our Lord God  
will not impute their sin,  
whose guilt has been forgiven,  
whose heart is true again.<sup>8</sup>

The closing lines of Psalm 23 from the pen of Dr. Watts express the highest confidence in God's continuing care for us in the warmest image:

The sure provision of my God  
attend me all my days;  
O may your house be my abode,  
and all my work be praise.  
There would I find a settled rest,  
while others go and come;  
no more a stranger, or a guest,  
but like a child at home.<sup>9</sup>

These are the exceptional examples. Metrical psalms generally must be scrutinized carefully for their imagery and poetry. After all, local pastors, country squires, and humble parish organists whose goodness of intent far surpassed their skill composed most of them. For example, Matthew Parker, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1558, wrote this impossible verse of Psalm 100:1 as an alternative to Kethe's immortal text:



O joy all men terrestrial, rejoice in God celestial;  
I bid not Jews especial, but Jews and Greeks in general.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps Oscar Wilde was correct when he observed that there seems to be a direct correlation between piety and poor rhyme! None of the great poets ever attempted versifying the entire book of Psalms, with the exception of George Wither, Christopher Smart, and James Merrick (and one might reasonably argue whether any of these were “great poets”). John Milton, John Donne, Richard Crashaw, William Cowper, and George Herbert composed a few settings of individual psalms—more as exercises in the discipline of paraphrasing—and then moved on to more liberated creative efforts.

Living on this side of the Cross, it is virtually impossible to sing the psalms as Hebrew poetry and not interpret them from our Christian perspective. In fact, some of the psalms were ripped right out of the Old Testament and imported into the New, leaving nothing subtle for our imaginations. Charles Wesley’s version of Psalm 23 takes such a gospel turn:

Jesus the good Shepherd is;  
Jesus died the sheep to save;  
he is mine, and I am his;  
all I want in him I have:  
life, and health, and rest, and food,  
all the plenitude of God.<sup>11</sup>

### **PSALMS OF ORIENTATION**

Augustine wrote, “Those who sing, pray twice,” and at no time is this truer than when we sing a psalm. Whatever the season of our life, there is a psalm to help us celebrate, give thanks for, overcome, or endure it.

Walter Brueggemann groups the psalms around three themes—orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. In the sheer exercise of living we often encounter these sequentially. Together they relate the book of Psalms to every aspect of our human experience.

During seasons of *orientation* we are at peace with ourselves, our neighbors, and God. Psalms of orientation articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and reliability of God, God’s creation, and God’s governing law. We give thanks for the good things in our life—the material blessings and the intangible gifts of God’s continuing care for us. We rejoice in who God is, who we are, and the ancient ties that bind us together.

The beautiful brief Psalm 100, perhaps more than any other psalm, calls us to worship and celebrate these seasons of well-being. It begins by introducing the One whom we are to praise (100:1-2):

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.  
Worship the LORD with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.



Then the psalmist defines our relationship with God: we are God's creatures and God's care for us is assured (100:3):

Know that the LORD is God.  
It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Finally, in worship we offer thanks and praise for all the good that God has bestowed upon us. We rejoice that God is a loving God, not just for now, but for all time (100:4-5):

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.  
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the LORD is good;  
his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

#### **PSALMS OF DISORIENTATION**

Our anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death are expressed in the psalms of *disorientation* that evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred. These psalms lament the ragged, painful disarray we inevitably encounter in our lives. We may feel alienated from each other and, more tragically, abandoned by God. We experience grief in what we feel has been taken from us and despair that we are alone.

Psalm 22 is a cry from the depths of the anguished soul. The psalmist expresses our ultimate despair—alienation from God (22:1-2, 11):

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words  
of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.

Do not be far from me,  
for trouble is near  
and there is no one to help.

We blame God for our sorrowful condition and for the grief that befalls us (22:6-9a):

But I am a worm, and not human;  
scorned by others, and despised by the people.  
All who see me mock at me;  
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—  
let him rescue the one in whom he delights.”

Yet it was you who took me from the womb...

Still, we entreat God to intervene in our dismal state and make promises to him if we will be delivered (22:19, 22):

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!  
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

### **PSALMS OF NEW ORIENTATION**

Providentially God hears us. We again are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God when joy breaks through our despair. Reconciliation, redemption, rebirth, and resurrection are the themes we sing about in the psalms of *new orientation*. We are restored to the comfort, the security, and perhaps even the complacency of our former lives when, as Robert Browning wrote, “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world.”

Psalms 30 brings us back to that “comfort zone” when we are restored to the presence and favor of God. Our redemption is accomplished and we are grateful (30:1-2):

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,  
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,  
and you have healed me.

Out of a conviction of our restored presence within God’s mercy, we confess both God’s wrath and grace, and we see beyond the conflict to its sure resolution at the hand of God (30:4-5):

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,  
and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment;  
his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.

It is God alone who no longer leaves us outside the wonder of his grace, but gathers us into his fold again, “no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home” (30:11-12):

You have turned my mourning into dancing;  
you have taken off my sackcloth  
and clothed me with joy,

so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

We spend our lives resting or wrestling in one of these stages of orientation, or in transition from one to the other. At any and every moment in our lives, there is a psalm that speaks to us where we are. A psalm of praise one moment, a psalm of lament the next—such is the recurring joy and plight of our human existence.

As we move between the mountain tops and canyons of our lives, there are surely times we may raise the question, “Why am I singing?” May we never doubt the song God gives us to sing, but rather ask ourselves, in the words of the beautiful old hymn, “How can I keep from singing?”<sup>12</sup>

## NOTES

1 David Dickson, *A Brief Explication of the Psalms* (London: Thomas Johnson, 1655), 3.

2 William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 213.

3 Richard Rolle, *The Psalter or Psalms of David and Certain Canticles, with a Translation and Exposition in English by Richard Rolle of Hampole. Edited from Manuscripts by the Rev. H. R. Bramley, with an Introduction and Glossary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884), 3.

4 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 15.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2001), 13.

6 Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and apply’d to the Christian State and Worship* (London: J. Clark, 1719), 229.

7 Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins, and others, *The Whole Booke of Psalmes, collected into English Meter, conferred with the Hebrue, with apt Notes to sing them withal* (London: John Daye, 1567), 132.

8 Fred R. Anderson, *Singing Psalms of Joy and Praise* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), 32.

9 Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David*, 68.

10 Matthew Parker, *The Whole Psalter translated into English Metre, which containeth an hundreth and fifty Psalmes* (London: John Daye, 1567), 279.

11 Charles Wesley, *A Poetical Version of Nearly the Whole of the Psalms of David. Edited, with a Brief Introduction, by Henry Fish* (London: James Nichols, 1854), 45.

12 For the original text of “How Can I Keep From Singing?” which has been variously attributed to Anna Warner, Robert W. Lowry, and others, see pp. 60-61 of this volume or [www.cyberhymnal.org/html/h/c/hcaikeep.htm](http://www.cyberhymnal.org/html/h/c/hcaikeep.htm).



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# Prophetic Music

BY J. NATHAN CORBITT

**Based on biblical principles, prophetic music presents a holistic gospel message. It describes problems of poverty, injustice, and degradation of the environment but also presents Kingdom-based solutions and calls individuals, congregations, and society to responsible action.**

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**L**et me start with a confession. I am not interested in hearing any musical prophets or prophetic music in my church during the Sunday morning worship service—especially not from a Christian gangsta-looking thug, or an aging rock star who has suddenly gotten religion, or a Bob Marley wanna-be who looks like he smoked pot to get inspiration and shouts about injustice in our society and my need to repent.

I might be willing to sing a prophetic hymn from the hymnal occasionally—though if you take a look at the stock of Christian songs, few are what we might call prophetic. Truth be told, I live with so much conflict, injustice, and just plain chaos these days that I need to hear some Good News. And Good News to me is that God is in control—“Peace! Be still!”—everything is going to be all right. I need comfort.

Have you ever felt this way? Some days, I don’t want to hear about the needs of the world or be reminded of my calling to bring the gospel message to life. Prophetic music, however, does not give me an option.

## **PROPHETIC MUSIC OUTSIDE THE CHURCH**

Prophetic music is a prophetic voice, based on biblical principles, that calls both the church and society to social justice. Because it also addresses society at large, prophetic music may not include Christian language and imagery as it addresses poverty, injustice, degradation of the environment, and other problems in contemporary culture. But effective prophetic music always presents a holistic gospel message: it not only describes the problems, but also presents Kingdom-based solutions and calls individuals,

congregations, and society to responsible action.

The heart of prophetic music is not the music really, but the rich words and their commentary on injustice in the world. These powerful words are encapsulated by culturally relevant music to highlight their meaning through emotional affect.

Using music (and other art forms) to raise critical awareness about the needs of the world—the essential goal of prophetic music—stands in a long biblical tradition. The Jewish prophets, like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Amos, employed drama, allegory, and poetry to jolt people into thinking about their lives. And Jesus used parables to break through to listeners who did not recognize their own role in oppressing the poor.

Outside the church walls, we can appreciate the prophetic role of some popular musicians. I can remember the civil rights movement and anti-war protests in the 1960s and 70s, when many popular songs were written and sung by artists with an acute political conscience and a biting sense of humor. Though not always motivated by a Christian belief system, these artists were influenced by their experiences in the church and a commitment to justice.

On July 2, 2005, I watched the LIVE 8 concert on television from the comfort of my rocking chair. I was not about to face the many thousands of people gathered for this concert at the Philadelphia Museum of Art just down the road from my house. It was one of the world's largest concerts to end poverty. My first thought was that a group of opportunistic artists were using the event to promote their music; what do popular and wealthy musicians know about the issue? I wondered. Yet the more I reflected on the event and those who organized it and heard the reports of people who attended, I had more hopeful thoughts. Supported and encouraged by Bono, whom many people consider to be a prophetic Christian musician, the artists were doing exactly what prophetic artists do—raising critical awareness about a justice issue and motivating others to get involved.

In debriefing the concert experience with a number of my staff who attended, I discovered that only one church had purchased a vendor table where they enlisted people to become involved through a local church ministry. There are nearly three thousand congregations in Philadelphia and many are involved in prophetic ministries. Most churches have a more traditional view about keeping the sacred and secular separate.

### **PROPHETIC MUSIC IN THE CHURCH**

Inside the church walls, whether the music is prophetic or not usually depends on a congregation's music preferences and the leadership provided by the pastor. Some churches serve a steady diet of nineteenth-century Evangelical hymns, which in the words of Albert Edward Bailey, have a "mystic approach," a "zeal for individual conversion," and an "ideal of God's kingdom as an...eternal city in heaven." Others mix in the High

Anglican hymns that look back “with nostalgia to the historic church, its theology, [and] its liturgy” or hymns that reflect the social gospel movement that wanted “the slums abolished, poverty and sickness banished, the will to grab transformed into the will to serve, and all our faith and energy devoted to bringing into being a brotherhood on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

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**Because prophets often address a contemporary form of injustice, their songs require immediacy to the problem and culturally appropriate language.**

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Brian Wren, who writes new hymns for congregations, sees himself as a prophet who is “called to announce the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ, who breaks barriers between human beings, loves the whole world, and cares especially for people who are impoverished, marginalized, enslaved, and oppressed.” He speaks God’s

truth as he hears it, which means he must “question conventional wisdom, and encourage congregations to voice a faith, commitment, and hope more daring, and more determined, than they might otherwise venture to sing.”<sup>2</sup> Wren is less concerned about whether the congregation wants to sing his text than with “writing a hymn poem because I believe it needs to be written, in the hope that, somewhere, a congregation will want to sing it.”<sup>3</sup>

Prophetic music ministry is taking exciting new forms within the Church. For example, I belong to a congregation that has renovated its church basement to provide showers, bedrooms, and a living area for homeless families. Several church members serve as hosts, cook meals, and tend to the children, and my ministry, BuildaBridge International, provides music therapy for these children and their moms, thanks to a grant from the United Way.

Other congregations of socially active young adults are redefining the time and place for worship away from the eleven o’clock hour on Sunday morning in a church building. For instance, not far from my house a youthful pastor presides over informal worship in which the participants sing songs by Bono and Bob Marley that express the realities, hopes, and needs of difficult daily living. After the worship service they move to a local pub for a fellowship time where they talk, listen, and encourage one another.

Another church supports a Christian hip-hop artist who left the secular recording industry to enroll in seminary and “preach” the good news in the tough places of Philadelphia. He produces an hour-long Christian hip-hop radio program that is gaining in popularity.

These songs from the secular world, when they are incorporated into worship as described above, become prophetic hymns that instill courage, provide comfort, and send out their innovative congregations to serve in sections of the city that have been neglected by suburban churches.

### TIMELY WORDS AND MUSIC

In the Germantown section of Philadelphia where I live, the latest popular music fills the urban environment of graceful historic homes. Every imaginable form of hip-hop and other contemporary music booms from car stereos passing up and down my street, through the surrounding neighborhood, and along the way to my office near center city. I am amused and educated by the kinds of music people share with the world from inside their car. I hear plenty of vulgarity, swearing, and abusive talk in the music. Knowing that many musicians speak and sing out of their own experience, I listen for meaning. What message do I hear?

Albert Nolan's classic study of Jesus' prophetic ministry and message, *Jesus Before Christianity*, describes how Jesus, drawing on passages in Isaiah, liberated the poor and oppressed.<sup>4</sup> According to Nolan, Jesus saw four basic pursuits as evil and in opposition to God—the pursuits of wealth, prestige, group solidarity (“the exclusive and selfish solidarity of groups”), and power. Those who follow Christ must be concerned for the poor and oppressed without concern for these pursuits. In other words, they must be prophets who seek social justice.

Nolan draws this interesting conclusion about Jesus and his disciples: their message of good news and confrontation with the evil in society is never timeless. Rather it must be spoken to people living in a particular context of pursuing wealth, prestige, in-group solidarity, and power—to people who need to be awakened specifically to their time and reality.<sup>5</sup>

This is a basic reason, I think, why so few prophetic hymns are found in hymnals and why prophetic music clothes itself in contemporary musical idioms. Prophetic music tends to be an oral and contemporary phenomenon, rather than a written and historical tradition. Prophets often address a contemporary form of injustice, and their songs require immediacy to the problem and culturally appropriate language.

As their worship experience moves away from printed music and toward multimedia technology that can bring globalization to their singing, congregations have more opportunities to fight injustice and share the gospel globally, while being involved in prophetic ministry locally.

### DISCERNING THE TRUE PROPHETS

Because not all prophets edify and point us toward truth, we must learn to differentiate between true and false musical prophets. We are right to mistrust some of them, particularly those who lose credibility through their abuse of wealth and power. I keep several principles in mind when I am listening to prophetic songs and hymns, both sacred and secular.

The first principle is that *prophecy is a gift to the church*. The Apostle Paul, after explaining that prophecy is given by God to edify the Christian community (1 Corinthians 12), urges us to “Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy.... [For] those who



prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Corinthians 14:1, 3b).

*We should pray for spiritually mature "ears" to listen to music in personal, social, and church life. Though it may difficult to pay attention to what musicians are saying because they are talking too loud, we must not let the noise distract us from really listening to their message and allowing them*

*to motivate us to action.*

*Of course, we are not called merely to be listeners. Prophecy, as I have said, calls not only for mature spiritual awareness, but also for "hands and feet" to bring the good news into being.*

*Testing the spirits is a necessary part of discernment, as Paul reminds the*

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**The primary goal of musical prophecy must be the redemption of a fallen world. Music of the street that preaches violence for its own sake, or self-gratification and glorification, is a false prophetic message.**

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church at Thessalonica: "Do not despise the words of prophets; but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). When we encounter the songs of the street, or the secular world, we would do well to follow the advice given to the Israelites about prophets who might be leading them to worship other gods: "If you hear it said about one of the towns the Lord your God is giving you to live in, that scoundrels from among you have gone out and led the inhabitants of the town astray, saying, 'Let us go and worship other gods,' whom you have not known, then you shall inquire and make a thorough investigation" (Deuteronomy 13:12-14a).

Make no mistake that *the primary goal of musical prophecy is the redemption of a fallen world*. Music of the street that preaches violence for its own sake, or self-gratification and glorification, is a false prophetic message.

Finally, *the test of truth is in the prophet's fruits*, which is manifested in the harvest after a season of labor. "Whoever is not with me is against me," Jesus said, "and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23). It is the fruit of a prophet's life—how the prophet lives in consonance with Jesus' way of living and not just what he or she says—that provides the ultimate test of the prophecies. False prophets will "die of their own words and destructive lives" (see 2 Peter 1:20-2:2).

True prophets always have an engaged and engaging faith that moves outside the sanctuary. Through their words they share a vision of a just society and a call to action based on compassion. More than anything else, they create a critical awareness of the truth that Jesus taught. They awaken us to how we should be living in this day and place, both in devotion to God and in righteous relationships with our neighbors and the world.



### EMBRACING PROPHETIC MUSIC

If anyone wants to start an argument in most congregations, simply request a different kind of music. They do not have to request songs by Bob Marley or Bono, just suggest that the congregation sing some contemporary Christian music rather than its favorite hymns, or black gospel rather than classical music. Asking for prophetic music can be especially touchy, for while the music of praise unites people in worship, the voice of prophecy often divides us because it addresses the failures of our common life in society.

Nevertheless, let me suggest some first steps that a congregation might take to embrace prophetic music. I will speak from my experience in the Second Baptist Church of Germantown, a wonderful and historic congregation that once was predominately white, became predominately black, and now is seeking to be multicultural. Our Princeton-educated, Mexican American pastor can “hoop” with the best of preachers. Though it is a special church and atypical in many ways, the one “hot button” is still the music.

When a congregation is proclaiming the whole gospel, which includes meeting the social needs of the community and world, *its music-making naturally should grow beyond praise and evangelism to include a call for social justice*. Its music ministry should develop spiritual sight and courage for the street, for it is outside the sanctuary walls and on the street that the faithful will encounter those people most in need of the good news. One way that this happens is the musicians move out of the choir loft and from behind the pulpit microphone to faithfully minister among the marginalized. Each Sunday as I look at our choir, I recognize members who work in city government, social service and nonprofit organizations, and city schools. They minister to the poor and marginalized in our city everyday.

*A congregation should provide financial support for musicians with a prophetic voice, both inside and outside the church*. Though contemporary Christian musicians have been criticized for commercializing their music, many of them are not only courageously confronting the secularized faith of the mainstream culture, but also disturbing the comfort of our sanctuaries when we ignore the poor and marginalized. The local church should expand its music ministry to include financial support for those musicians, like the hip-hop evangelist I described above, who are building bridges of love between the sanctuary and the street.

*A congregation should include the voices of world Christians in its worship*. A church musician once explained to me, “We don’t sing those songs. We are not political.” Unfortunately, many western Christians wrongly believe that they do not have a political orientation. Some are afraid that hymns from the third world will allow liberation theology into their church. Others simply struggle with singing in a language they do not understand. Yet the majority of the world’s Christians now live outside the western world, and if we do not sing their songs and hear their voices, we are failing to in-

vite a large part of the family to our worship banquet. When we incorporate some world hymns into worship on a regular basis, we not only will hear our brothers and sisters' prophetic voices, but also will prophetically proclaim our unity with them.

All new prophetic songs, whether they come to us from around the world or across the street, deserve our best efforts to "perform" them well

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**Most Christians live outside the western world. When we sing world hymns on a regular basis, we not only hear our brothers and sisters' prophetic voices but also proclaim our unity with them.**

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and present them within a context of meaningful explanation. This is part of our hospitality to the artists whom we have invited into our worship, and the congregation will be more likely to welcome their songs and listen to their prophetic voices.

#### **ENOUGH FOR THE DAY**

Do not think that a congregation must give up the old hymns and change all of its songs in order to embrace prophetic music. Several years ago my wife and I needed to hear a prophetic word specific to our lives at that time and place. Though we had experienced mission work in Africa for eleven years, the serenity, safety, quiet, and convenience of suburban life had begun to lull our calling. That prophetic word came to us during worship in the suburban Wayne Presbyterian Church through an old hymn, "Give of Your Best to the Master." We reflected on the needs of the world and asked, "Are we giving our best to minister to the most vulnerable of the world's population? Are we fulfilling our calling to be the gospel in the world?" We moved into Philadelphia where I helped to found Builda-Bridge International, a nonprofit organization to share the arts with vulnerable populations.

As we were singing that same hymn on a recent Sunday morning with our congregation at Second Baptist Church of Germantown, I reflected on the following:

The transit system is on strike and my students are having a difficult time making it to class.

There's a corruption scandal in the city government.

Sixty percent—that's right, *sixty* percent—of newborns in the metropolitan area are born to single mothers, and this statistic is climbing in every section of the country.

Every day in the city's public school system half of the students are absent. Since absenteeism is a predictor of life success or failure, what does this say about the future of our youth and our country?

The Archdiocese of Philadelphia has admitted that two former archbishops concealed sexual abuse by priests for decades.

Our nation's response to Hurricane Katrina has been inadequate, the healthcare system is failing the marginalized in the U.S. (and is nonexistent in the developing world), the war in Iraq continues amid the crisis in the Middle East and the threat of terrorism throughout the world, AIDS is epidemic in the developing world, human trafficking of innocent women and children exists worldwide, and on and on.

It was too much to think about. Where does one begin to address these problems anyway?

During the worship service I was comforted by the music and encouraged by the sermon. But I also was challenged and reenergized by the words of another old hymn:

Encamped along the hills of light,  
ye Christian soldiers, rise....  
Faith is the victory, we know,  
that overcomes the world.<sup>6</sup>

And, for me, that was enough for the day.

## NOTES

1 Albert Edward Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns: Backgrounds and Interpretations* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1977), 560.

2 Brian Wren, "Court Poet and Pastoral Prophet: The Contemporary Church and its Song-Makers," *Colloquium Journal*, 1 (September 2004), 2. This article is available online at [www.yale.edu/ism/colloq\\_journal/jpages/wren1.html](http://www.yale.edu/ism/colloq_journal/jpages/wren1.html).

3 *Ibid.*, 10.

4 Albert Nolan, O. P., *Jesus Before Christianity*, revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992, originally 1976).

5 *Ibid.*, 92.

6 From "Faith is the Victory," by John H. Yates (1891).



### **J. NATHAN CORBITT**

*is cofounder and President of BuildaBridge International and Professor of Cross-Cultural Studies at Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania.*

This photo is available in  
the print version of *Singing Our Lives*.

Surrounded by adoring men, women, and children playing folk musical instruments and clapping, and an inner circle of angels with their flaming crimson wings flowing outward from their throats, the Lord Jesus Christ appears ready to clap his hands.

*Laura James. PSALM 100, 2004. Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 25 1/2". Used by permission of the artist.*

# Make a Joyful Noise

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

In this delightful interpretation of Psalm 100 by Laura James, the people wear brightly colored everyday clothing and sit in a similar cross-legged position. They huddle around the Christ like sheep about their shepherd, rejoicing in the Lord's presence as they look to him for guidance. Christ's mouth is open as he prays for the people or sings to them.

The artist, who grew up and lives in Brooklyn, NY, is a self-taught painter of Antiguan heritage. Ms. James was brought up in the Brethren denomination, yet she draws inspiration from the iconography found in Ethiopian Christian art, which relies on pattern and repetition of shape to convey its message. When some Rastafarian friends introduced her to Ethiopian culture in 1991, she was impressed by the facts that Ethiopia had never been colonized and had been a Christian country since the fourth century. *Psalm 100* incorporates some of the Ethiopian style and themes that she has researched. The portrayal of a nonwhite Christ, for example, is an attractive feature of Ethiopian art for her.

Laura James' paintings and woodcuts have been praised for their multicultural approach and beauty. She has the wonderful ability to invite people of every community to enter the biblical stories, encounter the Church's saints, and see themselves in God's image. Numerous exhibitions of her work have been well received, particularly in the Roman Catholic communities of Harlem, NY, and Chicago.

Ms. James came to love the stories of the Bible and studied photography in high school. In her painting, she depicts the biblical narratives with the realism of daily life associated with photography. She has been influenced by contemporary Black culture as well as by the Ethiopian art, history, and culture that she has studied. These have profoundly impacted her understanding of Black history and the foundation of Christianity.<sup>†</sup>

Her work appears in many books, from the pages of the *Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible* ("Jesus Walks on Water") to the cover of David G. Myers' popular textbook, *Exploring Psychology, sixth edition* ("People Waiting in the Sun"). Other paintings can be seen on her website, [www.laura-jamesart.com](http://www.laura-jamesart.com).

## NOTE

<sup>†</sup> Donna Thompson Ray, "Contemporary Images, Ancient Traditions: The Art of Laura James," online at [www.laurajamesart.com/bio.htm](http://www.laurajamesart.com/bio.htm) (accessed 11 November 2005).

This photo is available in  
the print version of *Singing Our Lives*.

Luca's cantoria (above and p. 41) more accurately represents the narrative of Psalm 150, but Donatello's (p. 42) conveys the joy of those who answer the call to worship in the final psalm. These cantoria and their exuberant figures were, and always will be, a competing pair.

*Luca della Robbia* (c. 1400-1482). CANTORIA, 1431-1438. Marble, cantoria length 17'. Removed from the Duomo and now in Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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# Exuberant Praise

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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Luca della Robbia's "big break" came in 1431 when he received the commission from the Opera del Duomo, a committee that included artists and theologians, to carve the *cantoria*, or choir gallery, for the cathedral of Florence, S. Maria del Fiore. The gallery (see the photograph on p. 38) was to be placed over the door of the north sacristy, a room where the sacred vessels and vestments are kept, on the left as you enter the cathedral, or *duomo*. A political crisis had led to a ban on expenditures from 1428 to 1431, but the construction of the Florentine cathedral resumed with this commission. Historical documents describe Luca's *Cantoria* as an organ loft. Yet, given the small choirs and portable organs of the period, this does not exclude singers and other instrumentalists from using it as well.<sup>1</sup>

Luca carved in high relief sculpture a visual interpretation of Psalm 150, the psalm that sounds the concluding note in the Psalter by calling one and all to worship:

Praise the LORD!  
 Praise God in his sanctuary;  
     praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;  
     praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;  
     praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
     praise him with strings and pipe!

Praise him with clanging cymbals;  
     praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!  
     Praise the LORD!

What better way to inspire a congregation to worship than the delightful images on Luca's *Cantoria*? When they glanced upward during the Mass, the worshipers would see the joyful praise of children.

The gallery itself is a rectangular shape that resembles a Roman sarcophagus and is supported on acanthus consoles. A series of reliefs, four along the side and one at each end of the gallery, depict children praising the Lord as they dance and play the musical instruments mentioned in the psalm. These figural panels are separated by pairs of flattened pilasters and the Latin text of the entire psalm is incised above and below them.



This photo is available  
in the print version of  
*Singing Our Lives*.

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*Luca della Robbia* (c. 1400-1482). *BOYS SINGING FROM A CHOIR BOOK*, from the *CANTORIA*, 1431-1438. Marble. Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Archive Timothy McCarthy / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Luca posed the frolicking children in groups, and each scene is a beautifully balanced and arranged composition. The most popular scene, which is often reproduced today on Christmas cards, features the singing boys (see above). They are so realistically portrayed that some can be identified as treble voices and others as bass. The joy of singing is exhibited by the power of a song to hold the attention of these (momentarily) serene boys.

Donatello, by contrast, decorated a *cantoria* with younger, more energetic boys, who usually are referred to as *putti* rather than children. Donatello, the more famous Florentine sculptor, was away in Rome at the time that Luca received the commission for a choir gallery at the Florence cather-



dral. The story goes that Donatello's contract read, "If yours (Donatello's) is as good as della Robbia's, then we'll pay you this much.... If it is better, then we'll pay you more." Donatello's *Cantoria* was to be placed over the door of the south sacristy, to the right as you enter the cathedral and directly opposite Luca's.

Just back from Rome and inspired by ideas from ancient art, Donatello based his *cantoria* on classical models, but he added some new twists and unconventional combinations. The artist already had used Psalm 150 in his design for the pulpit in the cathedral of the nearby town of Prato. There he had carved a series of panels divided by pilasters, but allowed the putti to dance and flow behind the pilasters, for an illusion of greater depth. The artist employed the same illusion with even more sophistication in the Florence *Cantoria*—now the putti perform two continuous dances in a circle and, for even more depth in the entire structure, the putti are placed behind a series of free-standing paired colonnettes (see the detail below). Donatello, knowing that his *cantoria* would be seen in competition with Luca's, wanted to show his excellence in creating realistic perspective in a relief sculpture.

This photo is available  
in the print version of  
*Singing Our Lives*.

Donatello (c.1386-1466). *DANCING PUTTI*. Detail from the *CANTORIA*. 1433-39. Marble, *cantoria* length 18'8". Removed from the *Duomo* and now in *Museo dell'Opera del Duomo*, Florence, Italy. Photo: © Scala / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

The sculptor also displayed his knowledge of Roman architectural decoration. Above and below the dancing putti (and where Luca had chosen to place the inscription of Psalm 150), Donatello used the palmetto, the shell, the urn, and the mask. The combination of these elements and their proportions had not appeared like this before. All the surfaces are highly

ornamented and elaborate. The background to the panels and the colonnettes are encrusted with mosaic tesserae (cut pieces of colored marble) so as to reflect the light and add color to the frieze of ecstatic putti.

Both of the dueling *cantoria* were removed from the cathedral when the musical requirements for a grand-ducal wedding in the seventeenth century rendered them obsolete.<sup>2</sup> And despite the popularity of the singing boys in later years, Luca della Robbia's name is more commonly associated today with a technique of enameled terracotta (with white figures against a blue relief background) that he invented.

In the early years, Luca della Robbia won the battle of critical opinion. Leone Battista Alberti, the great Florentine architect, humanist, and writer, praised Luca alongside far better known artists Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, and Masaccio in an introductory note to *Della pittura* (*On Painting*) in 1435.<sup>3</sup> Alberti later criticized Donatello's *Cantoria*, complaining that the figures danced and twisted too much. Subsequent generations of critics, however, have ranked Donatello's work higher. They compliment his dynamism, especially in not constricting the children to neat frames like Luca della Robbia, but allowing them great freedom to feel the praise within the psalm.

Today in the Opera del Duomo Museum in Florence, which houses works that were conceived and made for the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Giotto's Campanile, and the Baptistery of San Giovanni, these two *cantoria* once again are placed on opposite walls in the same room for comparison. Although Luca more accurately represents the narrative of Psalm 150, Donatello conveys the joy in the souls of those who hear and take to heart the call to worship in the final psalm. These *cantoria* and their exuberant figures were, and always will be, a competing pair.

## NOTES

1 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, fifth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall and Harry N. Abrahams, Inc., 2003), 279.

2 Ibid.

3 *Della pittura*, written in Latin in 1435 and quickly translated into the vernacular Italian in 1436, was both an instructional manual and a theoretical treatise intended, in part, to educate Florentine artists about the intellectual side of their profession.



**HEIDI J. HORNİK**

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# Gifts of New Music

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What a wonderful gift we receive when someone writes a prophetic text or composes music that lifts our hearts to adore God, awakens us to confess the disorder in our lives, and inspires us to some good work that speaks God's transforming love into the hurting world.

This is why we invite writers and composers to create new music for the Church on challenging ethical themes like forgiveness, food and hunger, peace and war, cloning, vocation, or mysticism and the moral life. Their new songs help us to weave the landscape of Scripture and the fabric of Christian character into the pressing moral issues of our culture.<sup>1</sup>

The distinguished composer Alice Parker warns, "Writing either the words or music of a hymn is one of the greatest challenges possible. That tiny form, all self enclosed: How does one get the words in a natural flow, expressing a cogent idea in language that is rich with the images of scripture, which are really the images of human life? How does one get a tune in which not one note is out of place?"<sup>2</sup>

*Christian Reflection* invited Mark Hill, Mary Louise Bringle, and Kyle Matthews to write texts that examine how the rich practice of singing our lives can join us together with other believers and morally form us as disciples. We asked them to demystify, if they can, the art of hymn writing by telling us how they approach the task. Each one described a different path: Hill, a church pianist, paired "Fill This Holy Place with Music" with a beautiful nineteenth-century tune; Bringle, a college professor, invited noted church composer Jane Marshall to contribute a new melody for "We Sing!" and the professional songsmith, Matthews, wrote the text and music of "Hear Our Hearts, O Lord" together.

Here are their stories and their songs. May their music lead us in worship; may their stories inspire us to employ our own gifts with words and music to edify the Body of Christ.

## NOTES

1 These songs are available in the "Ethics Library" of the Center's website, [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws) and may be reproduced for personal or group study of an issue of *Christian Reflection*. For permission to reprint the texts or music for corporate worship or in other publications, please contact the copyright holder(s) identified for each song.

2 Alice Parker, *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 70-71.

While I was seeking inspiration for this hymn, I spent a life-changing week with Habitat for Humanity in the Jimmy Carter Work Project. As people from many places and backgrounds united to rebuild a community, I discovered new meaning for “family,” and I thought, “This is what church worship should be like—serving together with strangers only to discover they are part of God’s family.”

As we worship together in community, we are mutually taught, challenged, and inspired. We spend time together with the Creator, and only then can we adequately care for God’s creation.

Singing, especially, unites us. We strengthen and encourage one another even as we lift up the One who calls us to worship and gives us reason to sing. The language of music speaks to us in ways no other language can, especially in times of pain and grief. And it is the song of faith, both literally and figuratively, that we take with us into the world after the congregation has scattered.

“Fill This Holy Place with Music” begins by affirming the central importance of corporate singing in worship. Wherever two or more people gather together becomes holy because God is present, as are all the saints and angels who join our song. Then the text turns inward: even when we are struggling to cope with life and do not feel like singing, we are encouraged to sing. Music can offer comfort, lead us to experience God’s grace, and help us to find our joyful song again.

The third stanza turns outward: we should fill each day with music so that everything we do becomes a song that reflects God’s love and grace to others. As the Habitat experience reminded me, worship does not end when the last “Amen” is spoken; in fact, worship has just begun. Both worship and service look toward the day when all people live in peace and all creation joins to sing a song of praise to its Creator.

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**MARK HILL**

*serves as Pianist at First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee.*

# Fill This Holy Place with Music

BY MARK HILL

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Fill this holy place with music, songs of joy and hymns of praise.  
Giving glory, thanks, and honor, joined as one, our anthems raise.  
Telling of your might and power, singing of your love and grace,  
with the hosts of saints and angels, may your music fill this place.

Still our restless hearts with music, calm our fears and soothe our pain.  
Though we toil with heavy burdens, may we join the glad refrain.  
When our song gives way to silence, may your music peace impart.  
Grant us hope and strength and courage. Let your music fill each heart.

Permeate our lives with music, with your song each moment fill.  
Far beyond the benediction, may your music linger still.  
May our hearts and hands and voices, everything we do and say,  
sing your praise through work and service. Let your music fill each day.

Let the earth resound with music, highest mountain, deepest sea,  
till all people, all creation, live and sing in harmony.  
We will never cease to praise you, shout with voices clear and strong,  
till all nations bow before you, till the whole world sings your song.

# Fill This Holy Place with Music

MARK HILL

C. HUBERT H. PARRY (1848-1918)

1. Fill this ho - ly place with mu - sic, songs of  
2. Still our rest - less hearts with mu - sic, calm our  
3. Per - me - ate our lives with mu - sic, with your  
4. Let the earth re - sound with mu - sic, high - est

3  
joy and hymns of praise. Giv - ing glo - ry, thanks, and  
fears and soothe our pain. Though we toil with hea - vy  
song each mo - ment fill. Far be - yond the be - ne -  
moun - tain, deep - est sea, till all peo - ple, all cre -

6  
ho - nor, joined as one, our an - thems raise. Tel - ling  
bur - dens, may we join the glad re - frain. When our  
dic - tion, may your mu - sic lin - ger still. May our  
a - tion, live and sing in har - mo - ny. We will

9

of your might and pow - er, sing - ing of your love and  
 song gives way to si - lence, may your mu - sic peace im -  
 hearts and hands and voi - ces, ev - 'ry - thing we do and  
 ne - ver cease to praise you, shout with voi - ces clear and

12

grace, with the hosts of saints and  
 part. Grant us hope and strength and  
 say, sing your praise through work and  
 strong, till all na - tions bow be -

14

an - gels, may your mu - sic fill this place.  
 cour - age. Let your mu - sic fill each heart.  
 ser - vice. Let your mu - sic fill each day.  
 fore you, till the whole world sings your song.

**M**y hymn writing is essentially word-watching. Words are like shy forest creatures: they often seem more willing to come into view if they do not think they are being sought. Thus, when I began working on this hymn, I sent a question (“Why do we sing in worship?”) into the thickets of my unconscious and settled in to wait.

While waiting, I took a cup of morning coffee out to my back porch, picked up a volume of short stories, and began to read. A few pages into a story, a line of hymn text began appearing at the edges of consciousness: “When hearts filled full cannot contain....” Quietly, so as not to startle the words, I reached for pen and paper and began to write. The line rounded itself out into a complete stanza. Looking at the result, I realized I had been given a metric pattern (8.8.4.4.4.), a rhyme scheme (AABBC), and an outline (four lines stating a reason for singing and the repeating refrain: “We sing”). Unthinkingly, I had mirrored form and content; normally, each line of hymn text is a self-contained unit, so that meaning will not get distorted when singers inevitably take a breath between musical phrases. Yet, I had violated this “rule,” letting full hearts not be “contained” within their eight-syllable unit, but “burst their bounds” (“breathlessly,” at that!) to flow over into subsequent lines. I decided I was happy with the transgression.

Other stanzas followed as I filled in the given pattern with further reasons to sing: to lament injustice, repent wrongdoing, remember the past, rekindle poetic visions, and join with the saints who rejoice before the throne of God (Revelation 4:10-11). Jane Marshall agreed to set the text to music, and her sensitive rendering lets the rustling words take wing.

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**MARY LOUISE BRINGLE**

*is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Brevard College in Brevard, North Carolina.*



# We Sing!

BY MARY LOUISE BRINGLE

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When hearts filled full cannot contain  
their breathless joy, but swell and strain  
to burst their bounds  
in laughing sounds:  
We sing. We sing!

When suffering calls us to lament  
the wrongs we witness and repent  
the hurts we cause,  
in tearful voice:  
We sing. We sing!

When cherished mem'ries bind us fast  
to saints who lived in days long past,  
to tend and save  
the gifts they gave:  
We sing. We sing!

When poets craft with loving care  
the dreams and visions that we share,  
and words inspire  
with tongues of fire:  
We sing. We sing!

When dust ensouled by Spirit's breath  
is resurrected after death,  
before the throne  
with all God's own:  
We sing. We sing!

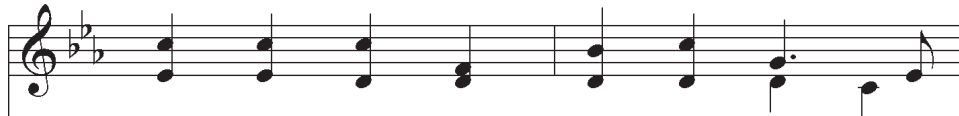
# We Sing!

MARY LOUISE BRINGLE

JANE MARSHALL



1. When hearts filled full can - not con - tain their  
 2. When suff - 'ring calls us to la - ment the  
 3. When cher - ished mem - 'ries bind us fast to  
 4. When po - ets craft with lov - ing care the  
 5. When dust en - souled by Spir - it's breath is



breath - less joy, but swell and strain to  
 wrongs we wit - ness and re - pent the  
 saints who lived in days long past, to  
 dreams and vis - ions that we share, and  
 res - ur - rec - ted af - ter death, be -



burst their bounds in laugh - ing sounds:  
 hurts we cause, in tear - ful voice:  
 tend and save the gifts they gave:  
 words in - spire with tongues of fire:  
 fore the throne with all God's own:



The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The melody in the treble staff starts with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The second measure has a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, and a half note A4. The third measure has a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, and a half note F4. The fourth measure has a quarter rest, a quarter note G4, and a half note A4. The bass staff starts with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G3, a quarter note A3, and a quarter note B3. The second measure has a quarter rest, a quarter note G3, and a half note A3. The third measure has a quarter rest, a quarter note G3, and a half note F3. The fourth measure has a quarter rest, a quarter note G3, and a half note A3. The lyrics are: "We sing, We sing!" on the first line and "(We sing. We sing!)" on the second line.

Music © 2005 Jane Marshall  
Text © 2005 GIA Publications, Inc.  
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Tune: BREVARD  
8.8.4.4.4.

I was inspired by the phrase “singing our lives.” What a phrase! I wanted to use it for the first line: “We are singing our lives to the Lord of life.” But soon it became apparent that the phrase begged some explanation—what do we mean by that?

So, the phrase became a guide for the lyric instead. Our “singing” is more than singing, it is responding to inspiration (verse 1), bringing prayers to God (verse 2), offering praise (verse 3), and telling our story (verse 4). Ultimately, though, our singing is our attempt to speak a spiritual language that transcends words alone. It is not merely what we mean to say, it is how we feel about it and how we attempt to make our meaning beautiful to God. The ultimate hope of our singing is that God will hear beyond our presentation to our heart’s intention, thus, “hear our hearts.”

And what is the “life” of the believer? It is having a small voice in a big world (verse 1), hoping that there is significance in our message that is not evidenced by our numbers. It is a life that confesses its sinfulness and neediness (verse 2). It is a reverent life, aware of our seeming insignificance in the scheme of things (verse 3), yet marveling that God has somehow found us necessary. And the believer’s life is a witnessing life (verse 4), motivated in real ways by the crazy hope that our way of life, our stories themselves, can be tools in God’s hands to do God’s will in the world.

The melody emphasizes the most important and most “singable” words. A more contemporary backbeat, married to a text that is both formal and traditional, keeps the sound current without sacrificing content. The melodic phrases rise and fall, but the third phrase in particular is written so that each verse lyric reaches a penultimate point that may be declarative or interrogative, but essentially is passionate—a cry. The musical resolution of each verse is common in order to suggest the peace that follows the catharsis of spiritual song.

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**KYLE MATTHEWS**

*is a Christian songwriter in Nashville, Tennessee.*

# Hear Our Hearts, O Lord

BY KYLE MATTHEWS

---

We are singing our songs to the Lord of Song,  
you inspire us, you inspire.  
Though our voices are few, make them beautiful.  
As we sing, hear our hearts, O Lord.

We are bringing our prayers to the Healing One,  
mercy calls to us, hope is calling.  
Though our offering is flawed, we bring all we are.  
Heal our pain, hear our hearts, O Lord.

We are lifting our praise to a worthy God,  
you created us and redeemed us.  
Though our offering is small, it's a song of love.  
You are good! Hear our hearts, O Lord!

We are telling our joy to a hurting world,  
love inspires us, love inspires.  
Though our efforts are weak, will you speak through us?  
Touch your world with our song, O Lord!

# Hear Our Hearts, O Lord

KYLE MATTHEWS  
Words and Music

*♩ = 75*

1. We are sing-ing our songs to the Lord of song,  
 2. We are bring-ing our prayers to the Heal-ing One,  
 3. We are lift-ing our praise to a wor-thy God,  
 4. We are tell-ing our joy to a hurt-ing world,

3

you in - spi - re us,                      you in - spi - re.  
 mer - cy calls to us,                      hope is call - ing.  
 you cre - a - ted us                      and re-deemed us.  
 love in - spi - res us,                      love in - spi - res.

3

5

Though our voi-ces are few, make them beau - ti - ful.  
 Though our off'-ring is flawed, we bring all we are.  
 Though our off'-ring is small, it's a song of love.  
 Though our eff-orts are weak, will you speak through us?

5

7

As we sing, hear our hearts, O Lord.  
 Heal our pain, hear our hearts, O Lord.  
 You are good! Hear our hearts, O Lord!  
 Touch your world with our song, O Lord!

7

# Worship Service

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

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This hymn festival is about the joy and grace of singing our lives before God. With wonderful hymns from Scripture and the great tradition of Christian worship, as well as songs written for this issue of *Christian Reflection*, we celebrate the wonderful story of God's love.

The first verse of "Behold the Glories of the Lamb" frames the service. Composed in about 1688 when Mr. Watts was fourteen, it is the first hymn written in English for public worship. The four stanzas of Mark Hill's new hymn, *Fill This Holy Place with Music*, introduce each part of the service. They may be sung at the appropriate times by a soloist, ensemble, or choir to the vibrant tune RUSTINGTON (see pp. 46-47 in this volume).

## *Solo (a cappella)*

"Behold the Glories of the Lamb"

Behold the glories of the Lamb  
amidst his father's throne.  
Prepare new honors for his name,  
and songs before unknown.

*Isaac Watts* (c. 1688)

*Tune:* NEW BRITAIN

## *Call to Worship: Psalm 96:1-5*

Leader: O sing to the LORD a new song;  
sing to the LORD, all the earth.

**People: Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.**

Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous works among all the peoples.

**For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
he is to be revered above all gods.**

For all the gods of the peoples are idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens.



*Chiming of the Hour and Silent Meditation*

Naught exists without voice:  
God hears always in all created things  
his echo and his praise.

*Angelus Silesius (1624-1677)*

*Unison Invocation*

Creator of heaven and earth,  
we lift our hearts to you  
that we might adore your beauty and goodness.  
Our Rock and Redeemer,  
we open our hearts to you  
that we might reveal the pain and disorder in our lives.  
Giver of all good gifts,  
we surrender our hearts to you  
that you might bring forth in us the fruit of good works.  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God,  
we sing our lives to you  
that you might raise us, with all creation,  
into your eternal song. Amen.

**FILL THIS HOLY PLACE WITH MUSIC**

*Fill this holy place with music, songs of joy and hymns of praise.  
Giving glory, thanks, and honor, joined as one, our anthems raise.  
Telling of your might and power, singing of your love and grace,  
with the hosts of saints and angels, may your music fill this place.*

*Scripture Reading: Psalm 27:1, 4-6*

The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid?

One thing I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
to live in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the LORD,  
and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter  
in the day of trouble;  
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;  
he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up  
above my enemies all around me,  
and I will offer in his tent  
sacrifices with shouts of joy;  
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

*Hymn: "All Creatures of Our God and King" (verses 1, 2, and 7)*

All creatures of our God and King,  
lift up your voice and with us sing  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Thou burning sun with golden beam,  
thou silver moon with softer gleam!  
*O praise him, O praise him!*  
*Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Thou rushing wind that art so strong,  
ye clouds that sail in Heaven along,  
O praise him! Alleluia!  
Thou rising morn, in praise rejoice,  
ye lights of evening, find a voice!  
*Refrain*

Let all things their Creator bless,  
and worship him in humbleness,  
O praise him! Alleluia!  
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,  
and praise the Spirit, Three in One!  
*Refrain*

*St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1225), translated by William H. Draper (1919)*  
*Tune: LASST UNS ERFREUEN*

*Hymn: "Hear Our Hearts, O Lord"*

*Kyle Matthews (2005)*  
*Tune: HEAR OUR HEARTS, O LORD (pp. 54-55 in this volume)*



### STILL OUR RESTLESS HEARTS WITH MUSIC

*Still our restless hearts with music, calm our fears and soothe our pain.  
Though we toil with heavy burdens, may we join the glad refrain.  
When our song gives way to silence, may your music peace impart.  
Grant us hope and strength and courage. Let your music fill each heart.*

#### *Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 31:30-32:6*

Then Moses recited the words of this song...in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel:

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak;  
let the earth hear the words of my mouth.

May my teaching drop like the rain,  
my speech condense like the dew;  
like gentle rain on grass,  
like showers on new growth.

For I will proclaim the name of the LORD;  
ascribe greatness to our God!

The Rock, his work is perfect,  
and all his ways are just.  
A faithful God, without deceit,  
just and upright is he;

yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him,  
a perverse and crooked generation.

Do you thus repay the LORD,  
O foolish and senseless people?  
Is not he your father, who created you,  
who made you and established you?

#### *Season of Prayer*

Almighty God, we come before you, like the people of Israel, having betrayed your love in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We pray silently now, confessing our personal sins and repenting of our rebellion. (*Silent prayers.*)

The institutions where we work, our families, and our community are broken because collectively we have betrayed your love in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We pray silently now, confessing these corporate acts of unfaithfulness and asking that you will restore our broken lives together. (*Silent prayers.*)

Our world is broken because we have betrayed your love in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Each of us selects one part of the world, one troubled nation, one distorted economy, and now intercedes on its behalf. (*Silent prayers.*)

You alone can heal us in spirit, mind, and body. We pray silently now, asking for your healing presence with individuals we know who are struggling with temptation, enduring disease, or facing death. (*Silent prayers.*)

God, because you are the Rock of our salvation, forever faithful in Jesus Christ, and our comfort in the Holy Spirit, we join in the song of the prophet Simeon:

**Lord, you now have set your servant free  
to go in peace as you have promised;  
for these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,  
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:  
a Light to enlighten the nations,  
and the glory of your people Israel.**

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:  
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.<sup>1</sup>**

*Hymn: "How Can I Keep From Singing?"*

My life flows on in endless song,  
above earth's lamentation.  
I hear the clear, though far off hymn  
that hails a new creation.  
*No storm can shake my inmost calm  
while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,  
how can I keep from singing?*

Through all the tumult and the strife,  
I hear that music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul.  
How can I keep from singing?  
*Refrain*

What though my joys and comforts die?  
I know my Savior liveth.  
What though the darkness gather round?  
Songs in the night he giveth.

*Refrain*

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,  
a fountain ever springing!  
All things are mine since I am his!  
How can I keep from singing?

*Refrain*

*Anonymous 19<sup>th</sup> Century American*  
Tune: ENDLESS SONG

### *Silent Meditation*

Keep praising God with hymns, and meditating continually, and so lighten the burden of the temptations that attack you. A traveler carrying a heavy burden stops from time to time to take deep breaths, and so makes the journey easier and the burden light.

*Sayings of the Desert Fathers (fourth century)<sup>2</sup>*



### PERMEATE OUR LIVES WITH MUSIC

*Permeate our lives with music, with your song each moment fill.  
Far beyond the benediction, may your music linger still.  
May our hearts and hands and voices, everything we do and say,  
sing your praise through work and service. Let your music fill each day.*

### *Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:3-11*

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

*Hymn: "I Cannot Tell"*

I cannot tell why he whom angels worship,  
should set his love upon the sons of men,  
or why, as Shepherd, he should seek the wanderers,  
to bring them back, they know not how or when.  
But this I know, that he was born of Mary  
when Bethlehem's manger was his only home,  
and that he lived at Nazareth and labored,  
and so the Savior, Savior of the world is come.

I cannot tell how silently he suffered,  
as with his peace he graced this place of tears,  
or how his heart upon the cross was broken,  
the crown of pain to three and thirty years.  
But this I know, he heals the brokenhearted,  
and stays our sin, and calms our lurking fear,  
and lifts the burden from the heavy laden,  
for yet the Savior, Savior of the world is here.

I cannot tell how he will win the nations,  
how he will claim his earthly heritage,  
how satisfy the needs and aspirations  
of east and west, of sinner and of sage.  
But this I know, all flesh shall see his glory,  
and he shall reap the harvest he has sown,  
and some glad day his sun shall shine in splendor  
when he the Savior, Savior of the world is known.

I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,  
 when, at his bidding, every storm is stilled,  
 or who can say how great the jubilation  
 when all the hearts of men with love are filled.  
 But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,  
 and myriad, myriad human voices sing,  
 and earth to heaven, and heaven to earth, will answer:  
 at last the Savior, Savior of the world is king!

*William Y. Fullerton (1929)*  
 Tune: LONDONDERRY

### Hymn: "We Sing"

*Mary Louise Bringle (2005)*  
 Tune: WE SING! (pp. 50-51 in this volume)



#### LET THE EARTH RESOUND WITH MUSIC

*Let the earth resound with music, highest mountain, deepest sea,  
 till all people, all creation, live and sing in harmony.  
 We will never cease to praise you, shout with voices clear and strong,  
 till all nations bow before you, till the whole world sings your song.*

### Scripture Reading: Revelation 15:2-4

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

"Great and amazing are your deeds,  
 Lord God the Almighty!  
 Just and true are your ways,  
 King of the nations!  
 Lord, who will not fear  
 and glorify your name?  
 For you alone are holy.  
 All nations will come  
 and worship before you,  
 for your judgments have been revealed."

*Hymn: "Let All the World"*

Let all the world in every corner sing:  
    my God and King!  
The heavens are not too high,  
his praise may thither fly;  
the earth is not too low,  
his praises there may grow.  
Let all the world in every corner sing:  
    my God and King!

Let all the world in every corner sing:  
    my God and King!  
The church with psalms must shout,  
no door can keep them out;  
but, above all, the heart  
must bear the longest part.  
Let all the world in every corner sing:  
    my God and King!

*George Herbert (1633)*  
*Tune: ALL THE WORLD*

*Silent Reflection*

Created anew in him and made perfect in a more plentiful grace,  
    we shall see in that eternal rest that it is he who is God,  
    he with whom we shall be filled....  
That day will be our eternal Sunday....  
There we shall be in peace and we shall see.  
    We shall see and we shall love.  
    We shall love and we shall worship.

*Augustine of Hippo (354-430)*

*Solo reprise (a cappella)*

Behold the glories of the Lamb  
amidst his father's throne.  
Prepare new honors for his name,  
and songs before unknown.



### *Benediction*

Almighty and ever living God,  
finish then thy new creation,  
pure and spotless let it be;  
let us see thy great salvation,  
perfectly restored in thee:  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee  
lost in wonder, love, and praise.<sup>3</sup>

### **NOTES**

1 In the unison response, which is the daily evening prayer from *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), the first part is adapted from the song of Simeon in Luke 2:29-32. The elderly prophet recognized the completeness of God's saving activity in Jesus Christ, and all who lay their pain and confess their sin before God have a share in Simeon's joyful song.

2 Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 65.

3 Based on Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (1747), verse 4.

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# Being Subject as We Sing

BY RANDY COOPER

**Singing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” is a political act that challenges all human categories and divisions. It can be a means of grace that unifies, that brings us into the life of the triune God as we learn submission to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

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*Ephesians 5:18-6:9*

**T**hough I have serenaded my beloved wife on more than one occasion in our thirty-two years of marriage, to be quite candid, she has never been swept off her feet by my singing to her. Yet this passage in Ephesians directs husbands and wives and other household members to sing to one another as we sing to God. When in worship we sing together and thus join our praises with the praises of the Son to the Father through the Holy Spirit, we participate in a weekly means of unifying grace. Or so the Apostle Paul seems to say.<sup>1</sup>

The first instruction is “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery” (5:18a). Do not empty a twenty-five dollar bottle of California wine, says Paul, and mistakenly think the buzz we feel is evidence of the presence of God. Rather than being filled with wine, we are to “be filled with the Spirit as [we] sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (5:18b-19a).<sup>2</sup> For Christians, worship is an intoxicating activity in which we enter the life of God through the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, our worship will include certain ongoing practices: “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” (5:19b-20). There is one additional ongoing practice that Paul associates with worship and singing, that of “[being] subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). You may notice that any recent Bible ver-

sion translates this verse as an imperative, “Be subject to one another....” These newer versions give the impression that Paul is changing the discussion as he moves from worship to household relationships. But the older King James Version is more accurate in translating the Greek participle as “submitting yourselves to one another.”

When we hold these opening verses together, they actually comprise one long sentence: “We are to be filled with the Spirit not through the intoxication of wine but the intoxication of worship, which involves the communal practices of singing to each other and to God, of singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, of making melody to the Lord, of giving thanks to God, and of *submitting to one another*” (5:18-21, my translation).

Suddenly the rest of our text takes on new meaning. Paul is painting a picture of wives and husbands, fathers and children, and masters and slaves learning how to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ as they worship and sing together. The foundational setting for embodying faithful household relationships is not the household itself, but the assembly that gathers for worship. If husbands and wives can sing together in worship, they may learn how to live together at home. The same for parents and children: let them sing together week after week and in their worship find a mutual love and respect. And despite our reactions to slavery, we can at least note Paul’s assumption that slaves and masters will worship together and in their singing learn something of mutual submission out of reverence for Christ.

It is quite a picture: the members of a household—including the young and the enslaved—singing together in worship and submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

### **A SHARE IN GOD’S ETERNAL “SINGING”**

Singing is more than making a joyful noise. God has given us singing and worshiping to break down categories of gender and age and race and class. In singing and worshiping, we enter the life of God through the Holy Spirit. If God’s Triune life is indeed one of mutual submission and love among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then as we become one body in Christ we share in God’s eternal “singing.”

How tragic when a congregation experiences conflict over music or singing! Many of the so-called “worship wars” are waged over the very practices of singing and music that God has given to the church to bring unity and peace. I recall the worried mother who attended a large congregation that offered multiple worship services every weekend. Her son and his family were members of the same church but attended one of the other services. The mother said in sorrow, “We don’t sing the same songs anymore.” One can only wonder what will happen to this family as the years of segregated worship mount. Their dilemma reminds us that some of the most vicious arguments in a church can take place over music and singing.

We all bear guilt for failures of imagination and love when such conflicts arise in our congregations.

But hear the gospel: it does not have to be that way. Music and singing can be a means of grace that makes the Body one.

There is one fellow pastor who has been a continual burr in my side. He and I have never seen eye-to-eye. When we have discussed the church

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**We all bear guilt for failures of imagination and love when conflicts over music arise in our congregations. It does not have to be that way. Singing can be a means of grace that makes the Body one.**

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and the gospel, we have never agreed. But I must say that he has a truly beautiful bass singing voice. On many occasions when we have worshiped together, I have sat beside him. When I have heard him sing, not only was he singing to God, he was singing to me. And, of course, I was singing to

him as well as to God. On these occasions our disagreements have seemed unimportant when we were singing and offering our prayers and praise to God. Singing emptied him and singing emptied me.

Do you think that Republicans and Democrats can at least sing together in worship? What about those who support the war in Iraq and those who don't—can they do the hard, yet joyful, work of singing together and emptying themselves in worship? Is it possible for Sunday School class members who cannot see eye-to-eye to gather in the sanctuary in order to submit themselves to each other as they submit to God?

Husbands and wives—singing to one another, standing shoulder to shoulder week after week, and serenading one another other as they sing to God. What might this practice mean for their home if they can sing as God intends?

Parents and children—the Apostle Paul dreams of teenagers holding one side of a hymnal and parents holding the other. Let them empty themselves before God Sunday after Sunday. Let them see what such a practice means over the course of eighteen years.

And, finally, masters and slaves. In our country, of course, they hardly ever worshiped together, and when they did, the slaves were forced to sit by themselves in the church balcony. We can only wonder if slavery in America would have ended sooner, or if its damage to our culture would have been less, if slaves and masters had worshiped together side by side, singing to one another. We know of Thomas Jefferson and his slave, Sally Hemings, who bore children by him. Do you suppose they ever sang psalms and hymns and spiritual songs together? All to say, true gospel singing is a political act that challenges all human categories and divisions.

### A GLIMPSE OF HEAVEN

The gospel word is that singing and music can be a means of grace that unifies, that brings us into the life of the triune God as we learn submission to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Jonathan Edwards, the early American philosopher and revivalist preacher, imagined life in heaven this way: "When I would form an idea of a society in the highest degree happy, I think of them...sweetly singing to each other."<sup>3</sup> Edwards enjoyed the happy hope that the heavenly community created by God will be filled with the sweet sound of people singing to one another.

We do not have to wait for the Final Day to enjoy a taste of heaven. Our worship is a foretaste of the heavenly life. If we sing as God intends, we will empty ourselves before God, and through the Holy Spirit we will enter the singing life of God. As we bow before God in submission, we will see that we have bowed to one another.

In the name of the Father. Amen.

### NOTES

1 Let not a sermon be the arena for debating the authorship of the letter to the Ephesians.

2 "Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" indicates a rich diversity of music and singing in the worship life of the Ephesian church. The implications for the present malpractice of segregating worship according to music styles and tastes are profound.

3 Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, 188.

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# Words of Comfort

BY G L E N N A M E T C A L F E

**Regardless of whether we have hymns memorized or not, they still have the words that provide comfort and healing when spoken or sung to us. We lift up through hymns the yearnings and joys of the human heart.**

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One Sunday evening when I was in the sixth grade, as I walked into our church sanctuary for worship, the organist, Frank Casebier, was sitting near the door. I stopped to talk to him and casually remarked that I would enjoy learning to play the organ. He took it as a challenge that evening to give of himself as my mentor, and so began our Sunday afternoon routine of organ lessons, ice cream, and visits with him and his wife, Betsey.

As I progressed in ability, he took me to other teachers in nearby cities for organ lessons. It was such a special time for me. He would pick me up at school and take me to my lesson, and afterward we would eat dinner at a nice restaurant. Frank and Betsey funded these organ lessons—not because they needed to, but because they wanted to. That was their gift to me—a gift that has forever changed my life.

When I was fourteen, Frank suffered a massive stroke from which he never fully recovered. After Frank left the hospital, he was cared for at home until his death two years later. During this time he was unable to talk, could not move around without help, cried easily, and seemed more like a tender child than an elderly man. I continued to practice the organ in Frank and Betsey's living room. Many times I would finish a piece, turn around to say something to him or to see his reaction, and he would be crying and smiling, with his hands awkwardly clasped together, trying to clap.

In that living room I began to understand the power of music and the comfort that it brings. Frank and I were not able to communicate as we had before, for words did not come easily, nor did comprehension. Yet we

experienced a wordless bond through music and it was only in those moments that I was sure he remembered our past together. Music became a wordless ministry to both him and me. It was a comfort.

Music has a pastoral and ministering effect on those who listen, which is as ancient as the Hebrew Scriptures: “And whenever an evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his lyre and play it, so that relief would come to Saul; he would recover and the evil spirit would leave him alone” (1 Samuel 16:23, CEV).<sup>1</sup> Music alone has such power. It can stir our emotions, inspire us, lift our spirits, and bring about commitment and action.

On a survey I distributed within my church family, one request read, “Share a time when music brought you comfort.” Jerry wrote:

During my junior year in high school I had an eye injury. The ophthalmologist said I had a 50/50 chance of losing my sight in that eye. He put patches on both eyes and I was basically blind for ten days. That first night, someone brought me record albums—a Bill Cosby comedy record and others. One of the songs on another album was “I just want to celebrate another day of living.” It was very upbeat and reminded me that if I lost my sight, I could still celebrate life.<sup>2</sup>

If just *music* can do these things, composer Fred Bock reminds us, what greater powers can we expect from *sacred music*?<sup>3</sup>

I was blessed to be part of a group of about sixty members from my church who gathered outside Will’s house on his fiftieth birthday for a surprise serenade. Our cars lined his residential street and everyone congregated in his front yard. Children, teenagers, parents, retirees—all there to give comfort and support to hopefully brighten his day—complete with flowers and a birthday cake! As many as possible stood in the entrance way of the house, while Will listened from the top of the stairs. We sang “Happy Birthday,” “Peace Like a River,” “Amazing Grace,” and “It Is Well,” and then we prayed. It was an extremely moving experience for me. I was surrounded by people I love—my kids, my church family, my friends—and I saw a Christian spirit in a man whose life was coming to an end. Lung cancer was causing Will’s body to slowly die, yet he radiated with an inward peace and trust in God.

The hymns of the Church are a comforting presence, not only in worship services, but also in places far removed from a sanctuary. They are with us in the many experiences of daily living—moments of joy and contentment, as well as times of grief, pain, and tragedy. I am reminded of Ben, a hometown friend of mine who died several years ago. When he was told that he was dying with AIDS and that there was no cure, he said that the greatest comfort and peace he found was sitting down at the piano and

playing hymns. Ben would play through the hymnal from start to finish and this sustained him through his illness.

I would venture to say that most of us can recall more hymn texts than scripture texts. So, couldn't we offer hymns, sung or spoken, to a person in need? In my survey I asked, "If you were in the hospital or in a crisis situation, would it comfort you to have one or more people sing hymns to

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**Most of us can recall more hymn texts than scripture texts. So, couldn't we offer hymns, sung or spoken, to a person in need?**

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you?" The majority felt that the singing of hymns would be a blessing and a ministry. Because this is not a universal opinion, one might ask the person in crisis if they prefer that the hymns be spoken. The

brief opening line of a familiar hymn is enough to remind them of God's healing and caring love. Familiar hymns provide comfort when recalled by a person in need.

An elderly invalid woman, confined to the upper floor of her home, said, "Sometimes when I am in my room alone at night, I feel lonesome. But I begin repeating hymns I know from memory, starting at the beginning of the alphabet— 'A Mighty Fortress,' 'Abide With Me,' and so on. Before long, I drop off to sleep in peace." This story reminds us that hymns are a part of us; they are our companions along our journey. When hymns are in our memory, they come to us, consciously or unconsciously, to support us.

Regardless of whether we have hymns memorized or not, they still have the words that provide comfort and healing when spoken or sung to us by others. We lift up through hymns the yearnings and joys of the human heart. On the survey Faye wrote:

While my mother was in the hospital and nursing home for several months, the music in our worship services was a great comfort to me. I was unable to participate in choir during that time, but I looked forward to the music each Sunday. It helped relieve the stress of caring for my mother and reminded me of God's love. Sometimes music has helped me to cry after I had been unable to cry. Such experiences were very therapeutic.

Brenda wrote very eloquently about how music has ministered to her:

My family met the Robinson family at Weight Watchers. They travel around the United States, singing at fairs and other engagements. They invited us to their New Year's Eve party.

My brother, Gee, said, "Let's go; if we don't care for the music, we can always leave." We went; we stayed. Something happened



that night other than our being entertained. As Mary Ruth Robinson, the mother, walked through the audience singing, I felt as though an angel walked among us, that we were being sprinkled with “angel dust.” My brother, sister-in-law, sister, and I came away from that evening feeling good, uplifted, and blessed!

On January 8, my brother was severely burned. When the Robinson family became aware of this, they came to the hospital. We asked if they would sing for Gee. They sang a song we had never heard called “I Hope You Dance.” This song became “our” song. They sang other songs, too, and stayed with us throughout that night and the next day. They were just there. They returned several times and always sang for Gee. I don’t remember what they sang; I just know we felt comforted, not only with their singing, but by their presence.

Glenna, it seems the human body is the vehicle of music through the voice, through the playing of an instrument, but when the human ego gets out of the way, the Comforter comes through the music, the Comforter that Christ said He would send.

Music is symbolic of love. It reminds us that we are loved by others. But, more importantly, music surrounds us with the assurance that God loves, God cares, and God is able.

## NOTES

1 Scriptures marked as “CEV” are taken from the Contemporary English Version Copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society. Used by permission.

2 I have changed the names of the following church members and friends, but not their stories.

3 Fred Bock, “Let’s Hear It for Eclecticism,” *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, 28 (Fall 1994), 213-215.



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# Nurturing the Congregation's Voice

BY C. DAVID BOLIN

Every congregation is an unmatched creation with lessons to learn about its voice—what music it is intended to make and what music is meant for another congregation. These lessons can be learned through the disciplines of hearing, joining, sounding, remembering, and coaching their voice.

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Familiar sounds reverberate through the room just as they do in any church fellowship hall—the comfortable, friendly sounds of people at ease with one another. They both know each other's stories and share a common one. There is laughter at the telling and retelling, and there are interruptions as latecomers are welcomed to the table, the sugar is passed, or a child demands her mother's attention. This conversational cadence, however, is unique. I've heard nothing like it before. At one moment it is soft and song-like, then it quickly turns loud and staccato. My slow Texas drawl cannot sync up with the rhythm of this Hawaiian island church where I have come as minister of music—to encourage and enable this voice I hear.

Yet, I am aware that these gentle folk have more to teach me than I them. They know their song, the song I dare to join and, even more audaciously, lead. My lips attempt to pronounce the family names—Miyashiro, Galacia, Kuroiwa, and Matsui. Thank the Lord for a few names like Cook and Edwards! As the years pass, there is still the occasional giggle as I give directions to the picnic at Kawaikui Beach Park, and never is there need to announce my name over the phone—whoever answers immediately knows on hearing my voice. I listen with amazement as my children are born into

this voice sounding like any “local,” while I am unable to shake my drawl.

Then comes the day when someone says, “Your voice is what we find charming about you.” I have always been grateful for those words. They put in perspective the voice of this and every other congregation. We have all journeyed from somewhere: the descendants of immigrants who worked Hawaii’s sugar plantations, the military families, the couple from the Northeast who moved with their children in search of unending summer, and the strong, beautiful Polynesians whose ancestors navigated the vast Pacific guided by the stars. My Oahu congregation is made of people from many places who in spite of their mother tongue have sought and found a common voice.

When pastors, music ministers, or church members listen deeply to the voice of their congregation, they realize the sacred responsibility of calling it forth. Any suggestion that it should be made to sound like another voice will seem as ludicrous as proposing a bird should imitate a frog. I still chuckle at the mega-church that beamed to Hawaii a satellite conference on how island churches could become like their North Dallas congregation. I remember the puzzled expression on a Hawaiian boy’s face when someone with a mainland youth choir said that one day by God’s grace, our choir might be as big as theirs. Quit listening to the voice of your congregation and the temptation grows strong to be big, to be loud, to be on the “cutting edge,” and to obliterate the voice’s God-given uniqueness.

One need not travel to faraway places to hear a congregation’s “special music.” As I said, it can be heard in most any church building. “How blessed are the people who know the joyful sound!” (Psalm 89:15, NASB).<sup>1</sup> The people at any church—even your church—long for the sound and know it when they hear it. All too often it has been lost as a succession of pastors and music ministers ride in on the wave of the latest trend and are pulled under by the next new thing. Paul warned the Ephesians about riding the waves of changing doctrine, gimmicks, and schemes (Ephesians 4:11-16). Pastors and teachers are gifted to equip the saints, build the body of Christ, and avoid musical gimmickry until the congregation attains unity and finds common voice.

Hawaiians know all about surfing, but the music I remember of my congregation there sounded not like the waves but a valley stream—ever running, singing, and nourishing the weary traveler who kneels on its banks for a drink. It’s the “spring of water welling up to eternal life” of which Jesus spoke (John 4:14, NIV).<sup>2</sup> The banks limit yet direct the water’s flow. Build a high wall on a third side and the flowing water will overflow its banks and make mud as it is lost to the earth. Build a wall on a fourth side and the water will become a stagnant pond. The music minister (every church member should assume this title) keeps the water flowing, respecting the limitations that direct the flow while eliminating its barriers.

The limitations as well as the possibilities of a congregation’s voice are

realized through the gifts and abilities of its people—the old and the young, the musically literate and illiterate, the talented and the ones who struggle to find their singing voice. Knowledge of the congregation should guide decisions about music for worship, education, mission, and ministry. Make pronouncements apart from such an understanding, and barriers will be built. “We’re blended (or contemporary, or traditional).” Such state-

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**Make musical pronouncements apart from knowledge of the congregation's voice, and barriers will be built. “We’re blended (or contemporary, or traditional).” Such statements can dam a flowing stream into a stagnant pond or muddy mess.**

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ments can dam a flowing stream into a stagnant pond or muddy mess. Will the classically trained vocalist be allowed to join the voice of the new church in the suburbs? Will the gospel singer’s improvisations be considered “charming” by the hundred-year-old church downtown? A congregation’s voice is a stream deeper and broader

than its members ever suspect. But it also has been directed in its course by traditions, history, the worship space, and countless other factors making it unlike the voice of any other congregation.

So, how does a congregation sound its singular voice in all its diversity? How can the living water be directed without building a dam? To answer these questions, we will consider five ongoing activities that keep the stream flowing onward and singing its song. Each activity may be most clearly observed as a particular age group encounters it for the first time, but all will be experienced many times over.

#### **HEARING THE VOICE**

The boy Samuel heard a voice calling in the night. So real was the call that he supposed it to be Eli, the high priest with whom he was living. Children are particularly attuned to God’s voice. It calls to them inviting exploration of the world God has made. They listen to what big people tuned out long ago. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17).

Children encounter their first sounds in the home. This is where they learn their language skills and discover music. What they hear tells them who their parents and siblings are and consequently who they are themselves. They also learn what is important to their family—the values by which they live. An embarrassed mother exclaims to the school principal that she has no idea where her kindergartner could have learned such a word. The principal knows—most likely the child learned it at home.

The ancient Israelites were instructed to introduce their children to God (in Deuteronomy 6:4-7, NIV):

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Young parents should be encouraged to read Scripture to their children and listen to their bedtime prayers. Parents should also be the voice of praise within their home and bring that voice with them to worship on Sunday morning. Children learn to pray by hearing their parents pray, and they learn to sing by hearing their parents sing. When dad will not open his hymnal, chances are that junior will not either.

Hearing the voice only begins in childhood. One must continue to listen intently to the world of song in all its diversity. Listen like a child for the voice that speaks in, to, and through your congregation.

### **JOINING THE VOICE**

Just as you and I have a voice, so does the congregation. As we hear the larger voice in all its beauty and power, we may wonder what our voices could possibly add. Indeed, many people are afraid to join the congregation in its song for this reason. They do not want to hear their seemingly inadequate voice against the beauty of the collective singing.

This insecurity first becomes apparent in adolescence with questions like “Do I fit in?” and “What makes me special?” Mom and dad’s opinions no longer count—not as much as the opinions of teens’ peers and the people they may fantasize as their peers. The exploration of God’s world begun in childhood turns inward as appearance and personality are evaluated for their worthiness in joining a social order outside the home. Contemporary culture rushes in to set the standard. Celebrity tied to marketing and product restricts teens to a certain way of looking, being, and acting. It dictates the music and mores for acceptance in a world that celebrates the moment and makes a good time the ultimate goal.

The congregation abides by a different standard—it is love. Love says people have worth unfettered by what is fashionable. Love insists that God has gifted everyone and that each gift is to be honored as important to the congregation’s life and voice. Love provides a mirror truer than culture by which teens can acknowledge their strengths and accept their limitations. The congregation helps them find the songs that fit their voices. When a congregation listens, encourages, and provides occasions for its members’ gifts to be used, it invites them into its fellowship in a way that the mere completion of a membership card cannot. Even as Paul admonished Timo-

thy, the congregation encourages teens to “kindle afresh the gift of God” and to do so with “power and love and discipline” (2 Timothy 1:6, NASB). Teens join a larger family than the ones into which they were born. Accepted as children of the congregation, they join in its song. Choirs, bands, solos, scripture reading, and public prayer are all ways that people in their teens and older can unite their voices to the voice of the congregation.

The psalmist said, “O magnify the LORD with me; and let us exalt his name together” (Psalm 34:3). This is an invitation for everyone to join the congregation’s song. The adolescent learns how to join the congregation’s voice, and the congregation learns how to join the Voice that calls all things into being.

### **SOUNDING THE VOICE**

Though contemporary culture must not set the standard by which the congregation sings its song, the congregation does exist within culture and relates to it. The congregation’s voice is meant to proclaim God’s word as did Jesus, so that the people of the world might know joy (John 17:13). The question of how to relate to culture as citizens of God’s kingdom becomes of primary interest to young adults as they begin their journey through life—establishing their careers, starting their families, and finding their places in both the world and congregation.

The starting place on the journey for each generation of young adults is different from that of any previous generation, though the fears, hopes, and excitement are much the same. They are entering new territory, beginning at the place to which previous generations have brought them and following visions of what could be (Joel 2:28). This spirit of adventure is often associated with bravado that exceeds acquired wisdom. The time has come to sound their voice and hear what echoes back. This sounding is necessary and is how the congregation restores its passion. Older generations may not appreciate this new song, for young adults may change direction in their musical preference. Everyone, though, should remember that the voice is a work in progress as a new generation adds its vocal line to the chorus that generations to come will add to again.

### **REMEMBERING THE VOICE**

Music has a power to transport us to times and places different than our own. When a congregation sings the songs of the ages, it is affirming that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Not only by their words, but also and especially by their music, songs bear witness to our struggles and triumphs. Through association, a cherished song will carry with it memories of other times and places where it was heard or sung. Congregations should celebrate the memories attached to songs. A young adult sings a chorus and is transported back to youth camp a decade before. A middle-aged adult hears a hymn, and a departed parent again sits near her in the pew.

Senior adults best understand this power. That is why you will hear them ask to sing the old songs again and again. They are trying not to dominate the church's music-making, but to pass on the meaning of their lives to the younger generations. The Bible urges us all to "Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past" (Deuteronomy 32:7, NIV). Seniors simply are asking not to be forgotten and, more importantly, they are providing memories, the carriers of life experience, which can enrich the songs of those who follow.

### **COACHING THE VOICE**

Singing requires coordination between the mind, body, and spirit, and a good voice teacher helps students achieve it. Coaching begins with posture—the body properly aligned so that its muscles are in optimum position and relationship to each other to do their work. Good breathing, for example, depends on controlled tension between muscles of inhalation and exhalation. This balance provides the right breath support to the vocal cords so sound can be produced. And so it goes, through the processes of phonation, resonance, and articulation. Serious singing is serious business, and even accomplished singers are greatly helped by a coach, someone who can spot potential problems and offer healthy concepts that will enable their voices to achieve their prime.

Coaches are also needed for the congregation's voice. The coach helps maintain the balance between the hearing, joining, sounding, and remembering activities necessary to the congregation's song. When children are not taught the music by which they can learn the language of praise, the coach becomes educator. When teens are not given opportunities to join the congregation's voice, the coach becomes advocate. When the unguided

visions of young adults turn to disillusionment, the coach becomes mentor. When the songs of yesterday are blasted away by the electric guitar, the coach becomes storyteller reciting the history that gives birth to the present.

Middle-aged adults are particularly suited by their experience to keep the dynamic in balance. Many are parents to children or adolescents. They have developed discernment through their young-adult years and are learning the nature of senior adulthood as they care for parents. "One generation will commend your works to another," proclaimed the psalmist (Psalm 145:4a). Median adults maintain the lines of commendation so that each generation might be a source of blessing to the others.

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**Music can transport us to times and places different than our own. When a congregation sings the songs of the ages, it is affirming that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."**

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## VOICE LESSONS

Every congregation is an unmatched creation, for no two churches have enjoyed the same history, met the same challenges, been led by the same ministers, or been composed of the same members. The work of creation is unending as folks come and go and new circumstances arise to which the congregation must respond by God's grace. The congregation's voice is a part of this work. It is being fashioned according to God's purpose and for God's glory. A proverb cautions, "you do not know what a day may bring forth" (Proverbs 27:1b, NIV). One could also say, "you do not know what a congregation's voice will bring forth!"

It is the same lesson that every parent must learn—what can be done to mold a child and what cannot. Parents come to understand that there is a lot about their child's future they will be unable to control. Whom will he marry? What will her career be? How many grandchildren will be born? Nevertheless, parents can cooperate with God's design by providing for the child's physical well being along with a stable home environment, spiritual and educational opportunities, and all the love and encouragement that is theirs to give. After that, all that remains is to watch with wonder as each day unfolds.

So too, there are lessons for every congregation to learn about its voice—what music it is intended to make and what music is meant for another congregation. The lessons can be learned through the disciplines of hearing, joining, sounding, remembering, and coaching the voice. Then all that will remain is to listen with wonder as the song comes to be.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1 Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. ([www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org))

2 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright©1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

3 I develop the ideas in this article in Terry W. York and C. David Bolin, *The Voice of Our Congregation: Seeking and Celebrating God's Song for Us* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005).



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# U2: Unexpected Prophets

BY STEVEN R. HARMON

Arguably the most successful rock band in the world, U2 not only cries out against injustice, but also dares to imagine an alternative in light of the Christian vision. The band searchingly examines the distortions of our world and proclaims with Scripture “the place that has to be believed to be seen” and “where the streets have no name.” Will we hear them?

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The function of a Hebrew prophet is to bring “the divine reality directly to bear on the sphere of moral conduct,” Walther Eichrodt famously noted.<sup>1</sup> Prophets envision and proclaim how God’s goals for the world are relevant to the way we live in the present. Since that is what theologians, whether they minister in a local church or teach in the academy, seek to do, we *expect* to hear prophetic words from them.

Yet even the most widely recognized pastors and professors do not have the ears of as many people as do vocalist Bono (Paul Hewson), guitarist The Edge (Dave Evans), bass player Adam Clayton, and drummer Larry Mullen, Jr., members of the Irish rock band U2. These Christian believers, arguably the most successful rock band in the world with a discography and touring history spanning a quarter of a century, are unexpected prophets. In their music they imagine, through their glimpses of the divine reality, a world that might be. Several recurring themes mark the band’s imagination as distinctively Christian.

## **GROUNDING IMPLICITLY IN WORSHIP**

Healthy Christian theology must be rooted in the worship of the Church: “The rule of praying is the rule of believing,” the ancient theologians maintained.<sup>2</sup> Although U2’s music is written not for services of

Christian worship but for concert tour performances in arenas and stadiums, it still has an implicitly liturgical context. “They’re all songs of praise to God and creation—even the angry ones!” Bono said in a recent “People in the News” interview on CNN.<sup>3</sup>

In U2’s live concerts, the context of “praise to God” frequently moves from the background to center stage. “Gloria”—a song from the band’s

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**Most concerts of the 2005 Vertigo Tour sent the twenty- to eighty-thousand members of each “congregation” out into the world singing words adapted from Psalm 6:3, “How long to sing this song?” That doesn’t happen at a typical rock concert.**

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second album, *October* (1981), that has been featured again in recent performances—incorporates the opening words of three psalms in Latin: *In te domine*, “In you, O Lord” (Psalm 31); *Exultate*, “Rejoice” (Psalm 33); and *Miserere*, “Have mercy” (Psalm 51). Indeed, the Psalter is a significant influence on U2’s Christian imagination, and Bono con-

tributed the preface for a pocket version of the Psalms published recently in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

During the band’s world tours in 1983, 1984-85, 1987, and 1989-90, the concerts customarily ended with “40,” a paraphrase of Psalm 40 with a refrain lifted from Psalm 6:3. After the band had left the stage, concertgoers would continue to sing this refrain, “How long to sing this song?” as they made their way out of the arenas and into the parking lots. The refrain from “40” served as the transition between “Bad” (*The Unforgettable Fire*, 1984) and U2’s signature song, “Where the Streets Have No Name” (*The Joshua Tree*, 1987), in many of the concerts of the 2001 Elevation Tour, the final concert of which concluded with “40.” Most concerts of the 2005 Vertigo Tour once again sent the twenty- to eighty-thousand members of each “congregation” out into the world singing these words adapted from the Psalter. That’s something that doesn’t happen at a typical rock concert.

Nor do rock concerts normally spotlight a lead singer who gestures heavenward with an uplifted hand when singing lyrics addressed to God, kneels in prayer onstage, recites the psalms, or works bits of hymns into the set list. During the segue into “Where the Streets Have No Name” in some concerts of the Elevation Tour, Bono knelt and quoted Psalm 116 from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* paraphrase. At the same point in U2’s halftime performance at the 2002 Super Bowl, Bono’s recitation of Psalm 51:15—“O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth show forth thy praise”—closely paralleled the invitatory responsive reading in the Morning Prayer service of the (Anglican) Church of Ireland’s *Book of Common Prayer*:

O Lord, open thou our lips  
*And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.*  
 O God, make speed to save us;  
*O Lord, make haste to help us.*<sup>5</sup>

The familiar hymn “Amazing Grace” has made occasional appearances in U2 concerts over the years, most recently at the end of “Running to Stand Still” (*The Joshua Tree*) during concerts in Berlin and Paris after the London terrorist bombings in July 2005.

The standard “second encore” in the concerts of the first leg of the *Vertigo Tour*, dubbed the “worship encore” by one online fan reviewer, featured a trio of songs directed toward God: “Yahweh,” “40,” and “All Because of You” (in which “I am” in the lyric “All because of you/I am” is a double entendre referring both to the singer’s existence grounded in God and to the God who is the ground of existence). These echoes and outright expressions of Christian liturgy point toward the context and content of U2’s Christian imagination: God and creation.

#### **STEEPED IN THE BIBLICAL STORY**

The Christian imagination must be formed by the story around which the worshipping Christian community gathers—the story told by the Bible. In bringing the divine reality to bear on human existence in their songs, U2 alludes frequently to Scripture. One Internet fan site, though it is not yet exhaustive, identifies approximately one hundred biblical references in U2’s lyrics.<sup>6</sup>

Some songs retell biblical stories. “Until the End of the World” (*Achtung Baby*, 1991) is set during Christ’s descent to the dead on Holy Saturday and imagines from Judas’ point of view the aftermath of his betrayal of Jesus. “The First Time” (*Zooropa*, 1993) retells the parable of the prodigal son with this interesting twist: after being welcomed home by the waiting father and receiving his gifts, the wayward son soon “left by the back door and threw away the key”; nevertheless, he is pursued by his father and continues to feel the father’s love despite his seemingly final rejection of it. “Vertigo,” the lead track from 2004’s *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, is rich in allusions to Jesus’ wilderness temptations. The song’s video underscores these connections through its desert-like setting and the band’s descent into a dark abyss as Bono intones, “All of this, all of this can be yours / Just give me what I want, and noone gets hurt.”

These and many other songs make sense only in light of the biblical stories in which they are rooted. But their deepest import may be veiled from those who do not share the framework of biblical narrative out of which the U2 catalog offers a distinctively Christian rendering of the world. In a conversation with a journalist about the difficulties inherent in singing about faith while being acclaimed as the most popular rock band in the world, Bono said, “We’ve found different ways of expressing it, and

recognized the power of the media to manipulate such signs. Maybe we just have to sort of draw our fish in the sand. It's there for people who are interested. It shouldn't be there for people who aren't." As with the parables of Jesus, the effect is often "that 'looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand'" (Luke 8:10b).

### **PORTRAYING THE TRIUNE GOD**

Christians do not worship a generic deity, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who made Israel the people of God, was incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, and continues to send the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower the Church. While U2's songs are not theological treatises on the Trinity, they do portray the divine reality in these specifically Christian terms.

The One whose name was disclosed as "Yahweh" is the ultimate audience for their music, and the Name is honored in the title for the final track on *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* and the penultimate song in most concerts of the Vertigo Tour. Scattered throughout the U2 catalogue are references to the persons of the Trinity. In "Wake Up Dead Man" (*Pop*, 1997), a brutally honest prayer of lament addressed to Jesus on an existentialized Holy Saturday awaiting the resurrection, Jesus is the Son of the Father who is "in charge of heaven" and "made the world in seven." On *Achtung Baby*, the Holy Spirit is "God's only dove" (in "So Cruel") and is identified with the biblical personification of Wisdom, she who "moves in mysterious ways" (in "Mysterious Ways"). One song, "The First Time," is fully triadic with verses that correspond to the persons of the Trinity: "I have a lover..." the Spirit; "I have a brother..." the Son; and "My father is a rich man..."

The early church found it necessary to narrate its story of salvation in triadic fashion, for the earliest Christians had experienced the saving work of Yahweh in the risen Christ and the indwelling Spirit, and they believed that only the one God could save. When U2 sings about the divine, the band likewise finds it impossible to do so without this distinctively Christian understanding of God pervading the lyrics.

### **SHARING CHRISTIAN HOPE**

Eschatology, the doctrine of Christian theology that focuses on the "last things" for which Christians hope, often is distorted by two extreme and inadequate perspectives on God's work in the world. A wholly realized eschatology has no need of a future hope: it has the fullness of salvation, "the power of his resurrection," now and is quite satisfied with life as it is. It has little place for "the sharing of his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10) as a paradigm for the Christian life. On the other hand, a wholly future eschatology gives up on the present world as the arena of God's reconciling work and waits instead for a new heaven and a new earth that are radically discontinuous with the present order.

The eschatology of the Bible as interpreted by the mainstream Christian tradition, however, maintains a tension between the “already” and the “not yet”: the reign of God is at hand and people have the opportunity to participate in it in the here and now, but it is not yet fully realized and cannot become so without the participation of people in the reign of God. This tension is the key theological concept for understanding the spiritual significance of U2’s music.

This already/not yet tension echoes in the psalms of lament scattered throughout U2’s music. The cry “How long?” rises from the first and final tracks of *War* (1983), an album filled with prophetic awareness of the not-yet-transformed nature of the world on the one hand and hope for its transformation on the other. “Sunday Bloody Sunday” recalls the 1972 massacre by British paratroopers of Northern Irish protesters against British occupation, an event that became a “battle call” for IRA enlistment campaigns, but Bono sings “I won’t heed the battle call.” Instead, he holds forth the hope that “tonight we can be as one” if people “claim the victory Jesus won”—yet he must continue to ask “How long? How long must we sing this song?” Similarly, the “How long?” refrain in “40” balances the new things that have come in God’s saving work—“He brought me up out of the pit, out of the miry clay” and “You set my feet upon a rock, and made my footsteps firm”—with the plea for God to make all things fully new: “How long to sing this song?”

This tension is most clearly rendered in “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” (*The Joshua Tree*). The “already” dimension of Christian faith is stated in no uncertain terms: “You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains/carried the cross and all my shame.” But even that has not yet completely transformed all that is wrong with the world (or the singer): “But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” On *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, “Yahweh” voices a similar hope: “Always pain before a child is born...still I’m waiting for the dawn.”

When Vertigo Tour concertgoers were sent out into the world singing “How long to sing this song?” tens of thousands strong, they were leaving an event that many characterized as a transcendent experience—perhaps for many people it was an encounter with God—with a sung reminder that outside the concert arena all is not as it should be and that their lives should have something to do with changing that.

### **BASING SALVATION IN GRACE**

As Christians we believe that God grants salvation and wholeness by grace; it is not something we attain by human merit. Or as “Grace,” the final track on *All That You Can’t Leave Behind* (2000), describes grace personified, “She travels outside of karma.” In other words, grace is alien to the common expectation that people ultimately get what they deserve.

Bono recently offered these thoughts on grace in a series of interviews:

You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics—in physical laws—every action is met by an equal or an opposite one.... And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that.... Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions,

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**U2's songs about God's grace are about "costly grace," for they demand that we view the injustices of this world through Christian lenses and identify with those who are marginalized.**

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which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff.... It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to

depend on my own religiosity.... The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled.... It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of Heaven.<sup>8</sup>

Grace, of course, not only is at work in our redemption, but also is the foundation of our very existence as a creature made for relationship with God. Augustine began his *Confessions*, "You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you."<sup>9</sup> Bono echoes this idea in "Mofo" (*Pop*), in which the singer is "lookin' for to fill that God-shaped hole."<sup>10</sup> The song "All Because of You" associates not only the creation of life but also the creation of the cosmos with God's gracious work: "I was born a child of grace" and "I saw you in the curve of the moon" leading to the confession, "All because of you/I am."

#### **CALLING FOR PROPHETIC SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

No expression of Christianity that is worthy of its namesake can proclaim what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace," the idea that salvation is an individual affair and has no impact on how one lives in society.<sup>11</sup> U2's songs about God's grace are rather about Bonhoeffer's "costly grace," for they demand that we view the injustices of this world through Christian lenses and identify with those who are marginalized. Identification with those who suffer injustice is the proper response to our receiving God's grace. Thus, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, the album that ends with "Grace," begins with "Beautiful Day," a song about Jubilee 2000 (a



movement that encourages rich nations to reduce some of the international debt owed by poorer countries), which specifies the motive for seeking economic justice: "Someone you could lend a hand/In return for grace."

Beginning with the album *War*, multiple songs on each album have brought the divine reality to bear on the sphere of social morality. Each of the first three songs of *War* addressed a social issue: the fighting in Northern Ireland ("Sunday Bloody Sunday"), nuclear proliferation ("Seconds"), and the plight of Soviet political prisoners and the promise of the Polish Solidarity movement ("New Year's Day"). Through the years, other songs have offered a Christian protest against violence in Northern Ireland: for example, "Love is Blindness" (*Achtung Baby*), "Please" (*Pop*), and "Peace on Earth" (*All That You Can't Leave Behind*). "Pride (In the Name of Love)" from *The Unforgettable Fire* memorialized the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the American struggle for civil rights, and "Silver and Gold" (*Rattle and Hum*, 1988) lent support to Desmond Tutu's call for economic sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa. "Bullet the Blue Sky" (*The Joshua Tree*) originally cast a spotlight on American support for repressive military dictatorships in Central America, and retooled versions of the song in later concert tours have addressed the international arms trade and the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal. Two songs on *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, "Miracle Drug" and "Crumbs from Your Table," have joined the previous album's "Beautiful Day" in taking up the cause of Africa's need for debt relief, medical intervention, and trade reform.

In these and other songs of social engagement, Bono and U2 continue to be unexpected prophets. They not only cry out against injustice, but also dare to imagine an alternative in light of the Christian vision. They searchingly examine the distortions of our world and proclaim with Scripture "the place that has to be believed to be seen," the place "where the streets have no name." Will we hear them?

#### **RESOURCES FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION**

U2's lyrics, songs, and concert videos, which are available through the band's official website [www.u2.com](http://www.u2.com), make ideal discussion starters for youth Bible studies on the themes in this article, but youth leaders should be judicious in their selections.<sup>12</sup>

Three fine books explore the connections between the music of U2 and Christian faith. *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2*, revised edition (Orlando, FL: Relevant Books, 2005) by Steve Stockman, a Presbyterian minister and chaplain at Queen's University in Belfast, has been updated to include *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* (2004) and the 2005 Vertigo Tour. Episcopal priests Raewynne J. Whitely and Beth Maynard recently edited and contributed to *Get Up off Your Knees: Preaching the U2 Catalog* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2003), a collection of sermons that employ U2's art to communicate the Gospel. An appendix provides study

guides for adult spiritual formation groups. And soon to be published is *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006) by Christian Scharen, a Lutheran minister and associate director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture.

## NOTES

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3 "Profiles of U2 and the Dave Matthews Band," *CNN People in the News*, aired 14 May 2005, 17:00 ET (<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/050514/pitn.01.html>, accessed 26 November 2005).

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7 Bill Flanagan, *U2 at the End of the World* (New York, NY: Delta, 1995), 480.

8 Michka Assayas, *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2005), 203-204.

9 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* 1.1.1. This translation is by Maria Boulding in John E. Rotelle, ed., *The Confessions*, part 1, volume 1 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 39.

10 Bono's phrase is closer to the expression of this Augustinian idea by Blaise Pascal in *Pensées*, 11.181. See *Pensées and Other Writings*, translated by Honor Levi (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 52.

11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated by R. H. Fuller (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1995), 43-56.

12 Bono's occasional lapses into the language of the streets of Dublin do not serve as the best model for Christian speech. For instance, in the *Rattle and Hum* concert film, Bono uses the "f-word" to denounce IRA terrorist attacks in a passionate performance of "Sunday Bloody Sunday" on the evening of the November 7, 1987, bombing in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, that killed eleven people and wounded sixty-three others. In the song "Wake Up Dead Man" (*Pop*) and the Boston and Slane Castle concert DVDs from the 2001 Elevation Tour, he laments to Jesus, "I'm alone in this world/ And a [messed]-up world it is, too" (expletive deleted). Many parents will not consider that acceptable language for Christian youth, and they may want to preview CDs and DVDs and make decisions about what they will allow their youth to listen to and view.



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# Music as a Spiritual Practice

BY MARK J. SUDERMAN

Christians often disagree about what music to choose for worship and even about its function within the liturgy. Three books follow different paths to clarifying music's role in worship, particularly in congregational singing.

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Most Christians would agree that music is an important aspect of their worship and is a vital complement to other spiritual practices. Yet within our congregations and between them we may disagree strongly about what music to choose for worship and even about its function within the liturgy. Three books follow different paths in clarifying music's role in worship, particularly in congregational singing.

## **BRINGING GOOD SINGING INTO WORSHIP**

In *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991, 122 pp., \$5.95), Alice Parker warmly invites us to think with her by beginning each chapter with an imagined conversation between a representative church musician and herself. Then Parker, who is a noted composer, clinician, and scholar of congregational singing, jumps right in to talk about the crux of issues regarding singing and song leading that churches face today. Her no-nonsense approach makes easy reading for the lay person, but also pushes the trained musician to think carefully about norms typically assumed in congregational singing.

Parker emphasizes the pressing need for song in churches today, for good singing can produce good congregational life by modeling a way for members to work and live with one another. Singing is able to foster unity among members and with God. Yet she stresses that not all of our singing in worship is *good singing*. Congregations must work at singing well: their members must study it, leaders teach it, and musicians expertly lead it. She fears that very rarely today can one find a congregation with an unbroken tradition of good singing, in which the children have grown up hearing their parents, friends, and peers sing. Our culture has drifted away from

this type of music-making, she warns, moving instead toward a diet of letting others produce sounds for us, either for our entertainment or for their purposes of advertising. There is a need to bring back the congregational voice that, in Parker's words, is "the heart of all church music" (p. 7).

To recapture its voice, Parker suggests, a congregation first needs a "vision" of the sound it wants. The key to this sound starts with the mel-

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**Alice Parker encourages the church to continue searching for the best union of good theology with good music, for our senses and minds must work together if we are to "see" God through the arts.**

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ody: hearing it, shaping it, bringing it to life with the human voice. (Parker includes a brief account of the history of melody.) A song leader initiates the song and models the melody, and the congregation responds to this. Church members do not need to be able to read every note; it is more important for them

to hear the music and re-create it in the best way possible. "Music is sound, and the better it sounds, the better it is—and the more people will be caught by it" (p. 34).

Song leaders must understand each song in its entirety—not only its music, but also its words and their meaning in context. Only then can they share a song with the entire congregation, inviting the participants to respond in the best possible way. Musical accompaniment can support singing in various ways, but Parker strongly believes that the best singing occurs when no musical instruments are used, when hymns are led by a person, not by an organ or piano or other instrument.

Parker encourages the church to continue searching for the best union of good theology with good music, for our senses and minds must work together if we're to have an opportunity to "see" God through the arts. Regarding the source of church music, she is broad and eclectic: we need music that speaks to the emotions, concerns, and needs of everyday living, whether it is drawn from the realm of folk music or is composed music.

All the key people involved in planning a worship time—the pastor, song leader, liturgist, poet, visual artist, and so on—must collaborate with and show respect for one another, and remember why and for whom they are planning this worship. "There is no reason for music unless it communicates, and it should communicate to our minds, hearts, and spirits," Parker concludes (p. 56). Music is a gift from God, and it is during worship (and other times in our lives) that we are able to offer this gift back to our Creator. With a true desire to return this musical gift to God, we should not only give of ourselves, but strive to give the *best* of ourselves.

### LETTING WORSHIP GUIDE THE CHOICE OF SONG

*Music in Christian Worship: At the Service of the Liturgy*, edited by Charlotte Y. Kroeker (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, 217 pp., \$18.95), is an anthology designed for the people who are responsible for church music: church musicians (both academically trained musicians and lay leaders), pastors, and theologians. Its twelve essays are by prominent scholars of worship and music from various Christian denominations. This interdisciplinary book provides a broad-based discussion of the complexity of church music, a discussion that acknowledges the interaction of music with a congregation's theology, liturgy, ethnicity, locality, and degree of involvement in worship.

Kroeker, a professional pianist who directs the church music initiative at the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame, frames the first section of essays on "Theological and Philosophical Considerations" with the question, "How can understanding the intersection of worship and art affect its integral contribution to Christian worship?" Nicholas P. Wolterstorff urges that church music primarily should enhance the action of the liturgy; only when the character of the music fits the liturgical action that it serves should we give consideration to its musical style. Don E. Saliers explores how music, as well as other symbols, can shape our sensory experience in response to God and produce different levels of congregational participation in worship. Michael S. Driscoll speaks of "musical mystagogy" and how the arts, especially music, can connect us with the mystery of God.

In the second section of the book, "Historical Perspectives," Kroeker poses the question, "What does the history of music in the church have to teach us about current and future practice of music in worship?" Two very different responses follow. Fr. Jan Michael Joncas uses the writings of Pope John Paul II to address the role of music in the church and to provide helpful distinctions of a family of terms, including "sacred music," "religious music," "church music," and "worship music."<sup>1</sup> Bert F. Polman offers a concise history of Christian hymnody from the medieval era to the present and concludes that "one of the history lessons we might have learned is to recognize that the church, at its best, has been able to integrate the best of the new songs with the best of the historic ones" (p. 72).

Part three, "Contemporary Cultural Considerations in the Light of Biblical Mandates," considers the question, "What issues in our current environment must be addressed in order for faithful music-making to occur?" A number of authors in this book regret the lack of modern hymns or worship songs expressing sorrow and lament. Echoing this concern, Wilma Ann Bailey draws the connection between the psalms of lament in the Old Testament and the spirituals of the African American slave experience. To address the need for discernment in worship planning, John D. Witvliet of-

fers several rhetorical models to help us choose music for the liturgy. This chapter is an excellent “nuts and bolts” approach to dealing with church controversies about music. The other two essays in this section present the cases for two different approaches to musical choices—singing songs from around the globe (C. Michael Hawn) and expressing the local uniqueness of a congregation (Linda J. Clark and Joanne M. Swenson). Both essays make strong points, and these two approaches should not be viewed as mutually exclusive.

In the final section of the book entitled “Practical Considerations in the Light of Biblical Mandates,” Kroeker asks, “How do we go about choosing music faithfully for worship?” Frank Burch Brown speaks directly to the question of musical styles that is at the heart of many congregational “worship wars.” Much of Brown’s essay is a critique of and response to William Easum’s warning, in *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World*, that churches are becoming spiritual dinosaurs. Mary Oyer, a Mennonite church musician and retired professor, is interviewed by Charlotte Kroeker concerning her experience in crossing cultural lines within church music. Kroeker’s concluding essay, “Choosing Music for Worship,” sums up the numerous ideas presented in the book.

#### **OPENING WORSHIP TO THE WORLD**

J. Nathan Corbitt’s *The Sound of the Harvest: Music’s Mission in Church and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998, 352 pp., \$28.00) introduces the role of music in the history and theology of the global church. In the first part, “Music in the Kingdom,” Corbitt shows how music functions in a local congregation in worship, prophecy, proclamation, healing, education, and theology. In the second part, “Music for the Kingdom,” he offers practical guidance to church musicians, pastors, and laypersons on the topics of the voice, the song, instruments, and musicians. Throughout the book Corbitt’s writing style is accessible and inviting to those who are just beginning to think about how music functions in Christian life and worship.

Corbitt begins each chapter with an organized synopsis and two stories. The first story, “the sound of the harvest,” offers a glimpse of a church music activity, while the second story, “and the beat of the street,” juxtaposes this church activity with music outside the church walls. The concrete examples in these stories connect the topic of the chapter to actual life. Unfortunately, Corbitt’s desire to cover each topic in great depth makes it difficult, at times, to follow his main thrust. However, the stories illustrate his ideas well and provide an excellent global, multicultural look at music in the church, moving us beyond our Western thought and experiences. Each chapter ends with questions and exercises to help the reader or study group dig more deeply into the subject.

This book differs from the previous two books in Corbitt’s approach to the practical issue of choosing music for use in worship. While Parker and

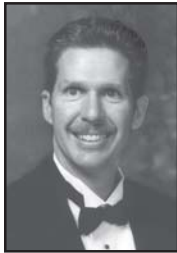
the contributors in Kroeker's anthology stress the need for music education of the church body, Corbitt (while not avoiding the need for education in the music of the church) emphasizes that people must be reached in their current milieu. As he moves us toward more globally sensitive worship, he sees the need for new songs, without discarding the old. Corbitt concludes that "musicians' greatest gift to the kingdom is the critical listening skills to evaluate the present, the prudence to remember the past, and the wisdom to extend the kingdom outside one's own frame of reference" (p. 252).

Though these three books approach the choice of music in worship in very different ways, each makes a valuable contribution to the complex, important discussion about how music reflects and prods the movement of the church. Together these authors can guide us toward a more complete musical offering in our worship.

#### NOTE

† Father Joncas discusses the *Chirograph of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II for the Centenary of the Motu Proprio TRA LE SOLLECITUNINI on Sacred Music*, which is available online at [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/2003/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_20031203\\_musica-sacra\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_20031203_musica-sacra_en.html). This document was issued in 2003 on the one-hundredth anniversary of Pope Pius X's effort to "renew sacred music in the liturgy...as a means of lifting up the spirit to God and as a precious aid for the faithful in their 'active participation in the most holy mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church.'"

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