

Being Subject to One Another As We Sing

By
Randy Cooper

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*To become involved in The Ekklesia Project,
or for more information, please contact:*

The Ekklesia Project
Brent Laytham, Coordinator
North Park Theological Seminary
3225 West Foster Avenue
Chicago, IL 60625-4895
mail@ekkesiaproject.org
(773) 244-6221

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Apart from those moments when the scriptures are being read or a sermon preached, when the bishop is praying aloud or the deacon is speaking the intention of the litany of community prayer, is there any time when the faithful assembled are not singing?

Augustine Letters

INTRODUCTION

As we begin, what goes without saying may need to be said: There is profound, widespread confusion regarding Christian worship among congregations in this land. We pastors and lay folk are increasingly unclear about what we are doing when we gather on Sunday mornings. Our confusion is surely several generations in the making, but it has become acute in recent years. We are witnessing “worship wars” within denominations and within congregations. We who are most intimately acquainted with such skirmishes know that battles in the church over worship are nothing new. Indeed, Christian worship has been occasion for misunderstanding and for malpractice since the time of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. However, the intensity of these battles is heightened in these days, as congregations face decisions regarding worship.

No observation applies to every circumstance and congregation. Yet we can safely say that conflict and confusion often surface over the role of music within worship. Other issues do not carry the political charge that music carries. Rarely, for instance, will someone choose a congregation because the congregation does, or does not, confess the Apostles Creed as a regular worship practice. Nor is one likely to leave a church in disagreement over certain doctrines that ruled the day in 16th century Europe. Yet we very likely know people whose life in a congregation hinges on the congregation’s choices for music for the praise of God. In a word, confusion and conflict revolve around the role of music in worship.

Let us reflect upon a particular practice that we may likely take for granted in our weekly worship. In particular, let us consider that congregational singing is the highest and most faithful musical practice in the worship life of our congregations. With Ephesians as our guide, we will lay a foundation for congregational singing. Then with a little help from John Wesley we will make modest suggestions for the role of music and singing in worship as we and our congregations seek to find our way in the fray. While not all of us will be familiar with Wesley or stand in the United Methodist tradition, I suggest that we can find in Wesley's "Directions for Singing" a wisdom for all our congregations, provided we do not allow his Directions to remain encrusted in an age long past. Before going any further, consider this word: congregational singing is a gift of God given to the Church as part of God's plan for bringing all things to Christ. When people sing together, thus joining our praises with the praise of the Son to the Father through the Holy Spirit, we are participating in a God-given means of unifying grace.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION – A SINGING CONGREGATION

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Ephesians 5:18-21

These verses from Ephesians are printed here exactly as they are found in the New Revised Standard Version. Other modern translations likewise assume a new paragraph beginning with “be subject to” (with the revered King James being a notable exception). A new paragraph implies a change of subject or thought on the part of the writer of Ephesians, as if the counsel about singing among themselves in worship is a matter quite separate from that which follows, namely, the counsel about being subject to one another, particularly wives and husbands (5: 22-33), children and fathers (6:1-4), slaves and masters (6:5-9).

Yet the Greek text holds together the dual matters of congregational singing and being subject to one another. Indeed mutual subjection and singing flow from the command to be filled with the Spirit. We can say this because there were no paragraph divisions in the first Greek manuscripts. Moreover, the Greek word that is translated as “*be subject to one another*,” is not an imperative, but is rather the present participle, “*being subject to one another*.” It is the last of five present participles in succession.

This may be more Greek grammar than you bargained for, but let us say it this way: *the command to be filled with the Spirit leads to ongoing actions within the Body: ‘speaking’ or ‘addressing,’ ‘singing,’ ‘making melody,’ ‘giving thanks,’ and, no less, ‘being subject to.’* Indeed, we can say that as the Ephesian Christians are filled with the Spirit, they will address one another in psalms, hymns and songs. They will sing and make melody to the Lord. They will give thanks. They will be subject to one another.

We should not expect these verses to shoulder entirely our understanding of music and singing in worship. But we can confidently say that “being subject to one another” is a practice inseparable from the other four practices that precede it, with everything flowing from the

lavish abundance of the Holy Spirit. The counsel to mutual subjection between wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters is an elaboration of the practice of being subject to one another. This practice occurs when the Ephesian Christians gather to address one another, to sing, to give thanks for all things. We are not falsifying the spirit of Ephesians if, as one commentator has said, we “imagine singing husbands and wives, singing parents and children, singing masters and slaves.”

We can say therefore that the home for the practice of mutual subjection is worship, and the habitual practice of mutual subjection is the face to face communication of singing and giving thanks before God and one other. In our worship, we are gathered by the Holy Spirit. In the work and practice of singing, we are learning to embody a mutual submission to one another. Singing to God and to one another in worship is a ritualized act of self-emptying (Philippians 2:5-11) in which categories of gender, age, and class are dethroned. When we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to one another and to God, salvation is made present by the Holy Spirit. In our worship and singing the Holy Spirit can make us a public, visible sign of the “mystery of God’s will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1.8-10).

In stark contrast to drunkenness (v. 18) which invariably destroys community with those with whom we live and worship, singing “intoxicates” us with the joy of offering to God hymns, psalms and spiritual songs. Our sinful tongues that are so capable of bearing false witness against our neighbor and of taking the Lord’s name in vain are being redeemed as we offer praise to God. Further, power and social location yield, if only fleetingly, to the eternal reality of the heavenly kingdom. Rowan Williams, now the Archbishop of Canterbury, has described music

and song in worship as a “moral event” that trains us in “a new ecology of power.”

BUT WE ARE STILL SINNERS!

We must be aware that singing as a faithful act cannot exist unto itself. Apart from the Holy Spirit congregational song can destroy the unity won for us in the death and resurrection of Christ. Singing and music can become an instrument of an *unholy* spirit, an inverted means of grace turning music and song toward death.

The Bible reminds us that congregations can “make a joyful noise” apart from the “spirit and truth” that make worship Christian. Ecclesiastes condemns the music and songs of “fools” (7:5). Indeed, drunkards love to sing (Ps. 69:12). Saul is caught up in an ecstasy of song that does not please God (1 Sam.10:10). Coming down from the mountain with the tablets of stone in hand, Moses and Joshua hear the sound of singing as part of the false worship rising from the camp of the Israelites who have made a golden calf in their worship of God (Ex. 32.18). The “horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, and bagpipe” of Daniel 3 could move the Babylonians to bend the knee as they worshipped idols. The occasional denunciation of Israel’s worship by its prophets warns us that God can hate worship that does not create a holy people whose character is justice. And the Apocalypse delights that Babylon’s harpers, minstrels, flute players, and trumpeters will be destroyed in the judgment of God (18.22)—a sobering word for church musicians!

We therefore must not be surprised that music and song in the church can become occasion for power plays, for division between generations. Individuals can count themselves better than others and insist on their own way regarding music, to the exclusion of others within the Body. Churches can adopt the culture’s calendar and sense of time and can sing praises to the culture’s gods, as

often takes place on or around national holidays. Further, congregations are quite capable of adopting music forms from the culture, sacralizing those forms, and declaring them Christian, with no discerning eye as to whether the music edifies the Body of Christ to be an alien, alternative community within the larger culture. We can fail to do the hard work of discerning the music and song fitting for the people of God.

Without dwelling on this matter too long, let us simply recognize that it is all the more tragic when music and song, given by God to Israel and the Church as a unifying means of grace, become occasion for the fracturing of the Body of Christ or for the dilution of the Church's witness to the Kingdom. We now move to a few modest suggestions for congregational singing.

ONE CHURCH'S INSTRUCTIONS FOR SINGING

Chances are that you who are reading this pamphlet are not United Methodist. Please bear with me as I place before you John Wesley's "Directions for Singing," first published in the 1761 hymnbook, *Select Hymns*:

- I. Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.
- II. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.
- III. Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.
- IV. Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.

- V. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.
- VI. Sing in time. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.
- VII. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

Even today, these directions can be found in the introductory section of the current United Methodist Hymnal (1989). You may regard Wesley's instructions as quaint and out of date. Indeed, when you read them you may have laughed harmlessly. Yet I suggest we can draw from Wesley at least five, more general "directions" for our congregations as we experience confusion over the role of music and song in worship, United Methodist or otherwise.

Direction 1: Our Singing is an Act of the Church

In most congregations, final authority in matters of worship is granted to pastors. Yet we are living in a time in which many pastors "do what is right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25) regarding worship. In the not-too-distant past, pastors exercised freedom to appropriate their particular worship tradition to the congregations they were serving, with diversity emerging from a common

tradition and commitment. In today's context, pastors exercise increasing license to do in worship whatever "seems to work." Many pastors are tempted to abdicate responsibility as resident theologians within their congregations. Or pastors may make lasting changes in the worship patterns and practices that alter their congregations' understanding of worship. (Of course, the issue is not whether worship changes but how a congregation and pastor go about making changes in worship.)

In noting our present, tradition-free environment, we may need to be reminded that we are not as free as many suppose to sing whatever we choose. Let there be a repertoire of hymns from our own traditions from which we draw, as we sing our faith. While we are most certainly free to know other hymns and to sing them, we all have Hymnals prepared by our denominations that can be our treasury of hymns for congregational singing. We are to "learn these before we learn any others."

Such a modest proposal may challenge some rural congregations that have never bothered to own their denomination's hymnbook, while also challenging the more experimental congregations that often lay aside their hymnbook in order to explore new hymns and songs being popularized by the current explosion of Christian music. Further, within those congregations with more than one weekly worship service, hymns may vary greatly from one worship service to another. Yet if singing is an act of the church, let there be at a minimum a hymnic "canon within the canon"—a common body of hymns that are learned and sung by everyone within a congregation and denomination. In the spirit of Ephesians, we are called to a common treasury of hymns as a way of practicing a mutual submission through congregational singing in which those persons led by God to a particular congregation are able to sing as one people.

Direction 2: Singing is a Way of Being Schooled

Some churches will give Bibles to their new members. The church which I currently serve gives a Hymnal to someone

who becomes a member. We know that if you wish to learn about United Methodist beliefs, your best resource is the United Methodist Hymnal.

This is true for your church and denomination as well. The theology of hymns within your hymnbook matters, and it matters greatly. Apart from the Bible, the closest thing to a theology book that many of your fellow Christians will ever hold in their hands is a hymnbook. A hymnbook is the sung theology of the congregation.

Congregational singing is a primary means by which we are theologically schooled. We need only look over what we sing in our congregations in order to learn much about what we believe and understand. It is therefore incumbent on us to make judgments between those hymns which most faithfully name or address the God of Jesus Christ and those hymns which in one way or another diminish the gospel. Yet how do we make those decisions? As but one example, does Stanley Hauerwas serve the church well in arguing that congregations should not sing the popular “In the Garden” since the hymn—though found in the United Methodist Hymnal—cannot properly train Christians to confront the culture in which we live? In a word, what criteria do we use in making these important judgments?

I join with Lester Ruth who suggests that a fundamental criterion for evaluating the theology of hymns should be the question of “whose story is told [in the hymns]: the personal story of the believer or the cosmic story of God?” The cosmic story of God—the creation; the story of Israel; the Incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus; the story of the church; and the final consummation of all things—will likely be forgotten or rendered secondary when our congregations focus upon the personal story of believers in our singing. We will judge our hymns by whether they are personally ‘meaningful’ and thus reduce the gospel to our rather small lives. On the

other hand, when in our hymns we gaze upon the grandeur of God's work in the world (Rev. 4:1) and participate in heaven's praise, we are drawn into a narrative far exceeding our personal experiences. We need only consider, for example, the first verse in what is perhaps the most loved of Charles Wesley's hymns, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing":

Hark! The herald angels sing,
 "Glory to the newborn King;
 peace on earth, and mercy mild,
 God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations rise,
 join the triumph of the skies;
with th' angelic host proclaim,
 'Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! The herald angels sing,
 "Glory to the newborn King!"

No reduction of the gospel here! We sing of a gospel that in its splendor addresses the nations and the hosts of heaven, and in the singing we lose ourselves in a story, grand and magnificent. It may be more than coincidence that the singing of most congregations is never better than Easter and Christmas when most of the hymns turn us away from ourselves and toward the sweeping story of our salvation.

Direction 3: Singing is Our Duty and Delight

Psalms 19 and 119 leave little doubt that Israel delighted in the commandments of God. And any command to sing can be heard as both duty and delight. We are to join with our congregations as frequently as possible, not allowing weakness or weariness to hinder us from singing. If worship is a festal gathering (Heb. 12.22), then worship

will lack its intended splendor apart from our singing as the people of God.

We do well to remember *who* is singing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us in his book, *Life Together*, that it is the “voice of the church that is heard in singing together.” And we as members of the Church “may share in its song. Thus all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church.”

When we sing, we therefore are submitting to the command of God. Sad is the occasion when we refuse to sing because of conflict with church members, because the hymn or music does suit not our taste, or because we find a particular song a bit too difficult for our untrained voices. While there may be the occasion when we must refuse song as a matter of resistance—in Daniel 3, the Jews resist the music and song of the Babylonians—to refuse to sing is more likely a sign of our acquiescence to the powers that threaten to divide the Body. We must sing as testimony that the powers of Sin and Death, ‘always couching at the door’ of the Church, have not and will not destroy the Church’s witness to a unity won in Christ and embodied in the melodies that rise to the heavens.

Direction 4: Singing is a Bodily Act

Singing is physical. It is an action of the body. It involves vocal chords, the ears, the mouth. We cannot sing “lustily and with good courage” from the head up. Our diaphragms, lungs, and legs participate in the making of music and song. Indeed, we sing best when standing, allowing the body to move in concert with the music. Singing involves the body in ways that merely listening to music does not.

In the not too distant past, all music was made anew each time, with instruments, voices or both. But that era has passed. Nowadays most music is not made but produced and then heard. Because of this, music has become largely privatized. The present condition of music has been made possible by the appearance of recording technology. In a word, music is now one's possession. This is a far cry from a previous time when music had to be made to be heard and when music ceased when the community making the music dispersed.

How significant therefore that people gather intentionally and make music to one another and to God! Bodies from different places gather in one place and time to make music as one Body. A congregation is never more bodily 'present' to one another than when it is singing. And while many Christians laudably desire a 'spiritual worship that comes from the heart,' singing reminds us that we do not offer a spiritual worship to God apart from our bodies, which means that neither do we offer it apart from one another.

Direction 5: Singing is a Communal Act

When we sing, we are certainly to be mindful of one another. We are not to destroy harmony by making ourselves heard above the rest of the congregation or by running before or staying behind the leading voices. Singing is an act of the congregation.

Our singing is like music itself. We can blend, harmonize, and resonate with each other in endless ways. In singing there can be a filling of space with sound in ways that draw more and more voices to take part, yet with no sense of crowding. David Ford has described our singing as "a performance of abundance," as we join with one another in our own distinctive voices. He reminds us that our music is both outside and within us and that the community of the church is being joined together

(harmonized together) into a ‘holy temple’, the space which above all is filled with psalms and hymns. And this is the work of the Holy Spirit.

We do well to consider that congregational singing is the highest and most beautiful musical act in the worship life of a congregation—more so than any other offering of music by choir, solo, or instrument. We should be more than slightly disturbed at the changes that occurred in music and hymnody in the nineteenth century United States, a time when musicians were hired to select and lead congregational song and to form choirs and choruses to perform in worship. The congregation and its song became separated from the choir, with the latter often becoming more important than the former. Church architecture had already by the time of the nineteenth century become unduly subject in the Protestant tradition to the preaching of the Word. With more and more attention given to the performance of music in worship, the design of church sanctuaries moved even further away from enhancement of congregational singing by granting prominence to the choir (with some even designed for the organ!). It was but a small step from the growing focus upon music as performance in the nineteenth century to Christian worship becoming a form of entertainment in our own lifetimes.

If there is to be a choir, we should wonder how it can recover, if necessary, its foremost vocation of enabling a congregation to lift its voice to God as one people. The performance mindset, when it appears within a congregation, can be transformed as choirs and musicians become servants of the liturgy and the gathered people. The one thing needful: a willingness to submit to the spiritual disciplines of Ephesians 5:18ff, where choir and musicians submit every Lord’s Day to the liturgical work of the congregation.

Direction 6: Singing is a Means of Grace

Congregational singing is a means of grace. It is a *means*—a frail, yet human instrument of God’s becoming present to us in a ‘language’ we can understand. It is *graceful*—resting finally in God’s decision faithfully to use our singing to draw near to us. Singing is therefore at once sacramental and relational. It is a gift from God by which our relationship with God and one another is nurtured as we participate in the praise of God through the Holy Spirit.

Yet we know that music can become an end in itself, and not a means. The heart can be carried away with the sound. Music and song can become “the organizing principle in a congregation’s worship.” We can be so carried away with the sound that we regard music as the primary means of God’s presence. Music and song can usurp Word and Table and can become the “primary sacramental principle” of the congregation, “the normal means by which a congregation assesses God’s presence in worship.”

In the contemporary climate, our word may seem too simple. Yet it is a solid, foundational place to begin: to sing spiritually; to have an eye toward God in every word. Congregational singing is an act of prayer in which we participate in the Paschal Mystery. Let our singing be a servant—and never Master—of the Paschal Mystery proclaimed in the Word and beheld at the Table

CONCLUSION

Skirmishes over music and song in a congregation must not be framed as a contest between, for instance, the music of the eighteenth century and the newest praise choruses. Conflict within a congregation will not be overcome by the new humanity created in Christ if the congregation labels or divides its worship into ‘traditional,’ ‘contemporary,’ or ‘blended’ styles. Such strategies are short-term antidote to what ails the church. The ‘worship wars’ over music

primarily reveal a failure of imagination and love. And who among us will be able to stand before Christ on that final Day as anything more than the failures we doubtless have been?

The question we face regarding music and song is the same as many other questions: Do we have the imagination and love to face these problems as the Body of Christ. Ephesians holds the promise that in singing we can learn mutual submission and obedience that—as with everything we do in worship—unifies the Body rather than fracturing it.

Principles for singing—such as those gleaned from Wesley’s “Directions for Singing”—may be said to be little more than a practical elaboration of the Holy Spirit’s work of drawing us together in Christ. It is fitting to close with the words of Jonathan Edwards from his *Miscellanies*: “when I would form an idea of a society in the highest degree happy, I think of them . . . sweetly singing to each other.”

Randy Cooper was raised on a farm in West Tennessee. He is an elder of The United Methodist Church, currently pastoring the Henderson First-Trinity charge. He and his wife Gayle have two daughters and one grandson.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Lester Ruth, “A Rose by Any Other Name,” in Todd Johnson, ed., *The Conviction of Things Not Seen* (Brazos, 2002)

John Witvliet, “Beyond Style,” in in Todd Johnson, ed., *The Conviction of Things Not Seen* (Brazos, 2002)

E. Byron Anderson, “‘O for a Heart to Praise My God’: Hymning the Self Before God” in Byron Anderson and Bruce Morill, eds., *Liturgy and the Moral Self* (The Liturgical Press, 1998).

Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings* (Brazos, 2000), Part 4.

