

15. The Wisdom of Song

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Knowledge of the truth of God or the truth of the Gospel is not given in an abstract or detached form but in a concrete embodied form in the Church, where it is to be grasped within the normative pattern of faith imparted to it through the teaching of the apostles, and is therefore to be grasped only in unity and continuity with the faith, worship, and godly life of all who are incorporated into Christ as members of his Body.¹

In the world Christian community today, nothing defines “brotherhood” more obviously than singing.²

1. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, as quoted in James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, “A Catholic and Evangelical Theology?” in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 9.

2. Mark Noll, “Praise the Lord: Song, Culture, Divine Bounty and Issues of Harmonization,” *Books & Culture: A Christian Review* (November-December 2007): 14.

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Singing and Knowledge

What does music contribute to corporate Christian worship? Calvin writes that singing “has the greatest value in kindling our hearts to a true zeal and eagerness to pray”;³ and this seems right. Most of us who have joined in Christian worship will have experienced the power of music to “kindle the heart” — to move and stir our emotions. Song engages us at the level of feeling and passion, and this is one of its great gifts to corporate worship.

There is potentially a “dark side” to this affirmation, however. Calvin continues in the next sentence: “Yet we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words.”

Calvin’s assessment of music (at least in this passage) would seem to be not only: “singing engages the emotions”; but also: “singing engages the emotions and *not* the mind.” While music “kindles the heart,” it is the “meaning of the words” that is perceived by “our minds.” If this is so, then Christians must use music with care. Music on this account strengthens the church’s heart but not its mind. Excessive attention to “the melody” (the *music* of music, as it were) means the relative neglect of meaning.⁴

This segregation of music’s service to the church continues to find currency. Some contemporary churches divide their services into a “worship time” (a time when music is played and sung) and a “teaching time” (a time when words are spoken and heard). The implication seems to be that music has to do with something other than the teaching ministry of the church. In general, while it is widely assumed that music has to do with emotion, feeling, or passion, it is rarely associated with growth in wisdom and understanding.

Early Christian writers also recognized the affective power of music, but just as often they associated music with “harmony.” Music seemed to them a sounding image of rightly ordered relationships. “The importance of singing ‘with one voice’ was a constant refrain among the early Christian writers,”⁵ writes Calvin Stapert. “Almost from the beginning music was an ex-

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.20.32, p. 895.

4. Of course, this concern also reflects a deficient understanding of emotion and its relation to cognition. See Jeremy Begbie’s essay in this collection, “Faithful Feelings: Music and Emotion in Worship,” esp. pp. 328–31.

5. Calvin Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 25.

pression of, a metaphor for, and a means toward unity.”⁶ The following passage from Ignatius of Antioch’s (died c. A.D. 108) letter to the Ephesians is a good example of this association.

In your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung. And do ye, man by man, become a choir, that being harmonious in love, and taking up the song of God in unison, ye may with one voice sing to the Father through Jesus Christ, so that He may both hear you, and perceive by your works that ye are indeed the members of His Son. It is profitable, therefore, that you should live in an unblameable unity, that thus ye may always enjoy communion with God.⁷

For Ignatius the harmony of believers is not simply a good organizational principle, or even a right behavior to be encouraged. The existence of the church is a theological statement. When the church is a concord, then “Jesus Christ is sung” — the person and character of Jesus is declared. In fact, Ignatius is simply repeating an idea found in the “Farewell Discourse” of John’s Gospel. Jesus prays that his disciples, “may all be one.”

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

Again, the idea is not simply that it is better to avoid conflict. Rather, Jesus’ prayer assumes that the unity of his followers will declare the glory of the Son, as well as the unity of Father and Son. The church’s unity has both a doxological and a pedagogical function. Paul’s metaphor for the church — the Body of Christ — suggests these same dimensions. As the “Body of Christ,” the unified community of believers is *imago Christi*, a living image of Jesus Christ, the One who is himself the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).

6. Stapert, *A New Song*, p. 26.

7. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, in *The Ante-Nicene Library*, vol. 1: *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870), pp. 149-50. See also the discussion and quotations in James McKinnon, ed., *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Stapert, *A New Song*, pp. 25-27.

This vision of the church provides the foundation for the argument I will develop in this essay. The activity of singing, I will argue, is both an enactment and an exposition of the church’s unity. Singing, we might say, is a sounding image of the unified church — which (in turn) is the image of Jesus Christ, who is the self-revelation of God. If these affirmations are valid, then we can venture the very bold claim that the singing of the church is one way by which God is made known. The church’s singing does not only “kindle the heart”; it is also a means by which the church grows in wisdom and understanding of God. Music (I am arguing) strengthens not only the “heart” of the church, but its “mind” as well.

In exploring this line of argument, we will give close attention to another letter to the Ephesians — the one written by the Apostle Paul.⁸ In this letter, Paul urges Christians to sing (Eph. 5:18-21). Moreover, two themes we have already mentioned — wisdom and knowledge; and the unity of the church — are also central concerns of Paul’s letter. The first question we will pursue is simply: why might have Paul urged Christians to sing at this particular point in the letter? Some have suggested that in these verses Paul, like a farmer wandering his field, simply scatters handfuls of general exhortations to do good. Is this the most we can say from these references to singing? Or is there a more organic connection between this exhortation and the larger concerns of Ephesians?

Singing and the Filling of the Holy Spirit

In chapter 5 of Ephesians, Paul writes:

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.⁹ (Eph. 5:18-21)

8. Ephesians is often identified as pseudo-Pauline, but the letter’s authorship is not directly relevant to my argument. For the sake of convenience, in this essay I will refer to the author of Ephesians as Paul.

9. Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptural citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

These references to song are often treated as a throwaway comment — one good thing in a list of good things. Eric Routley has this passage in view when he observes that the New Testament has relatively little to say about music — aside from “a stray remark in two of the Epistles about the singing of hymns and spiritual songs.”¹⁰ A close reading of Ephesians, however, suggests a much richer connection between this command and the rest of the letter. This is not a stray remark.¹¹

“Be Filled with the Spirit”

The references to music in Ephesians 5 are preceded by the imperative command, “be filled with the Spirit.” This imperative “is not just another in a long string; rather, it is the key to all the others.”¹² Indeed, this command can be seen as the culmination of the first five chapters.

Throughout the letter Paul wants to impress upon his audience their identity as “a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:21–22). Paul here identifies the multi-ethnic church with the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple (and before it, the tabernacle) is at the center of the Jewish universe, specifically because it is the place on earth where God makes his dwelling and manifests his glory.¹³ During his ministry, Jesus shockingly identifies his own body with the temple: “‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ The Jews then said, ‘This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?’ But he was speaking of the temple of his body” (John 2:19–21). Jesus, the passage suggests, is (like the Old Testament tabernacle and temple before him) the place on earth where God’s presence and glory are made manifest.

Jesus’ claim is startling enough, but in Ephesians Paul makes the even more remarkable claim that *the church of Jew and Gentile* is being “built together” into the dwelling of God’s Holy Spirit. The people of God are now

the temple — like the tabernacle, like Jesus — the place on earth where God’s presence and glory are made manifest. The command in chapter 5 to “be filled with the Spirit,” then, is not simply an exhortation to individual piety. It is a charge to be “joined together” (Eph. 5:21) as the people of God, and so, to be the temple. They are to be the dwelling place of God’s glorious presence; filled — indwelt — by God’s own Spirit.

At just this point Paul urges the church to sing, and he does so in a way that excludes any characterization of this injunction as a “stray remark.” Singing and the filling of the Holy Spirit are bound together grammatically. Verses 19–21 comprise a single grammatical unit, controlled by the main verb, “be filled” (*plērousthe*). This command is a passive imperative, followed by four subordinate participial clauses: (1) *speaking* (*lalountes*) to one another in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs; (2) *singing* (*adontes*) and *making music* (*psallontes*) in your hearts; (3) *giving thanks* (*eucharistountes*) to the Lord; and (4) *submitting* (*hypotassomenoi*) to one another.¹⁴ These five participles are grammatically dependent upon the verb. Conversely, the participles also support the verb, giving substance and content to the command to be filled with the Spirit.¹⁵ Structurally, we might set out the passage in the following way:

Be filled with the Spirit:

- *speaking* to one another in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs
- *singing*
- and
- making music* in your hearts
- *giving thanks* to the Lord . . .
- *submitting* to one another . . .

Five participles elaborate the command to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Three of these have to do with music: *speaking* to one another *in songs*,

14. I have learned a great deal about recent scholarship on Ephesians through conversations with my friend Timothy Gombis (see Timothy G. Gombis, *The Divine Warrior in Ephesians* [PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2005]). In particular, the analysis in this essay has been guided by his article, “Being the Fullness of God in Christ by the Spirit: Ephesians 5:18 in Its Epistolary Setting,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 53, no. 2 (2002): 259–72.

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

10. Eric Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith* (London: Collins, 1980), p. 15. Routley is referring to this passage in Ephesians and the parallel passage in Colossians.

11. David Ford’s *Self and Salvation* is an outstanding exception to the tendency to gloss over this passage. See “Communicating God’s Abundance: A Singing Self” in *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 107–36.

12. Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), p. 721.

13. See, for example, Exodus 19:42–43.

hymns, and spiritual songs; singing; and making music. Given the importance of the filling of the Holy Spirit in the theology of this letter, it is fascinating that the author should make such a strong connection between Spirit and song. How can we account for this?

"Speaking to One Another"

One way of making sense of this passage is to read "singing" or "music" as simply another way of saying "worship." Considering this passage, one New Testament scholar observes that the filling of the Spirit "manifests itself in several ways. One is in worship."¹⁶ This gloss absorbs the very particular command to "sing and make music" into a general exhortation to worship.¹⁷ No doubt Paul does want his readers to worship God, but the text argues against a simple equation of "singing" with "worship." Ephesians 5:19 urges Christians to speaking to one another (lalountes heautois) in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs. The focus of the first participial clause is not the praise of God.¹⁸ Rather "songs, hymns, and spiritual songs" are means by which the believers are to address *one another*.

This idea emerges even more clearly in a parallel passage:¹⁹

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; *teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. (Col. 3:16, Authorized Version)²⁰

16. Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 10 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), p. 264.

17. This same substitution crops up in some churches where "the time of worship" comes to mean "the portion of the service that includes music."

18. Andrew Lincoln observes this point. See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Bible Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), p. 345.

19. However one dates the letters and whether or not one attributes Ephesians to the apostle Paul, there clearly are relationships of dependence between Ephesians and the letter to the Colossians. One instance of this is Ephesians 5:18/Colossians 3:16.

20. Here the Authorized Version follows the sense of the original more closely than some modern translations. So for instance, the NIV groups "teaching" and "admonishing" with "wisdom," separating "singing" into a separate clause: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." This organization is driven less by the syntax of the original than it is by a twentieth-century sense of what activities can legitimately be considered means of teaching and admonishing. See the discussion in Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 652.

Commenting on this passage, Gordon Fee observes that the singing and worship of the early church was "two dimensional" — addressed both to God and to one another; meant for both the "worship of [Christ] and for the continuing instruction of God's people."²¹

Singing toward Wisdom

There is then a didactic, pedagogical character to New Testament song. If this is the case, then Paul's commendation of song is connected to one of the other principal concerns of the letter: wisdom.

Ephesians depicts the spiritual life in cosmic dimensions, contrasting those who are children of light with those who belong to darkness. The darkness that once enshrouded the children of light was (among other things) the darkness of ignorance. So Paul urges them to "no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the *futility of their minds*" (Eph. 4:17).

They are darkened in their *understanding*, alienated from the life of God because of their *ignorance* and hardness of heart. (Eph. 4:18)

The children of light on the other hand "have *learned Christ*" (Eph. 4:20). You "were *taught* in him, as truth is in Jesus," Paul continues in verse 21. Therefore Christians should no longer be "deluded" by the lusts of the old self (v. 22), but rather "renewed in the spirit of your *minds*." As people of truth, who have turned from delusion, we should "[put] away *falsehood*," and "speak the *truth* to our neighbors" (v. 25).

The language of wisdom, knowledge, and truth continues through chapter 5. Those in the light should "let no one deceive [them] with empty words" (Eph. 5:6). Since "the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true" they should "try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord" (v. 9). They should live, not as the unwise, but as the wise (*sophoi*) (v. 15). Nor should they be foolish, but rather they should

understand what the will of the Lord is. 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. (vv. 17-19)

21. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 656; see also p. 653 n. 68, and Stapert, *A New Song*, pp. 21-22.

In their epistolary context, the songs, hymns, and spiritual songs of verse 19 are connected with the long string of commands found in chapters 4 and 5: to learn the truth, to be wise, to know what is right. Paul says in effect:

- Put away ignorance . . .
- Let no one deceive you . . .
- Know the truth . . .
- Be wise . . .
- Sing!

If singing is a means of teaching and admonishing, that the Christian may attain wisdom (Col. 3:16), then we can also better understand why song should be linked so strongly with the filling of the Spirit. Paul urges Christians to be people of wisdom and knowledge, and in the theology of Ephesians it is the Holy Spirit who is particularly associated with giving knowledge and understanding, and revealing the wisdom of God.²²

The command to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) is also a command to be filled with the wisdom and understanding that come from the Spirit. And the singing of the church — speaking to one another, admonishing and teaching one another, in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs — is one means by which the Spirit reveals the wisdom of God.

The New Human

Another important theme in Ephesians is the unity of the church. In fact, there is an organic connection between this theme and that of wisdom. The multi-ethnic church of Jesus Christ in all its diverse unity is the “wisdom of God” revealed by the Spirit. Paul describes the ethnically and socially diverse church as “the mystery hidden for ages” (Eph. 3:9), “the mystery . . . made known to me by revelation” (Eph. 3:3).

The creation of this community is no secondary benefit of God’s redemptive work. Rather, “this was in accordance with the eternal purpose

22. Fee observes that in Pauline theology generally, “wisdom and revelation in the ongoing life of the believing community are expressly associated with the Spirit. In 1 Corinthians in particular wisdom is one of the Spirit’s charismata (12:8), and the Spirit is the means of revelation whereby believers come to understand the wisdom that lies in the folly of the cross (2:10-13). . . . In Ephesians the Spirit is explicitly noted as the source of the revelation of God’s mystery (3:5), which Paul wants his recipients also to understand” (Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, p. 676).

that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11). The cross of Christ has brought together Jew and Gentile, abolishing the hostility that existed, not only between them and God, but between one another. This reconciled community is nothing less than a New Humanity:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity (*hena kainon anthrōpon*) in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Eph. 2:14-16)

God, “who created (*ktisanti*) all things” (Eph. 3:9) has now created (*ktisē*) a New Human (2:15). This “new self” is “created (*ktisthenta*) according to the likeness of God” (4:23).

These gestures toward the Genesis creation account reveal the horizon against which Paul understands the church. God’s eternal purpose has been to create the kind of community — to create the kind of humanity — made manifest in the church. In Christ and through the church, God is re-creating humanity in his image.

“Created According to the Likeness of God”

Ephesians 3 and 4 echo the beginning of the biblical story, where God creates the Human Being in his image and according to his likeness.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26-27)

The *imago Dei* has been variously understood by the theological tradition and has been associated with everything from the capacity for reason to an upright posture.²³ Whatever else it may mean to say human beings are

23. See the discussion in Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of*

created in God's image, the passage itself seems to connect "image and likeness" with humanity's role as God's representative among the created order.²⁴ In an ancient society the one who bears the king's image (on a seal, for instance, or a signet ring) carries his authority, relays his commands, and acts on his behalf. In Genesis 1 then, God invites humanity to share in the care and administration of his creation, to act as his representative.

As the bearer of God's image, humanity also declares God's wisdom and glory to the created order. If "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1), then how much more clearly is God's glory announced by those made according to his likeness? "Human beings are created as the image of God for the divine glory," writes Moltmann. "They themselves are God's glory in the world."²⁵ Taking these two points together, we may say that there is a didactic or pedagogical dimension to the *imago Dei*. Humanity is created to manifest — to declare, make plain, and enact — the purposes and glory of God.

In addition to this, the passage in Genesis suggests that this "likeness" to God is not simply an individual endowment or capacity. Rather, there is a sense in which *the human community* bears the image of God: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness," reads the Genesis account, "and let *them* rule. . . . So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; *male and female He created them*."²⁶ It is as male and female — as a community of persons in relationship — that humanity is the image of God.²⁷ "Human beings are *imago trinitatis*" writes

Creation, The Gifford Lectures 1984-1985 (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 219-25; and in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), pp. 29-32.

24. See, for instance, Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), pp. 34-35; Wenham, *Genesis*, p. 32.

25. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 228.

26. Moltmann reads Genesis 1 through the lens of trinitarian theology: "These shifts between singular and plural at this particular point are important: 'Let *us* make human beings — *an* image that is like *us*.' That is to say, the image of God (singular) is supposed to correspond to the 'internal' plural of God, and yet be a *single* image. In the next verse the singular and plural are distributed in the opposite way: God (singular) created the human being (singular), as man and woman (plural) he created them (plural). Here the human plural is supposed to correspond to the divine singular. Whereas the self-resolving God is a plural in the singular, his image on earth — the human being — is apparently supposed to be a singular in the plural. The one God, who is differentiated in himself and is at one with himself, then finds his correspondence in a community of human beings, female and male, who unite with one another and are one" (Moltmann, *God in Creation*, pp. 217-18).

27. "The 'sacred story' begins with God's eternal purpose for man. . . . His eternal purpose was that mankind should be 'one body,' with the unity of a perfect organism: a higher

Moltmann, "and only correspond to the triune God when they are united with one another."²⁸

If our likeness to God is not just individual but communal (*in his image — male and female he created them*) then the divisions and hatred among humanity are nothing less than a destruction of the image of God. One part of humanity lashes out against another and in so doing destroys and continues to destroy God's image.²⁹ This is the pattern of sin that unfolds across the early chapters of Genesis. In the Garden, Adam and Eve recognize one another as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." The last words from an unspoiled Eden are: "the man and his wife were both naked, and were not shamed" (Gen. 2:25). After the fall, however, Adam defends himself by accusing Eve (3:12). Cain — the first Man born of Man and Woman — raises his hand to kill his brother (4:1-16). Genesis 4 lists the seven generations from Adam to Lamech, and then records Lamech's words to his wives: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (4:23-24). In seven generations a sevenfold vengeance has increased to seventy-sevenfold. The growing wickedness of humanity is expressed in terms of an exponential increase in violence and division. God looks at the human beings he has created and is grieved. He determines to send a great flood specifically because "the earth is filled with violence."

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and *the earth was filled with violence*. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for *the earth is filled with violence because of them*; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth." (6:11-13)

One of the characteristic marks of sin in the early chapters of Genesis, then, is the loss of peace and human community. Rather than showing forth God's image as his representative, fallen humanity has *misrepresented* God.

kind of organism, indeed than any that we know . . . a free and harmonious fellowship of persons united in the love of God. . . . That is God's plan for mankind: that it should be 'one body'" (D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* [London: Faber and Faber, 1948], p. 203).

28. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 216.

29. "But something has gone wrong. The organism has somehow failed to function as one body. It has come to be divided into countless little bits of life, each person trying to be a quite independent cell, a self-sufficient atom" (Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, pp. 203-4).

Rather than reflecting the glory of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternal community, humanity has defiled God's image through the destruction of community.

The Revelation of a Harmonized Humanity

This is why Paul finds such cosmic significance in the multi-ethnic church. From Jew and Gentile God has made a New Human Being, created in the likeness of God. This restored image is, as God intended, a declaration of his character and glory. Paul writes that

this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; *so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.* (Eph. 3:8-10)

The church enters into lived experience of this New Humanity as it "puts on" Christ.³⁰ Jesus is the perfect image of God — "the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:3). In Jesus, the invisible God is made known (John 1:18). The church, in turn, is remade in the image of the perfect humanity of Christ. Just as Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) and "the radiance of God's glory" (Heb. 1:3), so the church, Christ's body, is restored to humanity's rightful role as God's image-bearer and the declaration of his glory.³¹

30. "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires . . . and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22, 24). Cf. Colossians 3:9-10: "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

31. In his commentary on Genesis Walter Brueggemann draws out these connections between (a) humanity created in the image of God; (b) Jesus Christ as the perfect image and likeness of God; and (c) the church as the body of Christ, in which God is at work recreating the image. "In Jesus Christ, we are offered a new discernment of who God is and of who humankind is called to be. . . . And as Jesus models a new disclosure of God, so he embodies a call for a new human community. Paul urges an abandonment of the old life for an embrace of the new: 'Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, . . . put on the new nature created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Eph. 4:22-24). The idea of the 'image of God' in Gen. 1:26-29 and in Jesus of Nazareth is not an idea which lives in a cosmological vacuum. It

There is in fact a reciprocal relationship between our two themes of (1) wisdom and understanding; and (2) the unity of the church. On the one hand, wisdom and understanding lead to community. As "pastors and teachers . . . equip the saints" those saints "come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:11-13). As the love of God and the self-giving of Christ are revealed, believers come to understand the love they are to show one another.³²

On the other hand, the unity of the church is itself a "theological statement" — a declaration of the wisdom and purposes of God (Eph. 3:8-10). The church of Jew and Gentile bears the likeness of God, and as image-bearer, represents God to the created order. As the socially and ethnically diverse church is "built up in love" (4:13) it shows forth the shape of the triune life — a community of self-giving love and differentiated unity.

The Voice of the Body

To this point we have identified two of the central themes in Ephesians — and wisdom and understanding; the unity of the church. We have also seen that the command to sing is bound up with these themes. Since (as we acknowledged at the outset) singing is not often in our culture paired with "wisdom" or "understanding," before going on we may need to make clear just what is meant by these terms. What might it mean to say that singing contributes to the wisdom and understanding of the church?

The wisdom and understanding we are describing here is a deepened awareness that may or may not become fully (verbally) articulate; an awareness that arises from *sharing in the practices of the community*. It is what Susan Wood refers to as "participatory knowledge" (a knowledge which she in turn likens to Polanyi's "tacit knowledge"). She writes:

Our participation in the liturgy gives us access to a certain kind of knowledge of God, which I am identifying as participatory knowledge. This

is an explicit call to form a kind of human community in which the members, after the manner of the gracious God, are attentive in calling each other to full being in fellowship" (Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982], pp. 34-35; emphasis in original).

32. "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:31-32).

knowledge is mediated through the symbol system of the liturgy, including the scriptures, liturgical actions, sacraments and prayers.³³

In song, we share in the life and activity of the church. We learn — we come to *know* — its ways, not by having these articulated for us verbally and conceptually, but by participating in them. We come to a lived and (we might say) a kinesthetic understanding of what the church is, by taking part in what the church *does*. Wood employs a famous example from Polanyi to illustrate this point:

We learn what balance feels like by riding a bicycle rather than listening to explanations. By being fed, by hearing the words of forgiveness, by being caught up in the paschal events of the death and resurrection liturgically made present, we learn God's sustaining, self-diffusive love. By entering into praise and thanksgiving we know who we are in relationship to God and God's sovereignty. Within the liturgy we come to know ourselves and God because the liturgy orders our relationships: my relationship to others within the body of Christ sacramentally constituted within the Eucharist, my relationship to God as recipient of God's graciousness.³⁴

This is not to deny that there is cognitive content to the Christian gospel. Knowledge of God can be expressed verbally and conceptually: *we believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth*. And yet, this knowledge of God is received and can only be properly understood within the setting of the life and practices of the church.³⁵ The "core practices" of the church — including the activities of prayer, reading Scripture, sharing in the Lord's Supper, and singing — are the means by which the Holy Spirit mediates knowledge of God.³⁶ By sharing in these practices members of the Body are instructed in the shape, trajectory, and cadence of the church's common life. The participatory knowledge gained may shape future behav-

33. Susan K. Wood, "Participatory Knowledge of God in the Liturgy," in *Knowing the Triune God*, ed. Buckley and Yeago, p. 95.

34. Wood, "Participatory Knowledge," p. 96.

35. "Knowing is articulated in teaching, and in teachings about teachings. But to revise Austin Farrer's proverb, we cannot know that which we can *only* know. Knowing is an ingredient of our dealings with things — and, in this sense, an ingredient of our practices. The Church can state its faith, but what Christians say about the triune God cannot be adequately explicated without reference to what Christians most characteristically *do* in worship and obedience to that God" (Buckley and Yeago, "A Catholic and Evangelical Theology?" p. 9).

36. See especially Reinhold Hütter, "The Church: The Knowledge of the Triune God: Practices, Doctrine, Theology," in *Knowing the Triune God*, ed. Buckley and Yeago, pp. 23-47.

ior and *action*. As I speak with the church, I learn how the church and its members speak. This participatory knowledge also conditions the way in which the words and actions of the church are *received*. Through the teaching ministry of the church, we learn that God is Holy, and that we should come before him in reverence (to take one example). Through the liturgy of the church however, we learn the enacted content of "reverence." In song and prayer and public reading of Scripture we come to know the meaning of reverence by indwelling it; we come to know its posture and intonation. We might say that singing (along with the other core practices of the church) provides the prosody of the church's proclamation.

Returning to Ephesians, in Paul's letter a certain kind of unity is described and articulated. Congregational singing in turn allows us to *indwell* the unity that Ephesians *describes*. Singing does this by enacting that unity and modeling some of its most distinctive aspects.

An Enactment

Singing is an enactment of the differentiated unity of the body of Christ. It is the Voice of the New Humanity — One Voice composed of many voices; the "one new humanity out of the two" (Eph. 2:15). As Jew and Gentile sing together they sound out the reality of the new person fashioned in Christ. The restored image of God is made sensible, manifest in time — and that is important. An image is fashioned to be displayed and perceived. In the same way, the unity of the church — the restored image — is to be a declaration (Eph. 3:8-10). The singing of the church embodies and declares the New Humanity.

Of course, the power of song to embody community is not limited to the *Christian* community. Anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists have drawn attention to the way in which across human history "joint music-making [has] served to facilitate cooperative behaviour by advertising one's willingness to cooperate, and by creating shared emotional states."³⁷ William McNeill argues that singing together leads to the experi-

37. Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 218. The chapter from which this quotation is taken ("Making Music Together") is a helpful summary of recent research in the area. See also John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973); Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. pp. 109-63; and David J. Hargreaves and Adrian C. North, eds., *The Social Psychology of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

ence of "boundary loss" — "a blurring of self-awareness and the heightening of fellow feeling with all who share in a dance."³⁸ "This is the process," says Steven Mithen, "in which football crowds, church choirs and children in the playground are all engaging."³⁹

What was unique about the New Testament church, then, was not that it was a group of people experiencing community, nor that this community manifested itself in song. What was extraordinary was those among whom the "boundaries" were being crossed and which parties were experiencing "fellow feeling." In its congregational song one would have been able to hear the gathered church of Jew and Gentile — with all of its various regional accents, all the distinctive pronunciations of aristocrats, slaves, and free people; male and female voices, voices of young and old — all of these perceived at once in a single melody. This congregational song is not a *metaphor* of the socially and ethnically diverse church. It *is* this gathered body; or at least, this body's voice, this body made audible. The church's song is one way that the church and the Spirit announce this unity — to one another and to the wider world. It is one way that the Spirit reveals this community to its members, and continues to call its members to community. The members of the chorus literally participate in the one Body that is created out of many bodies. As they do, they *instruct* one another, saying: "Listen: this is the body of Christ — a chorus of Jew and Gentile, slave and free. Listen: this is the Image of God — a melody sung by male and female, impoverished and wealthy. Listen: this is the kind of life Christ brings — a harmony resonating through the bodies of these brothers and sisters, so lately aliens and enemies."

In addition to enacting the church's unity (something which other shared activities also do), singing also manifests the *distinctive shape* of the church's unity. I will mention three aspects of this shared life that one may hear elaborated in music.

Differentiated Unity

In the Garden God created Humanity, male and female, in his own image. The two are created out of one,⁴⁰ yet without loss of unity. In Jesus Christ, God creates a New Humanity, in his own image. The one is created out of

two (Jew and Gentile)⁴¹ yet without loss of distinction. Both the first Humanity and the New Humanity, then, are a unity that maintains the distinctiveness of its members.

"[Make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," writes Paul. For "there is one body and one Spirit" (Eph. 4:3-4). This unity, however, is facilitated through the very diversity of the body and its varied gifts: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (4:11). The New Human Being is no monolithic Unity. Rather, in Christ, many disparate, competing voices are drawn into consonance through the Spirit's ingenious work of re-harmonization. "Spirit," writes Colin Gunton, "is that which, far from abolishing, rather maintains and even strengthens particularity. It is not a spirit of merging or assimilation — of homogenization — but of relation in otherness, relation which does not subvert but establishes the other in its true reality."⁴²

Music provides a compelling sounding image of this differentiated unity and unified diversity. When we sing together we hear "*simultaneous voices which are nevertheless also one voice*."⁴³ We might say equally: when we sing together we hear one voice which is nevertheless the voice of many. Miroslav Volf argues that a truly trinitarian ecclesiology will affirm both person and community. The self in Christian community therefore "is a self that is always 'inhabited' or 'indwelt' by others."⁴⁴ Music, it would seem, is equipped to make sensible — as few other activities can — a self that is "'inhabited' or 'indwelt' by others." When I sing among others, I hear a voice that is both mine and not mine; a voice that is both in and outside of me. I hear my voice and your voice — and this third thing — our voices together: a sound which has properties which belong neither to your voice nor to my voice alone, but one that is nevertheless shaped and takes its substance from the individual voices comprising it.

Freedom in Submission

We have already seen that the command "be filled with the Holy Spirit" is joined to five dependent participles. The first three have to do with singing

41. Cf. Ephesians 2:15.

42. Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 182.

43. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 339.

44. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 3.

38. Mithen, *Singing Neanderthals*, p. 209.

39. Mithen, *Singing Neanderthals*, p. 215.

40. Cf. Genesis 2:21-24.

and making music. The fifth and last is "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). The section that follows (5:22–6:9) considers how this "submitting to one another" is to work itself out — in relationships between wives and husbands, parents and children, slaves and masters.⁴⁵ We should not miss the fact, however, that *singing* to one another, *giving thanks* to God, and *submitting* to one another are all part of the *same command*. All of these together fill out the dimensions of the imperative "be filled with the Spirit."⁴⁶ Singing and mutual submission, then, are two parallel manifestations of the New Humanity in Christ.⁴⁷ Those who are filled with the Spirit both sing to one another (*lalountes heautois psalmois*) and submit to one another (*hupotassomenoi allelois*),⁴⁸ and — marvelously — in the grammatical structure of the passage "submitting to one another" is informed and conditioned by "singing to one another." What a difference it might make if we were to take *music* as the model of "mutual submission" between husbands, wives, parents, children, slaves, and masters; if song were the school we attended to learn this kind of submission! Music immerses us in the event of mutual submission and so helps us to learn the submission Paul describes.

What kind of mutual submission happens in song? For one thing, singing words together involves *synchronicity* — staying in time with one an-

45. Paul urges the Christians "to be filled with the Spirit (v. 18) . . . they need to be full of the Spirit for their corporate worship (vv. 19–20) . . . [and] they need to be full of the Spirit in order to maintain the 'unity of the Spirit' in their several relationships in a believing household (v. 21), which are then spelled out in detail in 5:22–6:9" (Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 719).

46. "All of verses 19–21 take the form of a series of participles that modify the primary imperative in verse 18" (Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 719).

47. See, for example, Ephesians 5:28–32, in which the marriage relationship enacts the New Humanity: "In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church."

48. Unfortunately verse 21 is often treated as the point at which Paul concludes the preceding material and turns to a new theme. The New International Version along with some other modern translations actually breaks up the five participles that are grammatically dependent on verse 17, and inserts a paragraph break after verse 20: "Instead be filled with the Spirit. 18. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. 19. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, 20. always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ 21. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

other. The singers submit themselves to a common tempo, a common musical structure and rhythm. In addition to this, those who sing surrender to the constraints of a particular melody and harmony, a common key and tonal hierarchy. As they submit in this way they discover limits that are not oppressive; limits that do not frustrate but facilitate the participants' intention to sing. If this mutual submission entails the loss of one sort of freedom (the freedom to sing whatever notes one wants, in whatever way one chooses), it also enables freedom of another sort — the freedom to sing *this* tune; the freedom to be part of a chorus.

Musical submission also involves genuine participation. It is not and cannot be the silencing of a weaker by a dominant voice. The chorus is a society whose life depends upon its members contributing their voices. In a multi-voiced harmony, privileging some voices and excluding others does not mean that the louder voices "win." Rather, the harmony as a whole fails. The chorus depends on its members (acoustically) "making room" for other voices, allowing the other voices in the choir to sound out. Nor can the submission be imposed on the group by some of its members. If one voice persistently "enforces the rules" — insisting upon a particular tempo by drowning out the others, for instance — the chorus then ceases to be a chorus, the music suffers and ensemble is lost.⁴⁹

In song, then, we learn about a kind of mutual submission in which we do not lose, but discover our voices. This is a submission that is creative; which does not eliminate but opens up possibilities. Moreover, music manifests a mutual submission that is winsome and appealing, rather than dull, oppressive, and burdensome.

Sensitivity to and Awareness of Others

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, music may help us to understand what it means to listen and respond to others. Roger Scruton contends that hearing music *as* music means moving in "a dance of sympathy" with the imag-

49. In any chorus, as in the body of Christ, "different gifts are apportioned to each." It may well be that one or more among those singing (a singer with a better ear or a stronger voice) will take the lead — in securing pitch, dynamics, tempo, and so on. (Many of us, when singing in a choir, will have been grateful for the more accomplished, more experienced singer nearby — discretely piping out the correct note, or with her finger underlining the appropriate place in the score!) The point is simply that if this "leading out" obliterates the others, if there is no blend of voices, then the chorus is not musically successful.

ined life in the sounds, hearing a series of musical tones as gesture and movement in phenomenal space. "In responding to a piece of music," he writes, "we are being led through a series of gestures which gain their significance from the intimation of community."⁵⁰ And again, "through melody, harmony, and rhythm, we enter a world where others exist besides the self."⁵¹ The American philosopher Kathleen Higgins advances a similar idea, maintaining that "musical hearing . . . makes us aware of the world as a place of encounter and interaction between what is within and what is outside us."⁵² If the character of sin is that it is *incurvatus se* — turned in upon itself — then living as children of light means precisely becoming aware of "a world where others exist besides the self."

Paul writes that those in darkness are characterized — ironically — by both sensuality and a lack of sensitivity. They are separated from God and lost in ignorance "because of the hardness of their heart" (Eph. 4:18, NASB). "They have lost all sensitivity" he continues, "and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness" (Eph. 4:19). *Young's Literal Translation* renders the verse: "who, *having ceased to feel*, themselves did give up to lasciviousness."⁵³ Fee observes that in the chapters of Ephesians that follow, "most of the sins mentioned express the self-centeredness that contradicts love and disrupts the unity of the body."⁵⁴ Those in darkness attend and respond to only their own desires: "gratifying the cravings of [their] sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts" (Eph. 2:3, NIV).

At the most basic level singing together reminds us that there are others in the room, that the people seated to my right and to my left have voices. In song I participate in the experience of using my voice alongside and in concert with the voices of others. We have all attended musical performances where one poor soul in the choir makes the shift from fortissimo to pianissimo — one note too late. When singing in a group we instinctively avoid such embarrassing moments. If the others in the room are singing softly and slowly, I do as well. Unremarkable though this may seem, in these instances we *indwell* a kind of sensitivity and responsiveness to others. We gain experience in hearing one another; we learn to move in "a dance of sympathy" with those around us. And if we have ears to hear, we are reminded that the

50. Scruton, *Aesthetics of Music*, p. 357.

51. Scruton, *Aesthetics of Music*, p. 502.

52. Kathleen Marie Higgins, *The Music of Our Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 33-34.

53. The original reads: *hoitines apēlgēkotes heautous paredōkan tē aselgeia*.

54. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, p. 709.

New Humanity in Christ includes voices other than our own — voices of different quality, timbre, and register to which we must tune our own song.

All of this, I have suggested, we may learn *in the act of singing*. The singers may or may not be able to articulate these lessons fully, but they are realities learned (I have argued) through being indwelt. But we can say more: the church may grow in wisdom and understanding not only *in* the act of singing, but through deliberate and discursive *reflection on* the act of singing — the sort of reflection we are engaged in now, in this essay. Music provides an experience of unity; a participatory knowledge of unity; and also, conceptual resources that allow us more fully to appreciate and articulate that unity.

Back to the Choir Loft

Do these descriptions of music bear any meaningful relation to our actual experience of church music? While acknowledging the importance of the church's unity, we still may feel as if there is some distance between this talk of music as a "sounding image of the New Humanity" and the more mundane — and potentially contentious — world of choir rehearsals, music committees, and choosing music for Sunday morning. Does the preceding conversation really "touch down" in the world of the contemporary church's musical practice?

Which Music?

We might ask, for instance: *what kind of music are we talking about?* Does each and every possible instance of "music" potentially embody the unity of the church and lead it toward wisdom? Christian rap and Palestrina; Fanny Crosby's revival hymns and urban gospel choirs; the *St. Matthew Passion*, Southern Harmony "square-note" singing, and contemporary "lite-rock" worship teams — do all of these sound out the mystery of the church with equal fidelity? Or does Paul have some specific sort of music in mind?

We can venture a few broad statements. The music Paul refers to is vocal and communal. The command to speak "to one another" in song also suggests that the participants could hear one another. It also seems apparent that the songs Paul commends reflect the teaching of the church. We cannot go too far beyond this, nor do we need to — the ideas we have developed to this point would apply to nearly any form of communal singing.

The little we know about the liturgy of the early church suggests that the singing of the earliest Christians would most likely have been simple, unaccompanied, unison singing and chanting.⁵⁵ It may be that the hymnody of the modern church with its multi-voiced harmonies is even better suited to communicating the “unified diversity” of the church. And it may be that there are some types of music that express this less well, but have other gifts to bring to corporate worship.

But another, even more pointed question may come to mind.

What Unity?

Over the last twenty-five years churches in North America have waged countless battles, skirmishes, congregational revolts, and clerical counterattacks over the practice of music — hostile engagements that are often collectively described as “The Worship Wars.” Anyone who has ever directed a choir, served on a music committee, or played in a worship band (or even made the mistake of asking at Sunday dinner: “What did you think of the music at this morning’s service?”) will be forgiven for reading the last several pages with a wry smile. Music seems to split churches more often than it unifies them. It is also not difficult to think of counter-examples — instances in which excellent choral music is generated by thoughtless, mean-spirited people. Where then is this “sounding enactment of unity” we have been describing?

(1) In response, we might note that the same complaint might be made about many if not all of the practices of the church. Preaching, the reading of Scripture, the sacraments — all of these are good gifts given to the church for its life and health; none of these infallibly bring about the good for which they are intended. The Lord’s Supper is meant to embody the unity of the church,⁵⁶ but has also been the source of disunity, debates, and divisions.⁵⁷ Such failures simply bear witness to the sad but uncontroversial truth that humanity is able to misuse God’s good gifts. That music should be the source of discord is sadly ironic, but this is not an irony unique to music.

55. See the discussion in Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 73–74.

56. Cf. 1 Corinthians 10:17: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

57. In fact, it was a source of division in the Corinthian church to whom Paul wrote concerning “one loaf” and “one body.” See 1 Corinthians 11:17–22.

The sexual union of husband and wife *really is* an enactment of their unity. Is it possible for sexual intercourse to continue where there is no love or unity? Of course. Do these instances negate the reality of the union that is embodied in healthy sexual relationships? Absolutely not. In the same way, we may acknowledge that music often causes divisions in the church without calling into question its power to embody Christian unity.

The church’s singing, like its teaching and preaching, calls men and women to live differently. And, as with the teaching and preaching of the church, some respond to this call, while others disregard it.

(2) The very disagreements we are considering should also serve as a reminder that it is not music which creates the church, or which transforms individuals into the likeness of Christ. It is God’s Spirit. I have suggested some of the reasons why music is a powerful means through which God’s Spirit may enact his purposes for the church. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that music itself exercises some sort of magical power — as if the Kingdom will come if only our choir is sufficiently rehearsed or our worship band sufficiently polished. In some instances, the singing of the church may act as a testimony against its own behavior.

(3) It is also worth mentioning that most of the “music wars” are battles *about* music, not battles *in the midst of* music. I grew up singing nineteenth-century revival hymns in church, many of which had little appeal for me musically. Nevertheless, the experience of singing them gave me a powerful sense of belonging in that community. When I remember the church I grew up in, I remember first of all Sunday night “Song and Testimony” services. Those evenings spent singing together expressed more clearly than anything else the warmth, sincerity, and mutual commitment of that Christian community; and I became aware of the church’s unity and identity as a result of sharing in the songs. This happened, again, even though I didn’t care much for the songs musically. In a similar sort of way, I have on more than one occasion watched a choir under my direction develop a sense of camaraderie and unity, while learning a piece they dislike. The point is simply that the experience of *shared song* is not the same thing as *shared musical tastes* or a *shared aesthetic*.

Tuning the Music Committee: A Report from the Field

Ambrose, the fourth-century bishop of Milan, knew the wisdom of song we have been describing. He wrote:

[A psalm is] a pledge of peace and harmony, which produces one song from various and sundry voices in the manner of a cithara. . . .

A psalm joins those with differences, unites those at odds and reconciles those who have been offended, for who will not concede to him with whom one sings to God in one voice? It is after all a great bond of unity for the full number of people to join in one chorus. The strings of the cithara differ, but create one harmony.⁵⁸

Does this ever happen? Does a psalm ever “join those with differences, unite those at odds and reconcile those who have been offended”? I can relate at least one such instance.

For several years I worked as a minister of music, serving on the pastoral staff of various churches. One of these churches in particular struggled through a series of contentious disagreements about music. There were disputes about musical style, about the place of music within the services of the church, and (especially) about which people were and were not being used in the music ministry. Generals and armies had been recruited and armed, and trenches had been dug. I chaired a music committee composed of members of the different factions, and sat through week after week of tense, irritable, and unproductive meetings.

One week — feeling as if I had nothing to lose — I suggested that we begin our meeting by singing a couple of hymns together, *a cappella*. We had the same discussions, the same disagreements, and reached the same stalemates — but, the conversation seemed to me a little more gracious, the atmosphere a bit more open. Encouraged, I once again began the next week’s meeting with several minutes of singing, and then did so again the following week, and again — each week through the rest of the committee’s tenure. No one will be surprised to learn that our problems were *not* solved immediately. The conflicts and differences of opinion did not disappear. There was, however, a noticeable change. Our meetings “warmed” considerably. There was a greater sense of camaraderie and we became better at listening to one another. We compromised and made slow, steady progress on our disagreements. We came to enjoy our time together and (remarkably) over several months even began to resemble something like a Christian community (all the while continuing to disagree about issues of musical style)! No doubt, part of the change simply came about as we got to know one another better. Certainly, there were people praying for greater unity among the committee

members, and I believe those prayers were effective. But it seemed to me (and to others on the committee, when we discussed it some months later) that our singing had played a part in bringing about a change. The singing had been not so much “moving” or “inspiring” as *instructive*.

The members of the music committee were all church stalwarts — longtime Christians who had served the church in various capacities. It is safe to assume that all of them had read Paul’s description of the church as the Body of Christ, had heard sermons on loving one another, and, if pressed, could have offered a few helpful thoughts on the unity of the church. As we sang together, however, we came to understand what the unity of the church might mean and sound like in *this* room, in the midst of *these* issues, among *these* people with *these* voices. Even in the midst of our bickering, we all would have affirmed the wisdom of Paul’s command: “submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ.” With each week’s opening hymns, however, we were forced to *rehearse* this mutual submission, and as we did, we learned how such submission is enacted in song. What we had understood before — conceptually and at the level of conviction — we came to understand through indwelling and participation. As Christians we already knew we had been called to unity; in song we came to understand the distinctive shape of that unity. Harsh and irritable tones of voice were more quickly revealed as such when set immediately alongside our four-part singing. We seemed to remember more readily that each one around the table had a voice, and that it was best for the whole group if each voice were heard. And we discovered that the sound of all of our voices together could be beautiful, not just frustrating. Week after week our singing modeled the kind of community to which God was calling us; week after week melody and harmony intoned tuition in the wisdom of song.

58. Quoted in Stapert, *A New Song*, p. 26.