

## “Sing, Child, Sing!”: Church Choral Music and Spiritual Formation

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*Spiritual formation best takes place within the context of public worship. Within that intergenerational, multi-family context, choral music has tremendous formative power and influence. First, choral music informs the human spirit, teaching the great doctrines of the church to young and old alike. Second, choral music broadens and deepens our family memories by conforming our spirits to the forms of piety and devotion that the church has lived out historically, globally, and ecumenically. Third, choral music performs Christian spirituality by involving participants of all ages in a disciplined practice of claiming and proclaiming the Christian faith in concert with one another.*

Ours is a generation clearly obsessed with the formation of the human spirit, with spirituality, or with various spiritualities—creation spirituality, earth spirituality, new age spirituality, goddess spirituality, pagan spirituality, male spirituality, Christian spirituality. Hundreds of laypersons and clergy are learning techniques of Christian spiritual formation. Many are becoming involved in one-on-one spiritual direction. Others are attending para-church spirituality programs or retreats.

A few years ago a spiritual formation workshop was held on the campus of a denominational seminary. The two workshop leaders offered helpful suggestions regarding diet, exercise, work habits, and personal relationships. They recommended such personal activities as meditation, intensive journaling, and guided imagery. Even though both were lay leaders in local congregations, they did not suggest that going to church or public worship had anything to do with spirituality (Hancock, 1992).

This may have been a simple oversight, but I think that it is rather telling. It is telling because the church has long held that Christian spirituality is formed in the Christian *community*. Spirituality is not formed by individuals for the sake of individual growth, development or enhancement. It is shaped by the community of the church for the sake of the ministry and mission of the church.

John Calvin, the founder of the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, of which I am a part, tended to reject privatized religion in any form. This does not mean that he devalued private prayer or Bible reading. Calvin valued these things highly, but he felt strongly that they



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must be connected with, *and corrected by* the church, and brought under the dominion of the mission of the church in the world.

John Calvin also held that the church exists fundamentally as the church at *worship*. The church has long held that spirituality or “piety” is not a matter of us shaping our own spirits, but of entering into a context where our spirits will be shaped by the Spirit of God. This context is worship, especially Lord’s day worship, because of its continuity with the communion of saints throughout all ages. In this sense, worship is inherently intergenerational. Not only do diverse families of young and old gather together—at least they should—but worship connects us to a gathering of the larger Christian family—to all the generations that have gone before us, the living and the dead. The formative power of such community is easily overlooked in the contemporary obsession with “ages and stages.” Not only is worship inherently intergenerational, so are the various aspects of worship: “prayer, preaching, sacraments, architecture, ritual, and symbolism.” Each dimension connects us with the larger family of saints—past, present, and future.

While all these aspects of worship have formative power, none has more formative influence than music. We all know the power of music—power to move the soul, power to sculpt and chisel our emotions, power to excite our imaginations. Throughout the ages people have been awed and even mystified by the power of music. When an evil spirit was tormenting King Saul, his servants advised him to “seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well” (I Sam. 16: 16). Martin Luther wrote that: “whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate ... what more effective means than music could you find?” (1965, p. 323)

Mindful of the tremendous formative influence of music, I want to make a few observations about the ways that church choral music forms the Christian spirituality of children, parents, and elders in accord with the larger family of God, better known as “the communion of saints.” By choral music I mean music sung in chorus by choir, or by congregation, or by both choir and congregation—since choir and congregation are simply extensions of one another. I am focusing principally on hymns and anthems, though I also include other choral forms such as responses, psalms, various forms of sung prayers, cantatas, oratorios, or major choral works.

The basic question to consider is this: How, or in what ways, does choral music—as a part of Christian worship—shape or form the human spirit? Not intending to be exhaustive, I want to make three observations about this subject. First, choral music *informs* the faith of young

people and adults, over the course of their lives, about the God of their ancestors by repeating in a memorable way the whole drama of salvation. Second, choral music *conforms* the faith of families that worship each Sunday to the faith of the broader Christian family—historic, global, and ecumenical. Third, choral music encourages families to *perform* or enact their faith in concert with one another. Three ways of forming —*informing*, *conforming*, *performing*—all of which require things of choral directors and participants who wish to actualize this formative power in the church.

### Choral Music *In-forms* Christian Spirituality

First of all, consider that choral music shapes the human spirit by *informing* us about the author and finisher of our faith - the God who raised Jesus Christ. All of the central *doctrines* of the Christian faith are contained in the church's hymnody and in the great anthems of the church. Hymnologist Erik Routley once said that "our normal canon of popular hymns ... provide(s) all the cardinal doctrines of Christendom" (1956, p. x). Perhaps without realizing it, each Sunday, children and their parents stand side by side singing Christian doctrine!

In fact, many hymnals are organized along doctrinal lines. For instance, the hymns that I grew up singing from the 1942 *Hymnal* of the Presbyterian Church in the USA are organized into these categories in the index:

The Holy Trinity  
Doctrine of God (God the Father)  
Jesus Christ the Lord  
The Holy Spirit  
The Holy Scriptures  
The Life in Christ  
The Church and the Sacraments  
The Kingdom of God on Earth  
The Life Everlasting

When a parent invites a child to 'find the page' in the hymnal, that child is leafing through hundreds of short but profound lessons in the Christian faith that can inform them about who it is that we worship, and about who we are as the people of God. Likewise, many anthems are lessons in Christian doctrine. When an adult choir sings the words

of Paul Tchesnicoff's anthem, "Salvation is created in midst of the earth. Alleluia!" they are in-forming themselves and their hearers about a very important Christian truth. The claim is this: salvation in Christ is a creative action of God, in which God became incarnate—in the flesh—in the midst of the very stuff of the earth, in order to redeem us. This is an event that calls forth only one possible response: "Alleluia!"

Not only are we informed about Christian doctrine in hymns and anthems, but we are also informed about Scripture. Years ago, as a seminary student, I had to take a "Bible Content Exam" as part of my ordination exams. I recall being astonished at how many biblical texts and stories I had learned as a child and young adult by singing in the choir and by singing church hymns. There is currently a movement afoot in several denominations to revive the singing of the psalms, what is called metrical psalmody. Calvin wanted congregations to sing the psalms in worship, because he felt that the psalms were a summary of scripture, and should be learned by everyone. Calvin's concern gave birth to the Genevan and French psalters, which several traditions demusicalized and made into "responsive readings."

There is an important *theocentric* principle found in the church's choral music. This principle is crucial to our understanding of how Christian spirituality is *informed*. The great hymns and anthems of the church focus primarily on the drama of salvation—on God and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The focus is on God, creation, Christ, Spirit, Church, and everlasting hope, not on our feelings or needs or aspirations. When children, youths, adults, and elderly congregants stand together singing such hymns, spirituality is informed by focusing attention on the author and finisher of faith. Christian spirituality is formed by God rather than by our own wants and desires to be "spiritual." We are shaped and molded as Christian families committed to and sustained by God, not as discrete individuals consumed with self-fulfillment.

This is one reason that the words "me" or "I" are found less in many hymnals, and the focus is more often on "we" or "us" or "the church." Whenever the first person singular pronoun is used it is usually mentioned in a posture of *response* to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Look, for instance, at the great hymn by Isaac Watts in which he uses the pronoun "I": "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died."

When I survey the wondrous cross,  
On which the Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,  
Save in the death of Christ my God;  
All the vain things that charm me most,  
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
that were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Although Watts does not preclude my subjective, personal, spiritual development, he does not make it the focus of his hymn. Rather, Watts keeps the accent on the Prince of Glory. As Joseph Sittler once noted of this hymn, "Spirituality is not created by the surveyor, but by the surveyed" (1983, p. 125). Watts concentrates on the "wondrous cross" which is not our doing, and lets it be the shaping, forming power in our lives. Church choral music informs the human spirit by focusing us primarily on the author and perfecter of our spiritual formation—God in Jesus Christ—and only secondarily on the shape of our human response to what God has done.

### Choral Music Con-forms Christian Spirituality

Consider secondly that Church choral music *conforms* our spirits so that they will be in continuity with the spirit of the church in and throughout history. Church hymns and anthems are dated. They have historic and generational moorings. They were written during certain historical periods and carry with them certain spiritual and theological interests that were peculiar to their own day and age. They reflect the Christian spirituality of our extended historic Christian family.

Today's Christian families do not worship and work in a vacuum. We exist as part of a larger communion of saints who have gone before. We are formed by the memory of past forms of spirituality, and our memory of the past helps to make our present forms of spirituality more deeply rooted. We also learn that our forms of Christian spirituality will not last forever, that Christ's Spirit takes different forms in different generations and in different locations.

In one generation Christian spirituality takes a militant reforming shape such as that expressed in late 15th and 16th century German Reformation hymns. A good example is Martin Luther's "A mighty fortress is our God." Later in Germany, Christian spirituality changed into the German pietism of the late 17th century expressed in hymns such as Joachim Neander's "Praise to the Lord, the almighty, the king of creation;" the anonymous "Fairest Lord Jesus;" Paul Gerhardt's "O sacred head;" or the cantatas and oratorios of Johann Sebastian Bach.

In 17th and early 18th century England we find a rich devotional spirituality expressed in such hymns as Isaac Watts' "When I survey the wondrous cross;" Charles Wesley's "Love divine, all loves excelling;" or in anthems such as Orlando Gibbons' "O Lord, increase my faith" and Thomas Tallis' "If ye love me" and "O Lord give thy holy spirit." During the Victorian period in England, Christian spirituality was expressed in the high church romantic spirituality of such hymns as "Once in royal David's city," by Mrs. Cecil Frances Alexander; Bishop Cecil Wordsworth's "O day of rest and gladness;" or Sir William Henry Baker's "The king of love my shepherd is." During the same period, we encounter the low church spirituality of such hymns as Henry Alford's "Come ye thankful people come" or Frances Ridley Havergal's "Lord speak to me, that I may speak." In Scotland we find a deep and engaging evangelical spirituality in such hymns as "Beneath the cross of Jesus," by Elizabeth Clephane or George Matheson's "O Love that wilt not let me go."

As we sing hymns and anthems from our own century, we are reminded that for many of our ancestors, spirituality was profoundly social in nature. Consider the shape of Christian spirituality in hymns such as Frank Mason North's "Where cross the crowded ways of life;" William Pierson Merrill's "Not alone for mighty empire;" or Henry Van Dyke's "They who tread the path of labor." More recently, we discover faithful sisters and brothers from around the globe who engage our spirits with cosmic, charismatic, or liberation forms of Christian spirituality. Consider hymns such as Jane Parker Huber's "O God of earth and space;" James Manley's "Spirit;" or Alvin Schutmaat's Argentinian hymn, "Canto de esperanza," (Song of Hope). The anthems and hymns sung in our local congregations can represent all of these forms of Christian spirituality and many more. In this way the human spirit at worship finds itself being conformed to the body of Christ *historic, global, and ecumenical*.

We must beware of narrowing this conforming dimension of church music. The conformist impulse is very strong in popular understandings of Christian choral music. Often, one historical era and one form of Christian spirituality are elevated to the status of an idol.

All hymnody has to be revivalist, or social, or devotional. All anthems have to be from a certain period or culture, written by certain people, conveying certain forms of piety. Part of the debate over many of the new denominational hymnals stemmed from the desire by the hymnbook committees to include hymns that would represent an even broader strain of the current piety of the church. This meant that other forms would be cut back a little—something had to go. Many of these hymnals have been edited to conform faith to the faith of the whole church—historic, global, and ecumenical—not just to one, particular era of church history and experience.

### Choral Music Per-forms Christian Spirituality

Consider thirdly that church choral music forms our spirituality by *performing* or enacting the Christian faith. When we sing, we are caught up in a participatory event. We stand side by side (hopefully straight), young and old alike (hopefully sharing hymnbooks or songsheets), open our mouths (hopefully wide and with good diction), and sing out loud (hopefully with some sense of pitch, rhythm, blend, intonation, and harmony). In this *event*, words are connected to emotion and action. We begin to perform or act out our faith—to live into it. We begin to connect words to emotions such as joy, sorrow, grief, or peace. The music allows us to experience and live into a more complex and deeper expression of our faith than words alone permit. In short, music becomes an avenue of *approach*, a thread that we follow toward the actual encounter with the God of our faith—the very referent of the words we sing.

I recall as a teenager singing the Brahams Requiem with our church choir. We were singing the biblical words: “Behold all flesh is as the grass, and like the flower it withereth.” The intonations were deep and rumbling. The harmony built on a powerful bass line that I was singing. The rhythm was slow and steady. The choir suddenly became one voice in perfect rhythm and harmony speaking the reality of the human condition—that we are creature, not creator; that we are finite, perishing, and fragile—yet held by God, loved by God, redeemed by God. My knees buckled. I had to sit down for a moment. I had encountered the truth about myself, and the reality of God, and that encounter was forming my spirit, molding it. In these and other circumstances, church choral music performs our spirits; it enacts Christian spirituality.

This event must be distinguished from emotionalism or sentimentality. The distinction is simple. Sentimentality is a product of singing words and meaning that are focused on ourselves. The words

are about our feelings—about being “amazed” by God, loving Jesus, or being “in love” with Jesus (for instance), and the music is about our feelings - it is designed to match our emotions. Sentimental music is music in which our emotions, not God, are the object of our worship. This is not the case where words and music are focused on setting forth the truth about ourselves and about God.

In order for music to best *perform* our faith several things are necessary:

**Devotion**—Devotion simply means giving our best, no matter who we are: golden-throated choir members, tone-deaf congregants, or somewhere in between. Primarily, this means active and simultaneous *participation* by parents, elders, youths, and children, not standing with arms folded, looking at the ceiling, or worrying about the color of Ashley’s dress, or the pot-roast in the oven, or rifling through a box of crayons in a children’s worship packet. It means focused attention to words and music, *whether we consider ourselves singers or not*. It means anticipating that God’s Word is present in the hymn or anthem—and actively listening for it. Devotion means participating the best we can, giving God our best always.

I recall one evening at choir practice that we were obviously not giving our best. People were glancing at watches, talking over the director’s instructions, and shuffling pages around in loose leaf binders. The choir director stopped what he was doing, and stood in silence for a moment. Then he looked up at us and said “we are preparing this music to worship God. That is why you must be devoted to this music ... because to worship God requires our *best*.”

**Discipline**—Any form of spirituality requires discipline in its performance or enactment. Singers of all ages must learn certain fundamentals of singing and exercise them consistently. For hymn singing, this means (at a minimum), paying attention to posture (not slouching or leaning), paying attention to blend, (not singing so loud or soft as to lose the sense of community in singing), and paying attention to pitch and harmony, as we are able or skilled.

Discipline opens singing to the possibility that it can become more than merely mumbling notes and words—that we can rise above ourselves, transcend our limitations. When I was in junior high school, I had a wonderful choir director. She was a formidable woman, a perfectionist, who saw only *what we could be* as singers, never who we thought we really were (a rag-tag group of pre-teens whose voices had just begun to change). She would walk up and down the aisles as we sang our songs, and if she caught us slouching in our seats, or looking out the



window, or folding a sheet of mimeographed music into a paper airplane, she would sometimes shout "Sing, child, sing! This is not a circus. You're here to sing! To make music!" Nearly all of her students were faithful to her as a teacher. We respected her and stayed in her choir, because we knew that she saw what we could *become*, instead of who we thought that we were. This, I believe, is the key to discipline. It enables us to move beyond our ordinary sense of ourselves. It helps us to overcome mediocrity that may have become habitual. Discipline is the key to any process of spiritual formation.

*Cooperation*—Cooperation means that we seek unity across generations, unity of voice, of heart, of tone, of movement, of dynamics, of spirit. Perhaps the word "communion" would be better, or the word "concert" which is sometimes used of musical performance. Beyond simply blending, it means finding *together*, as families, and as the Church, the deeper spirit of the music and words themselves. This requires listening to each other as we sing—not only audibly, through our ears, but spiritually, through our souls—our longings, pains, fears, loves, imaginings, hopes. This is what it is to sing "in concert," to be of one voice as families at worship, to sing the Song of the Lamb together.

One of the great pictures of this is found in the book of II Chronicles at the dedication of Solomon's Temple:

All the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with a hundred and twenty priests who were trumpeters: and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord,

"For God is good,

for God's steadfast love endures forever,"

the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. (5: 12-14)

To sing God's praise requires a spirit of cooperation or unity, that we sing "in concert."

In conclusion, Christian spirituality is formed in the Christian community, and primarily in the Christian community at worship. Within that inter-generational and multi-family context, choral music has tremendous formative power and influence. Choral music in-

forms the human spirit, teaching across generations the great doctrines of the church. Choral music conforms the spirit to the forms of piety and devotion that the church lives out as an extended historic, global and ecumenical family of faith and practice. Choral music performs Christian spirituality by involving adults and children in a disciplined practice of claiming and proclaiming the Christian faith in concert with one another. From this solid ground, Christian spirituality can grow and flourish throughout the course of human life.

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