

Sacred Sound

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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Proverbs 8:22-31

I Corinthians 14:6-19

"I will sing praise with the spirit, but will sing praise with the mind also."

On this Reformation Sunday, the apostle Paul presents us with a formidable task: to consider the place of music in the worship of God and in the ordering of the cosmos when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy. We do this in the midst of a cacophonous world where noise trumps harmony, heat trumps light, emotion trumps the life of the mind. Yet we are those who have been called out by the God in whose presence "the harshness and discord of our human lives [may] be transmuted into music" and by whose mercy "a new harmony in our beings...shall return us to our many duties with fresh courage, with rejoicing and with eagerness." [Robert French Leavens]

John Calvin's reflections on our text, in his most pastoral edition of the Institutes--the 1541 French Edition, prompt our own. Having cautioned his readers on confusing the temple with the dwelling place of God, [we did the same a few Sundays ago], he continues his discussion of the church's worship by citing Paul's admonition to pray and sing not only with the spirit, but with the mind: "Likewise it is very evident," he writes, "that speaking and singing, if one uses them in prayer, are not worth anything before God and do not profit at all with Him, if they do not come from the affection and depth of the heart. But instead they irritate Him and provoke His wrath against us if they come only from the mouth..." The heart, you will remember from our understanding of God's dwelling there, was synonymous with the mind in Scripture. To sing from the depth of the heart is to love God with a mind whose faith seeks understanding.

But the human mind wanders! So for Calvin, both words and music rightly used in worship "help the human *intention*, which is fragile and easy to turn away if it is not confirmed in all ways, [by keeping] its thought focused on God." Therefore the words sung in worship, said Calvin, were to be the words of Scripture and preferably, if not exclusively, words taken from the Bible's songbook: the psalms. Words from any other source were likely to distract the attention of the worshipping congregation from the Word of God. Moreover, the singing of psalms was in keeping with the pattern of New Testament worship and an example of the principle of *sola scriptura*: reforming the church through God's word as we hear that word in Scripture.

Of music itself, Calvin had even more to say. NO MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS! Oh really? This is a quarrel Calvin's critics have won over the years. If you do not believe me, just turn around. That said, the singing of Calvin's congregation in Geneva was to be unaccompanied; the melodies of composers such as Louis Bourgeois, melodies we sing still, were marked by their simple chord style. Against Reformers such as Martin Bucer who, with Luther, permitted all kinds of music to be sung in church, Calvin insisted the music of the church be set apart [holy] from the frivolous music of the bar room, for instance, or from what he viewed as the pernicious music of secular society. This was because, more than any other figure in

the Reformation, I think Calvin understood the incredible power of music. “There is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men,” Calvin wrote in his preface to the Genevan Psalter.

And in fact, we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another...[I]n speaking now of music I understand two parts: namely the letter, or subject matter; secondly, the song, or the melody. It is true that every bad word (as St. Paul has said) perverts good manner, but when the melody is with it, it pierces the heart more strongly, and enters into it; in a like manner as through a funnel, the wine is poured into the vessel, so also the venom and the corruption is distilled into the depths of the heart by the melody.

His point, I believe, was to disallow any melody that was not in keeping with the integrity of the word being sung or any tune that, by appeal to unreflective emotions, would distract faith from its search for understanding.

While as Calvin's heirs we do not adhere to the letter of his exegesis of our text, as heirs of a church that is reformed and always being reformed, I think we mean to adhere to the spirit. For instance, the text of the hymns we sing and of the anthems offered by the choir must be consistent with Scripture and theologically sound; likewise the music will be music whose excellence draws out the depth of a text's meaning. In the words of another Presbyterian church and borrowing the words of Paul to Christians in Philippi, the music appropriate to the worship of God should be “noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.” Moreover the music of the church must have integrity, defined as “the overall truthfulness of a work. [Such] integrity demands that anything contrived merely for the sake of effect and not organically related to the purpose of a work must be ruled out.” So the music appropriate to worship should be evocative rather than manipulative, honest rather than manufactured. Or as Calvin put the matter in the third book of his *Institutes* : “Such songs as have been composed only for the sweetness and delight of the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest degree.” Put positively in a report to the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America, while repetitive music such as praise choruses and Taize chants may be used from time to time, “Hymns, both ancient and modern, which stretch minds, increase vocabulary, rehearse the biblical story, and teach of the nature and the mighty acts of God are essential for the congregation's growth in faith.” It has long been proven that hymnody has far more to do with shaping the theology of a congregation than the words of the preacher!

But a latter day Reformed theologian named Karl Barth says something more about the music of the church that both saves us from the parsimony of Calvinism and thrusts us expectantly upon the cosmos, creatures one and all who were made to delight in the music of the spheres. (Barth starts out badly, Mark, but fear not!) Joining Calvin in his distaste for instruments in worship, he writes that “It is hard to see any compelling reason why [the congregation] should have to be accompanied in [their singing] by an organ.” Nevertheless, Barth goes on to acknowledge that in the organ's sound and swell, “It might be argued that...the community's praise of God is embedded by anticipation in that of the whole cosmos, to which the cosmos is undoubtedly called and which we shall unquestionably hear in the consummation.” “*The heavens are telling the glory of God,*” sings the psalmist, “*and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.*” “*Where were you,*” roars God to Job, “*when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*” “*The Lord created me at the beginning of the earth,*” sings Wisdom, “*when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker, and I was*

daily his delight, rejoicing before him always.” The organ plays the part of the otherwise inaudible cosmos as the congregation joins the music of the spheres.

What was this music, this fundamental belief in the unity of the cosmos, known to the psalmists, to the writers of wisdom and to the apostle Paul? In the 6th century B.C., the century that found the Israelites hanging up their harps by the rivers of Babylon and weeping as they sang the songs of Zion for their captors, the quasi-mythical Greek figure of Pythagoras came upon the sublime harmony of the cosmos that had sounded from the beginning of creation. He had inherited a poetic cosmology and so imagined spheres moving around a cylindrical earth, a notion that led him to connect his discovery of the mathematical basis for musical intervals to the mathematical elegance ordering the physical universe. Certainly the spheres made sounds as they turned around the orb of the earth, “those sounds of necessity being musical and harmonious... a vast lyre, with crystal spheres in the place of strings.” The harmonious unity of the cosmos became a theme that resounded in the depths of the human psyche--from Pythagoras to Plato to Clement of Alexandria to Augustine to assorted medieval monks to the Great Chain of Being in the fourteen century [“there is no worm that crawls upon the ground, no bird that flies on high, no fish that swims in the depths, which the chain of this order does not bind in the most harmonious concord”] to John Milton who, in the wake of the Reformers, wrote:

*But else in deep of night, when drowsiness
Hath locked up mortal sense, then listen I
To the celestial sirens' harmony,
That sit upon the nine infolded spheres
And sing to those that hold the vital shears
And turn the adamantine spindle round,
On which the fates of gods and men is wound.
Such sweet compulsion doth in music lie,
To lull the daughters of Necessity,
And keep unsteady Nature to her law,
And the low world in measured motion draw
After the heavenly tune, which none can hear
Of human mold with gross unpurged ear.*

It is this heavenly tune for which we long amid the chaotic noise, the careless words, the malicious speech of the world as we have ordered it. When has it been worse, I wonder, than in this season of obscene politics and guttural accusations. When has it been more critical that the church in its music offer a foretaste of the harmony for which we were made. “At its truest,” notes Redeemer Presbyterian Church of its music, “art tends toward unity and order. Just as the three persons of the Trinity are equally integral to our [understanding] of God, so unity and order are inseparable in great art and music.”

Therefore on this Reformation Sunday, the gospel is simply and profoundly this: that the music of the spheres of which we are partakers as we sing God’s praises can be but a poor echo of the harmony that is God. “Our enjoyment of God,” writes theologian and friend of this congregation Robert Jenson, “is that we are taken into the triune singing. Perhaps we may say we are allowed to double the parts....A congregation singing a hymn of praise to the Father is doubling the Son’s praise, and the surge of rhythm and melody is the surge of the Spirit’s glorification of the Father and the Son....God is a great fugue. There is nothing so capacious as a fugue.”

At the end of in this season wherein we have asked after the foundation of this house, may I also nominate singing, which is to nominate no less than the conversation, the

harmony, the pure music that God is. I say this pastorally as we are surrounded by the harshness and discord of the world. How much more do we come, these days, in need of a new harmony that shall return us to our duties with fresh courage, with rejoicing, with eagerness. But I also with Barth say this theologically because

The Christian church sings...from inner, material necessity it sings. What we can and must say quite confidently is that the community which does not sing is not the community....And where it does not really sing but sighs and mumbles spasmodically, shamefacedly and with an ill grace, it can be at best only a troubled community which is not sure of its cause and of whose ministry and witness there can be no great expectation. In these circumstances it has every reason to pray that this gift which is obviously lacking or enjoyed only in sparing measure will be granted afresh and more generously lest all the other members suffer. The praise of God which finds its concrete culmination in the singing of the community is one of the indispensable basic forms of the ministry of the community.”

Let us therefore sing praises to the God who is music! Alleluia! Amen.