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Lost in Wonder, Love & Praise: Churches of Christ & the Sacrament of Singing

Darryl Tipkens

I will sing with the spirit, I will sing with the understanding also" (1 Cor 14.15). Sometimes you have to leave home to discover what you know to be true. One such discovery came to me in Wales, where I was studying the works of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. In the beautiful seaside university town of Aberystwyth, I visited a church near the campus one Sunday morning. Unlike so many churches in the UK, this one was packed with old and young—students, children, families. The Welsh are famous for their singing, and the vigorous congregational singing stirred my soul. As beautiful sounds reverberated through that ancient stone church, inexplicably I found myself weeping. At one point in the service an elderly man stood in the assembly and prayed in a sonorous voice, “O my God, thou art holy. We know that thou inhabitest the praises of Israel.”

The old man continued to pray, but I was seized by his declaration, which sounded like an oracle.¹ God inhabits his people as they sing. When we sing, he is with us. The veil between heaven and earth grows thin when we worship. God comes near. *Singing in worship is sacramental.*

Sacrament is not a word found in the Bible of my youth.² It was never the subject of a sermon, and it was never discussed in Sunday school. Yet sacramental themes suffuse Scripture, and worship through the centuries has been sacramental in practice. The word *sacrament* has considerable semantic range. According to Thomas Aquinas, a sacrament is “a sign of some sacred thing.”³ *The Book of Common Prayer* calls sacraments “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.”⁴ Although these definitions are usually applied to ecclesiastical practices (like baptism and Lord’s Supper), anything possessing a sacred character or mysterious significance can be sacramental. The rainbow, a sign of God’s covenantal promise, can be viewed as such. Indeed, all of creation has the potential to reveal “sacred reality,” as when Isaiah declares, “The whole earth is full of [God’s] glory” (6.3). Or as Gerard Manley Hopkins exulted one fine day in north Wales, not far from where I had my Welsh epiphany: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”⁵

The first Christians understood creation’s sacramental capacity to reveal God’s “eternal power and divine nature . . . seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1.20). The church’s first hymnbook, the Psalter, taught them to think and act sacramentally. If you sing the Psalms often, you learn that God is everywhere and that he is uniquely present in the worshipping assembly. Singing and the divine presence are related phenomena in the Bible (Ps 95.2, 100.2; Isa 12.6; Eph 5.18–19).

The doctrine of the incarnation and the presence of the Holy Spirit added weight to the early church’s sacramental orientation. If Jesus is Immanuel, “God with us,” then God in Christ is *truly* with us—not just

1. The man’s declaration *was* an oracle. He was quoting Psalm 22.3.

2. The word *sacrament* is in fact a biblical word: *sacramentum* appears in the *Latin New Testament*, a translation of the Greek word *mysterion* (“mystery”).

3. *The Summa Theologicae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 2nd & rev. ed., 1920. Online ed., 2016, www.newadvent.org/summa/4060.htm/.

4. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 857,

5. See Alexander Schmemmann’s book on the world as cosmic sacrament: *Sacrament and Orthodoxy* (New York: Herder, 1965).

figuratively or poetically. This is especially so in corporate worship, as Paul explains when he describes a service in the Corinthian church in which a non-Christian worshiper is so overcome by the sense of the divine presence that he bows down and declares, “God is really among you” (1 Cor 14.25). The divine manifestation was not some abstract, ethereal, mental event. No. God’s Spirit descends and dwells in real bodies.

The incarnation proclaims that the Creator loves the stuff of his creation, and this in turn shapes the embodied nature of worship. C. S. Lewis reminds us not to try to be more spiritual than God: “God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why He uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.”⁶

Spiritual worship in the New Testament was remarkably physical, involving all the senses. *Smelling* and *tasting* wine and bread on tongue and palate. The *touch* of holy kisses. The warm *embrace* of fellowship. The *anointing* of oil. The *washing* of feet. The *feel* of bread and the cup in one’s hands. *Seeing* one’s fellow disciples gathered around a table. *Observing* the play of shadow and lamplight in evening services in upper rooms, private homes, caves, and catacombs. The aerobic and kinesthetic dimensions of *bowing*, *kneeling*, *raising* one’s hands in adoration, supplication, and praise. *Making* the sign of the cross with one’s body (as described in a second-century Syriac hymn found in *The Odes of Solomon*). *Hearing* preaching, praying, and confessing. *Savoring* spirit-filled singing. *Intoning* the rhythmic, antiphonal responses of the Psalms. On it goes. Early disciples were not confined to just a few acts of worship: it was an embodied, multidimensional affair.

So the modern suspicion of embodied worship does not come from Scripture. Most likely, our understanding has been distorted by Platonic dualism teaching us that *spirit* is good, while *matter* is evil. The Reformation further confused the matter, as it marginalized the body and made the sermon the primary act of worship. In this move, worship became centered in the head. A dose of eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy, which privileged intellect and rationality over emotion and sentiment, was another major blow to embodied worship.

In the Enlightenment, reason, logic, and argument—operations of the mind—supersede the truths of the body, habits, practices, or tradition. In the words of Charles Taylor, *excarnation* replaces *incarnation*.⁷ The body becomes a mode of transport for the brain, not the temple of the Holy Spirit. Thus dawns the secular age with God fading from bodies and from creation. Given that the Stone-Campbell movement was born in the Enlightenment era, it’s easy to see why we came to distrust the body in worship.

Enlightenment biases help explain how we came to a particular view of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These practices remained important, even essential, but they were often treated as requirements and obligations, not sacred mysteries. It was our *duty* to remember Jesus in the Supper (to perform the *mental* act of recalling what he did in the past), but this was not an occasion to meet or receive Christ in some real way. Yet the Apostle Paul did not limit the Supper to being solely a memorial. He called it a *communion*. To commune means to “communicate intimately with someone, to confer or converse with” another person (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Somehow, the idea of divine intimacy in communion needed to be contained. The possibility of a personal meeting with Christ was rendered dubious by what was often pronounced at the table. Someone would say, “This bread, which *represents* the body of Christ . . . the fruit of the vine, which *represents* the blood of Christ . . .” In effect, we clarified (or corrected!) Jesus’s own language. One can see why. Our Enlightenment system made us nervous about the *real presence*, which felt mysterious and irrational, even medieval and Catholic. A memorial was more to our taste as it could be *understood*. In a memorial, you can elicit devotional thoughts about someone, even if he is absent.

But here is a crucial point: despite our intellectual maneuvers, there never was a complete rout of sacramental spirituality in Churches of Christ. A kind of “shadow” (or “subterranean”) sacramentalism survived, even flourished among us. This is so, I think, because a *living* faith requires an *experience* of the divine—not just thoughts about God. A religion rooted only in “right thoughts” about God has little staying

6. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 65.

7. *Excarnation* describes “the transfer of our religious life out of bodily forms of ritual, worship, practice, so that it comes more and more to reside ‘in the head.’” Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 613.

power across the generations. Said differently, anti-sacramentalism over time saps a religious movement. As our official teaching tended to empty baptism and the Lord's Supper of sacramental significance, church members did what they had to do: they looked for an experience of the sacred elsewhere. They turned to singing.

Congregational singing became our "approved" sacrament. In singing we could experience powerful emotions. In singing we could weep and express joy. In singing our imaginations soared. In singing we felt the deepest bonds of fellowship, and sometimes we sensed the very presence of the Lord. Singing was encouraged. And we got really good at it.

Despite the incessant rationalist teachings of my youth, like a budding Sherlock Holmes, I started noticing clues that *we actually believed in the divine presence.* Scripture itself provided an antidote to the rationalism. Even more, there were all those subversive songs validating my irrepressible longing for God. I learned through singing that it was all right to *long* for his presence and *feel* his nearness:

Be with me, Lord! No other gift or blessing
Thou couldst bestow could with this one compare—
A constant sense of Thy abiding presence,
Where e'er I am, to feel that Thou art near.⁸

In the hymns I could walk in the garden with Jesus.⁹ In the hymns "heaven came down and glory filled my soul."¹⁰ In the hymns I learned that God "shines in all that's fair."¹¹ In the hymns the congregation boldly declared the presence of the Holy Spirit:

There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place,
And I know that it's the Spirit of the Lord;
There are sweet expressions on each face,
And I know they feel the presence of the Lord.¹²

If you ask any member of the Church of Christ, "When have you felt closest to God? When did you sense his presence most profoundly?" many will reply, "It happened when I was singing in church." In a variety of ways our singing declared our sacramental conviction that *God is really among us.*

Over time I have come to understand why singing became our sacrament—even our "sacrament of sacraments." I have also come to suspect that our historic focus on *a cappella* singing and our harsh attitude towards those who differ with us have been misunderstood by our opponents—and misunderstood by us too. It's not that we were 100% *against* instruments. (Some of us were, to be sure, but not everyone.) More to the point, we were *for* something. We are 100% *for* full-throated, fully embodied, fully participatory congregational singing; and we are justifiably distressed to see the decline of beautiful congregational singing in our churches. We are loath to give up this rich, three-thousand-year-old tradition without resistance.

It is troubling to see so many churches, both *a cappella* and instrumental, doing so little to preserve the divine gift of congregational singing. Some churches are making decisions sincerely intended to make things better, but making them worse by weakening congregational participation. It doesn't have to be this way. I conclude with a few suggestions that might encourage a renewal of congregational singing.

1. *Make singing a big deal, especially among the young.* There was a time when group singing was integral to American culture. Singing was not just a church thing, but a universal practice. The legendary folk singer Pete Seeger observed:

8. "Be with Me Lord" by T. O. Chisholm.

9. "I Come to the Garden Alone" by C. Austin Miles.

10. "Heaven Came Down" by John W. Peterson.

11. "This Is My Father's World" by Maltie D. Babcock.

12. "Sweet, Sweet Spirit" by Doris Akers.

Once upon a time, wasn't singing a part of everyday life as much as talking, physical exercise, and religion? Our distant ancestors, wherever they were in this world, sang while pounding grain, paddling canoes, or walking long journeys. Can we begin to make our lives once more all of a piece? Finding the right songs and singing them over and over is a way to start. And when one person taps out a beat, while another leads into the melody, or when three people discover a harmony they never knew existed, or a crowd joins in on a chorus as though to raise the ceiling a few feet higher, then they also know there is hope for the world.¹³

Singing's historic role in churches closely tracks with Seeger's observations. The question is whether this is a picture of an antiquated world beyond revival. There is compelling evidence that people continue to love to sing in groups. Witness the thousands of choirs and informal singing groups found in virtually every city, town, and village in the land. If group singing were really passé, how does one explain the tens of millions who have watched a flash-mob choir sing Handel's *Messiah* in a mall? Churches should be the leaders in teaching children and youth to sing, sing, sing. If children are not nurtured in a culture of singing, we cannot expect them to value it in adulthood. Every church should maintain substantial music programs for every age.

2. *Encourage variety—both in theme and in musical form.* The fact that some churches employ praise music almost exclusively is a problem. Consult the church's first hymnbook, the Psalms, and you see a wide range of musical content. In addition to wonderful psalms of praise and thanksgiving, you also find songs of poignant sorrow and wrenching lament. As Nicholas Wolterstorff notes, worship should include trumpets, ashes, and tears.¹⁴ Trumpets represent the exultant praise-filled modes of worship. Songs of celebration are essential, but they must not crowd out expressions of repentance and grief.

There are various ways to achieve this variety. One is to study the hymnals of other traditions. It's surprising how many worship leaders know the newest songs on Christian radio, but do not know the great hymns from Mennonite, Baptist, Presbyterian, or Episcopal hymnals. Song leaders should acquaint themselves with Taizé songs, African American spirituals, African and Asian hymns, etc. One way to transcend the debate over old vs. new is to reclaim some of the lovely, but forgotten stanzas of old songs, available in others' hymnals.

Rhythmic songs are particularly important. Ken Nafziger, professor of music at Eastern Mennonite University, observes that the American ear, having been tuned to rock and roll for a generation, is highly responsive to rhythmic music. Rhythm's roots reach deep into African and African American cultures, yet this music communicates well across ethnic, denominational, and national boundaries. Today there is a virtual explosion of church music coming from churches in Asia and the Global South, where the majority of Christians now live. Of these many thousands of new hymns being composed around the world, shouldn't we know a few of them?

3. *Make memories as you make music.* Worship leaders must understand this: *songs both create and recall memories.* Once planted in us, songs can evoke memories for a lifetime. When speech fails in old age, it's often the case that the songs remain. God designed worship practices to plant and elicit memories. "Do this in my memory," we say at the table. This also applies to the songs we sing. We need songs to help us remember what we believe and who we are. Jeff Smith points out that "A culture . . . is based upon a group of people held together by common memories."¹⁵ A culture (a church) without memory is a culture on its way to losing its identity. Worship leaders must own the mandate to create and preserve spiritual, musical memories. They do this in part by making sure to balance innovation and tradition.

^{13.} Pete Seeger: *The Power of Song*, PBS film directed by Jim Brown, 2008.

^{14.} Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Trumpets, Ashes, and Tears." *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* June/July 2012. <https://perspectivesjournal.org/blog/2012/06/01/liturgy-and-lament/>.

^{15.} Jeff Smith, *The Frugal Gourmet Keeps the Feast: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: William Morrow, 1995).

4. *Lose the screen (at least some of the time).* The ubiquity of projection screens confirms their usefulness and convenience. While appreciating their benefits, we should honestly consider the downside to their exclusive use. Screens can so mesmerize us that we lose any sense of community. This is especially so if we lose sight of the faces and bodies of those worshipping near us. If we're not careful, worship becomes ever more insular: a private matter between just me and the screen. The average American spends eight and a half hours per day in front of electronic screens (whether TVs, smart phones, tablets, or computers). As Nicholas Carr and numerous researchers have demonstrated, bad things happen when you spend that much time in front of screens.¹⁶ If worship is to be embodied, then it must make space for bodies—whole persons, not just minds. I offer a modest proposal: consider eliminating the screen for a song or two to see what happens. Invite worshippers to turn to one another and sing directly to, with, and over others. Take the Apostle Paul's words *literally*: "speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5.19, emphasis added). A similar experiment might involve having the worship team or song leader occasionally step down from the platform, move among the congregation, and sing along with the people. Another suggestion: when singing a song the congregation knows well, turn down (or turn off) the microphone, so that the rich, full sound of the congregation can be heard in all its majesty.
5. *Give the church a chance.* Most people want to sing, but they must feel they are being invited to do so. This means conveying a certain degree of courtesy to the congregation—including songs that are actually singable by everyone. It means singing songs the congregation actually knows. It means taking time to teach new songs so that people know how to sing them. It means respecting worshippers enough to share with them the musical notation, not reserving the music solely for the praise team. Otherwise, the congregation will get the message: "We (the worship team) have got this covered. Join us if you like, but we can do this quite well without you."
6. *Teach and practice a robust sacramental theology of worship.* Singing is bigger than church. It is a way of life pervasive in all cultures. Singing accompanied creation at the beginning. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth . . . when the morning stars sang together and the heavenly beings shouted for joy?" God asks Job (Job 38.4, 7). Angels sang above the shepherds at Jesus's birth. Jesus sang with his disciples at the institution of the Lord's Supper (Matt 26.30). Jesus died with a psalm on his lips (Mark 15.34), and one day we will join him in joyous heavenly singing.

If singing is a sacrament—"something possessing a sacred character or mysterious significance"—if God is enthroned on the praises of his assembled people, as Scripture declares (Ps 22.3), then singing matters. If congregational singing is a vehicle of memory, faith formation, and spiritual transformation, then we should protect and enhance it.

Singing in Churches of Christ has consoled us in times of grief, sustained us in times of distress, lifted us above our sometimes bitter sectarianism, shaped us in community, and filled our hearts with ineffable joy and love. We can do more—much more—to preserve this treasure and pass it on to the generations that come after us.

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16. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2011).