

I came into the church singing. As far back as I can remember I have loved the music of worship and have found communion with God and my church family in the songs of faith. Hymns are as important as prayer and preaching. In fact, our hymns offer prayers to God and proclaim the gospel of Christ. A disciple of John the Apostle, Ignatius of Antioch pictured the ideal church as a choir: "In your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung. . . . Become a choir, that being harmonious in your love, and taking up the song of God in unison, you may with one voice sing to the Father through Jesus Christ."

Music is essential to worship. Without question music is more than a medium of entertainment in church. Music is soul language that wells up from the very depths of our being; it has long been a human medium to express strong commitment such as devotion to country, the bond of friendship and family, and the romantic emotions of lovers. Pastor and hymn-writer Carolyn Winfrey Gillette attempted to explain "Why we Sing" rather than merely think or talk with one another in worship. She concluded, "We sing because music is a gift from God. It is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, our greatest joys, and our most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally. Like all gifts from God, it is one that God calls us to use with gratitude." (*Christian Reflection*, 18, p. 11.)

The songs begin in the Bible: the psalmists invites us to "sing to the LORD a new song" and proclaims, "Happy are those who live in your House ever singing your praise." The 150 Psalms located at the center of our Bible are the songs of Israel; the Psalter is something like a church hymnal that gathers up Jewish prayers and doxologies for centuries before the time of Christ, and they continue to be sung in the church for centuries after Christ. The songs of faith erupt periodically throughout the Bible. Moses and Israel followed by Miriam and the women sang praises to God for the deliverance from the Egyptian army after crossing the sea (Ex 15). Throughout Deuteronomy instruction to Israel came with a command to sing the message of the Law of God. In Judges, "Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang. . . Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing, I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel (5:1,3)." The national history reports, "David appointed ministers of song in the Tabernacle" (1 Chr 6:31), and the people sang and danced as they brought up the Ark of Covenant (1 Chr 13:8). David appointed Asaph "for the singing of praises to the Lord" (1 Chr 16), and the songs that follow are repeated in Psalms 96, 105, and 106. One entire book of the Old Testament, the love sonnet of Solomon, is identified as "the song of songs (1:1)." The Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah repeatedly call for Israel to sing praise to God. The birth narratives in Luke are punctuated with songs from each of the main characters, from angels, and from the elders in the Temple. In Ephesians (5:19), Paul challenged the church: "sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts." Hymns of the early church emerge throughout the epistles. Finally, Revelation is a book of worship with heavenly choirs singing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come (4:8)" and, "You are worthy (9)."

Sometimes the church makes more noise than music. Paul's greeting to the church in Corinth is typical of the opening doxology in his epistles: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul no doubt was sincerely extending God's grace and peace in Christ to the church, but when he gets down to brass tacks, the epistle addresses anything but grace and peace in this particular church. There was an argument about who had baptized whom that prompted Paul to say he was glad that he had not baptized anyone, with a few exceptions. He found himself arguing that this was not his church. The church does not belong to Paul, or Apollos, or Peter. The church belongs to Christ and Christ alone. There were issues over morality, marriage, and divorce; the business about a member sleeping with his father's wife; confusion about eating meat sacrificed to idols; people who were turning the Lord's Supper into a gluttonous feast and leaving some to go hungry. Finally, the major theological debate in the church was over spiritual gifts. People were actually fussing about who the Spirit favored most.

Let's face it: the church is a human institution. The Bible is loaded with beautiful symbols of what the church ought to be, but anyone who is paying attention to the realities of history knows that the church is not always heaven on earth. It has at times been hell on earth. When Paul wrote this epistle, the Corinthian church had become an embarrassment to the name of Christ that she claimed, and this was only a foretaste of things to come.

Church history uncovers all of the human weakness and failings in the church as any political faction or religion has ever known. In 313 the Emperor Constantine acted to make Christianity legal. He decided that Christianity could reunite the Roman Empire, but to his dismay the bishops were locked into a feud over whether Jesus was man or God. Like any good politician, he looked for a political answer. He called the

bishops together to iron out their theological differences, and the Council of Nicea issued the Nicene Creed defining the Trinity. Constantine thought that he could bring the church together with authority and uniform theology. Instead of settling the matter, it intensified the battle. The church continued to debate the issues in the Creed for centuries, and we still do.

Authority was not the answer then or now. You cannot force faith any more than you can demand love. A couple of weeks ago the Medal of Honor, the nations highest military honor, was awarded to former Marine Dakota Meyer. When the president told his story, he affirmed Meyer's decision to defy orders to make five trips into combat to rescue his fellow soldiers. The award has not been without controversy. The military runs on a chain of command. When that breaks down, the whole system fails. But the military is also a human institution. Like the church, you cannot run just by authority and rules. People have to do what is right, and make that decision on their own.

Rufus and Maggie were about the age of my parents, but they were childless. They lived next door. Rufus had his own stringed band that sometimes played into the wee hours of the morning. I enjoyed sleeping in front of an open window listening to the music. Rufus was a friend of all of the neighborhood children. All of us loved him. One day I asked Rufus why he did not go to church. He grumbled something in response. Later he told my parent that he had been very active in a church as a young man, but his wife had gotten involved with a deacon and left him. He blamed the church and vowed never to return. No one could argue with his pain or offer a defense of the church, but somehow he had ignored all of the things the church had done right. I was shocked to discover on a visit to my home church some twenty years later that Rufus and Maggie had joined the church. I suspect that they had finally come to recognize that churches, like people, are capable of unthinkable evil and unimaginable good. We can spend our lives cursing the evil or invest our energy in bringing harmony.

What's the difference? Even for the first Christians, the church was sometimes off key, off beat, and dissonant. Behavior was bad, and one might have plenty of reason to say that the institution is badly overrated. Paul wrote in his glorious hymn to Christian love: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." The Corinthian church was supposed to be a choir, but they sounded like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Even in music, there is a place for a gong and a cymbal, but it has to work with the rest of the instruments. By themselves, gongs and cymbals are just noise.

If you feel inclined to dump the church, history will provide good reason for your action. Historic churches have been a disgrace to the name of Christ, as cruel as any of the Emperors who persecuted early Christians, and more harmful than any of the heretics and schismatics that arose to oppose orthodoxy or to defy church authority. The church has done more harm to the cause of Christ than any enemy we could imagine.

Paul chose not to dump the church over all of the failures evident in Corinth. He offered an explanation that might surprise us. Some of the worst disharmony in the church grows out of conflicting gifts. We are not all alike. Some of us sing, some don't. Some of us teach, some can't. Some of us fix things, some of us try to fix people. The very worst that can happen to us is the expectation that we should walk in lock step and be exactly alike.

Paul prefers the metaphor of a body. We are the body of Christ. We can't all be heads. Even if no one wants to be feet, we need to recognize our need of feet to go with heads. I think Paul would also agree that the church ought to be a choir, a harmonic sound of voices. Not all of us can be sopranos, and some have to sing bass even if we are not the best. We have every right to expect the best from church people. We are the body of Christ, but we are also a body of people with various gifts and sometimes dissonant sounds.

Steven Guthrie ("United We Sing," *Christian Century*, Jan 11, 2011, 27-29) is a theology professor at Belmont University in Nashville. He tells about an serving as a minister of music before his career as a theologian. In one church he worked with a music committee, struggling with conflict over the music styles and selections. One week he decided to ask the committee to sing a couple of hymns a capella to begin the meeting. Although disagreements remained, the conversation seemed slightly more gracious, so he decided to continue the practice and found that singing seemed to improve harmony in relationships.

In church, we are not a collection of solo voices, each singing our own song; and we are not required always to sing in unison. We are a chorus of different voices and voice-parts lifted in harmonious praise to God. Sometimes a dissonant chord is needed. If some are off key, if some voices are high and others low, if some sing loud and others soft, and if some sing silently within their souls, it's ok. Grace Covenant agrees: "We will live in harmony with one another respecting the diversity of our Christian experience with no expectation that we shall walk in lockstep or wear a theological uniform."