

## Come Let Us Worship

### With One Voice: How and What Shall We Sing?

Colossians 3:11-17

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*"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:11–17, ESV)*

Well, when you woke up this morning and realized it was Sunday, what was your first thought? Were you ready to come in a way that was different from last week? Did you take time to pray and prepare your heart? I hope so. This day and this moment are important.

Last week we started a three week series called *Come Let Us Worship* by looking at the purpose of our gathering. Hopefully you remember that we have two goals: 1) to rehearse the gospel and 2) to respond to the gospel. We live this out as we come together, cling to our confession, and consider one another. That makes Sunday worship special.

Today we are talking about singing.

### **Made To Sing**

Do you realize how much of your humanity is tied to singing? A few examples:

- How do you teach a child their A-B-C's?
- When you want to a group of people to wish one person a Happy Birthday, what happens?
- What is the tradition for the Notre Dame football team after a win?
- What is the most talked about controversy right now in the NFL?

How and what we sing is deeply embedded into the fabric of our humanity. And no group of people sings on a more regular basis than the church. It is vital to our weekly gathering in worship.

We are commanded to sing (Psalm 47:6). When God delivered Israel from Egypt, they sang (Exodus 14:30). When Jesus and the disciples ate the Last Supper, they sang together (Matthew 26:30). Paul sang while in prison after being beaten (Acts 16:25). Even God sings. Zephaniah 3:17 tells us He sings over His people loudly. And singing continues into eternity as the redeemed from every tribe, language, and nation sing a new song to Lamb (Revelation 5:9).

Singing is powerful. There are few things more connected to your heart than singing. Next week we'll explore the role of preaching. We'll see that preaching aims to reach your heart by first targeting your thinking. But singing aims to reach the heart by targeting the heart directly. Thinking is certainly involved, however, emotions are more front and center with singing. Bob Kauflin in his book *True Worshipers*, makes this point with a quotation from John Piper:

*"The reason we sing is that there are depths and heights and intensities and kinds of emotions that will not be satisfactorily expressed by mere prosaic forms, or even poetic readings. There are realities that demand to break out of prose into poetry and some demand that poetry be stretched into song... Singing is the Christian's way of saying: God is so great that thinking will not suffice, there must be deep feeling; and talking will not suffice, there must be singing."<sup>1</sup>*

There are few things more emotional than singing. Few things are more connected to your heart than singing. There are few things more subjective than singing. Few things are more connected to your preferences than singing. And there are few things more unifying than singing.

The church was made to sing. The church must sing.

## **Beautiful Harmony**

Our text today is Colossians 3:11-17. One of the most important words in this text is found in verse 14. It is the word "harmony." Other translations use words like "unity" (NIV) or "bond of unity." The word marks a transition from a series of descriptive statements connected to the words "put on" in verses 11-14 to how the church is to respond or act toward one another. This is very similar to the rehearse- respond framework we examined last week.

I love the word "harmony" because it captures the beautiful togetherness that can be created by the combination of individual parts. You don't create harmony on your own. And harmony adds a dimension of beauty that is absent when only one person or thing is involved.

The writer of Colossians, the Apostle Paul, had a vision for a church filled with harmony – a beautiful display of the gospel through what was true spiritually and musically about them.

Let's look at how this harmony is both explained and expressed.

### **1. Harmony Explained**

The connection between harmony and the body of Christ begins in verse 11. Paul has been talking about what it means for believers to be new people and a new community in this third chapter. Followers of Jesus have new spiritual vitality about them (3:1). Their old life is dead (v. 3). They have a new life with Christ in God (v. 3). And the result is a community that acts differently. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness are to be "put to death" (3:5). There is a moral distinction that should mark the people of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Kauflin, *True Worshipers: Seeking What Matters to God*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 107.

Unity in diversity should also mark them. In verse 11, we see the application of this new community into some of the most deeply held divisions within their culture. The church is designed by God to be a community that transcends and unites people across the deepest divisions. In the society of Paul's day Greeks, Jews, circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free were common cultural divisions.<sup>2</sup> People were separated by ethnicity, religious heritage, culture, and socio-economic status. Those divisions were common, familiar, and assumed.

But Paul says, "Not here!" Instead, there is a new reality because of Jesus. He "is all, and in all" (v. 11). Believers belong to Jesus in a way that gets underneath all other "broken belongings."<sup>3</sup> All cultural categories have now been superseded by the person and work of Christ. The church is a community whose central story is the gospel. The church is marked by a harmony that comes because of Jesus.

This unity extends further into how they treat one another. Verse 15 says they are to "put on" certain attributes. This means more than simply choosing to act in a certain way. The verb "put on" is something that is already completed. The list that follows are things that fit with who they are. Since Christ is all and in all, and since they are chosen, holy, and beloved (3:12a), there are particular actions that fit with who they are.

I've used this illustration before, but it is like my basketball coach telling me, "Mark! Be 6'5!" You see, I was one of the shorter kids in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I started to develop my basketball skills. By the time I made it to Varsity, I had grown a lot. But my confidence in being 6'5" lagged behind. So, he would remind me who I was. That is what Paul does here.

He reminds them that a church whose center is Christ needs to be full of the following:

- Compassionate Hearts - A deep concern for others. You feel what others feel.
- Kindness – Treating people with undeserving generosity.
- Humility - A self-forgetfulness in light of who God is.
- Meekness – Power under control. You are in control of your emotions, opinions, and actions.
- Patience – Putting up with people without getting angry or bitter.
- Bearing with one another and forgiving each other – Either applying love to situations that you don't need to bring up or granting forgiveness when someone asks.

Doesn't that sound wonderful? Who doesn't want those things to be true? They almost sound musical, don't they? It's like you can hear soft music playing in the background. Imagine if your last road trip was marked by those words. How awesome would that be? Imagine if your Small Group was marked by those words. Those traits are amazing! Individually they are compelling, but when you put them together, it is unbelievable.

It reminds me of a concert I attended recently. I couldn't take my eyes off the violin section. Now I love the sound of a solo violin, but it is a sight to behold when twenty talented violinists move their bows up and down with perfect synchronization, stopping at the exact same time, and under the control of the director. Individually the sound is amazing. But together the sound is unbelievable.

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller treatment on the subject of race and the gospel: <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/ethnicity-authority-and-the-gospel/>

<sup>3</sup> To explore the biblical foundations of belonging and how it fits our discipleship strategy see: <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/north-indy-belong/>

But there is one more trait. It is at the center of body of Christ – or at least it is supposed to be. Verse 14 identifies that love is the one thing that holds everything together in perfect harmony. Love is the glue of the church. Jesus said that we are to love one another as He has loved us. It is a command. Consider that! The Sovereign King who died for you calls on you to love (see John 13:34). And the witness of the church is on the line as Jesus also identifies that “all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). The church’s voice is compromised when love doesn’t reign.

If you have been around here for very long, you have probably heard me say, “We have to love our people more than we hate where they’re at.” I developed that pastoral philosophy years ago with my church in Michigan as I was trying to lead it out of its independent, fundamental, KJV-Only, Beulah Land-singing background. I discovered that you can deal with a lot of issues, earn a bunch of “trust chips”, and help people change if they know you love them. Love is a game-changer.

This relates to issues connected to “worship wars.” While there certainly is an appropriate place for discussion and disagreement on what and how we sing, I have found that more often than not pride (on both sides) causes deep problems. A friend of mine calls this the “pride divide.”

On one side are people who feel like they are not listened to, not considered, and forced to deal with things that they dislike or disagree with. On the other side are people who feel judged, whose motives are questioned and not given the benefit of the doubt. Pride, not love, begins to rule and divide as people retreat into the corners of resisters and resentors. How often and how easily it happens!

The church was designed to be a model of harmony. The presence of Christ in all of us, the fruit of Christ’s work flowing out of us, and obedience to Christ’s command (“love one another”) all compel us to do whatever we can to keep making beautiful harmony together. We must let the peace of Christ rule our hearts as we live in “one body” (3:15).

Even the world recognizes this as a remarkable thing. Consider, for example, the relationship between Supreme Court Justices Scalia (1936-2016) and Ginsburg. They could not have more different views on the constitution and the law, yet they were really good friends. I remember reading an article where Scalia was asked about his relationship with Ginsburg. He famously said, “What’s not to like about her except her view of the law?”

Now, if two Supreme Court Justices can figure out how to do that, surely those who have been raised with Christ can as well. Actually, the Scriptures are so bold as to tell us that harmony is what the church was made for.

## **2. Harmony Expressed**

We now need to turn to how we express this harmony. You may wonder why I’ve spent so much time on verses 11-15. Here’s why: If you don’t understand the foundations of biblical harmony, what follows in verse 16 is impossible. What do we see here about how harmony is expressed?

This is a command. Last week we learned about three “let us” statements in Hebrews. Here is a similar thought. When Paul talks about singing, we must listen carefully. Verse 16 is an expression of everything we have already learned. We must do what follows.

This is about the word of Christ in us. Singing, as an expression of harmony, has a target. The goal is to highlight the message of Christ, the person of Christ, the work of Christ, and the power of Christ. That is what “word of Christ” means. We are talking about the gospel – and rehearsing the gospel. As our team meets and plans the services, we are always thinking about questions like: How does this fit with the text? How can we rehearse the gospel? Are the words true? Are they doctrinally correct? Is it memorable? The goal is to have you in awe of Jesus.

This word is to dwell in us richly. At one level, the word of Christ already dwells in the heart of every believer (1Peter 1:23, James 1:21). But corporate worship allows for the already present Word to dwell at different level. Paul says nearly the same thing in Ephesians 5 but he connects it to the Spirit:

*“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,”* (Ephesians 5:18–19, ESV)

Being filled with the Spirit doesn’t mean we have a greater quantity of the Spirit. It means that the Spirit’s control of us is greater. Instead of being drunk and controlled by alcohol, we are to be controlled by the Spirit.

That is why the word “richly” is also important. The word means *in full abundance*. The goal is to have the word of Christ and the Spirit of Christ dwell in all of us in greater and greater ways. That means we try to speak the “heart-song language” of lots of different people. We’ll see this even in the text coming up. The phrase that I use is the “both” of worship.<sup>4</sup> Some churches have different services with one kind of music – classic, blues, jazz, gospel, contemporary, country. Other churches only use traditional songs. Others only use contemporary. We try our best to have a blend of both. I’m sure you have an opinion on how we are doing with that, and it is something we continually talk about. But I will tell you that I know very few churches who try to do the breadth of what we do at North Indy – from Bach to rock, from choir to orchestra to band. And we do it all with volunteers.

This definition goes beyond my personal experience of “richly.” Some sermons or styles of sermons touch people’s hearts differently. Some sermons I like. Some I don’t – even my own. The same is true for singing. I love some of the songs that we sing. I don’t care for others. Some of the other elements in worship are helpful to me. Others I could do without. But when I see it ministering to someone else or when I see how it “richly” blesses them, I’m reminded that the definition of richly has plural context. The text means the community is blessed. “Let the word of Christ dwell in ya’ll richly” – that’s the point not only in the text but also – hopefully – in my heart.

The harmony expressed through singing has an important teaching component. Verse 16 says “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.” While music, lyrics, and singing target the heart, they bring the head along very quickly. There is an old Latin phrase – *Lex orandi, lex cedendi* – which essentially says “As we

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<sup>4</sup> For an extensive unpacking of this theme and philosophy you can find a paper I presented to the Elders in April 2017 called “The ‘Both’ of Worship” here: <http://www.yourchurch.com/series/come-let-us-worship/>

worship, so we believe.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, you need to think of singing as a poetic catechism that teaches us what to believe, shapes our habits and loves and longings.<sup>6</sup>

Singing together is both a vertical and horizontal moment. Our aim is to receive God’s grace by considering truths beyond ourselves, but also to sing to one another about God. You may have noticed at North Indy we have only words on the screen at times. Other times we have words underneath the people leading worship or the choir. We try to match the method with the vertical or horizontal nature of the song. If we are singing to one another, we’ll probably highlight the people and the words. If we are singing with a vertical theme, we are more likely to only use words. There is a teaching component that is both vertical and horizontal.

Verse 16 also includes three categories of songs to sing: psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. The same categories appeared when we looked at Ephesians 5. These are not easy terms to define, but it seems that psalms are scriptural words<sup>7</sup>, hymns express doctrinal truth, and spiritual songs are new songs expressing praise to God. The diet of worship, over time, should include aspects of all the elements, but we have to be careful not to make one more sacred than another.

The Bible nowhere prescribes how many psalms, hymns, or spiritual songs we should sing. Even the terms themselves are fluid. There are songs that we now consider hymns which were not considered hymns then. And if you add a bit of preference into the mix, you have a recipe for conflict.

For example, there was church in Holland, Michigan that led the split between the Reformed Church of America and what became the Christian Reformed Church denomination. They split in 1857 over whether the church should sing man-made hymns versus on the Psalms. I wish that was the only time that congregational worship created schism.

Nearly every generation has their issues. For example, John Calvin banned the organ, some reformers banned all instruments, congregational singing was controversial, Anglicans mandated the book of Common Prayer, John Bunyan went to prison rather than use its liturgy. The Wesleys wrote unconventional hymns, the Puritans banned stained glass and Christmas, the Second Great Awakening gave us Trust and Obey and Come Thou Fount. Fast forward to the 70’s and 80’s when new choruses were written while churches in my tribe banned Keith Green and the Imperials. If you listened to Stryper you couldn’t tell anyone. Words on a screen was a battle while I was in seminary, and there was a great debate about raising your hands in worship. Majesty was cutting edge.

The point is simply for you to realize that every song was new at one time. Every generation has their challenges and controversies. And church life, including worship, is always reforming. It should be. But we must always maintain the core: our affection for the gospel and one another. I think that’s why we have words and phrases like “wisdom” and “with thankfulness” and “to God” in this text.

As I shared in my introduction to the first message, our church demographic and our culture are changing. I’m sure you sense that and feel that. I’m sure that there are times that you love what we do on Sundays, and

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<sup>5</sup> Brett McCracken, *Uncomfortable – The Awkward and Essential Challenge of Christian Community*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 151.

<sup>6</sup> McCracken, 151.

<sup>7</sup> For example: Create in me a Clean Heart, Not to Us, His Love Endures Forever, As the Deer, etc.

I'm sure there are times that you don't like it. While there is nothing wrong with having discussion about that (I have it often, actually), I want to both assure you and challenge you.

I assure you that our aim in everything we do is to glorify the Lord and to make the gospel clear and compelling. We aim to use the best songs from the past and the present. We try to speak the heart language of people from all walks of life. And we try to wisely use the tools available to us to create an environment that platforms the gospel well. You may not like everything we do, but I can assure you why we do it: we desperately want the word of Christ to dwell in all of us richly.

Let me also issue a challenge to you: As you prepare your heart for singing each Sunday, would you remind yourself about the following:

- 1) **This is about the gospel.** Our love for Jesus brings us together and our love for one another makes this meeting powerful. Look for ways to rehearse the gospel.
- 2) **This is about us not me.** The gathering of God's people is an unusual statement about the beauty of something beyond our individual lives.
- 3) **This may be uncomfortable.** There will be songs that you love and ones that are "not so much." You may not like to sing. You may like it softer, louder, shorter, longer...whatever. But you will likely be uncomfortable at some point. Embrace the tension. But still be "all in." We glorify God by loving and serving each other in the messiness of worship.<sup>8</sup>
- 4) **This is beautiful.** Look around you and just think of what an amazing moment it is as the church is gathered. You are singing to God, who you would hate and with people who would be your enemies without the intervention of Jesus. And together – yes, even in our different preferences – there is something better than singing on your own.

You need others to make harmony. One note or one voice will not do. You need the body of Christ in order for corporate worship to feed your soul. You need the person standing next to you, in front of you, and behind you. And you need that what they like, and you don't.

Because underneath our lives, our gathering, our music, and our singing is a more fundamental truth: Christ is all and in all. And with one harmonious voice, God calls the church to sing.

#### **College Park Church**

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<sup>8</sup> McCracken, 153.

Read more about worship: *The "Both" of Worship* by Mark Vroegop at: [www.yourchurch.com/comeletusworship](http://www.yourchurch.com/comeletusworship)

## NOTES