



The Church's Song, Wellness, and Vocation

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The church sings a countercultural song. This is not new, but in a time like ours when the culture is teaching us to fight with no concern for the common good, the countercultural component becomes especially apparent. The church lives by the grace of God, known in the biblical history with “a Cross that gems the middle.”¹ By grace through faith it sings the wellness it receives around word, font, and table, then is sent into the world with that wellness in its vocations for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor. The church’s concerns for the neighbor may in some ways permeate a culture even if not everyone in the culture shares the church’s faith, but the opposite may also happen. A state or culture may seduce the church into denying its being for the sake of other agendas. The message the church sings undercuts such seductions. In defiance of the world’s raging, it sings in peace as J. S. Bach epitomizes in his motet *Jesu, meine Freude*, where he sets the third stanza of Johann Franck’s hymn. Worship, song, wellness, and vocation help us understand this many-splendored reality.

¹ Henry Harbaugh, “The Mystic Weaver,” given in Linn Harbaugh, *Life of the Rev. Henry Harbaugh, D.D.* (Philadelphia: Reformed Church Publication Board, 1900), 59–62. The quoted phrase is on page 62 and is true whether or not one agrees with the whole poem.

Across time and around the world, a core way Christians express their faith is by means of song, which expresses emotions too deep for words. The church’s song moves believers out into the world, to serve the neighbor and to live out the wellness that comes from our trust in and love of the God who is our rock and our salvation.

1. *Worship*. Across its history the church has centered its worship around word, font, and table “on the day named for the sun”,² which we call Sunday, the Day of Resurrection, the Lord’s Day. Devotions at home or at meetings, prayer at meals and at times of retiring and arising, monastic offices, cathedral offices, and informal moments of personal or communal meditation move like a nimbus throughout the week around the worshipping assembly on Sunday. The Sunday meeting has been characterized by the pattern explained in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW): Gathering, Word, Meal, and Sending.

Gathering: The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God.

Word: God speaks to us in scripture reading, prayer, and song.

Meal: God feeds us with the presence of Jesus Christ.

Sending: God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world.³

This has been the weekly norm for most of the church most of the time. It includes baptisms if persons are to be baptized, but baptism is always remembered in spoken or unspoken words of thanksgiving and by means of a baptismal font whether there are baptisms or not. The remembrance is present physically in the font, which has often been placed at the entrance to the church to reflect entrance to the Christian life.

2. *Song*. Song is present throughout the church’s life. This is especially evident in the singing of the liturgy and its psalmody, hymnody, and choral music at worship on Sunday. In the West the organ and other instruments joined this mix about ten centuries ago, even though the early church had banned musical instruments because of their associations with idolatry and immorality.⁴ The nature of the church’s song is most obvious in what has “ordinarily” been sung at Sunday’s worship in the West. Not surprisingly, it is called the “Ordinary”—the Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis, Creed, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei.

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The Kyrie has been sung at Sunday worship since at least the fourth century, probably earlier. It calls to mind two accounts in Matthew: Matthew 15:22, where a Canaanite woman came to Jesus shouting, “My daughter is tormented by a demon. Lord, have mercy,” and Matthew 17:14–15, where a man knelt before Jesus and said, “My son is an epileptic. Lord, have mercy.” These accounts are like ours when we get

² Justin Martyr, *Apology I*, 67, given in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 20.

³ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 92–93.

⁴ See Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 66–67.

a surprising message of terrible horror or of wonderful good news and cry out with anguish or with joy, “Lord, have mercy!” This cry stands at the beginning of the service, reminding us where help is to be found: “Lord, you are the one who has mercy.”

The Gloria in Excelsis was first sung at Morning Prayer and was moved to the Sunday service after the Kyrie by the fourth century or earlier. It is derived from Luke 2:14, the song of glory to God and peace on earth that the angels sang to the shepherds at Christ’s birth. The church elaborated this song and added acclamations of worship, thanks, and praise to the “Lord God, heavenly King,” to the Son who takes away the sin of the world, and to the Holy Spirit “in the glory of God the Father.” After the Kyrie it gives Trinitarian precision to where help is to be found.

Then comes the Creed, which was in use by the fifth century in the East, the sixth century in Spain, and all of Europe by the eleventh century. It is not congregational like the shorter, repetitive structures of the Kyrie and Agnus Dei; but like them, the Sanctus, and the Gloria in Excelsis, it has called out to be “sung” in chant-like speech or other music.

I believe, comprehending, yet incomprehensible,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father,
through whom all things were made,
and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.

This is the church’s confession of faith by me, by us, with me, with us, beyond me, beyond mine, comprehending, yet incomprehensible.

The Sanctus follows. Derived from Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8, it was sung in worship at least as early as the second century. Isaiah, in the year that King Uzziah died, saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. The hem of God’s robe filled the temple, said Isaiah. Heavenly beings covered their faces and sang like the living creatures cited in Revelation:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of God’s glory.

The church lifts up its heart. With the whole earth and all the hosts of heaven it sings this ancient song, adding “Hosanna” to the one who comes in the name of the Lord in bread and wine at the table. As Rudolf Otto reminds us, this holiness is not superficial. It is the “intimate mutual interpenetration of the numinous with the rational and the moral,”⁵ expressed musically in many pieces, among them “In the Year That King Uzziah Died” by David McK. Williams.⁶

⁵ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

⁶ David McK. Williams, “In the Year That King Uzziah Died,” *Church Music Review* (New York: H. W. Gray, 1935), No. 1356.

The Agnus Dei, sung at worship by the seventh century, recalls John 1:29, where John the Baptist saw Jesus coming and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The church added the song of the angels about peace from the Gloria in Excelsis. It breaks out on the last repetition, "Lamb of God, grant us peace."

Peace is present, mostly sung, on a trajectory throughout the service. During the Gathering it is explicitly in the Kyrie if the Kyrie is done as a deacon's litany,⁷ its original form; and it is in the second phrase of the Gloria in Excelsis. Peace is shared at the end of the Word service following the prayers of intercession. The Creed confesses the God who gives us peace. The Sanctus sings of the One through whom peace, with forgiveness and sending, comes in the name of the Lord, as in Isaiah 6:1–8. At the Meal peace is sung in the Agnus Dei. In the Sending, peace is the essence of the dismissal. That is, what the church "ordinarily" has sung at worship is a trajectory in many musical styles. It moves from receiving the peace God brings to sharing it in the world. The church sings this message throughout its life. The song as a whole, in text and music in and beyond the Ordinary, fleshes it out.

The Orthodox Church has sung its version of the Word and Meal sequence in what it calls "The Liturgy."⁸ There the peace in the deacon's litany of the Kyrie⁹ leads to the Lord's blessing, grace,¹⁰ and the Song of Simeon about departing in peace with salvation prepared for all people.¹¹ Substantial portions of the church in the West, including Lutherans, have called the Sunday service "The Mass." The term is derived from the point of the trajectory to which the service leads, the "Ite missa est" at the Sending. Reformed churches have not used the Mass or the term "Mass," but they have its same Word and Meal sequence with the singing of only psalms and canticles. In Strassburg, the Supper was celebrated weekly. Calvin wanted "no less" in Geneva, though the Genevan Council "rebuffed" him.¹² Even in the alternative of a monthly celebration Calvin was overruled in favor of a quarterly one so that the service was Ante-Communion on most Sundays "in anticipation of the Holy Supper."¹³ The progression was from Confession¹⁴ to the peace of the "Canticle of Simeon."¹⁵

The quarterly pattern follows Zwingli's reforming activity in Zurich. Zwingli thought Christ was not present in the Lord's Supper and there should be no music at worship, and the model there was prayer in your closet. This suggests

⁷ ELW, 98–99.

⁸ See *The Orthodox Liturgy: Being the Divine Liturgy of S. John Chrysostom and S. Basil the Great according to the Use of the Church of Russia Together with the Manner of Setting Forth the Holy Gifts for the Liturgy, and Devotions before and after Partaking of the Holy Cup* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1960).

⁹ *The Orthodox Liturgy*, 32.

¹⁰ *The Orthodox Liturgy*, 96.

¹¹ *The Orthodox Liturgy*, 100.

¹² Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1961), 190.

¹³ Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 190.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 168.

¹⁵ Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 208.

that public worship is not needed at all except as an “imperative for the life of the visible church within the city.”¹⁶ Both Luther and Calvin disagreed with Zwingli. He has been influential among some Protestants, however, in blunting or removing the progression from receiving to sending, even though the church as a whole has normally sung and lived out this progression. There are exceptions, and it is always broken in our fallen world, to be sure, but in forgiveness it is counterculturally persistent.

This points to the tenacity of the church’s singing and its complicated connections. The Wesleyan movement followed Isaac Watts’s example and stimulated the singing of both psalms and hymns, not only psalms, among the Reformed. Charles Wesley was one of the most prolific hymn writers in the church’s history. Wesleyan hymn singing was tied to sacramental renewal with the *Book of Common Prayer* in the background as a central component. Eighteenth-century Anglicans neglected the Eucharist. John Wesley emphasized it, and early Methodists “flocked to the celebration of Holy Communion in such numbers that the clergy were really embarrassed with the multitude of communicants with which they had to deal.”¹⁷ In the nineteenth century, the Oxford Movement turned the tables. By then, Methodists had reverted to the Anglican eighteenth-century example. Anglicans engaged in a eucharistic recovery, objecting to the neglect of the Methodists. The eucharistic recovery brought with it a musical one and its trajectory of being sent into the world for the neighbor.

The experience of the church is that it sings and that a healthy church sings around word, font, and table. In addition to Zwingli, other exceptions include the fourth-century monk Pambo and the sixteenth-century Anabaptist Conrad Grebel. Their influence was mostly limited to specific places for brief times. The church in Zurich was singing by the end of the sixteenth century, Benjamin Keach restored the church’s singing among Baptists,¹⁸ and Quakers have framed their silent meetings with singing. Administrators have stopped programs of musical study, but they have not been able to stop the church from singing and studying music.

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3. *Wellness*. A scan of dictionaries suggests that the term *wellness* is of recent vintage and not “of settled status.” It is not in three dictionaries before 1971: *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* of 1956, *The American Heritage Dictionary* of 1969, and *The New Webster* of 1970. *Well* is there, defined similarly in the first as

¹⁶ Charles Garside, *Zwingli and the Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 45. See also Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, 152.

¹⁷ J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1948), 4.

¹⁸ See Benjamin Keach, *The Breach Repair’d in God’s Worship: or Singing of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs Proved to Be an Holy Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London: John Hancock, 1691).

“being in health; not ailing, diseased, or sick,”¹⁹ in the second as “in good health; not ailing or diseased,”²⁰ and in the third as “being in health; not ailing or sick.”²¹

In 1971, volume 2 of *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* gives *wellness* as “the state of being well or in good health,” then adds, “Rather a nonce-wd. than of settled status like *illness*.”²² For “nonce-word” it says, “the term used in this Dictionary to describe a word apparently used only for the nonce” [which is defined as] “for the particular purpose.”²³ In the *New Oxford Dictionary* *wellness* is defined as “the state of being in good health,” to which is added “especially as an actively pursued goal.” For *nonce word* it says “a word coined for one single occasion only: *English bristles with nonce words*.” *The Random House Dictionary* of 1987 defines *wellness* in what appears to be the most comprehensive way, as “the fact or condition of being in maximum physical and mental health.”²⁴

A search for books about wellness on Amazon in June 2022 yielded many books with topics including health, behavior, emotion, therapy, diet, vitamins, medicine, finance, education, keeping track, culture, and who is left out.

One of these books is explicitly Christian: *The Catholic Guide Through Anxiety*.²⁵ As the lavabo in the Mass, from before Augustine suggests, however—long before the coming of the term *wellness*—Christians have practiced being “well” through cleanliness, diets, exercise, and disciplines that keep their bodies, souls, minds, and hearts functioning at their best. This may not always have been consciously connected with their faith, but sometimes it has been quite conscious as following the two great commandments to love God and neighbor or, in closely related fashion, for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor.

What stands behind this Christian lifestyle, conscious and unconscious, is what the worship of the church provides and sings. The church sings the essence of wellness—namely, God’s forgiveness, grace, mercy, truth, goodness, beauty, love, joy, and peace. This is a gift that leads to actions of wellness. Wellness in the world’s terms is found in self-help procedures. These procedures can be followed with benefit, but in the Christian view they are understood as parts of our fallen and broken world. When they are perceived as a kind of salvation on their own, they are forms of justification by works and counsels of despair. They are always broken in our fallen world, no matter how good they are. What supports and drives them in the Christian view is God’s forgiveness so that we can forgive others and serve them in the world. That is what the church sings. Gustaf Wingren expresses this via Luther’s thought:

¹⁹ *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1956), 971.

²⁰ *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 1454.

²¹ *The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Chicago: Consolidated, 1970), 952.

²² *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3738.

²³ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1937.

²⁴ *The Random House Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1987), 2159.

²⁵ Catherine DiNuzzo and Meg Malone, *The Catholic Guide Through Anxiety* (Wichita, KS: Sacred Heart Mental Wellness, 2022).

Only as the old man, still under the law, does the Christian ask about the righteousness of his works. Faith and the new man knows only one righteousness: the forgiveness of sins. It is his neighbor in whom the new man finds his joy.²⁶

4. *Vocation*. In Ephesians 4:1 the writer begs us to “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called.” Vocation is the way this call is lived out. It has sometimes been mistakenly restricted to what pastors do. Vocation applies to pastors, but not only to them.

God calls all of us in Christ through the Spirit, each of us with specific gifts. We are called to develop and live out those gifts. At worship we receive grace and forgiveness and are sent on our way to live out our gifts as clerks, teachers, librarians, secretaries, doctors, lawyers, truck drivers, deacons, musicians, parents, children, grandparents, family members, church members, whatever, in the mixes we each have connected to everyone else’s mixes.

It should be noted that there are those who think musicians are not needed and are engaged in a trivial pursuit for which resources should not be provided. The mistake of this perspective becomes evident when it is realized that music sings the fullness of the church’s story and that it includes physical, intellectual, individual, communal, cultural, cross-cultural, artistic, and mathematical components in a wholistic mix related to wellness.²⁷ Music with its vocation is as important as other disciplines with their vocations.

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Specific vocations are both more and less consciously realized by Christians. Some Christians feel a strong call to their work and can articulate it. Others do not feel such a call and may not be able to articulate it, but they sometimes live it out with the strongest commitments to families, work, committees, and other living for God and the common good. These people often have sung the Ordinary every week, as well as hymns such as the classic Lutheran hymn “If you but trust in God to guide you.”²⁸ (ELW 769).

²⁶ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1957), 45. The English uses “man” generically, as “liberated” women at the time defended.

²⁷ Music history and appreciation books provide insights into this topic, as do many other books with different perspectives, like Wilfrid Mellers, *Celestial Music? Some Masterpieces of European Religious Music* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002); Oliver Sacks, *Musophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007); and Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

²⁸ Georg Neumark, “If You but Trust in God to Guide You,” *ELW* #769.

As usual in the church's song, the word *vocation* is not used in this hymn. Yet, also as usual in the church's song, vocation infuses the entire hymn with trying days, the cross and love of Christ which hold our restless hearts in peace and grace, song itself, and the faithful service that springs from it. That is, when we are sent from our song of peace at worship to serve the Lord by serving our neighbors, we do not get specific instructions about how to do this. We each have to figure them out in our vocations with our gifts and abilities in our times and places.

The church sings a countercultural song. The culture may teach us to fight one another with no concern for the common good, but by grace through faith the church receives and sings the wellness it needs for its vocations. ⊕

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