

HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING? THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON  
CONGREGATIONAL PARTICIPATION IN WORSHIP

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## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
PART I: THE PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP.....	3
Luther’s Policy on Music	3
Luther’s Policy on the Implementation of Change	7
Luther’s Musical Reforms	8
Liturgy	9
Hymnody	11
Lutheran Worship Today	14
PART II: THE SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE.....	18
A Study on Colossians 3:16	19
A Study on Ephesians 5:18–20	21
The Psychological Perspective	23
Music’s Ability to Aid in Memorization and Memory Recovery	24
Group Singing in the Context of Adult Community Classes	26
The Effect of Singing on Mental Health Among Those Taking Singing Lessons	29
The Effect of Group Singing on Those Caring for Cancer Patients	31
The Psychological Necessity of Music	32

PART III: THE MEDICAL PERSPECTIVE.....	34
Aerosol Particles and the Spread of COVID-19	34
Vocal Loudness and How it Relates to the Spread of COVID-19	38
Depression and Anxiety and their Relationship to COVID-19 Lockdowns	40
CONCLUSION.....	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48

## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has had drastic, far-reaching consequences throughout society, and the Lutheran church is no exception. For three months, many Lutherans and other Christians in America were prohibited from worshipping in person by state lockdowns. When those three months were over, many Lutherans came back to a worship setting and style that was very different from the one they left. Today in WELS circles, the effects of COVID-19 are still being felt as pastors and church leaders struggle with how to provide God's Word to people in a safe way during a global pandemic. One of the common ways this is done is by removing congregational singing and participation in worship. This presents the question, to what extent should we limit congregational singing and participation in worship in the COVID-19 pandemic? The goal of this paper will be to address this confusing issue and present evidence that, based on a historical perspective, a spiritual and psychological perspective, and a medical perspective, congregational singing and participation should not be limited at all because there are ways to minimize risk without removing a key component of worship.

## INTRODUCTION

There is a Christian hymn that was popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century attributed to the Baptist preacher Robert Lowry titled “How Can I Keep from Singing?” Many know of it today thanks to contemporary Christian artist Chris Tomlin, who released a version of the hymn in 2006 on his album *See the Morning*. Before this, it was also a well-known song performed by hit New Age artist Enya. Still before this it was a well-known Quaker hymn. Through all its resurgences in the public eye, its beautifully evocative text has brought joy and comfort to countless souls. While every verse is worth printing, here the second verse and refrain bear extra attention:

Through all the tumult and the strife/  
I hear that music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul/  
How can I keep from singing?

No storm can shake my inmost calm/  
While to that Rock I’m clinging.  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth/  
How can I keep from singing?<sup>1</sup>

One cannot help but think of the global pandemic as one hears these words. Many would agree the COVID-19 pandemic has brought its fair share of tumult and strife. Yet as the hymn beautifully describes, despite these challenges and difficulties, the Christian can keep singing. The powerful refrain captures the sense of calm Christians can feel in the face of such difficulties. While the Christian clings to Christ the solid rock, nothing can shake them. For how

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1. Robert Lowry, *RitualSong* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), #802, GIA Publications, 2002, quoted in “How Can I Keep from Singing,” accessed 11/24/20, [https://hymnary.org/text/my\\_life\\_flows\\_on\\_in\\_endless\\_song](https://hymnary.org/text/my_life_flows_on_in_endless_song)

can we be shaken when Christ is Lord of heaven and earth? It is this comfort that has kept the church firmly grounded since its beginning and will continue to do so through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs have been the means by which the Christian church has expressed to God and to one another this comfort we have as we cling to Christ our rock since the time of King David. God's Word in song has long been a means of proclaiming Christ's name and his holy acts for his people. However, with the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, many churches have changed that. Experts have proven that the disease is highly transmissible not only through droplets of saliva expelled from the mouth when sneezing, coughing, speaking, and singing but also through microscopic aerosol particles expelled when doing these same actions. The disease is also highly contagious, making these actions a health hazard. With these things in mind, many churches have reduced the amount of singing and speaking done in worship. The presence of large crowds at sporting events and in places of commerce like supermarkets and shopping malls, as well as gatherings including weddings, funerals, and worship services, have been prohibited or severely limited in their capacity. This presents a difficult question for worship leaders: to what extent should congregational singing and participation be limited in the COVID-19 pandemic?

This paper aims to demonstrate from a historical perspective, a spiritual and psychological perspective, and based upon evidence from medical studies that congregational singing and participation should not be limited at all. By removing these key aspects from worship, far too much of what makes Lutheran worship special and edifying is lost. Instead, there are ways to ensure the safety of those gathered for worship without sacrificing such a vital part of worship.

## PART I: THE PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP

A suitable place to begin is at the start of the history of Lutheran worship. It is beneficial to recognize where the Lutheran church has come from to understand where it is going. The Lutheran church has long been held as “the singing church.” When Luther changed how worship was done in the Roman Catholic Church, he won a lasting reputation as a reformer. Over five-hundred years later, the effects of his reforms can still be seen in modern worship. Therefore, there is good reason to continue worshipping in the way Luther designed. Therefore, this section will determine not only how Lutheran worship came about but also to analyze why it is so important that it should retain its unique quality of congregational singing and participation.

### **Luther’s Policy on Music**

Among all the reforms that Luther enacted in his time, perhaps some of the more significant were his reforms to worship. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, worship in the Roman Catholic Church had become little more than a performance. The mass was conducted in Latin, and there was little participation on the part of the people. In those days, people would congregate outside the church for as long as possible, talking amongst themselves even as the mass’s opening parts were conducted inside. The people would then go inside for the sermon and the consecration and elevation of the host. People would regularly sleep or talk through those parts of the service, and as soon as the host was partaken of by the officiant (people did not necessarily receive

communion every Sunday<sup>2</sup>), people would immediately return outside and continue their day.<sup>3</sup> Attending mass was required for all community members, but there was nothing of real theological substance to these services. Aside from the sermon, there was only the liturgical art in the worship space to edify faith. Hence, it is little wonder the worshipers did not want to stay. They would use the opportunity to pray their rosaries, but little more liturgical action was done. Luther saw this and knew it needed to change.

From the very start, Luther wanted one thing to take the highest priority in worship: the Word of God. He says regarding worship:

Let everything [in worship] be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word. Again, we profit by nothing as much as by the Word. For the whole Scripture shows that the Word should have free course among Christians. And in Luke 10 [:42] Christ himself says “one thing is needful,” i.e., that Mary sit at the feet of Christ and hear his Word daily. This is the best part to choose and it shall not be taken away forever. It is an eternal Word. Everything else must pass away, no matter how much care and trouble it may give Martha. God help us achieve this, Amen.<sup>4</sup>

Using the vivid example of Mary and Martha from Luke 10, Luther demonstrates his point. Just as Martha was focused on everything except the teaching of Jesus, so too in the Roman Church’s worship, Luther saw everything being emphasized except the Word. As he began the process of reforming the church, Luther realized one of the things that would need the most attention was how God’s people worshiped him.

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2. Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2004), 12.

3. Herl, *Worship Wars*, 25.

4. Martin Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold, vol 53, *Luther’s Works*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 14.



Another thing Luther acutely understood was the importance of music in the proclamation of the Word. Music was very much a part of the society in which Luther grew up and worked. There were many kinds of music outside of the church in Renaissance-era Mansfeld and Saxony. Things like *Volkslieder*, *Meistergesang*, *Balladen*, and *Leisen* were all modes of song with which Luther would have been well acquainted both as a hearer and a singer.<sup>5</sup> Then, of course, there was the music of the liturgy and the church that Luther no doubt learned as a monk and student: the chanted liturgy and the Psalms. From these, Luther realized the extreme value of music as a means for expressing the Word of God. In what is perhaps one of his most famous quotes, Luther says:

Here it must suffice to discuss the benefit of this great art [of music]. But even that transcends the greatest eloquence of the most eloquent, because of the infinite variety of its forms and benefits. We can mention only one point (which experience confirms), namely, that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is a mistress and governess of those human emotions—to pass over the animals—which as masters govern men or more often overwhelm them. No greater condemnation than this can be found—at least not by us. For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate—and who could number all these masters of the human heart, namely, the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or good?—what more effective means than music could you find? The Holy Ghost himself honors her as an instrument for his proper work when in his Holy Scripture he asserts that through her his gifts were instilled in the prophets, namely, the inclination to all virtues, as can be seen in Elisha [2 Kings 3:15]. On the other hand, she serves to cast out Satan, the instigator of all sins, as is shown in Saul the king of Israel [1 Sam 16:23].<sup>6</sup>

Luther loved music. He recognized it for its power to move emotion and to express things words could not. Yet, Luther saw music as more than just a means to an end or something simple. For him, it was a means through which the Holy Spirit could work.

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5. Robin A. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2017), 27.

6. Luther, *Liturgy & Hymns*, 323.

One of the many things that Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli disagreed on was the role of music in worship. Calvin was willing to keep psalms in worship because of their place in the Bible and the historical church, but Zwingli thought that music, when it is performed well, detracts from the power and efficacy of God's Word.<sup>7</sup> The temptation would be to focus on the splendor of the music itself and not focus on the message of the Word. Luther believed quite the opposite. According to one author: "Luther saw the great value of music, more so than his contemporaries, or even than church fathers such as Augustine and Ambrose. He was not embarrassed by music's ability to affect the emotions; rather, he embraced that aspect of music."<sup>8</sup> The emotional aspect of music is one of its greatest strengths. Where others saw a potential weakness and danger in music, Luther saw a strength. St-Onge goes on further to say:

Music should never seek to be master over the text, but serve it by making it more memorable, and by helping to communicate not only its intellectual, but also its emotional message. Music should make the liturgy of the church accessible to everyone. Any music that accomplishes these purposes, whether a folk tune, a chant, or a medieval chorale, Luther found to be suitable and of value in the worship of the reformation church.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, music is a tool. It was to serve a purpose. And Luther loved what music was capable of and desired it to be used in worship. This is abundantly clear from his own words on the subject, as well as what others say about him on the subject. So why would the modern church want to forsake such an excellent and powerful tool?

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7. Herl, *Worship Wars*, 109.

8. Charles P. St-Onge, "Music, Worship, and Martin Luther," *Logia* 13, (2004): 39-40.

9. St-Onge, "Music, Worship, and Martin Luther," 40.

## Luther's policy on the Implementation of Change

Luther realized that having access to God's Word alone, while it is powerful and beneficial, could be supplemented by music. He wanted people to have God's Word in their mouths and on their hearts all the time. To enable this, Luther made a point to create responsive, active worship that was centered around God's Word. Yet one thing was also crucial to Luther, and that was having a pastoral heart and concern for people in implementing these changes.

While Luther was hidden away for his protection in Wartburg Castle translating the New Testament into German, some of his fellow faculty at Wittenberg University were unwilling to patiently wait and gently introduce reforms into worship. At a historic Christmas Day service, Professor Andreas Karlstadt led worship wearing street clothes, spoke aloud the Words of Institution in German (it had always been spoken silently or quietly in Latin by the officiant), and gave communion in both kinds to people at the service.<sup>10</sup> In the months that would follow, Karlstadt would make sweeping changes, including removing vestments and religious art from churches in the name of removing anything that was faintly reminiscent of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as marrying—though he had taken a vow of celibacy as a priest.<sup>11</sup> Once Word reached Luther of what was happening, he came back and preached his famous “Invocavit” sermons, a series of eight sermons preached in March of 1522. In these sermons, Luther encouraged four principles to prevail when it comes to worship and reforming worship: reform must be orderly, not disorderly; love for the weaker brother or sister must condition actions; faith is free, unbound by laws, otherwise it is coercion and thus no longer faith; and the power is in the

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10. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 38-39.

11. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 39.

Word, not our own actions.<sup>12</sup> In these four simplified points, one can see a pastoral heart at work. Luther realized how truly vital it was that the Word be brought to people in the worship service. At the same time, he wanted these changes to be done in a way that would not offend. It was not as though Luther was saying what Karlstadt did was inherently wrong. To the reforms Karlstadt enacted, he says: “Not that it was not a good thing, but that it was not done in an orderly way.”<sup>13</sup> Changes to a person’s faith, or how their faith is expressed, must be gradual, not sudden. If change is done correctly, people will be able to understand the reasoning behind the change, and therefore will not be alienated because of it.

One cannot help but see the practicality of this as churches face dealing with changes in worship in light of COVID-19. All four of Luther’s principles are wonderful things to keep in mind as churches look to ensure every member of the flock is cared for. The last point, perhaps, bears the most attention. All things are done through God’s Word to ensure God’s Word is preached and taught to as many as possible. Any changes churches make must be done in the service of the Word. This was the truth that Luther emphasized in the *Invocavit* sermons, and it must be the truth the modern church emphasizes as well.

### **Luther’s Musical Reforms**

Now that Luther’s love and respect for music has been established, it is helpful to see how that love for music and God’s Word manifested itself in Luther’s work in the church. It has been said of Luther that next to his work of translating the Bible into vernacular, his reforms to worship are

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12. Leaver, *Music, Worship, and Martin Luther*, 40.

13. Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, 73.

some of the most important and substantial of his entire storied career.<sup>14</sup> Why is that? What would lead an author or writer to claim that of all the work Luther did in his day, his musical reforms rank higher than, for example, his work of getting the church centered again on essential doctrines like justification by grace? Perhaps it is because of how desperately his changes were needed and the profound effect they had on the church. Yet, it is interesting to note that Luther did not “re-invent the wheel.” One author puts it this way: “If we look at Martin Luther, ‘father’ of the Protestant reformation, we find that he did not so much break with his medieval past as build upon it.”<sup>15</sup> Luther took the kernel of God’s Word that existed in the Roman Catholic Church and planted it in the hearts, minds, and mouths of the people of God. This monumental change would be deeply impactful not only to the people of his day but to generations of Christians afterward. This all began with the reformation of the mass.

### Liturgy

When Luther began his career as a reformer in 1517, doubtless, he would not have called himself a reformer. He was merely looking to debate the biblical ground for indulgences, something which many of his contemporaries would have agreed with and gladly debated as well. Yet when Luther began to study further, he quickly came to the realization that there were many things Rome was doing wrong, and indulgences were only “the tip of the iceberg.” One of the more

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14. Ulrich S. Leupold, introduction to *Liturgy and Hymns*, by Martin Luther, vol 53, Luther’s Works, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 13.

15. Nancy Hardy, “Congregational Singing in the Medieval Church,” *Touchstone* 33, no. 1 (2015): 51.

substantial ones he would quickly address in his career was, as he called it, “the abuse of the mass.” He knew this was one of the primary areas that needed reform.

Luther believed the worship service was supposed to be a place that proclaimed Christ’s victory over death, and he wanted to place that victory in the context of the Christian life. However, Luther did not see that in the worship services of his time. Instead, he saw the Roman mass for what it was: a re-sacrificing of Christ by the priest that did not provide the full assurance of forgiveness. He also disliked the Canon of the Mass, a long prayer that talked of the sacrifice of the saints and how their holiness provided forgiveness for the common sinner.<sup>16</sup> Luther knew this needed to change. This abuse is what prompted him to begin working on a reform of the mass.

In 1523, only a few years after he was declared an outlaw by the Diet of Worms, Luther turned from his work of reforming the Roman Catholic Church’s belief system to reforming its worship life. This was done with the completion of Luther’s *Formula Missae*, a revised version of the Latin Roman Catholic mass. In many ways, it was still a mass of observation and not of participation.<sup>17</sup> Yet, with this mass Luther earnestly longed for more participation in worship. In an addendum to his *Formula Missae* he says: “I also wish for us to have as many vernacular songs as possible that the people could sing during the mass either along with the Gradual or along with the Sanctus and Agnus Dei. For who doubts that in times past all the people sang those things that now only the choir sings or answers in response to the blessing of the bishop?”<sup>18</sup> Luther realized that participation would be a blessing to people as they worshiped.

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16. Herl, *Worship Wars*, 3.

17. Herl, *Worship Wars*, 6.

18. Herl, *Worship Wars*, 6.

That was what drove him to pen his second most famous work in worship: the *Deutsche Messe* of 1526.

The *Deutsche Messe* or “German Mass” follows a rough form of worship that many modern-day Lutherans would recognize. Things like having the service open with a spiritual song (our opening hymn), having the church sing (or in our case speak) the creed together, and having the congregation sing during the distribution of communion were first put in place in this order of worship. Even songs of our modern-day liturgy such as the *Kyrie*, *Gloria in Excelsis*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei* were parts of this order of worship. On top of that, by 1526, Luther already had at his disposal a small number of hymns he himself composed and was already using them in worship.<sup>19</sup>

With these two orders of worship, Luther showed early in his career how important it was to him that Christians have worship that serves a purpose: to proclaim the Word of God to those gathered in worship. Yet Luther was not content only to provide new forms of liturgy and worship to the church. He also penned several hymns and sparked many others writing beautiful hymns. These hymns would become the songs the Lutheran church would sing for centuries to come.

### Hymnody

Many consider a ballad-like hymn (A New Song of Two Christian Martyrs in Brussels, Burnt by the Sophists in Louvain, or *Ein neues Lied wir Heben an*) written in 1522 to be Luther’s first contribution to hymnody. While this certainly is not anywhere near as well-known as “A Mighty

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19. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 103.

Fortress” or “Isaiah Mighty Seer in Days of Old,” its impact goes far beyond what many modern Lutherans realize. With this piece, Luther showed his own skills at poetry and composition and moved countless others along the same path. To this point, Leaver says: “*Eyn newes lied*, was not only the new song that initiated the distinctive Protestant tradition of hymnody but was also the inspiration for the introduction of vernacular congregational song into the worship of the Wittenberg churches.”<sup>20</sup> As Luther composed the *Formula Missae*, he realized that he would need many spiritual songs to fill a service with doctrinally sound music that proclaimed Christ crucified. So, in the *Formula Missae*, Luther states: “poets are wanting among us, or not yet known, who could compose pious and spiritual songs.”<sup>21</sup> Luther knew this would be difficult, and so did the men he asked to help him accomplish this task. That is why many started by writing metrical versions of psalms. One of the reasons was they found it much easier to provide people God’s Word to sing from an existing text than creating a new one. Another was to simply provide them with God’s Word to sing. From there, they also branched out by drawing from Latin hymns and antiphons, as well as writing new hymns from scratch.

On top of borrowing from other sources to write texts, Luther and his contemporaries were clever in their use of existing melodies. Contrary to common belief, Luther did not borrow folk tunes and drinking tunes from local taverns. Instead, he and many others used a simplified melody form called “bar form,” which followed an AABA pattern.<sup>22</sup> This way, music could easily be placed with a text. They would also use the same tune for multiple hymns, sometimes

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20. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 65.

21. Leaver, *The Whole Church Sings*, 72.

22. This information was imparted to the author by Professor Aaron Christie when addressing the Seminary Chorus in a rehearsal during the 2020 fall semester.



using the same melody up to five times. This allowed Luther and his friends to quickly build a large hymnody that would serve the church for centuries.

Seeing the work Luther did on his musical reforms makes it abundantly clear his goal in reforming worship: to give the people God's Word to sing in as much of the service as possible. This ties in directly with Luther's teaching of the priesthood of all believers. One author puts it:

Luther's contribution can be traced in the living illustration which congregational singing became to the reformational doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. As congregated Christians stood together in the great churches and cathedrals of Europe to sing, they enacted this doctrine dramatically. Their united voices symbolized their unity in Christ and the oneness of their calling. As they sang words that confessed the doctrines of their faith, they ministered to one another as priests, proclaiming in each other's hearing the truths of the gospel. In sharing lyrics that spoke to the sinfulness of humankind, they became confessors one to another, as in one accord they sang of their common nature.<sup>23</sup>

Music was far more to Luther than just a way to worship God. It was an expression of doctrine. This rich heritage of singing in worship still testifies to the same fact today. Singing together in worship is far more than just a historical exercise: It is a way for fellow believers to confess to one another their unity they have in a God who died for them to give them life.

Luther's reforms to both liturgical forms of worship and hymns and spiritual songs had a significant impact on the church of his day. It gave people who had never interacted with God's word a chance to do so on a weekly basis in worship. His reforms have had a lasting impact on the modern church as well. They have provided a foundation for worship that is often easy to overlook. This is why it is essential to understand Luther's perspective on worship as churches face the issues of conducting worship in a pandemic today. Removing congregational singing and participation would be doing a disservice to modern worshipers. It would be retrograding to

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23. Greg Asimakoupoulos, "The Contribution of Martin Luther to Congregational Singing," *The Covenant Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1998): 32.

a form of worship that allows for spiritual apathy. It would also see the work of countless protestant reformers not used to their full extent.

### **Lutheran Worship Today**

In the *Manual for Christian Worship*, this is said regarding worship and what it should be:

Christian worship focuses on the joyful use and reception of His Word and sacraments, and that encourages the joyful response of the people of God. When congregations, like individual Christians, experience a lack of spiritual energy and enthusiasm, the reason may well lie in their neglect of public worship. With that reality in mind, those who lead public worship find a powerful incentive to make worship the preeminent activity of the congregation and to put their hearts and hands and voices to eager and careful work as they plan, prepare, and preside at worship.<sup>24</sup>

When most modern-day Christians think of worship, doubtless, they think of what happens in a church sanctuary on a Sunday morning. While this is not the only activity of worship in a Christian's life, it is well-said that this is the "preeminent" activity of worship. That is why such attention is given to what happens on a Sunday morning. Pastors and worship leaders will plan their weekly services months in advance. Special attention is given to what hymns the congregation will sing, what anthems the choir will share, what liturgical rites and orders of worship the church will follow, how the church is decorated, and the music played. Countless other details also go into the service, but there is one goal in mind: to bring the Word of God to people in a way that is meaningful, impactful, and memorable. The policy used to create the details of worship in the church today is the same policy that Luther employed in his own reforms to worship: worship is a means to give God's people his Word.

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24. James Tiefel, Gary Baumler and Kermit Moldenhauer eds., *Christian Worship Manual*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993), 10-11.

Yet Luther knew it would require more than just having God's Word read aloud and hearing God's Word expounded upon in a sermon. He said regarding music: "But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, be used in the service of him who gave and made them."<sup>25</sup> The same is true in modern worship. Every act of worship should be an intentional one. Again, the Christian Worship Manual says:

There must be opportunity for dialogue; the people as well as the pastor must be involved in activity. If there is to be meaningful and understandable dialogue, the language and music of worship must in some way belong to the people. If the people are to gain lasting benefit from the dialogue, there must be ritual, something that is sustained and static, and there must be ceremony, something that touches the believer's eyes as well as his ears, his heart, as well as his head.<sup>26</sup>

These intentional choices on what is included in worship boil down to two key components: ritual and ceremony. Moreover, this ritual and ceremony must be done by the people if they are to gain lasting impact from it. This beautifully simple format for worship is one of the things that gives it its power. By ritual, the worshiper sees the same habits repeated week in and week out. They get used to the general flow of worship: opening hymn, confession, absolution, prayer, Scripture, creed, sermon, prayer, sacrament, prayer, and blessing. In each of these parts of the service, however, there is change. The hymns and Scripture lessons change. The liturgical responses vary from week to week. The colors on the altar and the themes of the service vary. These differences have an impact on the hearer. They not only see change happening, but they hear it and speak it as well. Yet in all this, it is still God's Word that is the focus. It is still God's Word that is being spoken and heard by everyone present. This simple formula of change and repetition, then, plants God's Word deep in the believer's heart and mind.

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25. Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, 316.

26. Tiefel, Baumler and Moldenhauer, *Christian Worship Manual*, 45-46.

Lutheran worship has long consisted of employing the gift of music in worship. This is because singing and hearing God’s Word in song solidifies it into the heart and mind of the believer in multiple ways. Luther realized this and made intentional decisions with the help of fellow reformers to make sure this would happen. He saw the result of the lack of congregational participation in worship: people disconnected from the Word, using the time in God’s house to chat about the harvest or catch up on sleep. One author puts it beautifully when he says:

The Protestant Reformation was, among other things, an expression of the desire for meaningful involvement in worship, for a fundamental change from observation to active engagement, from pseudo-mysticism engendered by obscure Latin to direct encounter with liturgy and biblical text in the vernacular ... The physical, sensual reality of congregational singing—making sound, breathing in unison, celebrating, sometimes weeping, through the formalized structure of song—is a gift offered by music in worship. When worshipers inhale together and join in song, a bond is created in the service of praise, confession, supplication, and affirmation. In communal singing, the “vertical” extension to the divine is grounded in a “horizontal” embrace of the group; the horizontal axis of the cross is en-fleshed. Congregational song affirms participation as a central dynamic of post-Reformation worship; in engaging in congregational song we live out in sound a commitment to the community of believers.<sup>27</sup>

By placing God’s Word in people’s mouths, he made them all preachers who proclaimed Christ’s death and atonement for all people. This should be our goal in the modern church as well. There is a time and a place for everything that is done in the service. The things that are done in the service were put there for a reason, and to strip the service down to its barest parts: the readings and the sermon, so much of God’s Word spoken by God’s people to God’s people is lost. Nevertheless, it is important not to overstate this point. One author puts it in context well when he says: “The point of worship is God. The point of liturgy is to enact the relationship we have with God in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Just as a date would be diminished without food, so our worship would be impoverished without music. But the date doesn’t exist

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27. Leonard J. Enns, “How Can I Keep from Singing?,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (2014): 20.

for food, and worship doesn't exist for the sake of the music."<sup>28</sup> God and his Word must always come first. That is what Luther strove for, and that is what we strive for today. Yet music is a wonderful tool for proclaiming this Word. This is why, based on the historical Lutheran perspective on worship, congregational singing and participation should not be limited at all in the COVID-19 pandemic.

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28. John Witvliet, "Soul Food for the People of God: Ritual Song, Spiritual Nourishment, and the Communal Worship of God." *Liturgical Ministry* 10, (2001): 105.

## THE SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

For the right listener enjoying the right genre, music can be a “body and soul experience.” Often music can elicit a physical reaction. When a person is stimulated by a beautiful melody, heart rates accelerate, breath quickens, and goosebumps rise on our arms. When music is truly touching, it can move the hearer to tears. Yet, just the power of the melody itself does not necessarily elicit this response. Often it is the text that accompanies a tune that gives it its power. This is doubly true for Holy Scripture. One author addresses this point when he says:

Especially vivid and compelling images and especially poignant music would, we might safely conjecture, register a physiological response. Even aside from the physiological response, we know by simple testimony that the images, sounds, and narratives of sung prayer have powerful force to shape our souls. Occasionally, our texts name an experience we all know about but have never been able to express.<sup>29</sup>

A common saying goes: “where Words fail, music speaks.” This is part of what Witvliet is getting at with the quote above. Music has a profound effect on our minds as well as our souls. Therefore, it would be beneficial to explore the details of this as we consider whether we should limit singing from our worship services. First, we will briefly explore what Scripture has to say on the topic; then, we will consider what scientific research has been done that shows the profound effect music can have on both our mental and even our physical health.

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29. Witvliet, “Soul Food for the People of God,” 103.

### A Study on Colossians 3:16

Perhaps the most well-known verse when speaking about public worship is Col 3:16. Verse 15 is included as well for context:<sup>30</sup> “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the Word of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Here Paul is encouraging the Colossians to continue in their faith. And to do that, they are to first and foremost “let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts.” The knowledge that our sins stand forgiven and we are at peace with God dictates how we as Christians see and interact with the world. This is doubly true for our interactions with those of our same confession and faith. Not only that, we are called to be thankful. And how can we not, when death itself holds no sway over us? So how, then, does Paul encourage us to do this? By letting God’s Word dwell richly among us with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Much could be said regarding these three terms, but here it will suffice to say these are three expressions of God’s Word in song. These Words are employed at several places in the New Testament. ὕμνος—or rather, its verbal form ὑμνέω—is the same Word used in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark to describe what Jesus and his disciples sang after the first Lord’s Supper before they departed for the Mount of Olives. It is also the Word used to describe what Paul and Silas were singing, which the jailor of Philippi noticed on the night of his conversion. These key moments in the Bible clearly demonstrate how impactful hymns can be to faith and even to evangelism. There are other “hymns” in the New Testament as well. Songs such as the Song of

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30. All references are from the NIV84 unless otherwise noted.

Mary or the Song of Zechariah in Luke 1 come to mind as clear examples of texts that are regarded as hymns today but are not called “hymns” in Scripture. Many are familiar with the “great Christ hymn” of Phil 2:6–11, which gives one of the most detailed expressions of Christ’s humiliation and exaltation in all of Scripture. Other such sections of New Testament Scripture include Col 1:15–20, Eph 5:14, and 1 Tim 3:16. Just like in the church today, it would seem that the early Christians had many musical aspects to their worship and faith life. Likewise, just as our hymns today can express pure Christian doctrine in beautiful and profound ways, so too—as we see from Scripture—were these hymns rich sources of doctrine.

Yet, these hymns were more than rich sources of doctrine. They were to be used as a means of encouragement and comfort between Christians. The NIV84 translates ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς as attendant circumstance with the participles διδάσκοντες and νοουθετοῦντες, or “as you teach and admonish, and as you sing psalms” etc. Here the NIV translation of means is preferred, which reads “as you teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.” This claim is supported in the NICNT commentary on Colossians.<sup>31</sup> While the translation of “songs of the Spirit” is slightly dubious, the dative of means translation best conveys what Paul is describing here.

The main verb in verse 16 is ἐνοικέτω, an imperative which translates “may/let it dwell.” The main thing Paul is encouraging is that God’s Word dwells among the Colossian Christians. This is to be done by teaching and admonishing and done by means of songs, hymns, and spiritual songs. While these certainly are not the only three ways that education and

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31. E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1957), 283-284.



encouragement can be done, they are still ways that Paul suggests for letting God’s Word dwell among Christians. William Hendriksen, in his commentary on Colossians, expresses this well:

It is well to bear in mind that Paul’s purpose is not to lay down detailed rules and regulations pertaining to ecclesiastical liturgy. He is interested in showing the Colossians and all those to whom or by whom the letter would be read how they may grow in grace, and may manifest rightly the power of the indwelling of the Word. His admonition, therefore, can be applied to every type of Christian gathering, whether on the Sabbath or during the week, whether in church or at home or anywhere else.<sup>32</sup>

Hymns, psalms, and other spiritual songs are meant to be a daily part of Christian life. They are a means by which Christians can encourage and admonish one another. They are a way they can easily share doctrine and confess to one another what they believe. Additionally, hymns provide Christians with opportunities to encourage one another, thus edifying others’ faith and strengthening their own. Hymn singing also allows them to share teaching with one another in ways that might not be available otherwise. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow rightly states: “Music is the universal language of mankind.” One can easily imagine a context in which language might be a barrier, but music will not. This beautiful expression of the human soul can easily open doors to the gospel. All this considered, Paul is right to encourage the use of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs among Christians, and we would do well to heed his encouragement.

### **A Study on Ephesians 5:18-20**

Closely related to Col 3:16 and structurally very similar, Eph 5:18–20 offers a slightly different encouragement than Col 3:16: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads

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32. William Hendriksen, *Colossians and Philemon*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 163.

to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Much like in Col 3, Paul offers encouragement to the Ephesian Christians to continue in the faith in his closing words of the epistle. He does this in two ways: by encouraging them not to be filled with wine but to be filled with the Spirit. Like in Colossians, Paul encourages them to accomplish this by speaking the faith to one another with music.

The reciprocal *ἑαυτοῖς* is significant. This points to the fact that in worship, the person being spoken to is not just God. Believers in worship speak to one another as well as to their maker in heaven. Enns says on the topic:

The gift offered by music in worship, then, especially through congregational song, is that it may serve as a unique kind of communion, reflecting both dimensions of the cross—communion with one another and with God. When thoughtfully chosen and placed in the liturgy, congregational song brings the experience of communion from behind the screen out into the midst of the people. It is possibly the Reformation’s most visceral, sensual, and precious gift to worship.<sup>33</sup>

Worship is a communion. In it, people join together and praise God as well as encourage and admonish one another. This is apparent throughout the liturgy. The confession of sins is spoken together, in which brothers and sisters address one another, clearly showing a dialogue between Christians. The creed is spoken aloud as Christians confess their faith not only to God but to one another. These things are vital to worship, not because they are required or because they are simply done for the sake of tradition. They are vital because, through them, believers speak the Spirit to one another. Hearing the Word being spoken or sung can be beneficial, as it allows for meditation. However, if these are the only elements of the worship service, the people miss out

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33. Enns, “How Can I Keep from Singing?,” 21.

on vocalizing their own faith to one another. This is more scriptural proof of how it is vital that congregations follow Paul's encouragement and keep congregational singing and participation in worship.

Countless other passages spring to mind that can demonstrate how vital music is to the Christian worship service. Foremost among them are those with encouragement to build one another up in the faith (1 Thess 5:11; Eph 4:29), encouragement to continue to meet together (Heb 10:25; Ps 122:1), and encouragement for Christians to offer themselves as living sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1). All of these could easily involve music in their lives of faith. All of these can touch on music and how it plays a vital role in faith. One could also look to beautiful psalms such as Ps 96 or Ps 100, or any of the "Hallel Psalms." All these are fantastic indicators of the praise God is due, and they provide the church with countless prayers to offer to their Creator and Savior. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider them here. Suffice it to say they will be touched on as the paper progresses, with the knowledge that Scripture provides ample proof and reason to praise God, and the church cannot help but offer these praises to God as a result of his grace.

### **The Psychological Perspective**

While the spiritual perspective will constantly be kept in mind as the paper progresses, the focus will now shift to what science can tell us about how our bodies and minds react to music. A great deal of research has been done regarding this fascinating topic, and there are spiritual implications that can easily be found among them. As the paper proceeds, it will be seen that

there is a reason music is beneficial, and when coupled with God’s holy and powerful Word, this can have a remarkable effect upon the body, mind, and soul.

### Music’s Ability to Aid in Memorization and Memory Recovery

Many students are familiar with the Latin phrase *repetitio est mater studiorum*, or “repetition is the mother of all learning.” Phrases that are repeated over and over are committed to memory and recalled much more easily. This is why such attention is given to learning Bible passages and hymns in biblical instruction for school-age children up through seminary-level education. Repeating these key passages from Scripture often will solidify them in the mind and make them easier to recall when needed. Yet, studies have proven how music can be a powerful tool in memory retention far beyond the years of formal education. Studies have shown that music can be beneficial to people with Alzheimer’s and aid them in remembering their past.<sup>34</sup> Music has also been proven to be helpful in recovering speech following catastrophic brain injury like a stroke.<sup>35</sup> This shows the incredible impact music has on the brain.

The Alzheimer’s Association has a page on their website that gives examples of how music and art can be beneficial to those with mid-to late-stage dementia. A quote from that page says: “Even in the late stages of Alzheimer’s, a person may be able to tap a beat or sing lyrics to a song from childhood. Music provides a way to connect, even after verbal communication has

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34. Anne Fabiny, “Music can boost memory and mood,” *Harvard Health Publishing*, February 2015, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/music-can-boost-memory-and-mood#:~:text=Listening%20to%20and%20performing%20music,us%20lay%20down%20new%20ones>.

35. Fabiny, “Music can boost memory and mood.”

become difficult.”<sup>36</sup> In November of 2020, many people on social media saw this firsthand when a video went viral in which a 94-year-old woman with late-stage Alzheimer’s can be seen dancing to music she knew as a ballerina.<sup>37</sup> Though the woman had not danced for many years, music helped her mind transcend the years, and she began to dance as if no time had passed since she learned it. This is just one example of how music can help the mind recollect long-lost memories. Witvliet puts it this way in his article:

And what more soul-shaping force can we imagine than the songs we sing? Even when we are tired or depressed, old songs well up from within us and dance on our plaintive, whistling lips. When we are old and can remember little else, we are still likely to recall the songs learned in our childhood. Music has the uncanny ability to burrow its way into our spiritual bones. When it comes to matters of spirituality and faith, we are what we sing.<sup>38</sup>

Music is a powerful tool for memory retention. As Witvliet poignantly says, it “burrows its way into our spiritual bones.” The songs we learned as children are the ones we remember when nothing else comes to mind. This is also true for God’s Word. Many pastors can tell stories of visiting shut-ins who were unresponsive throughout the whole visit, but when they heard the Words of the Lord’s Prayer, they fold their hands and listen during the prayer, or they even speak along as well. Even at the end of life, when the mind is no longer in its prime, the mind can be stirred by the right stimuli. Now, consider a regular, healthy adult who attends a worship service. As they go through the week that follows, doubtless, there will be moments that remind them of the previous week’s service. An interaction with a family member or a coworker will bring to

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36. “Art and Music” *Alzheimer’s Association*, accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/art-music>.

37. Anastasia Tsioulcas, “Struck with Memory Loss, A Dancer Remembers ‘Swan Lake.’ But Who Is She?,” *NPR*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/10/933387878/struck-with-memory-loss-a-dancer-remembers-swan-lake-but-who-is-she>

38. Witvliet, “Soul Food for the People of God,” 101.

mind something their pastor said in his sermon. A turn of phrase they hear will make them think of the hymns or the scripture readings. Going to church and being fed with God's Word in Scripture and song provides the Christian spiritual fuel for their week. So why not give them more than just the spoken Word? Why not give them something that they are far more likely to remember: the Word put to music.

One pastor I spoke to regarding this topic put it this way. "When a person leaves church on Sunday morning, they do not leave humming the sermon. They leave humming the closing hymn." While he certainly was not denying people's ability to remember the sermon, he spoke to the importance of hymns and other sung portions of the service. God's Word is powerful and effective, and the message of Christ's death on the cross will always be remembered in the hearts of those who love him. Since music is a powerful tool in remembering it, why would it be denied to our congregations?

### Group Singing in the Context of Adult Community Classes

Other studies have been done that show music is helpful to more than just memory retention. In every study considered for this paper, within the first few sentences of the abstract, singing was cited as beneficial to one's health.<sup>39,40,41</sup> However, a study done by Pearce et al. gave data to this

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39. Christina Grape et al, "Does singing promote well-being?: An empirical study of professional and amateur singers during a singing lesson," *Integrative Physiological & Behavioral Science* 38, (2002): 65.

40. Daisy Fancourt et al, "Psychosocial singing interventions for the mental health and well-being of family carers of patients with cancer: results from a longitudinal controlled study," *BMJ Open* 9, (2019): 1.

41. Eiluned Pearce et al, "Is Group Singing Special? Health, Well-Being and Social Bonds in Community-Based Adult Education Classes," *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 26, (July 2016): 518, doi:10.1002/casp.2278

claim. First, the study shows how in other studies done on the topic, singing has been proven beneficial to the mental health of specific study groups such as homeless men, female prison inmates, disadvantaged adults, the elderly, and those suffering from dementia.<sup>42</sup> Studies were also conducted that proved singing is beneficial for physical health. Because it employs controlled breathing, even among groups like those who suffer from COPD, improved health is noted.<sup>43</sup> Singing has also proven to be helpful in breathing control, posture, and stress reduction, along with cognitive stimulation and memory.<sup>44</sup> Finally, singing has been proven to be helpful psychologically as well. The study says:

As well as these physical effects, singing may improve health and well-being psychologically by encouraging positivity. Quantitative comparison has demonstrated that active group singing yields a greater increase in positive affect and a decrease in negative affect compared to passive listening to music and discussing positive personal experiences. The elevated positive affect and hedonic feelings associated with group singing may lead to a perception of greater well-being, which may also be tied to better mental health.<sup>45</sup>

These are all studies done outside of Pearce and his colleagues' research. This clearly shows how beneficial singing has proven to be. Dr. Pearce and his colleagues, then, wanted to look specifically at community adult classes that one might find at a community center. They hypothesized that singing classes in this setting would prove more beneficial than other classes given past research, but their hypothesis was disproven.<sup>46</sup> However, they did find that there were benefits to adult classes in general. While music was not any more beneficial than any of the

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42. Pearce et al, "Is Group Singing Special?," 519.

43. Pearce et al, "Is Group Singing Special?," 519.

44. Pearce et al, "Is Group Singing Special?," 519.

45. Pearce et al, "Is Group Singing Special?," 519.

46. Pearce et al, "Is Group Singing Special?," 530.

other classes, there was “significant improvement” in the mental and physical health and life satisfaction of those studied.<sup>47</sup> If that is indeed the case for adults participating in a community class where singing is involved, how much more will this be the case for brothers and sisters in Christ?

This study first and foremost points to the power of human companionship and the bond that we share as a race. God designed us to be social creatures. Moreover, as this study shows, humans thrive when they are together. Sharing experiences and teaching and encouraging one another can only bring benefit to all involved. Therefore, when the extra component of the bond Christians share in Christ is added, this will only increase.

Christians share a fellowship unlike anything one might find in an adult community class. While these classes are excellent opportunities for people to get out in their communities and learn skills, they pale compared to the life of the church. Christians are united to their brothers and sisters with the blood of Jesus. Paul emphasizes this when he prays in Rom 15:5–6: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In the church, there is more than just a shared community and a shared interest in singing, or woodwork, or guitar playing like one would experience by taking adult community center classes. Christians united in faith have one heart and one mouth with which to glorify God, and as a unified Church, that is precisely what they do.

More than that, Christians are unified in their struggle against persecution. Christians will have to rely on each other when living in a sinful world becomes too much to bear. The

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47. Pearce et al, “Is Group Singing Special?,” 530.



community Christians share as they confess and preach to one another is far more robust and far more beneficial than any bond found on earth. The study conducted by Dr. Pearce and his colleagues proves some inspiring facts about music and community-based classes. However, it also demonstrates that the bonds Christians share when united in music and the Word of God are stronger. That is why it is crucial to keep these communities together in worship, uniting voices in praise to God and encouragement to one another.

#### The Effect of Singing on Mental Health Among Those Taking Singing Lessons

The next study compared amateur and professional singers (those who had never had professional lessons before to those who had at least six months of lessons) and their heart rate levels, their hormone levels (looking specifically at key happiness and anti-stress hormones like cortisol and oxytocin) and how they rated on five “visual analogue scales” (sad-joyful, anxious-calm, worried-elated, listless-energetic, and tense-relaxed.) The study showed that amateurs showed increased heart rate (which is typically associated with excitement, satisfaction, etc.) and heightened cortisol and oxytocin levels.<sup>48</sup> While professional singers did not record such hormone levels, they reported feeling more relaxed and energetic following the lesson.<sup>49</sup> While this does not touch on the benefits of singing in a congregation, it shows how singing can be beneficial both to experienced and relative beginners to singing.

Again, implications for the Church arise from a study such as this. The main thing this study shows is that singing increases the “love hormone” in our bodies. Oxytocin is the primary

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48. Grape et al, “Does singing promote well-being?,” 65.

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hormone released when there is physical contact, such as hugging, cuddling, and even spending time with pets.<sup>50</sup> This proves singing is a bonding agent. It brings people together. When people lift their voices and sing together, it shows a unity that goes beyond even speaking together. When the Word is added to this powerful mode of unification, it can only increase the power of bringing people together.

As Paul so beautifully puts it in 1 Cor 10:17, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” Christians share a bond through Christ’s body and blood he gave for the forgiveness of sins, one that cannot be broken apart by time or space. Enns puts it this way:

When we gather in worship, we are part of a community that exists both physically in the present and mystically through space and time. We are one with those who are present, one with those who have gone before us, and one with those who will come after us. When we own long-held confessions of faith, this web of relationships comes alive; in congregational singing, the poetry and the music of our hymns confess this reality. Traditional hymn texts and music in particular bind the Christian church across time, while contemporary and global texts and music often unify it through space. In these ways, congregational hymn singing is one of the great gathering forces of the church.<sup>51</sup>

Christians have something the world cannot take away; singing together only strengthens that bond. On top of that, singing makes singers feel more relaxed and satisfied and more energetic. Why would we want to remove something as solidifying and powerful as a bond that goes across both space and time? Our unity in Christ is expressed in our song. Therefore, it is only fitting this continues as long as the Church exists on earth.

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50. Stephanie Pappas, “Oxytocin: Facts About the ‘Cuddle Hormone’,” *Live Science*, June 4, 2015, <https://www.livescience.com/42198-what-is-oxytocin.html#:~:text=Oxytocin%20is%20a%20hormone%20secreted,snuggle%20up%20or%20bond%20socially>.

51. Enns, “How Can I Keep from Singing?,” 20.

### The Effect of Group Singing on Those Caring for Cancer Patients

The final study is similar to the others, showing that there are benefits that go beyond even what happens in a church service. A study was done with cancer patients' caretakers to test if musical therapy could improve the caretakers' mental health. Unsurprisingly, the study found that those caring for a person with cancer who regularly sang in a group reported decreased anxiety and increased well-being.<sup>52</sup> The one thing that did not change was the study group's depression levels, which showed no real improvement.<sup>53</sup> This study shows the remarkable truth that even in a time of darkness and uncertainty like caring for someone dealing with cancer, singing can be beneficial and improve both physical and mental health.

Indeed, non-Christians can manage the heartache of caring for a cancer patient, but Christians are far more suited for this kind of hardship. Now, that is not to say that Christians will automatically weather any storm unflinchingly and be completely fine, but Christians have a care network "pre-installed" in their church. With a family of believers who can support them and encourage them, the hardships of dealing with cancer can be lessened. Nevertheless, when singing is used with the comfort of God's word, a Christian is even more capable of managing and overcoming stress and anxiety. Between musical therapy and the comfort of God's word, Christians are truly blessed with many hands to support in times of hardship. Witvliet puts singing and dealing with grief together well when he says:

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52. Fancourt et al, "Singing interventions of carers of cancer patients," 7.

53. Fancourt et al, "Singing interventions of carers of cancer patients," 7.

At every step of our encounter with death music is surely one divine grace that enables us to keep going. In moments when Words fail us, music gives us something to say. It gives us a way of expressing our lament and our hope. Death isolates us; it leaves us alone. Singing together is the one act that protests this solitude of suffering. One wise pastoral musician said that every week as she led congregational singing, she was rehearsing the congregation for some future funeral.<sup>54</sup>

What is cancer (or any diagnosis of a deadly disease for that matter) if not a brush with death? Furthermore, what better way to combat the soul-crushing possibility of death if not by uniting voices and singing? Singing together is an inspiring way to combat grief. It brings people together. Add God's Word to this mix, and there is a potent combination of comfort for a soul that is hurting and needing consolation. If this study proves that singing in groups can help those caring for cancer patients, then why would we not want that for our church services?

### The Psychological Necessity of Music

It has been made abundantly clear that there are countless benefits to singing, from both a spiritual and a psychological perspective. God's Word in song edifies the soul. Music edifies both body and mind. That is why some may even say it is necessary for existence as human beings. One author puts it:

We believe that music is more a necessity than a luxury not merely because it is therapeutic nor because it is the universal language, but because it is the persistent focus of [human] intelligence, aspiration and good will. To be an artist is to arrive at some sort of resolution of the mind and matter struggle... There is no landscaped approach to beauty and truth. You scratch and scramble around intellectual granites, you try to diffuse or tether your emotional tantrums, you pray for the day when your intellect and your instinct can co-exist, so that the brain need not calcify the heart nor the heart flood and drown all

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54. Witvliet, "Soul Food for the People of God," 102.

reason. But in that struggle lies the tolerable dignity and a tolerable destiny...To be an artist is not the privilege of a few, but the necessity of us all.<sup>55</sup>

Music is seen as a necessity because of its significance in representing the best of what man can create: intelligence, good will. It is also celebrated because it gives light and focus to the intangible. However, God's Word reveals that these qualities of man are exceedingly shallow. Man's intelligence can only get him as far as God allows, and more often than not, gets him into trouble. Man's good will is corrupted by a sinful nature. No good deed is truly good in God's eyes without Christ. Finally, to bring light to the intangible is God's domain as the light of the world. That is why music can only benefit from God's Word. Music certainly can do those things mentioned above and can be a great benefit because of them. Yet, when music is combined with God's Word, it is given far more power than a simple melody can muster. It is given the power of Christ himself to turn stony hearts into living, active ones. This is why music is a necessity. Not because of man's need for art or beauty, but because of man's need for the gospel. Music is a vehicle of the gospel and an effective one at that. That is why congregational singing and participation should not be limited at all in the COVID-19 pandemic.

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55. Robert Shaw, *The Choral Journal* 23, (1983), 21, quoted in Leonard J. Enns, "How Can I Keep from Singing?," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1, (2014): 16.

## THE MEDICAL PERSPECTIVE

Thus far, the paper has dealt with how vital it is to have singing be a part of worship based on a historical Lutheran perspective, a spiritual perspective, and a psychological perspective.

However, the reason these considerations have been brought into question has not yet been addressed. The SARS-CoV-2 virus, or as it is more commonly known, the COVID-19 virus, has changed a great deal in our society. The fact that the virus is highly transmissible has a long incubation period, during which it may be possible to spread, and is lethal for those with high co-morbidities has long been public knowledge. Despite this, it is vital to look at studies done to fully determine details that can be beneficial to churches wrestling with how to deal with worship with a virus that is easily spread by coughing, sneezing, speaking, singing, and even whispering.

Because COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus, information is continually changing regarding evidence of what the virus does. This, combined with the highly political nature of the national response to the virus, means that there may be contradictory information available than what is referenced in this paper. With that in mind, the writer acknowledges that what is referenced here is accurate to the best of his knowledge and prays that it may be beneficial to the reader in offering some sense of how to conduct worship amid a strange and new virus.

## Aerosol particles and the Spread of COVID-19

It is common knowledge that the saliva and mucus from sneezing and coughing are avenues for spreading viruses and bacteria. Every mother must admonish her children at some point in their childhood to “cover your mouth when you sneeze or cough.” One may perhaps recall posters hanging on the walls of grade schools as well, encouraging students to sneeze and cough into the crook of their elbow and not into their hand, or worse yet, the open air. However, a development in research with the COVID-19 virus shows that it is highly likely the virus spreads through more than just airborne droplets of saliva from infected persons; it also spreads from microscopic aerosol particles.<sup>56</sup> The study makes special note of how this can be a substantial health hazard. Since aerosol particles can remain airborne for up to hours in the right conditions,<sup>57</sup> clouds of aerosol exhaled by either those who have tested positive or even those who are asymptomatic can potentially infect large amounts of people. Such an event occurred at a “super spreader event” that garnered a great deal of media attention in the pandemic’s early days on American soil.

At a practice for the Skagit Valley Chorale in Washington state, fifty-nine of the sixty-one adults in attendance contracted COVID-19 from at least one person.<sup>58</sup> One person came to the practice with “cold-like symptoms” they had developed three-days prior. The rest of the choir in attendance reported feeling fine. This does mean there could have been asymptomatic spreaders among the group. However, it is believed that due to the close proximity of the group

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56. Elizabeth L. Anderson et al., “Consideration of the Aerosol Transmission for COVID-19 and Public Health,” *Risk Analysis* 40, no. 5, (May 2020): 3.

57. Anderson et al, “Aerosol transmission of COVID-19,” 2.1.

58. Shelly Miller et al., “Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 by inhalation of respiratory aerosol in the Skagit Valley Chorale superspreading event,” *Indoor Air*, September 2020, 2.

and the poor ventilation of the space, combined with aerosol spreading, this is what caused almost everyone to contract the virus.<sup>59</sup> Thankfully, in this case, there are some obvious reasons why the COVID-19 virus spread so easily within the group so that precautions may be taken against similar situations going forward.

First and foremost was the close proximity of the members of the chorale. The choir members were seated only .75m on each side and 1.4m between rows.<sup>60</sup> This goes against the current CDC recommendations of 1.83m minimum on each side. Additionally, the choir sang for 90 minutes, with only a small break between singing sessions.<sup>61</sup> This means everyone in the choir was in a tight space for a long time, explaining the massive number of singers that contracted the virus. Finally, it is unknown how much airflow there was in the building,<sup>62</sup> but based on the high number of people in the space, it is unlikely the heating system turned on, thus meaning the air was not being circulated at all.

It is little surprise this story received as much attention as it did. From only one person who initially tested positive, a staggering 97% of those in attendance contracted the virus in the days following. It is a sobering story of how easily the virus can be spread. Nevertheless, with all the factors laid out by the study, it is still important to see that aerosol transmission of the virus was highly likely. Thankfully, at the end of the report, the writers give an important statement regarding the aerosol spread of the virus: “Accumulating evidence points to these factors being important for increasing the risk of aerosol transmission indoors: dense occupancy, long

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59. Miller et al., “Aerosol transmission in the Skagit Valley Chorale,” 4.

60. Miller et al., “Aerosol transmission in the Skagit Valley Chorale,” 1.

61. Miller et al., “Aerosol transmission in the Skagit Valley Chorale,” 1.

62. Miller et al., “Aerosol transmission in the Skagit Valley Chorale,” 1.



duration, loud vocalization, and poor ventilation.”<sup>63</sup> While events like this may frighten or alarm some, it is comforting to see what factors can contribute to the virus’s spread. This way, churches know what to look for and avoid.

Thus far, both the Anderson et al. study and the Miller et al. study have demonstrated that aerosol spreading of the virus is “highly likely.” However, this information does not mean that churches must do away with all spoken and sung liturgy in the service. One tactic that many churches have already adopted with relative ease is seating worshipers in every other pew. This almost always creates enough distance between worshipers that they are not breathing the same air. Many churches also have slightly shortened services. By eliminating things like passing the offering plate, that frees up time from the service. Things like continuous flow distribution of Holy Communion also speed service times, often cutting a full service with communion down to an hour, if that. That addresses two of the four concerns that Dr. Miller and her associates raised in their study. Another suggestion raised by Barreda et al. suggests having “quiet zones” in which there is no singing or speaking to ensure aerosol production is minimal.<sup>64</sup> Churches can employ this by having a “non-singing” area in the congregation. By providing a zone where there is no singing (or even spoken participation) happening, some participants may feel more comfortable while still including them in worship. By looking at what studies are saying and taking steps to ensure safety, churches can keep the liturgy and flow of the service relatively intact without depriving people of the rich blessing of congregational singing and participation in worship.

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63. Miller et al., “Aerosol transmission in the Skagit Valley Chorale,” 6.

64. Santiago Barreda et al., “The Impact of Vocalization Loudness on COVID-19 Transmission in Indoor Spaces,” preprint, submitted September 9, 2020, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2009.04060>.

### Vocal Loudness and how it relates to the Spread of COVID-19

A recent BBC article came out with the tantalizing headline, “Singing ‘no riskier than talking’ for virus spread.”<sup>65</sup> While the title is partially true, there is a somewhat important disclaimer. Thankfully, the writer puts it in the first sentence of the article: “But it all depends on how loud a person is, according to the initial findings which are yet to be peer-reviewed.” The next series of studies to be considered all support this claim, which follows common sense. The louder one is, the more aerosol particles they produce, and the farther away from one’s body the aerosols travel. This information is vital to understanding how the virus behaves and how we can combat it in our churches.

Studies conducted by Barreda et al., Gregson et al., and Echternach et al. all reported the same: that the louder one is, whether they are speaking, singing, or when they are breathing (here it would be called “heavy breathing” instead of loud breathing) have a direct effect on how much aerosol you produce<sup>66,67</sup> and how far that aerosol will travel.<sup>68</sup> Each group of scientists has its own recommendations depending on their findings. The Gregson study suggests that regular breathing produces smaller size aerosols than the larger ones produced while singing, which

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65. Lauren Moss, “Singing ‘No Riskier than Talking’ New Study Reports,” *BBC*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-53853961>

66. Barreda et al., “The Impact of Vocalization Loudness on COVID-19 Transmission,” 8.

67. Florence Gregson et al., “Comparing the Respirable Aerosol Concentrations and Particle Size Distributions Generated by Singing, Speaking and Breathing,” preprint, submitted August 19, 2020, [https://chemrxiv.org/articles/preprint/Comparing\\_the\\_Respirable\\_Aerosol\\_Concentrations\\_and\\_Particle\\_Size\\_Distributions\\_Generated\\_by\\_Singing\\_Speaking\\_and\\_Breathing/12789221](https://chemrxiv.org/articles/preprint/Comparing_the_Respirable_Aerosol_Concentrations_and_Particle_Size_Distributions_Generated_by_Singing_Speaking_and_Breathing/12789221)

68. Matthias Echternach et al., “Impulse dispersion of aerosols during singing and speaking,” preprint, submitted July 24, 2020, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.07.21.20158832v2>

means that people not participating pose less risk than those who are speaking, who in turn pose less risk than those who are singing or speaking loudly.<sup>69</sup> To combat this, they recommend greater amplification of singers via microphones and acoustic volume to accommodate more quiet singing and speaking. The study also suggests audiences can produce more aerosol while breathing merely because they are a larger body of people.<sup>70</sup> The Barreda study recommended encouraging more silent or, preferably, entirely quiet social gatherings to reduce aerosol production.<sup>71</sup>

The Barreda study also recommended mask-wearing, which can reduce the number of aerosols that leave the person and limit the distance they can travel.<sup>72</sup> Finally, Echternach et al., recommended keeping a distance of at least 2–2.5m to the front and 1.5m to the side.<sup>73</sup> What is also worth noting is every study mentioned ventilation as a critical factor in keeping areas safe.<sup>74,75,76</sup>

Again, it is encouraging to see that these studies, while being honest about the dangers the virus poses and the difficulties it causes, provide ways to work around the virus. Ways that do not involve removing the heart of worship by taking congregational singing and participation away from the people. Whether it is by wearing masks or ensuring the space in which worship is

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69. Gregson et al., “Comparing Aerosol Concentrations and Particle Size Distributions,” 9.

70. Gregson et al., “Comparing Aerosol Concentrations and Particle Size Distributions,” 10.

71. Barreda et al., “The Impact of Vocalization Loudness on COVID-19 Transmission,” 8.

72. Barreda et al., “The Impact of Vocalization Loudness on COVID-19 Transmission,” 8.

73. Echternach et al., “Impulse dispersion of aerosols,” 9.

74. Gregson et al., “Comparing Aerosol Concentrations and Particle Size Distributions,” 9-10.

75. Barreda et al., “The Impact of Vocalization Loudness on COVID-19 Transmission,” 8-9.

76. Echternach et al., “Impulse dispersion of aerosols,” 9.

well ventilated, people can be put at ease knowing that churches are doing their best to avoid causing needless risk.

An excellent example of a church adapting to keep singing in worship was in Green Lake, WI (near where the author vicared). First, the pastor arranged the service so that he chanted all the liturgy. (This was common in the church historically and is not unheard of today.) Additionally, he had a cantor or cantors sing the hymns during the service inside, which meant the people were still given a chance to at least hear God's Word in song and meditate on the text in worship. At the end of every service, he would dismiss the congregation outside and lead them in singing a hymn a Capella in the church parking lot while socially distancing. This way, the historical liturgy was preserved, as well as congregational participation and singing. This is just one small example of a way churches can work around the difficulties COVID-19 presents. If a church is dedicated enough, there are ways to ensure congregational singing and participation are kept in worship.

### **Depression and Anxiety and their Relationship to COVID-19 Lockdowns**

There is one more sad reality that must be explored before concluding this overview of the health studies done concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of the paper, it was acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic effect on almost every aspect of average Americans' lives. 2020 was a volatile and unpredictable year in the financial sector, which affected many Americans in many different walks of life. One area that has been acutely affected is the mental health of the populace. At the very start of the March lockdown, the *Washington Post* posted an article addressing how the need for 24/7 crisis hotline operators increased as the

average wait time to speak to a hotline representative jumped from twenty seconds to one minute.<sup>77</sup> This is just a small look at how the global pandemic has affected mental health. A recent article on *CNN* reported that in Japan, suicides skyrocketed to such a disproportionate number that more people died from suicide in Japan in the month of October than from COVID-19 in January through September combined.<sup>78</sup> It is little wonder suicide is on the rise. Many people worldwide are facing financial hardship after losing jobs, and there is little a struggling global economy can do to sustain them or offer them work. This, combined with lockdowns and people living in isolation, is devastating to mental health. Studies regarding the pandemic, particularly relating to lockdowns and other quarantining measures, show what many are already feeling and have already felt: lockdown and relative isolation is not beneficial for one's mental health.

In one study, researchers went so far as to call the anxiety and depression related to COVID-19 a “syndemic,” or a pandemic that happens alongside another.<sup>79</sup> Researchers found one of the leading causes for this mental unwellness stemmed from uncertainty regarding public transit and how that would affect transit to and from work. Another study looked specifically at patients with COVID-19 in hospital and studied their mental health. Unsurprisingly, those hospitalized and without access to loved ones reported higher levels of both anxiety and

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77. Rebecca Tan, “In an era of quarantine, crisis hotlines face growing – and urgent – demand,” *Washington Post*, March 23, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crisis-hotline-quarantine-coronavirus-mental-health/2020/03/23/632e2d7c-6abe-11ea-9923-57073adce27c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crisis-hotline-quarantine-coronavirus-mental-health/2020/03/23/632e2d7c-6abe-11ea-9923-57073adce27c_story.html).

78. Selina Wang, Rebecca Wright, and Yoko Wakatsuki, “In Japan, more people died from suicide last month than from Covid in all of 2020. And women have been impacted most,” *CNN*, November 29, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/28/asia/japan-suicide-women-covid-dst-intl-hnk/index.html>.

79. João M. Castaldelli-Maia, “Investigating the effect of national government physical distancing measures on depression and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic through meta-analysis and meta-regression,” preprint, submitted on September 2, 2020, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.08.28.20184119v1>

depression. Related to this was the uncertainty and fear that they had spread the virus to their loved ones.<sup>80</sup> Interestingly, this study referenced how singing was one way doctors helped patients boost confidence as they recovered from the virus.<sup>81</sup> A final study showed that at the beginning of the lockdown, anxiety levels were high, particularly among women or young adults, those with no higher education, those in lower income brackets or those with pre-existing mental health conditions, and those who were home alone with small children.<sup>82</sup> However, as time progressed, people seemed to become more used to the situation and their depression and anxiety levels stabilized.<sup>83</sup> This is undoubtedly hopeful and may suggest that the effect of COVID-19 may not be as bleak as it looks from these studies.

These studies have proven that COVID-19 has had a profound effect on more than just the economy. The very soul of civilized countries around the world is at risk from this terrible disease. Nevertheless, there are a few small glimmers of hope in these studies. The fact that music was used in restoring confidence among COVID-19 patients is encouraging. Additionally, the fact that depression and anxiety levels were noted to flatline after several weeks among those in lockdowns is also great news. The human mind's ability to recover from extreme sadness and make the best of even the bleakest situations is a unique gift that can be aided by music. The quote from Witvliet comes to mind again. "Death isolates us; it leaves us alone. Singing together

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80. Xiangyu Kong et al., "Prevalence and Factors Associated with Depression and Anxiety of Hospitalized Patients with COVID-19," preprint, submitted on April 5, 2020, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.03.24.20043075v2>

81. Kong et al., "Depression and Anxiety among Hospital Patients with COVID," 6.

82. Daisy Fancourt, Andrew Steptoe, and Feifei Bu, "Trajectories of anxiety and depressive symptoms during enforced isolation due to COVID-19: longitudinal analyses of 36,520 adults in England," preprint, submitted on November 3, 2020, <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.06.03.20120923v3>.

83. Fancourt, Steptoe, and Bu, "Anxiety and Depressive Symptoms During Forced Isolation," 2.

is the one act that protests this solitude of suffering.”<sup>84</sup> Combine this with God’s Word, and the Christian is much more likely to be able to weather even the most troublesome of times.

Countless passages spring to mind that can remind us of our hope regardless of what happens in life. Some passages speak of the restoration we will have in Christ, such as 1 Pet 5:10 “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.” Others like Jer 29:11 remind us of the future God has in store for us: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” Still, others remind us of God’s lasting protection, like Ps 91:3 “Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence.” Scripture’s entire story is that of giving hope to the hopeless.

Furthermore, as was already mentioned above: “where words fail, music speaks.” Combine these two, and they provide a remedy for any hopelessness this world can offer. An excellent example can be seen in Christian hymns like “It Is Well with My Soul.” The author of that hymn, Horatio Spafford, did not have an easy life. He lost his son in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and all four of his daughters at sea just two years later while they were sailing to England. While sailing to join his wife, he penned the famous words to his hymn. The comfort of God’s Word enabled Spafford to declare, “it is well with my soul.” So it is with Christians in the COVID-19 pandemic. This unshakable truth that we can have hope regardless of what happens has sustained the church for millennia and will continue to do so in the uncertain future ahead of us.

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84. Witvliet, “Soul Food for the People of God,” 102.

In all of these health studies, the facts have been a sobering reminder of what the church must deal with if we wish to continue worshiping in ways that will not offend any of our weaker brothers. Yet, in each of these studies, there have been answers and ways to work around the difficulties. Often the researchers themselves provide solutions to the problems we face. It is now up to the church to put these efforts into practice. In all things, let us keep the Words of Jesus from Matthew 10:16b foremost in our minds as we navigate the uncertain waters of dealing with worship in a global pandemic: “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” We will be facing many hardships and uncertainties in the months and years ahead. Christians will need to be shrewd managers of what God has given as well as innocent in their intentions. In all this, we will need wisdom and guidance. Therefore, may God grant us the wisdom of Solomon as we navigate these uncertain waters.



## CONCLUSION

In a letter to all WELS congregations sent out in July of 2020, Pastor Jonathan Hein encouraged all WELS pastors to “leave no man behind.” By this, he meant that church leaders should adapt their worship to make it accessible for the most vulnerable members of each congregation. Those who are unconcerned about the virus will be far more likely to “stretch” their beliefs. They tend to be more willing, for example, to socially distance or wear masks in order to accommodate their weaker brothers and sisters in Christ, who are likely terrified to leave their homes or are—at the very least—concerned about the virus and their loved ones.<sup>85</sup> When Christians do something they do not necessarily want to do for their weaker brothers or sisters, this is a beautiful example of an application of what Paul teaches in 1 Cor 8 regarding adiaphoron and not being stumbling blocks to other believers. This concept of encouraging unity is also echoed in Luther in a letter to the Lutheran pastors in Livonia written in 1521. In it, he encourages unity in all things and says:

Now even though external rites and orders—such as masses, singing, reading, baptizing—add nothing to salvation, yet it is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions. Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinions and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the common people get confused and discouraged.<sup>86</sup>

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85. Jonathan Hein, “Resuming Worship in the Next Season of the Pandemic,” *For Such A Time as This*, (July 2020), 2.

86. Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, 47.

One cannot help but marvel at this simple letter's timeliness and aptness in our current times. It is almost as if Luther was writing to 21<sup>st</sup> century America. The words he speaks here are a mighty chastisement as we move forward with conducting worship in the global pandemic. In all things, for the benefit of our flocks, we should strive for unity.

Every pastor has a right to his own opinion, and every pastor will need to apply pastoral care as he shepherds his flock. There is no "one size fits all" answer on how to conduct worship in a global pandemic. An approach that will be comfortable for a congregation in rural Wisconsin will not be the same as an approach for a congregation in urban Arizona. Yet as this paper has progressed, hopefully, it has been made abundantly clear that there are excellent reasons for having congregational singing and participation be a part of Lutheran worship. There are undoubtedly many more quotes that could be supplied to help support this fact. Simultaneously, many scriptural passages could be referenced to show how vital music and worship are to the life of faith. There are doubtless multiple studies that show the benefits of singing in groups or alone or in church, or anywhere else. Finally, hundreds of studies have been produced and are still being produced on COVID-19 that provide invaluable information about how the virus behaves, which can be invaluable for pastors designing policy in their churches. Nevertheless, what has been provided in this paper will hopefully be seen as sufficient. All this has been compiled to support one argument: congregational singing and participation should not be limited at all in the COVID-19 pandemic.

What Paul says in Col 3:16 is the best argument for this statement: "Let the Word of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God." Ultimately, music is a vehicle for the gospel. It is a tool that the Spirit uses to bring the Word to us.

However, as important and wonderful as music is, one thing must be emphasized: the Word is what is most important. Without the Word, we are lost in the darkness. For it is the light of the gospel which reveals to us lowly sinful human beings the very face of God himself. In this Word, we see that he is a God of love, who freely offered his Son to pay for our sins. This Word is vital to our existence, and it will sustain us through the years as worship changes, it will sustain us through countless pandemics and calamities up to the end of time, and it will sustain us through the coming days of the global pandemic. So, whatever we do as church leaders, as pastors, and as Christians, let it be to make God's Word greatest. For it is in the Word we see our Savior.

SDG

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