

# THE SONG-SHAPED SOUL

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*Why do Christians sing? Is it simply a mode of self expression, or does it have value as a spiritual discipline? Steve Guthrie looks back to the Church Father, Athanasius, for answers. What he finds may come as a surprise to Christians today.*



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We eat because we are hungry; we sleep because we are tired. But many other things we do without any clear sense of why we do them. Certainly, music, especially *making* music or singing, would seem to be among these. I teach a course each year on theological aesthetics, and one of the questions I pose at the beginning of the semester is just this: *why do human beings sing?* Many answers could be given to the question. We sing for simple enjoyment, we sing to mark important occasions, we sing to pass time while working, and so on. One could also provide different *sorts* of answers to the question of why we sing—historical reasons, sociological reasons, perhaps biological, psychological or evolutionary reasons. Interestingly, though, my students answer the question of why we sing with a fair degree of unanimity. We sing, they say, to express our emotions.

In the fourth century of the Common Era, the church father Athanasius (c. 295–373) wrote a letter to his friend Marcellinus.<sup>1</sup> It is a letter written about



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the Book of Psalms specifically, and in it Athanasius draws attention to another reason for singing. Singing, he believes, is a spiritual discipline—an important practice in Christian spiritual formation and a means of growing in the life of faith. By putting it this way, we are getting a bit ahead of Athanasius, however. Athanasius is not so much interested in commending singing as he is in commending the Psalms. Athanasius acknowledges that all of scripture is valuable, but for ‘those who are prayerful’ (p101) the Psalms are a special help. Each portion of scripture,

he observes, has its own story to tell – the story of the exodus, the story of Israel’s rulers, or the story of the return from exile. The Book of Psalms also contains ‘things of all these kinds,’ but, Athanasius points out, unlike other portions of scripture it ‘sets them to music’ (p102). And beyond this, the Book of Psalms has treasures of its own ‘that it gives in song’ (p102). In other words, Athanasius suggests that the reason the Psalms are of such help in the spiritual life is precisely because they are not simply read or spoken, but sung. Why is song of such value?

## Receiving an impression

Athanasius' first reason for singing the Psalms very nearly inverts the reason given by most of my students. For them, singing is a means of expression—a way of drawing *out* what is in us (that's the 'ex' in *ex*-pression). For Athanasius however, the first and most important outcome of singing the Psalms is not *ex*-pression, but *im*-pression. In singing the Psalms the truth is not drawn *out of* but *into* the depths of one's being.

Athanasius explains that 'in the other books [of scripture], those who read ... are relating the things that were written about those earlier people' (p109). So, we might imagine the ancient preacher standing up before his church and reading the story of Moses and the burning bush. As the story is read, there are two separate actors: Moses, who is humbling himself before God; and the preacher, who is *reading about* Moses humbling himself before God. 'And likewise,' Athanasius continues, 'those who listen consider themselves to be other than those about whom the passage speaks' (p109). So again, we might imagine the preacher's congregation listening to the story of Moses in Exodus 3. Once again, there are two different actors and two different actions. On the one hand is Moses, who is worshipping; on the other hand is the congregation, who *are listening* to the

account of Moses worshipping. Now, says, Athanasius, consider the Psalms:

By contrast, however, he who takes up this book—the Psalter ... recognizes [the words] as *being his own words*. And the one who hears is deeply moved, as *though he himself were speaking*, and is affected by the words of the songs, *as if they were his own songs*. (p109, my emphasis)

For Athanasius, the first virtue of the Psalms is not that they allow me to express my emotions. Rather, by singing the Psalms it becomes possible for me to express *Moses'* emotions, or *David's* emotions as my own. And this potency,

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Athanasius suggests, arises from the sung character of the Psalms. Singing is an act of imitation. It is *im*-pression rather than *ex*-pression.

He who recites the Psalms ... sings them as if they were written concerning him, and he accepts them and recites them not as if another were speaking nor as if speaking about someone else. But he handles them as if he is speaking about himself. And the things spoken are such that he lifts them up to God as himself acting and speaking them from himself. (p110)

The Psalms are of such value to the spiritual life because they are a training ground in which we 'go through the motions'—in the best sense of that phrase. Like children playing dress-up, we are formed by the words as we 'wear them.' We act out the script of the spiritual life—a script written by the Holy Spirit and enacted in godly people who have gone before us. This Christian life is not drawn out of us, but welcomed in.

## Posture, gesture and the emotions of the soul

In what special sense, though, does the singing of the Psalms enable this welcoming in? Could we not simply *speak* the words of scripture as if they were our own? What is gained by *singing* them? Just this: singing engages our emotions. And so, in song, we learn not just the content of the spiritual life, but something of its posture, inflection and emotional disposition. 'For in the other books' Athanasius writes, 'one hears only what one must do and what one must not do ... But in the Book of Psalms, the one who hears ... also comprehends

and is taught in it the emotions of the soul' (p108). So while elsewhere in scripture 'we are asked to bless the Lord, and to acknowledge him ... in the Psalms we are instructed *how* one must praise the Lord and by speaking what words we properly confess our faith in him' (p109, my emphasis).

In other words, when we sing, we learn not simply what to say, but how and why to say it. And these things—inflection, prosody, tone of voice—matter deeply. 'It's not so much what he said,' we might tell someone after having been offended by another, 'it's the way he said it.' We all know, for instance, that there is a way of saying 'thank you' that is simply enacting a social convention (say, when someone holds the door for us). There is yet another way of saying 'thank you' (perhaps after receiving a beautiful gift, hand-made by one's child) that also means 'I love you.' And there is still another way of saying 'thank you' (perhaps half-way through an annoying sales pitch, or at the end of an unsuccessful audition) that also means 'please go away now'. We do not just say words, we inhabit them. And part of the meaning of words is the *way* they are inhabited. We might say that for



Athanasius, singing the Psalms teaches us how to inhabit their words. Song not only carries the words inside us; it also carries us to the in-side of the words.

Athanasius explains,

For as one who comes in to the presence of a king assumes a certain attitude, both of posture and expression, lest speaking differently he be thrown out as boorish, so also to the one who is running the race of virtue and wishes to know the life of the Savior in the body the sacred book first calls to mind the emotions of the soul through the reading. (pp112-13, my emphasis)

What matters in the spiritual life is not only the words that are said, but the ‘certain attitude ... posture and expression’ with which they are said. Some of those whom Jesus condemned during his ministry had failed to learn just this truth. They knew the words by heart, but didn’t know the heart of the

sweetness of sound, that also the Psalms are rendered musically for the sake of the ear’s delight. But this is not so.’ (p123) To contemporary sensibilities this sort of statement may seem unnecessarily harsh and ascetical—and it may be. But if Athanasius’ view of musical pleasure is severe, it provides a welcome counterbalance to our own culture, in which the value of music has been reduced almost entirely to entertainment, background and diversion. Certainly, music—like food, like sex, like friendship and a hundred other pleasures—is delightful. But in addition to this, music is a means by which the Holy Spirit can remake us in the image of Jesus Christ. And indeed, we might go on to say, this is true as well of food (think for instance of the communion meal); of sex (think of marriage, and how Paul likens the physical union of husband and wife

people to sing together; when singing is generally something done *for* one rather than *by* one. Along with the marketing and commercialisation of the arts has come its professionalisation. Much in our culture tempts us to think of singing (and art generally) as something that special people with special training do, in special venues on special occasions. But this isn’t true. Art and music are paradigmatically human activities. Children spontaneously begin to sing and dance at about the same age as they begin to talk. We are, all of us, singers and musicians.

What is more, Athanasius argues that as we sing, we learn the gestures and posture intimated by the song. In recent years the philosopher Roger Scruton has offered a very similar description of our experience of music. Scruton argues that to hear sounds *as music* requires hearing the imagined life

## That singing can be a spiritual discipline ... is out of

words; and so Jesus denounced them as hypocrites: ‘Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me”.’ (Matthew 15:8)

### Song as spiritual formation

It might be worth pausing here and briefly taking stock of some of the insights we can gather from Athanasius’ commendation of the Psalms. First of all, the very idea that singing can be a spiritual discipline is worth our attention. This is an ancient idea, but one that is out of step with the place of music in contemporary culture. In the developed world of the twenty-first century, music is first of all entertainment; or perhaps—more cynically—product. A little later in the letter, Athanasius will vehemently reject the idea that the melodies of the psalms are meant simply to tickle the ears. ‘Some of the simple among us ... imagine, however, on account of the

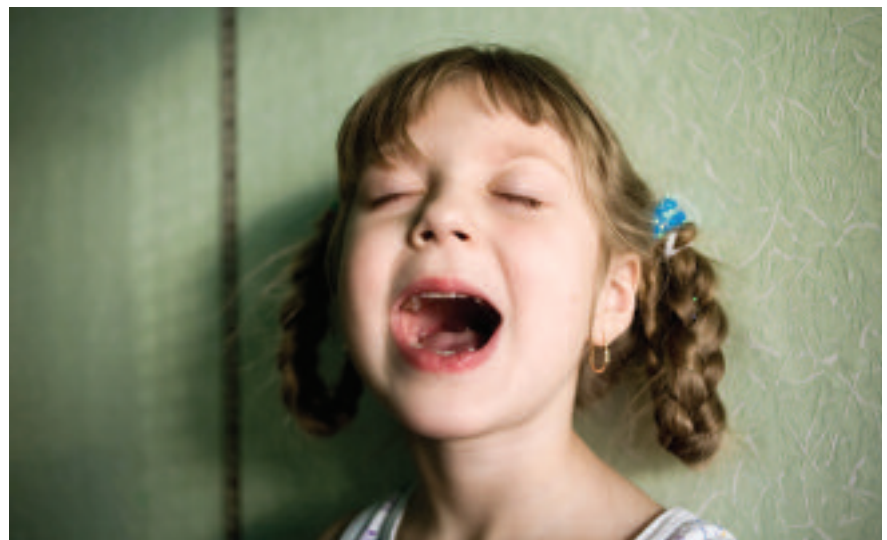


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to the union of Christ and the church); and of friendship (the shared life of his followers, Jesus says, will testify to the life Jesus shares with the Father).

In addition to this, Athanasius’ letter draws our attention to the importance of not just hearing the truth, but *entering into it, participating in it—singing it*. This is a vital insight in an era when it is less and less common for

embodied in those sounds. To hear a series of sounds as a melody means precisely to hear them reaching up, stretching forward or drooping languidly. In musical hearing, Scruton says, we move ‘in a dance of sympathy’ with the gestures embodied in the melody. ‘The formal organization of music,’ he writes, ‘can be understood only by the person who relates it,



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## step with the place of music in contemporary culture.

through a metaphorical perception, to the world of life and gesture.<sup>2</sup> And when we respond to a piece of music ‘a kind of gravitational field is created, which shapes the emotional life of the one who enters it. We move for a while along the orbit of a formalized emotion and practice its steps.’<sup>3</sup> In a similar fashion, Athanasius believes that singing allows us to do something more than simply hear or observe the life of faith. Instead, in a kind of melodic imitation, the singer shares in the life sounded out in the music. Athanasius’ letter can be read as a warning against any sort of ‘spectator spirituality’. Really knowing the truth means taking it into oneself and being transformed by it.

And, as we’ve already said, Athanasius’ letter reminds us that the meaning of our words includes this musical element of gesture and expression. The meaning of things includes *the way in which they are said*. Of course, we should add immediately that this does

not mean setting aside or diminishing the importance of the fundamental affirmations of Christian truth, of scripture, or the creeds. These are not to be replaced or superseded, but *inhabited* by a ‘certain attitude ... posture and expression’. We grasp the truth of our beliefs more fully if we know how they sound when confessed by a human voice. And we understand scripture much more deeply, Athanasius argues, by singing it. The melody acts as a kind of exegesis of the text, unfolding the meaning of what is said by guiding us in the way it is to be said. From scripture we learn that God is King; in song we may learn the ‘attitude ... posture and expression’ one adopts in the presence of the King.

### **A rich and broad place**

To this point in his letter, Athanasius has been concerned with commending the Psalms. We have seen that this commendation is bound up with the fact that the Psalter is a book that is

*sung*. It is only at this point in his letter, however, that Athanasius enquires into the question of music. ‘It is important’ he writes, ‘not to pass over the question of why words of this kind are chanted with melodies and strains’ (p123). Why, he asks, might God have given us this portion of his word in a form that is to be sung?

The first reason Athanasius suggests is that ‘it is fitting for the Divine Scripture to praise God not in compressed speech alone, but also in the voice that is richly broadened’ (pp123-24). In prose passages of scripture, such as historical books and the law, ‘things are said ... in close sequence’ (p124). In other portions however, such as ‘the psalms, odes, and songs’, the voice is ‘richly broadened’ (p123). This description is a bit puzzling at first. What does it mean to say that the historical books are ‘said in close sequence’? It becomes less puzzling when we recall that while, for the modern reader, reading is almost



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invariably a silent activity, for the ancient reader, it was almost invariably something done aloud.<sup>4</sup> If we think in terms of *audible* speech and *audible* song, then, Athanasius has given us a pretty reasonable attempt at describing the difference between the two. In ordinary speech there is intonation and rhythm, but these are ‘in close sequence’. When, however, ‘things are expressed more broadly’—

inhabiting the words in the way we described earlier, but by filling and animating them with her own strength and passion.

Our contemporary thinking tempts us to begin with this ‘third stage’ of Athanasius’ program of spiritual formation. When thinking of music, my students think first of all of self-expression. In the spiritual life generally,

*The singer enters in, not only by inhabiting the words ... but by filling and animating them with her own strength and passion.*

that is when we sustain and draw out the tones and rhythms of our speech—we move from prose, to poetry, to song.

And what is the spiritual import of singing—of speech that is ‘richly broadened’? Athanasius says that in intoning words in this way, ‘thus will it be preserved that men love God with their whole strength and power’ (p124). Words that are broadened, we might say, allow space for the speaker to *enter in*. The singer enters in, not only by

and in music particularly, we may wish to begin by pouring out our hearts, by giving voice to our own deepest hopes and longings. And of course, there is a place for immediate and spontaneous expression. But in his letter Athanasius is commending a pattern of discipleship—one that begins with self-denial rather than self-expression. Before the self is expressed, it is to be formed through scripture and worship. This should not be surprising. Jesus marks out this very

path. At the start of the Christian life there is a surrender, a laying down of one’s self—a kind of death. ‘Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’ (John 12:24). ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’ (Luke 9:23). And yet, nevertheless, neither the gospel nor the Christian life ends at the cross. After Good Friday there is Easter; after the grave there is resurrection. In the same way, it is after surrendering my own voice to the melody of another that—paradoxically—I find I can express myself truly. ‘For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it’ (Luke 9:24). Athanasius’ program of singing the Psalms does not begin with, but culminates in, self-expression. The Psalms are a rich and broad place in which all the fullness of one’s heart and soul and strength can be given voice.

### **An image of the well-ordered soul**

Athanasius suggests one further reason that God has paired these words with melody—namely, that God intends for melody to serve as ‘a symbol of the spiritual harmony in a soul’ (p124). While ‘the entire Holy Scripture is a teacher of virtues and of the truths of faith, [the Book of Psalms] possesses somehow *the perfect image for the souls’ course of life*’ (p112). We need this image of a well-ordered soul because in its present fallen condition, humanity does not enjoy the spiritual harmony described by Athanasius. Apart from Christ, our souls are confused and disordered; we are out of rhythm with God and out of tune within ourselves. Musical harmony, however, gives us some intimation of a life that is composed, harmonized and ‘beautifully disposed’ (p125). Music, Athanasius believes, is a sounding image of a soul that is no longer at odds with itself, nor at odds with God’s Holy Spirit. Melody

models an inner life in which the many different elements and impulses of the person are drawn together in a winsome and pleasing concord.

Athanasius will go even further than this. Not only is this singing of Psalms an image of the well-ordered soul; it is also a means by which God *brings about* this order. As one is ‘beautifully singing praises, he brings rhythm to his soul and leads it, so to speak, from disproportion to proportion’ (p126). This proportioned, harmonized self is not our normal state of being. Apart from Christ, the ordinary state of affairs is for the various members and impulses of our person to jostle for control, battling with one another (e.g. Romans 7:22-23). When one sings, however, reason, emotion, physical sense and desire come alongside one another, each contributing something essential to the experience of music. As we sing, we *become* a harmony.

This is not to suggest that music in itself has the power to make us holy. The spiritual discipline Athanasius describes involves singing the words of scripture, and singing them in the presence of God. Athanasius’ point, however, is that specifically by *singing* our praises, all the diverse elements of our humanity are drawn together, and then together lifted to God in worship.

## The Beauty of Holiness

When Athanasius imagines the Christian life, he imagines this sort of richly broadened voice, ringing out in song. This image of the spiritual life may be one of the most important ideas we can carry away from his *Letter to Marcellinus*.

Years ago, when I was a youth pastor, I ran a summer Bible study series on the spiritual disciplines. I now cringe just a little when I remember the name I gave the series: ‘Boot Camp.’ I printed the handouts and Bible study worksheets with military-looking stencils, and decorated the borders with clip-art of camouflage and—forgive me, I was very young—barbed wire. What a picture of the Christian life! What a set of images to surround our discussions of prayer and fasting and Bible study! And how far removed from Athanasius’ image of a soul that is ‘beautifully disposed’!

Of course, Christian growth and the spiritual life include hard work, discipline and training. The apostle Paul himself is not opposed to employing a military metaphor (2 Timothy 2:3-4). But we have missed something vital if our vision of spiritual formation is altogether lacking in poetry and music. Perhaps we simply recognize all too well the discordant inner impulses that Athanasius describes,

but we haven’t yet learned the way of melody and rhythm. We haven’t yet learned, that is to say, how to allow grace and beauty to draw our fragmented souls into God’s presence. So instead, we urge one another on in sanctification through guilt and threat; through petty systems and record-keeping; through heavy-handed admonitions and manipulative programs. But when Athanasius (and with him countless generations of monastics) thought of the way of spiritual formation, they thought first of all of the poetry and melody of the Psalms. For this reason, when Athanasius commends the spiritual life to his friend Marcellinus, he does so in terms of *song*. And when he chooses an image to describe the inner life of the Christian, the one he chooses is *melody*. ©

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Athanasius, ‘A Letter to Marcellinus,’ in *Athanasius: The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, tr. Robert G. Gregg. (Mahway, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1980). For further discussion see also Holly Taylor Coolman, ‘The Psalter for the Formation of Souls: How to Repent; How to Give Thanks; What One Must Say when Being Pursued,’ *Word and World*, Vol. 31(3), (2001), pp227-34; Paul R. Kolbet, ‘Athanasius, the Psalms, and the Reformation of the Self,’ *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 99(1), (2006), pp85-101; G. C. Stead, ‘St. Athanasius on the Psalms’ *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 39(1), (1985), pp65-78.
- 2 Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) pp341-42.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p357.
- 4 Paul Saenger, *Space between words: The origin of silent reading* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p1.

