

The pandemic calls for closed hymnals

Forgoing congregational singing as a spiritual discipline

by [L. Roger Owens](#) in the [July 29, 2020](#) issue



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Singing is my body's prayer. I don't do yoga. I don't dance before the Lord. I don't lift my hands in praise during worship. I do, however, raise my voice in song, and it takes every cell of my body. I sing during worship. I sing with all I've got.

Paul encourages us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. I do that with a song on my lips.

Which is why it's hard for me to imagine worship without singing. But studies are suggesting that singing might expel more virus-laden particles into the air than breathing and speaking. So churches that want to be safe when they regather after quarantine are doing the unthinkable: banning corporate song.

As hard as this reality is to accept, I believe there are faithful ways Christian communities can disobey Paul's injunction to "sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" together. There are ways we can make abstaining from singing an appropriate practice of self-denial for this time.

Unfortunately, many communities have no interest in even considering such a possibility. They have chosen to practice a spirituality of self-assertion. We have the right to gather whenever and however we want, they say, and we have the right to sing when we do. And they have chosen to assert that supposed right above the guidance of health officials.

This became clear in late May when a CDC guideline noting that the "act of singing may contribute to transmission of COVID-19, possibly through emission of aerosols" was scrapped because the Trump administration feared angering its evangelical base.

The debate over guidelines shows too clearly American—and especially white—Christianity's long-standing spirituality of entitlement. This approach to faith has forgotten that Christ's kenosis—Christ's releasing self-assertion and relinquishing entitlements—rests at the heart of Christian believing, praying, and living.

And, we might add, *singing*.

Many of us will balk at restrictions on our worship, but might there be ways to embrace this mandated musical reticence as a faithful spiritual practice given the circumstances?

Christian communities have long known that how we sing together expresses our deepest commitments. Whenever I have taught Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, students have questioned Bonhoeffer's rule that his seminarians should only sing in unison. *How can he deny them the beauty and diversity of harmony?* I suggest to them that, under the conditions of a fractured and apostate German Christianity, unison singing embodied the theological necessity of unity among the members of the Confessing Church and among the seminarians risking their lives to study with Bonhoeffer. It was appropriate for that context.

In my own United Methodist tradition, John Wesley's directions for singing are printed in the front of our hymnals. We should be under no illusions that how we sing

is up to us. Wesley knew that how we sing reflects our values. He wanted Methodists to “sing lustily” so we wouldn’t appear half-asleep, but also “modestly” so our voices could be united. He told us to “sing in time” in order to avoid laziness. And he said “sing spiritually” with an “eye to God” in every note. These directions express Methodism’s energetic, active faith along with its ecumenical, catholic spirit.

Most significantly, Wesley remarked that if following any one of these rules “is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.”

In other words, abandon self-assertion in your singing. It’s not about you.

Maybe we could say the same about not singing. Let not singing be a cross. Take it up. Find it a blessing.

I believe there are faithful ways to disobey Paul’s injunction to sing.

We might, for instance, allow our willingness to accept not singing signify our lament. Our corporate silence can become an eloquent cry to God, a lament not only over the destruction and fear caused by a virus but also over the ways willful ignorance, incompetence, and malfeasance have compounded the tragedy.

“How can we sing the Lord’s songs in a strange land?” the Israelites cried out as their Babylonian captors enjoined them to sing. Christians today might make that ancient lament our own. As we watch how people’s impatience with quarantine is causing a kind of pandemic amnesia, maybe our silent lament can be a reminder: in this strange land of global pandemic, the destruction is deep, wide, and ongoing.

More fundamentally, our willingness not to sing can be an *imitatio Christi*, a letting go of prerogative, a faithful kenosis.

Paul used the story of Christ’s kenosis, his abandoning divine privilege and accepting the humility of a servant, as the climax of his encouragement to the Christians of Philippi to “look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Christ’s own kenosis brought salvation, a word which comes from a Latin word that means to make safe or healthy. Our own self-denial around singing can be a way of looking out for the health of the members of our communities. It can be a way to make safe our gathering for worship.

It’s the same reason we will cover our faces with masks, pass the peace without touching, and position unsightly hand sanitizing stations around our sanctuaries.

Because Christians look not to their own interests but to the interests of others.
Because there are no Christian entitlements.

As Wesley said, "If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing."

I will still sing. I will sing lustily. I will sing at my own tempo. I will not sing modestly. I will pray with this instrument that is my body. How can I keep from singing?

But I will do it from the comfort of my home. My family will not be pleased. I can only hope God will.

And when we gather with others, we can become an image of Christ by keeping our hymnals shut. In this way our worshipful silence might become both a lament and somehow, by God's grace, a song of praise.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Not lifting our voices."