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As the Church Worships So She Believes

BETH BOWERS

Two years ago I sat in a community of teenagers, college students and church workers with tears running down my cheeks and hands lifted in the air. The speaker for the evening had finished his message, and in closing he played a worship song. The words of the song playing with intense emotion over the sound system were as follows:

Draw me close to You
Never let me go
I lay it all down again
To hear You say that I'm Your friend
You are my desire
No one else will do
'Cause nothing else can take Your place
To feel the warmth of Your embrace
Help me find the way
Bring me back to You

You're all I want
You're all I've ever needed
You're all I want
Help me know You are near²³

A few months previous to this moment, my husband and I experienced a miscarriage. God provided an enormous amount of love and support from our community of friends and family during that difficult time, and we experienced healing. I knew immediately that I wanted to begin trying to have a baby again. What was happening in my heart during that song was immense. Attempting to describe an experience with God is similar to describing the beauty of a sunset. Sometimes words do not provide adequate description. Nevertheless, in that moment I realized that I needed God to be my one desire. I wanted *God* to be all I could ever want or need. I wanted to desire God more than I desired a baby. The song—not only the lyrics, but the music and the environment in which it was sung took me to a place of worship, confession and brokenness that may not have been possible by any other means.

Looking back on that experience reinforces for me just how important music is to the church as she attempts to experience relationship with God and between the members of the community of faith. In that moment my experience was prayerful and individual, but experiences vary while worshipping in song. Some songs prompt individual praise or prayer. Some are anthems of communal praise and petition. Some encourage

23. Lyrics courtesy of "Draw Me Close," Metrolyrics.com, http://www.metrolyrics.com/lyrics/116963/Katinas/Draw_Me_Close (accessed September 13, 2007).

the church into right teaching and doctrine. Some provoke feelings of fear or frustration. All songs contain theology—some of which may be better left unsung.

My background and current affiliation is with the Church of Christ, and throughout my twenty-seven years I have experienced a vast array of worship songs, styles and traditions. Some of our hymnody has remained consistent; some has disappeared; much is new, and much will fade away in the future. Why does the church sing what she sings? How does the church determine what she sings? What should the church sing? I will explore these questions by briefly addressing the areas of hymnody as theology and the history of hymnody in Churches of Christ.

AS THE CHURCH SINGS, SO SHE BELIEVES

“Lex orandi, lex credendi” is a mantra popular among liturgical scholars and theologians. This Latin expression roughly translates as “the law of prayer is the law of belief,” or in modern terms, “As the church worships, so she believes.” Our hymnody is a reflection of our theology. But perhaps it is even more than a reflection. S. T. Kimbrough Jr. states, “The hymns of the church *are* theology. They are theological statements: the church’s lyrical, theological commentaries on scripture, liturgy, faith, action, and hosts of other subjects which call the reader and singer to faith, life, and Christian practice.”²⁴ R. W. Dale succinctly asserts, “Let me write the hymns and the music of the church, and I care very little who writes the theology.”²⁵ With Dale and Kimbrough’s comments in mind, I suggest that we can rightly say, “As the church sings, so she believes.”

Moreover, C. Randall Bradley maintains, “We need to be aware that worship also precedes theological reflection and indeed is what I would call ‘active theology.’ Active theology focuses on the actual experiences of common people who live out their Christian walk in the struggles of daily life.”²⁶ When the church worships in song, she is in fact actively proclaiming her theology in that moment, yet she also carries the theology with her daily as she lives in ordinary existence. A word put to music is a genius way for the church to teach her members a theology they can know “by heart.” I may not be able to recite the message of last Sunday’s sermon as I am washing the dishes, but I can and do certainly remember and recite the closing song of the worship service: *“Behold he comes, riding on the clouds . . . shining like the sun, at the trumpet’s call . . .”* Again, this reiterates the importance of careful reflection about our hymnody. As Robin Leaver says:

The fact that there is so much shoddy hymnody in the churches shows that we think superficially about the words and music of our hymns, and we rarely give their theology a second thought. Yet, for the people of our congregations, theology is largely formed by the hymns they sing. We cannot be good pastors if we ignore the theology of the hymns our people sing. We have to be concerned with the theology of hymns.²⁷

Hymnody is an essential portion of the worship and liturgy of most Catholic, Protestant and independent churches. For most Catholic and mainline churches that make use of a lectionary, the assumption would be that much forethought goes into the selection of hymns. I would suggest that for independent churches that do not depend on prescribed liturgy, much could be said about the sometimes haphazard selection of hymns without attention to the theology which they convey. If only for that reason, it is vital to take a close look at what we proclaim to God and each other when we sing what we sing. Sometimes I look though the hymnal sitting in the pew and wonder if the church really believes what some of her beloved hymns proclaim. And I

24. S. T. Kimbrough Jr., “Hymns Are Theology,” *Theology Today* 42, no. 1 (1985): 59.

25. R. W. Dale, *Nine Lectures on Preaching Delivered at Yale* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1952), 271.

26. C. Randall Bradley, “Congregational Song as Shaper of Theology: A Contemporary Assessment,” *Review and Expositor* 100, no. 3 (2003): 357.

27. Robin A. Leaver, “Renewal in Hymnody” *Lutheran Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (1992): 367.

question whether some of the songs with dubious theology inform our faith more than our faith informs our song. It is for this reason that I take a critical look at our hymnody. If what we sing is what we believe, it is essential that our faith inform our song. What, then, shall we sing?

WHAT SHALL WE SING?

Perhaps the first question that begs asking is: Why do we sing? Or, what is the purpose of our worship in song? In the Church of Christ heritage, one might say that we sing to praise God and to admonish one another. While that sounds simple enough, there is much to unpack in the phrase “admonish one another.” For some, that may simply mean to encourage each other in our praise to God. For others, it may mean to reinforce correct teaching and doctrine. And while I think the ideal is intended to be a balance, for good or ill, much of the music I grew up singing, and even more so the music my parents grew up singing, tended to focus on admonition—specifically reinforcing correct doctrine—than on praise to God.

This theological position comes from Paul’s Letter to the Colossian church and is one of the few references to song available in the writings of the New Testament. The King James Version of Colossians 3.16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” This was the version most readily available to the public during the formative years of the Restoration Movement, and continued to be the version of choice until rather recently in our heritage. However, a closer reading of the Greek is more accurately interpreted in the NRSV of the same text which reads, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” Rather than the KJV reading of “admonishing one another in psalms . . . ,” we would be better informed with the reading of the NRSV, “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms . . . to God,” which fits well contextually as Paul encourages the Colossian church to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is,” and to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father” (Col 3.1 and 3.17, NRSV). I am not suggesting that teaching and admonishing one another in right doctrine is unimportant—in fact this is a significant theme in Colossians. Above all else, the most important aspect of our worship in song is that the focus remains on God. Bradley states, “Beyond the discussion of belief and prayer, worship must always focus on God, and worshippers must always seek a unity of life, worship, and belief. As we pray that God will be visible in our lives that others may see God there, we also desire that our worship will be centered on God’s ultimate truth so that God will be the focus of all worship.”²⁸ In addition to the focus remaining on God, there are additional ways to determine what we should sing. Bradley asserts:

Like great poetry, great songs contain great thoughts, and great thoughts inspire deeper living. Intentional form and well-crafted metaphors can move worship to a new level of understanding the essence of God . . . Since a text sung in worship has the potential to be re-sung many times, should we not champion rich theologically packed texts written in beautiful poetic verse?²⁹

We should stand for nothing less than excellence in church music. Maureen Jais-Mick suggests that the standard for worship music is two-fold. First, the music must be worthy of praise to God; and, second, the music must be relevant to the community which sings it.³⁰ The second part of Jais-Mick’s criteria is open for a wide variety of interpretation, but I think that the heart of what she is trying to convey is what I have been saying thus far: the song conveys the theology of the community. And ideally, it is sound theology that has withstood the test of time.

28. Bradley, “Congregational Song,” 358.

29. Bradley, “Congregational Song,” 359–360.

30. Maureen Jais-Mick, “All Good Music is the Lord’s,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 16, no. 3 (1989): 196.

This is an important conversation the church needs to have. If the mantra, “As the church sings, so she believes” is true, perhaps we have some work to do in this area. The words of S. T. Kimbrough seem a fitting period on this brief examination of hymnody as theology:

As the church addresses what it shall sing in the present and future, it must be attentive to the spirituality that gives birth to song. If the hymns/songs one sings are shallow, there is a strong possibility that the spirituality from which they emerge is shallow, and the spirituality they spawn will likely be the same.³¹

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HYMNODY IN CHURCHES OF CHRIST

“Liturgy needs both a history and a future.”³² There is comfort in standing together with brothers and sisters in Christ on a Sunday and singing an old hymn—a hymn that has been sung by Christians for hundreds of years. There is a solidarity that comes from knowing that I am a part of a movement larger than myself, my immediate church body, and even my twenty-first century world. There is also great joy in learning and incorporating new songs—songs that reflect praise, prayer and confession in fresh and exciting ways; songs that the Christian community at large is singing each week. If it is theologically rich and poetically lovely, we should not care whether a song is two years old or two hundred years old. Embracing and learning from the past does not mean that we neglect the future. It is important to look at where we have come from in order to see where we are. Like Jais-Mick says, we need both a history and a future in our worship.

One of Alexander Campbell’s many contributions to the Restoration Movement was the hymnal which he compiled and edited. Campbell felt strongly that there was not an acceptable hymnal available for use in the church, so he decided to compile and edit his own. Campbell had high expectations of a hymnal, which he believed were met when the first edition of his hymnal was published in 1828; the last was published in 1865 with forty-nine editions in between.³³ With the exception of one edition, his book was entitled “Songs, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs.”³⁴ Campbell’s definition of an acceptable song meant that it fell into one of three categories: “They are, as we before defined them, recitations of past favors—of past dispensations—poetic narratives of the past. These are psalms. Or they are songs of direct praise, called hymns; or they are songs expressive of our own views, feelings, and emotions on all spiritual things.”³⁵ Additionally, in his first article on psalmody in the *Millennial Harbinger* he states, “Permit me, I also say, to dispense the psalmody of a community, and I care not who dictates its creeds, or writes out its catechisms.”³⁶ This point of view betrays not only the importance Campbell placed on church music, but also his conviction that hymnody ought to reflect proper theology.³⁷

After Campbell there were a few noteworthy hymnal publications, but the first work that gained a major following was Elmer Leon Jorgenson’s *Great Songs of the Church*, published in 1921.³⁸ McCann notes, “In the judgment of many, Jorgenson’s success lay in the fact that his hymnal reconnected the

31. S.T. Kimbrough Jr., “Lyrical Theology: Theology in Hymns,” *Theology Today* 63, no. 1 (2006): 24.

32. Jais-Mick, “All Good Music,” 198.

33. Enos Dowling, “The Alexander Campbell Hymn Book,” *Restoration Quarterly* 30, no. 2/3 (1988): 146–156.

34. Dowling, “Hymn Book,” 146.

35. Alexander Campbell, “Christian Psalmody—No III,” *Millennial Harbinger: Third Series* 1, no. 7 (1844), 25–26.

36. Campbell, “Psalmody,” 10.

37. It is interesting that Campbell insisted on “one hymnal” with a unifying creed, even though the ideal for each church body was that it was to be autonomous and creed-free.

38. Forrest M. McCann, “Time is Filled with Swift Transition: Changes in Worship Music in Churches of Christ,” *Restoration Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1997), 198. It should be noted, as well, that a major transition took place in 1906; the non-instrumental church officially separated from the larger body of Restoration churches. McCann notes that when this happened, Churches of Christ also inadvertently separated themselves from mainstream church hymnody in the United States. Surely this has had great effect upon the church’s hymnody, particularly in the decades a generation or two removed from the split. As the church became more exclusive, so did her music.

Churches of Christ with the great historic tradition of hymns and spiritual songs, especially the great hymns of the ages past.”³⁹ In the foreword to *Great Songs of the Church Number Two*, McCann states, “Excellence alone has been the principle of inclusion. The standards followed were truth and soundness, first of all; then strength and clearness, poetic beauty and lyric quality—the music wedded to the words and fit to wing them to the heart.”⁴⁰ This widely popular book was the hymnal used at the church I grew up in until the early nineties.

During this time period, several other hymnals became popular, giving churches a variety from which to choose. The song selections contained in each book are as varied as the editors who compiled them. They are each, it seems, in their own right, a reflection of the overriding doctrine and theology of their respective editors.

CURRENT TRENDS

“We are, in my judgment, rearing a generation of future church leaders who will be unaware of the great historic hymns of the ages and who, therefore, will not care about such. If this evaluation is correct, we may one day find ourselves again completely out of the mainstream of Christian song.”⁴¹ This is an interesting observation. I cannot say that I agree with McCann’s evaluation, but I resonate with the fear which it reflects. It seems that trends over the last thirty years in the Church of Christ have shifted from gospel songs and traditional hymns to what are commonly referred to as “praise” songs. I think this a poor name for what I would simply call modern hymns, for it implies that these and these alone offer praise to God. However, I see an emerging trend in Churches of Christ. Among worship leaders of my generation, there seems to be a renewal in older traditional hymns. We may not sing these from the pages of a hymnal, but we sing “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” written in 1758 by Robert Robinson, with as much excitement and fervor as we sing “How Great is Our God,” written in 2004 by Chris Tomlin. I think we are seeing the value in good, solid, theologically and poetically rich music as a whole—regardless of age or classification. We seem to have begun the process of true solidarity with the Christian community at large—the universal church of the past and the present. This is a distinct change in our traditionally exclusive mindset. I hope this is, indeed, the trend that will continue as the church grows and matures in her faith.

CONCLUSION

I would suggest that first and foremost the task of each congregation’s church leadership is to critically evaluate the songs that the church sings. Do we sing a song because we have always sung it, or do we sing it because it is a proclamation of what we believe about God? Is our priority praise and prayer to God, or do we want to teach and admonish one another—or both? I suggest that the purpose of our worship is to ultimately give glory and praise to God. In doing so, God receives honor, and we are encouraged in a deeper, more intentional relationship with our Creator. Additionally, songs of prayer and repentance take worshippers to a place of experiencing the ultimate glory and holiness of God, which also prompt a deeper relationship. Some may decide that a different approach is valid. Regardless, our ultimate goal should be reflected in the songs we sing. We sing songs each week, sometimes blindly and complacently. I would suggest that the more intentional we are about our hymnody, the more intentional we will become when we stand together each Sunday morning and lift our voices to the Lord.

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39. Ibid., 198.

40. E. L. Jorgenson, ed., *Great Songs of the Church Number Two* (Abilene: Great Songs Press, 1974), foreword.

41. McCann, “Time is Filled with Swift Transition,” 201.