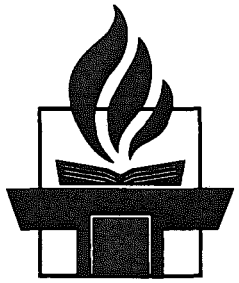
Reformation & Revival



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We should not ordain young men as preachers, unless they have been well exercised in music.

Martin Luther

Music is a noble gift of God, next to theology.

Martin Luther

What did the Holy Spirit do when He saw that the human race was not led easily to virtue, and that due to our penchant for pleasure we gave little heed to an upright life? He mixed sweetness of melody with doctrine so that inadvertently we would absorb the benefit of the words through gentleness and ease of hearing, just as clever physicians frequently smear the cup with honey when giving the fastidious some rather bitter medicine to drink.

Basil the Great

The medium is the message.

Marshall McLuhan

That David led dancing in the sight of God is no excuse for the Christian faithful to sit in the theater, for he did not distort his limbs in obscene gestures while dancing to a tale of Grecian lust.

Novatian

In Search of a Good Hymn

James Correnti

Hymns permeate the life of the Christian, and almost all Christians have hymns they consider favorites. But how does a Christian properly discern which hymns are best?

Most Christians agree that the fullest New Testament texts to focus our attention on music are two companion texts found in Ephesians and Colossians.

We're told in Ephesians 5:19 that the first glorious byproduct of being filled with the Spirit is "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." Even more complete is Colossians 3:16: "Let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." While the contexts are general, referring to all of our Christian living, particularly as we come in contact with one another, the texts certainly give us helpful direction for our music as we gather as congregations to worship the Lord.

What I want you to notice most of all is the centrality of God's Word throughout the Colossians text. While it speaks specifically about psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, it does not begin with music. It begins with the Word.

The opening phrase, "the Word of Christ," is used only here in the entire New Testament. This speaks about the Word which has a particular reference to Christ, coming from the very hand of Christ (through the inspired apostles). And this Word is to "richly dwell within you"—perhaps best illustrated by analogy to other New Testament images: indwelling sin (Rom. 7:17), indwelling Spirit (Rom. 8:11), and God indwelling His temple, His people (2 Cor. 6:16). This speaks of permanent presence and pervasive influence.

This Word of Christ richly dwelling within us has certain practical outworkings. It says, "with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another." We show forth wisdom when this Word of God, going beyond mere knowledge, has made such

an impression upon us that now we are able to put it to skillful use. In what ways would that happen? It says, "with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another."

With wisdom we may use the Word of Christ to explain, encourage, give special insight to someone, or to correct or confront. Each of these words and phrases has to do with the Word and its functions.

This provides the setting for "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

What does this have to do with evaluating our church music? I hope you can see it has everything to do with it. So much fruitless discussion, so much unnecessary grief and division, come when we do not see the Word as the central feature of all music in the church. Speaking not only as a pastor but as a musician, I urge you to begin by not considering music—begin by considering the text!

A hymn is not music which happens to have words. Rather, a hymn is a text which is filled with the Word, and which is appropriately and effectively wed to music.

So what makes the best hymn text? According to Ephesians and Colossians, the answer would be those hymns that have the richest concentration of the Word of Christ. They may fall into three categories:(1) Hymns that have Scripture quotations; (2) Hymns that have scripture allusions; (3) Hymns that have accurate scriptural formulations of doctrine and experience.

Scripture Quotations

What richer concentration of the Word of God can there be than directly singing the Scripture—Psalms and Scripture songs? There are some Christians who have even taken the position that "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" *all* refer to the book of Psalms, and therefore our worship singing must be exclusively the Psalms. While most Christians would not accept that interpretation, we nevertheless see at least the

first word as referring to the Psalms! On what basis, therefore, do we justify virtually excluding the Psalms from our New Testament worship?

It does not help that there are only a few Psalm settings available in the standard hymnals—usually Psalm 23 and Psalm 100. But metrical settings of all the Psalms are available, notably from the Reformed tradition.

Another more recent aid in the singing of God's Word has been the creation of songs of praise which are actually settings of the Word of God. There is a growing body of beautiful songs that have been written in the last twenty years featuring New Testament as well as Old Testament texts. In addition to the special place they can have in our worship, they also supply one of the easiest ways to memorize Scripture.

We greatly need to reconsider our times of worship so that they include a real infusion of the singing of Scripture, through the use of both Psalters and Scripture songbooks. We dare not neglect such a rich treasury when the Scripture commands the singing of Psalms.

Scripture Allusions

There are some songs in our hymnal that, while not simply quoting Scripture, are nevertheless filled with clear allusions to Scripture. One excellent example is "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." While it was not Charles Wesley's purpose to simply quote Scripture, notice how many of the phrases clearly relate to Scripture: "Glory to the newborn King, Peace on earth, God and sinners reconciled" (Luke 2:14); "Late in time" (Gal. 4:4); "Offspring of the Virgin's womb, Jesus our Emanuel" (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23); "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see" (Phil. 2:6); "Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6); "Son of Righteousness, risen with healing in His wings" (Mal. 4:2); "Mild He lays His glory by" (Phil. 2:6); "Born that man no more may die, Born to give them second birth" (John 3:16,3).

By the way, if you have concern about whether angels are ever said to sing in Scripture, it should be noted that the first line was an editorial change from Wesley's original line, "Hark, how all the welkin (heaven) rings."

Let's contrast what we've seen with another hymn: "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." First, note that there are almost no scriptural allusions here. Aside from the reference to Babel at the end of stanza two, the only one is "Peace on earth, good will to men." While this is actually a Scripture quotation, that is certainly one of the most misused Scriptures. (When your insurance company puts it on its generic Christmas mailing to Christians, Jews and atheists, what does it mean?)

But more important is how much has been added to the Scripture. Read the passage in Luke 2 and compare the barrage of poetic romanticism: Midnight clear? Angels bending? Harps of gold? World in solemn stillness lay? Cloven skies? Peaceful wings? Peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling? Age of gold?

As a final surprise, search for a reference to Jesus Christ in the standard version. (A later version carries a mention of "Prince of Peace" in the final stanza.) What we have is a Christmas carol which contains no mention of the birth of Christ! It's a hopeful ode to angels and peace, written by Edmond Sears, a Unitarian.

Have we looked closely enough to notice that? Is there any way these two hymns can be regarded on the same level? Won't the child of God whose heart is indwelt richly by the Word of Christ be drawn to the former over the latter, either instinctively or consciously?

Scriptural Formulations

Another category of useful songs for the people of God are those which contain accurate scriptural formulations of doctrine and experience. For our example here, consider "Rock of Ages." As you scan the text, there are only a few allusions to

Scripture. But this hymn is filled with good solid doctrine, and it speaks wonderfully of a believer's experience. Images of a rock, cleft, for a hiding place, water and blood from Christ's side, the double cure from sin's guilt and power—all point to good experiential theology. Can salvation and justification be better stated than, "Not the labors of my hand can fulfill Thy law's demand," and "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling"?

Then, in light of Satan's attempts to confuse us, shifting our focus from faith's grasping Christ to the quality of our grasping, we read, "Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow, All for sin could not alone; Thou must save, and Thou alone."

Finally, we are reminded that after our life is fully lived for Christ, our approach to God will be identical to the moment of conversion—hidden in Christ. This is as profound as it is simple.

Conclusion

I urge, in conclusion, that all believers consider a good hymnal as a devotional companion. When the hymnal tells you "Jesus Shall Reign" is from Psalm 72, or "O Worship the King" is from Psalm 104, explore them with an open Bible. How many Scripture references can you find, for example, in "The Light of the World Is Jesus"? What is the theological flow (or the sermon outline!) in "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"?

I urge pastors to further consider this question: Are the hymns you choose for a service of worship an afterthought or, worse yet, a negation of what you are preaching? Even if you are tentative about your musical abilities, you certainly must have the ability to analyze a text! Having invested many hours in the preparation of a message, surely you can give another hour to intelligent and prayerful selection of hymns and songs for congregational worship. Why dilute the clear words of a carefully crafted sermon by the sentimental texts of carelessly

chosen hymns? Begin mastering the resources of your hymnal, and you will have a wealth of reinforcement for your sermons.

Author

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