

Give the Winds

A

Mighty Voice

Our Worship in Song

By
Stan Mitchell

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Dedication

To Mom. Whose song was interrupted briefly as I wrote this book. I hear there is another alto joining the angel throng, however! She is yet another reason why I long to sing “the songs of Zion” (Psalm 137:3) one day.

Preface

A couple of years ago I was asked to lead a song or two at some church function. One of the songs I chose was “Precious Memories.” An elderly lady in the congregation burst into tears and left the room. Naturally I sought her out afterwards to see if she was all right.

She assured me that she was. But — and you might have guessed this — the song we sang was her late husband’s favorite, and she had been reminded vividly of her loss.

Singing is an emotional subject. When hymnbooks leave out “Mom’s favorite song,” or when someone proclaims that certain songs “should not be sung,” these are fighting words! Songs evoke memories — good ones and bad ones. We all know a song that someone led in our childhood so many times that we simply grew weary of it.

Sadly, churches have divided over songs, the kind that are chosen, or the way they are sung. That’s because our songs convey a great deal of meaning, and have a powerful impact on the human heart.

I am writing this book because I love these people who call themselves the churches of Christ. I want our worship in song to be our strength, not our point of division. I want our worship in song to be a source of inspiration, an uplifting time. I want us to think of the words in some of those rich, evocative songs that are our heritage.

My agenda is not to defend “old songs” at all cost, or to introduce and sing exclusively “new songs.” It seems to me that thoughtful church leaders should have much better ways to evaluate a song than by the relative recentness of its writing!

I write this book out of my background as both preacher and song leader. I have led songs ever since I can remember, standing

in front of my father and waving my hand in what I thought might be the way I had seen him do it many times. By the time I was 12, I was the congregation's main song leader.

Now that I preach every Sunday (something I have done for 25 years, now), I still find every excuse to lead a song. Sometimes I will even interrupt my sermon and ask the congregation to stand and sing a song that goes perfectly with the message. I love to sing! I love to learn new songs, and I love to sing old ones, too. I am anxious that our songs make us stronger, and not be a source of division and hurt.

So as a Gospel preacher, the resident theologian in my congregation, so to speak, I have sought to search the scriptures for clues to the songs of scripture, and to discern, if I can, what they say about our worship in song. I have also taken the time to examine our rich heritage in hymns, pausing every now and then to reflect on the lyrics of a song. What I hope to do is teach God's word by way of song.

How To Use This Book

As you glance through this study, you will notice that songs are interspersed throughout the comments. My suggestion is that the teacher make use of a song leader to sing the songs under consideration to illustrate the point being made. If the teacher is a song leader himself, of course, this will be automatic. In the interest of time, it is probably best to sing the first and last verses of these songs. This will make the class period both a time of teaching and a workshop on singing. There are usually far more songs than you can sing in a class, so choose the ones either that you know best, or that you feel illustrate the point best.

Teaching by Song

As I said, songs are emotional, with the potential to raise our

spirits to the heights, or to crush the feelings of a dear brother or sister in Christ. I will make some assertions in this book. Some will be convictions derived, I believe, from scripture. Even though they are true, I trust I will have spoken “*the truth in love*” (Ephesians 4:15). Please do me the favor of considering those teachings, and those scriptures, for the issues are of eternal consequence.

There are times when I have spoken, not Bible truth, but opinion. I do so, as I said, both as a preacher and as a song leader. These views have been won by observation, mistakes I have made, and prayer. Especially in these cases, please know that I express these views out of love for the people of God, with malice toward none.

I am proud of what the churches of Christ have done over the last two hundred years or so by way of song. We have become renowned for our singing. Generally speaking, I would recommend our singing over any religious fellowship on earth. Our singing, our songwriters, and our hymnbooks are better. The fellowship that has insisted that we sing *a cappella* has done so faithfully, beautifully, and wondrously. May we do so till eternity. And when we do enter heaven, may we join that mighty chorus, “*thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand upon ten thousand*” (Revelation 5:11). May I have the privilege, just once, in heaven to lead that chorus myself!

Publisher's Statement

Who likes music? I do, and I hope you do to. Did you know that the most beautiful music in the world is that of the blending of human voices? And what kind of music does the Lord like? The same! That is why we sing. We want to offer the Lord the very best we have — our hearts and our voices blended together in joyful harmony! Next, comes consideration for the songs that we sing. We want them to be beautifully worded, and most of all, scriptural. When all of these factors are combined, with a group of Christians singing an inspiring song, in spirit and in truth, then God is truly worshipped, and all who sing and hear are edified.

Stan Mitchell has written a beautiful book. He introduces us to numerous song writers and tells us something about them and the songs they wrote — songs that we use every week in our worship. Stan's purpose is to analyze the value of the messages, regardless of whether or not the writers were members of the Lord's church. In this process, he discusses early hymn writers and also some of the writers of today. He acquaints us with American song writers, including writers of the church. He talks about old songs and new songs. He reminds us of the purpose of singing, the need for the proper attitude and understanding among the ones doing the singing, and the need for awareness of the ones — both God and fellow-worshippers — to whom the singing is directed. This book will help us all to be better singers, to enjoy singing more, and to sing in such a way that will make worship more meaningful.

You will want to read and share this book with your friends. Congregations are encouraged to use it in their classes. With this kind of emphasis to help us, all of us can do a better job with our singing, and God will be glorified.

J.C. Choate
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Chapter 1

Let the Redeemed of the Lord Say So!

869* (111)** “Come We That Love the Lord”

“Martin Luther,” one Jesuit priest complained bitterly, “has murdered (that is, influenced) more souls with his songs than with his writings and sermons.”

Martin Luther, of course, is more famous for launching the Protestant Reformation, but he was also responsible for reintroducing congregational singing. “The Devil flees from the sound of music almost as much as from the word of God,” he once declared. I love the thought of his “Infernal Eminence” trembling like a leaf at the sound of a congregation raising anthems to God as one people.

Every time we sing “There Is a God, He Is Alive” in triumph, he whimpers. When we proclaim “Victory in Jesus”, he shudders. The words “Jesus Saves! Jesus Saves!” reduce him to a babbling mess. When we whisper, “Christ, We Do All Adore Thee,” this demented demon weeps!

Satan knows that there is little he can do when God’s people unite in song, raise their voices in harmony of music and union of thought to warn, teach, and praise. If he can, he will convince us not to sing. He will tell us that only those with good voices should sing out with vigor. To others he will say, “Those are new songs, (or old songs, or slow songs, or fast songs). And you don’t like new songs.”

Scare Satan silly by singing this Sunday with all your heart!

*“O give thanks to the Lord for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. **Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south**”* (Psalm 107:1-3, NRSV).

Speaking to One Another

Hymns Teach

When we sing, who is the beneficiary? Who do we help by our worship in song? Make no mistake, worship should be offered to God, and must be offered on his terms, and his terms alone. But though worship is offered to God, it is intended to benefit humans. When we sing, we speak to *each other*. There is a conversation going on, and I don't mean the little kids huddled together discussing the logistics of their hide and seek game to follow worship! This is a spiritual conversation, a Bible-based conversation, where Biblical truths are taught. Notice how Paul puts it:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in 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 the Lord” (Colossians 3:16).

“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:19).

“So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind. I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind” (1 Corinthians 14:15).

It is possible to sing a song, hit every note perfectly, and not worship one whit; it is also possible to sing a song, miss every note, and worship God with every word we sing. The reason? Because the essential element in any Christian hymn is not the notes, but the words! What do the words say? What do they teach? At their most basic level, they should teach God's word.

Our Songs Teach of God's Great Acts

113 (237) “His Grace Reaches Me”

The refrain in this song — “his grace reaches me” — is given substance by the *teaching* that lies behind the *praise*.

“Deeper than the ocean, and wider than the sea,
Is the grace of the savior, for sinners like me.”

Was the author, Jewell Gleason, thinking of passages such as this one? *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”* (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Or perhaps the following: *“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have the power together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and deep is the love of Christ...”* (Ephesians 3:18).

There are two great dangers for the Christian. He might take his own sin lightly. If he does, he will arrogantly behave as if he is sinless. The second and equal danger is to take God’s grace lightly. If he does this, he will lack application and thankfulness toward God, and this will result in a lifestyle that lacks dedication and commitment. “His Grace Reaches Me” goes directly to the heart of scripture’s message:

“It (that is, his grace) was offered at Calvary for everyone,
Greatest of treasures, and it’s mine today,
Though my sins were as scarlet, he has washed them away.”

The songwriter must certainly have thought of the following passage when she wrote those words. *“Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool”* (Isaiah 1:18).

We are fond of songs that speak of the glory of nature, and I am all for attributing the glory of creation to the power of the creator, but the most powerful reason to praise God must, absolutely, be for his grace and mercy on the cross!

76 (226) “How Great Thou Art”

This song, which is well known as a hymn of praise (loved and sung over and over again in the seventies until we were tired of it!), is now coming back because it is a sound and majestic offer of praise to God. We all love the first two verses that teach of God's creation, its beauty and majesty:

“When through the woods, and forest glades I wander,
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down, from lofty mountain grandeur,
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze,
Then sings my soul...”

There is something about these thoughts that strike the modern soul just right, perhaps because so many of us live in soulless cities, and would love to view the wonders of creation more often than we do! It's also Biblical, for the Psalmist often offers praise to God on the basis of creation:

“The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge” (Psalm 19:1,2).

But “How Great Thou Art” does more than talk of rocks and trees. Verses three and four go back to the heart of the Biblical message:

“And when I think that God his son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in;
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin;
Then sings my soul...”

But it doesn't end there. The song goes on to proclaim the certainty of Christ's Second Coming:

“When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation”
(That is, when he will claim all things as his own)
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow, in humble adoration
And there proclaim, my God, how great thou art!
Then sings my soul...”

The greatest way to exalt God is to humble ourselves! So this song not only praises God, it teaches us three reasons to praise him:
Because of the glory of his creation (verses 1,2)
Because of his death on our behalf (verse 3)
Because of his second coming (verse 4)

Here is a song that is choc full of Biblical teaching, and if we can understand its message, teach it to our children, our visitors in the worship assemblies, and put its message on our hearts, it will, without question, allow the “word of Christ” to dwell in us “richly”.

A song of praise, though undoubtedly addressed in admiration to God, is also the occasion for teaching man. Israel sang of God’s mighty arm leading them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. She sang of God’s act of greatness at creation, at the Red Sea, at Jericho and so on. Christians, in turn, sing of Christ, his coming to earth, his life as a model for us to follow, his atoning work at the cross, his burial and his resurrection. All of these themes, though addressed to God in praise, *are also opportunities to teach of his great acts for generations to come in the church.*

Our Songs Teach of Our Responsibility to Each Other

Many songs are songs of exhortation. Paul says that we “teach and admonish” one another through song. Some songs urge us to “love” each other, or to “Yield Not to Temptation”. So these songs teach us how to live.

719 (37) “Angry Words” (“Love One Another”)

Angry words, O let them never
From the tongue, unbridled slip;
May the heart’s best impulse ever
Check them e’er they soil the lip.”

The word “unbridled” certainly makes us think of James’ great passage on the use of the tongue: “*When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal around*” (James 3:3).

The chorus of the song, of course, is taken directly out of scripture too: “*A new command I give you; love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another*” (John 13:34,35). Notice how songs “preach” (teach, exhort, encourage) just as a sermon would preach. This is precisely what our hymns are supposed to do!

624 (571) “Seeking the Lost”

“*What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?*” (Matthew 18:12).

This song echoes the theme of Christ’s willingness to leave ninety-nine sheep and search for one individual lost in the “hills”.

“Seeking the lost, yes, kindly entreating,
Wanderers on the mountain astray;
‘Come unto me,’ his message repeating,
Words of the Master, speaking today.”

Several of our songs, such as “Ring Out the Message” and “Send the Light” urge us to reach the lost with the Gospel, surely one of our greatest responsibilities.

Our Songs Teach of Our Responsibility Toward God

This kind of song may take a variety of forms. Sometimes we address each other; at other times we will address God, undertaking a commitment to be more faithful to him, to “surrender all”, perhaps. Once we become Christians we might remind ourselves that there should be “no turning back”. In either case, we are teaching, for new Christians need to be taught that the call to be a child of God is a call of absolute dedication, and nothing less.

663 (724) “We Give Thee But Thine Own”

“We give thee but thine own, what e’er that gift may be
All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee.”

The deeply Biblical doctrine of stewardship is taught in these verses, the concept that all that we have is merely on loan from God, and an accounting will be made for the way we use these gifts.

664 (612) “Take My Life and Let It Be”

“Take my life, and let it be, consecrated, Lord, to thee.”

“Consecrated,” according to Webster’s Dictionary, is “to set apart as holy, make or declare as sacred; to devote entirely; dedicate.” Here is a good old-fashioned concept. When we give ourselves to the Lord, we are to offer ourselves fully in his service. Notice that in each successive verse the worshipper offers a particular aspect of his life to the Lord:

(Verse 2) “Take my hands and my feet.”

(Verse 3) “Take my voice and let me sing.”

(Verse 4) “Take my silver and my gold.” Also my “intellect”.

(Verse 5) “Take my love.”

In fact, verse five ends with a climactic offer of our entire beings:

“Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At thy feet its treasures store;
Take myself and I will be,
Ever, only, all for thee.”

“*Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength’*” (Mark 12:29).

Now you might be concerned about the difference between the hymns we sing and the Bible. After all, the Bible is the inspired word of God; the songs we sing are written by humans. That is precisely why we should pay such close attention to the words of the songs we sing. We should care that the words of those songs are words of substance and words of truth. In a sense, the song leader’s selection of songs is as important as the preacher’s selection of scriptures, for these songs *do*, or at least they *should*, teach *something*. Sometimes a song may teach false doctrine. At other times a song may not teach much of anything at all. One theologian declared that American Protestantism was “success-oriented, self-indulgent, sentimental...*3,000 miles wide and an inch deep*” (J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, page 22). Some of the songs we sing similarly are a thousand miles wide and an inch deep. But at their best, when hymns do what the Lord intended them to do, they inspire, exhort, and allow the word to “dwell” in us “richly”.

Some Practical Suggestions

626 (93) “Christ for the World We Sing”

a.) Buy a hymnbook for your own use at home. (No, don’t remove it from the rack at your church auditorium!)

b.) Take some time during your “Quiet Time” to read the lyrics of a song.

c.) Ask yourself, “Does this song refer to, or quote directly from, a scripture?” If so, look that reference up in a concordance,

and write it in the margin of your hymnbook beside the words the song quotes.

d.) Is there a word you don't understand? "Here I raise my Ebenezer", or "night with ebon pinion", perhaps. Well, throw your hands up in the air and surrender any attempt to understand the song! Obviously a song that requires just a few minutes of thought or research is simply not worth the trouble! (Conversely, you could look those words up in a dictionary, and enrich your appreciation for what the song says.)

e.) Purchase tapes of a good Christian university chorus. Listen to these uplifting songs for a change, and give the Country and Western a rest for a while!

f.) Don't adopt an attitude of "It's good enough for the folks we live with." Refuse to be satisfied with your worship in song. Learn new songs. Learn to read music. Go to a singing school. Adopt an attitude that if it is offered to the Lord, then the very best is what I plan to offer!

As a congregation there are several things you can do. You can train your young men to lead songs, and train young people to sing in parts. Organize a monthly singing time when you can work on your singing. Encourage your preacher to emphasize the subject of our worship in song from time to time. Merely by doing so, he will have communicated the importance of our singing. Lessons on worship, the theology of hymns, or even a lesson which correlates the lyrics of a thoughtful song with the scriptures from which the lyrics are drawn would be helpful.

Hymns Must Come From the Heart

615 (676) "There's Within My Heart a Melody"

Paul's instruction to "*sing and make music in your heart to the Lord*" (Ephesians 5:19) is one that has provided comfort to many a musically-challenged singer! Some church members sound as beautiful as angels when they sing; others sound more like a frog

on a lily pad. A church member recently told me he was going to bring an organ to church the next Sunday. Knowing me to be a pretty typical gospel preacher, he waited for my reaction, no doubt hoping I would show an appropriate degree of shock and dismay. Then he added, “I’m going to bring my heart! That’s an organ, isn’t it?” Of course he was absolutely correct.

When we come to worship God in song, that particular organ needs to be plugged in! Our hearts had better be “in” it. It is important to remind ourselves that if we don’t sing from the bottom of our hearts on earth, then we shall never sing in heaven! We should sing from our hearts because our children need to see that this is very, very important to us. We should sing from our hearts because our zeal will encourage weary and discouraged fellow Christians. We need to sing from our hearts so that our visitors, our guests to worship, will know that we take our worship of God very seriously indeed. But the greatest reason we need to sing from our hearts is because God demands that we do so!

859 (839) “When All of God’s Singers Get Home”

*“O give thanks to the Lord for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. **Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south**” (Psalm 107:1-3, NRSV).*

While our worship in song can be improved with attention to music, posture, following the song leader, and so on, I am convinced that at the heart of good singing is the heart of the singer. Are you redeemed? Have you been forgiven? Are you saved by the blood of the lamb? *Then say so!*

Redeemed Christians will have no trouble singing of their redemption. Forgiven Christians will have no problem singing of their forgiveness. Heaven-bound singers will have no trouble singing of heaven! Christians, loved by God, will have no problem singing of God’s love. I am convinced that the secret to good

singing lies in the heart. If your heart is full of his love and his mercy, then let the redeemed of the Lord say so!

*** “Songs of Faith and Praise”**

**** “Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. Why does Satan “hate” our hymn singing?
2. If it is true that we “speak to one another” in song, what kinds of messages should we convey to each other, and how?
3. Compile and discuss a list of subjects for which we should praise God.
4. In some songs we express an undertaking to God. Look up some of these songs, and discuss how the lyrics help us to make a deeper commitment to him.
5. Explore some ways in which your singing could become more meaningful.
6. What role can the “heart” play in this process, and how can you develop the use of your heart in song?

Chapter 2

Then Sings My Soul

One bright Sunday morning, we were walking in the shade of some beautiful *Acacia Abyssinicas*, the flat-topped trees most pictures show in tourist brochures of Africa. We planned to worship under one of those trees in the Zimbabwean bush with about sixty Shona tribesmen. With me was a friend from Texas. He stooped down and picked up the distinctive seed from underneath the trees, and asked: “I wonder if this acacia seed will grow in Abilene, Texas?”

“I see no reason why not,” I replied.

So he took some seeds to the United States, and planted them in the back yard of his west Texas home. The next time I saw him — it was in the US — he mentioned the fact that the acacia seeds had not germinated. Frankly, I was puzzled. When I returned to Zimbabwe, I told my father-in-law, a man who possesses a great deal of knowledge about the African bush.

He had the answer right away. “Tell your Texas friend to put the seeds in a mild acid, such as vinegar, overnight, and the seeds will germinate.”

I passed the instructions onto Texas...and, you guessed it. Today on the plains of west Texas there are several prime examples of *Acacia Abyssinica* growing strong and healthy. How did my knowledgeable relative know this would work? I asked him again.

“Oh, that’s easy,” he told me. “When elephants move through a stand of acacias and eat the seeds, the gastronomic juices in their stomachs have a mild acid, comparable to household vinegar. The acid eats away the outer shell, activating the seed, and when it is deposited on the ground, it’s ready to germinate.”

Such a simple, every day solution, and such a marvelous example of God’s creation, incomparable, and intricate in its design!

The God who cares for the lilies of the field and the birds of the air (Matthew 6:26-29), was also caring for elephants and acacia trees in Africa!

The Heavens Declare

Of course the subject of God's creation is mentioned many times in the Bible, but it was also sung about. The ancient Israelites were impressed with the power and beauty of creation, and their songs reflected their admiration of a God whose great power could make such a universe. Perhaps it was on a hillside outside Bethlehem that David wrote the words to the nineteenth Psalm:

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1).

There was always a degree of mystery in creation for ancient peoples. Perhaps *they* lacked our cold, scientific view of the universe. We assume, somewhat arrogantly, that sooner or later we will unlock all the mysteries of life! Perhaps what *we* lack, in turn, is the deep humility before our maker that they possessed. As creatures, we should sing often of the power of our creator!

For the purposes of this lesson, the English reader should use one of the more modern translations of the Bible such as the NIV. They typically render Hebrew poetic language in verse form, indicating that it has the ingredients to be put to music. The Psalms, which, in essence, was the Israelites' hymnbook, typifies this, but many other Old Testament books will have passages written out in verse form, too.

"Where were you," the Lord demanded of Job, *"when I laid the earth's foundations...while the morning stars sang together, and the angels shouted for joy?"* (Job 38:4-7).

At creation, because man did not yet exist, it was the "stars" and "angels" who witnessed the wonders God wrought, and sang about it on our behalf. The background of this song is the suffering of Job. Job's friends had concluded that he must have done something

sinful, for in their view, only sinners suffered. Job insisted that whatever he had done, he hadn't deserved suffering on *this* scale! At the end of the book of Job, God intervened with a prolonged speech in chapters 38,39, which put in poetic form a matchless description of God's power in creation, and our woeful lack of knowledge. Using an overwhelming series of questions that no human could answer, God demolished any human pretence at being his equal. The effect of this song is to leave no doubt whatsoever of the gulf between God the creator, and man, his creature.

Many Psalms, especially, speak of God's creation:

“The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
the world and all who live in it;
for he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters.”

(Psalm 24:1,2)

See also such passages as Psalms 33:6-9; 95:1-7; 102:25-27 and 148.

Our modern hymnbooks also have a rich heritage of songs that pronounce God as creator.

3* (200)** **“Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah”**

992 (78) **“Can You Count the Stars”**

To properly appreciate this song, I suspect it would be necessary to take a child outside at night, and gaze at the stars. Take enough time to be overwhelmed by their sheer number, their vastness, and your relative smallness.

The author of this children's song begins with a thought drawn from God's directive to Abraham: “*Look at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them.*’ Then he said to him, ‘*So shall your offspring be*’” (Genesis 15:5). Moving from the impossibility of being able to number the stars, Johann Hey, turned to Jesus' reassurance in Luke 12:6,7: “*Are not five sparrows sold for*

two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

So in his second verse, Hey entwines these thoughts together with the comforting words:

“Can you count the birds that warble
in the sunshine all the day?
Can you count the little fishes,
that in sparkling waters play?
God the Lord, their number knoweth,
for each one his care he showeth:
Shall he not remember thee?
Shall he not remember thee?”

6 (16) “All Creatures of Our God and King”

85 (24) “All Things Bright and Beautiful”

67 (157) “For the Beauty of the Earth”

76 (226) “How Great Thou Art”

202 (362) “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee”

Henry van Dyke (1852-1933), who was a preacher, US Ambassador to Holland and professor at Princeton University, was apparently inspired by the sight of the beautiful Berkshire Hills in Massachusetts to write the lyrics to “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee.” One of his finest lines, in the first verse, depicts our “hearts” unfolding “like flowers” before the sun. It was he who insisted that this grand expression of joy to the Lord be sung to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the “Ode to Joy”.

(398) “Let Us With a Gladsome Mind”

Ingratitude is, I believe, much more serious than a matter of bad manners. While it is certainly bad manners not to say “please” and “thank you”, whether these sentiments are expressed to parents or

God, the underlying problem is one of attitude. This is especially true of ingratitude toward God. To fail to thank the Lord is an indication of a great spiritual sickness indeed!

John Milton (1608-1674), is best known for his classic writings, “Paradise Lost”, and “Paradise Regained”, written astonishingly when he was blind. From about the age of 47 till his death, he wrote these, his two greatest works, mostly from memory. “Let Us With a Gladsome Mind”, however, was written at the tender age of 15.

Milton drew his thoughts from Psalm 136, the antiphonal psalm that dramatically repeats the refrain, “his steadfast love endures forever.”

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
For his steadfast love endures forever”
(Psalm 136:1, NRSV).

It’s easy to imagine the Israelite congregation repeating this refrain again and again as the song leader enumerates one great blessing after another, rising to a shout of triumph for a love that will not allow God’s people to slip from the realm of his blessing.

Aaron Wesley (A. W.) Dicus, 1888-1978

(416) “Lord, I Believe”

23 (523) “Our God He Is Alive”

A.W. Dicus was born in Festus, Missouri, but grew up in Swayzee, Indiana. He was baptized in 1908. At his baptism, he made a vow: “If the Lord will allow me to get an education,” he promised, “I will use it in his service.” He was something of a Renaissance man, a scientist, a professor, a Gospel preacher, and a songwriter. He even invented the automobile turn signal! He obtained his BA and MA in the physical sciences, and had done all

the course work for a Ph.D. at the University of Indiana when the depression hit, and he had to leave school.

He was offered a job at Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville, TN as head of the Physics department. During World War II he did some work on nuclear studies. Later in life, he became Academic Dean of Florida Christian College. He wrote 25 songs, the most well known of which is “Our God, He Is Alive.”

873 (666) “The Spacious Firmament”

991 (669) “This Is My Father’s World”

Maltbie Babcock (1858-1901) a minister in Syracuse, New York, was also known as an outdoorsman and athlete. He was well over six feet tall, broad-shouldered and muscular, and as such was able to earn the respect of young men, apt as they sometimes are to see Christianity as a life-style designed only for women and children.

Babcock loved to walk outside of town and look over nearby Lake Ontario, and was often heard to say, “I’m going out to see my Father’s world.” This song, however, is about more than the beauty of nature. It is a mature study of God’s justice and his ultimate control of all things. The song reaches a climax in the last verse with the words:

“This is my father’s world:

Why should my heart be sad?

The Lord is King! Let the heavens ring!

God reigns, let the earth be glad!”

(703) “Thou Whose Almighty Word”

78 “God Still Lives”

214 “Have You Seen Jesus My Lord?”

(Isaiah 40:28)

(Isaiah 45:12)

(Isaiah 48:13)

In a way, ancient Israelites held an advantage over us. Living in a rural and agrarian society meant that they had more occasions than we to walk out into the night and observe the stars, or to view a sunset and reflect on God's creation. Perhaps we should take the time to do just that — to walk out on a mountainside from time to time, to see the wonders of what God has made, and to sing "How Great Thou Art".

On the other hand, these songs are meaningful to us in a way that they might not have been in ancient times. The challenges of godless Darwinism, the mocking words of portions of the scientific and popular community force us to reexamine our convictions. Did God create the heavens and the earth? Is there reason enough to believe? There certainly is (though that would be the subject of another book!). Upon finding the many reasons to believe, our next impulse should be what the stars and angels once did, namely, to sing our convictions to an unbelieving world!

Pilgrims and Wanderers

When Israel stepped onto dry land east of the Red Sea, it was a seminal moment in her history. It was the Israelite's Fourth of July and Thanksgiving all rolled into one, a political, economic and spiritual Independence Day. The first thing they did was to sing (Exodus 15:1-21). What the cross is to Christians, the Exodus was to Israel. The Exodus was their defining moment, the moment in history when they were delivered from the bondage of slavery. This is a parallel to the moment that defines who we are as Christians, when we were set free from sin through the power of the cross. Not to have songs of the Exodus, for the Israelites, was as unthinkable as for Christians not to have songs of the cross.

So with the waters of the sea returning to their place, and the desert spread before them, Moses and his people raised their voices and sang. In Exodus 15:1-10, they sang both of their predicament, and of Egypt's presumption. The description uses some pret-

ty active verbs. Pharaoh's chariots did not merely sink in the sea, God "*hurled them into the sea*" (verse 4). The enemy was not merely defeated, God "*shattered the enemy*" (verse 6). The wind did not merely blow the waters over the charioteers' heads, it was instead "*the blast of (God's) nostrils*" (verse 8) that did them in. Egypt's presumption is recounted in verse 9, where her soldiers declare their plans to "*overtake*" Israel, and to "*gorge*" themselves on her spoils.

In verses 11-16, the Israelite singers arrive at an inescapable conclusion; God is incomparable! "*Who among the gods is like you, O Lord?*" is an oft repeated and rhetorical question in the Old Testament (Isaiah 40:18). We might respect or even admire someone else, but God is incomparable, and him we worship.

In verses 17,18 Moses declares that the Lord's assistance does not end with his rescue at the sea. He promised them a land, and security. This land, the song declares, is a "mountain" of "inheritance, a place for (God's) dwelling." He would bring them all the way to their destination.

This World Is Not My Home

A large number of our songs today take up the theme of Israel's deliverance from slavery and the Promised Land. Employing the Biblical theme of our pilgrim wanderings, these songs teach the needed truths of our impermanence on this earth, and our eternal destiny.

The analogies are not hard to find. Instead of economic slavery, the Christian struggles against slavery to sin (John 8:34; Romans 6:16). Instead of forty years in the wilderness, we face life here on earth (Hebrews 11:13), and instead of a Promised Land, we look forward to heaven. Some of our most beloved songs take up this theme.

537* (247) "Here we Are But Straying Pilgrims"**

759 (570) "Shall We Gather at the River"

747 (581) “Sing on, Ye Joyful Pilgrims”

(690) “There’s a Land Beyond the River”

889 (509,510) “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks”

Samuel Stennett (1727-1795), was born in Exeter, England in 1727, the son of a Baptist preacher. He grew up in London, where his father preached for the Baptist church on Little Wild Street. At age 21, Samuel began to assist his father, and took over the pulpit when his father died in 1758. He preached in the same congregation for the next 37 years. Stennett wrote 35 hymns, the most famous of which were “Majestic Sweetness Sits Enthroned” and “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks”.

867 (694) “To Canaan’s Land”

844, 390 (193,194) “Guide Me, Oh Thou Great Jehovah”

William Williams (1717-1791), as a young man, intended to leave his native Wales to become a doctor. His plans were changed when he heard the preaching of fellow Welshman, Howell Harris, and decided to preach instead. He served two congregations in England for a while, but felt the pull to return to Wales. When he did, it was as a traveling preacher, negotiating the rugged countryside on horseback.

He wrote 55 songs, mostly in the Welsh tongue. “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah” is one of the few translated into English. It was set to the “Rhondda” tune originally, which serves as a rousing Welsh national anthem. When sixty thousand Welsh fans link arms and sing at an international rugby match in Cardiff, this song is probably worth ten points to the home team before the game begins! There are few things as impressive as those Welsh voices raised in song!

Williams’ words compare the Christian life to the Israelites’ time in the wilderness, noting the “bread of heaven,” (manna), the “fiery pillar” and other images from that pilgrimage.

596 (332) “In the Desert of Sorrow and Sin”

889 (509) “I Am Bound for the Promised Land”

(306) “I’m a Pilgrim, and I’m a Stranger”

878 (602) “Sweet By and By”

957 (684) “This World Is Not My Home”

With unforgettable words such as: “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through,” Albert Brumley (1905-1977) draws his ideas largely from the New Testament development of this pilgrimage theme. The Hebrew writer is a good example. Such wanderers as Abraham and Isaac “*admitted*” that they were “*aliens and strangers on earth,*” and were “*longing for a better country, a heavenly one*” (Hebrews 11:13,16). Brumley’s immortal line, “and I can’t feel at home in this world anymore” is a rebuke of our tendency to become too quickly comfortable with our earthly surroundings.

As I write these words, an unspeakable tragedy is unfolding in Zimbabwe, the land of my growing up. A dictator is driving farmers off their land, robbing them of farms many have held for five generations. I probably know a hundred or so of these farmers by name. Many attended school with me. I could tell a score of heart-breaking stories. A farmer has a bond to the land in a way that city dwellers cannot imagine. One of those farmers, who obviously cannot be named, is a Christian. Recently he e-mailed me with these words: “Now I know what the song meant, ‘This world is not my home’.” It’s a great lesson to know, but oh how hard-earned a lesson it was for him and his family!

*** “Songs of Faith and Praise”**

**** “Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. The “*heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands*” (Psalm 19:1). What member of God’s creation is apt not to adequately proclaim God’s greatness, and why does he fail to do so?
2. As an exercise, work up a 15-minute devotional using songs and scriptures that express praise to God for the beauty of his creation.
3. Talk about some ways you can express gratitude to God, to your church leaders, to your friends and family.
4. List all of the parallels you can think of between the Israelites at the Exodus, and the Christian life today.
5. What factors make it hard for the Christian to accept that the world really is not our home?

Chapter 3

*O thou fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing thy praise
(Robert Robinson, 1758)*

Hear My Prayer, O Lord

The Hymnbook of the Israelites

Recently at my mother's bedside, our family did what it inevitably does in tough times. We sang a hymn. We were singing quietly, out of respect for the other patients in the hospital, when the door swung wide open. A nurse stood there, tears in her eyes. "We all want to hear you sing," she announced. Other nurses appeared. Patients who were able, walked, I.V. poles in their hands, to the end of the hallway where we were.

So we sang till our fears were replaced by faith, for the nurse was not the only one overcome. One nurse entered and began fiddling with the sheets.

"Join us," we urged her.

"Oh no," she said, "I can't sing a note. Besides, I probably don't know the songs you know. I come from another church."

"What church is that?" we inquired.

"I must admit I haven't gone for a long time," she explained, "but when I did, I went to the church of Christ."

We thought she might know the songs, after all.

I thought of the bleeding and beaten prisoners in Philippi, and how they replaced curses to the gods with praises to God, songs of vengeance with songs of victory. And, the writer remembers, "*the other prisoners were listening to them*" (Acts 16:25).

I'll bet they were! They were...a captive audience! I don't

know if Paul sang bass and Silas tenor, or whether their voices were in tune, but I know their hearts were! These preachers preached volumes by their singing.

And their jailer never forgot that night!

Oddly enough, in churches of Christ we have become ashamed of our *a cappella*, congregational singing. But I pray with all of my heart that churches of Christ will never lose their ability to sing. At picnics in the park, over a barbecue at the beach, in prison, hospital and in worship, our congregational singing is a comfort that goes beyond the notes and the music.

The words comfort and remind us of God's unfailing love. And let me tell you, it was more than the nurses and patients who were given strength that day in the hospital.

Those who sang were comforted, too.

The Book of Psalms is far more than a collection of poems; it was a part of Israelite worship. It was the "songbook" they used for corporate worship. How do we know this? Because the writers of the psalms frequently made reference to Israel's singing in the "house (or, "sanctuary") of the Lord."

"I rejoiced with those who said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord'.
(Psalm 122:1)

Why, one might ask, were they going to "the house of the Lord"? The answer should be obvious. They went there to worship together. Simply being allowed to worship like this was a privilege.

"But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house;
in reverence I will bow down toward your holy temple."
(Psalm 5:7)

The shepherd psalm ends with the comforting thought that we “*shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever*” (Psalm 23:6). A chastened David, for some reason alienated from Israel’s corporate worship, recalls wistfully the days when he was able to participate.

“These things I remember as I pour out my soul:
How I used to go with the multitude,
Leading the procession to the house of God,
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving, among the festive
throng.”

(Psalm 42:4)

How I wish that some of my brethren would view their times of corporate worship this way! Whereas David asked, “When can I worship with my brethren again,” we ask, “Do I have to go to Bible study Wednesday night?”

There are frequent references to the temple, Mount Zion, and various festivals held in Jerusalem, indicating that the psalms were intended for corporate Israelite worship. These references are usually generic. Rather than mentioning a specific worshipper (David, for instance), or a specific occasion, the psalms refer to “I” and “we”, and the carefully crafted poetic language is adaptable to many worship occasions. The various psalms are intended to convey the feelings of *any* worshipper in a given situation, whether it be celebration, sorrow, or one of the Israelites’ festivals. The poet interprets the soul of his people, expressing feelings they *have*, in words that they *do not have*. Yet when they see his words in a psalm, they say to themselves, “That’s what I felt! He put my thoughts into words!”

The title “Psalms” comes from the Greek word *psalmos*, which is the name given by the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Hebrew title is *mismor*, the word for “song”. The Rabbinic literature expands this by referring

to the book as *tehillim*, “Songs of Praise”. Although the Psalms are primarily songs that praise God, there is a variety of other themes too.

Like our modern songbooks, the Psalms consisted of old songs and new. They comprised songs that dated from the time of Moses (Psalm 90), to the period after the Babylonian exile. Imagine the heartbreak behind the words of this psalm:

“By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat and wept
When we remembered Zion.”

(Psalm 137:1)

Or the almost inexpressible joy in the words of this one:

“When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion,
We were like men who dreamed,
Our mouths were filled with laughter,
Our tongues with songs of joy.”

(Psalm 126:1)

The first and the last Psalms seem to have been put in place by design. Psalm 1 proclaims blessings on the person “*whose delight is in the law of the Lord,*” and who “*meditates on the law day and night*” (Psalm 1:2). Such a one, this Psalm declares, will prosper “*like a tree planted by streams of water*” (1:3). This introductory song, therefore, encourages us to sing the songs that follow as a means of teaching, and meditating on God’s law. The essence of a hymn is its ability to teach the singer about God, his will for us, and our responsibilities toward each other.

The collection ends dramatically with a doxology (Psalm 150), expressing praise for God “in the sanctuary”, “in the heavens”, and an eminently appropriate call for “everything that has breath” to “praise the Lord”.

Most of the Psalms have titles, some long, some short, that pertain either to the historical background of the song, or to some musical instruction. Although many scholars feel that these are not part of the original psalm, that they were placed later by a compiler or editor, it should be pointed out that the most ancient manuscripts contain these headings, so they are obviously very ancient, if not part of the original form.

There are indications that some Psalms were sung antiphonally, that is, with a singer who sang a line or lines to which the congregation responded. An example of this is found in Psalm 136 where a singer (or singers) enumerated God's blessings to Israel one by one, and the congregation responded resoundingly to each blessing with the words, "*For his steadfast love endures forever!*"

Jesus and the Psalms

Are the Psalms important to the Christian? The answer can be seen in the reverent way Jesus and the early church handled them. The early church claimed the Psalms as its own. Jesus was the fulfillment of many Psalms, in as sure a way as he fulfilled the great messianic prophecies of Isaiah and Joel.

It was Jesus who spoke the words to the lament of Psalm 22 (Matthew 27:46) on the cross. Once the king of Israel was known as the "son of God", but Jesus became supremely God's son (Psalm 8:4; Hebrews 2:6-10).

Jesus thought of the Psalms as more than liturgy; they were "scripture", and therefore inspired by God (Luke 22:42-47; Matthew 21:42). So when we sing this musical genre, we are singing songs that are inspired by the Spirit of God himself! Here is, indeed, a genre that must be emphasized in churches. More Psalms should be set to music, sung by congregations, and contemplated by Christians! As lyrics go, it would be hard to out-do those written by the Holy Spirit!

The Psalms are one of the three categories of songs which we

are commanded to sing — “*Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*” (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19).

By looking at the book of Psalms, we can determine some general categories of hymns.

1. **Psalms of Praise (e.g., Psalms 8, 29, 33, 104, 111, 113, 148)**

A psalm of praise would typically have three parts:

- a) It begins with an invitation to other worshipers to join in the song; a call to worship, if you will. Psalm 148:3 calls on the “sun, moon and stars” to join the psalmist in praise. Psalm 107:1,2 calls the “redeemed of the Lord” to “give thanks”. If *anyone* should be thanking God it ought to be “those he redeemed”! To fail to offer thanks in song would be the grossest kind of ingratitude. Psalm 100:1 begins with a universal invitation, given to *all the earth*.

“Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth,
Worship the Lord with gladness;
Come before him with joyful songs.”

(Psalm 100:1,2)

And Psalm 103:1 begins with the invitation to praise, although in this instance the invitation is neither to the nation of Israel, nor the other worshippers, but to the singer himself:

“Praise the Lord, O my soul,
Let all *my inmost being* praise his holy name.”

Even today the worshipper’s biggest challenge is to summon all the resources of his own heart, soul and mind to worship acceptably. Haven’t we all had to tell ourselves to concentrate: “Think about the words! Ignore that crying baby, the lady with the funny hat!”

Today such songs as “Come, Let Us All Unite to Sing”, “Come Share the Lord”, “Come, Ye That Love the Lord”, and “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come” bring out the same sense of a call to worship.

- b) The central part of the Psalm would explain the theological “why” of worship, and is therefore the teaching section. Why *should* we offer highest praise to God? The glory of the Psalms lies precisely in the way they explain with such eloquence the mighty acts of God, his holiness and majesty, and his compassion for his people.

What a thrill it is when God’s people are reminded of his glory, his absolute worthiness to be praised.

Whenever I hear a religious person urge me to “praise the Lord,” I want to ask, “Why?” Tell me the reasons for praising God, teach me why the Lord is worthy of praise.

When we tell our children, our visitors, and ourselves of God’s greatness by way of song, the call to worship will come naturally and spontaneously. The song we sing might tell of God’s mighty acts. “He created the universe!” “He saved Israel through the Red Sea!” By doing so, this psalm would be teaching valuable spiritual lessons. While it is important to urge others to *praise* God, it is also important to tell the congregation *why* we should praise him. Otherwise we are left with a rather limp and shallow plea to praise God without the concrete reminders as to why we should praise him.

The catch-phrase to watch for in this section, the one that triggers the “why we should be praising God” section is usually either “because”, “for”, or “who”.

“Praise the Lord, O my soul,
All my inmost being, praise his holy name.

Praise the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.”
(Psalm 103:1)

These words form the “call to worship”. Then follows the reason why we should worship:

“Who (our catchphrase, identifying him not only as “the Lord”,
but as “the Lord who does the great things that follow”)
forgives all your sins
And heals all your diseases.
Who redeems your life from the pit
And crowns you with love and compassion”
(Psalm 103:2)

The teaching section forms the heart of the psalm. There is good reason, excellent reason in fact, to praise God. A people who do not understand — who have not been taught — God’s wondrous ways will be a people who either find it hard to offer the praise he is due, or fail to praise him altogether. The way to avoid this tragedy is to teach God’s people, through song, the “why” of praising God.

c) The third section of these praise psalms is a conclusion, frequently renewing the call for all worshippers to join in praising God. Thus Psalm 103:22 concludes:

“Praise the Lord, all his works (of creation)
Everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the Lord, O my soul.”

2. Prayers Set to a Psalm (e.g., Psalms 6, 12, 13, 22, 31, 39, 44, 74, 79)

These Psalms are sometimes called “Laments”, but many have a much broader scope than simply to lament misfortune, as one might at a funeral. They also seek to “change the lamentable circumstances by petition” (Broyles, page 16). This form of song usually begins with what might be called the cosmic “why”.

“*How long,*” the Psalmist agonizes, “*must I wrestle with my thoughts, and every day have sorrow in my heart?*” (Psalm 13:2). What an apt way to put the human dilemma; we have all faced tragedy and had to do it, seemingly, without a word of explanation from the Lord.

Probably the best-known Psalm of lament begins, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Psalm 22:1). This song is made more poignant by the Lord’s use of its words on the cross (Matthew 27:46). For the thoughtful child of God, life is perplexing. Righteous people still suffer, even though it is our “Father’s world”; evil people appear to carry out their activities without hindrance. And where is God in all of this?

Next comes the confession of trust, where the speaker states something he knows to be true about God. So when he declares, “*But I trust in your unfailing love,*” (Psalm 13:5), he is confessing his undaunted faith in God’s goodness and character, in spite of the circumstances in which he finds himself. In other words, though his human eyes see dire circumstances, and there is only silence from God in his ears, the eyes of faith still trust in God’s character to act in these trying times. Similarly, Psalm 22, the archetypical psalm of Lament, turns to an expression of confidence in God’s goodness:

“Yet you are enthroned as the holy one;
you are the praise of Israel.
In you our fathers put their trust;

they trusted and you delivered them.
They cried to you, and were saved;
In you, they trusted and were not disappointed.”
(Psalm 22:3-5)

It is this appeal to history and precedent — namely that God has helped his people in the past — that draws out the courage in our present time of need. Did God help Moses, David and Paul in their times of need? Has he not always been the strength of his people? Then, the reasoning goes, surely he will again come to our rescue in our present distress, though we can hardly see how with our limited sight!

Next comes the “for” or “because” clause, where the writer explains the circumstances of his distress. Often the writer will express his difficulties in the light of God’s promises.

“Yet you are enthroned as the holy one,
You are the praise of Israel.”
(Psalm 22:3)

In other words, how could his condition be so desperate, if God is really so good and so powerful as is claimed?

The songs of Lament usually end with a declaration of God’s power and comfort. Hence the triumphant conclusion of faith.

“You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or disdained
The suffering of the afflicted one;
He has not hidden his face from him
But has listened to his cry for help.”
(Psalm 22:23,24)

In our hymnbooks, songs such as “This Is My Father’s World”, “Does Jesus Care?” and “Tempted and Tried” face similar issues as the psalms of Lament. The popularity of these songs is testimony to the fact that things haven’t changed much since David’s time. These questions, profound and deep, are put poetically so that we can bring these questions before God in song!

3. Royal Psalms (e.g., Psalms 2, 18, 20, 35, 40, 45)

There may have been several occasions that gave rise to royal psalms. Psalm 2 is a coronation psalm. Psalm 20 may have been used prior to a king’s going out to war, a prayer for safety and success. Psalm 45 is a royal wedding. All of these psalms are conscious of the king’s dual role, governing the people fairly, but ultimately answering to God. Psalm 110, a psalm that seems extremely important to the New Testament writers, depicts the king as God’s co-regent.

“The portrayal of the monarchy in the royal psalms is decidedly positive,” Broyles observes, “because it reflects the *prescribed* ideal to which the kings should aspire” rather than “the *described* realities found in the historical books of 1-2 Kings” (page 21).

This is where the psalms became relevant to the early church, which applied these ideal depictions of the king aptly to Jesus, the Messiah of prophecy. Such modern songs as “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”, “Joy to the World” and “Crown Him With Many Crowns” apply this ancient Biblical theme to Jesus.

4. Psalms of Penitence and Commitment (e.g., Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143)

The Old Testament is frequently and wrongly depicted as lacking in a “true” concept of God’s love and grace, which raises the question, where does one gain a “true” concept of grace? Surely from scripture!

The Psalmist frequently speaks of his failings, pleading for

God's mercy and re-invigoration. In our day, when the demand seems to be for songs and worship services that are relentlessly upbeat, the notion of a song expressing sorrow for sin seems out of place. Marva Dawn observes insightfully:

“The bombardment of hyped media impressions creates the need for worship to be similarly ‘upbeat’. There is no place for sorrowful hymns of repentance, mourning dirges for a crucified Savior, despairing cries for hope in the troubles of life, contemplative anthems that call for deeper thinking” (page 43).

Perhaps scripture's most beautiful confession of all is David's plea for mercy in Psalm 51. The title identifies these as David's prayer, expressed after Nathan's rebuke of the affair with Bathsheba. David's words follow a formula that most penitential psalms would take. He begins with an abject plea for mercy:

“Have mercy on me, O God,
According to your great compassion
Blot out my transgressions.”
(Psalm 51:1)

David's admission of guilt is thorough and absolute. There are no excuses given here!

“Against you, you only have I sinned
And done what is evil in your sight,
So that you are proved right when you speak
And justified when you judge.”
(Psalm 51:4)

While it is true that David's sin was not committed only against God — the unfortunate Uriah and the nation of Israel were harmed,

too — David understood that all sin, ultimately, is committed against God. If only he had understood what Joseph realized when Mrs. Potiphar attempted to seduce him! “*How then,*” the young Hebrew explained, “*can I do such an evil thing, and sin against God?*” (Genesis 39:9). But now a sadder, wiser David can see this, too.

First, David needs forgiveness. Next, he seeks restoration. “*Create in me a pure heart, O God,*” he pleads, “*and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me*” (Psalm 51:10,12).

The words of this psalm are powerful and evocative. Look at the verbs. David asks God to “create” in him a pure heart. “Create” is a verb that always has God as its subject in scripture! God creates, man *manufactures*. God made the original heart; now, David pleads for a recreated heart. Next David asks God to “renew a steadfast spirit within” him. “*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,*” David pleads, and “*grant me a willing spirit.*”

It is human, when we make a drastic mistake, to feel empty, beaten, and hollow. God’s mercy supplies not only forgiveness, but renewal to aid in our re-entry into a life of service and worship.

The measure of David’s penitence can be seen in his understanding of what is required of him. No mouthing of meaningless words will do! No mere ritual can suffice. “*You do not delight in sacrifice,*” David acknowledges, “*or else I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings*” (Psalm 51:16).

So does his declaration mean the end of ritual and formal worship? Hardly!

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
A broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.”
(Psalm 51:17)

Prior to Nathan’s rebuke, and David’s repentance, his actions had been anything but “broken and contrite”. His cover-up attempts, his murder of Uriah, his acquiring of Bathsheba for his wife as if nothing had happened — these were the actions of an arrogant man, of a man who obviously felt he was above the laws of God. But the words of this psalm show us a changed man, a man with the “broken and contrite heart” he describes.

David also undertakes to do some things. “*Then I will teach transgressors your ways,*” he promises, “*and sinners will turn back to you*” (51:13). Is it fitting, we might wonder, to allow a sinner like David to speak to other sinners? Dare we allow sinners to represent God to other sinners? The resounding answer to this question is that if we don’t allow sinners to speak to other sinners, exactly what kind of person will do the speaking?

Many of our “invitation songs” follow the magnificent style of these penitential psalms. Songs such as, “I Bring my Sins to Thee”, and “Just as I Am” bear words that David could well have sung.

5. Wisdom Psalms (e.g., Psalms 1, 32, 37, 49, 119)

These psalms are similar to much of the material found in Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the so-called “Wisdom” books. According to Craig Broyles, these psalms can be identified by three characteristics (page 21):

- a) An emphasis on teaching “skillful” or “wise” living, rather than addressing God directly. They teach or guide those who sing.
- b) The use of a wisdom formula, such as, “*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked...*” (Psalm 1:1). Numerical sayings or acrostics (such as Psalm 119) are also an indication of a wisdom psalm.
- c) The presence of wisdom themes, such as instructions for daily living, or a contrast between the actions of the wise and the foolish.

So, in the case of Psalm 1, the actions of the man who heeds the counsel of the wicked is in contrast to the one who “*delights in the law of the Lord*” (Psalm 1:2). While some hymns should certainly offer praise to God, others should teach God’s people how to live under this praiseworthy God’s rule. “Wisdom”, of course, refers to godly wisdom, a way of life that is directed and influenced by God’s guidance.

6. The Hallel Psalms (Psalms 103-118)

This group of psalms seems to have been grouped together deliberately, and are characterized by the use of the Hebrew exclamation, “Hallelujah” (“Praise Yahweh”) at the beginning of each.

Traditionally they were sung at the Passover feast, with Psalm 113,114 sung prior to the meal, and Psalm 115-118 following it (Matthew 26:30).

7. The Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120-136)

Can you imagine the rising emotions of devout Israelites making their way to one of the festivals in Jerusalem? Just think of their excitement as they saw the rugged escarpment upon which the city was built. And of the moment the first child cried out, “There are the city walls!” Imagine their heads lifted up, and their spirits, too, as they began to approach the city gates, and the sense of expectation as they entered the gates of Jerusalem and saw the temple on Mount Zion.

This group of psalms (120-136) seems to follow the progress of pilgrims approaching Jerusalem on a feast day. The “ascents”, then, would be a reference to the pilgrims’ ascent towards Jerusalem, which is physically higher than the surrounding countryside, and the temple itself, located on Mount Zion, and thus higher than the rest of the city. “*Who may ascend the hill of the Lord,*” the psalmist asks rhetorically, “*who may stand in his holy place?*” (Psalm 24:3). Psalm 122:4 notes that Jerusalem is the

place where “*the tribes go up...to praise the name of the Lord*”.

In this sense, the singers would be ascending both geographically and in their thoughts. Thus Psalm 121:1 proclaims:

“I will *lift up* my eyes to the hills —
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
The maker of heaven and earth.”

It is easy to see the pilgrims, heads lifted up to the hills surrounding Jerusalem, while trying to think “elevated” thoughts of God’s care and protection. I think that we need this moment in worship when our thoughts and hearts are elevated, for throughout the week our thinking is dragged down into the mire by our contemporaries, our televisions, and our own fallen state.

Thus Psalm 122:1,2 can express the joy of the moment when the people entered the great city:

“I rejoiced with those who said to me,
‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’
Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.”

Rising above the city itself would be Mount Zion, dominating the residential and business areas below it. It would be easy to think of the pilgrims walking towards Mount Zion, and considering its place in their faith:

“Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion,
which cannot be shaken, but endures forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
So the Lord surrounds his people
Both now, and forevermore.”

(Psalm 125:1,2)

As the temple itself came into clear view, they might think of the analogy between building a physical temple, and building a people of God:

“Unless the Lord builds the house,
Its builders labor in vain.
Unless the Lord watches over the city,
The watchmen stand guard in vain”
(Psalm 127:1)

As the pilgrims entered the temple precincts, they might have seen the various ones who served God in the temple — singers, priests and Levites — and they might have invited them to join in their own song:

“Praise the name of the Lord;
praise him, you servants of the Lord,
You who minister in the house of the Lord,
In the courts of the house of our God.”
(Psalm 134:1)

Finally the pilgrimage would reach a climax with the magnificent song of praise to which the worshippers would sing: “*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,*” and the pilgrims would begin that resounding refrain, “*for his love endures forever*” (Psalm 136:1).

Some of these Psalms, set to music, have made use of the KJV, so the language is at times archaic, but invariably beautiful and poetic.

215* (486) “O Lord, Our Lord”** (Psalm 8)

42 (857) “O Lord, Our Lord How Majestic Is Your Name”
(Psalm 8)

(151) “Flee as a Bird” (Psalm 11:1)
63 (866) “I Will Call Upon the Lord” (Psalm 18:3)
(590) “Surely Goodness and Mercy” (Psalm 23:6)
134 (642) “The Lord’s My Shepherd” (Psalm 23)
393 (641) “The Lord’s My Shepherd” (Crimond, Psalm 23)
126 (643) “The Lord My Shepherd Is” (Psalm 23)
794 (898) “Unto Thee, O Lord” (Psalm 25:1-7)
441 (987) “You Are My Hiding Place” (Psalm 32:7)
(862) “He Took Me Out of the Pit” (Psalm 40:2,3)
71 (843) “As the Deer” (Psalm 42:1-3)
896 (343) “Ivory Palaces” (Psalm 45:8)
31 (844) “Be Still and Know” (Psalm 46:10)
(901) “A Broken Spirit” (Psalm 51:7)
#(649) “The Rock That Is Higher than I” (Psalm 61:2)
92 (165) “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” (Psalm 87:3)
442 (868) “I Will Sing of the Mercies of the Lord” (Psalm 89:1)
851 (824) “I’ll Fly Away” (Psalm 90:10)
103 (949) “I Will Enter His Gates” (Psalm 100:4)
282 (488) “O, Praise the Lord” (Psalm 117)
(695, 891) “This Is the Day That the Lord Hath Made” (Psalm 118:24)
432 (253) “How Shall the Young Secure Their Hearts” (Psalm 119:9)
(477) “O, How Love I Thy Law” (Psalm 119:97)
137 (712) “Unto the Hills” (Psalm 121:1)
420 (569) “Search Me, O God” (Psalm 139:23,24)
3 (200) “Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah” (Psalm 148)
74 (531) “Praise the Lord” (Psalm 148)

Many of our greatest hymns today derive from the Psalms. This is no surprise, for the Psalms sustained the spiritual life of both the Israelites and the early Church. I have often wondered how the

psalms must have sounded when they were originally sung. Some writers have suggested that Israelite music amounted to a solemn chant, as if someone had been present with recording equipment, and knew this for sure. But listen to the words of the Psalms! Hear their exuberant and emotional sentiments! Remember the description of David, the Psalms' most prolific writer as the "*sweet psalmist of Israel*" (2 Samuel 23:1, NKJV). I cannot imagine that the Psalms' elevated words were sung to music that was a monotonous dirge!

More of the Psalms should be put to music today, for in this material we find the words of the original "Sacred Selections" to be sung by people of faith!

The significance of the Psalms, in a day when "wars" are being fought over worship and hymns, is that these divinely inspired songs give us the clearest and most extensive collection of hymns among God's people of ancient times, and of what a corpus of hymns should look like today. The form they take and the subjects they address should give us some insights into what God himself might consider as a worthy collection of songs. A study of the psalms as hymns can perhaps move us beyond the often divisive, always destructive, arguments over "what I like" to the more important question of what kinds of songs might nourish the people of God, and what might, most importantly of all, be worthy of God himself!

*** "Songs of Faith and Praise"**

**** "Praise for the Lord"**

Questions

1. Who benefits when we sing, and how?
2. Who is hurt when we fail to sing?
3. What do we learn from the fact that the Psalms was a collection that spanned many years and generations?
4. How can a song of praise offered to God also benefit the singers?
5. Compile (and sing!) a list of songs that are actually prayers set to music.
6. How can our songs lift our heads, our spirits and our thoughts?

Chapter 4

“On an appointed day, they...meet before daybreak and recite a hymn antiphonally as to a god” (Pliny the Younger, AD 112)

“And I Heard a New Song”

Hymns in the New Testament

I like to kid my song leaders about certain songs. Please, I beg them, don't lead “Troublesome Times Are Here” right before my sermon! What are you trying to say about my preaching? And don't pick “Revive Us Again” to follow it. (Incidentally, the latter isn't very appropriate for funerals, either). We have all heard about weddings where the congregation supposedly sang, “The Fight is On”, or, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, Forgive our Foolish Ways”.

We don't think deeply enough about the songs we sing. Mostly, we never get beyond saying, “I don't know anything about singing, *but I know what I like!*” Our worship, and our God deserve better than that!

Our songs are intended to teach. Speaking of hymns, Paul said that we are to “*let the word of Christ dwell in (us) richly as (we) teach and admonish one another*” in “*psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*” (Colossians 3:16).

An African preacher once told me that the African people learned more scripture through *song* than they did through *sermon*. He was not diminishing preaching at all, he was simply emphasizing the importance of songs, too. Our hymns, you see, are to be more than time-fillers between the Lord's Supper and the sermon!

Lyrics are the critical factor in hymns. Music without words is just music, sounds on a page, notes in the air. But place spiritual,

biblical, faith-building lyrics to that music, and it becomes something very, very special — a hymn!

Do the lyrics teach scripture? Are they true to God's will? I am not suggesting that we embark on a witch-hunt to find songs that are unscriptural, but to remind us that the purpose of a hymn is not to *entertain* but to *educate*! When we sing, "His Grace Reaches Me", we are teaching each other of God's mercy offered at the cross, the Gospel message expressed in rhyme and meter! When we urge each other not to use "Angry Words", we are teaching each other Biblically-based inter-personal behavior, drawn from scripture.

Here's a challenge. Get out a Bible and hymnbook, and design a song service based on a Biblical theme — the cross, our love for each other, or songs that declare our commitments made to Christ. Pick out some scriptures that fit the theme. When you've done that, you will have put more thought into hymns in a week than most Christians do in a lifetime!

Then you can sing, in truth, "O thou fount of every blessing, *tune my heart to sing thy praise!*"

Hymns in the New Testament

The earliest Christians were, of course, Jewish Christians, and it is no surprise that their worship was heavily influenced by synagogue worship. The New Testament writers quoted the Psalms frequently and it seems reasonable, therefore, that they viewed the Psalms, especially the Messianic ones, as their own.

As the first century went on, many hymns began to develop in order to counter false teaching, particularly the false teaching of the Gnostics. For this reason, the themes of early Christian hymns emphasized the unique position of Jesus Christ as Lord, crucified, risen and ruling at God's right hand. This was to counter the Gnostic teaching that Jesus was not divine. Early hymns also taught the need to live a holy life, one characterized by high ethical

and moral standards. This countered the Gnostic teaching that the body didn't matter, that only the spirit was important, and that therefore the body could be used in wanton lusts and immorality. What lies behind both of these impulses was the need to teach congregations by song. The major task of a hymn was to teach, whether it was to teach of God's great acts, or our responsibilities as Christians.

The Nativity Hymns

Three songs form a cluster surrounding the events of Christ's birth. The song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), traditionally known as the *Magnificat*, Zechariah's song (Luke 1:68-79), referred to as the *Benedictus*, and Simeon's song (Luke 2:28-32), known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, all names taken from the first phrase in the Latin translation of the songs.

The best known is Mary's *Magnificat*. Scholars, who specialize in speculating on the unprovable, have wondered if the early church composed this song, then put it in Mary's mouth, or if Luke himself composed it for the occasion. They pour over the words of the song in order to detect "Lukan" or "non-Lukan" phrases. I see no reason to think that Mary didn't sing the song, just as Luke records. What is so unbelievable about that? It seems logical to me that she was either inspired by the Spirit to sing those words, or that what she sang was a song already known to Mary and Elizabeth, but one that applied particularly to Mary's situation. We often do much the same thing when we sing "Be With Me, Lord", prior to facing some great danger or trial.

Mary begins with her own personal blessing, then widens her thoughts to that of her community. As in many of the Psalms, she declares that her "soul" and her "spirit" combine in offering glory to the Lord.

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

And my spirit has rejoiced in God my savior”
(Luke 1:46,47, NKJV)

This is, then, a praise song, but she will go from offering praise to teaching the reasons *why* she wishes to offer this praise. The familiar “because clause” begins in verse 48:

“*For* he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant”
(1:48)

“*For* the Mighty One has done great things for me” (1:49)
“His mercies extend to those who fear him...” (1:50)

And so on. Mary’s song offers praise to God because he is so praiseworthy. She teaches by highlighting his praiseworthy acts. Throughout history, she declares, he has always lifted up the underdog. Now Mary, too, is honored by being chosen to bear the Messiah. By such simple means as bearing a child, the world will be changed forever! Through her, broken, oppressed Israel in turn will be blessed.

The theme of this passage is borne out in such phrases as God’s “*mercy*” extending “*from generation to generation*” (1:50). Showing mercy to the ordinary person is God’s habitual way of dealing with humans! “*He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts*” (1:51) reminds us that those who oppose God do so from their hearts, evidence of a deep-seated and habitual arrogance. God, who alone can read the heart, perceives those thoughts, and knows them well.

When Mary sings of God performing “*mighty deeds with his arm,*” (1:51). She brings out a rich Old Testament allusion to God’s powerful acts in history, moving nations and freeing peoples. In the Old Testament the reference is usually made to God’s freeing Israel in the Exodus (Exodus 6:6; Acts 13:17).

The song ends with another of God’s great attributes, his abili-

ty to remember his promises. “*He has helped Israel,*” she sings, “*remembering to be merciful*” (1:54). In contrast to man’s chronic forgetfulness, God is true to his undertakings. As Joel Green puts it succinctly, “God remembers...and acts” (Green, page 105).

I remember when I was younger hearing the Russian Army Chorus sing songs. What an incomparable sound comes from the voices of several hundred men! There was always the hint of power and menace, for they represented a mighty army!

In Luke 2:13,14, the angels announced the arrival of Christ to a group of startled shepherds. “*A great company of the heavenly host*” burst forth in song to commemorate the occasion. The term “heavenly host” employs a military term for a detachment of soldiers (1 Kings 22:19; Psalm 148:2). Imagine the army of God, the “Lord of Hosts”, announcing the arrival of God’s son on earth! How frightening to those who lived in rebellion to God, how heartening to those who had hoped for his coming! And this was an army chorus far mightier than any merely human force! But this army choir was different. This mighty army announced peace! The Judean night air rang with the grand message, “*Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to men on whom his favor rests!*”

It is not necessary here to see universal election of some kind; it makes more sense to see that in sending Jesus to the earth to die — something which he was surely not obliged to do — God had bestowed his favor on all men. It seems to me likely that early Christians sang these songs, or songs very much like them, in order to teach the arrival of King Jesus to the earth.

A word on the “Christmas Carol” genre. We are often left with the impression that this collection of songs is made up of rather shallow jingles along the line of “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town”. Nothing could be more untrue. Some of the church’s most exalted language comes from these carols, and their message plumbs the very core of the Gospel message. Isaac Watts’ “Joy to the World” teaches more Gospel, and at a more profound level, than many ser-

mons these days. You will have to determine for yourself whether observing Christmas is appropriate for the Christian (read Romans 14:5,6), but whatever conclusion you reach, do not rob yourself of the magnificence and insight of these lyrics. Sing them in July, if you must, but avail yourself of their teaching!

995* (338)** **“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”**

1004 **“While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night”**

387 (622) **“Tell Me the Story of Jesus”**

1001 (202) **“Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”**

1002 **“Angels We Have Heard on High”** (*Glory in excelsis Deo* means “Glory to God in the Highest”.)

Hymns of the Apocalypse

John’s visions of Revelation are punctuated again and again with various characters bursting into song. In Revelation 4:8, we come across creatures whose sole purpose seems to be to extol the character of God as “holy”. Herein is a pretty good description of “worship”. Echoes of Isaiah 6:1-8, where Isaiah saw *“The Lord, high and exalted”*, abound.

In verses 10,11 we learn that the twenty-four elders *“lay their crowns before the throne...”* Often we hear people speak of the need to exalt God “to the highest place”. This is as it should be, but one great way to ensure that he possesses that exalted position is for us to humble ourselves. These elders take the sign of their greatest achievements and status — their crowns of victory — and in a mighty symbolic act, they lay these before the throne. Theirs is a delegated authority, and they return this authority to the one who gave it to them in the first place. In order to exalt God, one must humble oneself!

47 (238) **“Holy, Holy, Holy.”**

In their hymn of praise the elders proclaim: *“You are worthy, our Lord and God”* — in precisely the terminology that Caesar Domitian had presumptuously claimed for himself — *Dominus et*

Deus noster. The English word “worship” derives from the word “worth”. This is an excellent beginning point for our worship. Many people may be due our respect and honor, but who alone is worthy of our worship? Worship can be offered only to one who is worthy of it. The Psalmist said:

“Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory *due his name*;
bring an offering and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth.”
(Psalm 96:7-9)

So the elders proclaim God’s worthiness “*to receive (the) glory and (the) honor and (the) power.*” The definite article prior to each of these qualities, suggests that God alone is worthy of these expressions of praise.

Why is he worthy of such praise? “*For you created all things,*” they explain, “*and by your will they were created and have their being.*” Here, once again, is the “because clause” we have come to expect in Biblical hymns, the phrase that explains the “why” of worship.

Worship is far more than saying nice things about God; it is recognizing God for who he is, and for what he has done! God’s worthiness to be uniquely worshipped is the result of his unique action in creating the universe!

230 (782) “Worthy Art Thou!”

145,162 (19, 20) “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”

In Revelation 5:8 the twenty-four elders join the four creatures around the throne and, we are told, “*they sang a new song*”(Isaiah 42:10; Psalm 33:3; 40:3). What was new about it? Since time immemorial, faithful servants of God had sung his praises, but now

praises would in addition be offered to Jesus, the slain lamb. There are two Greek words for “new”, *neos* refers to new in time, and *kainos* to new in quality or nature, superior (Behm, TDNT, volume III page 447). It was a new song because it commemorated new mercies, new because it offered these mercies on the basis of a graceful, forgiving Lamb of God.

“*You are worthy,*” this chorus of twenty-eight begins solemnly, “*to take the scroll.*” No one else, “*in heaven or on earth or under the earth*” (5:3) had been worthy, so the lamb’s worthiness was unique.

As has become customary, we should note that there is a “because clause” here. Why is Jesus “*worthy to take the scroll*”? “*Because,*” they explain, “*you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God...*”

Thus this song addresses the Bible’s most essential theme, the death of Jesus. Is this a song of praise to Christ? Yes, without question! Is it also a teaching song, reminding the redeemed and proclaiming to the lost the Gospel message? Again, yes without question! This is what songs do: they teach.

But the four creatures and twenty-four elders are joined by other singers. “*Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand...in a loud voice they sang*” (5:11,12). How else would such a vast number of voices sing? “Thousands” — the Greek reads “myriads”, is the highest number known to the ancient Greeks. The heavenly host that sang was innumerable. Just as a vast crowd at a sports event might raise their voices for their favorite team, this numberless host of angels raise their voices in praise to Jesus. But we’re not done with the song.

“*Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth...singing,*” John recalls (5:13). One wants to ask, who is left? In a still wider antiphonal circle, every created being joins in the song, forming a magnificent crescendo of praise to God. What

we hear in worship sometimes is the voice of the feeble and the half hearted; what we ought to hear is the throng singing above us, and behind us, and on ahead of us! “Even if your assembly is ‘two or three...gathered together (Matthew 18:20)’,” remarks David L. Roper, “you are part of the most magnificent chorus in the universe” (Roper, page 238).

What would be the effect of this song, sung by this mighty throng, on John and his readers, surrounded as they were with such terrors and uncertainty? Three great effects come to mind:

a) Songs have a way of comforting the fearful, of stirring the soul to action.

b) The fact that God’s people, though few in number and strength, are joined by the hosts of creation will be encouraging. I remember preaching for a small church in the mountains of southern California. There were times when it was a little lonely, singing with a few voices, many old and thin. One morning a crowd of about sixty young people from a Christian university, on their way to a ski trip, stopped to worship with us. How we thrilled at their footsteps filling the building! How the song leader smiled when he announced his next song! How wonderful it was to be reminded that on the Lord’s day there are countless other people across the world offering praise to God!

c) The words of the songs themselves, teaching as they do of Christ’s redemptive act on the cross, and our consequent exaltation as a “kingdom” and “priests” — *the words themselves* would teach and admonish us, as the words of songs are supposed to do!

In Revelation 11:17,18 once again our formula holds true. The twenty-four elders throw themselves on their faces and announce God’s reign:

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
the one who is and who was.”

And why do they offer thanks to God? What follows is the “because clause”:

“Because you have taken your great power and begun to reign.”
(Revelation 12:18).

What a struggling, discouraged church needs to hear is that “God reigns”! What apathetic, half-hearted church members need to hear is that God rules the world, and demands our allegiance, too.

(57) “Awake and Sing the Song!”

258 (837) “The New Song”

578 (738) “We Will Glorify the King of Kings”

Hymns That Declare Christ’s True Nature

When the man in the street thinks of a cult, visions of Waco, Texas and Georgetown, Guyana come to mind. What causes a religious group to become a cult? Psychologists and social scientists will point to various degrees of mind control and manipulation, and I suspect that they are right. But several years ago I heard a “theological” explanation of a cult that I thought made a great deal of sense.

Look at the religious group in question, and ask yourself what they say about Jesus Christ. Their teaching regarding the savior must do two things; it must proclaim him as fully human, a man in every sense that we are, yet at the same time they must exalt him to the very highest place, as *God*. Any group whose teaching about Jesus is inadequate in these two areas is in danger of placing someone else at a higher plane than Jesus, and is therefore in danger of becoming a cult.

The nature and place of Jesus is the one absolute non-negotiable in Christianity! Gnosticism, the first great heresy to hit

Christianity, revolved around this question, and it very nearly destroyed the church.

Gnostics had taught that Jesus either did not truly become human, or that he was not truly God. Neither view of Christ was adequate for those who held him in highest esteem. For the Christian, he was both human and divine, subject to temptation yet victorious over it.

John begins his Gospel with a magnificent hymn to the uniqueness of Jesus (John 1:1-18). He begins obliquely, by referring to Jesus as “the Word”.

“In the beginning was the Word,
And the Word was with God,
And the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things were made;
Without him nothing was made
That has been made.”

(John 1:1-3)

Scholars debate whether the Prologue to John is a hymn or just exalted prose. It is probably impossible to say if it was actually a hymn, but it bears many of the characteristics of poetry in the Greek, and could conceivably be put to music.

John begins by teaching Jesus’ presence and activity at creation. He was eternal, and he was Creator! What theologians refer to as a “very high Christology”, we recognize as a proclamation of the essential divinity of Christ! How could a “Christian” cult find a leader, however charismatic, who was in any way comparable to Jesus?

John declines to identify the “Word” immediately, choosing rather to list the Word’s role in history. The song reaches a climax in verse 14, where it describes the incarnation, the moment when God became human:

“The word became flesh,
And made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory,
The glory of the One and Only,
Who came from the Father,
Full of grace and truth.”
(John 1:14)

John’s hymn ends with the Word identified:

“For the law was given through Moses;
Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
No one has ever seen God,
But God, the One and Only,
Who is at the Father’s side,
Has made him known.”
(John 1:17,18)

Imagine actors practicing for a play. The seats are dark and empty, the director and actors are reading their lines for the first time. The leading actor tries unsuccessfully to play his part. For some reason he is unable to feel instinctively the character’s emotions. His performance is dry and wooden. From the darkened seats, however, a man rises and says: “Allow me, for just a minute.”

The stranger proceeds to read the lines himself. It’s all there! He seems intuitively to understand the character’s feelings! How does he do it? Is he simply a great actor?

They ask him, “Sir, who are you, and how is it that you understood the character so well?”

He answers, “I wrote the play. That’s why I know how to play the character.”

In essence that is what Jesus does. If you can consider the Bible

the “play”, then Jesus takes center stage, and embodies the principles written in it, and shows us the way life should be lived!

The hymn that begins John’s Gospel is an excellent example of how a song teaches, shoring up the understanding of believers, and counteracting the falsehoods of the Gnostic teachers.

477 (447) “There Is a Place of Quiet Rest”

577 (984) “We Bow Down”

Most scholars also consider Paul’s anthem to Christ in Philippians 2:6-11 to be an early Christian hymn. “By printing these verses in poetical form,” Bruce explains, “the NIV reflects the widespread recognition that here we have an early Christian hymn in honor of Christ” (Bruce, page 68).

In the midst of an eminently practical exhortation, Paul inserts a hymn to Christ’s death and exaltation. The first four verses of Philippians, chapter 4, see Paul urging his readers to be united and selfless. He pleads with them to “*be like minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose*” (verse 2). “*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit,*” he begs, “*but in humility consider others better than yourselves.*”

To have politics and selfishness in a church — in Paul’s day or ours — is not unusual. But what Paul does next is startling. He quotes a song! The NIV helpfully alerts us to the fact that this is a song by placing verses 6-11 in poetic form. It’s as if Paul, the preacher, suddenly stopped his sermon and asked the song leader to sing a hymn that fits the message perfectly!

Why do we think this is a hymn? Two reasons, principally. The first is that the Greek lyrics are in metrical form. Why would someone go to the trouble to put the words in meter, rather than prose? The answer is, in all probability, to put those words to music. The second is that the lines seem to be written in parallel, mimicking the style of the Psalms. Thus, for instance, “*Being in very nature God*” in the first line is parallel with “*did not consider equality with God*

something to be grasped” in the second (2:6). “*Being made in human likeness*” is parallel to “*being found in appearance as a man*” (2:7,8).

So first, some preliminary observations about this hymn:

1. This is a hymn of highest praise to Jesus. Scholars speak approvingly of its “high Christology”, which is to say, its deeply respectful depiction of Jesus as God. But as we have already suggested, the song does more than praise Christ. It gives us *good reason* to praise Christ.
2. This hymn teaches the most central message of scripture, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). How this core message needs to be taught, again and again! How deeply impoverished our hymnology would be without those songs that tell of Christ’s incarnation, death, burial and resurrection!
3. This hymn goes from the theological (Christ’s death, burial and resurrection) to the practical. The Philippians were to “*let this mind*” be in them, as it was “*also in Christ Jesus*” (2:5, NKJV).

Scholars, who love to do this, speculate as to whether Paul wrote this song, or if some later writer inserted it here. It’s not hard for me to imagine that it was a song commonly sung by the early church, one that both Paul and the feuding, selfish Philippians knew well.

But oh, the effect of this beautiful song on Paul’s message! Here is a song that goes directly to the heart of the Christian message, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. It starts with Christ as God (2:6) being willing to strip himself of every divine prerogative (he “emptied himself”, 2:7 NRSV).

It describes his descent to earth as a time of self-sacrifice. “*He humbled himself*” (2:8). Jesus voluntarily humbled himself to this position of servant-hood, and with this truth Paul presses Jesus’ supreme example of self-renunciation on the Philippians.

He became human, and did so by submitting to everything which being human entails, even death. The song uses the word “death” twice, back to back:

“He became obedient to *death, death* on a cross!”

What an image this is! Here is God on a cross! The Creator dies at the hands of his creatures! This was the bottom rung on the ladder from the throne of God. Jesus has descended to the most despised death of all, that of the most despised criminal. That this one who was, in his very essence God, would die as a State criminal is proof of Christ’s willingness to go to any lengths to aid those he loves. Can the Philippians do less?

“How radically different is God’s view,” says Gordon Fee, “from the bland and shallow ‘beautiful people’ Western culture exhibits so well. Having abandoned God, our culture fawns on — and takes advice from — any and every celebrity, empty-headed as he or she might be, who appears on a television talk show” (page 98).

Follow *this* hero, the song seems to tell us, not the shallow, haughty heroes of our day. Follow *this* role model, not the “grasping”, selfishly ambitious corporate model. Have *this* “mind in you”, not the mind of the world. And the magic of this early church song is that it teaches these incomparable messages by using the central theme of scripture — the cross — to do it!

Think how perfect this song is in counteracting the various false teachings of the Gnostics. For those Gnostics who believed Jesus only seemed to come in the flesh (Docetic Gnostics), this song affirms that he was “*made in human likeness*” (2:7). Jesus’ likeness to men was “no mere phantom humanity” (A.T. Robertson, page 445). For those who believed that God’s Spirit joined Jesus at his baptism, and departed just prior to his death (Cerinthian Gnostics), there is the declaration that he “*became obedient to death, even death on the cross* (my emphasis)” (2:8).

Verse nine forms the crux of the song: *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place.”* After all, it was Jesus himself who declared, *“whoever humbles himself shall be exalted”* (Matthew 23:11).

“That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow” (2:10). Sometimes these days when a song mentions “standing” (“Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus”, or, “I Stand in Awe of You”), we make a big to-do about literally standing (missing, perhaps the metaphor implied). Wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing to sing this song, and at this point all the worshippers would spontaneously fall to their knees?

“In heaven and on earth and under the earth.” Rather like Psalm 148, where all creation is called upon to join the Psalmist in praise to God, the entirety of creation is depicted as one day, willingly or unwillingly, being compelled to acknowledge Jesus for who he is. While the early church, which confesses his name by faith, may be small, they will one day be joined by beings terrestrial and extraterrestrial, living and dead, to honor him as they ought. What an inspiring thought for those who sing this hymn!

“And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (2:11). This song no doubt says these words with half a glance at Roman Imperial rule, for in their day it was Caesar who was considered “Lord”, and his rule extended across the entire known world, an empire that enveloped all kinds of “tongues” and nations. The song, however, proclaims another “Lord”, one whose rule extends across the centuries, and covers languages yet to be spoken!

Don’t let the grandeur of this song obscure your view, however, from the reason the song is included in this passage by Paul in the first place. Paul wants to teach the Philippians a practical message about being *“one in spirit and purpose”*, *“doing nothing out of selfishness and vain conceit”*, and considering *“others better”* than themselves (2:3,4). He uses Christ’s death and vindication to teach the most practical of lessons in church polity!

185 (352) “Jesus, Thy Name I Love”

221 (876) “Jesus, Name Above All Names”

310 “At the Name of Jesus”

738 (611) “Take the Name of Jesus With You”

179 (858) “He Is Lord”

288 (137) “Fairest Lord Jesus”

Other early Christian hymns can be found in 1 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 1:1,2, Ephesians 5:14 and 2 Timothy 2:11-13. Mostly they emphasized the following things:

1. Christ’s lofty position in heaven, his pre-existence, his glory. The emphasis here is on how much he surrendered to secure salvation for mankind.
2. His saving work on earth. Here the emphasis is on his life which is our example, and his death, which reconciles us to God.
3. His victory over sin and the grave, his presence at God’s right hand.

In a word, these songs are songs of the Gospel, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

As Pliny complained to the Emperor Trajan, they sing to Jesus *as if he were a god!* And so he is!

* “Songs of Faith and Praise”

** “Praise for the Lord”

Questions

1. Have a look at several “Christmas Carols”, and evaluate the spiritual thoughts they express. Do they teach central Biblical messages, or are they shallow and trite?
2. What bearing do the words of Romans 14:5,6 have on the singing of “Christmas” carols, and the observance of “Christmas”? Can Christians observe “Thanksgiving”? The “4th of July”? Is there a difference?
3. Read Hebrews 12:18-22. In a small church where the singing is, let’s say, less than pleasing to the human ear, how do these verses help us to worship God as we should?
4. What are the consequences of a church failing to hold Jesus up to the very highest place?
5. In Philippians 2:1-11, how does Paul use the account of Jesus’ self-abasement to treat a problem in the Philippian church?

Chapter 5

Making Melody in the Heart

Our Worship in Song

A good friend recalls with wry humor the first time he worshipped with a congregation of the churches of Christ. He remembers their friendliness, and was impressed with the deeply Biblical content of the sermon. He appreciated the sincerity and simplicity of the prayers.

He was also impressed with the quality of the singing. So impressed was he, in fact, that he thought it was a pity they lacked a piano or organ to supplement the good singing. After worship he handed a ten-dollar bill to the astonished preacher, asking that the money be put in the “organ fund”. Of course he had a lot to learn about these strange people called the churches of Christ!

What I write below is intended as an explanation, expressed kindly and clearly, for our conviction that mechanical instruments are not authorized in Christian worship.

Argument from Silence

Imagine that you are driving down a road and encounter a “Stop” sign at an intersection. You are pressed for time, so you slow down and, checking to see that the road is clear, you roll through the intersection, then accelerate as you leave the area. Inevitably, you see the flashing lights of a police car, and when he comes to your window, he will say something like this:

“Sir, I observed you executing a ‘California roll’ through that intersection back there. Is there any reason why you did not come to a complete halt?”

To which you might reply: “But officer, the ‘Stop’ sign doesn’t specifically forbid my rolling through the intersection, does it?”

The policeman will probably respond with a rather solid “argument from silence”. “The sign,” he will insist, “instructs you to halt. It is silent on all the other possibilities. Therefore, you are not authorized to do anything but what the sign says.”

To be fair, the Bible is silent on many subjects. It does not mention hymnbooks (a silent “aid”), or “Devos” (a name given to a brief period of worship and devotion), buildings or church pews (shelter and furnishings for the comfort of the worshiper), or youth rallies (another type of gathering, in which worship takes place). So why do we have each of these aids, but not the musical instrument in worship? For the same reason as the “Stop” sign, by instructing us to stop, naturally prohibits rolling through an intersection. Because “singing” is specified in the New Testament scriptures as one of the elements or actions of worship, but playing an instrument is not included.

This is a line of reasoning that we take in everyday life. When our children are told to arrive at school at eight in the morning, the instruction includes eight and excludes nine o’clock! When we order a cup of coffee in a restaurant, that logically excludes a mug of hot chocolate, or a cup of tea! A command is inclusive, as well as exclusive. You cannot stop at an intersection, and roll through it at the same time! Your child is tardy if he arrives at nine when the stated time for school is eight. Your waitress got the order wrong when she brought you orange juice if you in fact ordered coffee! To follow one instruction means we have disregarded the other. When the New Testament instructs Christians to sing, it is both what the command includes (singing) and what it excludes (other options) that convinces us to sing *a cappella*.

Please do me the courtesy of reading each one of these New Testament passages, and observe the musical verb in each.

“When they had **sung** a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Matthew 26:30).

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and **singing**

hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

*“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, I will **sing** hymns to your name”* (Romans 15:9).

*“Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and **sing** praises to him, all you peoples”* (Romans 15:11).

*“So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind. I will **sing** with my spirit, but I will also **sing** with my mind”* (1 Corinthians 14:15).

*“Speak to one another with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs. **Sing** and make music in your hearts to the Lord”* (Ephesians 5:19).

*“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you **sing** psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in your hearts to God”* (Colossians 3:16).

*“I will declare my name to your brothers, in the presence of the congregation I will **sing** your praises”* (Hebrews 2:12).

*“Is any of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? He should **sing** songs of praise”* (James 5:13).

No Coincidence

I believe that the argument is accumulative. If the Holy Spirit had commanded us in one verse to sing, and one verse alone, we might conclude that this was a coincidence, and that he intended the instrument to accompany the voice in our hymn singing. But as we read each verse, and as we see the New Testament’s exclusive use of the verb “sing” for our worship in song, the evidence gathers momentum. This is no mere oversight. It was the Spirit’s intention that we *sing*, and not *play* our praise to God.

I am aware that there is other evidence for a *cappella* music in worship. Some will appeal to the witness of the early church. Fair enough. But the most important plank in our practice has already been laid, that of the plain evidence of scripture.

I smile indulgently as my friend recounts this story, but even as I smile I am aware that the issue of instrumental music is not a dead one, even in churches of Christ. Two comments which I have overheard recently indicate that this is so.

“I can conscientiously worship with or without the instrument,” one Christian said. “I have a great respect,” another told me, “for the *tradition of a cappella* music in churches of Christ.”

I hope I responded to each person in kindness, yet in truth. Our practice of *a cappella* music is no tradition. It is a sincere conviction gained from a study of the scriptures, and, what is more, the New Testament is certainly not silent on the subject of our worship in song!

Yet still there are objections. “What about David? He played with a harp, didn’t he?” This comment surprised me, for it was made by a young man who had grown up in the church and had been trained to minister to churches. I answered that we do not use David’s harp for the same reason that we don’t keep the Passover, offer animal sacrifices in Jerusalem, and practice circumcision. The new covenant is the Christian’s guide for doctrine and practice today (Colossians 2:14,15; Hebrews 9:15-17).

“But,” someone else objects, “those who sing with the instrument do so sincerely.”

May I say this with kindness? Some who worship with an instrument are sincere; some are not, just as some who worship *a cappella* are sincere, while some are not. I don’t accept the simplistic notion that those who call on us to go back to the Bible are necessarily insincere because they care about the “forms” of proper worship. Insincerity is a condition of the heart, not a condition of the Biblical conservative! There is no excuse for the child of God to sing fine words that he doesn’t mean. This constitutes the vain worship Jesus spoke of when he quoted Isaiah: “*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*” (Matthew 15:8). The question before us is not, whether hypocrisy

is wrong — we all agree that it is — but whether instrumental music is authorized in scripture!

“Well,” another person remarked, “I am not willing to condemn people to hell because they don’t believe we should worship *a cappella*.”

Neither am I. It is my task to preach and proclaim; it is God’s to judge. And, yet, teach I must.

We worship *a cappella* not just because the Bible is silent on the subject of the instrument, but because it is also *not* silent on the subject of singing! We are *commanded* to do the latter; the Bible is *silent* on the former. We are commanded frequently to sing; we are never commanded to sing and play. Our desire is to follow God’s instructions simply, respectfully, and fully. We invite you to join us, and if you are moved to donate money for an organ, let it be for a heart and a voice lifted up in praise to the Lord!

Back when I attended Abilene Christian University (sometime before the Elizabethan Age, you understand!), I participated in what ACU calls “Sing Song”. There were two parts to this festival of song; several singers were chosen to emcee the performances with songs of their own; they were the very good singers at the university. The classes, clubs, and so on, sang in a competition of their own, groups usually numbering fifty or sixty young people singing a medley of secular songs. I was a rather anonymous member of one of these groups.

I recall that, as was the custom at ACU, we would end the performance by standing in Moody Coliseum and singing “The Lord Bless You and Keep You” with the “Seven Fold ‘Amen’.” It’s one of my fondest memories. When several thousand singers — students and parents, comprising several generations of ACU students sing that song together, the sound rises in ranks like a mighty army! To say the least, it’s a pretty stirring way to end an evening.

The university would invite musical professors and performers from outside the Abilene community to judge the classes and club

singing, and award prizes. On one particular evening there was a judge from the north-eastern part of the United States who was apparently not terribly well-acquainted with churches of Christ.

He was deeply impressed, but not by what you might think would impress a musical expert. “Every university has five or six extraordinary singers,” he explained. “I expected to see that. But how do you get hundreds, even thousands of young people to sing the way those classes did? No university that I know of could get that many young people to sing that beautifully!”

Of course those thousands of kids had grown up in hundreds of churches of Christ around the world. They had learned to sing because they sang *a cappella*. Singing with our voices is not only our conviction; it is our heritage.

129* (36) “Amazing Grace”**

(39) “Angels Are Singing”

(57) “Awake and Sing the Song”

626 (93) “Christ for the World We Sing”

121 (180) “Come, Let Us All Unite to Sing”

869 (111) “Come, We That Love the Lord”

513 (300) “I Will Sing of My Redeemer”

509 (301) “I Will Sing the Wondrous Story”

8 (388) “Let Every Heart Rejoice and Sing”

*** “Songs of Faith and Praise”**

**** “Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. Discuss the subject of scripture's silence. When the Bible says that baptism is a "burial" (Romans 6:3-6), does that automatically exclude its being a sprinkling, or a pouring?
2. Look at passages such as 1 Corinthians 4:6, 2 John 1:9 and Revelation 22:18,19. How do they relate to our understanding of Biblical interpretation?
3. It has often been said that the presence of a piano or organ hurts the singing of many denominations. Why is this so?
4. The scripture is "silent" on such subjects as a hymnbook, Wednesday night services, Gospel meetings and so on. How do these differ from the instruments of music in worship and the silence of scripture regarding their use?
5. "But David sang with a harp!" List as many Old Testament activities as you can that the Christian no longer does because they are not included in the commands of the New Testament (example, animal sacrifices).

Chapter 6

With the Heart and With the Mind

Singing Passages in the New Testament

I have always wondered what happens to young people who graduate from a Christian college and a big congregation and find themselves in “Windswept South Dakota”, or “Snow Bound Alaska”. What happens when the country song leader there, and the septuagenarian preacher who is available in that town, do the best they can, but lack the charisma of the big-time preachers back in the college town our young people just left?

Does your young person’s worship and service for the Lord become useless because the small-town leaders are less compelling?

Perhaps you have read about the Saddleback Community church in California that polled its community to determine what the “unchurched” (is that a word in the English language?) want in a church.

I wonder when we will poll the Lord our God, and endeavor to determine what he wants in a church.

Paul warns us: *“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will”* (Romans 12:2).

Two things stand out in this passage. First, the world is making a relentless, overwhelming effort to sweep our convictions away. To those brethren who object to “pattern theology”, please notice that the world presents a “pattern” that it demands we follow. Now here, truly, is a pattern we can, and must object to!

The second thing that stands out is that it is our obligation to “find out” what God’s will is.

Make no mistake; this is no defense of the child of God who treats worship as if it is a dreary routine to be endured. Worship is an appointment with an all-mighty God, a breath-taking privilege, and a moment that surpasses all of life’s routine.

Should we be studying society to determine what it wants, or scripture to determine what God wants? Should we call on the church to conform to the world, or call on the world to conform to Christ?

We try to make worship “meaningful” by appealing to the senses — by “great singing”, “relevant” preaching or dimming the lights during the Lord’s Supper. There is another way to make worship meaningful. We could sing from the bottom of our hearts; we could open our minds and ears to the sermon; we could humble ourselves in prayer. That way our worship would be meaningful whether we are in a church of five hundred...or five!

In this chapter I would like to return to the passages in the New Testament that deal with singing, and endeavor to learn what we can from them.

(Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) *“When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”*

It would have been in the spring, and a great, orange, full moon had risen over the land of Israel. Some historians have suggested that Jerusalem would have been filled with close to 100,000 pilgrims, all intent on celebrating Israel’s freedom from Egyptian slavery. This was always a night of tension and fear, for the Passover was the Jews’ Independence Day, and memories of their freedom from Egypt jangled with the current reality of Roman Legions posted in their capital, and the reality of their nation once again in bondage.

In an upper room, by the flickering light of oil lamps, thirteen

men, soon to become twelve, were reclining around a table and listening to their leader. The meal that has come to be known as the Lord's Supper, it should be remembered, was instituted during the eating of the Passover meal.

At the end of the Passover meal, the fourth and final cup was drunk and the conclusion of the *Hallel* (Psalm 113-118) was sung. There were four Passover cups drunk (rather like the modern "toast"), where a declaration was made regarding some moment at the Exodus, or prayer for blessing expressed. The first two Psalms were sung after the second "cup". The last four following the fourth and final one. Often they would end with what Jews called the "Great Hallel", Psalm 136.

When the Apostles and their Lord had sung their song, they walked out into the night and made their way, as you know, to the Mount of Olives, just outside the city's eastern enclosure.

(Acts 16:25) *"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."*

When Paul and Silas fell foul of powerful interests in Philippi, they were summoned before the city magistrates, beaten, and thrown into the city prison's maximum security. There, at midnight, to the astonishment of the other prisoners, the missionaries began to sing.

This amounts to a captive audience! One can imagine that the other prisoners were indeed listening to them, for they would have been accustomed to newly-imprisoned victims cursing the gods and their captors; what a contrast to hear the Apostles sing praises to God! What a testimony to their courage, and faith!

Who sang the melody? Who sang the bass? Did Paul hit the notes, or was he tone deaf, singing purely from the heart? What was the subject matter of their singing? Did they offer praise to God in spite of their circumstances, or did they perhaps sing songs petitioning God for deliverance, courage and faith?

There certainly is an element of evangelistic testimony associated with our worship in song. When Christians enter into singing with zeal and obvious love for their Lord, it says something important to visitors, to our children, to the community. It says that God is worthy of our praise, and that our worship to the Lord is genuine. When God's people face trial, our willingness to persist in singing to God is a witness in itself!

The Apostles' reaction to their plight is a time honored response to adversity. The Psalmist frequently cries to God out of the depths of despair (Psalm 27; 42; 43). Singing helps lift the spirits, and when words fail us, the words of others, already written, will sometimes help.

Usually in times of distress, we seek to hold on to eternal realities, but our hearts do not necessarily follow! Our feelings remain engulfed by the problems.

"Songs help truth travel down to the heart, and the use of music, the language of the heart, helps speed that process. The objective truths we get from Biblical songs challenge our subjective feelings; our theology addresses our experience. Moreover, the permanent triumphs over the temporary, and we are able to praise God from the heart" (Fernando, pages 449,450).

As Tertullian astutely observed, "The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven" ("To the Martyrs" 2).

(Romans 15:9) *"As it is written, 'Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.'"*

In this verse the Apostle Paul quotes David in Psalm 18:49. Paul is trying to demonstrate that the role of the Jewish Christian was to proclaim God's word, not only among Jewish people, but among the Gentiles, too. He does this by quoting four Old Testament passages all emphasizing the universal nature of God's call. The Gospel is for all. Our passage is the first, where David promises to "sing" God's praises among the Gentiles.

(1 Corinthians 14:15) “*So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.*”

A number of years ago I visited the city of Rome and spent an enjoyable day looking at the various historical sights. On Sunday, I looked up the church of Christ and took a series of busses to get there.

About 60 brethren met in an upstairs room. They welcomed me warmly, each man solemnly kissing me on both cheeks in the manner of many Mediterranean peoples. But I knew no Italian, and they knew no English. Their worship service — obviously heartfelt and loving — was a mystery to me!

In the city of Corinth, worship services, it seemed, were a circus. Some brought food and ate it in front of the hungry (1 Corinthians 11:21). Leaders in worship spoke all at once, rudely interrupting each other (1 Corinthians 14:29,30), and some spoke in languages unknown to anyone else in the assembly, leaving the listeners mystified as to the content of their message (1 Corinthians 14:13). The result, Paul feared, was that anyone who visited this church would conclude that they were all out of their minds (1 Corinthians 14:23)!

Paul, on the other hand, is “distinctly in favor of the intellect in prayer. Prayer is an intelligent exercise of the mind”. And regarding singing, Paul “prefers singing that reaches the intellect as well as stirs the emotions” (Robertson, page 183). “Rational prayer,” C.K. Barrett adds, “is not less spiritual than irrational” (page 320).

When we sing and pray, both our emotional and our rational faculties should be at work. Both spirit (*pneuma*) and mind (*nous*) are involved in worship. This ideal fits in with Paul’s earlier statements regarding the more cognitive gifts of revelation, knowledge, prophecy and teaching being the most desirable (1 Corinthians 14:6).

Why, one might ask, is this question of understanding the songs

so important? The answer lies in the nature and purpose of hymns, a purpose I believe we have soundly established in this study so far; the purpose of a hymn is to teach. As Gordon Fee remarks, “Besides being addressed as praise to God, such hymns served as vehicles of instruction in the gathered community” (page 671). As we shall see in a moment, when we sing, we allow the “word of Christ” to dwell in us “richly”.

Make no mistake, worship must be conducted according to God’s commands, but it is also intended to benefit man. The purpose of the words we use in worship is to educate, to edify, to teach. We are to see to it that sermons, prayers, the Lord’s Supper and hymns have Biblical substance, and that they help us to see God’s will more clearly.

“Just as a Christian is not free to exercise his liberty in regard to his idolatrous food without consideration for his brother, so he is not free to act as he pleases in worship, but there too must consider the needs of others” (Barrett, page 321).

If there are some in the congregation who do not sing “with their minds”, they should be taught what the words and the concepts mean, and then be urged to enter into worship, not only with the spirit, but with the mind too.

(Ephesians 5:19) *“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord.”*

How great a comfort to the tone deaf the words “make melody in your heart” have been! While “good” singing might inspire the human spirit, the Lord, as always, looks at the heart. To the singer who simply lacks musical talent, the exhortation to “make a joyful noise”, and do so from the heart, is always appropriate.

The focus of these songs, surprisingly, is not on praise to God but on mutual teaching and edification. Much of what is taken to be hymnic in Paul’s writings has a didactic (teaching) function (Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16).

The three categories of hymns that Paul gives overlap somewhat. “Psalms” (*psalmos*) (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33) is of course a reference to the book of Psalms, the Jews’ hymnbook “Hymns” (*hymnos*) (Mark 14:26; Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25; Hebrews 2:12) refers to a song of praise, offered either to God the father, or Jesus, the son.

“Spiritual songs” (*hode pneumatikos*) (Revelation 5:9; 14:3; 15:3) are songs whose subject is spiritual, as opposed to secular, or earthly.

Paul says that we are to “Speak to one another.” Singing is a conversation between believers. The words we use are to be intelligible, message-filled, and godly.

When we “make melody in (our) heart”, we are to sing in a manner that is utterly sincere. The words we sing should be more than something read from a page, they should come from the very core of our being.

These songs are to be offered “to the Lord”. Hymns are an offering, dedicated to no less than God himself. You think you’re refusing to sing “with those people?” Do you feel superior to others in the assembly, and therefore don’t join in the singing? If so, remember that you’re actually refusing to sing to God!

“The purpose of singing is both praise to God and instruction of believers. Singing, therefore, has two audiences” (Snodgrass, page 291).

So what was the Lord’s intention when he said that we are to “sing”? According to Bauer, Gingrich, and Danker, scholarship’s premiere lexicon, to “sing” (*psallo*) means “to sing, sing praise”. Originally it meant “to pluck, play (a stringed instrument)”. This meaning “persisted at least until the time of Lucian.” In the LXX it usually means to sing, “whether to the accompaniment of a harp or (as usually) not. This process continued until *psallo* in modern Greek means ‘sing’ exclusively. *Psaltes*, singer, chanter, with no reference to musical accompaniment. Although the New Testament

does not voice opposition to instrumental music, in view of Christian resistance to mystery cults, as well as Pharisaic aversion to musical instruments in worship, it is likely that some such sense as “make melody” is best here. Those who favor ‘play’ may be relying too much on the earliest meaning of *psallo*” (BAG, page 891).

Clearly Paul is using the verb to indicate that the “instrument” to be “plucked” in this case was the “heart”.

(Colossians 3:16) *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing songs, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”*

This passage and the one in Ephesians 5:19 present very similar messages. Paul begins by urging the Colossians to *“let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”* That God’s word should find lodging in our hearts is no surprise, but notice that in this passage the means by which his word dwells is by song.

This does not deny, of course, the vital role of preaching, but rather emphasizes the additional and supportive role of songs and hymns. They allow God’s word to dwell in us. They reinforce the message of the word preached. This is why worship is so rewarding when a song leader and preacher collaborate in choosing songs that fit the sermon, and the reason why it is so important that the words of our hymns teach! “Shallow music,” Marva Dawn remarks, “forms shallow people” (page 175).

The worship of early Christians placed a premium on words, or rather the word. Words are important. The thing which makes a song a *spiritual* song is not the music, and not the rhythm, but the *words*. The words of our hymns must say something, say something eternal, spiritual, Biblical. If they do, then the word of Christ will dwell in us in its richest form!

It is easy to overemphasize the quality of singing, especially for

those of us who enjoy music, and who try to teach singing to others. But it is the heart's condition that is most important when we sing.

What if we could secure the services of a grand singer — Julie Andrews, perhaps, or Placido Domingo, to sing our hymns for us? While the quality of our music might be exquisite, we will not have worshipped, for it was not *our* voices and *our* thoughts that were offered to God in worship.

The idea that God's word is conveyed and enriched in song has been borne out by history. Remember that the Protestant Reformation, though it was begun by the proclamation of Martin Luther, was enriched by his emphasis on congregational singing. Charles Wesley's songs provided the context and background to his brother John's preaching. Their deep theological content helped to cement and illustrate John's sermons. In our own fellowship, the vigor and heart-felt spirit of our singing has often brought us closer together, and closer to Christ.

(Hebrews 2:12) *“He says, ‘I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.’”*

In this verse the Hebrew writer quotes Psalm 22:22. The Greek word he uses is “congregation” (*ekklesias*), making it evident that he has corporate, public worship in mind. Jesus is the speaker, and he expresses his willingness to claim his people as his own by way of song.

What lies behind the use of this Psalm in Hebrews is the fact that the risen and divine Jesus is “not ashamed” to count humans as “brothers”, and is, in fact, more than happy to be seen in the “assembly”, worshipping with them. Now I am all for taking a moment for “quiet time”, and have stood numerous times before an ocean or on top of a mountain in solitary worship, but there is also a community aspect to worship, and worship in song in particular.

There are those who, for whatever reason, choose to disassoci-

ate themselves with the congregation as a whole in worship. Do they think they cannot sing with other, flawed children of God? Are they superior to the gathered group of believers? If so, they should give some thought to the fact that Christ himself was willing to “sing” with us in the “assembly”.

(James 5:13) *“Is any of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.”*

“Is anyone happy?” is the present active imperative of (*euthe-meo*), to be cheerful. In Acts 27:22,25,36 the Apostle Paul, on a storm-wracked ship, repeated this word several times, the NIV translating it “courage” and “encourage”. “*I urge you,*” Paul said to the fearful travelers, “*to keep up your courage.*” After explaining that though they would be shipwrecked, God would spare all of their lives, he concluded, “*So keep up your courage, men.*” His words were effective, for Luke recalls that “*They were all encouraged and ate some food.*”

Just as Paul and Silas demonstrated that we can sing even in adversity (Acts 16:25) so we too can sing when facing tough times; in fact, singing can be a means of facing adversity because of the song’s ability to lift the spirits and encourage.

Don’t forget God in the good times, however. It is one thing to turn to God when in trouble — that is half of our service to God. We must also remember God when things are going well.

William Barclay recalls a fascinating fact about the Jewish people and their singing:

“In the orthodox Jewish synagogue, since the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, there has been no music, for, when they worship, they remember a tragedy; but in the Christian church, from the beginning until now, there has been the music of praise, for the Christian remembers an infinite love and enjoys a present glory” (page 129).

My prayer is that we will never be like the Israelites in this respect; may our voices never fall silent in song!

- # 587* (841)** “Sing and Be Happy”
- # 747 (581) “Sing on, Ye Joyful Pilgrims”
- # 543 (788) “Sing Them Over Again to Me”
- # 853 (756) “Sing the Wondrous Love of Jesus”
- # 716 (583) “Sing to Me of Heaven”
- # 242 (886) “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord”
- (690) “There’s a Land Beyond the River”
- # 615 (676) “There’s Within My Heart a Melody”
- # 859 (839) “When All of God’s Singers Get Home”

* “Songs of Faith and Praise”

** “Praise for the Lord”

Questions

1. Talk about the parallels between the Exodus and the Lord's Supper. Have a look at some of the songs we sing "to prepare our minds for" the Lord's Supper. Do they do an adequate job?
2. If we are to sing "*with the mind*" (1 Corinthians 14:15), then how can we make our understanding of the songs we sing better? Suggest some ways we can do this, individually and corporately.
3. How does our singing benefit the visitor?
4. How does our singing benefit our children?
5. How does our singing benefit us?

Chapter 7

“How many tears I shed at the sound of hymns...sung by impassioned voices of your church! Their voices poured into my ears and dissolved truth in my heart”
(Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 9, chapter 6)

The Very Thought of Thee

Early Church Hymn Writers

One Sunday morning I was leading a typically rambunctious group of kids in “Pew Packers” songs.

“What songs do you want to sing?” I asked.

One little boy’s hand shot up. “Jingle Bells!” he said in a voice that rang around the auditorium. Several of my more austere brethren looked up in shock. But I need not have worried. One of his fellows straightened him out.

In a loud stage whisper, he said, “He meant ‘*Jesus* songs,’ stupid!”

Now I won’t vouch for the young fellow’s methods, but he was right. Worship is about singing “Jesus songs”. In the centuries following the close of the New Testament cannon, churches began to write and sing hymns that were distinct from the songs of the synagogue and the Psalms, and began to offer praise not only to God the father, but to Jesus, his son. In effect, they began to sing “Jesus songs”.

In the early lessons of this series I have tried to discern hymns found in scripture, and to learn from those Spirit-driven lyrics what we can about hymns. The next few lessons will follow hymns in somewhat chronological order from the close of the New Testament to the present day. I will try to relate these songs back to the scrip-

tures that inspired their thought. Where possible I will supply their background in the hope that these thoughts will make the songs more meaningful.

Early Christianity became increasingly divided between the Eastern Orthodox churches (following the leadership of Constantinople) and Western (Catholic) Christianity, following the leadership of Rome. To this day Orthodox churches sing *a cappella*. In the Roman church, early music was influenced by Gregory of Rome (590-604 AD), whose unaccompanied and majestic songs therefore became known as Gregorian Chants. Guido d'Arezzo, a Benedictine monk of the eleventh century developed the early form of what we know as modern musical notation. He developed a six-tone scale (the one we use today has seven).

Clement of Alexandria (150-215)

Clement was born in Athens, the son of pagan parents, but following his conversion to Christianity, he moved to Alexandria in Egypt, where he gained renown as a Christian teacher and scholar.

(576) ** “Shepherd of Tender Youth”

“Shepherd of Tender Youth” is significant because it is the oldest extra Biblical Christian hymn whose author is known, making the song about 1700 years old. Though the hymn is very ancient, its translation into English is fairly recent. Henry Dexter, a minister for the Congregational Church in Manchester, New Hampshire, did the translation to accompany his sermon based on Deuteronomy 32:7.

Clement's hymn is found at the end of his book “The Instructor”, a kind of manual for the new Christian. The song's presence in this work, and its reference to Christ, the “shepherd” of “tender youth” make it likely that he intended it to be a song for young Christians.

It is impossible to guess which passages of scripture Clement was thinking of, because there are so many that depict God as a

shepherd. In Psalm 95:7, David declares that *“He is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.”* In John 10:11-13, Jesus declares himself as “the good shepherd”.

One phrase to watch is in the first verse, where Christ is said to guide us “through *devious* ways”. This does not mean that Christ was underhanded or insincere; the use of this word is archaic, meaning, “through circuitous and roundabout ways”, as in the phrase, “We got here by a devious route”, referring to an out of the way route. Today we might say that Christ leads us “through *various* ways”.

The song appears with two tunes, one written by Felice de Giardini, the tune more usually associated with the hymn “Come Thou Almighty King”. The other tune was composed by Edward Bunnett.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

Bernard of Clairvaux was the son of a wealthy family in France, but surrendered his rights to this wealth in order to build a monastery in Clairvaux (beautiful vale). He earned a reputation for integrity in a day when many clerics were known for their corruption and vice.

200* (374) “Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Hearts”

307 (373) “Jesus the Very Thought of Thee”

In the first verse of this song Clairvaux expresses an idea that reflects the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12:

“Now we see but a poor reflection, as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

Though a thing so small as “the thought” of Jesus fills his “breast” with “sweetness”, Clairvaux longs for a day when he will see the Lord “face to face”.

Jesus, the very thought of thee,
With sweetness fills my breast,
But sweeter far thy face to see,
And in thy presence rest.”

318 (484) “O Sacred Head”

Matthew records that soldiers “*twisted together a crown of thorns*” and placed it on Jesus’ head. They “*spit on him, and struck him on the head again and again*” (Matthew 27:29,30). “O Sacred Head” is one of seven poems Clairvaux wrote dealing with various parts of Jesus’ body on the cross — his scarred hands and feet, his broken heart, his side that was pierced, and so on. The poem that we know best deals with the Lord’s head, wounded by the brutal crown of thorns thrust so carelessly upon it.

Verse two begins with a rhetorical question:

“What language shall I borrow
To thank thee dearest friend,”

as if to say that there is no human language adequate to express thanks for God’s mercy on the cross.

The song ends with the prayer,

“Lord let me never, never,
Outlive my love for thee.”

While some might think they outgrew their “childish” dedication to Jesus, Clairvaux expresses the hope that he would never do so.

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)

Francis of Assisi is undoubtedly the most beloved of late medieval church leaders. His gentleness, his love of nature, the

poor and suffering, make him a favorite. He is perhaps best known for his ability to see the hand of God in nature.

6 (16) “All Creatures of Our God and King”

His most well-known song (he wrote over 60), demonstrates this emphasis on God’s creation. In this song he calls on “all creatures” to “lift up” their voices and sing. Rather like Psalm 148, Francis calls on various parts of creation — the “rushing wind”, the “clouds that sail in heaven above” to offer praise. Finally, he calls on God’s most unreliable creature of all, human beings, to offer praise to God:

“And all men of tender heart,
 Forgiving others take your part.
Alleluia, Alleluia!”

Francis was born the son of a wealthy clothing merchant in the northern Italian province of Assisi. His youth was rather wild and misspent. During a battle between Perugia and Assisi, Francis was captured and imprisoned. There he suffered a severe illness, and almost lost his life. When he emerged, he was a much more serious man, and he resolved to give his life into service for God. He took very seriously such passages as Matthew 10:5-14 regarding the Christian’s use of material possessions, and decided that if Jesus lived in his day, he would have associated with the poor. He took a vow of poverty, worked in leper colonies, and began to restore dilapidated church buildings. His churches began to fill with the poor, peasants and servants, the dregs of society. Eventually his movement became known as the Franciscan Order.

Another song written by Francis of Assisi demonstrates beautifully his humble, servant attitude:

Lord make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Where there is injury, pardon.
Where there is discord, unity.
Where there is doubt, faith.
Where there is error, truth.
Where there is despair, hope.
Where there is sadness, joy.
Where there is darkness, light.
Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console,
To be understood, as to understand.
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

Looking at these words, the preacher in me wonders what effect their singing would have on a congregation if it were sung (and sincerely meant) every week! If only we could convince Christians that their purpose was indeed to serve rather than to be served, our congregations would greatly benefit. Perhaps someone out there who is good with music could take these words and set them to music.

Hymns of the Reformation

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

One Sunday morning in 1519 a hooded figure walked quietly to the door of his local cathedral. In his hands was a document he had written himself, a hammer, and nails. That cool morning in Germany the sound of hammering might have been heard through the university town of Wittenberg, but it was also a sound that has rung through the religious world ever since. When Martin Luther

hammered his ninety-five proposals on to the Wittenberg cathedral door, he stepped out of the mists of obscurity and became perhaps the most well-known religious leader since the Apostle Paul. The courage and conviction of this man set into motion the Protestant Reformation, and the echoes of his thinking can still be heard from pulpits and seminary classes today. Other reformers such as Zwingli and Calvin took courage from his action, and began reforms of their own. We owe an incalculable debt to these men, for our own Restoration Movement would not have been possible without their efforts.

While Luther is rightly known for beginning the Protestant Reformation, he is less well known for restoring congregational singing to its rightful place in churches. He felt strongly about the value of hymns as Christian edification. The Devil hates music, he reasoned, because he cannot endure gaiety. “Satan can smirk, but he cannot laugh; he can sneer, but he cannot sing.” On another occasion he declared, “The Devil...flees from the sound of music almost as much as from the word of God.”

Even his detractors acknowledged the power of congregational singing. One Jesuit priest declared that Luther had “murdered” (i.e. influenced) more souls with his songs than with his writings and sermons.

Luther encouraged many writers of his day to write songs in German “for the masses” (as opposed to “for Mass”), “that the word of God might continue among the people even in song.” He wished often that his young fellowship “had more songs in the vernacular for the people to sing...for who doubted (the value to the congregation) once the voices of all the people did this, which now only the choir sings?” (*Formulae Missae et Communionas*, Volume 12, page 218).

10* (6)** “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”

This is Luther’s best known song, based on Psalm 46:

“God is our refuge and strength,
An ever-present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear,
Though the earth give way
And the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.”
(Psalm 46:1,2)

“A Mighty Fortress” is notoriously difficult to sing, but the words are well worth the effort. My suggestion is that song leaders ask the congregation to sing it in unison, thus relieving them of the task of picking through the difficult harmony. Thus released, they can concentrate on the powerful words. The emotional effect of singing these words in unison is, by the way, quite impressive.

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)

Zwingli argued rather oddly that there was no Biblical authority for worship in song at all. Instead, Christians should treat hymns the same way as they should prayer — consider it a thing to be done only in the closet, between the worshipper and God. Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6:6, of course, does not ban the practice of prayer in the assembly at all, it simply teaches the need for the Christian to emphasize private devotions, done to receive praise from God.

He taught that Colossians 3:16 urges us to sing “in our hearts” to the Lord, not with our lips, thus ignoring Paul’s obvious meaning, that we should sing from the bottom of our hearts. We must sincerely mean the words we sing. He was rightly concerned, however, with the danger that our singing could become nothing more than performance, addressed for man’s applause rather than God’s.

John Calvin (1509-1564)

Calvin is best known for his theological treatise, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, but he was also influential in the singing of

his day. In the preface to the **Geneva Psalter**, he emphasized that singing, like prayer, should be sung in the language of the people, as opposed to Latin. He also believed that humans cannot offer anything worthy to God in their own words, that instead they should utilize God’s own inspired words, especially the Psalms. From this conviction the early English, Scottish and Swiss churches refused to accept any song written by an uninspired (that is, non-Biblical) writer.

God’s Grace

Martin Luther’s greatest theological achievement was to remind us of God’s incomparable grace. Although we might argue with his assertion that justification was by “faith *alone*”, a concept never expressed in scripture, nevertheless his emphasis on God’s grace centers on scripture’s central theme. The following are some songs that Luther (and Paul, Romans 1:16,17; 3:23,24; Ephesians 2:8-10) would have loved.

111 (189) “**Grace, Greater Than Our Sin**”

112 (786) “**Wonderful Grace of Jesus**”

113 (237) “**His Grace Reaches Me**”

129 (36) “**Amazing Grace**”

136 (420) “**Love for All**”

122, 133 (646, 647) “**The Love of God**”

John Newton (1725-1807)

What factors make a hymn a classic, beloved, and sung for generations? An ex-slave trader named John Newton, (not Isaac, that’s the guy who was hit on the head by an apple!) one day came face-to-face with the horrors of his trade in human souls, and realized that he was damned, a sinner, lost.

He was the son of a ship’s captain, who lost his mother at age seven. By the time he was ten, he was on his father’s ship as a

sailor. When he was eighteen, he was “shanghaied” into the British Navy. At length he became the captain of a slaver ship, bringing his hapless cargo from West Africa to the Americas. When he married Mary Catlett, his childhood sweetheart, he began to change to a more Christian lifestyle. He continued the slave trade, however, for several more years until the famous politician and anti-slave advocate William Wilberforce convinced him of its evils.

The result was one of Christianity’s most enduring and beloved hymns, “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound”. Why is this song so special?

Newton wrote this classic in 1779, over two hundred years ago, yet for two hundred years the strains of sweet grace have been sung, in brush arbors, cathedrals, and from New Hampshire to the New Hebrides. Why does this song sink so deeply into our hearts?

Hymns that have lasted for hundreds of years endure because they speak of a deeper level of experience. Learning them is more difficult, but we don’t tire of them so quickly. Songs that are timeless become so because their thought is so central to scripture (as God’s grace surely is), thoughtful and profound. “The hymns that have lasted through the centuries have done so for a reason,” writes Ann Sewell, “each time they are sung, something new is discovered from their hidden treasures” (page 206).

Though the words are simple, their message is profound. Second-class words and second-class lyrics can never express this first-class message: “I once was lost, but now I’m found — was blind, but now I see.”

Read those words again, as if for the first time.

*** “Songs of Faith and Praise”**

**** “Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. Of course the songs examined in this chapter are older songs, and thus have archaic language (such as Clement's "devious ways"). Should we simply throw all songs with difficult language out, or should we take the time to teach the concepts? Discuss.
2. Francis of Assisi believed that we should give up all material possessions. While not completely agreeing with him on this point, it should be said that there is a more serious danger — that of succumbing wholeheartedly to materialism! Can you think of any songs that help us to understand the Christian's use of money and things?
3. Francis of Assisi's song, "Lord Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace" emphasizes the Christian's responsibility to give, rather than to receive. Try to compile a series of songs and scriptures (a devotional) based on our need to serve.
4. Zwingli believed that Christian singing should be done only in the heart. While not agreeing with him completely either, it is nonetheless true that we must sing from the heart. Suggest some ways that we might better appreciate the songs we sing, and truly sing them from the heart.

Chapter 8

“The singing of God’s praise is the part of worship most closely related to heaven; but its performance among us is the worst on earth” (Isaac Watts)

Love So Amazing, So Divine

The Golden Age

Worshippers in Bible times didn’t “go to church”. They didn’t “go to hear an inspiring sermon,” and they didn’t “go to hear the wonderful song service.”

They used another verb to describe their “worship experience”. They made an *offering*.

*“Through Jesus Christ therefore, let us continually **offer** to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name” (Hebrews 13:15).*

They *offered* something to God. They *offered* him their praise in song. They *offered* their ears when his servants the prophets taught. They *offered* their hearts to him in dedication and discipleship. They *offered* him nothing less than a sacrifice!

The centrality of sacrifice in the Old Testament left no doubt regarding the necessity of giving. Offering remains the central activity in the New Testament, too. Paul urges us to “*offer (our) bodies as a living sacrifice*” (Romans 12:1).

But a funny thing happened on the way to Christian worship. At some point, as Marva Dawn observes, we began to attend worship as a means to *receive* a blessing, rather than to *offer* one. “Worship began to center on what could be received from an experience (whether or not the music was inspiring, the lessons were edifying and the sermon was exciting) rather than on what should be expended during a service.”

“So what,” the new family in town asks the preacher, “can this church offer us?”

“I didn’t get anything out of the worship service,” the church member complains.

“Every act of worship should be understood as a part of the church’s offering to God. Any action that does not meet with that qualification does not deserve to be a part of a worship experience” (Dawn, page 81).

A funny thing did, indeed, happen on the way to worship. At least the ancient Israelites offered an animal to God.

What did you offer?

Isaac Watts: The Father of English Hymns (1674-1748)

One of the greatest contributions of Isaac Watts was to write hymns that did not reflect such shallow thinking as an attitude of “What’s in it for me?” He understood that when we offer God our songs, we should express sentiments that offer much more than music; we should offer our hearts and lives, too.

Watts almost single-handedly moved our hymnology from a simple chanting of Psalms to the “Gospel hymns” of our day. As influential a leader as John Calvin insisted that no hymn offered to God should be composed by a mere human being; it should instead be a quotation taken directly from scripture. Though Isaac Watts’ songs were not generally direct quotations from scripture, a cursory glance at any of his writings will reveal that scripture literally oozed out of his pores when he wrote.

Isaac Watts was born in Southampton, England, in a family of Congregational Dissenters, and was thus subject to a great deal of persecution from the Church of England. His father was, in fact, in prison at the time of Isaac’s birth. He learned Latin at the age of

five, Greek at nine, French at eleven, and Hebrew at thirteen! Isaac had an annoying habit of rhyming everything he said as a boy. When his father scolded him for the practice, Isaac replied: “O father, do some pity take, and I will no more verses make!”

Hymns in English churches of the time were ponderous translations from the Psalms that were first read by a deacon, and responded to by the congregation. An example of this uninspiring sort of song is the following:

“Ye monsters of the deep, your Master’s praises spout;
Up from the sands ye codlings peep, and wave your
tails about.”

While still a boy, Isaac complained to his father about the poor quality of hymns in their church. His father replied, “Write something better!” Watts did — writing over 750 songs in his lifetime.

His “new” songs were not universally appreciated. Some objected to the fact that they were so personal, speaking of his sin, and his gratitude toward God for grace. His departure from simply “lining out” Psalms, was radical and refreshing. The resistance his songs received is a reminder that old songs were once new songs, and often were viewed with suspicion until their form became more familiar.

Watts never enjoyed good health, and spent the last thirty years of his life as a virtual convalescent in the home of a wealthy friend named Sir Thomas Abney. His mental health, however, was excellent, and along with his hymns, he wrote books on philosophy, theology, and several books of sermons.

Although he never married, Watts loved children and took the trouble to write a complete song book specifically for children, endeavoring to “sink the language to the level of a child’s understanding, and yet to keep it, if possible, above contempt.” It is interesting to think that such a genius would apply his great talent to the benefit of children.

522* (470) “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” (Psalm 90:1,2)**

This song is based roughly on Psalm 90, and is a commentary on the subject of time, especially the contrast between a timeless God and his time-limited children. It has become the spiritual national anthem of Great Britain. Watts attempted to “Christianize” the Psalms, showing where their lyrics applied to Christ.

315 (742) “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

Matthew Arnold declared this “the greatest song in the English language.” The words are chock full of scriptural references. As an exercise, you might try one day to see how many scriptures there are in this one song. No wonder it has provided worshippers with such rich spiritual nourishment! His ability to paint word pictures is simply brilliant. One of the best lines in all our hymns must be the one describing the blood Jesus shed on the cross.

“See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?”

When Watts begins with the words “See, from his head, his hands, his feet,” one might expect him to describe the path of blood flowing down Christ’s body, but Watts deftly switches to the metaphor, “Sorrow and love flow mingled down”. What witnesses saw that day was blood mingled; what Christians see in retrospect is the sorrow and love it stood for!

Isaac Watts ends the song with a similarly profound thought:

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That (that is, the whole realm of nature) were a present far
too small
Love, so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all”

We often think of a tyrant demanding certain things of us, but Watts, like the Apostle Paul, appeals to love instead. *“For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if one died for all, then all died”* (2 Corinthians 5:14, NKJV).

28 “Give to Our God Immortal Praise”

75 (941) “I Sing the Mighty Power of God”

324 (12) “Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed”

This great classic has one line that has caused worshippers and hymnal editors fits. It’s the one that asks: “Would he devote that sacred head, for such a *worm* as I?” Some editors, sensing the strong imagery might offend readers renders it: “For such a *one* as I?” Is Watts’ language too strong, depicting an inappropriately poor self-image for the 21st Century? Or is our concept of God’s grace and our need too poverty stricken to appreciate that Watts’ language is an accurate reflection of reality?

My own suspicion is that we tend to err more on the side of taking God’s mercy for granted, and thus diminishing our need for that grace. My preference is for keeping the less politically correct rendering.

As can be seen from the list below, the touch of Isaac Watts’ pen has enriched our hymn singing immeasurably.

(34,35) “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?”

(64) “Before Jehovah’s Awful Throne”

869 (111) “Come, We that Love the Lord”

785 (123) “Early My God, Without Delay”

432 (253) “How Shall the Young Secure Their Hearts?”

609 (298) “I’m Not Ashamed to Own My Lord”

1018 (376) “Joy to the World”

888 (403) “Lo! What a Glorious Sight”

(428) “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need”

126 (643) “The Lord My Shepherd Is”

(748) “When I Can Read My Title Clear”

The Wesleys

John Wesley (1707-1788)

Charles Wesley (1703-1791)

Generally speaking, John Wesley is considered the preacher and Charles the songwriter. Charles did indeed write songs — about 6,000 of them. The Wesley brothers were sons of Samuel and Susannah Wesley, their father a preacher at Epworth, in the Church of England. Their mother, who had eighteen children, taught them all to read by using the Bible as a textbook.

When Charles and John attended Oxford University they joined up with several other earnest young men (such as George Whitefield), and formed the “Holy Club”, where they used a system of “methods” to live the Christian life, hence the term, “Methodist”.

Charles and John went on a mission trip to the “New World” in an effort to evangelize the Indians of the state of Georgia. Their mission work proved largely unsuccessful, but on the way, they were greatly impressed by a group of Moravian Brethren traveling by ship from Germany. When their ship was hit by a heavy storm in the cold North Atlantic, many passengers cried out in fear, but the Moravians calmly sat and began to sing hymns in their native German tongue. John, especially, would never forget their faith and courage, and he later traveled to Germany where he befriended a church leader named Count Von Zinzendorf. He subsequently translated several of the Moravian hymns, so deep and heartfelt, into English.

(406) “Lo, He Comes With Clouds Descending”

“Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness”

131 “Give to the Winds Your Fears”

John began to preach in the out of doors to the ordinary people of urban England. His preaching was powerful, yet spoken in the simple terms that the man in the street could understand. Often he

would deliver fifteen sermons a week. Whitefield and Wesley sparked a great spiritual revival in England, and many believe that it was their preaching that spared their land from the violence and bloodshed of a revolution such as the one that swept over France with such devastation. Charles did his part in these revivals by beginning to write hymns that taught the tough industrial crowds of London, Birmingham, and Liverpool almost as much as his brother's preaching!

Charles had the ability to express the most sublime truths in a few words, and picked up the mantle from Isaac Watts to enrich our worship in song.

(46) “Arise, My Soul, Arise”

Rather like Isaac Watts, Wesley's songs are full of scriptural references. This song is an excellent example of this. “Before the throne, my surety stands” comes from Ephesians 1:14. “He ever lives above, for me to intercede” quotes Hebrews 7:25. “His blood atones for all our race, and sprinkles now the throne of grace” from Hebrews 10:22. “With confidence, I now draw nigh” (Hebrews 4:16). “And father, Abba father cry” (Romans 8:15). To me, the line “my name is written on his hands” is as beautiful a way as there is of expressing the truth that those hands, pierced through with nails, were scarred specifically because of his love for me.

(108) “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus”

(285) “I Know that My Redeemer Lives”

140* (405) “Love Divine”**

233 (468) “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”

Wesley wrote this hymn following a chance remark by a Moravian friend, Peter Bohler, who said: “Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise Christ Jesus with all of them.” Often I hear someone say, “I love to sing.” It is a sentiment I can appreciate, but perhaps more to the point, we should say, “I love to sing praise to Christ.” It is not so much our love of music that causes us to sing as it is our love for the Master!

284 (548) “Rejoice, the Lord Is King!”

345 (97) “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today”

371 “And Can It Be That I Should Gain?”

647 (585) “Soldiers of Christ Arise”

807 (365) “Jesus Lover of My Soul” (Martyn)

814 (364) “Jesus Lover of My Soul” (Refuge)

Henry Ward Beecher once said of this song, “I would rather have written that hymn of Wesley’s than to have all the fame of all the kings of earth...people will go on singing that hymn until the last trump brings forth the angel band.” For any worshipper who feels himself to be under grave threat, this song is a great comfort, singing as it does of the refuge that can be found in God alone: “Other refuge, have I none” Wesley declared, “hangs my helpless soul on thee.”

Wesley’s final verse, which speaks of God’s grace rising from within the singer like “streams” is probably drawn from John 7:37,38: “*Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.*”

“Plenteous grace with thee is found, grace to cover all my sin;
Let the healing streams abound; Make and keep me pure
within;
Thou of life, the fountain art, Freely let me take of thee;
Spring thou up within my heart, rise to all eternity.”

What about the archaic words found in many of these older songs, such as those ending in “est”, or the archaic personal pronouns, “thou” and “thee”? In some songs the pronoun can be changed without losing the rhythm and meaning of the song. Perhaps the editors of hymnbooks still to come will take the initiative. Louis Hartsough’s song, “I Am Coming, Lord” could be changed without any damage to quality and meaning from: “I hear *thy* welcome voice, that calls me, Lord to *thee*” to “I hear *your* welcome voice, that calls me, Lord to *you*.” Another useful adjustment

could be done to Thomas Chisolm's "Only in Thee". The song could open, therefore, with the words, "Only in you, O savior mine, dwells my soul in peace divine".

The use of these pronouns, however, is not so difficult that they cannot be understood. "Thee" and "Thou" are second person pronouns ("you"), and their meaning is not hard to discern. I can remember singing these songs as a young child and having no problem understanding their intention. Some worshipper's objection to these old English terms probably has more to do with a semblance of sophistication that equates "modern things" with being "progressive" and old things with being backward. It would be a pity to lose any of Isaac Watts' or Charles Wesley's classic hymns on the false notion that the language is not "state of the art". Use of these pronouns in prayer falls into a different category, however; there is no reason to assume that God is being addressed more respectfully by an archaic pronoun as with a modern one! Shakespeare and Watts spoke like that in the 16th Century; in the 21st Century, we do not!

1001 (202) "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing!"

The rich and deeply personal sentiments of Isaac Watts' songs and those of Charles Wesley need to be sung by every believer because they express so eloquently our deepest feelings. Bud Wilkinson, the late coach of Oklahoma University, once described a football game as "an event where seventy thousand people needing exercise come to watch twenty-two people needing rest." Our worship in song is not a spectator sport. God requires that our worship for him be more than sounds and words; he demands that we worship from the heart. All the pomp and circumstance, all the musical skill and aesthetic pleasure are for naught if the Lord looks and sees that our hearts are dead, our worship a drudgery. There is no substitute for the simple devotion of a humble, sincere heart!

* "Songs of Faith and Praise"

** "Praise for the Lord"

Questions

1. What are the implications of understanding worship in terms of “offering” rather than something to receive and expect?
2. Watts’ “new” songs were not universally well received. What does this say about “new” and “old” songs today?
3. “Had I a thousand tongues to sing.” Have you ever been part of a worship service in a mission field, in a language other than English? What did you learn from the experience, and their singing?
4. Suggest some other ways that we can continue to receive the benefit of older songs with archaic terms in our day.
5. Discuss the importance of worship in song as participation as opposed to spectator sport.

Chapter 9

But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven"

(Matthew 19:14)

“This I Know.”

The “Sunday School” Movement

Jerry McDade and his wife were out walking one Sunday morning when they heard singing so beautiful that they just had to stop and listen. Both were members of the Anglican Church (he was English), and had heard beautiful choirs sing, but what made this so startling was that it was congregational singing. Ordinary Christians raised their voices in adoration with such feeling that it compelled visitors to come in. It wasn't long before they were baptized into Christ.

Some time ago I was in a church building that had a screen in the front where words were projected for songs without printed music. This seems to be a brotherhood trend. I spoke to one of the members, and he said: “We might as well have only the words to songs. Most people can't read music anyway!”

I thought: “When did we concede the point?”

We need to teach our people to sing. We need to teach our children, and our new members. You know by now that I worshipped many years in Africa with neither hymnbooks nor multi-media capacity. For a bush church meeting on a rock under a tree, *Power Point* presentations are not controversial! It's not the technology that worries me.

I am afraid we will lose our capacity for congregational singing. We need to train our young people to sing, just as I remember train-

ing African brethren by song. We can develop our ability further. We can learn new songs. It is important to remember our objective. We aren't training children to sight read Gregorian Chants or Bach's quartet music. In congregations across the land, however, we have always had the remarkable ability to pick out a harmony so that the new song takes hold and becomes a part of our worship in song. That's a precious heritage indeed!

And one more thing. A century ago, when the organ was brought into Churches of Christ, the reason was: "Our singing is so bad that this will improve it." I never want that to happen to this fellowship that I love again.

I remember singing "Jesus Loves Me, This I know" to my child. Now she's twelve, sings a rather good alto if I may say so, can sight read a new song, and loves to sing. It's no accident.

Children learn a great deal from songs. Think of this fundamental difference between a child and an adult. Tell an adult that God is "right here", in our midst, and he will react with skepticism. But tell a child that God, though unseen, is here with us, and with the faith of the innocent, he will say, "OK!"

In the seventeen and eighteen hundreds, a movement in Britain and the United States began that emphasized songs specifically written for children.

Robert Raikes (1736-1811)

Raikes was born in Gloucester, England, and grew up to be a newspaper editor. He became intensely concerned about the condition of those children who worked in the factories of industrial England. Their working conditions were deplorable, they were shamefully exploited, and many did not grow beyond their teenage years.

Because the only day they had off was Sunday, Raikes took them off the streets and began a "Sunday School", where they were taught from the Bible to read and write. In the years that followed

a large number of hymn writers used the medium of song to teach these children the Bible. The rhyme and meter of the song, along with a tune, proved an excellent way to convey God's truth to children. On both sides of the Atlantic, children's songs began to proliferate.

Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895)

A mark of great writing is the ability to make profound truths understandable to children. Mrs. Cecil F. Alexander had that ability. She was born in Tyrone, Ireland, and married the future archbishop of Ireland, William Alexander. As influential as he was, she probably made a greater impact on future generations of children with her songs.

When she was a little girl, she wrote poems in secret, hiding them under the carpet of her room, fearing that her father, a stern military officer, would disapprove. When he found her writings, however, he gave her a special box with a slit in the top for her to put in her new poems, and from then on, he read her works out loud with pride.

(656) “There Is a Green Hill Far Away”

#399* (344) “Jesus Calls Us, O'er the Tumult”**

Here is a song that expresses beautifully the need for the Christian to turn his back on the distractions of earthly life and to serve God completely. Taking her thoughts perhaps from Jesus' words to Peter in John 21:15: “*Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these,*” Alexander develops a theme where the singer asks the Lord for help in serving and loving Jesus “best of all”.

85 (24) “All Things Bright and Beautiful”

Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924)

646 (522) “Onward Christian Soldiers”

This song was written for a parade day in central Yorkshire. Baring-Gould wanted to find a way to keep the children in his church group marching together, so he wrote the lyrics to this hymn. Notice especially his dependence on passages such as Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 28:19,20, expressing the thought that though human empires might rise and fall, God's kingdom will survive forever.

795 (460) "Now the Day Is Over"

This song was written for the children in Baring-Gould's local church at Hornbury Bridge, England. It was based on the words of Proverbs 3:24.

992 (78) "Can You Count the Stars?" (Johann Hey, Elmer Jorgenson)

Anna Bartlett Warner (1820-1915)

Anna and her sister Susan were daughters of a wealthy New York City lawyer. He purchased an old mansion on Constitution Island but was in danger of losing the property when he suffered financial disaster. His daughters turned their hand to writing. Both wrote successful novels, but Anna also wrote hymns, of which "Jesus Loves Me" must be the most famous ever written. Her words, simple yet profound, convey a Biblical certainty. For more than fifty years the sisters would arrange to row the young students at West Point across to Warner House where they would teach Bible Class. When Anna died at ninety-five years of age, she was buried with full military honors.

1014 (810) "Jesus Loves Me"

"Jesus Bids Us Shine"

William O. Cushing (1823-1902)

714 (812) "When He Cometh"

Based on the passage in Malachi 3:17, this song profoundly expresses the value of God’s children in his sight. For twenty years Cushing was a successful preacher amongst the Disciples of Christ, but upon the death of his wife in 1870, his health failed drastically, including his ability to speak. In this trying time he prayed, “Lord, give me something to do for thee.” It was then that he began to write hymns, especially children’s hymns.

1015 (809) “Jesus Loves the Little Children” (Clarence Woolston)

I think it is important to notice the content of these songs. While the vocabulary might be less complex than the typical adult song, the thinking and teaching are not insultingly simplistic. These songs neither talk down to children, nor do they forget the hymn’s principle function, to teach God’s word and God’s ways.

Soon after his triumphal entry, the crowds (Matthew notes that they were children) continued to sing in the temple courts because of Jesus’ miracles. Not everyone was pleased. The Pharisees said to Jesus, “*Teacher, rebuke your disciples!*” *‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out!’*” (Luke 19:39,40).

I think of the difference between the profound simplicity of “Jesus loves me, this I know,” and the profound thinking behind Bernard of Clairvaux’s “O Sacred Head Now Wounded”.

“What language shall I borrow, to thank thee dearest friend,
For this thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever; and should I fainting be,
Lord let me never, never, Out live my love for thee.”

We may outgrow rocking horses, and we may outgrow rock music, but it is imperative that we never outgrow our commitment to the Christ we worship! Otherwise, a rock will have to take our place!

The Hebrew writer takes his language from the world of educa-

tion when he speaks of that church's need to "grow up". Although they had been Christians long enough, one would suppose, to be teachers, they in fact needed someone to teach them "*the elementary truths of God's word all over again.*" Then, switching analogies, he adds, "*You need milk, not solid food!*" (Hebrews 5:12). "*Solid food,*" he explains, "*is for the mature*" (Hebrews 5:14).

There are two things we learn from this passage. The first is that a natural step in a Christian's development is the need to feed on milk. Babies in Christ cannot digest meat; though they must not perpetually feed on milk, the milk stage is a natural step in their development.

There comes a time, however, when Christians should "grow up", when they should grow beyond dependence on everyone else, and become the one others depend on. What was unnatural about the situation in this Hebrew church was that though some were chronologically mature, they were not temperamentally mature. "By this time" they should have grown. It is natural for Christians to grow out of the milk of the word and advance to the meat of the word. In terms of our hymns, too, it is unnatural for a person to be a long-time Christian who still insists on simplistic, one-dimensional lyrics. In order for him to mature and to maintain that maturity, he will have to feed on the meat of the word, and to think on mature, adult-type lyrics.

There is an important place for children's songs. The songs our teens and college students sing are yet another step in their development. The question church leaders (parents, preachers, elders, song leaders) must ask is whether these songs teach God's word, albeit at a child's (or teenager's level). Why do we need to ask this? Because it is our responsibility, in the classroom, in the home, and in the Bible class room to see that these precious souls are fed healthy, nutritious spiritual food.

As Peter says, we should be "like newborn babies", craving "*pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salva-*

tion” (1 Peter 2:2). Children are innocents, and they idolize their teachers. With simple faith they trust their teacher’s every word, and this fact should weigh heavily on our hearts as a deep responsibility, both to teach God’s will correctly and to model it correctly before them.

Many of today’s children’s songs are good songs, giving our children at the outset of their Christian formation a healthy, sound view of the Bible’s message. Just think how marvelous it is that a child’s first introduction in song to the Gospel is the words to Anna Warner’s “Jesus Loves Me”, or “Jesus Loves the Little Children, all the Children of the World”. From their earliest years they are taught through song that they are valued by the most important character in history, and that they should equally value children of other races and lands. The implications for young minds, the possibilities for mission work and racial harmony, are infinite!

Anyone who has gone to Sunday School knows Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 7:24-27 precisely because we have sung the words to “The Wise Man” a thousand times. We understand the Lord’s teaching on our influence (Matthew 5:14-16) because we have sung “This Little Light of Mine”. Children can learn these concepts, and they do so readily through the magic of song.

But because children are innocent, and because we bear such responsibility as teachers (James 3:1), we must take thought on their behalf regarding the songs they sing. While granting that children’s songs should express the Gospel message in simplicity, we should still take care that they teach scripture. Mindlessly shallow songs such as “Father Abraham”, no matter how rousing, should be kept to a minimum, and songs that teach God’s will should be emphasized.

Karl Barth, the renowned Swiss theologian, at the end of a distinguished academic career was asked by admirers what had been the most profound theological insight of all his reading and research. Barth solemnly addressed his hearers: “Jesus loves me,

this I know. For the Bible tells me so.” For children, their parents and grandparents, this song still expresses the simplest, and profoundest, of truths!

* **“Songs of Faith and Praise”**

** **“Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. Compare these children's songs to the ones we use today. How do they differ?
2. Name a couple of children's songs (today) that you feel are particularly good. Why do you think so?
3. Name a couple of children's songs that are not so good. Why?
4. For an excellent devotional exercise, try this. Ask several adults to name their favorite children's song, and why they think it is a good one. Encourage your group of adults to enter into the spirit of things by including the hand motions and all. This will teach humility (how can you keep up a pretense of sophistication while putting a candle "under a bushel, no!"). It will also give parents an idea of what children's songs do, and do not, teach.

Chapter 10

“If I had been given a choice at birth, I would have asked to be blind...for when I get to heaven, the first face I will see will be the one who died for me.” (Fanny Crosby)

“We Walk by Faith, and not by Sight”

Hymns in America

By now you may be asking this question: why are we looking at songs, delving into their background, and looking at the thoughts they convey anyway? Frankly, one of my concerns is that as society steadily “dumbs down”, the effects are being felt in the church. We feel relentless pressure to think in a shallow manner. One theologian has said that “North American Protestantism” is “man-centered, manipulative, success-oriented, self-indulgent and sentimental.” It is, he concludes “3,000 miles wide and a half-inch deep” (Packer, page 22).

What lies behind some of the clamor for exclusively new songs, whose “theological content makes a nursery rhyme sound like Thomas Aquinas” (Keck, page 42), is a desire to entice society to come to our churches by means of caving in to its standards.

Christianity is a *thinking* religion. Early Christians out-thought their pagan contemporaries. They studied their Bibles, and reasoned with their friends and neighbors (Acts 17:2). When Paul urged the Romans to offer their lives as “living sacrifices”, he included in this not only a call to avoid the “pattern of the world” but to “*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Romans 12:1,2).

The words “renew our minds” implies that on a regular basis our minds become worn down, depleted, drained and exhausted. As we rub elbows with the world, as we hear the sordid thinking of our colleagues, observe the base thinking on television, we need to touch base regularly with the Lord, to “renew our thinking”.

The temptation is, as one social commentator says, to lower ourselves down to the world’s level, rather than drawing them up, out of the muck. “We do not serve” our communities, “we pander to them!” (Carl Bernstein, “The Idiot Culture”, *The New Republic*, June 8, 1992, page 25).

Worship should raise our thinking to God, not lower it to the standards of those around us. “*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things*” (Colossians 3:2). Our preaching should raise the level of our thinking; the Lord’s Supper should raise our consciousness; and the words of our songs should enrich our thinking, too. They should teach us.

While we must certainly learn new songs, for they enrich the body of hymns we already have, we dare not lose the deep thinking and rich expression of our older songs, lest our thinking be diluted and cheapened, and in the end we find we have nothing to offer the world about us.

Songs From North America

By the year 1700, the average American congregation knew about 13 songs. Obviously this led to a very monotonous worship service. It also gave rise to a uniquely American phenomenon, the Singing School, organized in an effort to teach congregations to sing. Along with the singing school came the general use in congregations of notes. One of the early influences was Thomas Symess, who wrote, “The Reasonableness of Singing by Notes”. After several systems of musical notations were tried, these singing schools settled on a seven-tone system, devised by Jesse Aikins in 1847. He used a shaped note system, each note represented by a

different shape. This made it easier for congregations to sight-read music.

Ray Palmer (1808-1887)

586* (442) “My Faith Looks Up to Thee”**

Some have suggested that Palmer’s “My Faith Looks Up to Thee” was the finest American hymn ever written. Palmer was born in Rhode Island, but when financial difficulties hit his family he had to quit school at thirteen and take on a job as clerk in Boston. Later he resumed his education and completed a degree from Yale. As a young man he taught in a private school. Following a difficult year in which he suffered from illness and loneliness, he wrote the words to this song. Two years later he met Lowell Mason who had written music for numerous hymns. Rather shyly, Palmer handed him the lyrics. Mason declared, “You may become known for many things, but you will be best known for writing this song.”

Fanny Crosby (1820-1915)

(Hebrews 11:1; 1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Corinthians 5:7; John 9:25; 39-41)

Before she was a year old, Fanny became desperately ill. A country doctor prescribed a poultice for her eyes, and the mixture caused an infection that resulted in her blindness. The frightened man left the region and was never heard from again. When Fanny’s grandmother heard that she was blind, she declared, “Then I will be her eyes.” She described to the little girl the color of the rainbow, the shape of a tree, everything that surrounded her. She also taught Fanny the scripture, one verse at a time, until the little girl had memorized entire chapters.

For the first fifteen years of her life she lived with her family in rural New York, but when they found a school for the blind in New York City, she became their star student. It wasn’t long before

Fanny Crosby was a teacher in that same school. She was already a nationally-known poet before she had written the lyrics to her first hymn. She spoke to congress (the first woman to do so), and moved the august lawmakers to tears with her appeal to provide more schools for the blind.

In 1848 a terrible outbreak of cholera swept through the city. Crosby was evacuated for her health, but the deaths began to make her think seriously. In 1850 she heard a church sing Isaac Watts' classic, "Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed". The words that struck home to Crosby were: "Here, lord, I give myself away; 'tis all that I can do."

Crosby decided to do just that; she gave her life to the Lord. The great publisher William Bradbury asked her to write some words for a piece of music he had. He was so impressed with her efforts that he declared: "As long as I have a publishing house, you will always have work." She was the leading poet for the "Gospel Hymn" movement that also included D.L. Moody and Ira Sankey.

For years she worked in a soup kitchen in the New York ghetto, and she was well known amongst the poor of that city for her willingness to listen and talk about their troubles. It was while working in this mission that she wrote the words to "Rescue the Perishing". For many years she would write two songs a week, many of them still favorites today.

It's fascinating to read Crosby's lyrics while recalling that she was blind. Her "insight" was certainly not impaired by her handicap! Here is an uplifting exercise: note all the references in her writings to the verb "to see" and its cognates. Can you imagine a blind woman writing the lyrics below? There are more subtle references, such as the need to be "led" (blind people are certainly aware of that!), the willingness to be told the old story (because they can't "see" it), and so on. Look at these songs as examples:

4 (682) "To God Be the Glory"

In verse two, Crosby writes,

“Great things he hath taught us, great things he hath done
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the son
But purer and higher and greater will be
Our wonder, our transport, *when Jesus we see.*”

Some time ago I performed the funeral of a dear Christian brother who was deaf. My first words were: “The first thing Curtis Hendrix will *hear* will be the voice of his savior saying, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant!’” The very first thing a blind person would *see*, I suppose, would be Jesus Christ himself! How Crosby must have imagined that event during her years of blindness.

(22) “All The Way My Savior Leads Me”

I wonder how many times the sightless Crosby was led by the hand or the arm in her life? There is a sense in which a blind person understands dependence to a much greater degree than we. Notice these words:

“All the way my savior leads me
What have I to ask beside?”

One can hardly imagine someone so cruel as to lead a blind person part of the way, then abandon him or her on the street side, several hundred feet from the safety of the destination. Yet there are those in life who will abandon us, through sin or weakness, before our journey is done. On the other hand, Jesus will lead us “all the way” to our heavenly destination.

(526) “Pass Me Not”

This song is probably based on the passage in Matthew 20:30, where Jesus “passes by” two blind men on the road outside Jericho. When they cry out, “*Jesus, son of David, have mercy on us,*” he returns and asks them what they want. They respond, “*Lord, we want our sight.*” Crosby uses their words as her refrain:

“Savior, Savior,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others thou art calling,
Do not pass me by.”

You might surmise that Crosby understands the two blind men’s cries particularly well, but in the song she does not ask for the Lord to have her physical sight restored. Instead, the song is a plea for healing to “my wounded, broken spirit”, a plea to be saved by God’s grace. There is an especially moving reference to her desire to “see” God in the way a blind person might: “Trusting only in thy merit,” she writes, “Would I seek thy face.”

Of course this is a theme often expressed in the Old Testament, too. The Psalmist repeatedly speaks of his desire to seek God, as a blind man might, by reaching out his hands and feeling the very face of God: “*My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, Lord, I will seek*” (Psalm 27:8).

(581) “Sing on Ye Joyful Pilgrims”

This blind lady, whose insight seems to outdistance most of us who see, wrote of her vision of heaven this way:

“Lo, on the Mount of Blessing, the glorious Mount I stand,
And looking over Jordan, I see the Promised Land.”

The reference is, of course, to the day Moses looked from Mount Nebo into the Promised Land just before his death (Deuteronomy 34:1-4). Songwriters often appeal to the Promised Land imagery to refer to heaven, but Crosby’s vision of it seems to be particularly clear.

383 (359) “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross”

Perhaps as vivid as any is what Crosby sees in her mind’s eye of the crucifixion scene. She writes:

“Near the cross, O Lamb of God,
Bring its scenes before me
Help me walk from day to day
with its shadow o’er me.”

Every preacher has struggled to bring the scenes of the crucifixion before his hearers. Paul put it this way: “*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was **clearly portrayed** as crucified.*” Crosby’s lyrics paint the word picture perfectly.

387 (622) “Tell Me the Story of Jesus”

In “Tell me the Story of Jesus”, she does it again. In her third, and climactic verse, she writes:

“Tell of the cross where they nailed him,
 Writhing in anguish and pain;
Tell of the grave where they laid him,
 Tell how he liveth again.
Love in that story so tender,
 Clearer than ever I see.
Stay, let me weep while you whisper,
 ‘Love paid the ransom for me.’”

She certainly did see it all, clear as a bell. Though her sight was dark, her mind was alight with the images, and no one has written of the Lord’s death more eloquently.

473 (559) “Safe in the Arms of Jesus”

In this song Crosby again imagines the day of her rising to see Jesus in terms of the night (here on earth), and the dawning of a new day (in heaven).

“Here let me wait with patience,
 Wait till the night is o’er
Wait till I see the morning
 Break on the golden shore.”

480 (71) “Blessed Assurance”

In this song of faith in God’s assurance, she recalls Jacob’s dream at Bethel in Genesis 28:10-12:

“Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture, now burst on my sight;
Angels descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.”

Then she speaks of her watchful attitude, anticipating the Lord’s return:

“Perfect submission, all is at rest
I in my savior am happy and blessed
Watching and waiting, looking above
Filled with his goodness, lost in his love.”

Crosby might have been thinking of the words of Jesus: “*Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come*” (Matthew 24:42). What a pity it would be if there weren’t some people with their physical sight intact watching with her!

485 (616,617) “Take the World But Give Me Jesus”

As usual, taking her cue from Biblical allusion, Crosby writes of the day she will “see” her Lord “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12, NKJV).

“Take the world, but give me Jesus,
In his cross, my trust shall be.
Till with clearer, brighter vision
Face to face my Lord I see.”

501 (683) “Though Your Sins Be as Scarlet”

In this beautiful hymn that draws its inspiration from the prophet Isaiah (1:18), Crosby lays out poetically the prophet's appeal to sinners. Whether consciously or unconsciously, she again uses the imagery of sight:

“He'll forgive your transgressions,
And remember them no more
'Look unto me, ye people',
Saith the Lord your God.”

God's people Israel seemed to have a very short attention span, looking from one “savior” to another. We are not much different today, appealing to our own strength, or some “sure fire” church growth method. How much better to be like Fanny Crosby wrote in her hymns, and look steadfastly to God for guidance and strength!

508 (9) “A Wonderful Savior”

In a world that is as uncertain for the blind as for those who see, a solid place to stand is pretty important. In this song Crosby speaks of Jesus as a savior who hides her in the safest of refuges:

“He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,
Where rivers of pleasure I see.”

514 (544) “Redeemed”

Drawing perhaps from Psalm 1:1,2, Crosby writes again of the day she believed she would see her Lord:

“I know *I shall see in his beauty,*
The king in whose law I delight.”

Judging from the number of times this theme of seeing Jesus appears, it is evident that she thought about it a great deal.

666 (261) “I Am Thine, O Lord”

In this song of consecration, Crosby pleads:

*“Let my soul look up, with a steadfast hope
And my will be lost in thine.”*

Although Crosby’s eyes could see nothing, her soul saw a great deal, and it seems clear that she looked up to her Lord from the very depths of her being. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we, too, could see God’s steadfastness with something more than our physical eyes?

841 (230) “Hide Me, O My Savior”

When I think of Crosby’s words here, I wonder where a blind person could hide. When danger threatens, it must be terrifying to be blind and not be sure if one is safely hidden from that danger. But for Crosby, there was one place where this was so:

*“Hide me O my savior hide me
In thy holy place;
Resting there beneath thy glory
O let me see thy face.”*

The Lord once worked with a man who had physically been blind, but his ire was reserved for those who, though they could see, were spiritually blind. *“For judgment I have come into this world,”* he declared, *“so that the blind will see, and those who see may become blind”* (John 9:39). When the Pharisees took umbrage at this remark, Jesus responded, *“If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim that you can see, your guilt remains”* (John 9:41).

Sometimes it is our very ability to see that makes us blind. Perhaps it is not the darkness, but the very blinding light of all that our physical eyesight takes in which blinds us from the unseen, and the eternal. Fanny Crosby reminds us that *“faith is the substance*

of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

Other songs written by this softhearted visionary are given below.

(700) “To the Work!”

(771) “Will You Come, Will You Come?”

300 (532) “Praise Him! Praise Him!”

584 (101) “Thou My Everlasting Portion”

639 (551) “Rescue the Perishing”

849 (689) “’Tis the Blessed Hour of Prayer”

862 (567) “Savior, More than Life to Me”

947 (356) “Jesus Is Tenderly Calling”

“Let My People Go”

Spirituals

(Exodus 5:1; Galatians 5:1; Isaiah 61:1; 2 Corinthians 3:17; John 8:34)

The term “spiritual” usually refers to a hymn whose origin was oral rather than written, and whose language reflects the every-day speech of those who sang it. Many spirituals, therefore, had their origin in England, Wales, Scotland and Spain. These made their way across the Atlantic to New England and the Appalachians.

Many “Negro Spirituals” are the result of melding “white” and “African” traditions. Their songs arose, of course, out of their background of tribulation as slaves. Because they were passed on orally, they have changed considerably from region to region, and over the years. Recent interpretations of Negro Spirituals, somewhat cynically, have suggested that they are allegorical expressions of the slaves’ desire to escape economic slavery under the guise of Christian lyrics.

This is probably simplistic. The slaves hung on to their faith precisely because of the tough times they faced, and their songs are

a marvelous expression of the faith that sustained them. Their oft-expressed themes of freedom, given their condition, is perfectly understandable. Whether escape was attained by geographical flight to the north, or a release from life's trials to the next life, these songs echo a deep longing for the freedom offered in Christ. Such songs as "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen", and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", can be interpreted at several levels.

966 "Amen"

962* (734)** "Were You There?"

"Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"

979 (252) "A Poor Wayfaring Stranger"

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"

988 (826) "I'll Be Listening"

961 (881) "There Is a Balm in Gilead"

960 "It's Me"

958 "In My Father's House"

"Turn Your Radio On!"

J.R. Baxter (1889-1960)

Virgil O. Stamps (1892-1940)

Virgil Stamps and J.R. Baxter contributed to hymnology as singers, publishers and composers. They took over the publishing company begun by A.J. Showalter and began to publish hymnbooks, but they are probably best known for the performance of the Stamps Quartet in the 1920's over the radio. Because technology was limited, these performances were live, and therefore had to be good the first time! Stamps and Baxter are remembered for a particular genre of hymns that are known for their lively pace and staggered harmony parts.

As has been the case with many "new" hymns in history, acceptance of these songs was hard at first. Many felt their synco-

pated rhythm was not “becoming” for worship, or that the words tended to be shallower than earlier hymns. As has also been the case through history, however, the best of these hymns rose to acceptance and remained a part of our worship in song, while the ones that didn’t quite make the grade were forgotten. Most worshippers sense when a song genuinely speaks to them, and when it does not. Examples of the Stamps Baxter genre are given below:

351 (820) **“He Bore it All”**

831 (391) **“Let Me Live Close to Thee”**

859 (839) **“When All of God’s Singers Get Home”**

898 (527) **“Paradise Valley”**

258 (837) **“The New Song”**

* **“Songs of Faith and Praise”**

** **“Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. Discuss the suggestion that society has begun to “dumb down”. Can you cite some examples of this?
2. How does this “dumbing down” affect the church?
3. Often blind people are said to develop their other senses more keenly because of their blindness. Discuss the question of spiritual blindness. How do we avoid this ailment?
4. It has been suggested that historically, some songs were not well received when they were first introduced. Can you think of some songs in your lifetime that were once popular, and are no longer sung. Why did they drift into obscurity? Do some of them warrant reintroduction?
5. What about those songs that have survived the test of years? Why have they done so?

Chapter 11

When We Meet in Sweet Communion

According to Webster's Dictionary, a "straw man" is "a weak argument or opposing view set up by a politician, debater etc., so that he can attack it and gain an easy, showy victory."

You set up a straw man when you pretend that your opponent believes something silly, and you demolish his weak argument in one great slam-dunk. A good example of this is when some foreigners point to one "ugly" American doing something rash or insensitive, then pretend that all Americans are like him. It's illogical and unfair!

It's a common tactic in churches, too. I would like to remove some "straw men" in the church's current debate over worship. To those who wish to make wholesale changes in the way we worship, I wish to say this kindly, but plainly.

It's not about the screen in front. A screen, a hymnbook, or a song sung from memory has little to do with the heart's condition. It's not about singing "new" songs or "old" songs, "contemporary" songs or "traditional" songs. All songs were new once; all songs will be old soon enough. It's not about "two songs and a prayer". I have never heard anyone, anywhere say that this is the "scriptural order of worship". I have only heard the phrase set up as a "straw man".

It's not about raising hands in prayer, or closing one's eyes in apparent ecstasy during a song. Personally, I would just as soon that we restore the old fashioned practice of kneeling in prayer, too! Sometimes when the body kneels in humility, it has a similar effect on the attitude!

Neither is it about singing with warmth and enthusiasm, in

other words, singing from the bottom of our hearts. If a child of God fails to sing with all his heart, “conservative” or “progressive”, then he needs to do some soul searching!

It is about our continuing desire to seek the pages of scripture for a “thus saith the Lord” for everything we do. About song books and praise songs the Bible says not a thing. About the role of women in worship, the high place of public preaching, and *a cappella* singing, it says a great deal.

There was a time that people dismissed Jesus as a “*glutton and a drunkard*” (Matthew 11:19). They also said he forbade paying taxes to Caesar (Luke 23:2). Both characterizations were “straw men”. Instead of setting up straw men, let’s go back to scripture, and find out what God wants. Therein we will find, not scarecrows, but statutes, by which we should live and worship.

Probably because churches of Christ have sung, and sung so well, we have also developed a rich heritage in song writing and hymn book editing.

Alexander Campbell (1788-1866)

Campbell published the first hymnbook amongst churches of Christ. His book purposefully lacked musical notations because he believed that the music would prove a distraction for the worshipper, who would then worry more about the music than the words. It was entitled “Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs”, and was published in 1828. Walter Scott, Barton W. Stone and John T. Johnson collaborated with Campbell to publish a second edition in 1832.

Scott was an accomplished singer, and he began a singing school in Carthage, Ohio. In 1839 he published his own hymnbook, one which included musical notations. He believed that without the written music, singers would have to depend on memory, and because human memory is limited, the variety and beauty of the songs would become limited too.

Knowles Shaw (1834-1878)

Shaw was the first known songwriter in the churches of Christ in America. Born in Ohio, he benefited from Walter Scott's singing school and conducted both Gospel Meetings and singing schools throughout his life. His father died when he was just thirteen years old. The elder Shaw's last words to his son were, "*Prepare to meet your God*" (Amos 4:12). He was killed tragically young, in a train wreck on the way to a singing school in McKinney, Texas. The following are some of his songs.

(260) "I Am the Vine"

783* (609) "Tarry With Me"**

(84) "Bringing in the Sheaves"

342 (726) "We Saw Thee Not"

This song is based on the text in John 20:29, following Thomas' insistence upon seeing the nail marks on Jesus' body. Jesus pronounces a blessing on all those who, though not seeing, have believed.

James Fillmore (1849-1936)

Fred Fillmore (1856-1925)

These brothers were part of the musical family that formed the Fillmore Brothers Music House. James was a preacher and writer of music. He scored the music for such well-known hymns as "There's a Garden" and "Purer in Heart". Fred did both lyrics and music.

596 (332) "In the Desert of Sorrow and Sin"

643 (589) "Are You Sowing the Seed?"

528 (282) "I Know That My Redeemer Lives"

The words to this song come from Job's plaintive cry in Job 19:25. Several other songs have found their inspiration from this passage, too.

Will Thompson (1849-1909)

Thompson, born in Ohio, was one of the most accomplished musical people in the early Restoration Movement. As a young man he decided to dedicate himself to helping the singing of the church, and to this end received training in the New England Conservatory of Music, and a musical school in Leipzig, Germany.

Thompson worked with Dwight L. Moody in some of his revivals. It is said that on his deathbed, Moody whispered to Thompson, “Will, I would rather have written ‘Softly and Tenderly’ than anything I have been able to do in my entire life.”

823 (379) “**Lead Me Gently Home**”

934 (584) “**Softly and Tenderly**”

590 (348) “**Jesus Is All the World to Me**”

(674) “**There’s a Great Day Coming**”

Tillit Teddlie (1886-1988)

Teddlie was born in Swan, Texas, near Tyler, and was a product of the Southern Development Normal singing school in Waco. He was a preacher and songwriter. One of his best friends was the secular songwriter Stephen Foster (“Camp Town Races”, “My Old Kentucky Home”), and Teddlie’s writing style reflected the smooth, easy style of Foster’s. By the middle of the twentieth century Teddlie had already reached normal retirement age, but he continued well into his nineties writing songs and conducting singing schools.

(764) “**When We Meet in Sweet Communion**”

(39) “**Angels Are Singing**”

230 (782) “**Worthy Art Thou**”

These words are found on the lips of the angels, “*numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand upon ten thousand*” (Revelation 5:11,12).

884 (225) “**Heaven Holds All to Me**”

Teddle's words, "earth holds no treasure but perish with using" probably stem from passages such as Matthew 6:19-21 and Hebrews 11:16.

375 (495) "Oh, the Depth and the Riches"

(340) "Into Our Hands"

(511) "Oft We Come Together"

From Camp Meeting to Contemporary

L.O. Sanderson (1901-1992)

L.O. Sanderson was a well-known Gospel preacher, song leader and songwriter. Born in Jonesboro, Arkansas, he studied music in the Little Rock Conservatory of Music, and at the University of Arkansas. Following a ministry in Springfield, Missouri, he was hired by the Gospel Advocate Company to edit a hymnbook. His first publication, "Christian Hymns I" was published shortly before World War II. His second edition, "Christian Hymns II" was one of the most popular in churches of Christ.

778* (40)** "Be With Me Lord"

911 (67) "Bring Christ Your Broken Life"

619 (85) "Buried With Christ"

443 (249) "How Precious Is the Book" (Psalm 119:105)

688 (303) "I'll Never Forsake My Lord"

(615) "That Dreadful Night"

(787) "Yes, for Me He Careth"

(117) "Crossing the Bar"

386 (217) "He Loves Me"

821 (537) "Pray All the Time"

This song probably had 1 Thessalonians 5:17 in mind.

(638) "The Lord Has Been Mindful of Me"

(644) "'Tis Set the Feast Divine"

Albert Brumley (1905-1977)

Albert Brumley was born on a cotton farm near Spiro, Oklahoma. As a young man he attended the Hartford Music Institute just across the border in Hartford, Arkansas. Because he was their star student, he was hired after graduation to work for the company. This he did for a number of years until the Stamps Baxter Company hired him to write songs for them. At a later date, Brumley was able to buy the assets of the Hartford Music Company and bring it to his home in Powell, Missouri.

Many well-known singing groups sang Brumley's songs, including Roy Acuff, the Jordainaires, the Chuck Wagon Gang and the Blackwood Brothers.

851 (824) "I'll Fly Away"

#412 (350) "Jesus, Hold My Hand"

957 (684) "This World Is Not My Home"

Brumley's line that we "can't feel at home in this world anymore" must surely be a classic. In a world where we have become far too comfortable in our surroundings, this song calls us back to such passages as Philippians 3:20 and 1 Peter 1:4.

Alton Howard (1925-)

Alton Howard, a businessman, publisher and songwriter, was born in Louisiana. His business interests were built around West Monroe, Louisiana, where he has served as an elder in the church. He is best known in churches of Christ for publishing two hymnals, "Songs of the Church" (1971) and "Songs of Faith and Praise" (1994). Along with his first publication, Howard recorded many of the unfamiliar songs on tape cassette, greatly assisting congregations and song leaders to learn the songs. In his second publication, he provided a computer program which accomplishes much the same purpose.

His greatest contribution to singing in our fellowship probably

comes from two things. First, he made accessible to churches of Christ the Stamps Baxter type songs with his first publication. Second, he published a large number of the so-called “Praise songs” that have become popular in the last half of the 20th Century in his second hymnbook. Both actions, there is no question, has enriched greatly our worship in song.

608 (213) “He Gave Me a Song”

356 (267) “I Believe in Jesus”

550 (296) “I Walk With the King”

78 “God Still Lives”

Other Hymnbooks

Abilene Christian University took over publication of E.L. Jorgenson’s “Great Songs of the Church” in 1957. This went through a number of publications, and tends to lean toward the classic hymns such as those written by Isaac Watts, and the Wesley brothers. While “Great Songs of the Church” made great contributions to our worship in song as a fellowship, its failure to include the newest genres of songs is perhaps a drawback to its most recent publications.

The major drawback to “Songs of Faith and Praise”, on the other hand, has been that while it correctly introduced contemporary songs, it mistakenly “threw” a large number of excellent hymns “out with the bath water”.

A hymnbook that provides a better balance between new and old is John P. Wiegand’s “Praise for the Lord” (1997). Admittedly the task of a hymnbook editor is difficult, even thankless. We owe a great deal to all of our brethren who have invested their time and money into enriching our worship in this way.

The decision to include a new song is, of course, never easy. Will it prove its worth? Will it continue to speak to generations to come of God’s will and our responsibilities? Leaving out a classic is equally difficult. Has it lost its message because of archaic lan-

guage? Was it a song that spoke only to its generation, but has now lost its relevance? Or will it become timeless, in the sense that “Amazing Grace”, or “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” have become timeless?

All three of these hymnbooks are, however, excellent examples of our heritage in songs and provide, generally, a better quality and variety than most denominational hymnbooks. This is not surprising, for it is the churches of Christ who have emphasized and loved to sing most of all!

Tommy E. Wheeler (1931-)

Wheeler was born in Scotsville, KY. His father was an associate minister there, and a song leader who later taught music at Freed Hardeman University in Henderson, Tennessee. Following a degree in music at Abilene Christian, and a Masters at Texas Tech, Wheeler taught chorus in various schools in west and south Texas. Throughout his life Wheeler sang in quartets and choruses, often arranging the music they sang himself. He established the well-known Dallas Choraliers, and much of his music was published by the Stamps Baxter Company. For many years he was well known as the song leader for the church of Christ in DeSoto, Texas. His best known songs are, “I Met the Master Face to Face”, and “Why I Love the Lord”.

359 (287) “I Love the Lord”

Wheeler’s refrain, “I love the Lord because he first loved me,” comes from passages such as 1 John 4:19 and Psalm 116:1.

Contemporary Songs

The closer we come to our own time, the more difficult it is to analyze events and trends. It is also hard because of the difficulty of finding documentation and facts about writers, songs and fathoming the directions the trends are taking.

It is apparent that a new genre of hymns, known variously as “Praise Songs” or “Contemporary hymns” has arisen. This genre has been influenced by the popularity of “Christian Contemporary Songs” in the popular music industry, and great difficulty has often occurred in rewriting the music sung by accomplished popular singers to fit the capabilities of the average congregation. This is no doubt one of the reasons for a shift in some congregations to the “praise team” concept, where the “professional” singers take on the more difficult harmonies these songs present.

In the church, such writers as Gary Mabry and Ried Lancaster wrote “Devotional” songs popular in the 1970’s and 1980’s. In the last decade of the 20th Century, Ken Young and Jeff Nelson have made great contributions to our hymns.

705 (842) “A Common Love”

(851) “Blue Skies and Rainbows”

474 (888) “Thank You, Lord”

437 (896) “There Is No Condemnation”

How do we analyze this trend and the value of these “contemporary” songs? This is not easy either, because music is, by its very nature, an emotional subject, and because this trend is part of a greater phenomenon in churches that spreads into theological, social and generational issues.

It is important to keep a historical perspective on events. Once we listened to the music of Glen Miller, then Elvis. Later we listened to the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel and so on. Fashions change. Trends come and go. Can we really be certain that today’s craze will still be tomorrow’s classic? If our look at hymns throughout history has demonstrated anything, it is that every song was new once, and will one day be an old song. Mark this, please: *no song is worthy of dividing a church, or harming a brother in Christ!*

Counting the Psalms of David, we have thirty centuries of devotional literature at our disposal. This new genre will enrich

what we already have. Some of these “new” songs will withstand the test of time, and be sung by our children; others will slip out of use, our hymnbooks, and our memory.

18 “Faithful Love”

31 (844) “Be Still and Know” (Psalm 46:10)

71 (843) “As the Deer” (Psalm 42:1)

77 (929) “Glorify Thy Name”

96 (937) “I Stand in Awe”

100 (932) “Holy Ground”

*** “Songs of Faith and Praise”**

**** “Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. Alexander Campbell feared that musical notation would distract worshippers from the task of meaning the words. Do we sometimes allow the music to distract us from the lyrics?
2. I have expressed some opinions (they are only opinions!) on songs that have been included in hymnbooks. The local song leader also bears some responsibility to select the songs a congregation sings. Can you suggest some thoughtful, Biblical guidelines for this process (beyond merely saying, “I know what I like”)?
3. Those of you who are, well, more mature (anyone over 30!), what did you feel the first time you heard such songs as “Then Sings My Soul”, “Jesus Is Lord”, or “There Is a God, He Is Alive”. Do they seem to be passing the test of time?
4. If you have read this far, I know you love to sing and love the church of Jesus Christ. On that basis, think about some ways we can avoid the rancor and division these subjects have caused in recent years.

Chapter 12

*“Anything you can preach about, I can sing about”
(Alton Howard)*

Why Do Armies Sing?

(1 Samuel 17:45; Psalm 20:7; Ephesians 6:10-18; 1 Timothy 6:12; Revelation 2:11; Revelation 17:14)

One winter morning in Zimbabwe I woke up to a sound as stirring as any I have heard in my life. I opened the blinds of the living room and the bright African sunlight revealed almost a thousand soldiers in dress uniform, on the march. In perfect four-part harmony, a thousand African men sang, their boots falling in time with their voices. At first the sound swelled as they approached my house, then diminished as they moved farther and farther away.

Why do armies sing?

They sing in order to keep in step. The rhythm and meter of the song enables their feet to keep time and, thus harmonized, they march in time to their destination.

They sing to lift their spirits. Armies have one purpose — to go to battle. War is a frightening and dangerous thing. As they sing, they hear the other voices swelling in a magnificent chorus. The very sound of so many voices, singing together, reminds them that they are not alone, that the other voices they hear will not only sing by their sides, but fight the battle by their sides, too.

They sing in order to tell who they are. Their very words teach the soldiers of their country, of their cause, or of their hopes. So it is that Confederate armies sang of their longing for “Dixie”, and the US marines sing of the exploits of Marines from “Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli”. British troops in World War II heartened themselves with wry reminders of the distance between the battle-

field and “Tipperary”. But for each army, the songs are a reminder of what they hold dear, and an opportunity to ground the new recruits in the traditions foundational to their nation. So armies sing to teach.

Like a “mighty army”, the people of God, too, must march in step. We need the sound of other voices, singing the same sentiments as we, and we need the reminders of who we are, and what the fight is all about.

10* (6)** “A Mighty Fortress”

1009 (802) “Battle Hymn of the Republic”

Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910)

The words of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* Magazine, and the author, Julia Ward Howe, received a mere five dollars in royalties! Howe’s husband was a doctor stationed in Washington DC, and she was distressed to hear ranks of soldiers every day march by their house singing the strains of “John Brown’s Body”, the song about abolitionist John Brown, who was hanged for his efforts to free slaves. The words were hateful and derisive. One day as the men marched by, a friend challenged Julia to write better lyrics for the song. That very night she did. It became one of President Lincoln’s favorites, and subsequently became the battle song of the northern armies.

(34) “Am I a Soldier of the Cross?”

469 (134) “Faith Is the Victory”

(155) “For All the Saints”

646 (522) “Onward Christian Soldiers”

647 (585) “Soldiers of Christ, Arise”

648 (595) “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus”

627 (671) “There’s a Royal Banner”

749 (977) “The Battle Belongs to the Lord”

470 (717) “Victory in Jesus”

Often it is said that our worship (including our worship in song)

is primarily intended to please God, not man. This is true! Jesus declared that our worship is “vain” if it is conducted according to the “*rules taught by men*” (Mark 7:6,7). No matter how compelling, exciting or “inspirational” a worship service is, if it is carried out in a manner contrary to God’s will, it is “vain”. So in a sense when we leave worship saying, “I didn’t like that worship service,” our evaluation is irrelevant. The absolutely, completely relevant question is, “Did God like it? Was it pleasing to him?” If not, no other question need be asked.

But it is not true to say that worship is directed solely to God. Make no mistake, the only proper object of worship is God, and God alone (Revelation 22:8,9). Yet there is another sense in which our singing is a conversation amongst the humans gathered in his presence.

Speaking to One Another

(Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19)

Notice the verbs used in these two passages. In Ephesians we are told to “speak to one another” by way of “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” In Colossians Paul tells us to “teach and admonish” one another through song. When we sing, *there is a conversation going on!* Even in a song of praise, where the words are addressed to God, we are also speaking to each other, reminding our children, the unbelievers, the weak and discouraged of all the reasons why God is worthy to be praised.

“Let us come before him with thanksgiving, and extol him with music and song,” David urges us. Why? Is there reason enough to offer such praise to God? Certainly! *“For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods...”* (Psalm 95:2,3).

While the praise is being offered to God, you see, his *worthiness to be praised* is being explained to those gathered together in his presence, for indeed, he is “*worthy*” to receive “*glory and honor and power*” (Revelation 4:11).

How do we make our worship in song more meaningful? Sing the songs specifically to someone in your mind! So, for instance, when you say “Be not dismayed what e’re betide, God will take care of you,” think of someone in the congregation, perhaps someone recently widowed, or heartbroken, who needs to hear these words! So when we sing, we do the following:

1. We comfort each other. So many songs that draw from the promises of scripture are a comfort to our beloved friends and brethren who face tragedy and discouragement. Singing these songs reminds them that in Christ, there is a peace that “*passes understanding*” (John 14:27, Philippians 4:7).

461* (191)** **“Be Not Dismayed”**

479 (530) **“Peace, Perfect Peace”**

2. We undertake a commitment to God and each other. Here our worship is made concrete, as we move from what God has done for us to what we will do in return.

936 (414) **“Lord, I’m Coming Home”**

3. We pray. Many songs are prayers set to music. A faith-building exercise is to open a hymnbook in our own private devotionals and read the words of those songs that speak to God in prayer.

807 (365) **“Jesus, Lover of My Soul”**

796 (731) **“Remember Me, O Mighty One”**

4. We express our surrender to his will. Of course we must do more. We must obey him, apply the message, but it helps when we express this submission in song.

552 (197) **“Have Thine Own Way, Lord”**

924 (380) **“Just as I Am”**

5. We warn and exhort. Young people, new Christians, everyone needs to be reminded of the dangers of sin and our selfish desires.

719 (37) **“Angry words” (“Love One Another”)**

905 (798) “Yield Not to Temptation”

6. We call on others to come to Christ. The “invitation” must be more than a message expressed to “those” sinners, however. The words of most of these songs can also be sung and meant by Christians.

950 (110) “Come, Ye Disconsolate”

911 (67) “Bring Christ Your Broken Life”

7. We remind each other of who we are, the blessings and hopes that go along with who we are.

893 (69) “Beautiful Isle of Somewhere”

537 (247) “Here We Are but Straying Pilgrims”

8. We tell the story, especially of his death, burial and resurrection. These songs might teach what happened (the facts of the crucifixion event), or they might teach the significance of what happened.

387 (622) “Tell Me the Story of Jesus”

349 (621) “Ten Thousand Angels”

9. We offer Praise to God.

300 (532) “Praise Him! Praise Him!”

92 (165) “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”

We spend so much of our lives speaking in clichés, of inconsequential matters that could not possibly affect the outcome of eternity. Conversations that begin, “How about them Cowboys?” might be all right for a moment, but when Christians sing, they teach and admonish each other about eternal matters. Failing to attend worship means that you fail to speak these important messages to your brethren, and fail to hear them in return. Failing to sing these songs in worship demonstrates, at best, apathy towards our brethren’s welfare; at worse, disdain for them. And this does not take into account what it says about the Lord whom we address in praise and prayer!

“Special Music”

Every time God’s people open their hearts and their mouths to sing is a special occasion. I can’t think of anything more special than God’s people — little children, elderly saints, singers of great beauty, and, well, those who are vocally challenged, singing in honor of God.

But of course, you know what I mean by the term “special music”. It is a reference to “Praise teams”, “worship teams” and so on. It seems to me that there are two questions we should ask of this innovation. The first question is theological. Is this Biblical? The second is practical. Does a worship team actually improve congregational singing?

Theologically, I worry about this practice falling foul of 1 Timothy 2:11,12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34,35, and the God given role of men and women in worship. I have read numerous efforts to explain these passages away, and have concluded that these explanations are, as the British would say, “too clever by half”. When one tries to prove too much, one usually proves nothing at all. These ingenious explanations are more difficult to accept than a plain reading of the passages, and a submission to the Lord’s will on the subject.

I am aware that there is often a woman in small congregations who, in effect, “leads” the songs sitting down, due to her strong voice, but I don’t think this is a release to put her in a structured position to lead singing. Think, for a moment, about the very terms we use. We have men who “lead in prayer”, and we have “song leaders”. This indicates to me the fact that we understand these people to be taking a lead in the church, and in worship. I feel we need to take Paul’s words on the role of women seriously.

I am not questioning the sincerity of those who want to participate in a “worship team”, and I understand that the experience of practicing, then performing before the church, can be a very compelling one. Often it is suggested that this could be a good means

to teach other worshippers a new song, or how to sing a harmony part.

While the experience of singing in a worship team might be a most compelling one for those who love to sing, and who are good at it, the practical result is rarely better *congregational* singing. While the chorus' performance may be technically very good, and while the chorus members may indeed be singing from the heart, the effect on the rest of the congregation is often analogous to the effect of an organ on the congregational singing of most denominations. They tend to listen to the singers rather than sing themselves.

Who partakes of the Lord's Supper for you? A trained "partaker"? A "Special Lord's Supper Team"? Speaking as a song leader, I think it should be said that there is nothing more compelling than good congregational singing, where "we" sing together in a shared endeavor. "We" sang beautifully today is always more satisfying than "they" sang beautifully. When an army can sing together, it marches together, and when an army can march together, it fights the enemy and prevails together, too.

I will acknowledge that it is harder to develop good congregational singing. There will always be a dozen or so good singers in a congregation, people who teach music, or played in the high school band, or simply have the aptitude to sing. Training a congregation to sing is a job that, like cleaning a house, is never done. New members, and children, rise through the ranks who were not taught previously, and the job must be started over again.

But if we work at developing a culture of singing, it helps. If the preacher teaches and emphasizes the subject, and if leaders make sure not to neglect it, then our heritage of good congregational singing will not end.

Planning a Song Service

Most of us are mightily unimpressed with a preacher who stands in a pulpit and begins to deliver a sermon that he has obvi-

ously not prepared. In essence, a preacher who has not studied his text and prepared his delivery has wasted a lot of listeners' time. They deserve the very best he can give.

In the same way, it seems to me a pity when a song leader on the way to worship tosses a hymnbook to his wife and says, "Honey, I forgot I was leading singing this morning. Can you pick out a few songs?"

Those who sing deserve more thought than this. So, it might be added, does the Lord to whom we sing! Taking the time to plan a song service is extremely rewarding for the song leader, and beneficial for the congregation. Begin by liaising with the preacher, and find out his text and subject. His subject will not always suggest songs. In that case, the song leader can always pick a theme of his own. Look in the topical index at the back — there are hundreds of possibilities! On other occasions the sermon topic will suggest a great many songs. If the sermon is on the cross, or heaven, or the love we should have for each other, the song leader can greatly enhance the worship service by easing the congregation in to the thought of the sermon.

Making Our Singing More Meaningful

1. Pitch the song correctly. For those of us song leaders who are mortal, and thus make mistakes, this requires the use of a pitch pipe. Pitching a song too low, for instance, excludes bases and altos — fifty percent of the parts on offer! The glory of our sopranos is cancelled by the fact that they are not required to reach to their higher notes. While it may be true that the early church did not have four-part harmony, it is true that almost every form of music we hear today (Country, classical, rock 'n roll etc.) is based on four-part harmony. A chord on piano or guitar is based roughly on this concept.
2. The song leader should demonstrate zeal for his task, a love

for what he is doing. Even those songs that are more contemplative should not be dragged mercilessly! Songs that urge us to joy or action should be sung with enthusiasm. Remember that Mrs. Evilsizer’s song of hope was entitled “In the *Morning* of Joy”, not “In the *Mourning* of Joy”! The song leader’s attitude affects the congregation.

3. Preachers and song leaders should take appropriate moments to teach. When the words of a song are not immediately obvious, don’t just dismiss the song — explain what it means! Point out Bible verses that go along with particular lyrics.
4. Instill in the next generation a love for singing. Teach your children to sing. Let them see that you feel the joy of singing. Some of my fondest memories as a child were of listening to the adults get out their hymnbooks and sing late into the night.
5. Remember who you are singing to. One of my personal pet peeves is the person who declines to sing when he is “just” in worship, then sings like a lark when a microphone is put in front of his lips, and an audience at his feet! The one is worship, the other, apparently, performance. The difference is not subtle!
6. Think about the words of the songs you select. For instance, you are aware that songs such as “I Stand in Awe” and “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus” are employing metaphors, aren’t you? Some members feel an obligation to “spontaneously” stand when these songs are sung, while others feel compelled by peers to do so. It’s better for the song leader to simply ask the congregation to stand (without making a reference to why we “can’t sing this song sitting down”) and understand the expression for what it is. To “stand up for Jesus” means to defend our Lord against those who will attack his word and church. To “stand in awe” of

Christ means to show him the deepest respect. (Should we literally “bow”, “fall on our knees”, and “stand on his promises” too?) I am not suggesting it is wrong to stand, merely that we understand what the phrases mean!

7. Mean the words that you sing. This is the most important factor of all. There is nothing that will lift the spirits more than singing “how great” God is, and becoming conscious of how thoroughly true that statement is!

* **“Songs of Faith and Praise”**

** **“Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. Discuss the analogy of the church as an army, singing on the march. How does singing help an army?
2. Can you think of a song, or songs, that spoke a particular message to you when you needed it?
3. Several ways were suggested to make our singing more meaningful. Can you think of some not mentioned?
4. Discuss some ways you think that churches could improve the quality of their singing.

Chapter 13

We're Not Just Going to Church; We're Going to Worship

You may have heard about the preacher who died and went to the pearly gates. Just ahead of him was a man in a loud shirt, sunglasses and a leather jacket. Peter asked the man, "Who are you, so I can know whether or not I should allow you into heaven?"

The man replied, "I'm Joe. I'm a New York taxi driver."

Peter consulted his list, then announced, "Take this silken robe, a golden staff, and enter the joys of heaven!"

The taxi driver took his robe and golden staff and entered heaven. The preacher, observing all of this, felt his spirits lift. He approached Peter with rising anticipation of his reward.

"My name is Joe, too," the preacher announced, "I was a preacher for 43 years."

Peter consulted his list. Then he looked up at the minister. "Take this cotton robe and a wooden staff and enter the joys of heaven."

The preacher was shocked and puzzled. "Just a minute," he objected, "That man was a taxi driver, and you gave him a silken robe; I'm a preacher and you give me a cotton robe! How can this be?"

"Up here," Peter explained, "we go on results. While you preached, *people slept*; while he drove, *people prayed*!"

It's a good story, but it troubles me, too. Are "results" the only way we should evaluate church work, and worship? Well, perhaps it depends on what we understand as "results"! It seems to me that there should be two criteria for proper "results" in worship.

Worship on God's Terms

I look at the subheading I just wrote, and wonder; if it's not on God's terms, *then can it be worship at all?* Jesus expressed this thought:

“Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’”

(Mark 7:6,7)

Talk about “results” for worship! These peoples’ worship was “vain” — futile and fruitless. The Lord does not reflect on the eloquence of the preaching or the magnificence of the singing; his concern was with the willingness of the worshippers to do so on God's terms.

These verses tell us three things. First, we need to sincerely mean the words we use, in prayer or song, so that our lips and hearts will be in unison! Isaiah's complaint was that Israel's words and their intentions were in discord.

The second thing we learn is the relative value of human tradition versus the word of God. While tradition is not always wrong, it never carries the weight and authority of God's word.

Thirdly, worship is acceptable only on God's terms. We enter his presence seeking mercy. We enter seeking an audience with him. We enter seeking his guidance in life. We enter seeking to glorify and honor him. So it makes sense that we enter his presence on *his* terms, and his terms alone!

It has always been important to God that we worship according to his directives. Ever since the day a nomadic shepherd stood before a burning bush, God has given instructions as to how he should be approached in worship. “*Do not come any closer,*” God commanded Moses, “*take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground*” (Exodus 3:5). When God wanted to

Speak to Israel, he declared, “*Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, ‘Be careful that you do not go up to the mountain or touch the foot of it.’ Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death*” (Exodus 19:13).

When the unfortunate Nadab and Abihu found themselves on the wrong side of the one whose view of worship really matters, we read:

“And they offered *unauthorized fire* before the Lord,
contrary to his command.”

(Leviticus 10:1-3)

That little parallel puts it in a nutshell; “Unauthorized” worship is the same thing as worshipping in a manner “contrary to (God’s) command”. Some might feel that in the church we have placed too great an emphasis on following the Bible and the Bible alone. They have perceived what they think of as too wholesale a dependence on what God has, and has not said. Yet the emphasis on following God’s will is *his*, not ours. The need to ask for scriptural authority is his demand, not ours. It is for us to humbly comply.

Whatever else we learn from these examples, we must surely learn this: We cannot, we dare not, presume on God. He is a God that must be approached on his terms, or not at all.

“*Ascribe to the Lord, O family of nations*” David cries out, “*ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord **the glory due his name**, bring an offering and come into his courts*” (Psalm 96:7,8).

In our worship it is easy to forget who is immovable, and who is transitory, who is creator, and who is created. We come to worship in order to honor God, not ourselves. Worship, of all the things we do, is an act in which we must forget our selfish wishes and personal tastes, and direct our attention to God in the specific way he himself has prescribed.

Perhaps our problem stems from forgetting the nature of God,

his holiness, his grandeur. When we lose this sense of who God is, we begin to presume upon him. The following songs remind us of his holiness:

13* (119)** “**Day Is Dying in the West**”

47 (238) “**Holy, Holy, Holy**”

52 (140) “**Father and Friend, Thy Light, Thy Love**”

96 (937) “**I Stand In Awe**”

100 (932) “**Holy Ground**” (Beatty)

101 (933) “**Holy Ground**” (Davis)

108 (685) “**The Lord Is in His Holy Temple**”

227 (515) “**On Zion’s Glorious Summit Stood**”

Edification

When — and I emphasize only *when* — we have established the Lord’s will in our worship, then we can turn to a second great principle that lies behind worship. The word “edify” (*oikodomeo*) is variously translated as to “edify”, “strengthen”, and “build up”. It is a favorite term of the Apostle Paul:

“Now I commit you to God,” he tells the Ephesian elders, *“and to the word of his grace which can **build you up** and give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified”* (Acts 20:32).

It would be hard to imagine something more uplifting, strengthening and needed in the church than God’s word proclaimed and applied. Though this should be a “given” in most churches, sadly, it is not. I do think, however, that most people come to churches hoping that on this day they will hear a word from God. We can and should be edified by way of the word preached, but, as we have established in earlier chapters, the role of our hymns, too, should be to teach God’s will, and therefore to edify.

Paul tells his Roman brethren to *“bear with the failings of the weak,”* and reminds them that *“each of us should please his neighbor for his good to **build him up**”* (Romans 15:1,2). There will be those who have not attained our exalted understanding of things.

Our task is not to mutter darkly, “Oh, get a life,” but to bear with them and build them up!

Paul tells the Thessalonians much the same thing: “*Therefore encourage one another, and **build one another up***” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Sometimes the impatient and “knowledgeable” brethren forget to love and build up. Paul reminds them that “*knowledge puffs up, love **builds up***” (1 Corinthians 8:1). The things that we *might* do are not always the things we *ought*, in all wisdom, to do. Paul reminds the Corinthians that while “everything” might be “permissible” for him to do, “*not everything builds up*” (1 Corinthians 10:23). Christians should think deeply about how their actions affect their brethren, whom they love.

The theme of 1 Corinthians 14 seems to be the need to edify (1 Corinthians 14:3-5,12,17,26). In this context Paul is anxious to explain that whatever our gifts, whatever our desires, our main aim is to be deeply conscious of each other, to seek to do what is good for each other, to edify each other. He ties his thinking up with a summary statement:

*“What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the **strengthening** of the church”* (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Edifying each other in private or in worship is a ministry, a service that we render to our brothers and sisters in Christ. In songs, sermons, prayers and whatever we do, “*all of these things must be done for the strengthening of the church.*”

Suffer the Little Children

In Matthew 19:13-15, Jesus urged his disciples to “*let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them...*” We behave as if children are a barrier to worship, that their squirming and shuffling gets in the way of our time with God. Contrast this with Jesus, who drew them into the center of his activities (Matthew 18:1-5).

The disciples said, “Send them away”. Jesus said, “Bring them to me!”

Now we all realize that this is a struggle. Most of our kids know how many beams there are across the ceiling of the church building, how many rows of bricks on the wall, how many people around them have gray hair, or are bald. They know this because they are passing time during worship!

Sit with your children in worship. Explain that there are times when they can pay attention to their friends but that, right now, it is time to pay attention to Jesus. “Right now, you must pay attention to Jesus, because he has some important things to say to you.”

Children have the capacity to see that which is unseen. I had imaginary friends when I was little; my daughter has them now! Kids have no trouble loving a Jesus they have never seen. That is a problem of grown-ups, not children!

Eutychus is, without doubt, the patron saint of everyone who has fallen asleep in an assembly (Acts 20:9-12). There are several lessons we can learn from this story, but one that is obvious is that he should not have been in the window in the first place; he should have been sitting with his parents!

Rather than bringing a “Where’s Waldo” book to worship, why not train your child to sing the songs, write down scripture references used, and learn how to worship? Talk about the songs we sing. Define the difficult terms. Point out the beautiful allusions. Some new songs may be “fluff”. Others may be real gems. Some old songs may be “fluff”. But most songs that have lasted for centuries have done so for good reason. Remember that the “oldies but goodies” were once new songs, too.

We who are older must acknowledge our responsibility to teach our children. Training up a child implies that we move him upward to a state of maturity, not that we lower ourselves downward to his every whim! If we are to “*train up a child*” (Proverbs 22:6;15-19), then surely this includes training children how to worship.

Preparing to Worship

“Worship is work, hard work,” says Robbie Castleman. “To worship the Lord ‘in spirit and in truth’ does not come easily, and it certainly does not come naturally to us. It is difficult to worship in the left-over energy of a long week and a late Saturday. The Sunday morning encounter with God is worthy of our best energy, not our least” (page 43).

David asks the vital question:

“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?
Who may stand in his holy place?”

He answers his own question with the memorable words:

“He who has clean hands, and a pure heart,
Who does not lift up his soul to an idol
Or swear by what is false.”

(Psalm 24:3,4)

David is not talking about the need for good physical hygiene; still less that we should hold our hands up in the air while singing. This is not necessarily wrong, it’s just not what David is talking about! His point is that we need to prepare ourselves for worship, morally, emotionally, and physically. Please consider these suggestions for preparation:

1. Prepare clothes, books and Bibles on Saturday night, and lay them out.
2. Get a tape or CD and play “Jesus songs” Sunday morning before worship.
3. I give moms “permission” not to prepare a historic, culinary masterpiece for Sunday lunch. Make tuna fish sandwiches and invite your friends over. That way mom doesn’t have to worry about the roast burning.

4. Need I say this? Be there. Take worship seriously. Little eyes are watching and taking it all in. If you balance your checkbook during the sermon, whisper constantly to your friend, roll your eyes in exasperation at the song leader, or check the time during the sermon, they will see it. You teach by your attitude and actions.

In a village of southeastern Zimbabwe I was worshipping with about eighty of your Shona brethren on Sunday morning. There were probably twenty children, squirming and dressed in tattered clothes. During a rather long prayer, I was startled to feel a touch, light as a butterfly, on my face. A little boy, not yet four years of age, was running his hand lightly over my face, his eyes intently on me.

He might simply have been trying to see if my pale face was “real”, but I was struck that moment by the responsibility that was mine. This little fellow might never have seen someone worship before that day. And I wanted, desperately, to turn his attention from my face to the face of Christ.

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of his glory and grace.”
(Helen Lemmel, 1922)

May all of our eyes be on him till we see him face to face!

* **“Songs of Faith and Praise”**

** **“Praise for the Lord”**

Questions

1. “Getting results” in worship. What kind of results should we be seeking?
2. Discuss the vertical aspect of hymns. How do we talk to God?
3. Discuss the horizontal aspect of hymns. How do we talk to each other?
4. What is “unauthorized” worship? Is it important to worship only in ways God has authorized? Does he care?
5. Some suggestions were made as to how we could prepare our families and ourselves for worship. Can you think of some more?

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