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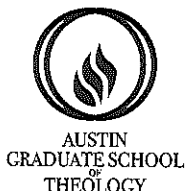
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“Congregational Song Is in Trouble” *What Makes a Good Hymn?*

R. Mark Shipp

Mennonite, Moravian, Church of the Brethren, and Church of Christ congregations cherish their heritage of congregational part-song, though nowadays they worry about losing it. Worry they well might, for congregational song is in trouble.¹

Perhaps at no time in the history of the Church has there been more ferment and confusion relative to the music which the church creates and sings. I have recently visited churches where there was no song in worship dating prior to the 1970s or 80s. This is a de facto abandonment of the rich heritage of Protestant hymnody, not to speak of earlier forms of congregational music, going back at least to the fifth century. Until relatively recently, most hymnals in Churches of Christ—indeed most Protestant hymnals—contained hymns and songs from many periods of church history. I have recently seen hymnals which do not contain any compositions other than the “contemporary Christian” music genre, composed within the past few years.²

¹Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: WJKP, 2000), 51.

²See Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 279-292. Warren states that a congregation’s choice of music may be “the most influential

Changes in church music are part of a wider phenomenon of pressure for change in worship throughout many religious communions. We often hear that the church must adapt to the culture's changing tastes and aesthetic styles, or risk losing our children to the world and becoming irrelevant to society.³ The most obvious arena for cultural adaptation is public worship and especially the church's music.

What is lacking in most discussions about worship music are biblical and artistic criteria for evaluating lyrics, musical styles, and poetic quality. In this article I propose to offer criteria for evaluating hymns and hymnody for corporate worship among Churches of Christ.

Theological Criteria for Assessing Church Music

I have rarely heard in discussions about hymnals and "special music" reflections about the content or theological criteria to be used in determining which hymns or songs are appropriate for corporate worship. Typically, what one hears is "these songs are so meaningful," or, "it speaks to my heart," whether the style is that of eighteenth-century Europe, 1920s America, or contemporary pop culture. The first concern ought to be, "does the song, regardless of style, reflect biblical faith and theology and does it communicate that faith clearly?" While nowhere in the Bible is there a prescription for proper hymnody, several principles can be drawn from biblical texts relating to the issue of congregational music.

I know of no better passage which deals with the theology of congregational song than 1 Chronicles 16.⁴ David has succeeded in bringing

factor in determining . . . whether or not your church grows" (280). The implication is that if a church does not primarily use contemporary pop styles in worship, that church will not grow. After surveying his church, it was decided that it would be "unapologetically a contemporary music church" and that, within a year of this decision, his church "exploded with growth" (281).

³Even Wren, *Praying Twice*, suggests that it is important for "liberals to give a critical welcome" to contemporary Christian music (127).

⁴Some of the discussion on 1 Chronicles 16 below may be found in a

the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem and ordered certain priests and Levites to minister in song before the sanctuary:

Moreover he appointed certain of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel (1 Chron 16:4).

The ministry of music in David's new sanctuary was to involve three things: *causing remembrance* (NRSV: "invoke"), *thanking*, and *praising*. While the three categories mentioned here relating to the content of the music of the sanctuary may not be exhaustive, they are sufficiently broad to allow us to begin a theological survey. 1 Chronicles 6:8–36 is attributed to Asaph, the chief musician, which emphasizes these three functions of the Levitical music ministry at the sanctuary. This "new hymn" is composed of the bricks and mortar of three older psalms: vv. 8–22 correspond to Psalm 105:1–15, vv. 23–33 correspond to Psalm 96:1b–13, and vv. 34–36 correspond to Psalm 106:1, 47–48. The new psalm features several imperatives (give thanks, praise, sing, remember, ascribe, tremble, etc.), but I wish to focus on three of these, around which the psalm is structured: *remember*, *praise*, and *give thanks*. These three imperatives are commanded of the Levites in v. 4, are found in the introductory section of the psalm, and provide the themes and structure of the psalm which follows.

The song commands the people of Israel to *remember*. After an introductory section (vv. 8–13, in which most of the imperatives of the new psalm are mentioned), vv. 9–22 comprise the *remember* section. These verses exhort Israel to remember God's faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham and his protection and providential care of them. The second section, vv. 23–33, is the *praise* section. This section, corresponding to most of psalm 96, does not begin with the imperative "praise," but rather "sing." The

much more expanded format in Mark Shipp, "Remember His Covenant Forever": A Study of the Chronicler's Use of the Psalms," *RQ* 35 (1993): 29-39.

reason for singing is given in v. 25: "For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised." In any event, this section of the psalm is characterized by praise for God's awesome majesty as king, judge, and creator. The final section is the shortest. It is the *give thanks* section, corresponding to Psalm 106:1, 47-48. It begins with the command to give thanks (v. 34) and ends with the petition for God to deliver Israel from the nations, in order that they may give thanks to him (v. 35).

Several observations may be made relative to this psalm and the injunctions to the Levitical priests in charge of the service of song. I will look at each section of the Chronicler's song in turn, with the aim of identifying principles which still apply to the theology of Christian song today.

First, much of what we do in Christian worship involves *remembering* and *reminding* a congregation who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. Congregational song is one of the major vehicles we have for remembering God's mighty acts in the past, which have redeemed us and constituted us as his people. We, too, remember God's covenant with the patriarchs as a part of our own story of redemption. We, too, recall God's mighty acts in Egypt and at the Red Sea, at Sinai and in the wilderness. The story of the judges, kings, Israel's idolatry, exile, and redemption from Babylon are also part of our story. We remember the prophets and their prophecies of a greater redemption to come and a greater son to sit on David's throne. As Christians, we remember the events of Jesus' birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, and the stories of the early church which reflected concerning those events.

It is not without reason that the commands to the Levites begin with "remind" or "cause remembrance." What happens when a community of faith forgets its own story? Israel was prone to forget as, it seems, we are too. No community of faith can long exist without its own story, involving a beginning, a middle, and a purpose toward which it strives. If it forgets, that

community may exchange its authentic story for a counterfeit one. This counterfeit story may be one of American culture or supremacy. It may be one where personal blessing supersedes God's action and lordship. It may be one of anemic remembrance, where pop culture, with its memory of 20 to 30 years, replaces the authentic Judeo-Christian memory of God's mighty acts of deliverance.

So we come together regularly as churches to *remember*. What is remembered in 1 Chronicles 16? The people of Israel are commanded to remember God's faithfulness to his covenant, God's nature as creator and king, and God's grace in delivering his people from sin and bondage. We engage regularly in acts of remembrance each first day of the week. The Lord's Supper is the paramount example, but textually-based sermons and the faith we express in song also call us to remembrance.

Second, David's new song commands us to *praise*. The primary means of expressing praise is the faith we sing, as we are reminded by the current plethora of "praise songs." Praise, however, should not be simple repetition of the Lord's name or some contentless commands to "praise" or "bless." Reasons for praise are specified in 1 Chronicles 16 and these reasons correspond to those given in hymns of praise found in the Psalms. We render praise to God because of 1) his nature as creator, king, and judge, 2) his faithfulness to his covenants and promises, and 3) his concrete acts of redemption in the past and his continuing work of the redemption of his creation. These may be simplified in three categories: who God is, what God has done in creation, and what God has done in redemption.

Who God is: God is praised as king and judge in the middle section of the poem. God alone is the righteous judge, dispensing justice to the nations (v. 33). He alone is sovereign over his creation (vv. 27–31). These two roles are perfectly joined in a benevolent and just sovereign. The middle section of the poem is tempered by the initial section (vv. 8–22), where God

demonstrates his love, providence, and loyalty to Israel, and by vv. 34–36, where his loyalty to his covenant moves him to save and deliver Israel from the nations.

What God has done in creation: Two aspects of God as creator are mentioned in the middle section of the poem. First, he is creator of the heavens and the earth, which distinguishes God from idols (vv. 25–26). Second, he has so ordered and established creation that it is dependable and immovable (v. 30) and it rejoices in his sovereignty (vv. 31–33).

What God has done in redemption: Much of the Bible recounts the story of God's redemption of his creation and his people Israel/the Church. We praise him for his faithfulness in redeeming, for without it we would all be dead in our sins. God has saved us, not because of our goodness, but because of his grace and his faithfulness to his covenants and promises. We, too, can repeat with Israel, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his covenant loyalty endures forever."

Third, 1 Chronicles 16 commands us to *give thanks*. The primary reason for thanksgiving in the Chronicler's song is related to the last point above: because of God's wonderful acts of faithfulness in keeping covenant and saving us "from the nations." Psalm 106, which 1 Chronicles 16 reflects in vv. 34–36, is not so much a song of thanksgiving as it is a corporate confession of sin. After rehearsing Israel's history of rebellion, the psalmist exhorts the community to give thanks for God's covenant loyalty (v. 34), in spite of their sin, and cries out for God to save once again and deliver them from the results of their sin. While thanksgiving should extend to every area of life, David's new song emphasizes giving thanks for God's covenant faithfulness and presupposes confession of sin. The hymns which we sing together should also thank God for what he has done in redeeming us and in giving us the privilege of confession and forgiveness of sin.

What makes a good hymn in terms of biblical theology? The

injunctions to the Levites at David's sanctuary are perhaps not an exhaustive list. Nevertheless, they are an appropriate way to approach a biblical theology of hymnody. The faith that the church sings should invoke remembrance of our story. Hymns should praise God for who he is and what he has done. Hymns should lament and confess our sinfulness and thank God for redeeming and restoring us. It is striking that in the Chronicler's psalm, blessings and benefits to individual Israelites are nowhere emphasized. The emphasis is rather upon who God is and what he has done and on the community's response to a gracious God ("Save *us* and deliver *us*!").

Aesthetic Criteria for Assessing Church Music

Even with good theology and a good grasp of the story of God's nature and redemption, it is possible for a hymn to be "not a good hymn." This is because a hymn is not only composed of biblical concepts, but musical movement and poetry as well. If a hymn is to be addressed primarily to God, without primary reference to ourselves and our own experience, the words and music should be suitable for addressing God. One implication of this is that a hymn's words and music ought not to be of such low musical and poetic achievement that we end up worshipping God with the worst examples of pop "artistry."⁵

Because hymns are and have always been congregational song,⁶ and

⁵Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, states unequivocally that the music the church sings is merely a matter of taste and culture: "I reject the idea that music styles can be judged as either 'good' or 'bad' music. Who decides this? The kind of music you like is determined by your background and culture" (281). Warren does not demonstrate sensitivity to the church as an alternative culture, nor to the impact that 2000 years of church music has had upon the church and general culture. One suspects that to Warren influence flows mainly in one direction: from the world to the church.

⁶Erik Routley suggests that hymns are "communal song." See Routley, *Christian Hymns Observed: When in Our Music God Is Glorified* (Princeton: Prestige, 1982), 1. Some hymnologists have disagreed with this and have insisted that the hymn as a "congregational phenomenon" is a Protestant invention. Note, however, Ambrose, Basil, and Clement's body of hymns and especially Ambrose's injunction

we also sing to one another, hymns should be singable and accessible to the majority of a congregation or community. "Hymns are the folk song of the Christian folk."⁷ A major implication of this is that hymns should be simple musically, so that the majority of a congregation can readily learn and repeat the melody. The meter, rhyme, and wording should be regular, simple, and literary, without unusual, strange, arcane, or bizarre words or images. Another implication is that the hymns the church sings should be representative of the *whole* body, not just of one particular age or interest group.⁸

We have here a seeming contradiction. A hymn is a poetic composition, with reference to God, and an eloquent vehicle for expressing thanksgiving, praise, confession, and petition. It is also a folk song, in that it arises from and is sung by the Christian "folk." How, then, can hymn poetry be both eloquent and "folksy"? How can hymn music be simple and regular, but at the same time exalt the soul in worship to God? Indeed, to compose a hymn for corporate worship is no mean feat. Every generation of the church, however, has expressed its faith in song and we can do no less. The question

for the church to sing in the fourth century (Routley, *Christian Hymns Observed*, 9–10).

⁷Routley, *Christian Hymns Observed*, 3.

⁸See Paul Westermeyer, "The Voice of the People: Here, Now, and Beyond," *The Hymn* 54 (2003). Westermeyer suggests that the "global nature of the [church's] song protects the church from idolatry. We are constantly tempted to regard our apprehension in the song of our time and place as the truth. . . . Global song protects us from taking such a tempting path" (15). One of the problems with over-contextualizing the church's hymnody is that it contributes to fracturing the church into a number of special age, race, and culture groups, each with its own musical "requirements." Cf. Michael S. Hamilton, "The Triumph of the Praise Songs," *Christianity Today* 43 (1999): 30, who says "Music has become a divisive and fractionalizing force, balkanizing Western culture into an ever-expanding array of sub-cultures—each with its own stylistic national anthem." The hymnody of the church should unite us with the church of yesterday and today, not further contribute to its division. See Also Dan Lucarini's discussion of the fallout which happens when contemporary music is forced upon a congregation—the older members are marginalized, silenced, and often hurt. Dan Lucarini, *Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement* (Auburn: Evangelical Press, 2002).

is how to do it so that new hymns are in continuity with church culture and hymnody of the past, that God is glorified, and that the congregation is instructed, encouraged, and admonished. The following principles are not intended to be exhaustive, but are guidelines for evaluating the church's hymns in light of the present confusion surrounding church music.⁹

Principles for Evaluating Hymns: Poetics

The hymn is, first of all, a *poem*.¹⁰ As poetry and literary art, it is subject to the canons of literary analysis and critique. While poetry resists attempts to over-analyze and quantify how or whether it moves us in profound ways, there are nevertheless broad principles whereby we can assess a poem's coherence, meter, rhyme, singability, and overall artistry.

First, a hymn should have regular meter and a consistent rhyme scheme. My students regularly insist that hymns need not have rhyme or a consistent metrical pattern. I answer them, "Yes, that may be true, but if you want anyone to sing it, it will." While some forms of Christian music throughout the ages lack a metrical pattern or verses tied to stanzas—witness Medieval plainsong, Gregorian chants, and some types of Oriental music—congregational hymns have largely developed over the centuries with rhythmic patterns and rhyme. Few Christian hymnals contain many examples of the chant, difficult for most churches to sing. At least as early as Ambrose and Gregory (4th and 6th centuries), a repeated metrical pattern was in place for church music.¹¹ One of the first questions one should ask is, *are the meter and rhyme consistent?*¹²

⁹Many of these reflections have come out of my own experience with evaluating hymns and hymnals as part of a worship committee at my congregation.

¹⁰Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath, *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology* (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 13.

¹¹Routley, *Christian Hymns Observed*, 10.

¹²What is meant by "metrical pattern"? A metrical pattern is a series of verses (poetic lines), usually divided into stanzas, with a set number of stressed and unstressed syllables per line, repeated for each stanza. According to Brian Wren,

There have been many metrical patterns throughout the history of Christian hymnody, but the most common have been long meter (four-line stanzas of 8, 8, 8, and 8 syllables), common meter (four-line stanzas of 8, 6, 8, and 6 syllables), and short meter (6, 6, 8, and 6 syllables). The pattern of repetition is virtually irrelevant; the crucial issue is that a pattern of syllables be consistently repeated throughout a hymn. One of the common practices of contemporary pop music is the relative freedom from the constraints of a metrical system, so long as the words and the music more or less match each other. What may be inventive or clever sounding on the radio, however, may be very difficult for a congregation to sing. Recently, a missionary to Brazil told me that what is currently popular among many Brazilian churches are songs with no particular metrical or strophic pattern. The end result is that half the members of his congregation do not, or cannot, sing.

The next question to be asked is, *is the rhyme pattern regular and is the rhyme of particular words forced or trite?* Lyric (song) poetry as it has been developed in the West normally has a rhyme pattern as well.¹³ The rhyme pattern is normally set in the first stanza and should be regularly repeated throughout. Good rhyme is not forced, but is natural and does not call attention to itself.

Are the words in common, but literary English? Related to this, is the grammar correct? As mentioned above, the goal is to compose a “folk

poetry is “time art,” art in motion. The meter constrains the art of the poem into a pattern of repetitions, making the poem memorable and singable. One of the quickest ways to determine that a hymn is poorly written is to count the number of syllables per poetic line and compare the numbers of the lines in each stanza with each successive stanza. A beginner will typically force too many syllables into a poetic line in order to make a particular point, or else will force the music to carry the words along by having too few syllables.

¹³Typically, in four-line stanzas, the last words of the 1) second and fourth lines, 2) first with third and second with fourth, or 3) first with second and third with fourth will rhyme. Other rhyme schemes are also possible.

hymn" for the church, but with simple words and music. Archaisms, slang, colloquialisms, overly technical terminology, or excessively ornamented terminology should be avoided.

Are the lyrics consistent with scripture and hundreds of years of "church culture"? My concern really has to do with the transmission of biblical and apostolic traditions. One of the dangers which the church faces today is poverty of theology and biblical illiteracy, leading to impoverished worship and faith. This poverty of worship is partially a result of the wholesale abandonment of many hundreds of years of the church's music, which, with all its flaws, nurtured the church, passed on its faith and devotion, and galvanized it for ministry.¹⁴

As the "new song" in 1 Chronicles 16 was constructed out of the bricks and mortar of the "old songs" familiar from Israel's corporate worship over the years, so too our hymnody must reflect continuity with scripture and should draw on the rich hymnic tradition of our past. To abandon this heritage reflects a peculiar sort of naiveté or arrogance, which does not see a problem with replacing "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" with "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." Some modern hymn poetry will survive us and deserves to, but what kind of legacy do we leave our children if we replace the classic with the mediocre? Should not the hymnody of the twenty-first century be at least be as rich as that of the eighteenth?

Principles for Evaluating Hymns: Music

The music of hymns is often seen as culturally neutral or negotiable.

¹⁴My point is that the church has its own distinctive culture, developed over two thousand years, to which we owe considerable allegiance. See Mark A. Noll, "We Are What We Sing: Our Classic Hymns Reveal Evangelicalism at its Best," *Christianity Today* 43 (1999). Noll says "Evangelicalism at its best is an offensive religion." One might apply this principle more broadly to the whole Christian movement: it deals with the scandal of the cross and is therefore unapologetically counter-cultural (39).

While it is true that the musical vehicle for conveying hymn lyrics is not so immediately theological as the lyrics themselves, S. Paul Schilling has reminded us of an important caveat relative to the selection or composition of hymn tunes:

Though hymn . . . [tunes] do not in themselves convey definite theological ideas, when they are joined with texts they may strengthen or undermine the meanings expressed.¹⁵

The music of a hymn, therefore, should not overwhelm the poetry; it should be at the service of the words in order to maximize their meaning and impact. Brian Wren has recently suggested that the common feature of contemporary Christian music is an emphasis on the beat.¹⁶ Similarly, contemporary Christian music tends to emphasize the tune rather than the words. If the vehicle overshadows what it conveys, on the other hand, will it arrive at its intended destination? In an atmosphere in which tunes can easily overwhelm meaning, we do well to remember Schilling's caution.

As with poetic principles above, the following questions relating to hymn tunes are not intended to be exhaustive. They are, rather, general principles to be considered in selecting hymns for corporate worship.

Is the marriage of text and tune a happy one? Hymn tunes should be appropriate for expressing the meaning and ethos of the text.¹⁷ A text which is contemplative, dealing, say, with the cross, ought not to be sung to a march tempo. A commonly cited example of an unhappy marriage of text and tune is "Love Lifted Me," which says "I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore," in joyful and triumphant music.

Is the tune singable by the congregation? This is perhaps a criterion

¹⁵S. Paul Schilling, *The Faith We Sing* (Waco: Word, 1983), 35.

¹⁶Wren, *Praying Twice*, 129, 131.

¹⁷Schilling, *The Faith We Sing*: "In hymns it is obvious that the mood of the music should fit that of the words. When it does, the tune sustains or intensifies the mood of the text and serves to reinforce its message" (36).

most subject to debate: what one congregation may excel at, another could never pull off. Perhaps some general considerations will not be far off the mark. First, most "special music," performed by professionals, is not appropriate for congregational singing. Attempts by churches regularly to include choral pieces or pop numbers contribute to the loss of congregational singing in favor of trained singers who can perform such music.¹⁸ Second, music which is heavily chromatic (full of sharps, flats, naturals, and complicated chords, such as major and minor sevenths) can be tremendously difficult for congregations to sing. While chromatic movement and chords can be interesting when done well, the end result for a congregation is not to sing the difficult harmonies or even the melody. Third, the melody should have a regular pattern of repetition of musical motives with variations, tied to the poetic stanzas. If each stanza of a hymn has a different melody, or if there is no consistent pattern of repetition, that hymn will have a short congregational singing life.

Is the music consistent with hundreds of years of "church culture"? This criterion, in my opinion, is the one most likely to be neglected. There is considerable concern in the contemporary church that music reflect a changing culture, as music is often thought of as inescapably tied to changing fads, preferences, and styles. As much as the church is influenced by culture, however, the church is also called to be an alternative to the secular culture and often must stand in opposition to it. Furthermore, the church does not exist in a historical or theological vacuum. We are the product of hundreds of years of church culture. It is irresponsible for us to discard two thousand

¹⁸Westermeyer has a series of helpful questions relative to analyzing musical styles appropriate to our congregations: "You have to ask what normal people in virtually every time and place can sing together. What is intrinsic to the song a community of faith has to sing? What can stand alone in their voices? What grows from their voices out, not from instruments in? What will best carry the texts they have to sing?" ("The Voice of the People," 19).

years of Christian reflection and musical development in favor of the passing whims of musical fancy. Each generation must contribute its best hymns, for the church is best served when it can sift and retain that which is suitable for congregational singing and helps us to best remember, thank, and praise our creator and redeemer.¹⁹ The alternative is not pretty. What do we leave as a legacy for our children when we willingly replace Newton, Mozart, and Crosby with Big Tent Revival and Audio Adrenaline?

Conclusion

What makes a good hymn? A good hymn is one which causes us to remember God's acts of faithfulness in the past, to praise him for who he is and what he has done, and to thank him for his provision, redemption, and forgiveness. It is singable by the majority of a congregation, without being trivial or trite. It is simple and elegant in its poetry and musicality. It is regular in its meter and rhyme, with simple and memorable musical movement. Finally, a good hymn is one which passes on the faith of the prophets, apostles, and the saints who have gone before us. It is a "new song," but a new song which owes more to centuries of church culture than it does to recent decades of pop culture.

¹⁹Westermeyer, "The Voice of the People," 18.

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