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*Institute for
Christian Studies
1909 University Avenue
Austin, Texas 78705
(512) 476-2772
Fax: (512) 476-3919*

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Contemporary Trends in Hymnody

Bane or Blessing to the Church?

Allan J. McNicol

We are troubled over the steadily increasing cacophony of the debate concerning the role of music in the assembly. Some see this as a sign of vitality; they are no longer prepared to accept uncritically the venerable legacy of the hymnody of the church over the centuries. It is asserted that this hymnody is out of touch with the concerns of the modern person. Moderns, we are told, are tone deaf to such music. We need music that is upbeat; music that leads us to shout praises and clap. Bluntly, it is claimed that traditional hymns hinder rather than help worship and evangelism. With the increasing balkanization within congregations over music and hymns, several disquieting new directions have begun to emerge. The issue needs to be raised whether these directions are simply harmless departures from the present norm or whether they reflect, however unintendedly, an ominous theological agenda.

Two Troubling Developments in Recent Hymnody

It would be easy to be critical of the selection and function of hymns in the average church during the past generation. Many are sentimental, moralistic, and banal. And we have too often tended to use hymns as mood setters or "fillers" before or after the events that are deemed to be of "real" significance.

Still, one must confess dis-ease with respect to several undercurrents that are now at work with respect to the use of hymns in Churches of Christ. First, we note the appearance of what some have called "performance music."¹

Performance music has been a characteristic feature of Southern Baptists. Indeed, Baptists with their use of choirs, orchestras, soloists, and energetic precentors (song-leaders) have consciously structured the music of their assemblies to culminate in the sermon with its evangelistic plea to accept Christ. Performance music is part of the evangelistic thrust of the service; it prepares those in the assembly for a call to decision.

¹The term is that of the prominent Baptist professor of church music Don Hustad, "Christian Worship: Is this One of God's Terrible Springtimes?" *Crux* 28/4 (December 1992) 31. In this context, performance music involves centering the music program of the church in choirs, soloists, and other trained musicians who "perform" music before the congregation as a central feature of the liturgy.

This model has developed another wrinkle with the emergence of the large urban "mega-church" and the impact of television. Congregational singing is not very telegenic. For television purposes, it is more effective to focus on an orchestra, choir, and soloists. These can be scripted and managed, allowing visually and aurally appealing performances. Thus the performance of most of the music by a select group—apart from the congregation—is even more solidified.

Echoes of this model are appearing in Churches of Christ. Simple and unadorned a cappella congregational singing hardly lends itself to dramatic images for either the television viewer or the actual participant. Hence, we are seeing choral groups, soloists, and similar use of performance music in Churches of Christ as among the Baptists. If the worship assembly is primarily a vehicle for setting up stirring evangelistic messages, it is hard to see why such methods should not be implemented; for they have been shown to increase attendance.

Of course, there are many who have a different vision of the role of music in worship. They are not enamoured by this trend. Stout resistance to these innovations insures that there will be difficult cross-currents that can easily submerge even the most well-intentioned changes in the utilization of songs and hymns in a local church.

If this development were not enough to cause headaches on the part of worship leaders, the development of "praise songs" or choruses is also having an effect on what takes place in the assembly. This development has a potential for additional volatility because it has the possibility to create inter-generational conflict in the church. It would be fair to say that the praise song has become the preferred option of music among youth ministers throughout the church. In some places it has become so dominant that the youth refuse to sing traditional hymns because they are not "their music."

The praise song originated in the charismatic movement. Unlike the performance music that involves a small number in worship leadership, the praise song involves the entire congregation. The congregation is not only called upon to sing but, at the same time, each worshiper is urged to carry out various bodily actions such as raising of the hands, clapping, and embracing.² The idea is that the whole person is intensely engaged in praise to God. Among the charismatics the use of guitars, drums, and trumpets, and a selective use of banners, enhance the impression that a celebration of praise is taking place. In our view the theology that informs the praise song movement represents a strong and direct challenge to the theology of music in Churches of Christ.

Before leaders embrace the praise song movement, they ought to be aware of the origin, focus, and understanding of worship that undergirds this trend. While it may be worthwhile to use select praise songs in the assembly, the theology that

² Hustad, 31.

nurtures these songs is incompatible with the heritage of the common faith of the church. A more defensible basis for the selection of songs for use in the assembly will be set forth in the following pages. To give substance to this argument, we will analyze the praise song movement. Then, after reflecting on the hymnology of the early church, we will suggest criteria to guide worship leaders in selecting hymns in the assembly.

The Origin and a Critique of the Praise Song Movement

Those who embrace the use of praise songs in worship may be surprised to know that contemporary praise worship has its origin in a definite theological agenda.

In the charismatic churches a widespread model for worship is based on an analogy with Old Testament temple worship; especially a certain understanding of Psalm 100:4.³ A typical charismatic service starts out with a series of choruses and songs that praise and adore God and Jesus for their acts in creation and in history. The analogy is made with entering the holy place, or "the gates of thanksgiving" (Ps. 100:4). The song leader will move the worshipers in contrived spontaneity through a rapid series of songs.⁴ It is this aspect of charismatic worship that has been most admired and copied among evangelicals, including some Churches of Christ.

But this is only a preliminary step to the main event of charismatic worship. The analogy is the transition into the holy of holies or, in the words of Psalm 100:4, "entering his courts with praise." To facilitate this event the charismatic service takes on a very different orientation. It becomes much more subdued and calm. Each worshiper quietly, but often very repetitively, utters brief phrases of adoration for the attributes of God. This is the place where the worshiper seeks to encounter the divine perhaps in revelation or in the speaking in a tongue. This two-fold procedure of a long almost kinetic service of song followed by a quiet interlude constitutes the basic structure of much of twentieth-century charismatic worship.

Critique

While the influence of the praise song movement has revitalized interest in singing in the wider ecumenical community, some questions need to be asked.

First, there is the very practical issue of the time factor involved. In order for all the dynamics of "praise worship" to operate fully, one needs a considerable period of time. It is not unusual for assemblies to last for two or three hours. Praise worship

³ Paul Wohlgenuth, "Praise Singing," *The Hymn* 38/1 (1987) 20.

⁴ Hustad, 31-33. Hustad notes that in order to facilitate a form of contrived spontaneity the device of placing songs on an overhead projector beamed on a screen has been used widely. But the replacement of the hymnbook is not just a utilitarian action. Charismatics understand that these are the last days of Joel 2:28. These are the days when the Lord will do "a new thing among his people" (Isaiah 43:19). This new thing must not be compromised by the stale legacies of the past. Thus, new songs inspired in the new age of the Spirit should be used; and the hymnody that contributed to the fall of the church in the past should be discarded.

cannot easily be accommodated under the mantle of two or three songs and a prayer. Unless one is in a special setting (e.g., a retreat or youth rally), it is difficult to envision a modern urban church where people would be prepared to spend such time in one assembly. Would this mean we would give even less time to the sermon and the Lord's Supper? The minister of the large urban church knows that *the* unforgivable sin is to allow the assembly to go ten or fifteen minutes overtime.

Second, although the verbalizing of praise to God and his Son is a central feature of worship, it is not the exclusive form of our lyrical response to God. Christians are called into fellowship on the basis of a rich and nuanced recital of the history of salvation. In Christian worship the major features of this story are repeated and rehearsed. The poetry in the traditional hymnal has been a significant enabling factor in maintaining a legacy of the most evocative ways Christians have reflected on all aspects of the story. Next to the Bible, the hymnal has served as the fount of Christian piety. By providing songs of consecration, penitence, invitation, and praise, traditional hymnody affords many musical forms in which we respond to the story. Will we discard all of these responses to the Holy One and raise a generation who associate worship only with expressions of adoration?

Third, a fundamental theological question needs to be raised regarding the basic presuppositions behind many praise songs. Hustad notes that a preoccupation with the awesome attributes of God has produced a whole series of songs with such refrains as

Lord, I praise You because of who You are,
not just for all the mighty deeds that You have done.⁵

Inherent in such a claim is the notion that we have decided that God is worthy of *our* praise. But, it is not because of intimations of majesty that *we* *deign* to ascribe worth to God, implying that the initiative for worship rests with humans. Rather, worship emerges out of *response* to what the Holy One has *done* for us.

Although many in the praise song movement would acknowledge this point, the language of much praise song music caters to a segment of our culture seeking self-actualization not as a result of a story of certain actions that took place in a historical past, but on the basis of a feeling response approach to reality. Given its appeal among youth, this movement is particularly susceptible to promoting the idea that praise of the triune God is solely rooted in human feelings.

Wholesale implementation of the praise song model of worship would not be desirable for the Churches of Christ on practical, liturgical (i.e. the order and shape

⁵ "Because of Who You Are," words and music by Bob Farrell and Billy Smiley. Copyright 1982 by Paragon Music Composition, as quoted in Hustad, 32, 36.

of our service), or theological grounds. However, certain individual songs produced in this movement can be used effectively in the assembly. Probably such products of the praise song movement as "Father, I Adore You," "Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God," and "Sing Hallelujah to the Lord," will stand the test of time and be sung by later generations in settings far removed from their original contexts.

Criteria for the Choice of Hymns

Early Christian Music

As a Restoration fellowship, Churches of Christ appeal to Scripture as the norm for what takes place in the assembly. The New Testament offers no specific criteria for what constitutes an appropriate hymn. However, a brief glance at what we can learn about singing in the early Church yields several principles that may serve as the basis for establishing criteria useful for worship leaders.

In the early part of the second century of our era Pliny the Younger in his letter to Trajan gives an account of an assembly of Christians who sang a hymn to Christ as God.⁶ This evidence is corroborated by a good amount of internal testimony for the existence of hymns and fragments of verse within the New Testament that allows us to conclude that the singing of hymns was part and parcel of the worship of the early church.⁷ Some suggest that the central setting for the early Christian hymns was the sense of eschatological joy among the early Christians who anticipated the coming of the new age.⁸

The key term that early Christians used for their songs was *psalmoi*,⁹ drawn from the Greek translations of the book of Psalms (1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16; 5:19). But here we need to be careful. For the Greeks *psalmoi* were songs sung to the accompaniment of an instrument of music. But in the circles of the Jewish culture of the Diaspora, formative for the expansion of the early Christian mission, *psalmoi* meant something different. As in the synagogue, Christian *psalmoi* were freely composed religious songs.¹⁰ *Psalmoi* are notably listed first in the Pauline lists of early

⁶ Pliny, *Ep.* 10. 96.

⁷ Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-4; 1 Tim. 3:16; (cf. Eph. 5:14; and the canticles of Lk. 1-2). Also, Ralph P. Martin, "Hymns in the New Testament: An Evolving Pattern of Worship Responses," *Ex Auditu* 8 (1992) 38-39.

⁸ Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Early History of Christianity* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/ Fortress, 1983) 81.

⁹ The term for the formal Greek hymn *paian* is not used in the New Testament. Only Eph. 5:14b (perhaps a fragment of a baptismal hymn) can be construed as having meter which approximates the hymns of the Greco-Roman world.

¹⁰ Hengel, 80-81; the reasons why both the synagogue (until the nineteenth century) and the church of the early centuries eschewed the use of an instrument in the assembly were complex. But the bottom line was that the absence of an instrument provided a distinguishing badge that delineated what took place in the assembly from both the Jewish temple (when it was in existence) and from the pagan cults where instrumental music had very specific theological connotations. cf. J. Quasten, *Music and Worship in*

Patristic and Medieval Church Music, ed. D. C. M. (London: Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983 E.T.)

Christian "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,"¹¹ (1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). Their central focus was the joyous response to the reality that God had fully disclosed himself in Christ. This was *the* hymnody of the early church. Although it is possible, there is no evidence that the early Christians sang from the book of Psalms in their assemblies.¹²

If we study the content of the songs embedded in the New Testament, we discover that they are not confined to the theme of praise. As in 1 Timothy 3:16 and Philippians 2:6–11, they have a quality of narrating what God had done in Christ; and on that basis seem to function as both restating the theological truths of the story and evoking a joyous response on the part of the people. Praise is one element of this response, which also has other forms. This is particularly evident when we consider that it is difficult to differentiate between the form and function of early Christian prayers and songs. Scholars maintain that both had a certain musical quality!¹³

Out of this brief summary of early Christian hymns we can identify basic principles and criteria for Christian music.

First, early Christians structured their lyrical expressions of worship in musical forms that were in keeping with their confession. They allowed their own story to set the agenda for their hymnody, i.e., it was not set by the *Zeitgeist* of the surrounding culture.

Second, early Christian hymnody emerged in a context of eschatological joy and awareness that God had broken into history in Christ. Everything in life was colored by that understanding. Contemporary claims that the legacy of great hymns of the church is boring and out of touch with the times may be more an indicator that we have lost touch with the genuine spiritual impulses of the faith rather than a negative reflection on the traditional hymns. What we need is not to replace the hymns but to recover our spiritual heritage.

Finally, the study of early Christian song shows that the didactic quality of these songs covered the basic themes of Christian theology. Such songs were used not for strictly personal inspiration but to edify and instruct the whole church. A congregation that panders to private tastes and needs will quickly become spiritually malnourished.

1–55; E. Foley, *Foundations of Christian Music: The Music of Pre-Constantinian Christianity* (Grove Liturgical Studies 22–23; Nottingham: Grove Books, 1992) 83. In our view discussions about whether there is a special kind of music, as opposed to other forms of music, that best comports with the theological claims of the faith, an issue which seemed greatly to concern the church of the early centuries, is still an important question.

¹¹ All three of these terms are synonyms drawn from terminology for singing in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

¹² Nor, for that matter, do we know that the Jews sang from the Psalms in their regular Sabbath assemblies in the synagogue. See Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (New York: Oxford, 1992) 23.

¹³ Foley, 25.

Practical Guidelines in the Selection of Hymns

Those who advocate the adoption of changes in the assembly often say that, since there is no biblical injunction against such changes, opposition is based merely on biases and preferences. Clearly, there are many things that are inappropriate or wrong that are not, however, specifically condemned in the Bible. It is time that we recognized that change may be opposed or promoted for a host of reasons. It may be as neurotic to promote change as to resist it. What we need are clear criteria to allow us both to promote responsible change in our use of music and to recognize and restrain irresponsible change.

It is the rare congregation that uses more than a hundred hymns in the assembly in the course of a year. Thus each hymn should be considered a special treasure for the development of the spiritual life of the congregation.

The guidelines for the selection of hymns, based on the theological principles identified in this essay, fall into two areas: (1) Theological: Is the text of the hymn in harmony with scripture? Does it reflect the central insights of both the theology and experience of the common faith? Is it appropriate for the liturgical action taking place at a given point in the service? (There should be no hymnic "non sequiturs.") The hymn should not have excessive emphasis on the self or narcissistic concerns. (2) Literary and Aesthetic: Does the structure of the hymn clearly articulate a central theme? Are the words and phrases of the song put together without violating basic rules of grammar and syntax? Is the language of the hymn clear and are the images well chosen and appropriate? Does the musical setting, especially the rhythm, express the tones of the feelings of the text? Is the rhythm appropriate to entrance into the divine assembly?

Scripture tells us that all things should be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40). More attention given to the criteria for the selection and use of hymns does not guarantee the presence of the Holy One; but it will surely not hinder.

Conclusion

We have discussed the emergence and impact of performance music and the praise song movement in modern Christianity and their growing impact upon Churches of Christ. We have argued that although some praise songs will stand the test of time, most are too insular and theologically misdirected to replace traditional Christian hymnody: the combined treasure of the common faith of the church. This negative critique should not be viewed as an endorsement of the status quo. It simply means that these new developments are not the appropriate means to substantive and lasting renewal in worship. Indeed, if we push very far in these new directions, serious theological questions will need to be answered about the meaning of worship.

Contributors

All the contributors to this issue of *Christian Studies* are on the faculty of the Institute for Christian Studies, Austin, Texas.

David Worley is the President of the Institute for Christian Studies. He also serves as Professor of Biblical Studies.

R. Mark Shipp is Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Missions.

Jeffrey Peterson is Assistant Professor of New Testament and Homiletics.

Gary Holloway is Pat E. Harrell Associate Professor of Church History and Librarian.

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament.

Michael R. Weed is Billie Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics.