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A Discriminative Study of How Hymns Should Relate to the Present Age

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A DISCRIMINATIVE STUDY OF HOW HYMNS SHOULD
RELATE TO THE PRESENT AGE

A Special Studies
Presented to
the Honors Program
Ouachita Baptist University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Honors Program

by
Shelby Earl Cowling
January 1970

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Cultural struggles never have been of short duration. The development of music has been no exception. Western music owes its development primarily to the church.¹ The evolutionary process has sometimes been rapid, at other times almost stationary. It was servants of the church who invented the system of musical notation; formulated the laws of musical grammar; and transformed the primitive organ of Ctesibius and the hydraulus of Carthage into the instrument of today.

Out of early Christian psalmody came, one by one, the Gregorian chant, counterpoint, multiple metrics, harmony, the oratorio, the lyrical drama, and the choreographic musical narrative. The three centuries following the Renaissance saw the emergence of the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic eras. Forgotten by many is the fact that there was a time when there was no dichotomy between sacred and secular music. The art of music was then one and indivisible; there was not one idiom for weekday madrigals, operas, and symphonies and another for Sunday Masses and Vespers.

In the nineteenth century there was a rapid transformation of musical techniques and expression through such composers as Wagner, Berlioz, Verdi, Franck, Brahms, Debussy, and Moussorgsky.

¹Johannes Riedel, Cantors at the Crossroads (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 163.

In recent decades, composers like Stravinsky have made rhythm the major element in their works, a throwback to the time when musical language was still in its infancy. Others, like Schoenberg, have glorified chromaticism and confounded tonality by outlandish, crashing, loud productions, in the process of which musical sound is thoroughly pulverized into something supposedly of the utmost delicacy.

Music, whether sacred or secular, has three basic elements: rhythm, melody, and harmony, which came into being in that order. If rhythm prevails, it calls for the dance; if melody is dominant, it expresses itself in song; and if the total impression is harmonic, the composition is an expanded form of melody, represented by chords instead of single notes.

Today, when the church and church music no longer dictate the cultural development of music as it once did long ago, and when composers use one of the three basic elements of music as the basis for their compositions thus offering many different types and styles of music, church music finds itself in a state of confusion. It culturally lags behind that of secular music and quite often gets trapped when trying to decide on which style to adopt today. It does not attract as it once did the composers of its century to compose music for the church. As for the music of talented composers who do compose for the church, it is only the largest churches who would quite naturally have the personnel that are able

to use the music; and the music composed generally could not be classified as hymnody. Hymns are the worship music of the church services. Since a great deal of fine church music that is written is not worship music, the people are not able to participate and are not assisted in their devotions. For the clergy, organist, and choir the anthems and motets may often be sincere expressions of religious fervor. But people do not go to church to watch and listen to others worship. A church service should be a corporate act of worship; everything that happens there should be designed to affect everyone present. Whenever that has not been the case, interest in the church has declined.

Some years ago the American Music Conference conducted a survey to ascertain the types of music preferred by Americans. The result revealed the sequence: church music and hymns, first; then followed popular dance music, folk tunes, semi-classical and opera, cowboy and hillbilly, classical music, and boogie woogie, last. Polls conducted by magazines listing hymns according to degree of popularity differ widely in their results. Periodicals published by denominations dominated by strong fundamentalism reported that their subscribers give the top spots in their voting to such songs as "In the Garden," "The Old Rugged Cross," "Count Your Many Blessings," and "When They Ring the Golden Bells," while such classics as "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" and "A Mighty Fortress Is

Our God" either are way down on the list or do not make the list at all. Lutheran denominational magazines have the great texts and tunes which have stood the wear and tear of the centuries listed in the uppermost part of the lists.

In the United States where freedom of expression is one of our prized liberties our people have sometimes been forced to put up with hymnody that is a caricature and travesty of the real thing. One finds it especially entrenched in the South. In the year 1936 in Dallas, Texas, V.O. Stamps began to broadcast purported "hymns" over Station KRLD.² His stock in trade is various combinations of chromaticism, which feminize a hymn, also varied loudnesses, high and low pitches, pauses, durations, something making one wonder whether he and his fellow perpetrators of sacred "music" are trying to transfer the loudnesses of the integrating serialists to the religious field. These jazzed-up gospel songs have invaded hymnals till in some areas of the country they are the basic repertoire of hymns used in the church worship service.

The "hot gospel" denominations continue to depend on numerous late-nineteenth-century salvation songs of the P.P. Bliss and C.W. Gabriel variety.³ However, even the most

²Ibid., p. 167.

³Robert Stevenson, Protestant Church Music in America (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, inc., 1966), p. 126.

successful of modern revivalists fails to surround himself with any composer who can match the appeal of Bliss, Sankey, or Gabriel. As a result, old-time religion in the mouths of the masses means gospel hymns of the type popularized before 1914 or the type gospel hymn patterned after the V.O. Stamps style.

Hymns which are current in an age with feudal overtones will not fit into one in which democracy holds sway. A good example is the third verse of "All Things Bright and Beautiful:"

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate.
God made them, high and lowly,
And ordered their estate.

It has been said by those who would improve our worship and our theology that many hymns are "sub-Christian," and, though popular, unsuitable for use in public worship. All will agree with this statement. One of the most influential writers on this subject, the late Bernard Manning, was fond of disparaging most hymns that did not come up to the Christian standards exemplified by Charles Wesley. "The greatest hymns," he wrote once, "are Christian, thoroughly and irrevocably Christian; and when I say Christian, I mean that they concern Christ."⁴ Is a service of Christian worship the better for

⁴Erik Routley, Words, Music, and the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 184.

having its congregational utterances limited to the hymns which are in this sense the greatest? Do we achieve our aim in worship if we insist on the puritan doctrine that all worship is statically "New Testament" worship. If all the hymns are of the loftiest Christian standard, then the presupposition is that the worshiper steps into the New Testament as soon as he puts a foot over the threshold of the church door. In the world as we have it, with congregations as we find them, this simply does not correspond with the facts of life. The world must be brought into the New Testament through the drama of worship itself. Those who have a tradition of "common prayer" have always held this. Reverting for a moment to Anglican morning and evening prayer, the worshiper in these is not thrown straight into the New Testament, but is prepared for it by way of the Old Testament. To precede these services with a New Testament hymn is one more way of upsetting their dramatic rhythm.

Hymns, therefore, should exhibit the "Old Testament" virtues whether or not they deal explicitly with "New Testament" subjects. Literary grace, effectiveness of expression, memorability of phrase, and all such virtues are "Old Testament" virtues. They are what one would expect of any decent secular poetry. They are required in a hymn just as in the Christian ethic there is no question but that the disciple is required to go the first mile. The error of those who

would rather sing a second-rate gospel song than a fine piece like "When wilt thou save the people?" is that of trying to go the second mile without ever having gone the first, even though the gospel song is about Christ and the other is not.

All hymns, therefore, should exhibit the "Old Testament" virtues whether the hymns are "Old Testament" or "New Testament" in character of text. The order of service should dictate whether to use, in character of text, "Old Testament," "New Testament" or Christian as defined by Bernard Manning, or a combination of both.

In regarding texts for hymns, a large deterrent to composers today is the increasing prevalence of several translations of the Bible. Most of us have accustomed ourselves to the comfortable archaic flow of the King James Version, and musicians for generations have turned to that familiar source for texts. Now, however, the sensitive worshipper questions the unity of a service in which the spoken portions come from the Revised Standard Version or the New English Bible, but the musical sections provide only the King James Texts.⁵ The composers of church music of the present age have found success using old texts. These texts being used were written by such men as Charles Wesley (1707-1788), Andrew of Crete (660-732), and Clement of Alexandria (ca. 170-220).

⁵Elwyn A. Wienandt, Choral Music of the Church (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 438.

A simple definition of church worship music is as follows:

Ideally, it should be good music, acknowledged as such by musicians and worthy of being played and sung anywhere. It must, however, have this qualification: that it elevates the mind, and assists the people to turn their thoughts Godwards.⁶

If interest in worship music is to be renewed and higher standards set, it will be necessary to start where every renaissance of Protestant church music has had its beginnings--with the congregation.

⁶Charles L. Etherington, Protestant Worship Music (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 261.

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