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“Four Hundred Years of Baptist Hymnody in Thirty Minutes”

Singing was by no means universally practiced by the earliest Baptists. About 1608, John Smyth, the founder of the first Baptist church, claimed that singing while looking on a book was not true worship. In this, he was following ideas that had earlier been put forth by Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, who claimed that singing was a form of prayer. Jesus had laid down specific instructions for prayer: “when you pray, go into your closet and there make your request be known to God.” Zwingli took “closet” to mean the “chamber of the mind.” Thus, “singing” was not an external action, but an internal one.

Following a similar tack, Smyth claimed that singing must be done by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the use of books, rhyme, and poetic meter—what came to be called “prelimited forms”—were a restriction on the free exercise of the Spirit.

Smyth and his followers did acknowledge that one could sing a solo under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but this was not very practical for congregational singing and was seldom practiced, if ever.

Baptists who followed Smyth's views were called "General Baptists" because of their belief in "general atonement."

Another group of Baptists that arose in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England was the Particular Baptists, so called because of their belief in election, that God has predestined some for salvation and others for ... well, you get the drift.

Some Particulars opposed singing on the same grounds as the Generals (prelimited forms), and also because it encouraged what they called "conjoint singing," that is, joint participation of believers and unbelievers in an act of worship that cannot come from the heart of the latter.

Other Particulars believed that singing was a Christian duty, and these differing views among the Particulars resulted in a significant controversy among British Baptists in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The London Baptist pastor Benjamin Keach led the charge for the "singing" Particulars with a book titled *The Breach Repaired in God's Worship*, published in 1691. Keach attempted to demonstrate that singing was to be a vocal utterance, that God himself had given the Hebrews "prelimited forms" to sing in the Book of Psalms, and that singing was an

“ordinance,” a task that Christ himself had laid on the church, and one in which Christians should participate regardless of the presence of unbelievers. Keach is also noteworthy for having published the first hymnal specifically for use in congregational singing among Baptists, *Spiritual Melody*, also dated 1691, and for being a hymn writer himself, though he was not a very good one.

Ultimately, of course, the “singers” won out. One amusing anecdote from this era concerns Keach’s own church. In 1691, his congregation experienced a split, with some dissatisfied members leaving to form their own church, in part because of their pastor’s use of singing. In 1733, this Maze Pond church, as it was known, was in the process of calling a new pastor. The person they selected said he would come to the church only if they began singing. Apparently, the congregation agreed, because he became pastor of the church. One hundred years later, we find references to the church being famous for the scope and quality of its congregational singing!

The British singing controversy naturally affected American churches as well. Some churches that were founded as “singing” congregations became “non-singing” when large numbers of non-singers emigrated from England. But by the beginning of the Revolutionary War most Baptist churches in America were of the singing variety.

Baptist churches then as now have been free to use whatever hymnal they want or none at all, and many of them drew their congregational songs from the Anglicans Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady's *A New Version of the Psalms* or from the hymns and paraphrased psalms of the Congregationalist Isaac Watts, and later from the Baptist John Rippon's *Selection of Hymns* (1787). All of these were English collections.

The earliest Baptist hymnal to be compiled in America was published in 1766. This is colloquially known as the Newport Collection after its place of publication. No compiler is named for the book, but it was probably put together primarily for the First Baptist Church of Newport, Rhode Island, which had accepted singing only two years before. The book consisted mainly of reprints from Watts and the hymns of Joseph Stennett, a British Seventh-Day Baptist who compiled a collection of baptismal hymns and one of Lord's Supper hymns.

A different sort of approach was taken by a New Hampshire Baptist laypreacher, Joshua Smith, whose 1791 *Divine Hymns* contained a significant number of folk hymn texts, marking the first widespread publication of such items among Baptists or anyone else.

The Baptist collections published in America to the end of the eighteenth century contained little that was really new, and there were no

significant Baptist hymn writers in the New World during this era. The one place in which Baptists made an original and long-lasting contribution was with the publication of the tune CORONATION, for the text “All hail the power of Jesus’ name.” CORONATION was written by Oliver Holden, a Massachusetts singing schoolteacher and shopkeeper, who ultimately became a real estate developer, and one of the wealthiest men in his state. Holden was a member of the First Baptist Church of Boston, a founding member of the First Baptist Church of Charlestown, Massachusetts, and ultimately the “teaching elder” of the Second Baptist Church of Charlestown. CORONATION has been in continuous use since its first publication in 1793, is the only 18<sup>th</sup>-century American tune to be nearly universally used in hymnals, and is one of the two or three best-known tunes written by a Baptist.

Baptist hymnals of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were mainly words-only affairs. This had several advantages: (1) music takes up a lot of space, so printing only the words means that more texts can be included in the book, (2) a greater variety of tunes can be used with the texts—a text is not locked up with the tune that accompanies it on the page, (3) no special fonts or spacing are needed, so the book is easier and cheaper to print—and thus to buy. There are also drawbacks, of course, but it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup>

century that the now-common practice of interlining texts and music began to be practiced in a systematic way.

The nineteenth century also saw the first important hymn texts written by Baptists in America. Among these were “My country, ‘tis of thee” and “Our Father God, who art in heaven.” “My country, ‘tis of thee” was written by Samuel Francis Smith while he was still a seminary student, and is certainly one of the best-known national hymns. The author of “Our Father God, who art in heaven” (CG 382) was Adoniram Judson, the famous Baptist missionary to Burma.

Two among the many hymnals published for Baptists during this era stand out because of their widespread use. *The Psalmist*, published in 1843 by Baron Stow and Samuel F. Smith, became the most common hymnal among Baptists in the North, while in the South, Basil Manly and Basil Manly, Jr’s., *Baptist Psalmody*, published in 1850, held sway. The latter book was helped by the endorsement of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in 1851.

Baptists were also responsible for the publication of the two most widely used shape-note folk hymn collections of the nineteenth century, *The Southern Harmony* and the *Sacred Harp*. The *Sacred Harp* is the source of the tune BEACH SPRING, sung with “Come, all Christians, be committed”

and a variety of other texts. From *The Southern Harmony* have come the tunes for “On Jordan’s stormy banks,” “Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,” and—perhaps most importantly—the combination of John Newton’s “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound” and the melody with which it is now indelibly linked, NEW BRITAIN. Both *The Southern Harmony* and *Sacred Harp* are still in use today at annual singings, over 165 years after their first publications.

Another area in which Baptists made significant hymnic contributions during the nineteenth century was the Sunday school song. Up until about 1875, Sunday schools were aimed strictly at children, so when you said “Sunday school song” during that era, it was another way of saying “children’s song.”

One of the best composers of Sunday school songs was the Baptist William B. Bradbury, and one need look no further than his tune for “Jesus loves me, this I know” to prove the point. But if you sing “He leadeth me, O blessed thought,” “Savior, like a shepherd lead us,” “My hope is built on nothing less,” “Sweet hour of prayer,” or “Just as I am, without one plea,” you will also be singing a tune by Bradbury.

The Sunday school became a significant influence on the development of another type of congregational song in the late nineteenth century, the

gospel song. The gospel song was aimed principally at the unconverted person on the street, to present to them the gospel message in a nutshell, wrapped up in a popular and familiar musical style, such as that of the waltz, march, minstrel show tune, or operetta.

Two Northern Baptists wrote a number of classic songs in this style. Pastor Robert Lowry contributed the words and tune for “Nothing But the Blood,” the music for “I need thee every hour,” and the refrain and music for “We’re Marching to Zion.” His best-known hymn, “Shall we gather at the river,” for which he wrote both words and music, has become the pre-eminent Hollywood symbol of southern rural religion and baptizin’ in the crick—though the author/composer was a northerner, served as pastor of a city church and a university professor, and the hymn has nothing to do with baptism.

Lowry’s colleague and collaborator, W. Howard Doane, was the president of a woodworking machinery manufacturing company, whose avocation was the writing and publishing of gospel songs. He showed a special affinity for writing tunes to match texts by the Methodist author Fanny Crosby, including those for “To God be the glory,” “I am thine, O Lord, I have heard thy voice,” “Jesus, keep me near the cross,” “More like

Jesus would I be,” “Pass me not, O gentle Savior,” and “Rescue the perishing.”

Mention must also be made of George C. Stebbins, who composed the familiar music for such texts as “I’ve found a friend, oh, such a friend,” “Ye Must Be Born Again,” “Take time to be holy,” and the invitation hymns “Jesus is tenderly calling,” “Out of my bondage, sorrow, and night,” and “Have thine own way, Lord.”

These are but the major figures in Baptist contributors to the gospel song in the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, of course, the pre-eminent writer of gospel songs among Baptists was Baylus Benjamin McKinney, whom one of my hymnological colleagues has dubbed the “Franz Schubert of Southern Baptists.”

When the gospel song came to prominence in the 1870s, many Baptist churches pretty much abandoned whatever they had been singing before, and adopted this new form almost wholesale. There were exceptions, of course, but Baptist churches ran principally on gospel song fuel at least through the 1940s and the publication of *The Broadman Hymnal*. The Baptist Sunday School Board had been publishing hymnals since 1904, but it was not until *The Broadman Hymnal* that any of these books could be thought of as truly

denominational in scope. This collection was spectacularly successful and brought a sense of unity and identity to Southern Baptists everywhere.

In the 1950s, the repertory of Baptist hymnody began to expand somewhat, thanks in part to the publication in 1956 of *Baptist Hymnal*. This book kept gospel song as its core, but added some of the Victorian hymnody of the nineteenth century that Baptists had either forgotten or had never sung previously. Apart from the songs of McKinney, however, the twentieth century was almost completely ignored.

Another edition of *Baptist Hymnal*, published in 1975, was the most eclectic hymnal Baptists had ever produced, drawing from some of the most recent developments in British and American hymnody, as well as recovering for Baptists some much-needed historical material, such as “Of the Father’s love begotten” and “O come, O come Emmanuel.” It also contained some popular gospel songs that were not in the previous book, including “How Great Thou Art” and “In the Garden.” A special feature of this hymnal was the emphasis it placed on including works by living or recently deceased Baptist authors and composers, such as William J. Reynolds’s “Share His Love.”

The 1991 *Baptist Hymnal*, the last during what might be called the “period of denominational cohesion,” continued the eclectic tradition of the

1975 book, dropping some of the seldom used items and including newer forms of popular Christian song, such as the scripture chorus and contemporary Christian music, while still maintaining a healthy balance of historic hymnody and gospel song. All hymnals have a responsibility to enlarge the repertory of congregational song, and the 1991 book followed in the steps of its 1975 predecessor by including the works of recent Baptist hymn writers, including Terry York and Mark Blankenship's "Worthy of Worship."

In 2008, one group of Baptists published another collection titled *Baptist Hymnal*. In some senses, this book reverts to the populist approach of the *Broadman Hymnal* by emphasizing popular idioms and largely ignoring hymnic developments in the broader stream of Christian song. In many respects, it breaks with the tradition of its three immediate predecessors and falls more into line with hymnals produced by independent publishing houses.

Today, of course, we celebrate the publication of *Celebrating Grace*, the latest in a long line of hymnals published by Baptists for Baptists. Compiled over a period of four years by five editors and a committee of fifty persons from various Baptist traditions and walks of life, the contents of *Celebrating Grace* represent both the long stream of Christian hymnody and

the fruits of contemporary hymnody in many styles, as well as the labors of Baptist hymn writers over the past centuries.

Much has happened in our congregational singing during the last 400 years. What are some lessons we can learn from what has gone before?

- (1) Baptists have seldom had a common hymnal from which all or most of the churches sang. For 350 years, Baptists either didn't sing or—more commonly—they used a variety of books and materials. The fifty years between 1940 and 1991 were exceptional in this regard. Baptists are a diverse lot, and their history has shown that no one style, format, or book suits them all. The last few decades have seen Baptists return to their common practice, which is that there *is* no common practice.
- (2) As a populist denomination that does not have strong liturgical roots, Baptists tend to adopt more or less wholesale the popular musical style of the surrounding culture. It happened with the gospel song in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has happened more recently with contemporary Christian music.
- (3) Baptists are a singing people. Singing their faith is important to them. As we have seen, some have even considered it to be an ordinance on the level of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The importance of singing

to Baptists is evident in the hundreds of hymnals they have published over the centuries in an attempt to “get it just right.” It also shows up in the controversies over singing that have erupted among them from time to time. People do not argue about things that don’t matter to them, and the controversies become controversies because people care about the issues. Congregational song is worth the arguments, for it is one of the chief means by which Baptists learn and express their faith.

(4) Baptists have always been ecumenical in their song selection. At the same time, Baptists have also made substantial contributions to the stream of Christian song. One of the challenges for us today is to seek out creative individuals who will provide new texts and tunes that will enrich the worship not only of Baptist churches, but of the wider Christian community as well. That is part of the goal of *Celebrating Grace*—to preserve the worthy expressions of the past, to record the moving of the Spirit in the present, and to prime the pump of creativity for the future.