

Hymnody Workshop

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Gambrell Street Baptist Church

Ft. Worth, TX

Hymns for a Lifetime of Worship and Devotion

My assigned title includes the word “lifetime:” Hymns for a **Lifetime** of Worship and Devotion. Hymns have much to say to that *span of time* called a “life.” Hymns *also* have much to say to the *depth of engagement* called “life.” *Hymns for a Lifetime of Worship and Devotion* assumes both a breadth *and* a depth that encompasses the entirety of our existence on this earth. Deep *and* wide, deep and wide; there’s a fountain flowing deep and wide, and hymns teach us to cup our hands and hearts for a lifetime of refreshing.

To speak of hymnody merely as one of several congregational song options is to force hymnody into the wrong conversation. To assign equal status to all congregational song options is to misunderstand the role of hymns and hymnals in the free-church tradition. Do not misunderstand me. It is not my intention to demean any form of congregational song. The point is this, just as one need not get an “A” to pass a course, one need not sing a hymn to worship. Listen carefully to the statement as hymns are placed in a different conversation, “To assign equal status to all congregational song options is to misunderstand the *role* of hymns and hymnals in the free-church tradition.”

For the Christian, the Bible stands second only to the Trinity as a source of revelation, inspiration and formation. Even so, in the free-church tradition the hymnal must be held in high and separate esteem. The hymnal is a unique and formative repository. A hymnal is a bound copy of carefully gathered testimony of human experience and Christian tradition, formatted to be sung into our worship and discipleship. We call those testimonies, “hymns.” Selected examples from other congregational song options are included in hymnals when they exhibit potential for passing the

“lifetime” test in both length and depth. Indeed, let us quickly acknowledge that individual hymns must pass that same test to be included as well.

Hymn writers pause along the path to chronicle, as best they can, what they sense to be significant spiritual moments or insights. They, then, offer those metered messages to the Church for use in worship, both private and corporate. Hymn writers *must* do this work, and they must do this work in the context of the Church and on behalf of the Church because they, like we, are priests.

The hymn writer does their chronicling in hymn format because it has become evident that the hymn (or some might say the *concept* of the hymn) is **the** congregational song form that can stand the test of time, absorbing or dismissing its poetic and musical challengers along the way. Further, the hymnal, as a medium, has proven to be a perpetually new wineskin. The hymnal only glances as the screen passes by. “Where,” the hymnal asks of the screen, “where are your boundaries? Please leave in my care the best that you have to offer before you go.”

But, lest the hymnal boast too loudly in the presence of the screen, even the hymnal bows to the hymn. This is because we can only sing one hymn at a time and it is that hymn that will either sing the necessary lifetime breadth and depth, or not. In sequence, the hymn bows as well. It bows to scripture as its necessary guide and stay. Then scripture bows to its Living Lens and Fulfillment, even Jesus, the Christ who is God the Son. Hymn-singers, let us be humble, no matter which way the congregational song pendulum is swinging. Let hymns humble us into a lifetime of worship and devotion.

Mark, in his gospel, tells us that when Jesus and his disciples had finished their final supper together, *they* sang a hymn. They sang a hymn before departing the upper room for the Mount of Olives (14:26). Many scholars agree that what they sang was probably Psalm 118, the final psalm in the “Great Hallel” which begins with Psalm 115. They sang a psalm, but Mark calls it a hymn because of its lifetime

breadth and its lifetime depth. Here the *concept* of hymn has absorbed even a psalm. When read, it is scripture. Sung, it is a hymn, according to Mark. Jesus understood what they were about to walk into when they walked out of that upper room. Jesus understood what *Life* was about to demand. The disciples understood only in part and *that* in differing interpretations, but they all knew that leaving the upper room and moving to the Mount of Olives was no small thing. That night a psalm functioned as a song of praise and glorification. Call it a hymn. I believe that night Jesus and his disciples sang the psalm for courage and context as well. Call it a hymn. The courage is for *this* day, *every* day. The context is *eternal* day, the big picture.

I've heard the sound of songs being sung for courage and context. I've heard the sound of a bunch of Marines singing *their* "hymn" for courage and context; few on key, many monotones, but courage was summoned for the depth and likely length of life nonetheless. Hear the "hymn" of *these* few men, these disciples and their master, gathered in the upper room, about to deploy in their very human mixture of cowardice and courage. Hear the praise and glorification; hear the courage and context:

[read Ps. 118, NRSV]

Can you hear the raw-voiced hymn? I imagine it sung quietly and in a contemplative mood. Something that is often sung in a robust manner becomes especially moving when sung slowly, quietly, and thoughtfully. Scripture calls 118 a psalm *and* scripture calls it a hymn. Hymns are songs of praise and glorification. Hymns are also songs of courage and context, combining for a lifetime of costly worship and *terrible* devotion. I use the word "terrible" here in the same way our beloved mentor Donald Hustad uses it in the phrase "terrible springtime" in the epilog of his book *Jubilate II*¹. Hustad suggests that the turmoil and conflict surrounding contemporary worship and music styles might be a harbinger of true renewal in the church. From his "terrible springtime" comes my humbler "terrible devotion."

Songs of praise and glorification combine with songs of courage and context to produce hymns of costly worship and terrible devotion. I believe this to be the work of Holy Spirit and for a sobering reason.

I define “terrible devotion” as a courageous, clear-headed determination to live according to Christ’s teachings and example. Though our nation was once for Christianity a warm and welcoming hearth with a crackling fire, ideological division is changing the U.S. into a raging furnace for the refiner’s fire. I believe it is Christianity’s worship and devotion that is being refined and the process will call for a terrible devotion to the hard teachings of the Gospel. If the refiner’s fire is to burn away the dross of Nationalistic Christianity, or Civil Religion, leaving the gold of mercy and justice in our hearts and laws, songs of costly worship and terrible devotion will be present in the process. If from that same refiner’s fire a “radical” Christ-following is also to emerge, a Christ-following that cares not who is in the White House, or the legislative halls, or the judicial benches, only who is on the throne, again, songs of costly worship and terrible devotion will be present in the process. Call them hymns.

What is costly worship? It is worship that costs us our lives as we are transformed from who we are, into a more Christ-like peculiarity. What is terrible devotion? It is Christ-following that calls the conservative, orthodoxy-focused Christian and the liberal orthopraxy-focused Christian to forswear their current crusade mentality and work together towards a more Christ-like presence of the Church in this world. Orthodoxy as you know might be called a concern for right doctrine, theology, rules and regulations. Orthopraxy is a concern for right practice, ministry, justice and mercy. The division is not clear-cut, of course, but neither is it difficult to see, especially in life’s major issues. Along with bold preaching, bold hymnody that praises the Master and emboldens the disciples will be called for in order for Christ-followers to merge their orientations and give themselves to a lifetime of this sort of fire-refined worship and devotion. If this concept of costly worship and terrible devotion, the concept of a terrible springtime, is of interest to you, I suggest you read Phyllis Tickle’s little book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (BakerBooks’ , emergent village imprint, 2008)ⁱⁱ.

Can such a merging or “emerging” of orientations really happen? Can Christians divided by secular politics and sacred worship unite to live glowingly in a dark world? I think so, but we must not be annoyed by the glimmers of hope that blind us for an instant. Many of you have seen, I’m sure, the recent essay by Mike Harland, director of LifeWay Worship at what was the Sunday School Board in Nashville. I received this essay via a Singing Men of Central Texas network email attachment. The email (dated 5/13/2010) is from Jimell Badry of Marketplace Chaplains USA. It was originally sent only to a few friends. The title of his essay addressed to contemporary worship practitioners is *They are not singing anymore*. Here is his “Summary”:

So, if you ask me, turn up the lights, and turn down the sound--- pick songs and hymns that proclaim God’s truth and reveal the character of Jesus Christ. Use resources that let the people excel in their corporate expression of praise and not just fit the style and strengths of your artistry. And don’t waste energy trying to embrace a demographic of people when all you really need to do is embrace Jesus. The styles and trends of the culture where you live will take care of themselves if you will do that one thing.

And serve your people---love them, let them lead you, and you will slowly earn the right to lead them. Pray about everything and ask God to change hearts, starting with yours. Jesus modeled it perfectly---he started where people were and showed great patience as He served them and put their needs above His own.

God help us---and may His church start singing again.ⁱⁱⁱ

I will not tell you how annoyed I was when I first read this. Ministries were destroyed and churches split by swift and determined turnabouts from traditional to contemporary worship. Finally, now, they are discovering and admitting what others saw from the beginning? The first word that came to my lips cannot be found in the Bible. But, the annoying glimmer and momentary frustration was light. We must embrace the light, even in its early sparks and reflections. We must embrace God’s light if differing Christian orientations are to merge and emerge into a Lighthouse for a new day and time. Enter, possibly at great cost to egos and agendas, enter *Hymns for a Lifetime of Worship and Devotion...* for a lifetime such as this. I wonder if church musicians of our several, separate, vocations and

persuasions are ready to leave the upper room of invitation only membership and follow Christ to the Mount of Olives and then on to Mount Calvary, praying “not my will but thine” and “Father forgive them”?” We need hymns that will lead us to and through costly worship in a time that calls for terrible devotion.

Our hearts [deep] and our days [wide]; these are parameters that define our lives. These parameters must have a song. Let us, like our scripture and our hymnals, call that song a hymn. These songs, if they are indeed to be *hymns for a lifetime of worship and devotion* must have a strong “Amen,” a strong so be it; by God, so be it. To the overarching story of life and to the daily stories of life, hymns sing a gratifying and encouraging “Amen”. Keep hymns in the proper conversation.

It is common knowledge that **our** story [wide] must have **a** story [deep] into which it can be absorbed; let our hymns say, “Amen.” The rhyme and reason of our lives (however meager) must have a larger poem into which they can be absorbed; let our hymns say, “Amen.” The music of our short lives must have an eternal song into which it can be absorbed; let our hymns say, “Amen.”

Because of its *story, poetry, and music*, the hymn is a model for the forming and informing of our lives; our *lifetime of worship and devotion*. No, one might say, the Bible is that model, not the hymn or the hymnal. In response I take us back to the earlier mentioned sequence of humility. The hymnal bows to the hymn. The hymn, in turn, bows to scripture. Scripture bows to its (proper hermeneutic, its) Living Lens and Fulfillment who is Jesus, and, in turn, then,...

Jesus **calls** us o'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea;
Day by day His sweet voice soundeth, saying “Christian, follow me.”

Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us, saying “Christian, love me more.”

In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
Still He calls in cares and pleasures, “Christian, love Me more than these.”

Jesus calls us: by Your mercies, Savior, may we hear Your call,

Give our hearts to full obedience, serve and love You best of all.^{iv}

Now, to assure applause, let me announce that it's time for a break.

Amen.

Terry W. York
George W. Truett Theological Seminary
Baylor University

ⁱ Hustad, Donald P. *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal*. Carol Stream, IL. Hope Publishing Company, 1981, 1993. pp. 534ff. ISBN: 0-916642-17-8.

ⁱⁱ Tickle, Phyllis. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008) ISBN: 978-0-8010-1313-3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harland, Mike. "They Are Not Singing Anymore..." undated essay.

^{iv} Alexander, Cecil F. "Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult"