

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

Psalm 95:1-7, Ephesians 5:19-20

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August 29, 2010

A minister was winding up his best sermon ever on temperance and the evils of alcohol. With great passion he said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." With even greater passion he said, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." And then finally, shaking his fist in the air, he said, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river." Sermon complete, he sat down.

The song leader then stood very sheepishly announced the closing hymn: "Please open your hymn books to #365, as together we stand and sing, 'Shall We Gather at the River.'"

"Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord."¹ I cannot imagine what it would be like to have to express our faith without the help of music. Music adds power to any expression of self that words alone are unable to capture. The blending of poetry, rhythm and music move the heart and mind in ways that words fail to communicate.

For as long as the people of God have gathered together for worship, music has played a role. The book of Psalms has frequently been referred to as the hymnbook of the Bible. It is a collection of poetry that was typically recited to music; in fact, musical instructions are often part of the subtitle of individual psalms, or marginal notes that indicate musical movements. Indeed, until about 100 years ago, the primary source for the hymns sung in churches was the Psalter. I have a book in my office titled, "Psalms and Hymns Adapted to Social, Private and Public Worship in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America," that was published in 1843. It has the psalms adapted to specific meter of English poetry, and the pastor or song leader would simply instruct the congregation which tune to sing to that particular meter.

Believe it or not, it's not just in the past 50 years that there has been dispute or disagreement as to which styles of music are more appropriate for worship. The truth is, people have always had their own favorites, and so the introduction of new music has always created some tension in the church. The other day I came across a story about a young man, about 18 years old, who complained that when the old songs were being sung in worship, it was as if a rusty saw were being sharpened close to his ear. That could very well have been an observation from an 18-year-old of today, because there is a gap between musical preferences of many of our young people and the older generations. But the truth is, that observation was made in the late 1600s by young Isaac Watts, who went on to write scores of hymns, including 13 which are found in our own hymnal. It seems that there was a day when "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past" was considered a contemporary song...

Music style in worship need not be a source of tension and strife in the life of the church. Instead, it should be embraced as a way of recognizing the many-faceted ways that our faith finds musical

¹ Ephesians 5:19

expression. It turns out that in today's mainline Protestant denominations, there are about five distinct musical preferences found in most of our congregations. A high percentage of Protestants born before 1927 prefer the old gospel hymns written predominantly between 1870 and 1935. At least 75% of Protestants born between 1927 and 1945 prefer the great classic hymns that were predominantly written between 1520 and 1870. And then for those born after 1945, there are three distinct classes of contemporary songs.

People who make their money studying these trends note that healthy, multi-generational mainline protestant congregations like the Presbyterian Church will find a way to connect with those who prefer the great classics, with an occasional old gospel hymn included from time to time, as well as include at least two of the three types of contemporary music in their Sunday services. That's a real challenge for Thom and me as we try to select music that will appeal to the broadest possible audience. Between our two services on Sunday mornings (reminder: we go back to our two-service schedule next week), we do try to incorporate as many musical styles as we can without making our services seem musically fragmented.

In order for us to truly worship together as several generations, I believe the key is for each of us to recognize that there are those gathered here with us whose musical tastes may differ from our own, but who share an equally passionate love for the Lord and an equally strong desire to connect to the Lord through our music.

But it's not just style that matters; the content of what we sing is critical, as well. The great truths of Scripture find expression in the words of the hymns we sing. The hymns we sing are rich in the great theology of our faith: "Our God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home..."² "Thou art the life, by which alone we live, and all our substance and our strength receive; sustain us by thy faith and by thy power, and give us strength in every trying hour."³ "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; our helper, he, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing."⁴

Music has always played a vital role in the transmission and interpretation of our faith. Sometimes the hymns and spiritual songs of our faith are occasioned by personal circumstances. Our closing hymn this morning will be "Because He Lives," written by Bill and Gloria Gaither. The song was written during a very difficult period in their lives. Bill Gaither had suffered from a long bout of mononucleosis. It was the sixties, and American society was in upheaval, full of racial tension and a "God is dead" pronouncement by many intellectuals of the day. The Gaithers were expecting their third child, but wondering about the wisdom of bringing a child into such a world. Gloria Gaither recalls how on New Year's Eve she sat alone in the darkness of her living room, thinking about the world and the nation and Bill's health and family problems. Who in their right mind would bring a child into such a world, she wondered? Then, inexplicably, she felt released from all her worries. The panic that had begun to build up inside her was gently dispelled by a reassuring presence that engulfed her life and drew her attention. The fear left, and the joy began to return. She said she felt the Resurrection affirming itself in their lives again that enabled her to face the future with optimism and trust. Out of that newfound assurance she penned the words to the hymn, *Because He Lives*.⁵

² Our God, Our Help in Ages Past, #210, Presbyterian Hymnal

³ I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art, #457

⁴ A Mighty Fortress Is our God, #260

⁵ Amazing Hymn Stories, www.tanbible.com/tol_sng/becausehelives.htm

Sometimes the songs are inspired by socio-political situations. One of the hymns in the back of our hymnal is “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” often referred to as the national anthem of the African American churches. It was originally written as a poem recited on Lincoln’s Birthday in 1905, and was later put to music. For many African Americans, it is a hymn that allows for an expression of patriotism and hope for the future while also speaking out subtly against racism and discrimination that the African American people have experienced through the centuries:

Lift every voice and sing,
'Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on 'til victory is won.

Like the Scripture that inspires our hymns, many hymns have a prophetic message to proclaim.

As often as not, a hymn is also a prayer, which is why I join many of you in ruing the day that someone decided to remove the “amens” from all our hymns. Saint Augustine once said, “Whoever sings once, prays twice.” And so as we sing, we ought to pay heed to the words, especially as the words tend to draw us closer into God’s presence and cause us to seek God’s blessings, his care, and his salvation.

Friends in Christ, there are few ways to express our faith more movingly or more beautifully, than through the gift of music. The hymns of faith not only communicate with words, but they also engage the heart.

And so make a joyful noise, or as Wesley put it, “sing lustily!”
With thanksgiving in your heart, sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.
Amen.