

“Why We Still Need Hymns in a Postmodern World: The Formative Power of Worship”

Rev. Kevin Twit (Jan 2004)

Introduction: Is There Really a New “Movement” Going On?

- **Lori's testimony** *“Coming from a typical praise chorus-reliant high school youth group I sort of turned my nose up as I was handed a notebook of hymns at my first visit to RUF. I didn't understand a lot of the poetic and imagery-driven lyrics and the word hymn automatically meant boring music. But as the weeks passed, I found myself falling in love with the old hymns and the idea of putting new (and very beautiful) music to them. The words are so profound and full of truth one can't help but be broken. Singing hymns has seriously changed my life and freed me from feeling frustrated by surface lyrics that focus on how I feel about God, which is always changing. Hymns have allowed me to center my worship on the Gospel, which in turn compels me to love the God I am prone to hate and wander from.”*
- **What's going on?** See *The Younger Evangelicals* by Robert Webber, *Bobos in Paradise* by David Brooks, and *The New Faithful* by Colleen Carroll. Webber writes, *“I find three trends in the worship of the younger evangelical. They are (1) a reaction to entertainment worship, (2) a longing for an experience of God's presence, and (3) a restoration of liturgical elements of worship.”*
- **“My grandmother saved it, my mother threw it away, and now I'm buying it back”**
- **Roots and wings!** *“The challenge is to provide roots and wings – to bring young people into a sense of connectedness with the past that doesn't rob them of their vision of the future.”* (Gerard Kelly, *Retrofuture: Rediscovering Our Roots, Recharting Our Routes*)

I. What Do We Mean by a Postmodern World Anyway?

- Postmodernism is easier to describe than to define. *“Postmodernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is!”* (Ernest Gellner)
Some noticeable cultural shifts are:
- Skepticism about scientific rationalism and renewed spiritual openness (ex. X-files, spirituality books)
- People care more about aesthetics and gut feel, than facts and evidences in deciding what they believe
- A distaste for plastic mass-culture and a renewed quest for authenticity (No Depression, Bobos, O Brother)
- The attraction of story and stories, while being skeptical of meta-narratives
- The embrace of mystery and the skepticism about easy answers
- An intense desire for community (while not wanting to give up individualism)

- A growing distaste for the consumer culture which makes us believe we are what we choose to buy!
- A longing to be part of something rooted rather than ephemeral (renewed interest in liturgy and ritual)
- Renewed concern for social justice, environment, and mercy ministry issues
- Change in management styles needed – not top down but consensus building
- Convergence as the route to the future: rather than new styles we have new combinations of old things

II. Worship Is Formative – *Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi* (The law of prayer is the law of belief)

“And we, who with unveiled faces all gaze upon the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” 2 Corinthians 3:18

- **The expulsive power of a new affection!** Worship shapes and molds us! Our hearts are drawn from other “treasures” as our eyes are opened to see Jesus for who He really is. Thomas Chalmers (19th century Scottish Presbyterian) called this the “expulsive power of a new affection.” By that phrase he means that you never really get over one love until a new one comes along. *In worship we seek to have Jesus become more beautiful and believable to us.* (Bill Lane's wonderful phrase!) See “Thou Lovely Source of True Delight” by Anne Steele (18th century), *“Thou lovely Source of true delight, Whom I unseen adore. Unveil Thy beauties to my heart, That I might love Thee more!”*
- **Worship restores our sanity!** We seek to have God restore our sanity so that we can live in line with the truth of the gospel rather than in accordance with the fantasy world in which we must earn God's favor and manipulate Him to do whatever we want. Our basic problem as believers is that of idolatry – we too often worship a “god” who is so much less than the God of the Bible. But the gospel heals us of our idolatry by showing us that we already have what we are trying to get from our idols. Whether it be power or security or meaning, we already have it in Jesus. When we see this, and the truth of it connects to our hearts, we are transformed!
- **The longing for experiencing God.** Postmoderns long to experience God and the hymns are some of the richest expression of Christian experience we have – they are a real doorway into sensing the truth on our hearts rather than just “knowing” it in our heads! See Wesley's “Arise My Soul Arise” for a great example of crying out to God to sense what we confess. *“Arise my soul arise, Shake off thy guilty fears, The bleeding sacrifice, On my behalf appears.”* This communion hymn is a pleading with the soul to feel what we see displayed in the sacraments!

III. Hymns Help Us Grow Up!

- **Hymns teach us the rich theology we really need!** If we have a limited view of who God is and what the gospel is, our experience of it will be limited as well. Why does Paul write the longest explanation of the gospel to people who are (literally) world-famous for their faith? (Romans 1:8) Because as Luther said, we leak the gospel and it needs to be beat into our heads over and over again!

- **Hymns stretch us!** Postmoderns despise a watered-down, content-less gospel! “*People think if we make it easy on young adults, we’ll draw them in, [but reality] is the very opposite. Youth are looking for a cause, a reason to live. They need something to give their lives to. A Christianity that says, “Go to church on Sunday and be a good person” – that’s no cause! Christianity doesn’t say go to church on Sunday, Jesus said, “He who loses his life will find it.” In other words, “If you don’t love me above all things, you’re not worthy of me.” But few people are given that message.*” (Rosalind Moss, quoted in *The New Faithful* by Colleen Carroll) Don’t be afraid of content in our worship services! Sometimes we might even have to ask someone what a line means. But who says that everything we sing must be instantly accessible? Is there no value to learning songs that take some work? *Why is Henry Lyte’s “Jesus I My Cross Have Taken” one of my students’ favorite hymns?* I think it is because it offers us orientation to what the Christian life really is all about and doesn’t sugar-coat things at all!

*“Jesus I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee.
Destitute, despised, forsaken, Thou from hence my all shall be.
Perish every fond ambition, All I’ve sought or hoped or known.
Yet how rich is my condition! God and heaven are still my own.
Let the world despise and leave me, They have left my Savior, too.
Human hearts and looks deceive me; Thou art not, like them, untrue.
O while Thou dost smile upon me, God of wisdom, love, and might,
Foes may hate and friends disown me, Show Thy face and all is bright.”*

IV. Hymns Focus Us Where the Focus Needs to Be!

- **Hymns are mini-meditations on the “paradoxes” of the gospel that drive us to worship.** C.H. Spurgeon once said “*When I cannot understand anything in the Bible, it seems as though God had set a chair there for me, at which to kneel and worship; and that the mysteries are intended to be an altar of devotion.*” I think that is good advice. *Hymns are an opportunity to sit in a mystery like “And can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?!” until it begins to enter into our heart!* Another great example is Augustus Toplady’s “*O Love incomprehensible, that made Thee bleed for me. The Judge of all hath suffered death, to set His prisoner free!*” *The greatest mystery is not why is there evil, but why God would suffer for His enemies?!* If we ever lose our amazement at that, then we are in deep weeds!
- **Many hymns actually are born out of meditation upon scripture – an art we desperately need to relearn!** Tim Keller (pastor at Redeemer Church in NYC) says meditation is thinking a truth in [into your heart] and then thinking it out [thinking out the implications of this truth for your life etc.] That is what the hymns help us do as they take their theme and turn it over and let us gaze upon it from all different angles. And they often will suggest (though by no means do they ever exhaust) ways in which this truth should change our lives. In this way they model how to meditate upon scripture and the truths of the gospel. *This is not just a happy coincidence, it is born out of the fact that hymns are usually the result of meditation in the first place!* A great example of this is “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” by John Newton (18th century.) We have the notes from Newton’s sermon the day he introduced this hymn to his congregation and it reveals that his text was “*Thy Name is as ointment poured forth*” (Song of Solomon 1:3). As he reflected upon that text all week he saw its fulfillment in Jesus and the implication for the trials and tribulations of the Christian’s life. When was the last time you got that much out of meditating on Song of Solomon 1:3?
- **Hymns remind us that we can only approach God through the shed blood of Jesus (1 Pet 2:5)** It is amazing how little the gospel is celebrated in some modern choruses. The idea that we

only approach God as Christians through the blood of Christ is (I hope) assumed but it is too rarely mentioned! And when the cross is mentioned, it is only *mentioned*, it is never explained or unpacked or gazed upon. The major theme is wanting to see God's face and His glory, but *the cross is the way we see God's face and it is the fullest expression of His glory!* (Luther called this the “theology of the cross” and we need to relearn this theology – especially in Middle Class America!) We need deeper and richer, and longer, looks at the cross and all that it means! As Luther advised, “*For every one look you take of your sin, take 10 looks at the cross!*” But we rarely look at our sin, perhaps because we don't look at the cross enough! Because if you really look at your sin without seeing the cross as huge – it will devastate you!

- **Hymns focus us on God's promises more than upon ours!** *We grow by feeding on God's character revealed and by feasting on His promises.* Many modern choruses, with their almost constant emphasis on what *we* want to do, (“Lord I just want to ...”) fail to teach us to rely on God's love for us as 1 John 4:16 says (“We know and rely on *God's* love for us”). We need to recall Augustus Toplady's hymn “Rock of Ages” (originally titled “A living and dying prayer for the holiest believer on earth”): “*Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone, thou must save and thou alone!*”

V. Hymns Engage the Whole Person

- **Hymns offer a more full emotional range of expression.** Dan Allender (author and Christian counselor) has said that if we sang more Psalms we would have a lot less need for Christian counselors. Calvin (in his intro to his commentary on the Psalms) says “*I have been accustomed to call this book... “An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul,” for there is not an emotion of which one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror... ...[and] they call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of ourselves in particular so that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and the vices with which we abound, may remain concealed.” I think a similar thing could be said for hymns because they help us work through emotions and they cover a wider range of emotions than modern choruses.* This is often a surprising point because we associate hymns with a lack of emotion and modern choruses with emotional excess at times. But a careful study will reveal that the emotional range touched on by modern choruses is really rather narrow.
- **Hymns tend to engage our imagination, intellect, and will together!** Many praise choruses go directly for the emotions, but good hymns (unlike many of the melodramatic gospel songs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries), give us rich language and images that require us to think and imagine as the way to stir the passions. While praise choruses do use imagery, many times they are stuck in the same limited number of clichés that no longer engage our imaginations. The scriptures are full of diverse images and our songs should reflect this creativity too! For example, “*I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain*” (from “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go” by Matheson) recalls the covenant with Noah *and* applies it to our current situation in a rich way.
- **Hymns broaden our range of metaphors.** Modern choruses tend to be pretty limited in the metaphors used, in contrast to the rich range of metaphors we find in scripture and in the classic hymn tradition. The reason this matters is that as Peter Matheson argues in *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*, “*When your metaphors change, your world changes with them.*” Postmodern people think more in terms of metaphor and image than linearly, and in the hymn tradition we have a great resource to engage this generation!

- **Hymns are theology on fire!** We need solid theology rather than just a constant diet of fluff and fads. Hymns are a great way to wrestle with theology because they connect theology to life and worship rather than allowing theology to just puff us up as disconnected truths that we memorize to impress our friends! J.I. Packer (in the introduction to “Knowing God”) says it is vital for us to turn what we know about God into a basis for praising God – and hymns are wonderful vehicles for this!
- **Hymns are great art!** The arts, stories, poetry, music all combine to sneak into the heart by the backdoor – something increasingly important for our ministry to the coming generations. *“How will you reach this post-modern generation – a generation that cannot conceive of objective truth, cannot follow your linear arguments, cannot tolerate anything (including evangelism) that smacks of religious intolerance?”* (Kevin Ford)

VI. Hymns and the Importance of Story

- **The postmodern world has rediscovered the importance of story.** *Stories are often wrongly regarded as a poor person's substitute for the ‘real thing,’ which is to be found either in some abstract truth or in statements about the ‘bare facts.’ Stories are a basic constituent of human life... The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world.* (N.T. Wright) Christianity has always been about story even though since the Enlightenment many Christians have forgotten this!
- **Hymns tell a story and walk us through the gospel.** I would say modern choruses are often more like “images” that flash on the television screen for but a moment. They do stir us, but they don't take us anywhere. (Although I will say that a skillful worship leader can string together choruses to take us from somewhere *to* somewhere. Unfortunately though because choruses are rather limited in the themes they address, the journey is more restricted and often less interesting.) *In a good hymn, the writer offers their story and invites you to try it on and see if it might be your story too!* (Example: Anne Steele and her hymns of trust in the midst of suffering like “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul.”)
- **Hymns remind us that the church is bigger than the people we know, or even who are alive today!** Through hymns we can connect with believers who lived centuries before us! We can have *“mystic sweet communion, with those whose rest is won”* (from “The Church's One Foundation” by Stone). When I introduce people to Anne Steele's hymns (like “Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul”) they are struck by the powerful way she dealt with her immense suffering and find that her cries can become their cries, and her tears can join with their tears, and that her faith can encourage their faith. To see that we can connect with an English lady who lived in a small village 300 years ago and feel what she felt is powerful. All of the sudden the kingdom of God grows much bigger! Thus it really helps to study the stories behind the hymns!
- **But we must beware of worshiping tradition and hymns themselves.** Hymns are not beyond critique, though many of the poor ones have dropped out of sight. I find that putting old hymns to new music allows us to connect with the hymns and yet still be relevant and authentic to our own culture. And by putting familiar hymns to new music often people slow down and think about what they are actually singing and the meaning takes on fresh life for them.

VII. Conclusion: So Why Do We Still Need Hymns in a Postmodern World?

- **The church is not a passing fad – it is something solid and rooted.** *“The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God.”* (Leslie Newbigin)

- **We need roots and wings!** “*The challenge is to provide roots and wings – to bring young people into a sense of connectedness with the past that doesn't rob them of their vision of the future.*” (Gerard Kelly in *Retrofuture*) I think this quote captures what many 20-somethings have experienced through a re-discovery of hymnody and the new-found freedom to express these words of passion and devotion in music that resonates with who they are.

For further information on *Indelible Grace Music* please visit our website at www.igracemusic.com There you can order CDs, explore the RUF Hymnbook online, download sheet music, and contribute to the ongoing conversation through our discussion board.

To contact Rev. Kevin Twit email me at kevintwit@comcast.net

Hymn Examples for Calvin Symposium on Worship

How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds

Words: John Newton Music: Alexander Reinagle (arr. Bill Moore)

1. How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrow, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.

2. It makes the wounded spirit whole,
And calms the troubled breast;
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,
And to the weary, rest.

3. Dear Name, the rock on which I build,
My shield and hiding place,
My never failing treasury, filled
With boundless stores of grace!

4. By Thee, my prayers acceptance gain,
Although with sin defiled;
Satan accuses me in vain,
And I am owned a child.

5. Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King,
My Lord, my life, my way, my end,
Accept the praise I bring.

6. Weak is the effort of my heart,
And cold my warmest thought;
But when I see Thee as Thou art,
I'll praise Thee as I ought.

7. 'Til then I would Thy love proclaim
With every fleeting breath,
And may the music of Thy name
Refresh my soul in death.

Dear Refuge of My Weary Soul

Words: Anne Steele Music: Kevin Twit
Music ©1998 Kevin Twit Music

1. Dear refuge of my weary soul,
On Thee, when sorrows rise
On Thee, when waves of trouble roll,
My fainting hope relies
To Thee I tell each rising grief,
For Thou alone canst heal
Thy Word can bring a sweet relief,
For every pain I feel

2. But oh! When gloomy doubts prevail,
I fear to call Thee mine
The springs of comfort seem to fail,
And all my hopes decline
Yet gracious God, where shall I flee?
Thou art my only trust
And still my soul would cleave to Thee
Though prostrate in the dust

3. Hast Thou not bid me seek Thy face,
And shall I seek in vain?
And can the ear of sovereign grace,
Be deaf when I complain?
No, still the ear of sovereign grace,
Attends the mourner's prayer
Oh may I ever find access,
To breathe my sorrows there

4. Thy mercy seat is open still,
Here let my soul retreat
With humble hope attend Thy will,
And wait beneath Thy feet,
Thy mercy seat is open still,
Here let my soul retreat
With humble hope attend Thy will,
And wait beneath Thy feet

O Love Incomprehensible

Words: Augustus Toplady (chorus and verse 3), Anne Steele Music: Kevin Twit
Music ©2001 Kevin Twit Music

CH: O Love incomprehensible
That made Thee bleed for me
The Judge of all has suffered death
To set His prisoner free

1. What pain what soul-oppressing pain
The Great Redeemer bore
While bloody sweat like drops of rain
Distilled from every pore!
(Repeat chorus)

2. Arraigned at Pilate's shameful bar,
Unparalleled disgrace!
See spotless innocence appear
In guilt's detested place
(Repeat chorus)

3. The spotless Savior lived for me,
And died upon the mount
The obedience of His life and death,
Is placed to my account!
(Repeat chorus)

4. " 'Tis finished!" now aloud He cries,
No more the Law requires
And now, amazing sacrifice,
The Lord of Life expires!
(Repeat chorus)

5. On Thee alone my hope relies,
Beneath Thy cross I fall
My Lord, my Life, my Sacrifice,
My Savior and my All!
(Repeat chorus)

O Love That Will Not Let Me Go

Words: George Matheson Music: Christopher Miner

1. O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

2. O light that followest all my way,
I yeild my flickering torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.

3. O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

4. O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

Thou Lovely Source of True Delight
Words: Anne Steele (alt. Kevin Twit)

1. Thou lovely source of true delight
Whom I unseen adore
Unveil Thy beauties to my sight
That I might love Thee more,
Oh that I might love Thee more
2. Thy glory o'er creation shines
But in Thy sacred Word
I read in fairer, brighter lines
My bleeding, dying Lord,
See my bleeding, dying Lord
3. 'Tis here, whene'er my comforts droop
And sin and sorrow rise
Thy love with cheering beams of hope
My fainting heart supplies,
My fainting heart's supplied
4. But ah! Too soon the pleasing scene
Is clouded o'er with pain
My gloomy fears rise dark between
And I again complain,
Oh and I again complain
5. Jesus, my Lord, my life, my light
Oh come with blissful ray
Break radiant through the shades of night
And chase my fears away,
Won't You chase my fears away
6. Then shall my soul with rapture trace
The wonders of Thy love
But the full glories of Thy face
Are only known above,
They are only known above

Some Helpful Books for Leading Worship (revised 12/03)

- **Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down and A Royal Waste of Time*** She is excellent and a good place to start. *Reaching Out* is the one to start with, *Royal Waste* is her further thoughts and reflections from interacting with people over the ideas in her first book. You may think she is advocating traditional worship, but she tries to correct this misunderstanding in her second book. Still, I would critique her rather uncritical acceptance and adoption of Ken Myer's "high art / low art" distinction in her chapter on music in *Reaching Out*.
- **John Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth and Contemporary Christian Music: A Biblical Defense*** The first book is a good overview; in the second book he responds (very convincingly I think) to many of the typical arguments against praise choruses. My main criticism of the second book is that many of the songs he holds up as good choruses are really kind of trite. He is a theologian and has a classical background and so he is not as familiar with what is excellent (musically) in the more popular musical genres. Still, very worthwhile reading.

- **David Montgomery, *Sing A New Song* (pub. by Rutherford House in Scotland)** If you can track this one down it is a very helpful book. He does a good job responding to elitist arguments and advocates singing hymns set to new music. He also critiques shallow praise choruses. But some of his examples are English ones that you may not relate to. Overall, very helpful, especially for a short little book.
- **Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship and Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology*** Old is the leading scholar of traditional reformed worship, and he writes a column for *Worship Leader* magazine. He will help you appreciate the richness of the tradition. His dissertation, published as “The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship” (it's out of print and impossible to find except in libraries these days) proves that the reformers were really trying to go back to early church worship.
- **Terry Johnson (ed.), *Leading in Worship*** This is an excellent resource that gathers gold from the best reformed liturgies and puts them all in one book! Great corporate prayers and wisdom on the order of a service too. He is very "high church" in his perspective, and I disagree with him at points, but you can learn a lot from him
- ***The Trinity Hymnal and The Trinity Psalter.*** A good hymnal is invaluable. The Psalter puts all 150 Psalms in verse form and suggests tunes so that you can sing the Psalms in worship!
- **Louis Benson, *The Hymnody of the Christian Church and Studies in Hymns*** Both of these are out of print, but he is a great scholar of the history of hymns. Some of the modern hymn story books include apocryphal stories but his “Studies in Hymns” is reliable and solid. I find his stuff through Internet sites like abebooks.com and bibliofind.com. Anything by Benson is worth reading!
- **Henry Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody*** Out of print, too, but it is a great historical overview of hymnody in America. You will learn tons from this book! But beware, he's sympathetic to Unitarianism.
- **Asahel Nettleton, *Village Hymns*** This is a great 19th century reformed hymnal that has been reprinted recently. Nettleton was a famous reformed revival preacher (you should read his “Life and Labors” someday!)
- ***Gadsby's Hymns*** This has been reprinted recently too. It is reformed Baptist and includes 1200 hymns (without music) and can be obtained (as can Nettleton's hymnal) from www.heritagebooks.org
- **John Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology*** The standard reference work, but it would cost you \$100 if you can find it on the Internet used somewhere.
- **Electronic Encyclopedia of Hymnology** An excellent CD-ROM with thousands of hymns, an encyclopedia, great bibliographies, and even a trivia game!
- **Brian Wren, *Praying Twice*** A very thoughtful book on the nature and practice of congregational song by a poet. Beware of his theology at times, but you will learn much from Wren, especially regarding the psychological aspects of how music works. He does a fine job walking the thin line between elitism and the postmodern tendency to make no aesthetic judgments at all!

- **Spurgeon's *Our Own Hymnbook*** About 1000 hymns! [Order](#)
- **D.A. Carson, *Worship by the Book*** Very good overview of the Bible's teaching on worship plus a great long chapter by Tim Keller explaining the liturgy behind Redeemer's services.
- **Richard Gore, *Covenant Worship*** One of the best new books I've read in awhile. Gore explains the regulative principle of worship according to Calvin and the Puritans and explains how the Puritans took it too far. Very helpful in dealing with strict regulative principle issues – a raging debate in Presbyterian circles.
- **John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*** John is the director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and he has written a great book full of good historical stuff as well as sane pastoral wisdom. His chapter on lament in the Psalms and our liturgy and his chapter on music as nourishment are worth the price of the book!

http://www.calvin.edu/worship/lit_arts/music/still_need_hymns.php