

## “Why We Still Need Hymns In A Postmodern World: The Formative Power Of Worship”

### 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” Robert Webber, “Bobos in Paradise” David Brooks, “The New Faithful” 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 “Retro-future”

### **I. 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”* 2Cor 3:18

- **The songs we sing model for our people what the normal Christian life feels like.** What would they conclude from the songs you sing? Do strong theology and strong feeling both show up? Is lament allowed? Is Christ displayed?
- **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 (19<sup>th</sup> 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 (18<sup>th</sup> 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! Worship is spiritual warfare and practice in seeing through common sense (as Rodney Clapp puts it.)
- **The longing for experiencing God.** Postmoderns long for experience with 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!

### **II. 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 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!
- **Are we preparing our people for their inevitable encounter with death?** (John Witvliet’s important question for choosing songs in worship.) *“Our people die well.”* John Wesley. What is your goal in picking songs to sing?

### **III. 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.
- **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 (18<sup>th</sup> 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 it’s 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 (1Pet 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 1John 4:16 says (“We know and rely on *God’s* love for us”). See 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!*”

#### **IV. 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. (See “O Heart Bereaved And Lonely”)
- **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 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 “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. “*It is a noble thing to be a poet, it makes all the world so lively. I might have preached more sermons than Tillotson [a famous 18th century English preacher] did, and better, and the world would have been still fast asleep, but a volume of verse is a fiddle that puts the universe in motion.*” William Cowper

#### **V. 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 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 of hymns!
- **But we must beware of worshipping 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: A Couple Responses To Critics Of Setting Old Hymns To New Music**

**1. Indelible Grace Music is not out to deconstruct church music!** Actually hymnals, with their metrical index, are designed for us to try alternate tunes for the hymns! We are trying to encourage musicians to use their gifts to set the great hymns of the faith to music that is authentic to who we are culturally, and which will help us hear and feel the deep emotion of the text. (For further discussion of these issues see my “Criteria For Judging Rock Music” at [www.igracemusic.com](http://www.igracemusic.com) )

**2. Controversy over setting new tunes to older texts is nothing new!** Consider the objections to new tunes catalogued by Thomas Symmes in 1723 (writing in New England responding to those who objected to singing the psalms to new tunes).

1. It is a new way, an unknown tongue.
2. It is not so melodious as the usual way.
3. There are so many new tunes, we shall never have done learning them.
4. The practice creates disturbances and causes people to behave indecently and disorderly.
5. It is Quakerish and Popish and introductive of instrumental music.
6. The names given to the notes are bawdy, even blasphemous.
7. It is a needless way, since our fathers got to heaven without it.
8. It is a contrivance to get money.
9. People spend too much time learning it, they tarry out nights’ disorderly.
10. They are a company of young upstarts that fall in with this way, and some of them are lewd and loose persons.

**3. Why not set words written for the poor to music invented by the poor?** Many hymnwriters (Watts, Cowper, Newton for example) deliberately wrote words for the poorer classes – condescending to their level of education. The musical style of Indelible Grace is rooted in the musical styles of the poor (blues, jazz, folk, bluegrass.) Doesn’t it seem fitting to set words written for poor people to music invented by poor people. Interestingly, John Newton wouldn’t let Handel’s Messiah (thought by some to be the epitome of church music) be sung in his church because he thought it too worldly (though he did preach a sermon series on the text!)