

Statement: **DM806**

WITH HEARTS AND MINDS AND VOICES

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SYNOPSIS

It's clear that modern church music, as a rule, is vastly inferior to the classic hymns that were being written 200 years ago. This is not, for the most part, a complaint about the *style* in which the music is written. Rather, the lyrics are what most graphically reveal how low our standards have slipped.

Hymns used to be wonderful didactic tools, filled with Scripture and sound doctrine, a medium for teaching and admonishing one another, as we are commanded to do in Colossians 3:16. More than a hundred years ago, church music took a different direction, and its focus became more subjective. Songs emphasized personal experience and the feelings of the worshiper.

Modern musicians have pushed this trend even further and often see music as little more than a device to stimulate intense emotion. The biblically mandated didactic role of music is all but forgotten.

The effect is predictable. What we have sown for several generations we are now reaping in frightening abundance. The modern church, fed on insipid lyrics, has little appetite for Scripture and sound doctrine.

We are also in danger of losing a rich heritage of hymnody as some of the best hymns of our faith fall into neglect, being replaced with banal lyrics set to catchy tunes. It is a crisis, and the church is suffering spiritually. Both pastors and church musicians need to see the severity of the crisis and work diligently to reform.

Recently, I collaborated on a book about some of the greatest hymns of the Christian faith.¹ My task in the project was to write a doctrinal synopsis of each selected hymn. This exercise was fascinating and enlightening, causing me to delve deeply into the rich heritage of Christian hymnology.

In my research, I was reminded that a profound change took place in church music around the end of the nineteenth century. The writing of hymns virtually stopped and was replaced by “gospel songs” — songs generally lighter in doctrinal content, with short stanzas followed by a refrain, a chorus or a common final lyric line repeated after each stanza. Gospel songs as a rule were more evangelistic than hymns. The key difference was that most gospel songs were expressions of personal testimony aimed at an audience of people, whereas most of the classic hymns had been songs of praise addressed directly to God.

NEW SONG

The style and form of the gospel song was borrowed directly from the popular music styles of the late nineteenth century. The man commonly regarded as the father of the gospel song is Ira Sankey, a gifted singer and songwriter who rode to fame on D. L. Moody's coattails. Sankey was the soloist and music leader for Moody's evangelistic campaigns in North America and Britain.

Sankey wanted music that would be simpler, more popular, and better suited to evangelism than classic church hymns; so he wrote gospel songs — mostly short, simple ditties with refrains, in the style of the popular music of his day. Sankey would sing each verse as a solo, and the congregation would join each refrain. Although Sankey's music provoked some controversy at first, the form soon caught on worldwide. By the early part of the twentieth century most of the new works were gospel songs in the genre Sankey had invented.

It is noteworthy that in most hymnbooks even today, the only well-known hymn with a copyright date after 1940 is “How Great Thou Art.”² To classify that work as a twentieth-century hymn is stretching things a bit. It includes a refrain, which is more characteristic of gospel songs than of hymns. Moreover, it is not even really a twentieth-century work. The first three stanzas were originally written in 1886 by a well-known Swedish pastor, Carl Boberg, and translated from Swedish into English by British missionary Stuart Hine not long before the outbreak of World War II. Hine added the fourth stanza, which is the only verse in the popular English version that was actually written in the twentieth century.³

In other words, for more than 70 years, virtually no hymns have been added to the popular repertoire of congregational church music. Few true hymns of enduring quality are being written.

My remarks are by no means meant as a blanket criticism of gospel songs. Many familiar gospel songs are wonderfully rich expressions of faith. Although Ira Sankey’s most popular song, “The Ninety and Nine” is almost never sung as a congregational song today, it was the hit of Sankey’s era. He improvised the music on the spot in one of Moody’s mass meetings in Edinburgh, using the words from a poem he had clipped earlier that afternoon from a Glasgow newspaper. Those lyrics, written by Elizabeth Clephane, are a moving adaptation of the Parable of the Lost Sheep from Luke 15:4–7.⁴

A more enduring favorite from the golden age of gospel songs is “Grace Greater than Our Sin.”⁵ The song celebrates the triumph of grace over sin. Its refrain is familiar:

Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God’s grace,
Grace that is greater than all our sin!

Songs like these have enriched the church’s expressions of faith.

In general, however, the rise of the gospel song in congregational singing signaled a diminishing emphasis on objective doctrinal truth and a magnification of subjective experience. The changing focus clearly affected the content of the songs. It is worth noting that some of the archetypal gospel songs are as vapid and vacuous as anything that opponents of the current generation of contemporary Christian music could ever legitimately complain about.

As a matter of fact, traditionalist critics who attack contemporary music merely because it is contemporary in *style* — especially those who imagine that the older music is always better — need to think through the issues again. The concern I am raising has to do with content, not merely style.⁶ Judging from lyrics alone, some of the most popular old-style music is even more offensive than the modern stuff. I can hardly think of a contemporary song that is more banal than the beloved old standby, “In the Garden”:⁷

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses,
And the voice I hear,
Falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.
And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.
He speaks, and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody
That He gave to me,
Within my heart is ringing.

I'd stay in the garden with Him,
Tho' night around me be falling,
But He bids me go;
Thro' the voice of woe
His voice to me is calling.

Those lyrics say nothing of any real substance, and what they *do* say is not particularly Christian. It's a mawkish little rhyme about someone's personal experience and feelings. Whereas the classic hymns sought to glorify God, gospel songs like "In the Garden" were glorifying raw sentimentality.

Numerous gospel songs suffer from such weaknesses. In fact, many of the "old-fashioned" favorites are practically devoid of any truly Christian substance and are thick with sappy sentimentality. "Love Lifted Me," "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," "Whispering Hope," and "It Is No Secret What God Can Do" are familiar examples.

Obviously, neither the antiquity nor the popularity of a gospel song is a good measure of its worthiness. The fact that a gospel song is "old fashioned" is clearly no guarantee that it is suited for edifying the church. When it comes to church music, older is not necessarily better. In fact, these same gospel songs that are so often extolled by critics of modern church music are actually what paved the way for the very tendencies those critics sometimes rightly decry.

I'm not suggesting the music Sankey introduced had no legitimate place. Gospel songs have played an effective evangelistic and testimonial role, and therefore they *do* deserve a prominent place in church music. But it was unfortunate for the church that by the start of the twentieth century, gospel songs were virtually *all* that was being written. Church musicians at the end of the nineteenth century (like the theologians of that era) were far too enamored with anything "modern." They embraced the new style of congregational music with unbridled aggressiveness. Sadly, by the twentieth century, the gospel song had muscled in and elbowed out the classic hymn; and so the trend Sankey began all but ended the rich tradition of Christian hymnology that had flourished since the time of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and even long before.

Prior to Sankey, the dominant hymn writers had been pastors and theologians — men skilled in handling Scripture and sound doctrine.⁸ With the shift to gospel songs, just about everyone with a flair for poetry felt qualified to write church music. After all, the new music was supposed to be personal testimony, not some kind of lofty doctrinal treatise.

Prior to Sankey, hymns were composed with a deliberate didactic purpose. They were written to teach and reenforce biblical and doctrinal concepts in the context of worship directed to God. Those hymns aimed to praise God by proclaiming His truth in a way that enhanced the worshiper's comprehension of the truth. They set a standard of worship that was as cerebral as it was emotional; and that was perfectly biblical. After all, the first and great commandment teaches us to love God with all our heart, soul, *and mind* (Matt. 22:37). It would never have occurred to our spiritual ancestors that worship was something to be done with a subdued intellect. The worship God seeks is worship in spirit *and in truth* (John 4:23-24).

These days worship is often characterized as something that happens quite outside the realm of the intellect. This destructive notion has given rise to several dangerous movements in the contemporary church. It may have reached its pinnacle in the phenomenon known as the Toronto Blessing, where mindless laughter and other raw emotions were thought to constitute the purest form of worship and a visible proof of divine blessing.

This modern notion of worship as a mindless exercise has taken a heavy toll in churches, leading to a decreasing emphasis on preaching and teaching and an increasing emphasis on entertaining the congregation and making people feel good. All of this leaves the Christian in the pew untrained and unable to discern, and often blithely ignorant of the dangers all around him or her.

THE ERA OF THE PRAISE CHORUS

In the late twentieth century, another major shift occurred. Gospel songs gave way to a new form — the praise chorus. Praise choruses are pithy verses set to catchy music, generally shorter than gospel songs and with fewer stanzas.

Praise choruses, like hymns, are usually songs of praise addressed directly to God. With this recent shift came a return to pure worship (rather than testimony and evangelism).

Unlike hymns, however, praise choruses generally have no didactic purpose. Praise choruses are meant to be sung as simple personal expressions of worship, whereas hymns are usually corporate expressions of worship with an emphasis on some doctrinal truth.⁹ A hymn usually has several stanzas, each of which builds on or expands the theme introduced in the first stanza.¹⁰ By contrast, a praise chorus is usually much shorter, with one or two verses, and most of these choruses make liberal use of repetition in order to prolong the focus on a single idea or expression of praise. (Obviously, these are not absolute distinctions. Some praise choruses *do* contain doctrinal instruction, and some hymns are meant to be wonderfully personal expressions of simple praise.¹¹)

There is certainly nothing wrong with the simple, straightforward personal praise that characterizes the best of today's praise choruses. Neither is there anything wrong with the evangelistic and testimonial thrust of yesterday's gospel songs. It is a profound tragedy, however, that in some circles, *only* contemporary choruses are sung. Other congregations limit their repertoire to hundred-year-old gospel songs. Meanwhile, a large and rich body of classic Christian hymnody is in danger of being utterly lost out of sheer neglect.¹²

SONGS, HYMNS, AND SPIRITUAL SONGS

The biblical prescription for Christian music is found in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (KJV). That verse plainly calls for a variety of musical forms — "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Regarding the meaning of those expressions, Charles Hodge wrote, "The early usage of the words *psalmos*, *hymnos*, *ode*, appears to have been as loose as that of the corresponding English terms, *psalm*, *hymn*, *song*, is with us. A psalm was a hymn and a hymn a song. Still there was a distinction between them."¹³

A *psalm* spoke of a sacred song written for accompaniment with musical instrument. (*Psalmos* is derived from a word that denotes the plucking of strings with the fingers.) The word was used to designate the psalms of the Old Testament (cf. Acts 1:20; 13:33), as well as Christian songs (1 Cor. 14:26).¹⁴ A *hymn* spoke of a song of praise to God, a religious paean. A *song*, on the other hand, could be either sacred or secular music, so the apostle specifies "*spiritual songs*."

Distinctions between the terms are somewhat hazy, and as Hodge pointed out, that haziness is reflected even in our modern usage of those words. Nevertheless, determining the actual forms of the early church's "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" is not essential. Otherwise, Scripture would have recorded those distinctions for us.

The greater significance of the expression "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" seems to be this: Paul was calling for a variety of musical forms and a breadth of spiritual expression that cannot be embodied in any one musical form. The strict psalms-only view (which is gaining popularity in some Reformed circles today) allows for none of that variety. The views of fundamentalist-traditionalists, who seem to want to limit church music to the gospel-song forms of the early twentieth century, would also squelch the variety for which Paul called. More significantly, the prevailing mood in modern evangelical churches — where people seem to want to binge on a steady diet of nothing but simplistic praise choruses — also destroys the principle of variety Paul set forth.

I believe the Protestant evangelical community erred a hundred years ago when the writing of hymns was almost completely abandoned in favor of gospel songs. Christian songwriters today are making a similar mistake by failing to write substantial hymns while purging the old hymns from our congregational music repertoire and replacing them with trite praise choruses and pop song look-alikes.

TEACHING AND ADMONISHING ONE ANOTHER

Writers of praise choruses and other modern church music too often forget the biblically mandated didactic role of church music. Most modern praise choruses are written to stir only the feelings. They are too often sung like a mystical mantra — with the deliberate purpose of putting the intellect into a passive state while the worshiper musters as much emotion as possible. The Vineyard paradigm of worship was virtually built on this principle, and churches worldwide have adopted the model.

Music...is limited exclusively to praise choruses — with lyrics shown on overhead projectors rather than sung out of books, so that the worshiper will have total freedom to respond physically. Each praise chorus is repeated several times, and the only signal that we're moving on to the next chorus is when the overhead changes. There is no announcement or spoken remarks between songs — indeed, no song leader, so the singing has a spontaneous feel to it.

The music starts slow and soft and builds gradually but steadily in a 45-minute crescendo. Each successive chorus has a more powerful emotional tone than the previous one. Over the course of 45 minutes, the emotional power of the music increases by almost imperceptible degrees from soft and gentle to a powerful, driving intensity. At the beginning everyone is seated. As the feeling of fervor increases, people respond almost as if on cue, first by raising hands, then by standing, then by kneeling or falling prostrate on the floor. At the end of the worship time fully half the congregation are on the carpet, many lying face-down and writhing with emotion. The music has been carefully and purposefully brought to this intense emotional peak....

Yet in all this there is no particular emphasis on the content of the songs. We sing about “feeling” God’s presence among us, as if our rising emotions are the chief way His presence is confirmed and the force of His visitation is measured. Several of the songs tell the Lord He is great and worthy of praise, but none ever really says why. No matter; the goal clearly is to stir our emotions, not to focus our minds on any particular aspect of God’s greatness. In fact, later in the sermon, the preacher cautions us against following our heads rather than our hearts in any of our dealings with God.

In other words, the worship here is intentionally and purposefully anti-intellectual. And the music reflects it. While there is nothing overtly erroneous about any of the praise choruses that were sung, there is nothing of substance in most of them either. They are written to be vehicles of passion, because passion — deliberately divorced from the intellect — is what defines this concept of “worship.”¹⁵

Not all contemporary church worship goes that far, of course, but the most popular trends are decidedly in that direction. Anything too cerebral is automatically suspect, deemed not “worshipful” enough, because the prevailing notion of worship frankly gives little or no place to the intellect. That’s why, in the typical church service, sermons are being shortened and lightened and more time is being given to music. Preaching, which used to be the centerpiece of the *worship* service, is now viewed as something distinct from worship; something that actually intrudes on the “praise and worship time,” in which the focus is music, testimony, and prayer — but mostly music, and music whose main purpose is to stir the emotions.

If music’s proper function includes “teaching and admonishing,” then music in the church ought to be much more than an emotional stimulant. In fact, this means music and preaching should have the same aim. Both properly pertain to the proclamation of God’s Word. The songwriter ought therefore to be as skilled in Scripture and as concerned for theological precision as the preacher; even more so, because the songs he or she writes are likely to be sung again and again (unlike a sermon that is preached only once).

I fear this perspective is utterly lost on the average church musician these days. As Leonard Payton has observed, “So extreme is the case now that anyone who knows half a dozen chords on a guitar and can produce rhymes to Hallmark card specifications is considered qualified to exercise this component of the ministry of the Word regardless of theological training and examination.”¹⁶ Payton points out that the leading Old Testament musicians, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan (1 Chron. 15:19), were first of all Levitical priests, men who had devoted their lives to the Lord’s service (cf. v. 17), men trained in the Scriptures and skilled in handling the Word of God. Their names are listed as authors of some of the inspired psalms (cf. Ps. 73–83; 88:1; 89:1). Payton writes,

It was Asaph who thundered that God owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10). If the modern church musician wrote a worship text like Psalm 50, he would probably not get it published in the contemporary Christian music industry, and he might be on the fast track to getting fired at his church. Heman’s Psalm 88 is incontestably the bleakest of all the Psalms. All this to say, Levitical musicians wrote Psalms, and those Psalms were not obligated to the gnostic, emotional demands of twentieth-century evangelical church music.¹⁷

First Kings 4:31 says of Solomon, “He was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman” (KJV). Payton observes the significance of that statement:

If Solomon hadn't been in the land, two musicians would have been the wisest men. In short, musicians were teachers of the highest order. This leads me to suspect that Levitical musicians, being scattered through the land, served as Israel's teachers. Furthermore, the Psalms were their textbook. And because this textbook was a songbook, it may well be that the Levitical musicians catechized the nation of Israel through the singing of psalms.¹⁸ (emphasis in original)

Like it or not, songwriters are teachers as well. Many of the lyrics they write will be far more deeply and permanently ingrained in the minds of Christians than anything pastors teach from the pulpit. How many songwriters are skilled enough in theology and Scripture to qualify for such a vital role in the catechesis of our people?

The question is answered by the paucity of expression found in the most popular modern praise choruses — especially when compared to some of the classic hymns. Compare the lyrics to “Shine Jesus, Shine” with “O Worship the King, All Glorious Above”; or compare “Something Beautiful” with “O Sacred Head Now Wounded.” I chose those examples not because I see anything erroneous or antibiblical in those particular modern praise choruses, but because they are the *best* of the genre. If the *very best* that modern songwriters can do looks insipid by comparison to our spiritual ancestors’ music, it might be appropriate to ask if the church of today is collectively guilty of cursing God with our faint praise.

It would be hard to think of any more feeble expression of praise to offer God than “Heavenly Father We Appreciate You”; but “Our God Is an Awesome God” comes close — partly because the adjective *awesome* has been plundered by the current generation to turn it into the favorite all-purpose compliment, applicable to everything from skateboard maneuvers to body piercings. In the mouth of a modern young person “Our God Is an Awesome God” is tantamount to singing about how “cool” God is.

At least “Our God Is an Awesome God” makes passing reference to God’s “wisdom, power, and love,” giving actual biblical reasons why He is awesome and worthy of praise. It’s better in that regard than the hoard of modern praise choruses that express vague worship toward God but never bother to mention what it is about Him that makes Him deserving of our worship (and it’s certainly better than the other popular variety of praise chorus — those which focus almost completely on the feelings of the worshiper).

Now read the final stanza of a classic hymn of worship, “Immortal, Invisible.” After reviewing a fairly comprehensive list of the divine attributes, the lyricist wrote:

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
All praise we would render; O help us to see
‘Tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee!¹⁹

Both the poetry and the sense are superior to almost anything written today.

Modern songwriters clearly need to take their task more seriously. Churches should also do everything they can to cultivate musicians who are trained in handling the Scriptures and able to discern sound doctrine. Most important, pastors and elders need to exercise closer and more careful oversight of the church music ministry, consciously setting a high standard for the biblical and doctrinal content of what we sing. If those things are done, we’ll begin to see a dramatic qualitative difference in the music that is being written for the church.

Meanwhile, let’s not throw out the classic hymns. Better yet, let’s revive some of the great hymns that have fallen into disuse and add them once again to our repertoire.

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NOTES

- 1 John MacArthur, Joni Eareckson Tada, Robert and Bobbi Wolgemuth, *O Worship the King* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).
- 2 Many new hymns have been written and published since 1940, of course, but few of them has become standard church fare.
- 3 Robert K. Brown and Mark R. Norton, *The One Year Book of Hymns* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House), 1995.
- 4 J. C. Pollock, *Moody: A Biographical Portrait of the Pacesetter in Modern Mass Evangelism* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), 132–33.
- 5 Written by Julia H. Johnston (music by Daniel B. Towner).
- 6 I do think the style must be appropriate for the content, and for that reason I would object to some contemporary Christian music on stylistic grounds, but my first concern has to do with content, not style.
- 7 Lyrics by C. Austin Miles (1868–1946).
- 8 Isaac Watts, John Rippon, Augustus Toplady, and Charles Wesley are a few of the well-known hymn writers, who were first of all pastors and theologians.
- 9 The familiar hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy,” for example, is a recitation of the divine attributes, with a particular emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity. “Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Hearts,” an ancient but familiar hymn, is a hymn of praise to Christ filled with teaching about Christ’s sufficiency.
- 10 In Luther’s best-known hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” each stanza builds on the previous one, and the stanzas are therefore so inextricably linked that to skip a verse is to destroy the continuity and the message of the hymn itself.
- 11 “How Great Thou Art” would be a prime example.
- 12 This concern is precisely what provoked Joni Tada, the Wolgemuths, and me to write *O Worship the King* (see n. 1).
- 13 Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991 reprint), 302–3.
- 14 Those who argue for exclusive psalmody (the view that no musical forms should be employed in the church other than metrical versions of the Old Testament psalms) often claim that the expression “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” is a reference to the various categories of Davidic psalms in the Septuagint. But if the apostle Paul’s intention had been to *limit* music in the church to the Old Testament psalms, there are many less ambiguous ways he could have made the point. On the contrary, what he is calling for here is a *variety* of musical forms — all employed to honor the Lord by admonishing and teaching one another with the truths of the Christian faith. If we were to allow no lyrics in church music to go beyond the Old Testament psalms, then some of the most glorious truths at the heart of our faith — such as Christ’s incarnation, death on the cross, and resurrection — could never be fully expounded upon in our music.
- 15 Taken from the unpublished notes of a friend who was researching church growth and worship styles in a few representative megachurches.
- 16 Leonard R. Payton, “Congregational Singing and the Ministry of the Word,” *The Highway*, July 1998 (<http://www.gospelcom.net/thehighway/articleJuly98.html>).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Lyrics by Walter Chalmers Smith (1824–1908). Smith was a pastor and one-time Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland.