

## Of Us We Sing: The Changing Focus of American Hymns

The hymns sung in America's Christian churches have changed in many ways over the years. The canon of hymns has grown from the versified Psalter of early New England to include compositions of many kinds, and the sort of music to which hymns have been set has changed even more radically. In recent years, there has also been an interesting change of focus. New hymns and the revisions of old ones tend to be about *us*—about *us* in several senses. They less often about God the ruler or savior or about the individual sinner, and more often about the assembly of good people who are singing.

A hymn, strictly speaking, is a song of praise. Its focus is not on the singer, the congregation—or to use the liturgically correct jargon, the assembly—but on God. Of course it is not possible to draw that line perfectly: one of the things God is praised for in Christian worship is what he has done for the singer.

In new hymns, however, the focus *is* often on the congregation itself. To illustrate the change, one need only compare old and new texts set to traditional hymn tunes. I take my first example from the Presbyterian *Hymnal*. In the 1933 edition of *The Hymnal*, the tune “Beecher” is used for Charles Wesley’s “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” (You are just as likely to have sung Wesley’s text to the tune “Hyferdol.”) The first two stanzas go like this:

Love Divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven to earth come down,  
Fix in us thy humble dwelling  
All thy faithful mercies crown!  
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,  
Pure, unbounded love Thou art;  
Visit us with Thy salvation  
Enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit  
Into every troubled breast!  
Let us all in Thee inherit,  
Let us find thy promised rest:

Take away the love of sinning;  
Alpha and Omega be;  
End of faith, as its beginning,  
Set our hearts at liberty.

Reading the poem, one sees again what a first-rate poet Charles Wesley was. As Donald Davie pointed out in his essay on Wesley, he has all the virtues of the best 18th-century poets: clarity, memorability, abstract language that is nevertheless full of active, forceful verbs. What is more, he writes joyfully without producing pabulum or glossing over the harder parts of Christian doctrine.

In the new 1990 edition of the Presbyterian *Hymnal*, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” is set to “Hyferdol.” (To give the editors credit, they do print it with all the words: in some recent hymnals, such as the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982* and the Catholic hymnals *Worship* and *Breaking Bread*, the second stanza is omitted. Evidently “Take away our love of sinning” does not speak to the condition of the nice people who are the intended audiences of those works.) In any case, in the new Presbyterian *Hymnal*, the tune Beecher has a new text: “Called as Partners in Christ’s service” by Jane Parker Huber.

Called as partners in Christ’s service,  
Called to ministries of grace,  
We respond with deep commitment  
Fresh new lines of faith to trace.  
May we learn the art of sharing,  
Side by side and friend with friend,  
Equal partners in our caring  
To fulfill God’s chosen end.

Christ’s example, Christ’s inspiring,  
Christ’s clear call to work and worth,  
Let us follow, never faltering,  
Reconciling folk on earth  
Men and Women, richer, poorer,  
All God’s people, young and old,  
Blending human skills together  
Gracious gifts from God unfold.

Thus new patterns for Christ’s mission,

In a small or global sense,  
Help us bear each other's burdens,  
Breaking down each wall or fence.  
Words of comfort, words of vision,  
Words of challenge, said with care,  
Bring new power and strength for action,  
Make us colleagues, free and fair.

Comparing the two poems—and hymns are poems—one is immediately struck by the banality of the language in the more recent text. (I defy anyone used to singing “Beecher” to either “Love, Divine,” or to “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” to sing the line “In a small or global sense” without giggling.)

But there is a more important shift in focus. The subject of Wesley’s hymn is Jesus. The subject of Ms. Huber’s hymn is us, the singers. In most of “Love Divine,” Christ is the grammatical subject of the sentence, whether that is an imperative sentence, as in the four lines—“Fix in us they humble dwelling”—or a declarative sentence, as in the next four—“Jesus, Thou art all compassion.” In most of “Called as Partners,” *we* are the grammatical subject. Even the “Let us” is not a request, but simply the first person plural imperative. But the shift is not just a matter of grammar. In “Love Divine,” the agent is Christ. He acts. He is called on to *do* things—to fix a dwelling, to visit, to enter, to breathe, to take away, to set at liberty, to come, to return. In “Called as Partners,” *we* do everything.

It is especially odd that this text is promulgated by a denomination that still calls itself Calvinist. (Admittedly, you are more likely to hear about self-esteem than about total depravity at most Congregations of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.) The forthrightly Arminian Wesley presents a much clearer idea of God’s greatness and the human’s need for him that does this text. The Wesleys did *not* believe in *total* depravity or predestination: they believed in “free grace,” to use the title of one of John Wesley’s most famous sermons. But they also recognized that, just as much as Calvinism, *any*

version of Christianity that regards Christ as *savior* must see human beings in their unredeemed state as lost.

The texts set to another traditional tune, “Duke Street,” provide just as clear an example of the shift in focus from God’s greatness to our own actions—though the new hymn in this case does not make us so completely self-reliant. “Duke Street” is usually sung with words by Isaac Watts:

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journeys run;  
His Kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

For Him shall endless prayer be made,  
And praises thong to crown His head;  
His Name, like sweet perfume, shall rise  
With every morning sacrifice.

People and realms of every tongue  
Dwell on His love with sweetest song;  
And infant voices shall proclaim  
Their early blessings on His name.

Watts captures the idea of Jesus as ruler—as Lord—splendidly. It is no wonder that Dr. Johnson insisted that he be included in the collection of poets for which he wrote *The Lives of the Poets* as introductions. (A good Church of England man, Johnson wrote that the Baptist Watts should be imitated in “all but his nonconformity.”)

Recently a new text has been sung to “Duke Street,” “Forth in the Peace of Christ we Go,” by the Jesuit James Quinn. The song is clearly intended as a recessional.

Forth in the peace of Christ we go:  
Christ to the world with joy we bring;  
Christ in our minds, Christ on our lips  
Christ in our hearts, the world’s true King.

Priests of the world, Christ sends us forth  
The world of time to consecrate,  
This world of sin by grace to heal,  
Christ’s world in Christ to recreate.

.....  
We are the Church; Christ bids us show  
That in his Church all nations find  
Their hearth and home where Christ restores  
True peace, true love, to humankind.

If Father Quinn will not rank with Isaac Watts in the history of hymnody, he is nevertheless a skilled poet, and there is nothing in this text that might raise a giggle, as in Ms. Huber work. There even may be an admirable consciousness of the continuing tradition of English language hymnody if the text was written with “Duke Street” and “Jesus Shall Reign” in mind, since the image of Christ as the ruler of all nations appears at the end of both poems. (The text is also sung to the tune “Lledrod,” so it’s not certain “Duke Street” was in the author’s mind.) I would say that “Forth in the Peace of Christ” is a good hymn, and I am happy to sing it.

Nevertheless, it displays the same shift in focus from Christ to the congregation. Again, *we* are the subject. Here, perhaps, it is mostly a question of emphasis, but *we* are still doing the work *We*, more than Christ, are the agents.

In many new hymns, *we* are so much the subject that Christ almost disappears. Some hymns are so bent on celebrating the “gathered community,” that it itself becomes the center of attention. (We see the same shift in focus in both architecture and ritual: the circular or semi-circular churches that were supposed to fix attention on the central altar often lead people to focus on each other; the sign of peace, which is supposed to be the passing of *Christ’s* peace—which he gives “*not* as the world gives peace”—becomes simply an occasion for saying hello to your friends or showing strangers how friendly you are.) There are a number of songs in which the congregation celebrates itself, such as Fred Pratt Green’s “God is Here! We are his people,” although that hymn does also recognize that those gathered are not perfect. A more extreme example is “What is this place,” originally by the Dutch writer Huub Oosterhuis and translated into English by

David Smith. In this song, we hear a community described that seems not even to *need* Jesus:

What is this place where we are meeting?  
Only a house, the earth its floor,  
Walls and a roof sheltering people,  
Windows for light, an open door.  
Yet it becomes a body that lives  
When we are gathered here,  
And our God is near.

[Both the meter—the shortness of the last line—and the syntax—the sentence is complete before the final “and clause”—make God’s presence seem like a trivial afterthought.]

Words from afar, stars that are falling,  
Sparks that are sown in us like seed.  
Names for our God, dreams, signs, and wonders,  
Sent from the past are all we need.  
We in this place remember and speak  
Again what we have heard:  
God’s free redeeming word.

And we accept bread at his table,  
Broken and shared, a living sign.  
Here in this world, dying and living,  
We are each other’s bread and wine.  
This is the place where we can receive  
What we need to increase:  
God’s justice and God’s peace.

“*We are each other’s bread and wine*”! The Lord’s Supper has become, not the sharing in the body and blood of Christ, but our mutual sharing with each other. It seems very odd that this declaration of self-sufficiency is considered a hymn of praise.

(I also can’t help thinking it odd that in the Catholic *Worship* hymnal this song is given a headline saying it is appropriate for the dedication of a church, since it seems to dismiss all the arts that go into building one. If anything, this song is a celebration of Le Corbusier and the International Style in architecture: the house of God is just walls, roof, and floor—and the windows are just there for lighting. There better not be any of that

old-fashioned stained glass that taught Bible stories through memorable images. That might distract us from our worship of—well, of us.)

There are several other senses in which *we* have become the focus of American hymns. I will not even try to explore the celebration of individual experience that comes from gospel music, since that field is so wide. Sometimes the *I* in the gospel song is a sinner rejoicing in his salvation, sometimes a suffering believer who has been down in Jesus' name, and sometimes a self-satisfied Pharisee boasting that Jesus loves him. But for good or ill, the focus is on us the singers more than on the greatness of God.

In many new or revised hymns, *we* are the focus in yet another way. Over the centuries, hymns of praise have been in the plural: "Holy God, *we* praise thy name." Songs of penitence are in the singular: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like *me*." There is the same contrast in the traditional Catholic liturgy: The confession is in the singular: "*I* confess to almighty God. . ." The *Gloria* is in the plural, "*We* praise you. . ." (I leave aside whether the creed should be singular or plural, since that can bring even mild-mannered liturgists to blows.) Many of the best Good Friday hymns make the simple point that Christ died for each sinner individually—and that they all need to be redeemed by his death. William J.S. Simpson's "Cross of Jesus" declares,

Here the King of all the ages,  
Throned in light ere worlds could be  
Robed in mortal flesh is dying,  
Crucified by sin for me.

(While that hymn appears in the 1933 Presbyterian *Hymnal*, it has disappeared from the 1990 *Hymnal*: evidently too grim.)

"Ah, Holy Jesus, How Hast Thou Offended?" (the text by Johann Heermann, translated by Robert Bridges the Poet Laureate) asks,

Who was the guilty? What brought this upon thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.  
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee:  
I crucified thee.

That is evidently not an answer that goes down well universally: The *Worship* hymnal, which included Heerman's hymn (with Johann Cruger's music) in its second edition, omits it in the third. Talking about our personal guilt is becoming a taboo.

All the same, *personal* guilt is the basis of the rest of Christianity: I can hardly praise God for taking away my sins if I didn't have any to begin with. Hymnals sometimes try to overcome this difficulty by making declarations of penitence *corporate*. For example, in "Crown him with many crowns," Matthew Bridges wrote the joyful lines,

Awake, my soul, and sing  
Of Him who died for thee,  
And hail Him as thy matchless King  
Through all eternity.

The editors of the *Worship* hymnal revise the second line:

Awake, my soul, and sing  
Of him who set *us* free.

There are several supposed advantages here: First, we get rid of the word "Thee": the members of the assembly are assumed to be too dimwitted to understand archaic words like that. Second, we get rid of that unpleasant business about death—no point harping on that. And finally, we now have Christ dying, not for me, not to save *my* soul, but for *us*. (I have discussed on a previous occasion how the same alteration is made in "Amazing Grace!" in some hymnals: "Who saved a wretch like *me*" becomes "who saved and set *us* free.")

These alterations reveal a great deal. First, they show the disinclination of many American Christians to face the idea of *personal* sinfulness. It is not hard to admit being part of a group of sinners. We have all heard people who are happy to admit that, yes, they are members of a racist society and that we are all guilty of the sin of racism. Making that admission on behalf of the millions of our fellow white-folk is one of the ways we sensitive liberals make it clear the we ourselves are not personally racist. But



you never hear someone say, *I am a racist*: I have done wrong this or that person because of the racial group he or she belongs to. That would mean something *personal*—and it would hurt. We Americans like to think of ourselves as innocents—and that makes making even a generic confession—“I myself am a miserable sinner, so wicked the God Incarnate had to die to save me”—uncomfortable for us. We still like the idea of being saved, all the same, and the clash of those desires is what has made much in our hymnals so bland and lifeless.

There are many settings where it is not inappropriate to take a moment of pleasure in your own achievements and to ignore the wickedness in your heart—the Boy Scout Court of Honor, the commencement ceremony, the family reunion (those last, I admit, are usually proof of human depravity all the same.) But, if we take the doctrines of Christianity seriously, public worship is a setting where one should forget one’s own goodness, admit one’s wickedness, and then focus squarely on the transcendent glory of God. American culture has more and more told us that what we need is self-esteem, and our hymnals have tried to weed out hard truths that might damage that quality, and to add props that might bolster it. But in worship—and, I would add, in other areas, such as education—self-esteem should never be the goal: the goal should be self-forgetfulness. Rather than celebrating himself like Whitman—or even celebrating the community of which he or she is part—the worshiper should focus on Christ in his goodness. This, I must stress, does not mean that we must think of ourselves with loathing. We can see where we are strong and good. It does mean we should see even that as trivial. Charles Wesley ends “Love Divine” with a glorious vision of redeemed humanity

Finish, then, Thy new creation;  
Pure and spotless let us be:  
Let us see Thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in Thee;  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,

Till we cast our crowns before Thee,  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

If we have crowns, in worship we should cast them down, not model them proudly for the rest of the assembled community.

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Brian Abel Ragen, Professor of English at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, can be contacted at [inquiries@brianableragen.net](mailto:inquiries@brianableragen.net). He retains copyright to this essay.