

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONGREGATIONAL SONG TO WORSHIP, PART II

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In Part I of our study on Congregational Song, the congregation is identified as the main choir of the church, and its song is the most important musical element of the worship service. Biblical accounts and prominent theologians from Martin Luther (1483-1546) through the present day see vigorous congregational song not only as an aid to worship but also as a requirement for effective worship. Churches with dynamic congregational singing radiate spirituality and witness. Hymns, prayers, and liturgies accumulated through centuries of Christian wisdom provide essential and positive resources for effective worship.

The congregation sings to glorify God, and in doing so, joins the great cloud of witnesses gathered around God's altar that are also singing praises to God. Congregational song is at the heart of worship because it gives response to God's love with gratitude and joy. "God doesn't need our praise. Because God designed us, God knows what we need. God dictated that we should sing songs of religion and belief because God knows they help us to remember, they motivate us, and they bring us closer to God; God knows that they are what we need..." (Daniel J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature*, Penguin Group, 2008, page 228) A Christian *community* offers praise and thanksgiving to God in song; *individuals* in the community are brought closer to God.

During Old Testament days of Kings David and Solomon, an elaborate form of worship was developed in the Jewish Temple. These services prominently featured psalms sung by the congregation and instrumental music. The first Temple was destroyed, and, in 587-586 B.C., people were taken into captivity by the Babylonians. It was during and after the Babylonian exile that the 150 psalms were written and assembled. These psalms influenced Christian worship and served as models for Christian hymns from the New Testament era through the present day.

Martin Luther is the first significant evangelical hymn writer, creating hymns for his congregation to sing in 1523. He not only wrote hymns, but he also composed tunes. Usually, hymn writers are poets only, not composers. Luther's hymns gave the Christian congregation a song that continues to this day.

The hymn is significant because it has been the principal song of Protestant worship since the 16th Century and is the primary vehicle through which the theological education of most parishioners is developed. Laity, not professionally trained clergy, writes hymns most often. The theological wisdom of every generation for centuries is reflected in these hymns. Memory banks of congregations can be nourished with hymns that are varied in style and content, that embrace historic periods to include the accumulated wisdom of saints past and present. Research shows a typical congregation sings less than 100 hymns in worship throughout a year. What wisdom awaits a congregation in the remaining 500 hymns in their hymnals!

Hymns are poems, not music, frequently metrical, and often based directly on a particular scripture passage. A hymn is usually written with the intent of providing congregational song, so sound Biblical truths are an important component. When sung, a hymn should have the effect of unity and integration with the singers, creating a sense of solidarity, camaraderie, and shared beliefs. The story of the Church is told in its song, and when this story is sung, the singing group “ becomes one and remembers its story.” (Paul Westermeyer, *The Heart of the Matter*, GIA Publications, 2001, page 41)

Unification (mutual support and cohesion) of the congregation was one of Luther’s criteria in creating hymns, to give his congregation an opportunity to sing together in worship in their native language. He emphasized this solidarity further by having the congregation sing only the melody of the hymn in unison, unaccompanied. Luther was a trained musician (not a professional) who knew the benefits of people singing together in social surroundings. He needed to find a way for them to achieve the same unity in the worship service. “Sung prayer (congregational song) not only symbolizes the unity of the church gathered, it is per se an act of unity. It is in this manner that it has transforming sacramental potential.” (C. Michael Hawn, *Gather into One Praying and Singing Globally*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, page xvi)

Metrical hymns utilize poetic meters, as do other poems. Many hymns are written in three frequently used metrical patterns referred to as Short (6.8.6.8), Common (8.6.8.6), and Long (8.8.8.8.) Meters. Other hymns have different combinations of poetic phrases or are irregular in poetic construction. All of the different metric combinations can be seen in the Metrical Index of every hymnal. For example, the hymn *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past* is a Common Meter hymn (8.6.8.6.). This is important to know because if the hymn is sung, the tune must be compatible with the hymn’s meter.

When a hymn takes on musical life, it is sung to a melody. Such melodies are called HYMN TUNES, and each tune has its own name, separate from the title of the hymn. For example, the hymn *Our God, Our Help in Ages Past* is usually sung to the hymn tune ST. ANNE. (Hymn tune names are identified in capital letters.) Tunes are matched with poetic meters of hymns with which they are paired. All Common Meter hymns will be sung to Common Meter tunes. Before the age of hymnals with music, a congregation knew only a limited number of tunes they had learned by rote. These same tunes were repeated over and over with varied texts that shared the same meter. Hymns and tunes gradually became paired together and many were consistently used through the present day. *Our God Our Help*/ST. ANNE is such an example. This text is seldom sung with any other tune. Through the years, however, certain tunes became so popular they were not attached to a specific text and were used with many different hymn texts. Such a tune varies from hymnbook to hymnbook. Look in the **Alphabetical Index of Tunes** in your hymnal to discover which tune has the most hymns set to it.

Matching hymn tunes with texts is like a marriage. With text and tune combined, is the end result a more satisfactory experience than just reading the text? Will the tune help one remember the text? A tune does disservice to a hymn if the combined product can’t easily enter the ears and memory banks of the singers.

It is beneficial that a tune supports the spirit of the hymn and be simple enough not to call gratuitous attention to it. Many hymn tunes are folk melodies, some of the most singable, beautiful melodies ever heard. Will the text and tune find their way into the heart and soul of the believer? Will the combination of text and tune offer strength and consolation many years after first singing it?

As good as a hymn and tune may be together, the effectiveness of a hymn will be compromised or lost through improper use in a worship service. Hymns are *not* created equally according to liturgical function, and *it is the text of a hymn that gives the hymn its best use in worship*. Singing randomly selected hymns without specific, liturgical purpose does disservice to worship and uses the hymns inefficiently. Erik Routley, Congregational pastor, hymn writer, composer, theologian says, "Hymns used in a service of worship are precision tools, and are not all designed for the same purpose." (Erik Routley, *Those Hymns!* in Promoting Church Music, January, 1973, page 6)

The following suggestions are offered in choosing hymns for effective worship. **Select hymns that:**

- faithfully support the scriptures of the day, sermon, liturgical season/emphasis
- teach sound theological and Biblical truths
- represent life situations experienced by the congregation
- convey the faith of the community, not individuals
- embody ethnic and cultural diversity represented in the congregation
- give evidence of belief in the communion of saints, past and present

The best uses of hymn texts are those that support and affirm specific components of the day's worship: scriptures, sermon, specific liturgical emphasis of the day (Communion), or liturgical season (Advent, Lent). Opportunities to create an effective worship service are enhanced when liturgical emphases of the day are explored in the choice of congregational hymns. There is every opportunity to do this, as resources for selecting appropriate hymns that match scripture, liturgical days, and topics abound. *Every denomination has printed and on-line hymnological aids that offer choices of hymns that match readings in the liturgical year.* [See the Church Music Institute on-line Home Page Resources List for these sources.] The 2013 hymnal, *Glory to God*, contains a Lectionary Index that lists hymn selections for each Sunday of the three-year liturgical cycle. And, most hymnals have indexes that give liturgical and topical emphases.

Hymns that teach theological truths based on scripture and sound theological teachings are essential for developing the faith. The use of banal, bland, repetitious texts doesn't meet this requirement. A goal is for the congregation to grow spiritually through each hymn selected for worship. With each hymn sung, questions can be asked regarding the spiritual growth achieved with the content of the hymn. While there may be reasons for using short texted musical settings in worship experiences, care can be taken that criteria mentioned above are met and that, because of the limited text, the musical setting is not compromised to be trite.

Hymns chosen for worship can reflect daily life situations that test our faith. These are the same kinds of experiences expressed by psalm writers such as the challenges of family, aging, healing

(lament and longing for healing), justice and reconciliation, love for others, personal peace, vocation and work, and many others. Being a Christian doesn't eliminate a person from life's problems, and hymn writers who have experienced these problems are best able to communicate their experiences. Who would expect that persons suffering from severe physical handicaps or the illness of depression wrote some of the greatest hymns of our faith? What a source of support these hymns are for a community of believers. A congregation that sings only upbeat music, never using texts and music of lament or reflection, will lose opportunity to minister to the needs of the congregation.

The purpose of corporate worship is not to please the leaders of worship or individual persons sitting in the pews. Why? If worship is corporate, hymns chosen for worship will want to reflect the faith of the entire body of the gathered community. The likes and dislikes of individual persons in the selection of hymns are secondary to the common needs of the body of worshippers.

The Old Testament teaches oneness in God; the New Testament teaches oneness in God through Jesus Christ. "We, who are many, are one body in Christ." (Romans 12:5) The very nature of church denominations assumes homogeneous interest groups. When strangers appear in worship outside the norm in ethnic diversity, socioeconomic placement, disability, or other areas, the community of Christ often feels threatened. All believers have the right to be treated with respect and acceptance, and it is a wholesome community that welcomes these strangers into oneness in worship. The church of Christ in the 21st century has become a global church. Denominational hymnbooks and other sources contain music from many languages, nationalities, and religious groups. Other issues of separation from the normative congregation are also addressed in new hymns. The selection of hymns for worship can include hymns that offer acceptance to these "strangers," eliminate cultural fragmentation, and give oneness in Christ to the whole congregation by raising their voices in spiritual song that is possibly different from their own culture.

Karl Barth (1886-1968) declares a congregation is responsible for discovering its own song. The congregation's song should honor and maintain teachings of the historical Church, denominational beliefs, liturgical practices, and musical repertoire that have been sacred to the congregation for generations. In addition, the song should represent oneness with individuals in the community of believers that represent ethnic and other areas of diversity. Barth is convinced that when a church fails to seek out and propagate its own unique song, it will fail in finding its way and has little hope of survival.

Hymns from the rich heritage of our Church's history as well as hymns that reflect today's social and ethical concerns can add meaning to the repertoire of a congregation. Hymns used can give evidence of belief in the communion of saints – past, present, future. Isn't this what we pledge in our official statements of belief? A congregation that does not sing *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence* (4th Century) or Luther's immortal *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* is an impoverished one. Congregations will be enriched by connection to the saints who created and have continued to sing hymns through the ages and be reminded of the privilege of owning these hymns through hundreds of years of continued use. A congregation will benefit from preserving and nourishing the historical connections that have given birth to it.

Hymns are God's story, the ordinary stories of faith by believers transformed by divine revelation into life-changing testaments. These common folks filled sacred spaces of our churches week-to-week, year-to-year, for generations and centuries. Their hymns were thought important enough to be set to music, sing in worship, and pass down through generations from hymnbook to hymnbook.

Hymns sung in worship are not part of an irrelevant formality but an opportunity for the singer to acknowledge God's goodness and have opportunity to experience a divine revelation. William Cowper, pastor and hymn writer in 1779, wrote, "Sometimes a light surprises the child of God who sings. It is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings." (William Cowper, *Sometimes a Light Surprises in Glory to God*, Hymn #800, John Knox Press, 2013)

The Holy Spirit speaks today through the singing of hymns in the same way Cowper was moved in the 18th Century. It is beneficial that worship planners understand the opportunities hymns provide for effective worship, to know that selection and proper use of hymns support participation in worship, teaching of Biblical truths, unification of spirit, and evangelism.

Congregations need preparation to assume their role in the liturgy, the work of the people. This role includes vigorous congregational hymn singing and teaching our children the song of the church. The spiritual formation of the church is indebted to the theology of hymns sung. With educational arms of the church and home instruction often less effective in teaching beliefs and doctrines of the faith, it is important that hymns sung in worship take this slack.

The ritual of Christian worship connects times and places from the cycle of history in an encounter with God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Music in worship gives meaning to texts that express beliefs of the faith. Many of these texts (beliefs) remain common to our memory, both personal and collective, through the singing of hymns. Hymns of saints past, present, and future give opportunity for congregants to worship while providing retrieval cues for memories of religious experiences, doctrines, and beliefs of the faith that sustain and nourish spiritual growth.

It is appropriate to conclude this series on Congregational Song by quoting a portion of a prayer written by Walter Brueggemann. The writer states why we worship in song and the purpose of Congregational Song. "We are people who must sing you, for the sake of our very lives. You are a God who must be sung by us, for the sake of your majesty and honor. And so we thank you, ... We are witnesses to your mercy and splendor; We will not keep silent...ever again." (Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*, edited by Edwin Searcy, Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003, page 133)