

Over the past twenty-five years, the American evangelical church has moved away from the hymns we sing at Faith Presbyterian Church. What are now widely referred to as “praise songs” have replaced the hymns that had been sung in Protestant worship for many generations.

Churches began to sing these songs, often putting the text before the congregation by means of an overhead projector, in hopes that their worship would be more accessible to the ordinary American who, it was thought, found the established church music alien, dull, and hard to sing. So complete has been the transition in many churches that the rising generation of Christians is now largely unfamiliar with the literature of Christian hymns.

Much, of course, could be said in favor of the new church music. A good bit of what many evangelical Protestant churches in America had been singing for the past century was of poor quality, gospel songs that were overly sentimental, if not positively untrue, and composed in a musical idiom that was, deservedly, fast fading away. Previous generations have added new texts and new music for the sung praise of the church and those additions have typically been controversial until they were thoroughly absorbed by the church.

One has only to think of the resistance that was once offered to the great hymns of Isaac Watts, now so beloved of serious-minded Christians, to know that every great advance in Christian worship was once some Christians’ unwelcome novelty! We are certainly not against the production of new music for the worship of the church. Indeed, we think it necessary that each generation add to the literature of sung praise works in its own poetic and musical idioms.

However, we have not, by and large, moved over to this new music and that for several reasons. Our problems concern first and foremost the text, not the music, of the new songs.

*First*, the praise songs do not rise to the theological standard set for our sung praise in the Book of Psalms. Very few of them are anything more than simple ascriptions of praise to God. Most of these songs are very simple. Unlike the psalms of the Bible and the great hymns of the church, they say very little. They do not deal with the wide range of important theological subjects turned into hymns in the biblical *Psalter* and in the great hymns of Christian history nor do they convey the depth, richness, humanity, and the seriousness of those ancient and historic hymns.

God’s people through the ages have had their faith nourished by the singing of the church, but a faith fed on contemporary praise songs must eventually be a weak and juvenile faith. Many of us used to sing songs like the praise songs of modern Christian worship when we were growing up in the church, but, and here is the point, everyone understood that these simple songs were songs for young people. It was not imagined that they would be sung by adults and by the church in the worship of the Lord’s Day. They were suited for younger minds and hearts, not for the mature expressions appropriate to an experienced faith.

The question for the defenders of contemporary Christian praise songs as songs suitable to replace the hymn in the “high” worship of the church is this: what really is different about this music than that of a generation ago? The question simply put is this: has the modern church simply substituted juvenile songs for adult ones? If so, can this be right? It cannot be a step forward to have a sanctuary full of Christian adults singing campfire songs!

To put this concern another way, the great question posed by contemporary Christian worship in general is whether it can sustain over time a fully biblical and orthodox faith, leaving, as it does, so much of that biblical faith unsaid and unsung. The hymns that have stood the test of time teach the faith, inscribe it in the heart, add deep emotion to the truest and purest doctrine, and communicate that doctrine and that feeling both to our children and the world. Most of the modern praise songs communicate almost nothing to the mind of the church. And, in that, they are utterly unlike the *Psalter*.

*Second*, even if, as we fondly hope, we may find new poems to sing that rise to the biblical standard for use in the church's high worship on the Lord's Day, we should still sing the great hymns of Christian history and the Psalms of the biblical *Psalter*. The hymns that have stood the test of time have done so because they have a timeless merit. Singing those historic hymns, we join our voices to the Christian ages and worship not simply as people of our own day, but as part of the one, holy, catholic church. The hymns of Christendom have been a common language that unites believers with one another across national and cultural borders and across the ages. It has often been said and it is wonderfully true, that the Christian church meets in her hymnal.

Many of the greatest hymns also have a special and irreplaceable *elan* as a result of the circumstances of their origin, whether the great Christological and Trinitarian hymns from the tumultuous fourth century, or the battle hymns of the Reformation era, or the new birth hymns of the Great Awakening, or the church hymns of the nineteenth century. They have been set to music that is also timeless: tuneful, often very beautiful, and well serving the text. The proof of the accessibility of that music is how often it makes its way into contemporary Hollywood movie scores!

That a hymn is old is no adequate objection. The Christian church is fed from her past. When the Lord Jesus sang a hymn (one of the psalms of the *Hallel*, viz. Pss. 113-118) with his disciples on the night of the Last Supper, the hymn they sang was already a thousand years old!

*Third*, the biblical psalms and the finest Christian hymns are great poetry that is, at the same time, eminently accessible to all Christians. This explains why their lines have been so deeply embedded in the literary and popular culture of the world. The praise songs, as a class, are accessible, but they are not fine poetry. Most of this literature, frankly, is banal, predictable, and eminently forgettable. It's really top forty stuff, easily displaced by the next praise song to come along. Several generations of this music have already come and gone in just several decades. In fact, contemporary Christian music is so disposable that it cannot unify the church over time. Much of the reason for this is that these texts are not being written by poets, much less great poets, still less theologically literate poets, as were so many of the church's finest hymns. Most of the praise songs are written by musicians. It shows!

We are, to be sure, always on the lookout for new hymns that rise to the standard set both in the *Psalter* and in the history of Christian praise. We sing some contemporary hymns and hope to sing more. We need hymns on biblical themes that the modern church has reflected on with greater seriousness and understood with greater clarity than previous generations. We need new texts and new tunes that are clearly the products of our own day, but are as worthy to be sung as

the hymns of the past. We need new hymns to mix together with the best hymns of the past. That is the only way we can offer to God worship that is the very best of which we are capable, which is always the worship that will do us the most good as well.