

Hymns versus Praise Choruses

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Cows, Corn and Choruses

It's hard to be a Christian in the United States and not be aware of the "worship wars" over musical style (for more about "worship wars," see my column "Why Truth Is Better than Trends" in the series *What Worship Is...and Isn't*.) Whether your preference in worship music leans to traditional, classical, urban, Celtic, rock, pop, or something else, nearly everyone has an opinion about style. So, we'll survey a well-trod battlefield: hymns v. praise choruses.

You may have seen the following story in your email recently. If I knew who wrote it, I'd tell you, but the author's name was long gone by the time it got to me.

An old farmer went to the city one weekend and attended the big-city church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was.

"Well," said the farmer, "It was good. But they did something different. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns."

"Praise choruses," said his wife, "what are those?"

"Oh, they're OK. They're sort of like hymns, only different," said the farmer.

"Well, what's the difference?" asked his wife.

The farmer said, "Well it's like this: If I said to you: 'Martha, the cows are in the corn,' well, that would be a hymn. On the other hand, if I said to you:

'Martha Martha, Martha, Oh, Martha, MARTHA, MARTHA, the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows, the white cows, the black and white cows, the COWS, COWS, COWS are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn, the CORN, CORN, CORN,' then if I were to repeat the whole thing two or three times, well, that would be a praise chorus."

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“Praise choruses” began to appear in the late 1960s. Many who were believers in those years have vivid memories of sitting in a circle and singing “Alleluia,” “This is the Day,” or “Seek Ye First.”

For the sake of discussion, let’s think of a praise chorus as a relatively short praise song, often with lyrics taken directly from Scripture, and which can be easily sung, easily played, and easily learned by a congregation.

Today, countless Christians across the globe use such songs as their predominant, if not exclusive, form of worship music. Despite such widespread acceptance, many sincere believers question the value of this music. Here are some of the most common concerns:

1. **Message:** Praise choruses contain little in the way of sound doctrine or biblical references. When they are based on Scripture, it’s more like “Bible-lite.”
2. **Man-centeredness:** Praise choruses often reflect a man-centered faith, focusing on personal needs and experiences rather than eternal truths. Common themes in these songs are God’s nearness and presence, and our joy, comfort, healing, and blessing. As one writer remarked, “One cannot sing praise songs without noticing how first-person pronouns (I, me, mine, we, us, ours) tend to eclipse every other subject.” The lyrics often seem to begin and end with the worshiper.
3. **Mediocrity:** Psalm 33 commands us to “play skillfully” when playing worship music, yet some praise choruses require very little skill to write or perform. Excellence and professionalism are downplayed or ignored due to an unstated belief that simpler is better and often “more anointed.”
4. **Motive:** Many praise choruses are written quickly, for monetary gain, and not as a result of diligent labor for the glory of God. Also, many churches use praise choruses primarily as a means to church growth. This is wrong because worship is for God, not for people.

Are any of these criticisms legitimate? We’ll weigh the validity of each of these issues. Remember that “the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love” (Ps 33:18).

Praise Choruses: Muted Messages?

I introduced a discussion on the relative merits of praise choruses v. hymns. Before we go any further, I want you to know I’m not seeking to promote or discourage the use of praise choruses *or* hymns. However, taking time to examine each genre carefully will

enable us to *define* the issues, *discern* what is best, and *devote* ourselves to that which brings glory to God.

Let's look at the claim that praise choruses lack a complete and clear biblical message. One writer expresses it this way: "One need only scan the various collections of praise choruses out there to notice that there is something strikingly absent: the 'meaty' portion of the biblical passage." This claim needs to be taken seriously, and Colossians 3:16 provides vital biblical guidance: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." Can praise choruses help us obey this passage?

It's true that many praise choruses quote only a portion of the scriptural passage they're taken from—"This is the Day" (Ps 118:24); "Let God Arise" (Ps 68:1); "Be Exalted" (Ps 108:3–5); "Hallelujah, for the Lord Our God the Almighty Reigns" (Rev 19:6), etc. Other choruses aren't based on any one passage, but emphasize scriptural themes ("Lord I Lift Your Name on High," "Shout to the Lord," "I Love You, Lord," etc.). How do songs like these measure up to Colossians 3:16?

Let me suggest two responses. The first deals with the **devotional value** of singing portions of Scripture, or songs based on Scripture. To let the word of Christ dwell in us "richly" is not referring simply to quantity. To "dwell...richly" has to do with illumination, with whether we have really grasped some truth about God.

"When a congregation sings twelve stanzas of a psalm version to a traditional tune, they cover a large *quantity* of material, and that can be a good thing. But how much of it do they *remember*? How much of it has grabbed their imagination? How much of it will come to mind when they wake up the next morning?"²

God encourages us to meditate on his law day and night (Ps 1:2). This involves reflecting on some portion of the Word of God over time, until its truth inhabits our thinking. Scripture choruses can be an excellent means to that end. Repetition of a passage of Scripture, however brief, helps me remember, and produces a fondness for and a deeper understanding of what I'm singing. Even choruses that are merely drawn from biblical themes can still help us "set our mind on things above" and cultivate hearts that worship in spirit and truth.

But how much repetition is enough? How much is too much? Can this area be abused?

Certainly. This brings us to the area of **diet**. Many churches never grow beyond a basic repertoire of a few dozen choruses. Eventually, the lack of variety in music and content

² John Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R) p 39 (emphasis added)

make it difficult for even the most determined worshipers to exercise faith while singing these songs. This hinders the rich indwelling of God's Word. "Sing to the Lord a new song!" God commands us (Ps 149:1). New praise songs, covering a range of scriptural themes, help us deepen our understanding and experience of God.

At our church we make it a goal to learn two new songs a month. That may be a little steep for those just starting out, but a healthy church will recognize the importance of growing in its expressions of worship.

Praise Choruses: Mainly Man-Centered?

A second common criticism of praise choruses is that they frequently reflect a man-centered faith—in other words, that the lyrics often focus on personal needs and experiences rather than on eternal truths about God. Let me develop that point a little, then I'll critique it.

One denomination recently commented, "People nowadays are less interested in ideas about God and more interested in experiencing God. The question for the worshiper in the nineties is not primarily: Was that true? But: Did I experience God?"³ When a song is dominated by phrases such as "I feel, I want, I desire, I love, I need, I can't live without," it's obvious we are saying a lot about our feelings, but not very much about God. We may be *implying* things about God, but we're not *saying* them; the distinction is an important one.

We too easily forget that Jesus is called the Word, not the Experience. He is the Truth, not the Feeling. Worship that focuses primarily on our needs, emotions, problems, or enemies, but refers only occasionally (if at all) to God's attributes or actions, can actually rob God of the glory we seek to give him. *He* is to be the center of our attention!

The objective and the subjective

As valid as this criticism of praise choruses may be (and of course that varies from song to song), it's easy to fall into another trap just as problematic and sinful: setting truth at odds with our response to it.

There are two sides to true worship: the objective and the subjective. The *objective* is grounded in eternal, unchanging truth. It's the lack of clear, objective truth in many worship songs that drives the criticism I presented above. The *subjective* involves our emotions and experiences: how we feel, how we respond, how we are affected, etc. In the best worship songs, the two elements are combined: subjective lyrics express the heart's

³ *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1997) p 29

response to lyrics that state objective truth about God with clarity, precision, poeticism, and power.

What is the purpose of truth if it is not to be experienced and responded to? God receives no glory when we worship him as an act of willpower, taking little or no delight in our relationship with him. The Psalms, for example, are filled with personal expressions in response to God's works and character. No lack of emotion there! Joy, fear, reverence, peace, celebration, desperation, repentance, desire, and more are all displayed freely in Scripture. We should expect no less of our own experience.

True worship does not come from people whose feelings are like air ferns with no root in the solid ground of biblical doctrine. The only affections that honor God are those rooted in the rock of biblical truth.... True worship comes from people who are deeply emotional and who love deep and sound doctrine. Strong affections for God rooted in truth are the bone and marrow of biblical worship.⁴

Context, context, context

Rarely, however, does the public worship of God end after just one song. That's where context comes in. During worship, one song might contain great theological truths about the atoning work of Christ, and the next song might be a heartfelt response to that truth—"My Jesus, my Savior, Lord there is none like You."

Emotion-based praise choruses, when used in response to theologically rich songs or hymns, can be very effective in enabling us to worship God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Praise Choruses: Merely Mediocre?

Are contemporary praise choruses an inferior art form, unsuitable for the worship of our excellent God? Many critics think so. "Lacking creativity... too simple... uninteresting... too easy to play." These are just a few of the concerns people have voiced.

Before I respond, let's be clear about one thing. God's glorious work of redemption is in no way dependent on our notions of quality. He has drawn untold thousands to himself through bad performances of poorly written songs. God can speak as easily and effectively through a donkey as he can through us (and sometimes, I might add, it's hard to tell the difference).

⁴ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996) pp 90, 76

At the same time, quality does matter to God. We see in verses such as 1 Chronicles 15:22, 28:21, and Psalm 33:3 that skill is an issue in song leading, artisanship, and musicianship. God commands us to offer the “first fruits,” or that which is of the best quality. But how do we define quality?

We frequently use the word “quality” to describe what we intellectually admire, based on our knowledge and experience. For example, in music, “quality” might be related to complexity, harmonic structure, or historic significance.

This abstract approach to determining quality is valid, but incomplete, for at least two reasons. First, respected musicians often disagree about what is “best,” when their standards are based on technical merit alone. Second, if we feel our preferences are the “last word” on musical excellence, where do we draw the line? For example, more than once I’ve read that “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” by Isaac Watts is the best hymn in the English language. If that’s true, does this mean we should never sing anything else?

Of course not, but I’ve pushed this illustration to the limit to make a point. Restricting our definition of “quality” to aesthetic or technical criteria is a limited and unworkable means of determining what is best in the worship of God.

According to the need of the moment

Aesthetic beauty and technical merit *are* important aspects of quality, but so is *suitability*. So, along with asking, “Is it crafted well?” we must also ask, “Does it communicate clearly to its intended audience?” (See 1Co 14:7–8.)

A Bach chorale sung in German may be musically excellent and lyrically profound, yet totally incomprehensible to most American congregations. Not all that is admirable in the abstract sense is “the best” for every group.

How do these concepts help us think about praise choruses?

1. On the **aesthetic** level, praise choruses are no different than any other style of musical composition: some are better than others—more creative, thoughtful, and interesting.
2. On the **technical** level, praise choruses are, as a rule, simpler than hymns. As a classically trained musician, I know the temptation to conclude that “simple” means “inferior” or “shallow.” But I’m convinced that God does not hold that view. Which is more profound: the simple brevity of God’s Name as he revealed it to Moses, or the depth and complexity of Paul’s magnum opus to the Romans?

God has created things as simple as a blade of grass and as complex as the solar system. Which does he find more meaningful?

3. On the level of **relevance** and **suitability**, praise choruses have proven to be very effective communicators of God's truth. For that reason, they are often of better "quality" for congregational use than are many hymns. At times, the music of hymns fails to reflect adequately the power, passion, and scope of the lyrics. Praise choruses, by contrast, narrow the focus of a song to a particular truth or response: praise, celebration, repentance, peace, adoption, God's reign, etc. Rather than covering an abundance of material, they enable us to reflect on and appreciate one aspect of our great God, whose love surpasses all knowledge.

The main point, then, is to sing those praise choruses that most effectively communicate God's living Word. Sing them enthusiastically. Sing them often. Sing them well.

Praise Choruses: Of Money and Motives

The fourth and final criticism of praise choruses that I'd like to address involves motive. Why are praise choruses written? Why do churches use them in worship?

Critics of praise choruses like to point out that while musical giants such as Bach and Handel labored days, weeks, even months, to produce their devotional masterpieces, many praise choruses are written in less than an hour ("And if they weren't, they certainly could have been," I can hear the critics add). They also claim that the large number of praise choruses is due in part to the allure of financial gain; a widely sung praise chorus can generate fairly substantial royalties over time.

Given the depravity of the human heart, there's little doubt that some worship songwriters are hoping to get rich quickly. Very few of them will. Only a small fraction of praise choruses ever gain enough attention to generate significant income. Those that do often support Christian ministry in other forms. One of my favorite stories about song royalties concerns Karen Lafferty, a godly woman who in the 1970s wrote the simple chorus "Seek Ye First" during a time of personal need. The income she has received over the years from that six-note song has been a primary means of support for her work on the mission field.

But what if God chooses to financially bless a sinfully motivated songwriter? Philippians 1:15–18 gives us some helpful guidance: "The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice."

Surely, Paul did not *prefer* preaching motivated by “selfish ambition” (verse 17), nor does God prefer song-writing motivated by financial gain. Yet the “important thing” is the content of the message that goes forth. The selfish motives of a few don’t take away from the countless songwriters seeking to communicate God’s glory in fresh and creative ways so that many more will be drawn to worship our matchless Savior.

What about churches that use praise choruses to attract larger crowds to their services? “The hymns just aren’t reaching them,” some might say, “We need to be more current.”

It’s not wrong to want to reach people. But our primary motive must be to honor God, his Word, and his ways. Using praise choruses because you want to glorify God more effectively is commendable. Incorporating praise choruses because you “like the sound” and think they’ll draw more people isn’t. In previous columns of *Worship Matters* we’ve discussed how praise choruses (like many other musical genres) can be musically appealing while remaining theologically weak and emotionally driven. The focus of our worship services should always be content first, style second.

As you might have guessed, praise choruses are a mixed bag. Still, God has used praise choruses over and over to help millions exalt his name and encounter his presence.

This brief survey has been far from exhaustive, but I hope that in some ways it’s been helpful. For more study, I’d recommend the book *Contemporary Worship Music* by John Frame (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

And what about hymns? Are they strictly for traditional congregations? Do they have any relevance for the twenty-first century church?

Timeless or Tedious? The Debate over Hymns

It wasn’t too long after I had read the story about Martha, the cows, and the corn that I received this good-natured counter-assault:

What is a hymn?

A young, new Christian who usually went to his local church, one Sunday attended a small-town church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was.

“Well,” said the young man, “It was good. They did something different, however. They sang hymns instead of regular songs.”

“Hymns,” said his wife, “What are those?”

“Oh, they’re OK. They’re sort of like regular songs, only different,” said the young man.

“Well, what’s the difference?” asked his wife.

The young man said, “Well it’s like this—If I were to say to you, ‘Martha, the cows are in the corn,’ well that would be a regular song. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you:

‘Oh Martha, dear Martha, hear thou my cry,
Incline thine ear to the words of my mouth.
Turn thou thy whole wondrous ear by and by
To the righteous, inimitable, glorious truth.

‘For the way of the animals who can explain
There in their heads is no shadow of sense,
Hearkenest they in God’s sun or his rain
Unless from the mild, tempting corn they are fenced.

‘Yea those cows in glad bovine, rebellious delight,
Have broke free their shackles, their warm pens eschewed.
Then goaded by minions of darkness and night
They all my mild Chilliwack sweet corn have chewed.

‘So look to that bright shining day by and by,
Where all foul corruptions of earth are reborn.
Where no vicious animal makes my soul cry
And I no longer see those foul cows in the corn.’

“Then, if I were to do only verses one, three, and four and do a key change on the last verse, well, that would be a hymn.”

What about hymns? Can they be effective today?

Let’s now review some of the strengths and weaknesses of hymns. Here are the topics we’ll cover:

1. **So many words:** Most hymns tend to be “dense” theologically. So many concepts are addressed that the worshiper often lacks sufficient time to really grasp or reflect on what’s being sung. The goal seems to be to sing as many words as possible during each hymn.
2. **Skill overkill:** More than one guitarist has complained that hymns require too much of your average church musician. The chords often seem to change with

every note of the melody. Because hymns emphasize musicianship over accessibility, they are played less often, or are not played well.

3. **Sentimentalism** Many people favor hymns simply because they grew up with them. Hymns sung in childhood bring back fond memories for many believing adults, helping them feel more comfortable in changing times. Yet the archaic language and musical style of hymns no longer communicate effectively to younger generations, and are typically a hindrance to evangelism.
4. **Spirit deficiency:** The more wordy the hymn, the more a worshiper's attention must be focused on keeping up with the lyrics. There is little time to hear the Spirit speak to us as we reflect on or respond to the lyrics. Worship "in truth" is over-emphasized, while worship "in spirit" is neglected.

These concerns may be overstated in some cases, but I believe they represent some of the main concerns people can have with using hymns in congregational worship. We'll respond to each criticism, seeking to determine the place of hymns in worship today.

Hymns: So Many Words, So Little Time

After discussing some of the criticisms commonly leveled against praise choruses, let's direct our attention now to hymns.

One common reason given for not using hymns in congregational worship is that they're too wordy. "All those words just make it hard for me to tell God how much I love him!" In this "visual age," language is sometimes seen as an obstacle to emotional expression. But what does Scripture tell us?

The Old Testament

In Exodus 33:18, Moses asks God to show him his glory. How will God respond? What will best reveal his glory to Moses?

"And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin'" (Ex 34:6-7). The Almighty Creator passed in front of Moses...yet we aren't told what he looked like. We're told what he said about himself! God revealed his glory to Moses, and to us in Scripture, through words—and quite a few words at that.

Consider also the Tabernacle, where the nation of Israel went to meet with and worship God. At its very center, it housed the Ten Commandments, the Word of God inscribed on stone tablets. This is more than a subtle indication that God's Word dwells in the very heart of true, spiritual worship.

The Psalms, carefully crafted and often lengthy, are obvious examples of poetic expressions of praise and worship to God. Who will claim that all those words get in the way of worship?

The New Testament

Earlier we recalled how Colossians commands us to “let the word of Christ dwell in us richly” as we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to one another (Col 3:16). The Gospels contain numerous hymn-like passages, which the early church sang in its corporate worship (Lk 1:46–55; 1:68–69; 2:14; 2:29–32). Certain passages in Paul's letters also appear to have been used in worship (1Ti 3:16; 2Ti 2:11–13). The worship songs of Revelation further demonstrate how the declaration of God's attributes and works are integral to God-honoring worship.

Still, we must ask: Is it possible to have too many words?

Yes. I love to read books about God that cause me to think more deeply about his character and actions. Yet reading lots of words does not necessarily mean I understand them. Sometimes I just need to sit back and reflect on what I've taken in.

So it is in our worship of God. There are times for verbally plumbing the depths of our salvation and relationship with God, seeking to ignite our hearts with the fuel of biblical truth. Then there are times for simply crying out, as Thomas did upon encountering the risen Christ, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28) At that moment, a theological treatise on the resurrection would have been inappropriate. A simple expression of adoration and wonder was perfect.

Words are given to us, not to hinder worship, but to enlighten it. They are gifts from God that bring solidity and clarity to our intangible thoughts and emotions, however imperfectly. They deepen our understanding of God's greatness, challenge our dullness in approaching him, and provoke a greater passion for knowing him.

Many of the eighteenth-century hymn writers excelled at producing theologically rich, yet wonderfully passionate God-centered lyrics. If you aren't used to singing hymns, I'd suggest you check out some written by Isaac Watts (“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”), Charles Wesley (“And Can It Be”), Augustus Toplady (“Rock of Ages”), or John Newton (“Amazing Grace”). I don't think you'll be disappointed.

Hymns: Skill Overkill? (Part 1)

A second objection I've heard concerning hymns is that, for corporate worship, they require too high a skill level. Guitarists sigh mournfully, "The chords change on every note!" Frustrated vocalists respond with, "I can't sing that high!" Members of the congregation have trouble trying to sing hymns they can only pick up after the tenth hearing.

Are hymns too difficult to use in the worship of God? Naturally, not all hymns are equally challenging, but for your average musician or singer, hymns can pose real problems.

Let me mention here that I'm a classically trained pianist who grew up in a denomination that didn't sing any of the hymns I've since come to know and love. My goal in tackling this whole topic of "hymns v. praise choruses" is to help us see that God has given us an incredible number of ways to express his glory.

I've received a few responses from well-meaning readers scolding me for seeking to impose my opinions on others. I've encouraged them to stay with me until the end of this series. If they do, I believe they'll see that the only opinion I seek to impose (and I believe it's a biblical one) is that God is overwhelmingly glorious and worthy of worship in every conceivable musical style and form. Most of us settle for a narrow selection of styles we prefer, to the neglect of other valid expressions. Are hymns more difficult than praise choruses? In some cases, yes. Are they a valuable tool for worshiping God? Absolutely.

Of thee I sing

Take the issue of hymns being difficult to sing. In the interest of creativity, hymn writers have sometimes composed melodies that sound unusual to our twenty-first century ears. We decide we don't like the hymn because we don't know the tune. However, most melodies we hear often enough become familiar and therefore memorable. I've been amazed to see my own young children learn songs that some adults would dismiss as too complex. How did they do it? They simply listened as we played a recording at home or in the car repeatedly.

The truth is, we all sing songs that have complex and even hymn-like melodies, because we've heard them so many times. "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "The Star-Spangled Banner" are just two of the more obvious ones. Are these songs "too complex" to sing? They might challenge your vocal range, but not your melodic memory.

So maybe the real question when it comes to hymns is whether they enable true spiritual worship. I believe they do. While simpler songs may appeal to our love for “instant access,” more-complex songs can offer a different and deeper satisfaction as we focus on them more intently and for longer periods of time.

Here’s an analogy that might help. I love the book of Proverbs. More times than I can count, some simple two-line passage from that book has cut me to the quick. But I also love Genesis, and Isaiah, and Romans, and Revelation, and many other books of the Bible where I see a “bigger picture” that affects me in ways far different from the Proverbs. Of course, songs are not Scripture, but the fact that many hymns have a theological depth uncommon in contemporary choruses should provoke us to explore what’s available.

Even though I didn’t grow up with hymns, I spent a couple of summers in the mid-70s using a hymnal in my devotional times. I was surprised to discover the wealth of biblical teaching contained in many of the songs. After a while, I even learned the tunes. You can too. So can your church. And if you’re feeling creative, why not rewrite the music to make it more familiar-sounding? Most hymns are in the public domain (no copyright restrictions), so have at it!

Finally, what about those high notes? If you find that certain hymns are too high, and the words are worth singing, ask your musicians if they can lower the key. Wow, isn’t that profound?

Hymns: Skill Overkill? (Part 2)

I want to focus on the challenges of playing, rather than singing, them.

It’s usually my guitarist friends who put up the greatest resistance to playing hymns. (I have a hard time convincing them that hymns were composed on a Taylor guitar.) And yes, hymns can be a challenge for some musicians. But given the rich theological truths found in so many hymns, it would be well worth our time to figure out ways to use them.

Consider these words from verse two of “Before the Throne of God.” These were penned by an eighteenth-century writer, Charitie Lees Bancroft:

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died

My sinful soul is counted free
For the God the Just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.

What heart-freeing truth! What a powerful picture of the effectiveness of our Redeemer's sacrifice on the Cross! We must find ways of singing words like these, and others like them that bring precision to our praises.

God will be worshiped for who he is, and not for who we think he is. That's why truth is so crucial. Many songs that simply emphasize how we feel about God could just as easily be sung to Allah or Buddha as they could to the triune God. Also, as we benefit from theologically rich lyrics, we will learn to discern which lyrics are shallow or man-centered. But remember, lyrics don't have to be complex to be worshipful; simple language can be fine. The Bible has numerous examples of both.

So how do we handle hymns that are difficult to play? One way is to create or find arrangements in which the harmonic structure is simplified. One resource I recently came across is Fretboard Fellowship. This guitar-oriented Web site has served the church by reducing the number of chords in some familiar hymns. Or, if you're gifted in this area, you can consider rewriting the melodies and chords of hymns in which the music is unusually difficult or has grown tired. Thousands of worshipers have benefited from the work of my good friend, Vikki Cook, who completely rewrote the melody to the hymn I quoted above in order to make it more accessible. (The song can be found on Sovereign Grace Music's *Depth of Mercy, Upward, and Songs for the Cross Centered Life* CDs or on Kingsway Music's *Beautiful Saviour* CD. Several other rewritten hymns appear on recent releases from Sovereign Grace Music.)

Play it again, Sam

A more enduring solution to the challenges of playing hymns is to seek to grow in our craft. Why let your lack of ability keep you from enjoying rich expressions of worship?

Can't change chords quickly enough? Practice! Alright, maybe I'm being Captain Obvious again. But it's so easy to become content with a certain level of musical ability, especially if God has used our musical gifts in the past. "Our reasons for making music must not knowingly exclude high standards. We cannot afford to rest with mediocrity because it is effective."⁵ So keep learning about music, and keep practicing. Many excellent resources for musicians can be found on the Internet or at your local music store.

⁵ Harold Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, p 118

One final comment. If you enjoy hymns because of their grandeur, their well-crafted and varied melodies, and their thoughtful harmonic progressions, wonderful! But let your appreciation and worship be directed to the God who inspired them, and not the artistic qualities you see in them. Also, learn to find beauty in simple melodies and simple songs. Otherwise we might be deceiving ourselves into thinking that God is more interested in our art than our heart.

Hymns: A Sentimental Journey?

We've discussed the challenges related to singing and playing hymns. Now, I'll begin to address the issue of sentimentality.

Some people favor hymns primarily because they grew up with them. Hymns sung in childhood bring back fond memories of youth camp, Sunday school classes, or family worship times. Familiar words and lilting melodies bring comfort and reassurance in the midst of changing times. For many, God seems much closer when they sing a well-loved hymn.

Critics of hymns, however, will point out that the archaic language and musical style of hymns no longer communicate effectively to younger generations, and therefore can be a hindrance to evangelism.

Some churches, trying to accommodate both sides, have established two separate services, usually labeled traditional and contemporary. In a future column, I'll present some reasons why I don't think that's the best solution. For now, let's address the issue of sentimentality.

Webster's Dictionary defines a sentimental person as one who is "marked or governed by feeling." The key word in that definition is "governed." I see at least three problems with using sentimental attachment as a basis for choosing songs for worship:

1. Sentimentality can obscure or sacrifice truth for the sake of personal preferences.

There are many hymns with rich theological texts that aid us in our worship of God. Regrettably, there are others that emphasize poetic imagery and musical devices more than biblical content. Such hymns (including many that have been written in the past 150 years) seem primarily designed to affect the worshiper's emotions. When our worship diet consists primarily of hymns of this sort, we are in danger of developing a simplistic, unbiblical view of God.

2. Sentimentality distorts the meaning of worship.

Harold Best writes, “Being emotionally moved by music is not the same as being spiritually or morally shaped by it...Being moved by music is secondary to worshipping God. The Spirit is always to be free to direct our worship, whether the music moves us or not.”⁶ Worship has to do with my wholehearted response to the God of Scripture, not the way a particular song makes me feel!

3. Sentimentality exalts my preferences over those of others.

A few years ago, a member of our congregation struggled when we introduced Isaac Watts’ “Arise, My Soul, Arise,” set to a new melody by Twila Paris. “Do you realize that’s not how Watts wrote it?” he emailed.

He was right. That wasn’t how Watts wrote it. In fact, Watts didn’t write the melody at all! Most of the hymns from the eighteenth century were originally composed without a melody. Churches sang them to different tunes until eventually one surfaced as being the most preferable. The melody that we consider “the original” might have been written 50 years after the lyrics! Although that practice changed significantly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the principle remains the same: melodies that may seem “sacred” to us are often merely our preference. We must not allow our sentimental attachment to certain hymns to keep us from finding ways to communicate the unchanging truth of God’s glory and gospel to a younger generation.

Does this mean that older hymns shouldn’t be used in a church that seeks to attract and affect unbelievers? Not necessarily. We’ll explore that topic further, where I’ll give three reasons why wisdom might lead us to use those hymns that are so well loved by the senior saints in our midst.

Hymns: A Sentimental Journey (Part 2)

We discussed how hymns are sometimes used in worship merely for sentimental reasons—and why that approach is wrong. Does this mean hymns have no place in a church seeking to attract and reach unbelievers? Let’s see...

I recently received this insightful email from someone who reads *Worship Matters*:

I think the problem with [the whole question of hymns v. praise choruses] is that people in each camp tend to think the other group is not worshipping if they don’t sing their particular style. While I prefer hymns, I do not think they are a

⁶ Harold Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith*, pp 151–152

prerequisite for worship. What happens the week before the worship service has more to do with worship on Sunday than the style of music in the service. If we are not right with God we cannot worship him whatever we may do in the "service."

Did you catch that last sentence? In other words, if church members are in conflict with one another over musical style, it's unlikely God is going to be honored in the way he desires. God uses more than musical style to draw people. He uses our lives, attitudes, and relationships, too!

To sing worship music from more than one generation is, in part, to communicate our larger identity as the people of God. We hail from many backgrounds, families, races, and tastes, but now we are joined together through the blood of Jesus Christ, who has reconciled us to the Father *and* each other. Christian faith is not about being a certain age or liking certain music or living in a particular time and place. Christians are part of a magnificent legacy that began unfolding thousands of years ago, and will continue throughout eternity. To narrow our vision exclusively to a small, culture-bound slice of that history is to embrace a kind of spiritual poverty.

Author Marva Dawn comments,

Not only is the idea of taste as an entry point [into the church] wrong biblically, but also it is extremely destructive of genuine community, fosters an independent view of the local congregation, and reduces worship simply to a matter of preferences instead of an entering into God's presence in the company of the church throughout space and time.⁷

Building on those thoughts, here are three reasons for using hymns in congregational worship.

1. To serve older Christians.

Familiar hymns can enable more mature saints to worship God in spirit and truth. It gives them opportunities to worship without struggling through music and words they have difficulty understanding or relating to.

2. To help Christians and non-Christians grow in their perspective.

All Christians, and certainly unbelievers as well, need to know that God is bigger than their current understanding of him. Wise leaders will use words, phrases, and images from older hymns as jumping-off points for further explanation or discussion. For

⁷ *Reformation and Revival*, Vol 9, No 2, p 71

example, addressing God in seventeenth-century English (Thee, Thou, etc.), while initially foreign, can also communicate God's transcendence and "otherness."

3. To promote an attitude of honor and deference.

In a true community, everyone makes sacrifices. No one's preferences are met *all* the time. God's Word commands us to "accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Ro 15:7). Jesus taught that in laying down our lives for the gospel, we find true life. Yielding our preferences is a gateway to the joy of loving others like ourselves. So, including hymns in an otherwise "contemporary" worship service communicates the importance of honoring others, and expresses a culture of respect and appreciation that few people experience outside the church.

These issues are not always easy to work through in the context of a local church with a specific history (and perhaps some unresolved offenses). But God *will* be glorified in his Church. He is eager to produce a people who "with one heart and mouth [will] glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ro 15:6).

Hymns: Silencing the Spirit?

Several years ago, a group of college students composed a list of reasons why they did not support the use of hymns in congregational worship. They sincerely contended that hymns do not contribute to praise and worship, and that praise choruses lend themselves more easily to flowing in the Spirit.

While not a phrase found in Scripture, "flowing in the Spirit" is a good thing. It can be best understood as acting under the influence and leading of the Holy Spirit as we worship God. Jesus said the Father seeks those who "worship...in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23). Paul adds that we are those who "worship by the Spirit of God" (Php 3:3). "Flowing in the Spirit" is shorthand for refusing to let our own habits, ideas, or actions obscure or detract from what the Holy Spirit wants to do.

But what does the Spirit want to do? For many, "flowing in the Spirit" has come to mean an emotionally responsive experience characterized by crying, joy, prophetic words, times of waiting, etc. All of these can be signs that God's Spirit is flowing in us and through us.

But the work of the Spirit is more than a subjective event. Before leaving his disciples, Jesus told them, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (Jn 16:12-13). Note that God's Spirit is sent, not to guide us into all experiences and feelings, but into all truth.

Three times in his Gospel, and once in his letters, John refers to the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth.

This doesn't mean God is against experiences and emotions. He's simply concerned that we keep things in their proper order. Passionate, God-directed emotions follow naturally when our minds have grasped some aspect of God's truth. The activity of God's Spirit is both initiated and encouraged by our feeding on God's Word. As pastor and author John Piper has said, the Spirit enables us to "think truly so that we might feel duly." Theologically rich hymns can be an excellent way to accomplish this.

Whether the college students I mentioned earlier were aware of it or not, we can unintentionally adopt an arrogant attitude when we think that previous generations didn't understand the working of the Holy Spirit like we do today. May God keep us from the narrow-minded view that what God is doing in our lifetime is more important or more significant than what he has done in the past. We will always be standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, and together we are being built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, who is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

Praise Choruses and Hymns: In Conclusion

We've reached the end of our series on the relative merits and usefulness of praise choruses and hymns in corporate worship. Certainly much more could be said on the subject, but I think we've covered some of the basic concerns. Now, I'd like to make a few summarizing comments and recommend some of the resources I've found helpful.

Our discussions of corporate worship should never begin with the style of music we use. Musical styles should be chosen to serve the broader purpose of worship—to see God exalted in the hearts of his people as they proclaim his greatness and encounter his presence. Both praise choruses and hymns can be used effectively to that end.

An awareness of the vast diversity of cultures on the earth should help us appreciate the fact that God is much bigger than any one musical style or preference. What works well in my town doesn't translate well to the aboriginal tribes in Australia. We need to fiercely guard our hearts from the parochial view that insists our particular brand of music is best for worshiping God.

Allowing for diversity, however, doesn't negate the need for wise leadership. What are the particular needs of a congregation? What is its history? How much has it been influenced by contemporary culture? Which are the *best* hymns and praise choruses?

Answering these questions will help pastors and worship leaders decide how to lovingly broaden their congregation's exposure to different musical expressions in worship. Again, this is not for the purpose of "being all things to all men," but rather to give God the glory he alone deserves.

Finally, as worshipers of God, both individually and corporately, it is our joyful duty to search out—and in some cases, to write—songs that will enable us to worship God more effectively in spirit and in truth. May we never feel that our present relationship with God is enough!

I've found the following resources helpful, both in providing new songs and in helping me think more clearly in this area. These are hardly exhaustive, but can help get you started.

Books

- *Music through the Eyes of Faith* (HarperCollins, 1993)
I've quoted from this book throughout this series, and continue to find it the most insightful book on the purpose and meaning of music. The author, Harold Best, is former dean of music at Wheaton College.
- *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (P&R, 1997)
In this book, author John Frame makes a winsome, biblical case for the use of contemporary music in worship. While some of the examples of contemporary worship songs he gives are a little dated, the book is one-of-a-kind in addressing this topic.

Music

- *Wholehearted Hymns*
This is available on two CDs or one songbook from www.wholeheartedworship.com. The book contains both piano and guitar transcriptions, with simplified guitar charts. It is an excellent resource for introducing hymns into your church.
- *Worship Together*
Probably known most through their web site (www.worshiptogether.com), Worship Together also produces a number of contemporary worship CDs. I especially appreciate the contributions of Matt Redman and the Stoneleigh band, both from the UK. If you're looking for solid, contemporary worship songs, this is a great place to start.

- **Sovereign Grace Ministries**
I couldn't finish out without recommending the ministry I'm involved with. We regularly produce CDs of new worship songs and updated hymns. Information can be obtained at www.SovereignGraceMinistries.org.