

What a Teenager Thinks of the Battle of Hymns within the Church

The music we sing in church remains a controversial topic in many congregations across America. What makes a good hymn? Some churches argue that contemporary music is just as good, if not better, than those old hymns contained within those sterile hymnbooks. But what standard should a hymn be placed under? Are all hymns as good as the next?

The Christian church should desire hymns that are solid, serious, and substantive. The purpose of hymns is to impart doctrine and admonish Christian believers. The hymns, therefore, should incline the heart towards contrition and encourage the downtrodden by offering the truth and assurance found in Holy Scripture. Modern hymns very often fail in this area, instead wandering into subjectivism, encouraging emotions based on fluff, and losing their north star by failing to mention Jesus Christ.

I offer here five criteria for hymns. Criteria 1) Good hymns should be solid, serious, and substantive. Criteria 2) Good hymns should teach and admonish. Criteria 3) Good hymns are mature and not feminized. Criteria 4) Good hymns need appropriate melodies. Criteria 5) Good hymns are not acceptable to unbelievers. Let's examine each of these one at a time.

Criteria 1. Good hymns should be serious, solid, and substantive. Why? Hymns are not ditties, nor are they nursery rhymes. They are also not the perverse popular songs you hear on the radio. They are the songs of the Church. When someone enters a church, they step into the presence of God Almighty. Therefore, it may be helpful to ask, "Would I sing this in church in front of an earthly king, like the King of England?" And if the hymn text would not be appropriate to sing in the presence of an earthly king, how much more inappropriate would it be to sing it in the presence of God! Second, hymns must be solid in doctrine, as they are the hymns of the church, and therefore, their proclamation or lyrics are viewed as truthful. Singing hymns that lack a firm foundation risks spreading heresy and harming faith instead of nurturing faith based on truth. Third, hymns should also be substantive in theology, since we are admonished in Hebrews to "leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity."

The following hymns are used to illustrate this first criterion. The first hymn is *The Day is Surely Drawing Near* by Bartholomäus Ringwaldt, who lived in the 16th century.

"The day is surely drawing near
When Jesus, God's anointed,
In all His power shall appear
As judge whom God appointed.
Then fright shall banish idle mirth,
And flames on flames shall ravage earth
As Scripture long has warned us."

The second hymn is *How He Loves* by David Crowder, released by Crowder in 2009.

"He is jealous for me,
Loves like a hurricane, I am a tree,
Bending beneath the weight of his wind and mercy,
When all of a sudden,
I am unaware of these afflictions eclipsed by glory,
And I realize just how beautiful You are,
And how great your affections are for me.
Chorus:
And oh, how He loves us so,

Oh how He loves us,
How He loves us all
Yeah, He loves us,
Whoa, how He loves us
Whoa, how He loves us
Yeah, He loves us..."

Let us run both these hymns through our first criterion. The initial hymn meets all the previous standards. It is theologically solid: Jesus *shall* return to judge both the quick and the dead, fright *will* banish idle mirth at the last trumpet blast, and the earth *will* be destroyed. It is also obviously serious - it would be ridiculous to point out that this is no laughing matter. Lastly, it is substantive. Throughout this hymn, Ringwaldt is teaching us about many weighty theological issues: the reality of the Last Day, Law and Gospel, baptism, *sola gratia*, Jesus as intercessor, the existence of hell and heaven, and the reality that people will be placed in one or the other for all eternity. All this in only seven lines!

But what about the second hymn? Simply put, it fails miserably. It is certainly not doctrinally sound; it is like theological Jell-O that cannot be pinned down if one tried. "I'm loved like a *hurricane*?" Is that the best analogy? And who is this mysterious "He" the song keeps mentioning? Allah, Joseph Smith, Buddha, Muhammad, Brahma, the little-green-god-that-eats-toasted-cheese-sandwiches, or Jesus? And top that off with the fact that this hymn is not serious. It is gimmicky and all about me and *my* relationship with Jesus, not about Jesus and what He has done for me. This hymn is a subjective, emotional experience with no biblical basis.

Indeed, you do not find hard Law-and-Gospel here. There is no "I am a poor, miserable sinner condemned to hell, and yet God saw me in my wretched state and planned for my salvation. There is no Jesus who came for me, lived for me, suffered for me, died for me, and rose for me. *That* would be too uncomfortable. And people prefer to provide what itching ears want to hear, to paraphrase the Apostle Paul.

Now, to move on to the third part: the song's substantiality. There is nothing substantial in the lyrics, "I am a tree, bending beneath the weight of his wind and mercy." What does the author possibly mean? This whole hymn is full of vague, inadequate statements. "How he loves us" is not the Gospel, although this hymn presents it as such. It is part of it ("for God so loved the world") but not all of it ("that he gave his only begotten Son" ...).

What does it mean by "how great your affections are for me"? I am reminded of Wolfgang Pauli, who wrote in the margin of a colleague's paper, "This isn't right. This isn't even wrong!" And also, of Dr. Montgomery, who loved the old adage, "This theology, if converted into hair, would not make a wig for a grape!" If a hymn cannot bother to be solid, serious, and substantive for use in the presence of God, we certainly do not have any business playing it in the Church.

Criteria 2. Hymns should teach and admonish. The basis for this is from St. Paul in Colossians 3:16, where he writes, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing each other in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." This passage illuminates the purpose of hymns to teach and admonish. At first glance, this may seem like an overlap of the first point, but it is different because this dives deeper and asks whether the hymn *does* anything. For example, in the hymn *The Day is Surely Drawing Near*, it is clear that we are being taught and admonished. We are learning about the end times, admonished with the law, and reminded that were it not for the grace of God, we would go to the eternal flames.

How He Loves, however, is quite different. It does not teach us anything (except what the author, David Crowder, feels), and it does not admonish us. According to Crowder, I am not miserable, I am not a sinner, and I do not need grace (he mentions mercy but never defines it or explains why I need it). In short, I am perfectly fine in that hymn, and the cross is nowhere in sight. This hymn, and those like it, are somehow attractive, however. I am reminded of what Jaroslav Vajda said in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice* "Good poetry is ignored and even scorned by the general public, popular taste runs toward the banal and shallow." For whatever reason, people naturally prefer the shallow and banal.

Criteria 3. Hymns should be adult and not feminized. According to E. Margaret Clarkson, who wrote seventeen books and numerous articles, one of which is an article in a 1980 publication of Christianity Today titled "What Makes a Hymn 'Good'?", "Good hymns are adult in word and tone. They do not insult our intelligence by requiring us to sing immortal truths in childish or unsuitable modes of expression." Adult truths should be expressed in an adult fashion, childish truths in childish fashion. This is not the same as being *child-like in faith*, as Jesus instructs us to be in Matthew 18:3. It is true that we are to be humble, completely trusting, and confident in our Heavenly Father's care, but the Scripture admonishes us to grow in our faith, and not to be content with spiritual immaturity.

Hymns should also not be feminized. What does this mean? Hymns should not be emotionally manipulative. They should not be based on our emotions, but on facts, because we have a faith founded on fact. If we do not base our faith on solid fact, we end up like the Mormons with a special "burning in the bosom," which is hardly the basis on which one wants to rest one's eternal salvation. Hymns, if they are based on the *facts* of the Bible, may evoke emotions, but they are not resting on emotional manipulation. Hymns *will*, as a byproduct of the marriage between solid lyrics and beautiful melody, reflect what we experience as we walk with Jesus in this world: joy and anticipation, sadness and distress. Hymns also, however, need to reflect self-control over those emotions.

The issue of feminized, childish hymns also ties into *lex orandi, lex credendi*. What we sing in church is influenced by our theology, and vice versa. If our hymnody is childish and feminized, then our theology is bound to be, in one way or another, childish and feminized.

Someone may argue that the hymns we sing have little impact ultimately on what we believe. But as a 16-century Jesuit priest once said of Martin Luther, "He has damned more souls with his hymns than with all his sermons." It also "sings the faith into people's hearts," as Cantor Phillip Magness so aptly put it. So let us not sing a childish, feminized faith into people's hearts.

Criteria 4. Hymns should have an appropriate tune. There is more to hymns than simply having a piano playing and a guitar strumming a gazillion refrains. God Himself is present there before us at the altar, giving us His gifts of Word and Sacrament. If, as stated earlier, we would not play that song in front of the Queen, we should not play it in front of God. But some might object that the Bible does not say anything about the tunes we use, and that this is adiaphora. It is true that the Bible does not say, "Thou shalt play such-and-such every Sunday except for special occasions, and certain tunes are forbidden." But, as Craig Parton has pointed out in an interview on a related issue, "The Bible does not say we should use a nice offering plate either, so maybe we should just pass around a cardboard box for offerings." The Bible does not say we must use a chalice to pass around Holy Communion, so how about we use a Styrofoam cup? Music is also part of the service, just as these things are, and it has its own connotations. Our minds connect one type of music to one thing, and another type of music to something else. The connotations of our self-centered, sexually charged, emotionally manipulative contemporary music should be avoided in the Divine Service.

Criteria 5. Good hymns are not acceptable to unbelievers. Hymns that an unbeliever could listen to and say, "Sure, I agree with that," are bad hymns. Theology that Christians and unbelievers can agree

on is generally so broad that it is, in fact, theologically void. *Christ* makes the *Christian*, so Christians must be cross-focused and Christ-centered, or they will end up being something entirely other than *Christian*.

The factual crucifixion and resurrection offend every other religion. Just think of the militant atheists like Dawkins and Hitchens, Muslim “apologists,” Mormon missionaries, and the ardent evolutionists out there. They despise not your feelings but your Jesus. To have a hymn be Christian, then, the hymn must have Christ in it. Consider *The Day is Surely Drawing Near*. Any religion apart from Christianity would be offended by some part of the hymn. But with *How He Loves*, there is no mention of anything resembling orthodox Christianity. Jesus is nowhere in sight. A Mormon would be fine with this hymn. After all, their “god” had enough mercy to send Joseph Smith to the earth to show them the “true way.” A hymn, if it is to be within the church and of lasting value, must not be agreeable to unbelievers.

If we are concerned about solid doctrine in books and sermons, then we should be equally concerned with solid doctrine in hymns. Hymns are not just the fluff of the liturgy. They fight, they teach, and they admonish. So we need to be careful about our hymns. These criteria are certainly not the only criteria for hymns, but they offer some guidance for what we may choose to include in our worship services.

Some people believe that contemporary music attracts the youth and unbelievers. This is untrue. An AEI (American Enterprise Institute) report says that “And to the extent liturgical style has any effect [on declining Church membership in the LCMS], highly liturgical churches appear to be experiencing slightly faster growth (or, more typically, slower decline) than are less liturgical churches... the evidence that changing musical style will lead to church growth is *extremely weak*” (emphasis added). If changing the music style does not attract the youth and the unbeliever, then why should we change from the historic hymnody to contemporary styles, which do not have any substance at all? And not only this, but why should the unbeliever (or the youth) go to LCMS churches that change their hymnody? I know for a fact that I can find better “church lite” music at a Calvary Chapel or an evangelical church down the street. Lutherans have glorious gifts in the Divine Service that do not even compare with those of other churches. If we want to actually attract people, give them the gift unique to us as Lutherans, of being able to hear the Divine Service with the historic hymnody. *That* is what is attractive.

Hymns are an essential part of the Divine Service, and the hymns we sing need to be held to some standard as Christians. This is not a complete guide to good hymnody, nor does it pretend to be one, but it offers a few guidelines so that we may better proclaim what we believe, teach, and confess. I will end this article with a quote from John Julian in the fourth line of his hymn *O God of God, O Light of Light*:

“Then raise to Christ a mighty song,
And shout His name, His mercies tell!
Sing, heav’nly host, your praise prolong,
And all on earth, your anthem swell!
All hail, O Lamb for sinners slain!
Forever let the song ascend!
Worthy the lamb, enthroned to reign,
All glory, pow’r! Amen, amen.”