

Reflecting on Hymns

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by Ron Comoglio

As the pastor who oversees the Music and Performing Arts Ministry (or MAPAM) at OBC, I have the unique privilege of hearing a lot of opinions—as well as informed input—on the state of music in our church. Song selection, styles, and themes are just a few of the common “suggestions” I receive. And on more than one occasion the subject of hymns comes to the forefront.

As a team, it is our goal to always sing at least one hymn in our Sunday morning service. But that raises the question, “What exactly is a hymn?” How do we distinguish a hymn from a praise chorus? Is it the instrumentation? Does an organ or piano equal a hymn? Do drums and electric guitars disqualify it from being a hymn? Or is there something more to the distinction?

I have to confess some of these questions I could not answer, either, but then, within the space of one week I had the opportunity to listen to a couple of modern hymn writers and a modern hymn-adapter.

First, several of us attended a seminar given by [Keith Getty](#) (author of “In Christ Alone” and [hundreds of other songs](#)) and hosted by Capitol Hill Baptist, whose musical director, Matt Merker, also writes [hymns](#). In that time we sang a few selections by both gentlemen and I gleaned some meaningful answers for reflection. Then, on the following weekend OBC hosted Matthew Smith in concert. Smith is an artist in the movement known as [Indelible Grace](#), a community of artists who “reimagine” centuries-old hymn texts into modern takes. He also shared some thoughts with us in a seminar setting.

Lyrical Lessons Learned

So what did I learn? Keith, who hails from Northern Ireland, noted that the value in any song is what it brings to our life experiences, stating a hymn is a song marked by “rich truths, put in a new, unique way and set to a beautiful melody.” Some may enjoy love songs because they have a romantic yearning; others may gravitate to tragedies. But we as people marked out by one Faith gravitate to that which is true and beautiful about Jesus and the Gospel. Matthew remarked that we are drawn by beautiful words that grip our emotions without being manipulative. The Gospel does that with truth and when expressed well by artistic writers our appreciation is enhanced.

We don’t become better Christians by trying harder. Rather it is the power of the Word, given by the Spirit through willing servants of God which increases our faith. With hymns our faith is increased as our imagination is engaged. When we “Turn our eyes upon Jesus / Look full in His wonderful face / And the things of earth will grow strangely dim / in the light of His glory and grace” we are drawn into deeper communion with Him. And when we do that corporately we are bound together in worship and community.

Still, perhaps one of the most powerful thoughts on this subject is how singing the old hymns connects us to past generations of believers. For example, we know from the Bible that many songs were written by the likes of Moses, Miriam, and David. In Exodus 15 and the Psalms, they told God's story as a narrative to pass down (see Psalm 78:1–8). A sobering observation is that the modern church, in its quest for cultural relevance, as Keith stated, "may be the first generation in Judeo-Christian history that does not sing a Psalm every Sunday." By not singing Scripture we do ourselves a disservice and if our music does not tell the Gospel story we miss an opportunity to share theology in a memorable way.

Lastly, hymns often tend to finish with a charge to go, to evangelize, to conduct our mission on earth. When done rightly, hymns draw our attention vertically to the triune God. They proclaim the gospel one to another. And they propel us to go into the world with a song in our heart.

Let Us Sing and Worship the Lord Together

By singing congregationally we encourage each other toward this threefold purpose—vertical worship, horizontal encouragement, evangelistic mission. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:19, let us all come together every Sunday morning, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" ensuring that whatever style greets us, our intent is to glorify God with every note.