

The Hole In Our Praise (and Lamentation) and Worship

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by David Schrock

On my shelf, I have a *Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship*. It was published in 1997, foreworded by Jack Hayford (Pastor of The Church on the Way), and intended to provide "tools for 'blended worship'" (from the Preface). Consisting of 865 selections, it combines new songs and old hymns, Scripture readings, and even various calls to worship.

Yet, what is strikingly absent are songs or Scriptures devoted to lament or confession. Instead, *The Celebration Hymnal* celebrates all that the triune God has done. And its opening section of "Songs and hymns for worship" are categorized under nine headings:

- Praise the Lord
- Exalt the Lord
- Bless the Lord
- Adore the Lord
- Glorify the Lord
- Magnify the Lord
- Worship the Lord
- Give Thanks to the Lord
- The Family at Worship

These stunningly positive categories of song are inter-leafed with Scripture readings to make up the first 201 selections. Likewise, under the category titled "Walking with God," we find 12 categories:

- Faith and Hope
- Aspiration and Consecration
- Assurance and Trust
- Commitment and Obedience
- Comfort and Encouragement
- Prayer and Devotion
- Purity and Holiness
- Stewardship and Service
- Guidance and Care
- Provision and Deliverance
- Spiritual Conflict and Victory
- Peace and Joy

These sections compose more than 200 songs and Scriptures (526–752), and provide a well-rounded corpus of songs dedicated to different areas of faith, hope, love, and holiness. Yet, what remains absent is any mention of lamentation, sorrow, or pain, as well as any explicit mention of sin and confession.

Songs of "repentance and forgiveness" find four spaces under the category "New Life in Christ." But these four songs are overshadowed by the ten songs of "invitation and acceptance" and eleven songs of "witness and and praise" in the same category.

To be fair, these themes will be addressed in various songs throughout the hymnal. I confess, I haven't read the whole book. But what I am interested in does not require a full reading but a look at the organization which the publishers supplied.

It is instructive that lamentation and confession did not make it into the arrangement of *The Celebration Hymnal*. While lamentation is a key biblical theme in the Psalms, only two Psalms of Lament are even cited in *The Celebration Hymnal*. And tellingly, those selections are from the vows of praise. Nothing comes close to the cries of dereliction or the screams for salvation that are found in Psalm 13, 22, 88, or 89.

The Imbalance of our Age: Praise (and Lamentation?) and Worship

If I am honest about these observations, [I must admit that someone else had to show me the imbalance of our praise and worship](#). Growing up listening to the "positive hits" of Christian Radio and learning guitar to play songs from Vineyard, Passion, and Third Day, my theological diet matched the content of *The Celebration Hymnal*.

I don't blame the Christians who put this hymnal and other modern song selections together. I am one of them. Yet, as the entertainment impulses of my teen spirit have been replaced by the joys and pains of adult life, I realize how desperately I need confession and lamentation.

Many years ago, a good friend gave me a copy of *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*. Here's what he wrote on the title page,

One thing I've experienced recently and realized is that there are moments---even seasons---in life where we lack the vocabulary or clear mental capacity to express what we are feeling in the innermost reaches of our being.

Time and again the prayers in this volume have taken me to the throne of grace, broken me, and given me a satisfying expression of contrition, confession, and worship. My hope is that the Lord will allow you to enjoy sweet moments of intimacy with him in the heartfelt expressions of these pages.

Indeed, through the years this little book has taught me more about prayer than anything outside the Bible. And what it has taught me again and again is that lamentation and longing, confession and contrition are the language of prayer. In striking contrast to *The Celebration Hymnal*, *The Valley of Vision* includes 30 prayers of "penitence and deprecation."

And still, while this book has taught me much about my sin and need to repent, I struggle to lament, confess, and celebrate the sweetness of God's mercies which only come after our hearts have made confession and cried for mercy. Why is that? There are at least two reasons.

Reason 1: I am a sinner whose self-sufficiency runs deep in my soul. I do not lament because I mask my sorrow with other activities and worldly comforts. I do not confess because I do not see how wretched I am.

Reason 2: I have never witnessed lamentation and confession as a regular part of corporate worship. And as a pastor, I have never really led the churches I have served in this way either.

As I mentioned before, someone else had to show me that absence of lamentation and confession for me to see my need. To that end I credit Carl Trueman and his stunning article, ["What Can Miserable Christians Sing?"](#) In truth, this is the glaring weakness in non-liturgical services. For all that low church evangelicals like to pride ourselves that our worship is free and spontaneous, not rote and repetitive, there is something we can learn from our liturgical brethren.

Prayers of confession and lament are essential elements of the liturgical church. And while these weekly repetitions can become perfunctory or even phony, they do recall our endless need of forgiveness and the ongoing sorrow that comes from living in a fallen world. Psalm 51, a precious individual confession, tells us, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (v. 17).

This is a word that American Christians steeped in the [soft prosperity gospel](#) need to hear---again, and again, and again! Contrition (= sorrow of heart) is not to be avoided at all costs; it is to be sought. Confession is not something growing disciples of Christ will do when forced by others; it is something that should come more free and regular with every passing year. And lamentation is something---it may be the only thing---that will keep us sane in a world of childhood drownings and unjust shootings.

Worship That Weeps and Waits

Truly, Christians have all we need to weep and to weep with those who are weeping (12:15), but only if we give ourselves to the whole counsel of Scripture. The Psalms are filled with words and expressions of sorrow, desperation, *and* faith. There are ancient hymns, slave spirituals, and modern laments that captures the dark parts of life. As [Matt Merker has recently said](#), ["The minor key is a gift from God."](#)

Sadly many turn away from this gift when they only attend to music and messages that talk about the sunny sides of life. We do not put into practice James 4:9, "Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom." And as a result, we are ill-equipped to seek God and flee all the lies of the devil (which is what comes in James 4:8).

We do not actively seek contrition or know how to express lamentation. Again, this point could be entirely autobiographical. Carried along by the happiness cult of our day, we come to church looking to paint over life's disappointments and get a quick hit of spiritual life before racing back into the world. Yet, like Job's friends---before they started talking---we need to learn also how to rend our clothes, sit in the dust, and wait upon the Lord.

This must sound crazy to those on whom the sun only shines. But to those who have tasted and seen the miseries of life, there yet remains a path forward. It may not look like your best life now. Frankly, it may look horrible now. But hereafter, for those who have died and risen with Christ there is an eternal hope of glory. And this is where confession and lamentation become absolutely vital for individual Christian and the worshiping church.

Becoming a Church That Laments, Confesses, and Celebrates

Today, the modern church service is built to minister to happy people. The unspoken rule is that counseling ministries exist for the miserable. How sad this is!

The Word of God, on which the church is built, is not just for the happy but also for the contrite. When we gather for worship, we must sing and pray and speak with an awareness that for some, life feels as though it is no longer worth living. We must make space in our services of worship for sorrow, prayers that touch the bottom of life, and songs that reach into the depths and make a pathway of gospel hope to heights of heaven.

This does not mean our services are all gloom and doom. We have every reason to rejoice, but such celebration comes on the other side of the grave. Our gospel is that God raises the dead to life, which means we are not afraid of talking about death or ministering to those who feel its ongoing sting. For truly, biblical worship is not a pep rally for the religious; it is---or it should be---a place where the most miserable in life can place their lives on the altar of God and offer a sacrifice of praise.

Indeed, every Lord's Day the Spirit assembles a people composed of various ages, ethnicities, and life conditions. For some, praise will be easy, for others it will be hard. And as we seek to be biblical in all we do during our gathered assembly, we need to make sure we are not leaving a hole in our worship. For truly, such a hole in worship will have a deep impact on all our hearts and on many in our assembly.

To that end let us gather this Sunday seeking to confess our sin, lament our sorrows, praise our God, and cling to Christ in faith. For truly, the triune God is worth all of our worship---whether that looks like lament or celebration.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds