

Engaging The Emerging Church With Hymns

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I. What Do We Mean By A Postmodern World Anyway? **Postmodernism is easier to describe than to define!** *Postmodernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is!* (Ernest Gellner)

II. Engaging Means More Than Just Offering Critiques

- **I think of the postmodern condition as an opportunity for the Church to go back to the Bible and read it again to see if (in our modern blinders) we missed some things.** Often the answer I get is, “Yes we have!”
- **We can learn from the Emerging Church movement.** They are raising important questions and questioning assumptions that need to be challenged. While I would not agree with all of their answers, ideas, or practices, I find I often resonate with their rage at the modernist seeker churches.
- **The Emerging Church can learn from the hymn tradition as well.** I find that the hymn tradition resonates with many of the concerns of the Emerging Church. Some of the things that they think were missing in the modern church actually are there in the hymn tradition: the concern for holistic experience that overcomes the modern dualism of head and heart, a healthy ecumenicism, the representation of both men and women, the inclusion of laity and clergy, the wrestling with mystery, the importance of bringing all of life – including suffering – to the Lord in worship etc. But the Emerging Church can learn from the hymn tradition and be challenged by things that are overlooked or under-appreciated by the many in the Emerging Church.

III. Engaging Some Particular Areas Of (Mostly Mutual) Concern

1. Worship is formative – Lex Orandi Lex Credendi (The law of prayer is the law of belief.) *And we, who with unveiled faces all gaze upon the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit”* 2Corinthians 3:18 I find that the emerging church takes this more seriously than the seeker churches did. What we sing, and see, and do, really matters. (See John Witvliet’s chapter “How Common Worship Forms Us For Our Encounter With Death” in “Worship Seeking Understanding”.) I would offer a couple related thoughts to encourage deeper wrestling with this idea, particularly the lack of explicit connection to Jesus in some of the practices of some of the emerging churches:

- **The expulsive power of a new affection!** Worship shapes and molds us! Our hearts are drawn from other “treasures” as our eyes are opened to see Jesus for who He really is. Thomas Chalmers (19th century Scottish Presbyterian) called this the “expulsive power of a new affection.” By that phrase he means that you never really get over one love until a new one comes along. In worship we seek to have Jesus become more beautiful and believable to us. (Bill Lane’s wonderful phrase!) See “Thou Lovely Source Of True Delight” by Anne Steele (18th century), “*Thou lovely Source of true delight, Whom I unseen adore. Unveil Thy beauties to my heart, That I might love Thee more!*”
- **Worship restores our sanity!** We seek to have God restore our sanity so that we can live in line with the truth of the gospel rather than in accordance with the fantasy world in which we must earn God’s favor and manipulate Him to do whatever we want. Our basic problem as believers is that of idolatry, we too often worship a “god” who is so much less than the God of the Bible. But the gospel heals us of our idolatry by showing us that we already have what we are trying to get from our idols. Whether it be power or security or meaning, we already have it in Jesus. When we see this, and it connects to our hearts, we are transformed!
- **We need to understand church in a bigger way.** I am concerned that some emerging church leaders are still being controlled by modernism in that it what they are reacting to. But I have hope that as leaders mature there will be an ability to recover some babies they have thrown out with the bathwater. For example, some want friendship and feelings in intimacy to define what church is, some want commitment (the will exercised) to define it [this all from the Gibbs & Bolger chapter on community], but we need church that is holistic. Hymns can help bring together the intellect, heart, and will.

2. We don’t need to water things down! **The emerging church is very serious about living a life following Jesus.** This is to be commended and I have found in my work with college students that there is an increased seriousness among many young people. I would contend that hymns can help us grow up.

- **Is there still a place for propositional truth in a postmodern world?** I agree with the emerging church that content is not all propositional, but when you look at the OT and NT, (rather than just looking at Jesus as the sole model) you find a balance of stories, poetry, and propositional logical arguments.
- **Hymns teach us the rich theology we really need!** If we have a limited view of who God is and what the gospel is, our experience of it will be limited as well. Why does Paul write the longest explanation of the gospel to people who are (literally) world-famous for their faith? (Romans 1:8) Because as Luther said, we leak the gospel and it needs to be beat into our heads over and over again!
- **Don't be afraid of content in our worship services!** Sometimes we might even have to ask someone what a line means. But who says that everything we sing must be instantly accessible? Is there no value to learning songs that take some work? Why is "Henry Lyte's "Jesus I My Cross have Taken" one of my students favorite hymns? I think it is because it offers us orientation to what the Christian life really is all about and doesn't sugar-coat things at all!
- **What about "Christian-ese" language in the hymns?** The emerging church is very concerned about welcoming the stranger – thus an issue to wrestle with is the use of Christian-ese language in the hymns. My thought is that it is ok to use *our* language but we must explain it. We don't need to water things down or we are not being honest in our seemingly welcome attitude. What are we welcoming people into? The real deal or a watered-down substitute?

3. Hymns and the importance of story

- **The postmodern world has rediscovered the importance of story.** *Stories are often wrongly regarded as a poor person's substitute for the 'real thing,' which is to be found either in some abstract truth or in statements about the 'bare facts.'* *Stories are a basic constituent of human life... The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world.* (N. T. Wright) Christianity has always been about story even though since the Enlightenment many Christians have forgotten this!
- **Hymns tell a story and walk us through the gospel.** I would say modern choruses are often more like "images" that flash on the television screen for but a moment. They do stir us, but they don't take us anywhere. (Although I will say that a skillful worship leader can string together choruses to take us from somewhere *to* somewhere. Unfortunately though because choruses are rather limited in the themes they address, the journey is more restricted and often less interesting.) In a good hymn, the writer offers their story and invites you to try it on and see if it might be your story too! (Example: Anne Steele and her hymns of trust in the midst of suffering like "*Dear Refuge Of My Weary Soul.*")
- **The emerging church rightly understands that post-moderns need to try Christianity on before they will embrace it.** I believe hymns help us try on a Christianity that is bigger than our current cultural expression.

4. Connecting with the Church of the ages

- **We need the past to see the present.** There seems to be a lot of reaction against seeker churches and practices and (of course) anything considered modern in the merging movement. But how will they achieve critical distance to critique postmodern assumptions? "On The Reading Of Old Books" (C.S. Lewis) – we need Christians from other generations and ages to see our own cultural blinders. Hymns can help with this.
- **Not all of the modern period is bad – we must beware guilt by association.** Hymns have been a mediating influence in many places – Bruce Hindmarsh's point (made in a lecture he gave at our "Indelible Grace" worship conference that I hope to soon have online) about how hymns had been integrated into everyday life during the Evangelical Revival is illustrative here, as is John Witvliet's chapter "The Spirituality Of The Psalter In Calvin's Geneva" (in his excellent book "Worship Seeking Understanding")
- **We need the diversity of the church of the ages as well.** They recognize that their desire to be small (often less than 40 people) can bring the danger of being very monochrome (pg. 111) because it is a small group of people all with the same interests. – I think drawing from other ages and cultures could help mediate against this some, and hymns can help. Dick Keyes warns against lifestyle enclaves rather than real diverse community. And Marva Dawn is rightly concerned about this as well: *"Too often the concept of community is perceived merely in terms of a feeling of coziness with God or compatibility with other members of the congregation. To reduce the importance of genuine community on the part of God's people to such emotions or sentiments is terribly destructive. ... Contemporary images of community... emphasize "sameness, closeness, warmth, and comfort. Difference, distance, conflict, and sacrifice are alien to this approach and therefore are to be avoided at all costs. Modern communities maintain a façade of unity and harmony by*

eliminating the strange and cultivating the familiar, by suppressing dissimilarity and emphasizing agreement... Those who are strange – other than we are – are either excluded or quickly made like us.” The results are homogeneous communities of retreat where persons must be protected from one another as well as from outsiders, and where reality is suppressed and denied due to fear and anxiety. Community in the Biblical sense is more open to the realities of differences, more openly gracious to all, more deliberate, an act of the will. It does not depend upon feelings of affection. In fact, sometimes (perhaps always?) God seems to put us in a community together with people whom we don’t like so that we learn the real meaning of agape – that intelligent, purposeful love directed toward another’s need which comes first from God and then flows through us to our neighbor.”

5. Hymns help overcome some of the modern dualisms that concern the emerging church

- **Hymns help us bring things together that have often been separated** like thinking and feeling, joy and sorrow, the life of trials and the life of faith.
- **Hymns give a more honest picture of what being a Christian feels like.** The emerging church rightly wants to welcome those with doubts and brokenness etc. and I think singing hymns that express that *Christians* deal with these same things can help with the welcome. Hymns can help us get past the “we’ve got it together” kind of Christian attitude that is a huge barrier for insiders and outsiders.

6. What about social justice? This is an area where we can learn a lot from the emerging church. The hymn tradition doesn’t bring out justice themes as strong as the Biblical witness. Although there are significant hymnwriters who engage in this work, it rarely if ever appears in their hymns. People like James Montgomery, William Cowper, John Newton, Francis Ridley Havergal, Fanny Crosby, Henry Lyte and others were very involved in work with the poor. Cowper and Montgomery deal with these issues in their poetry but almost never in their hymns – although there are many references to loving others which would have included the poor in their minds.

7. Concerns from living in a consumer culture

- **Discerning true needs is difficult.** There is recognition in the emerging church that marketing-focused churches actually create needs in people and then offer Jesus as the product to meet the needs. They rightly see this as very problematic because “needs must be reformed and transformed to correspond with the gospel.” (Gibbs and Bolger pg. 138) I think the hymns help us get beyond individual felt needs by modeling what a mature faith feels like and calling us to a big gospel with a big God who doesn’t exist just to meet our needs.
- **Moving from being consumers to producers (Gibbs and Bolger pg. 159) is challenging.** I have been encouraged to see the IG movement as spurred on by college students using their gifts to serve the church – rather than being a professional product. It has always been a community who has resonated with these texts and wanted to create for our own joy as well as to pique the interest of the wider church in what we have discovered and gotten really jazzed about.

8. The importance of indigenous culture.

- **Emerging churches want indigenous worship rather than imported worship. And the work we are doing with RUF and Indelible Grace is about this.** We are concerned when churches try to duplicate the sound of our cds without reflecting on who their congregation is musically. That’s why we made the RUF hymnbook in a stripped down way. We wanted to encourage people to learn from our process and to incarnate the songs in their own culture (as much as possible) We agree that musical style is a language and a culture – though we would encourage churches to be local and universal, not just local. Recently someone posted on our IG discussion board about an emerging church doing hymn rewrites in electronica style. Check it out at <http://www.soundclick.com/bands/pagemusic.cfm?bandID=105712>

Conclusion: So Why Do We Still Need Hymns In A Postmodern World?4

- **The church is not a passing fad, it is something solid and rooted.** “The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God” Leslie Newbigin
- **We need roots and wings!** “The challenge is to provide roots and wings – to bring young people into a sense of connectedness with the past that doesn’t rob them of their vision of the future.” (Gerard Kelly in “Retrofuture”) I think this quote captures what many 20-somethings have experienced through a re-discovery of hymnody and the new-found freedom to express these words of passion and devotion in music that resonates with who they are.

For further information on Indelible Grace Music please visit our website at www.igracemusic.com There you can order cds, explore the RUF Hymnbook online, download sheet music, and contribute to the ongoing conversation through our discussion board. To contact Rev. Kevin Twit email me at kevintwit@comcast.net