

The “Why?” Behind The Modern Hymn Movement

I. Introduction: Is There Really A New “Movement” Going On?

- **Lori’s testimony** “Coming from a typical praise chorus-reliant high school youth group I sort of turned my nose up as I was handed a notebook of hymns at my first visit to RUF. I didn’t understand a lot of the poetic and imagery-driven lyrics and the word hymn automatically meant boring music. But as the weeks passed, I found myself falling in love with the old hymns and the idea of putting new (and very beautiful) music to them. The words are so profound and full of truth one can’t help but be broken. Singing hymns has seriously changed my life and freed me from feeling frustrated by surface lyrics that focus on how I feel about God, which is always changing. Hymns have allowed me to center my worship on the Gospel, which in turn compels me to love the God I am prone to hate and wander from.”
- **What’s going on?** See “The Younger Evangelicals” by Robert Webber, “Bobos in Paradise” by David Brooks, and “The New Faithful” by Colleen Carroll. Webber writes, “I find three trends in the worship of the younger evangelical. They are (1) a reaction to entertainment worship, (2) a longing for an experience of God’s presence, and (3) a restoration of liturgical elements of worship.”
- **My comments are born out of noticing how hymn texts were resonating with my students and reflecting on why they were resonating so deeply with these texts.**
- **The story of how “Indelible Grace” began.** The influence of prior efforts by James Ward and Scott Roley at Christ Community Church. Collecting old books and hymnals and suing them with my students in pastoral counseling. RUF philosophy of singing. Chris Miner and other early RUF and RYM efforts (like Darwin Jordan.) Writing “Arise My Soul” at a Sonship Conference in 1995.
- **But really there are people all over the country who are journeying back to hymns.** Through the work of Indelible Grace, and the publicity that we have received, I have been privileged to be contacted by people who have been doing similar things for years, often in isolation.

II. Many Younger Evangelicals Were Ready For A Change

- **“My grandmother saved it, my mother threw it away, and now I’m buying it back!”** In many ways this captures the way younger evangelicals regard their Baby Boomer parents and church traditions.
- **There was a growing longing for experiencing God.** Postmoderns long for experience with God and the hymns are some of the richest expression of Christian experience we have – they are a real doorway into sensing the truth on our hearts rather than just “knowing” it in our heads! See Wesley’s “Arise My Soul Arise” for a great example of crying out to God to sense what we confess. “Arise my soul arise, Shake off thy guilty fears, The bleeding sacrifice, On my behalf appears.” This communion hymn is a pleading with the soul to feel what we see displayed in the sacraments!
- **Post-moderns despise a watered-down, content-less gospel and the hymns stretch us!** “People think if we make it easy on young adults, we’ll draw them in, [but reality] is the very opposite. Youth are looking for a cause, a reason to live. They need something to give their lives to. A Christianity that says, ‘Go to church on Sunday and be a good person’ – that’s no cause! Christianity doesn’t say go to church on Sunday, Jesus said, ‘He who loses his life will find it.’ In other words, ‘If you don’t love me above all things, you’re not worthy of me.’ But few people are given that message.” Rosalind Moss (quoted in “The New Faithful” by Carroll)
- **Hymns are theology on fire!** We need solid theology rather than just a constant diet of fluff and fads. Hymns are a great way to wrestle with theology because they connect theology to life and worship rather than allowing theology to just puff us up as disconnected truths that we memorize to impress our friends! J.I. Packer (in the introduction to “Knowing God”) says it is vital for us to turn what we know about God into a basis for praising God - and hymns are wonderful vehicles for this!
- **Post-moderns are suspicious of the mainstream and mass-marketed products.** There is no doubt that the fact that IG was an independent community, and not mass-marketed by some big record company as the “next wave of college worship” made it intriguing for many. It has been a word-of-mouth phenomenon

III. Exploring Some Possible Reasons Why Hymns Are Resonating With Many Today

- **Post-moderns love mystery.** My students are much more comfortable today with my explaining that there is a tension in scripture between divine sovereignty and human responsibility than they were 15 years ago.

- **The hymns love to sit in mysteries. Hymns are mini-meditations on the “paradoxes” of the gospel that drive us to worship.** Spurgeon said “*When I cannot understand anything in the Bible, it seems as though God had set a chair there for me, at which to kneel and worship; and that the mysteries are intended to be an altar of devotion.*”
- **Hymns are an opportunity to sit in a mystery like “*And can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?!*” until it begins to enter into our heart!** Another great example is Augustus Toplady’s “*O Love incomprehensible, that made Thee bleed for me. The Judge of all hath suffered death, to set His prisoner free!*” The greatest mystery is not why is there evil, but why God would suffer for His enemies?! If we ever lose our amazement at that, then we are in deep weeds!
- **Hymns engage the whole person by offering a more full emotional range of expression than most modern choruses.** Dan Allendar (author and Christian counselor) has said that if we sang more Psalms we would have a lot less need for Christian counselors. Calvin (in his intro to his commentary on the Psalms) says “*I have been accustomed to call this book... “An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul,” for there is not an emotion of which one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror... ...[and] they call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of ourselves in particular so that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and the vices with which we abound, may remain concealed.* I think a similar thing could be said for hymns because they help us work through emotions and they cover a wider range of emotions than modern choruses. This is often a surprising point because we associate hymns with a lack of emotion and modern choruses with emotional excess at times. But a careful study will reveal that the emotional range touched on by modern choruses is really rather narrow.
- **Hymns tend to engage our imagination, intellect, and will together!** Many praise choruses go directly for the emotions, but good hymns (unlike many of the melodramatic gospel songs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries), give us rich language and images that require us to think and imagine as the way to stir the passions. While praise choruses do use imagery, many times they are stuck in the same limited number of clichés that no longer engage our imaginations. The scriptures are full of diverse images and our songs should reflect this creativity too! For example, “*I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain*” (from “*O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*” by Matheson) recalls the covenant with Noah and applies it to our current situation in a rich way.
- **Hymns broaden our range of metaphors.** Modern choruses tend to be pretty limited in the metaphors used, in contrast to the rich range of metaphors we find in scripture and in the classic hymn tradition. The reason this matters is that as Peter Matheson argues in “The Imaginative World Of The Reformation”, “*When your metaphors change, your world changes with them.*” Postmodern people think more in terms of metaphor and image than linearly, and in the hymn tradition we have a great resource to engage this generation! People are getting tired of same old clichés! (See Brian McLaren’s “Open Letter To Songwriters” in Worship Leader)
- **Hymns are great art!** The arts, stories, poetry, music all combine to sneak into the heart by the backdoor – something increasingly important for our ministry to the coming generations. “*How will you reach this post-modern generation – a generation that cannot conceive of objective truth, cannot follow your linear arguments, cannot tolerate anything (including evangelism) that smacks of religious intolerance?*” (Kevin Ford)
- **Hymns remind us that the church is bigger than the people we know, or even who are alive today!** Through hymns we can connect with believers who lived centuries before us! We can have “*mystic sweet communion, with those whose rest is won.*” (from “*The Church’s One Foundation*” by Stone) When I introduce people to Anne Steele’s hymns (like “*Dear Refuge Of My Weary Soul*”) they are struck by the powerful way she dealt with her immense suffering and find that her cries can become their cries, and her tears can join with their tears, and that her faith can encourage their faith. To see that we can connect with an English lady who lived in a small village 300 years ago and feel what she felt is powerful. All of the sudden the kingdom of God grows much bigger! Thus it really helps to study the stories behind the hymns!
- **Hymns focus us on God’s promises more than upon ours!** We grow by feeding on God’s character revealed and by feasting on His promises. Many modern choruses, with their almost constant emphasis on what we want to do, (“Lord I just want to ...”) fail to teach us to rely on God’s love for us as 1John 4:16 says (“We know and rely on God’s love for us”). We need to recall Augustus Toplady’s hymn “Rock of Ages” originally titled “A living and dying prayer for the holiest believer on earth”): “*Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone, thou must save and thou alone!*” many of my students have grown weary of a Christianity that is all about what I just wanna do.

IV. Why Hymns Are So Important For The Contemporary Church

- **Hymns remind us that we can only approach God through the shed blood of Jesus (1Pet 2:5)** It is amazing how little the gospel is celebrated in some modern choruses. The idea that we only approach God as Christians through the blood of Christ is (I hope) assumed but it is too rarely mentioned! And when the cross is mentioned, it is only mentioned, it is never explained or unpacked or gazed upon. The major theme is wanting to see God's face and His glory, but the cross is the way we see God's face and it is the fullest expression of His glory! (Luther called this the "theology of the cross" and we need to relearn this theology – especially in Middle Class America!)
- **We need deeper and richer, and longer, looks at the cross and all that it means!** As Luther advised, "*For every one look you take of your sin, take 10 looks at the cross!*" But we rarely look at our sin, perhaps because we don't look at the cross enough! Because if you really look at your sin without seeing the cross as huge – it will devastate you!
- **Many hymns actually are born out of meditation upon scripture – an art we desperately need to relearn!** Tim Keller (pastor at Redeemer Church in NYC) says meditation is thinking a truth in [into your heart] and then thinking it out [thinking out the implications of this truth for your life etc.] That is what the hymns help us do as they take their theme and turn it over and let us gaze upon it from all different angles. And they often will suggest (though by no means do they ever exhaust) ways in which this truth should change our lives. In this way they model how to meditate upon scripture and the truths of the gospel. A great example of this is "How Sweet The Name Of Jesus Sounds" by John Newton (18th century.) We have the notes from Newton's sermon the day he introduced this hymn to his congregation and it reveals that his text was "*Thy Name is as ointment poured forth*" (Song of Solomon 1:3). As he reflected upon that text all week he saw its fulfillment in Jesus and the implication for the trials and tribulations of the Christian's life. When was the last time you got that much out of meditating on Song of Solomon 1:3?
- **But we must beware of worshipping tradition and hymns themselves.** Hymns are not beyond critique, though many of the poor ones have dropped out of sight. I find that putting old hymns to new music allows us to connect with the hymns and yet still be relevant and authentic to our own culture. And by putting familiar hymns to new music often people slow down and think about what they are actually singing and the meaning takes on fresh life for them.

V. Some Suggestions On How To Encourage A Hymn Movement In Your Own Church

- **Sing more hymns – and tell the stories of the hymns.** Not just in church services but in special times of singing and prayer as well. **And talk about why we sing the songs we do.** I think that if our grandparents had told the stories of why hymns resonated with them more often, then maybe our parents wouldn't have been so quick to discard the hymns.
- **Use the hymns and the stories of the hymns in your pastoral counseling and your preaching.** I know if Christian counselors who use our hymn cds for their clients to use to soak on the gospel. I copy of words of hymns to hand out to people I meet with and use them to work through different subjects and experiences.
- **Make some of the reprinted hymnals available to your people.** A.W. Tozer said that next to the Bible the best devotional book one can have is a good hymnal! If you have a church bookstore stock things like Spurgeon's "Our Own Hymnbook", Philip Schaff's "Christ In Song", and Gadsby's Hymns. Carry good books about hymns as well like Faith Cook's "Our Hymnwriters And Their Hymns." *Most local Christian bookstores don't carry this stuff – so if you want people to get them they need to have them within reach.*
- **Try to give a vision to your musicians to use some of their talent to serve the church by writing hymns and hymn-tunes.** Give them hymnals to use. And if they write a new tune listen to it and try to use it if you can. Offer 10 words of encouragement for every one word of critique. Usually people need to write a lot of bad tunes to learn to write better ones – is your church a place where people can grow and learn better how to write? Maybe you can sponsor an event where songwriters can come and share new tunes and get feedback.
- **Encourage songwriters to write hymn tunes by writing the melody first rather than a guitar riff.** This music is for congregational singing and the tunes that work best are often written 1st as a melody.
- **Encourage your writers to be part of the growing movement through the internet.**
www.igracemusic.com has lots of resources. Another group to explore is www.liturgyfellowship.org