

Are Your Hymns Too Spiritual?

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The average Christian will learn more from hymns than from any systematic theology. Hymns chart progression from classic hymns of the 17th and 18th centuries (especially those of Charles Wesley, Augustus Toplady, John Newton and William Cowper) to the Romantic "songs and choruses" of the 19th and 20th centuries. They reflect the shift from Reformation categories (God, sin and grace, Christ's saving work, the Word, church, sacraments, etc.) to Romantic individualism. We sing, "I come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses. And the voice I hear, singing in my ear, the voice of God is calling. And he walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own." Or, "He touched me." The number of 19th century hymns that talk about the objective truth of Scripture, and that which God has done outside of my personal experience, is overwhelmed by the number of hymns that focus on my personal experience. It is my heart, not God and his saving work, that receives top billing.

If that was true of the 19th century, the 20th century only exacerbated this emphasis, and the style of the commercial Broadway musical was imitated in songs that elevated personal experience and happiness above God and his glory. Today, the vast majority of entries in the *Maranatha*, *Vineyard*, and related praise songbooks are not only burdened with this self-centered and Gnostic tendency, but often contain outright heresy--probably not intentionally, but as a result of sloppy theology. In our day, sloppy theology usually means some form of Gnosticism. Below are some classic hymns to contrast with examples that I dragged out of a very (happily) dusty box of music books many of us grew up with in fundamentalist and evangelical churches.

Classic Hymns

"All People That On Earth Do Dwell," to the tune of the Doxology, is the "Old Hundredth" (Psalm 100), composed by Louis Bourgeois, Calvin's church composer, in 1551. The music actually says the same thing as the words, moving reverently and majestically through this God-centered psalm. The *Trinity Hymnal*, a hallmark of Reformed worship, is a great source of Psalms (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications).

Who can forget John Newton's "Amazing Grace"? But he also wrote, "Glorious Things Of Thee Are Spoken," with the third verse reading, "Blest inhabitants of Zion, washed in the Redeemer's blood, Jesus, whom their souls rely on, makes them kings and priests to God. 'Tis his love his people raises over self to reign as kings; and as priests, his solemn praises each for a thank-offering brings." Like the warm orthodoxy of 18th century Lutheran hymns, the Calvinistic hymns of the same period reflect the harmony of awe and joy, thoughtful reflection, and jubilant emotion. One actually feels like expressing emotion when the great lines from redemptive history are sung! It is not "Alleluia" or some banal "Wow Jesus, you're so neat" chorus. For instance, Newton sings, "Could we bear from one another what he daily bears from us? Yet this glorious Friend and Brother loves us though we treat him thus: Though for good we render ill, he accounts us brethren still." One of my favorites is Cowper's "Let Us Love And Sing And Wonder": "Let us love, and sing, and wonder, let us praise the Savior's Name! He has hushed the Law's loud thunder. He has quenched Mount Sinai's flame: He has washed us with his blood. He has brought us nigh to God...Let us wonder; grace and justice join, and point to mercy's store; when through grace in Christ our trust is, justice smiles and asks no more." These classic hymns, a sampling of the riches of hymnals that are now quite difficult to locate except in used theological book shops, are

hardly stiff, cold, and formal. The passion is linked to truth. There is content, without which the great hymn-writers believed there could be no legitimate, godly, emotional response.

The 19th Century Romantic Hymn or "Song"

"When I'm With Him" is a far cry from "Crown Him With Many Crowns." The former reads, "When I'm with Him, ...when I'm with Him, ...The fairest pleasures of the world grow dim; ...And in my heart I feel the thrill of glory, When I'm with Him, when I'm with Him." "Since Jesus Came Into My Heart" is typical of the Romantic hymns in that it is a musical "testimony" of the hymn-writer's own personal experience that is set forth as normative for the worshipper. Victory, perfect peace, perfect joy, and perfect surrender are prominent themes in these songs, heavily influenced not only by Romanticism but by the Keswick "Higher Life" movement, which B. B. Warfield characterized as "Protestant mysticism" in *Perfectionism* (Oxford University Press). The God and the Christ outside of us (the Reformation emphasis) is replaced with God and the Christ within the individual's heart (the medieval and Gnostic emphasis). "Open Your Heart To Jesus" is representative of this sort of hymn.

The Gnostic disdain for human aspects (body, passions, etc.) appears again and again as we "Fight manfully onward, dark passions to subdue." Heaven is a major theme, but it is seen more in terms of romantic sentimentalism and escape from nature than as glorification and perfect communion with Christ. "Sinner, why not come and join us on our trip to the sky?" one hymn-writer queries. "I'll Do The Best That I Can" was a popular hymn written by the Stamps Quartet. In "Climbing The Stairway of Love," we read, "I now am climbing the stairway that leads to heav'n above. Each step is guided by God's great hand of love. I'm moving higher and nearer that home up in the sky, and if by faith I keep climbing I'll reach it by and by." Here are some other examples: "Higher yet and higher, out of clouds and night, nearer yet and nearer rising to the light, -Light serene and holy, where my soul may rest, purified and lowly, sanctified and blest."

In the "Living Above" songs and choruses, the first entry is, "I Want To Rise Above the World": "I want to live up in the highest heights where Heaven's radiance glows." Another exults, "I've been on the mountain top and seen His face...Lifted in His arms to heights I tho't could ne'er be mine." The theme of seeing God's face and experiencing that direct encounter is what Luther meant by the "theology of glory": the desire to see "the naked God" in his majesty. While Newton was singing about the "glorious things" that are spoken of Zion, God's holy church, Ellen Goreh writes of being "In the Secret of His Presence." "Would you like to know the sweetness of the secret of the Lord? Go and hide beneath His shadow: this shall then be your reward; and when-e'er you leave the silence of the happy meeting place, you must mind and bear the image of the Master in your face, of the Master in your face." Oswald J. Smith's "Deeper and Deeper" expresses a similar idea: "Into the heart of Jesus, deeper and deeper I go...Into the will of Jesus, deeper and deeper I go...Into the cross of Jesus, deeper and deeper I go...Into the joy...Into the love...Rising with soul enraptured far from the world below." Even the mention of the cross here is not a reference to the same cross that stood outside of center-city Jerusalem in A.D. 33, but a metaphor or allegory for one's own personal experience of intimacy with Jesus.

The mystical intimacy between the soul and Jesus (i.e., his Spirit) is represented in, "The Touch of His Hand On Mine." "There are days so dark that I seek in vain for the face of my Friend Divine; but tho' darkness hide, He is there to guide by the touch of His hand on mine." While such authors are often men, most men I know would feel somewhat uncomfortable singing "love songs" to another man, even if he is Jesus Christ. The mystic's love for Jesus is romantic; the orthodox believer's love for Jesus is filial and is always linked to his saving work. We do not love Jesus "just for who you are," for apart from his saving

acts we do not have any reason to love him any more than we love any other historical figure.

This theme of the "namelessness" of God is replete in Gnostic as well as mystical literature: God cannot be described, or, if he can at all, it is by negation—that is, by saying what he is not. Similarly, the Gaithers write, "There's Just Something About That Name." Well, what? All of the names for God and for Jesus Christ are pregnant with theological meaning, but unless one unpacks that truth, we are left with "just something about that name." Nobody seems to know quite what that "something" happens to be. It is actually the thing someone says when one does not really know. For instance, when we vaguely remember a name on a wedding invitation: "I can't remember exactly who that is, but there's just something about that name."

Many of the Gaither songs, in fact, are deeply Romantic in their orientation. Jesus seems to be conceived of exclusively as a friend and as someone who lives inside of us. Individual experience is key. One finds very little objective, redemptive, doctrinal content in their works and if that is true for the Gaithers, it is even a greater problem with the Maranatha Songbook and the Vineyard songbooks. Let us limit the discussion to the latter, although we could use a great deal of space on the Maranatha Songbook.

Remarkably, written by a husband and wife team, "By Your Side" goes like this: "By your side I would stay, in your arms I would lay. Jesus love of my soul, nothing from you I withhold." John Barnett writes, "There is a season for faith beyond reason, there is a time for lovers to cry." As we have seen, the "theology of glory" characteristic of Gnosticism and mysticism in general, has as its goal the ascent into the presence of God to touch him and to see him in all of his glory, even though he has said that no one can see him and live. "Draw me closer, Lord," goes another Vineyard song. "Draw me closer, dear Lord, so that I might touch You, so that I might touch You, Lord I want to touch You. Your glory and Your love, Your glory and Your love, Your glory and Your love, and Your majesty." This is an invitation to disaster, for apart from Christ (who is nowhere to be found in this song), "our God is a consuming fire" and to see him or touch him is to be turned to ash (Heb 12:29).

"I'm In Love With You" is another "love song to Jesus." Since the rest of the song does not say much more than the title, we need not quote the entire piece. A little later in the song book we are encouraged to "turn t'ward to kiss Your face." It is difficult to find a single song in the Vineyard song books that actually presents us with a Christ-centered, cross-centered, doctrinally sound, and thoughtful exposition of biblical teaching for use in praise. Clearly, the one praising is more central than the one praised: "I Bless You," "I Have Found," "I Just Want To Praise You," "I Only Want To Love You," "I'll Seek After You," and on and on we could go. "Spirit of God" reads, "I can almost see Your holiness as I look around this place. With my hands raised up to receive Your love, I can see You on each face. Spirit of God, lift me up, Spirit of God lift me up, fill me again with Your love sweet Spirit of God." Notice the "theology of glory": The worshipper is expected to sing, "I can almost see Your holiness as I look around this place." Really? Isaiah, when he saw God's holiness, immediately recognized, "I am an unclean man and dwell among a people of unclean lips" (Is 6). Further, "With my hands raised up to receive Your love"? Rather than hands raised out to receive the earthly elements of bread and wine, or to turn the pages of Scripture, it is the hands raised up to the air that become receptacles of divine love for the soul. Finally, can the people really "see [God] on each face"? At best, it is sentimental mysticism; at worst, it is Gnostic pantheism. Emerson and Thoreau would have appreciated the "spark of divinity" on each face, but it is certainly sub-Christian by any measure.

The famous "Spirit Song," written by John Wimber, reads, "Oh let the Son of God enfold you with His Spirit and His love." Now, how would that first line be rewritten in a more classical

Christian vein? "Oh trust the Son of God to redeem you by His flesh and His blood." It even rhymes with the original version.

The "Inside God" is proclaimed throughout the Promise Keepers album, *A Life That Shows*. For example, in the song, "I Want To Be Just Like You," a father prays for his son: "Help me be a living Bible, Lord that my little boy can read..." turning from the external Word to "the self." The song then continues, "...I know that he'll learn from the things that he sees, And the Jesus he finds will be the Jesus in me." So not only are we missing an "external Word," now we're not even left with an "external Christ." Compare this with secular song-writer Joan Osborne, who asks the question, "What if God was one of us...just a stranger on a bus trying to make his way home." While Christians are seemingly obsessed with the Inside God, it seems there is interest in the external, historical, objective, "Outside God" after all.

Conclusion

This is not written in order to provoke reaction, but to help us recognize the extent to which popular forms of worship have come to be dominated by Gnostic influences. These influences are not calculated by the song-writers, who are, no doubt, sincere and devoted believers. Nor is it to suggest that those who write (or sing) them are heretics, even though some of the content is at least heterodox, and in a few cases heretical. One must persist in heresy and refuse correction in order to be an enemy of the Faith, but ignorance is a serious problem that cripples the Church and easily accommodates departures from clear biblical teaching. May God grant us a new generation of Bachs, Handels, Newtons and Topladys who can tune their harps to sing God's praises in a way that sacrifices neither truth nor love.

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