

Hymns as Tools for Worship

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Introduction.

- A. Last summer, a Pixar movie came out called *Ratatouille*. In this movie, one of the main characters is a food critic named Anton Ego, tall, skeletally thin, and scary. Early on in the film, he proclaims that he hates food. What he enjoys about being a food critic is not the opportunity to discover new chefs, but to write scathing reviews that blast every dish he tastes and seek to humiliate those who cooked them.
- B. We need to take care, lest we become hymn critics the same way he was a food critic. It's important, friends, that all of us be able to evaluate hymns, to determine whether they will help us meet God's goals for our worship, and as part of that, we need to be able to recognize an unsuitable hymn when we see one. However, that is not the point of the exercise. The point of what I've said today is not that we should dissect every hymn in the hymnal, find each microscopic flaw, and leave each service grumbling about the song selection. That attitude toward hymns produces absolutely nothing that is useful or good.
- C. Instead, friends, we need to regard discussion of inadequate hymns as a distasteful prelude to understanding and using hymns that are good. The purpose of pointing out blemished sacrifices is so that we can offer ones that aren't, so that we can focus on hymns that do fulfill God's goals. This evening, then, let's move on to the much more enjoyable subject of good hymns. Let's look at hymns as tools for worship.

I. Content.

- A. Of course, a hymn isn't going to do a good job of giving us content we can use unless the hymn has content in the first place. It almost goes without saying that that content has to be in line with Scriptural truth. As we already noted, a hymn must not teach false doctrine, but a good hymn does more than merely avoiding error.
- B. In fact, Scriptural **ACCURACY** is a trait that we should require of the hymns we sing. This idea comes from 2 Timothy 2:15, where Paul urges Timothy to consider himself a workman and the word of God the tools of his trade. Just like none of us would want to hire a plumber who doesn't know how to use a pipe wrench, so too we don't want to have an instructor in the word who doesn't know how to accurately handle it. Remember, friends, hymns are supposed to teach too. That means that a good hymn must demonstrate both the ability to understand the truth of the Bible and the ability to apply it. The hymn must present Scriptural concepts in Scriptural ways, so that if we understand the hymn, we also understand the word.
- C. This morning, we discussed hymns that blur the Biblical imagery of heaven through misapplication. Let's look now at a hymn that does a much better job of dealing with the similar Biblical imagery surrounding death. In Scripture, our spiritual journey to heaven is often compared to the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land. They crossed the Red Sea; we are baptized. They wandered in the wilderness; we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth. Finally, just as they crossed the Jordan River to get to Canaan, we have to die to get to heaven.
- D. Look at the extremely Scriptural discussion of death in the third verse of "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." It's obviously using all the right words: Jordan, Canaan, and so forth, but the accuracy of this verse goes even deeper than that. Pay particular attention to the first two lines of this verse, then compare them to the Scriptural account of the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3:14-16. This passage tells us that the Jordan was only stopped up by God when the feet of the priests touched the very edge of the river. In the same way, this hymn calls upon God to quell our fears when our feet are touching the very edge of death. The author is accurately using the smallest details of an inspired metaphor to instruct us and help us worship God.
- E. Just as important to a hymn is the concept of Scriptural **DEPTH**. A hymn has depth when it has enough content to it that it doesn't limit the mature Christians of the congregation to expressing themselves in spiritual baby talk. Some Christians object here in favor of simplistic hymns. They argue that sometimes we should sing baby-talk hymns so that the new Christian can find spiritual nourishment in our worship too.
- F. It's certainly important to feed babes in Christ with our singing, but what this argument overlooks is that a hymn with good Scriptural content will always contain milk and meat both, just like the Scripture itself does. This is evident in many of our finest hymns, but perhaps nowhere more so than in the chorus to "Give Me the Bible." Both the immature Christian and the mature Christian can feed on the truth of this hymn. For the babe in Christ, it offers the simple plea, "Give me the Bible." That's important because every single Christian, even if he's only a day old, needs to learn to long for and cry out for the word of God. By contrast, the experienced Christian can turn his attention to the subtler content of the hymn, like the phrase, "Precept and promise, law and love combining." When we sing this phrase, we are instructing one another that the Bible isn't just about precepts. It's not just about commandments. It's about the good news of God's promises to us too. Likewise, the Bible isn't just about love. It combines that love with God's law, and we need to pay attention to both. Folks, there's enough truth in that one line to turn the denominational world upside down, if only they'd listen.

- G. A good hymn, though, must show not just accuracy and depth, but also **FRESHNESS**. One of the sad things about the hymn world, to me, at least, is the way that so many hymns have the same message, said in the same way, as 50 other hymns written before them. That does a miserable job of reflecting the richness and variety of Scripture. Far more valuable are the hymns that explore new Biblical ground or take a different look at a familiar topic. For an example of this second kind of hymn, consider with me the second verse of "Immanuel, God with Us." There have been literally thousands of hymns written about the birth of Jesus, but I don't know of a single other one that approaches the topic from this perspective. Rather than focusing on the glory of Jesus' birth, it focuses on the weirdness and irony of it, that the One who sat the throne of heaven is now lying on the straw of a feeding trough in a stable that his parents had to borrow. That vividly describes how far Jesus had to come to become flesh, which is an extremely Scriptural idea we need to understand.
- H. Finally, to have good content, a hymn must have **FEELING**. Remember, God expects our worship to involve not just our intellects, but our emotions. This doesn't mean that we should sing hymns that generate artificial emotion like a charismatic preacher whipping a crowd up into a frenzy. Instead, a good hymn draws emotion from the deeply powerful and moving concepts of Scripture. It's feeling based on thought.
- I. We see a great example of this in the second verse of an altered Charles Wesley hymn, "And Can It Be?" This verse takes its content from the description of the humility of Jesus in Philippians 2, and it presents it in a way that should move the heart of every one of His disciples. When we sing this hymn, we are saying to Jesus, "You gave up almost everything You had: Your authority, Your place, Your power, even Your life. You gave up everything but Your love, and it was that love that led You to bleed on the cross for me." Brethren, I don't think the word has been invented yet that describes how that makes me feel. I am awed by the sacrifice of Christ, I am grieved that He had to do it, I am joyful that now I don't have to die, and I love Him for this incomparable thing that He has done for me, all at once. This is not just random emotion that I have no reason for feeling. This is emotion that is generated by a powerful thought. This is the word piercing hearts.

II. Technique.

- A. Content, of course, is critical, but the best content in the world doesn't do any good unless it is conveyed in a readily accessible form. One of the first formal requirements of a hymn is that it have good **FLOW**. By this, I mean that it moves along in a smooth, predictable fashion that doesn't offer any rhythmical or metrical speed bumps that distract the attention of the worshiper. Many hymns have good flow, but we see an excellent example of this in the hymn "Our Father Forever." There aren't any funny little hitches in the rhythm. Each line bounces along in an expected and intuitive way. Just as importantly, the hymn sets up a pattern and then doesn't break it. There are no lines that have more or less syllables than the singer might expect. As a result, when the congregation sings it, they can focus on the meaning without having to worry about singing a funny-sounding syllable or singing the wrong note at the wrong time. It has good flow.
- B. Just as important as the idea of good flow is the idea of **CLARITY**. Basically, a good hymn will use words that we understand and put them in a natural sentence structure. A clear hymn doesn't have words in all kinds of weird places just to force a rhyme. Sometimes, confusion arises because the English language changes out from under hymns, but a hymn that is truly clear can remain easily comprehensible for hundreds of years. Consider, for instance, the first verse of a very familiar hymn: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." This hymn is quite possibly the oldest English hymn that we sing in worship. It was written 300 years ago. However, the author uses such simple words and natural sentence structure that it could have been written yesterday. It sounds like Isaac Watts wanted to sit down and tell somebody about how he feels about the cross, and the results naturally came out in rhyme and meter. We can all worship with hymns this clear.
- C. It's worth noting, though, that sometimes confusion arises not because the author wrote in unclear fashion, but because we aren't good enough Bible students to understand the reference he's making. A classic example of this appears in the second verse of "O Thou Fount of Every Blessing." We've been singing this hymn probably since the Restoration, but there are still plenty of Christians who think that Ebenezer is Scrooge's first name. Actually, it's a cool Scriptural reference to something that Samuel did after the Israelites defeated the Philistines in battle. We see the story in 1 Samuel 7:11-12. They've chased the Philistines down into the coastal valley, and once they're done chasing, Samuel sets up a stone and names it Ebenezer, which means "the stone of help," because God had helped them win the victory to that point. The hymn is making the application that we can all raise our Ebenezers right now, because God has helped us remain faithful to Him to this point of our lives. That's spiritually useful. It's not unclear. It's just a teachable moment.
- D. Finally, a good hymn has **GOOD MUSIC**. In theory, this might not have to be true. In theory, Christians should be able to worship effectively with a hymn no matter the caliber of the music. In reality, a good hymn that doesn't have a good hymn tune is just as dead as faith without works. No one will sing it. By contrast, when a hymn does have good music, it can take the hymn to another level. A hymn that has this kind of enhancing music is "Nearer, Still Nearer," #124 in *Hymns for Worship, Revised*. It matches the mood of the words and rises to its high point where the words do. The music naturally helps to create worship.

Conclusion. However, hymns, whether good or bad, don't make much difference unless you're right with God.