

Hymns that Teach

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Introduction.

- A. If the Lord wills, in just a few months, our long-awaited hymn supplements will arrive, and we will be able to use them in worship. This supplement will contain about 70 hymns, the bulk of which have been written by brethren within the past 15 years. Many of these hymns will become familiar parts of our worship.
- B. But why are we doing this? In our pews right now, we have a hymnal with more than 700 hymns in it, of which we regularly sing only about 200. When my parents were here, my dad remarked that our repertoire was so different from what he was used to back home that it was like we were singing out of a different hymnal. Why do we need another book with another 70 hymns to learn? Perhaps another, even better, question is, "Why do we need to know more hymns than the 200 we already sing?"
- C. There is a reason, friends, and it's not because the really good singers in the congregation enjoy the technical challenge of learning to sing new stuff. It's because these new hymns will help us to please God and to grow spiritually in ways that the hymns we have access to now do not. In the next two or three months, we'll be looking at somewhere around a dozen of these new hymns to understand what makes them spiritually useful.
- D. However, before we can embark on that journey, we first must grasp what makes a good hymn a good hymn, and what makes a not-so-good hymn a not-so-good hymn. Sometimes, we behave as though hymn selection in worship is a matter of taste. You may like this hymn, but I like this one, and both are equally useful and good. Now, certainly it is true that some things about hymns are subjective. One brother may prefer music that has a very formal, high-church sound; another may like hymn tunes that are a little more gospelly. Provided the Scriptural requirements are met, there's nothing wrong with either of those.
- E. On the other hand, some things about hymn worship are emphatically not subjective. Just as God defines what the form of our worship must be, so He also defines what its content must be. It is just as much a violation of God's law to ignore those content restrictions as it is to bring the instrument into our assembly. Because this is so, let's consider them this evening. Let's consider the importance of hymns that teach.

I. Defining Content in Hymns.

- A. To understand where all of this is coming from, we first need to look at the two passages we primarily use to define our worship: Ephesians 5:18-19 and Colossians 3:16. Both of these passages define the same basic action. They tell us to sing, and from this, we rightly infer that there are to be no pipe organs, no guitars, and no anything else. However, if that's all God wanted us to get from these two Scriptures, "Jesus wept" would no longer be the shortest verse in the Bible, because both of these would just read "Sing."
- B. Obviously, there's more to these verses than merely that. Instead, they also explain what the reason for our singing should be and lay out the results we should be trying to achieve with it. Let's start by looking at the underlying reasons. They're worded in different ways, but they're really about the same thing. Ephesians 5:18 tells us to be filled with the Spirit, which gets our charismatic friends all worked up until we point out that in the same place, Colossians 3:16 instructs us to let the word of Christ dwell richly within us. Here's what Paul is trying to tell us, then: we should fill ourselves up with the power of the Holy Spirit as contained in the word of God, and when we come here to sing together, our singing should be that divine word overflowing.
- C. This abundant outpouring of the word of God is to have two different results, and both passages describe the first of these two results in generally the same way. With our word-inspired singing, we are to speak to one another, teach one another, and admonish one another. I've heard some brethren say that they don't consider a singing night to have the same spiritual importance as a Bible study, and that's a sad commentary both on those brethren and the way we miss the point of this passage. When we sing together, our minds are not to go on autopilot! Instead, we should be completely awake and actively seeking both to teach and to learn.
- D. However, our songs are not to be entirely directed to one another, otherwise it wouldn't very well be called "worship." Both of these passages tell us that our song should be directed to God too. Our song worship is also the melody of our hearts offered to God. We need to remember that also as we sing. This is not an act we go through for the benefit of our brethren. It's an opportunity to thank God and give Him the glory.
- E. So, then, now that we've looked at these passages fairly closely, we can go back and put together a composite Scriptural definition of hymn worship. It reads like this: "Hymn worship is a rich indwelling of the word of Christ that expresses itself in singing for the purpose of teaching and admonishing other Christians and worshiping God." Every time we come together, our singing must fit that definition.
- F. At this point, it's also appropriate to define another Scriptural concept, the word "edification." This is a Scriptural term that has really been used and abused by some folks in the denominational world, until they've got us all convinced that "edification" is that warm fuzzy emotional high you have when you're walking out the door after a really good worship service. Now, that sounds good, except that it's not a thing like the way the

word is used in Scripture. As with singing, there are two primary passages to which we can turn to define edification, and they are Ephesians 4:11-13 and Acts 20:32. Let's use these to produce another definition.

- G. The first part of this definition is that edification is the work of ministry. This is what we get out of Ephesians 4:13. Basically, edification is about service. This work of service, then, as we can also tell from Ephesians 4, is to be carried out by the saints, because it is they whom the church leaders are to equip. Now, if each of us as saints is to edify the other saints with whom we come in contact, what are we supposed to use to accomplish this task? Our own human wisdom? Some pop psychology we heard on the radio on our way into work? Clearly not. That's why we need to turn to the tool mentioned in Acts 20:32. That's why we need to turn to the word of God, which indeed is the only tool the Christian should use for this central task. Either some thought comes from the word of God, or it is not truly edifying. Finally, though as we turn back to Ephesians 4, we see what the purpose of this process of edification is. It is to bring us all to spiritual maturity, which is defined as the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. So, then, once we put all of that together, we can rightly define edification as "The work of ministry carried out by the saints through the word to bring all Christians to the measure of Christ." Unless something makes us more Christlike, we have not been edified.
- H. Remember, the reason why we've spent all this time laboriously developing these definitions is because both of these ideas are critical to deciding what hymns we should use in worship. In fact, both of these definitions share a thought that gives us a central insight into what hymns are more and less useful. That idea is the word. It is impossible to worship in song without the word, and it is impossible to edify without the word. Thus, it is fair to say that the most important thing about any hymn is the extent to which the word indwells it.

II. Examples of Content in Hymns.

- A. Now, that's all well and good, but what does it mean? What does it mean to say of a hymn that it contains a rich indwelling of the word? Let me show you some examples to flesh out this concept. Let's begin by looking at a hymn entitled "I Am the Way." It is one of the hymns we'll be learning from our new supplement, and just a casual glance at it shows that it bears a suspicious resemblance to all the "I am" sermons I spent the past three months preaching. In fact, every line of this hymn is a quote or paraphrase from Scripture. "I am the Way," "I am the Truth," and "I am the Life" all come from John 14:6. "I am the light" appears in John 8:12. "I am the Son" may be found in Luke 24:70. "I am the Lord" is taken from John 13:13. "I am the King" comes from John 8:37, and "I am the Christ" from John 4:26. "I am the Bread" is what Jesus says in John 6:48, "I am the Vine" are His words in John 15:1. "I am the First" and "I am the Last" repeat the words of Christ in Revelation 1:17. Jesus says "Believe in Me" in John 14:1; He also tells us, "Be not afraid" in Matthew 17:7. "Come unto Me" repeats His words in Matthew 11:28, and we've already seen, "I am the way." Basically, in this short two-verse hymn, the author makes obvious references to 12 different Scriptures. That's more Scriptures than I commonly use in a half-hour sermon. Simply by singing this hymn in the assembly, we are relaying a massive amount of information to one another about the nature of Jesus. That makes this a hymn that possesses exactly the sort of rich Scriptural indwelling that God demands from our hymns.
- B. Sadly, however, not all hymns contribute to our understanding the way this one does. Indeed, some have the opposite effect. Consider, for example, this hymn that I found in a hymnal that is in wide use in churches of Christ today, although not, thankfully, in our hymnal. The problem with this hymn becomes quite evident once we look up "Noel" in the dictionary and find that a Noel is a Christmas carol. Put that together with all the language about the "cold winter's night," and if we were to sing this in our assembly, we would be teaching one another that Christmas is a Scripturally valid concept. The problems with that are obvious.
- C. Does this mean, then, that as long as a hymn does not teach false doctrine, we should be satisfied with singing it? Absolutely not! Remember, friends, Colossians 3:16 doesn't tell us to let the word of Christ dwell minimally within us. Instead, the word is richly, which teaches us that we should use only the hymns that contain the word to the highest degree possible. Our attitude should not be "Well, this hymn has a pretty tune, and it has enough Scripture to it that we can get away with it." Instead, we should look for hymns filled with the word.
- D. Let's look at some examples that illustrate this, beginning with a fill-in the blank exercise. As I read this hymn, which I myself wrote in about five minutes as an illustration, see if you can figure out what word goes in each blank. Most of these are pretty obvious, aren't they? Why can we do this? Why can we go through and fill all the blanks? It's because rather than being filled with the word, this hymn is filled with clichés. There are dozens of hymns out there that say exactly what this hymn does, using exactly the same words. Now, any English teacher on the planet will tell us that clichés make writing weak and meaningless, and that's just as true in hymns as it is anywhere else. A cliché-filled hymn, and there are many just as bad as this one, does nothing to teach and admonish because we sing right through the clichés rather than thinking about them. There is nothing false about these words, but there's nothing useful about them either.
- E. By contrast, compare this well-known hymn that addresses the same topic of heaven in a thoughtful, Scripture-based, non-cliché way. We've all sung "There Is a Habitation" for as long as we've been Christians, yet it still has the power to provoke thought through its connection to the word. Let's look for hymns like this.

Conclusion. If you have learned the truth, whether through hymns or something else, now is the time to obey it.