

Sermon Title

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Introduction.

- A. In the church, we invest a lot of effort in making sure that the sermons we preach are filled with Scriptural content. All of us know of times when preachers have been confronted for not preaching sermons that are meaty enough. Likewise, we are very careful to make sure that our Bible classes are actually about the Bible, and the teacher who spends too much time talking about other things is likely to get into trouble.
- B. For some reason, though, this determined defense of the importance of Scripture breaks down when we get to hymns and song worship. Countless brethren believe that God is fine with them singing whatever they want as long as their hearts are sincere, or that one hymn is just as good as another, regardless of content, or that hymn writers have "poetic license" to say whatever they want and not be held accountable. Many of the excuses that we don't let the denominations make about Bible study are the excuses we make about hymns.
- C. We need to be careful with those attitudes, friends, because they run counter to what God's word says about our song worship. As we looked at during our Bible class session, the Scripture clearly sets out two main purposes for our song worship. We are to use it to teach and admonish one another, and we are to use it to praise God. The Scripture also makes clear that both of these purposes are best accomplished when we are able to use our song worship as an outlet for the word of God dwelling richly within us.
- D. Sadly, not all hymns are equally effective as a conduit for the message of Scripture. There are a number of ways that hymns can block our expression of the word, either because of their content or because of the way in which they are written. We need to recognize these problems so that we worship God in a way that is as fully pleasing to Him as possible. Let's look this morning, then, at worship barriers in hymns.

I. Content Barriers.

- A. The first and most important kind of barriers are the kind that arise from content that is in some way unsuitable. This begins, of course, with hymns that teach out-and-out **FALSE DOCTRINE**. Thankfully, this is not a problem that we have to deal with on a regular basis. After all, for at least the past hundred years, the hymnals we use have been edited by brethren with the same attitude toward false doctrine that we have.
- B. However, that doesn't mean that every hymn in our hymnals teaches the truth. For example, consider this hymn that I pulled from a hymnal in wide use in churches of Christ today: "The First Noel." This hymn gets into serious trouble for its use of the word "Noel," which, according to the dictionary, means "a Christmas carol." A visitor who came into our assembly and heard us singing this hymn would be completely justified in believing that we thought Christmas was a Scriptural concept. Let's be watchful for false doctrine in hymns.
- C. In a slightly different but still problematic way, we have to recognize hymns that have **POOR ACCURACY** in their wording. These are hymns that contain misinterpretations of Scripture that don't arise to the level of false doctrine. Let me give you an example: In many of our hymns about heaven, the writers use all kinds of oceanic imagery. They talk about the crystal shore and the golden strand and the sunset sea and all sorts of things like that, to the point where we can easily start thinking of heaven like a vacation home on the Gulf Coast. That whole category of imagery is drawn from one passage: Revelation 4:5-6. It describes a "crystal sea" that is before the throne of God. Now, that's all well and good, except that the "sea" of Revelation 4 isn't an ocean at all. We get a glimmer of what John is actually describing from 2 Chronicles 4:2, 6. Basically, back in the time of the temple of Solomon, there was a massive bronze basin in front of the temple that the priests used to purify themselves, and that basin was called "the sea." In the same way, John describes a big CRYSTAL basin in front of God in heaven as a reminder that we need to purify ourselves before we approach Him. That's what the "crystal sea" is, but we don't realize it because we are misled by our hymns.
- D. And that, in a nutshell, is the problem with inaccurate hymns. If we sing them, they make us into bad Bible students. In the Lord's church of today, we already struggle enough with studying our Bibles. We don't need to make the process even harder by filling our heads with incorrect messages from our hymns.
- E. Next on the list, after hymns that say the wrong thing, are hymns that say nothing at all. Hymns like this have **POOR DEPTH**. Remember, friends, we don't just have a negative responsibility to avoid teaching untrue things. We have a positive responsibility to teach the truth, and if our hymns say nothing, we aren't doing this.
- F. For an example, look at "I Will Bless Thee, O Lord," another hymn that, once again, appears in a hymnal widely used in the brotherhood. As you might be able to tell from the way I notated this, the hymn is written with a lead part and then an echo part. If this hymn is sung at all, it is sung because of that music, because there is absolutely no reason to sing it because of the words. Remember, friends, a hymn is supposed to be a rich outpouring of the word of God. This hymn, by contrast, provides no evidence that the author has even so much as opened a Bible. This is how bad it is: I could take this hymn and hand it to a Buddhist, and the

Buddhist could sing it in praise to the Buddha without having to change a single word. This hymn, and hymns with a similar lack of content, are unsuitable for the congregation because they do not teach.

- G. The fourth and final variety of content problem, though, is **OVERUSED CONTENT**. These hymns are written by those who have at least opened the Bible, but opened it to the same verse that 50 other people have already written hymns on. Typically, this happens when there's some idea that captures the idea of the believing world for 10 or 20 years, and everybody wants to write about it.
- H. For an example of this, consider the following sequence of hymns that appeared in about the same 20-year time period. Once again, these are all drawn from the same brotherhood hymnal. The last hymn in the series was a repeat. Did anyone notice? The point is not, friends, that there's something wrong with hymns that say "Worthy is the Lamb." There isn't; in fact, we should have hymns that say that. But let's be honest about it: do we really need ten different hymns that say exactly the same thing? A hymn repertoire that only has a few different messages isn't any better than a preacher who only preaches on two or three different subjects. Neither one is doing justice to the variety and richness of the word of God. Let's avoid overused content.

II. Technique Problems.

- A. Of course, not all problems have to do with content. Some have to do with the way that perfectly good content is obscured by the way the hymn is written. The first set of problems that we need to address in this area are **FLOW PROBLEMS**. Basically, these arise whenever there's a glitch in the rhythm or meter of a hymn. There's a brother in Missouri named Craig Roberts who's done a lot of teaching about hymns over the years, teaching which I follow heavily. To him, the classic example of a rhythm or meter problem occurs in #564 in our hymnals, "Follow Me." Here's what happened there: When the writer was writing the words to the hymn, he set up a rhythmical and metrical pattern, but then he broke it. You can see the places where he broke it just by looking for the "holes" in the words as they line up in the musical staff, and those holes are where we tripped up. The problem is that the congregation wants to continue singing the pattern even though the rules of music don't allow it. This is not a big deal in "Follow Me." This is a hymn with a good message, and the little glitches are manageable. However, there are hymns, especially newer hymns, where the flow is so bad that the congregation can't sing it together, and the problem with hymns like that is obvious. When we start focusing on music rather than meaning, we stop worshiping and stop doing what God wants us to.
- B. Similar to flow problems are the problems that arise from **CONFUSING WRITING**. Typically, the writing in hymns becomes confusing for two main reasons. The first of these is outdated or unusual words. Just like all languages do, the English language changes over time, and during the course of those changes, once-familiar words fall into disuse or take on different meanings. This process is why many Christians today struggle with understanding the King James Bible, and they struggle with some centuries-old hymns for the same reason.
- C. Second, though, hymns can be hard to understand because of awkward writing caused by the poetic constraints of writing a hymn. As any of you who have tried writing a poem know, it's not an easy thing to cram your thoughts into a few short lines that all rhyme and have a bounce to them. The process is even worse for hymns because the constraints are more severe. A lot of writers, then, will bend over backwards to try to force a rhyme into place, and in the course of so doing, they make their content hard to understand.
- D. A good example of both of these conflicts shows up in the third verse of a familiar hymn, "By Christ Redeemed." We've been singing this hymn for decades, yet few know what it means. Part of the problem is the weird word choice. When we see the word "advent," we think of counting down the days until Christmas. This hymn, of course, isn't talking about Christmas at all. It's using the word "advent" in an older way, to refer to the coming of something or someone. Likewise, "rite" is a weird word that, if anything, we associate with the Masonic Lodges. In this case, though, it just refers to the ritual of partaking of the Lord's Supper.
- E. Worse than that, though, is the havoc wreaked by the hymnist scrambling to get his rhymes in. He has to deal with a challenging rhyme scheme here, three rhymes stacked on top of each other, and to get it, he ends up saying something like what Yoda from *Star Wars* would say. It's really hard to understand. Once we untangle it, though, it ends up expressing a cool thought: the idea that we connect the Last Supper with the Second Coming by partaking of the Lord's Supper until Christ returns. Great content; extremely cloudy phrasing.
- F. The final worship barrier we're going to look at is the barrier created by **MUSIC PROBLEMS**. To this point in the lesson, we've been looking at word-based problems, but music can mess things up too. For our purposes this morning, the main reason why this happens is when the music to a particular hymn is too difficult for the congregation. Now, not all congregations are equal in what they can sing. For instance, the church I worshiped with in Texas before coming here, the Dowlen Road congregation in Beaumont, had a number of phenomenal singers. That congregation sang some hymns on a regular basis that most churches would be wise not to even attempt. However, most congregations have a more modest musical capacity, and for us, we need to make sure that the hymns we use are not so musically complex as to distract the church from its worship. A good example of a beautiful hymn that is too complex for most congregations is "O Sacred Head," #136 in *Hymns for Worship (Revised)*. We need to be aware of this and not select distracting hymns.

Conclusion. Of course, all the worship in the world won't do you any good unless you're right with God.

