

## Why We Still Need Hymns In A Postmodern World Part #2 Rev. Kevin Twit (June 2003)

### I. Hymns Engage The Whole Person

Hymns offer a more full emotional range of expression. Dan Allender (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 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!

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)

### II. Hymns And The Importance Of Story

The postmodern world has rediscovered the importance of story. Stories are often wrongly regarded as a poor person’s substitute for the ‘real thing,’ which is to be found either in some abstract truth or in statements about the ‘bare facts.’ Stories are a basic constituent of human life... The whole point of Christianity is that it offers a story which is the story of the whole world. (N. T. Wright) Christianity has always been about story even though since the Enlightenment many Christians have forgotten this!

Hymns tell a story and walk us through the gospel. I would say modern choruses are often more like “images” that flash on the television screen for but a moment. They do stir us, but they don’t take us anywhere. (Although I will say that a skillful worship leader can string together choruses to take us from somewhere to somewhere. Unfortunately though because choruses are rather limited in the themes they address, the journey is more restricted and often less interesting.) In a good hymn, the writer offers their story and invites you to try it

on and see if it might be your story too! (Example: Anne Steele and her hymns of trust in the midst of suffering like “Dear Refuge Of My Weary Soul.”)

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 and the lives of the hymnwriters!

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.

### III. What Do We Mean By A Postmodern World Anyway?

Postmodernism is easier to describe than to define. Postmodernism is a contemporary movement. It is strong and fashionable. Over and above this, it is not altogether clear what the devil it is!” (Ernest Gellner)Some noticeable cultural shifts are:

- Skepticism about scientific rationalism and renewed spiritual openness (ex. X-files, spirituality books)
- People care more about aesthetics and gut feel, than facts and evidences in deciding what they believe
- A strong hunger for experience – even more important than money and fame for many
- A distaste for plastic mass-culture and a renewed quest for authenticity (No Depression, Bobos, O Brother)
- The adoption of cynicism and “outside” and “random” humor (Nihilism with a wink, Seinfeld)
- The attraction of story and stories, while being skeptical of meta-narratives
- The embrace of mystery and the skepticism about easy answers
- An intense desire for community (while not wanting to give up individualism)
- The channel-surfing, multi-tasking generation. Stay safe by staying free!
- The consumer culture makes us believe we are what we choose to buy!
- A longing to be part of something rooted rather than ephemeral (renewed interest in liturgy and ritual)
- Renewed concern for social justice, environment, and mercy ministry issues
- Change in management styles needed. Not top down but consensus building.
- Convergence as the route to the future: rather than new styles we have new combinations of old things

### IV. Conclusion: So Why Do We Still Need Hymns In A Postmodern World?

The church is not a passing fad, it is something solid and rooted. “The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God” Leslie Newbigin

We need roots and wings! “The challenge is to provide roots and wings – to bring young people into a sense of connectedness with the past that doesn’t rob them of their vision of the future.” (Gerard Kelly in “Retrofuture”) I think this quote captures what many 20-somethings have experienced through a re-discovery of hymnody and the new-found freedom to express these words of passion and devotion in music that resonates with who they are.