Perspective and Poetry: Reimagining 21st – Century American Hymnody

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COMP 211

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It is a delicious Christmas Eve. With a full heart, you look up to the skies and sigh at God's glorious sending of Christ. Tomorrow brings the exchange of gifts and happy memories with your family, friends, and congregation. But the weather is not frigid this year. In fact, it is never cold out here during the remembrance of Christ's birth, because it is the middle of the summer:

> Carol our Christmas, an upside down Christmas:
> Snow is not falling and trees are not bare.
> Carol the summer and welcome the Christ Child,
> Warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air. (Grindal, 2015, p. 28).

As seen in the above example, hymnody can be strangely specific, based on its locale. This individuality, combined with the many-faceted theological truths of Scripture, results in a huge variety of liturgical material. 20th – century scholar Millar Patrick notes, "The range of any hymn collection has now to be very wide; a glance at its list of contents will show how far-reaching and comprehensive it must be. But its chief office must ever be to encourage and aid worship; its end is first the offering of praise to God. Everything else is subsidiary" (Patrick, 1927, p. 178). Unfortunately, this latter statement seems to go unheeded in 21st - century hymnody, with the dying out of communal singing as an unfortunate result. The syntax of old favorites seems elusive to today's diverse congregations as the English language continues to evolve. At the same time, many of the more contemporary and linguistically approachable songs available lack in theological depth, a key component of a solid faith. Since music as a mode of worship permeates many of the various Protestant denominations, the topic of its syntactic form

remains applicable to a majority of congregations. Additionally, song plays an equally important role in the presentation of Christian beliefs and values to those not familiar with typical church doctrines. Finally, different minds respond to musical expressions in differing ways; thus, a balance of old and new lyrics alike satisfies the needs of both mentalities. Ultimately, the souls of human beings are at stake, so a topic pertaining to the Church is eternally important to all of humanity. Even for those who do not profess the Christian faith, the quality of its music can still provoke positive reactions. Thus the question is raised: how can American hymnody remain understandable, unique, and thought-provoking to people of all demographics? By removing archaic syntax, distilling complex theological subjects into comprehensible sentences, and creating unique hymns that capture the struggles of city-wide communities throughout America, hymnists and the Protestant Church can reimagine their musical legacy to glorify God.

This line of argumentation dismisses the debate of what medium of music is best for worship, for several reasons. Due to its intangible nature and differing auditory perception in hymns, individual musical tastes vary greatly within the population. Thus, congregations disagree on what is acceptable in church liturgy, with the more recent genres of rock, jazz, and pop sometimes dismissed by church leaders for their flippant and sensuous connotations. However, the instruments used in creating these genres simply vibrate in different ways; this rhythmic motion is defined by the term 'timbre'. The distinct timbres of individual instruments are thus suitable for different accompaniment purposes (Powell, 2011, p. 40). Sound is in of itself amoral and only receives morality when it is assigned it. Thus, the topic of stylistic choice is disregarded in this paper, so as to prevent it from overshadowing the syntactic debate. However, the lyrics of both contemporary and old texts alike present a potential problem to 21st – century congregations, pivoting on reference to God.

South-Korean Christian scholar Sunny Yoon looks into the trends of contemporary Christian music in her native country. Her findings in a study conducted among young Koreans attending megachurches reveal their somewhat dissatisfied attitude toward the syntactic content of worship songs. Overall, Yoon found that many of the selections focused on an individual's relationship with God, as opposed to a more generalized statement of love. Yoon states, "The current patterns of youth services was criticized by young members of the churches during the survey. In the comment section of the survey, many people wrote their concerns about their lack of biblical knowledge and prayer" (Yoon, 2016, p. 329). This study reflects the dry atmosphere of modern hymnody across the globe.

Part of the hymnodic problem seems to have originated in the latter half of the 20th century. A 2018 study analyses the changes in hymnodic pronoun usage in samples from post-1960 hymn books from Roman Catholic churches. Overall, the studies found that the liturgical focus has shifted noticeably towards the church body. "Most notable is the significant rise in the self-referential first-person plural pronouns, which confirms the Catholic traditionalist claim that hymns have indeed become more self-focused since Vatican II" (Sigler & Renner, 2018, p. 21). The verdict of this papal decision ultimately resulted in the Catholic Church having to look for other musical types: "In the liturgy after Vatican II, there was little music from the Catholic past that could be recycled for use by congregations, especially once texts were to be sung in the vernacular. Much music was, therefore, "borrowed" from Protestant churches" (Quinn, 1995, p. 147). This fact, in turn, illustrates the weakness of Protestant musical choice.

For much of the 18th century, American Christians relied only on musical settings of biblical psalms, with some ministers arguing against including man-made poetry in the liturgy (Music, 1991, p. 35). However, as the century progressed, the colonies saw an increase in

original hymnodic development as new English literary materials were imported (p. 36). Throughout the next 200 years, the debate between the proponents of traditional and 'contemporary' church music moved to the forefront of American liturgical concern (Wren, 2000, pp. 10-11). The ensuing recession of lyrical importance eventually resulted in lesser theological depth within 21st – century American hymnody. The 2007 worship song "Hosanna" by Hillsong United provides a prime example of this shift in its chorus with its repetitious praise to God:

> Hosanna, Hosanna
>
> Hosanna in the highest
>
> Hosanna, Hosanna
>
> Hosanna in the highest ("Hosanna", 2007, lines 8-12)

While praising of God, this type of hymnody is not particularly useful in its lyrical content, simply repeating a singular word. Over the past century, the musical focus has shifted towards humanity and away from God. Many hymns speak of 'what God has done for them' and 'how much they love God', when in actuality, the spotlight is on the person. Another example of a song that focuses primarily on the sinner is MercyMe's 2001 hit 'I Can Only Imagine':

> I can only imagine what it will be like
>
> When I walk by Your side
>
> I can only imagine what my eyes will see
>
> When Your face is before me
>
> I can only imagine, yeah (lines 1- 4)

The text addresses the speaker's wonderance about what heaven holds. However, it utilizes the first-person singular excessively, putting God in a more passive role. Additionally, the speaker solely addresses God in terms of what he will one day achieve; indeed, the song almost seems to place God into the role of a genie as opposed to a Savior. Overall, this opening, while intriguing in topic, ultimately reflects a self-absorbed nature.

It is undeniable that hymnody does indeed change. Charles Wesley's beloved Christmas hymn "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" remains a popular 21st – century carol. Intriguingly, the text itself has changed dramatically over its nearly 300 years of existence. Consider this excerpt from Wesley's original 1739 publication:

> Hark how all the welkin rings
> 'Glory to the King of kings,
> Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
> God and sinners reconcil'd!'
> Joyful all ye nations rise,
> Join the triumph of the skies,
> Universal nature say
> 'Christ the Lord is born to day!' (Wesley, 1739, lines 1-8)

The word 'welkin' originated in the 9th century, with one of its now-archaic definitions as the following: "Considered as the abode of the Deity, or of the gods of heathen mythology: The celestial regions, heaven." ('welkin', 2b) Additionally, this edition of the Christmas classic contains an antiquated use of an apostrophe in the word 'reconcil'd'. These archaisms were ultimately omitted by George Whitfield, visible in this 1774 revision:

Hark! the Herald, Angels sing,

'Glory to the new born King;

Peace on Earth, and Mercy mild,

God and Sinners reconciled.'

Joyful all ye Nations rise,

Join the Triumphs of the Skies,

With th' angelic Host proclaim,

Christ is born in Bethlehem. (Occom, 1774, lines 1-4)

In addition to removing irrelevant words, Whitfield also recrafted several sentences to resemble their more current forms. The clergyman even changed the last two lines to mention specifically the birthplace of Christ. Even with these updates, the carol has changed slightly since the 1700s. Hymnodic evolution such as this is not uncommon; indeed, lyrics of this era were often more contentious than their musical accompaniment. Unfortunately, some of this outdated language has lingered on in traditional hymnody.

Archaisms litter the Church's songbooks. For example, the words 'thee' and 'thou', which have long since faded out of use in the general public, remain common in the general liturgy. This preservation of language presents several problems. The usage of unfamiliar words distances those not familiar with their meaning, creating a closed loop. This vocabulary is only partially compatible with the mission of the Church. The Christian faith makes a distinction between two overarching categories of people: those who trust in Christ and those who are still lost. While the use of well-seasoned language in liturgy may touch the spirits of those familiar with it, this verbiage has the potential to confuse unbelievers.

An interesting holdover from past writing is the poetic apostrophe in hymns (Richardson, 2002). This is a term used to address something or someone who is not present or unable to respond. Many church denominations typically assign such a role to the Trinity. However, this designation can become distracting when used with the term 'O', as it attaches an archaic air to the topic. The 1907 English translation of 'Be Thou My Vision' fell victim to this unfortunate confusion:

> Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
> naught be all else to me, save that thou art -
> thou my best thought by day or by night,
> waking or sleeping, thy presence my light. ('Be thou my vision', n.d., lines 1-4)

The lyrics of this poem struggle in its unusual grammatical structure. The translator of the hymn into English in the early 20th century seems to have taken syntactic choices similar to those of Old English, in which the verb is often placed differently in sentences (Haeberli & Haegerman, 1995). 21st – century English is quite different from that of the Middle Ages. The syntax structure of the ancient island language placed the verb in a different spot than its newer counterpart (Haeberli & Haegerman, 1995). Thus, a 21st – century reader would find this different arrangement confusing, and the translator's choices seem out of place. After all, why would a 20th century editor force archaic language into a Gaelic hymn? Regardless of her motives, this linguistic approach produces a rather distancing effect on those not part of the church.

Jargon can become estranging to people not part of a group (Dean, 2011). This is especially true in the case of Christianity, and its hymns are some of the largest perpetrators of this fallacy. Since hymns are among the most familiar items of the Church to the outside world,

this problem is compounded further. If such biblical jargon is kept, it must be explained to congregations, or else it will distance them from the teachings of the Church. For example, the first verse of the renowned hymn 'Holy, Holy, Holy!' provides an excellent specimen of properly defined vocabulary:

> Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
> Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.
> Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty!
> God in three Persons, blessed Trinity! ('Holy, holy, holy!', n.d., lines 1-4)

The hymn clearly establishes God's triune identity without being confusing. This is an example of what modern hymnists ought to aim for, as concise, clear language is the key to transparency in church lyrics. But while writers can clarify much of the syntactic confusion, part of the problem is the language itself.

One problem is that word definitions constantly change. For example, the word 'awesome' is now used to describe an event that causes pleasure, whereas it formerly ascribed a powerful connotation to whatever it described (Lu, 2019). This older meaning is still present in several church hymns; however, the current generation may not understand its inclusion. Another issue involving the liturgy is that its theological terms are often complex. This means that songs either assume the knowledge of the terminology, or that they must teach it within the context of the song. For example, the word 'grace' in Christianity is very different from that in common usage; however, those unfamiliar with the church might easily confuse the definitions. Additionally, the church is home to a very specialized vocabulary which, even though non-archaic, is hard to understand. Words such as 'assurance', 'transgression', 'justification', 'glorification', and 'sanctify' are somewhat mysterious to the general population. The term

'Christianese' is often used to denote such confusing terms (albeit often attached to more contemporary language) (Stewart, 2012).

Finally, the loss of the English second person singular pronoun has hampered the use of. Thus, to combat this, writers are faced with several options. A possibility would be to create a new word to replace 'thou', and reserve 'you' for only plural occasions. Another option is to attempt to resurrect the word 'thou'. Both of these options would be very difficult to accomplish in reality. Thus, in the 21st century, the best solution is simply to utilize 'you' as the singular and specifically state 'you all' as the plural.

In response to the archaisms of older liturgy, hymnists must carefully decide their word choice. This, indeed, is affected on the local level, as different regions utilize different vocabularies. Local poets should therefore familiarize themselves with their community's native syntax. If they choose to include eclectic language, they should either explain them to their singers within the text or through outside instruction. As English constantly evolves, composers and poets must adjust their vocabularies (Lu, 2019). A Tri-Cities Christian named 'D.L.' stated the following concerning the matter:

> Archaic language can often be fine in hymns as long as it is not so distracting or old that the congregation has to struggle to sing or understand what they are singing…What I find problematic is when word meaning has changed (e.g. How Sweet and Awful is the Place vs. How Sweet and Awesome is the Place or hymns that use words that now are insults/cuss words but meant something completely different before) or a word has completely disappeared from our vocabulary (Dykes, 2019, response 11).

Fortunately, the matter of archaic vocabulary is easily resolved through careful checking of word definitions. 'D.L' brings up a fair point – the general population is able to comprehend the meaning of more common archaisms. That being said, this language has the potential to distance visitors to the church through its perceived flavor. Every word has an associated perception (or 'taste') in the mind; thus, in presenting the Gospel, church leadership should seek persuasiveness, kindness, and modernity in syntactic choice. Hymn-writer Ruth Duck gives informal advice concerning the construction of poems on her personal blog. Her two primary suggestions are to avoid cliché rhymes and to set up a pattern in their existence or absence thereof: "Be consistent in patterns of rhyming or not rhyming. Rhymes help to unify a text and make it memorable; other devices, such as repetition, can also do this" (Duck, n.d., para. 7). In addition to current liturgical options, the use of chant and other mediums could be acceptable in the 21st - century church, especially to convey theological thoughts that do not easily rhyme. There are many routes to consider concerning the future of linguistic choices in hymnody. Whatever form these songs take on, however, must be compatible with the localized needs of congregations.

Due to America's vast size, it can be hard for hymns to apply universally to all areas of the country. Fortunately, poetry on the community level often reduces this generalization. Arguably, the majority of creative work stems from the personal experiences or other passions of its author; it follows then then that this work, if directed towards a community, could potentially serve it quite well. Fortunately, there is not a current shortage of Christian poets.[1] For example, Episcopalian poet Luci Shaw has produced works pertaining to the faith for over four decades,

[1] Other living poets include Julia Kasdorf ('Julia Kasdorf', n.d.), Kimberly Johnson ('Kimberly Johnson', n.d.), Michael Symmons Roberts, and Gracia Grindal. The late 20th century also produced a bountiful stock of Christian writers, with Czeslaw Milosz as a primary example ('Czeslaw Milosz', n.d.), and Lionel Basney as another (Hooslema, 2000).

and continues to write at the age of 90 (Shaw, n.d.). Each creator provides a unique viewpoint of their local world and thus the issues that they face in their community. However, what these poets need to do is collaborate with composers to produce new and unique works. The New Zealand hymn from earlier provides a great example of the specialization of hymnody. Another poem, authored by Gracia Grindal, illustrates the creative prowess that local writing can take on:

> Behold, a woman from the city
> Came to the place where Jesus ate,
> Brought a box of precious ointment;
> With her tears the woman washed his feet,
> Weeping as the Savior ate. (Grindal, 1983, lines 1-4)

Great work has already occurred in Christian hymnody. However, much of it goes unnoticed because of its localized status, as in the above example. Grindal only published this work in a singular hymnal – it is not at all famous. Yet it likely helped the churches to which it was directed in some way.

Keith and Kristyn Getty, two present-day hymn writers, share advice on the nurturing of song in congregations and the home. The couple recommends that parents incorporate singing into their family devotions and free time, in order to instill theological truth in their children. Additionally, the Gettys mention that the congregational act of singing has taken a secondary role in worship, while the accompaniment and presentation have become the main focus. In their words, “as we’ve traveled around, one thing we’ve noticed is that it doesn’t really matter what a church’s budget is, what its demographics are, even the number of professional musicians up front. These things can help, but only a little. Congregations that sing well are congregations that understand why it’s so important” (Guthrie, Getty, & Getty, 2017, p. 80).

Lorraine Burgh, the director of the Kantorei choir at Valparaiso University, conducted a survey in 2017 on the stress levels of the students before and after their communal singing. Many choir members reported lifted spirits after their participation; the science majors processing the data noted that while a direct connection between the two variables could not be proven, a clear correlation was seen. Burgh primarily argues the importance of communal song, musing on the application of this idea to church worship through breath, prayer, and discussion: "While I use the word "community" when I talk about the Kantorei, the students most often describe the Kantorei as "family". In their overly stimulated electronic world, virtual communities of social networks often leave them still feeling isolated. I believe many of them have missed the deep pleasure and satisfaction of human community, completely unplugged" (Burgh, 2017, p. 30-31). Hymnody, indeed, is as much a social act as one of theological imbibement. Burgh's research provides a good reason for why congregations should especially emphasize communal song. The close-knit feelings of Burgh's Kantorei community provide a model for church music's role in congregational worship. It also exemplifies the two-fold nature of hymnody: it is both to save the lost and to nurture those who are already saved; by allowing people of all faiths to participate, it allows for Christ's love to better be shared and to penetrate the souls of the wandering.

Adherents of the so-called 'praise and worship' musical format may cite the elevated emotional state associated with their music (Merker, 2019). And this is a valid point, as the act of communal singing often induces such a feeling. However, the purpose of church music is not to glorify humanity, but God. Merker states,

> What if composers of modern praise songs carefully selected lyrics that focus more on God's character than on our experience? What if we embarked on a campaign to teach believers that worship is more about ascribing worth to God than pursuing an emotional

> response—that in fact, our emotions will often be stirred in the right ways when we focus *more* on God and less on ourselves? (Merker, 2019, para. 11)

Christians must make the distinction between service to the Lord and the experience of worship. As a compromise, 21st- century creators can craft different songs for different circumstances. Luckily enough, there is already a community of poets, musicians, and composers that are actively pursuing this distinction.

An important point to consider is the diversity of musical purpose in church worship. There is a place for songs such as 'Hosanna' and 'I Can Only Imagine', for they capture the individual relationship that each human being cultivates with God. However, the primary goal of church worship is a communal gathering with God; accordingly, its music should reflect the act of multiple souls gathering and focusing on the Lord. Both musical varieties must be put into balance so that both can be best utilized by congregations as needed. After all, sometimes it is wonderful to simply sing of what the Lord has done in an individual's life.

Proponents of traditional hymnody may argue for the preservation of ancient works. However, the composing of new works does not equate the destruction of old ones. With the technology available in the 21st century, all versions of recreated hymns can be archived and accessed. Another problem facing modern hymnody is that congregations simply do not want to commission the writing of new works. However, this can be combatted by a change in focus. Hymnists do not have to be paid to utilize new music in their congregations – it may be a small sacrifice to them, but it would help their communities immensely. Even if a hymn is only sung locally, it is still serving the immediate vicinity.

A survey of 27 young Tri-Cities Christians revealed much insight into this issue, with differing opinions amongst those questioned. Consider the following quote from participant 'J.D.': "If there are any elements of localness [sic] music, they need to be small because we are all worshipping the same God no matter where on the earth we live or what problems we face" (Dykes, 2019, response 7). Another respondent, 'H.S.', had a differing viewpoint: 'I think that inspiration can certainly be drawn from local events and occurrences but I don't think they should necessarily be so detailed as to be inaccessible to other churches" (Dykes, 2019, response 19). The general thoughts of the East Tennessee community were that specific music can play a role in church worship, albeit not a large one. Overall, these findings proved useful for gauging the conditions of Protestant hymnody in the Tri-Cities area.

Remember that warm Christmas Eve and its associated perspective? The author, Shirley Erena Murray, wrote the hymn 'Carol Our Christmas' from the unique perspective of New Zealand. Gracia Grindal uses this to make the point that even though Christianity has become more globalized, it is important to remember the individualism of local congregations in their songs. Indeed, "We should value the way the story is told throughout all the world, enjoying the wintry of a Chinese Christmas night as much as the warm beaches of New Zealand. It is the rich variety of global imagery that give a different slant on the story – not a different story altogether" (Grindal, 2016, p. 29).

Each unique area of the Earth has an individual experience of faith to offer. A hymn by Reginald Heber sums up this ultimate purpose of hymnody:

From Greenland's icy mountains,

From India's coral strand,

Where Africa's bright fountains

Roll down their golden sand,

From many an ancient river,

From many a palmy plain,

They call us to deliver

Their land from error's chain. (‘From Greenland’s icy mountains’, lines 1-4).

The Earth contains such variety, especially in the circumstances of its differing nationalities. As this hymn demonstrates, Christians around the globe have the ability to provide a unique perspective in hymnody. Thus, they should utilize their God-given location to glorify His name. Different areas will ultimately use different methods, but the end result is the same: to serve Christ. Regardless of their place in space or time, Christians must continue to sing their praises of God, drawing inspiration from their surroundings and needs. From the mountains of Appalachia to the beaches of the Hawaiian Islands, the pen will continue to move and the voice will continue to sound, carrying with them the sorrows and thanksgivings of congregants innumerable.

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