

Gospel Hymns and Lutheran Worship

[Until his death on June 22, 1993, the author was the Hymnal Project Director for the WELS. He prepared this article at the request of the *Quarterly*.]

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What is a "Gospel Hymn"? One might think that it is any Christian hymn that contains the gospel. Not so. "Gospel Hymns" (or "Gospel Songs" or simply "Gospels") are a specific kind of Christian song with well-defined characteristics. These characteristics are precisely those which have brought certain mainline and liturgical churches (particularly Lutheran and Episcopalian) to ignore this genre of hymnody, especially when it is hymnal-making time.

What are these characteristics?

1) The texts, though scriptural and atonement-centered, are generally shallow and theologically thin. The themes tend to be repetitious and consist of a small group of subjects.

2) Gospel Hymns are personal and highly emotional, both in text and music. There is much repetition of phrases or single words which do not appeal to the mind but rather involve feelings by means of simple repetition.

3) The Gospel Hymn is concerned with the individual singer and not with the church as such. The vertical relationship with God is stressed and not the relationship to or participation in the Body of Christ.

4) Musically, the Gospel Hymn is in form a solo song with a group refrain. The interest and attractiveness of these songs lies in their melodies, which are very easy, catchy, and sentimental. Some of their rhythmic patterns invite physical movement from gentle swaying to toe-tapping or hand clapping. Harmonically, the Gospel Song is very simple, consisting mostly of three chords, inviting part-singing at the refrain. The bass line usually changes only at the bar lines and not within the bar.

Most of the above characteristics will be best observed by singing and playing about 15 or 20 Gospel Hymns, one after the other. One may sense that they call for no musical knowledge to understand them and no skill to sing them. One may also find that they are fun to sing.

The Gospel Hymn originated in the intense atmosphere of evangelistic mass meetings of preacher Dwight L. Moody and singer Ira D. Sankey. They brought the "Second Evangelical Awakening" (1859) to a culmination in 1872 and the following years. Moody met Sankey at a YMCA convention in 1870 where he watched Sankey rouse a slumbering audience into enthusiastic singing. Moody was unmusical and could not tell one tune from another, but he was immensely interested in music's power to move and sway an audience. He persuaded Sankey to follow him to England and Scotland. There they enjoyed enormous success, singing and preaching to audiences totaling 2,500,000. Biographer Gamaliel Bradford says of Moody's ability to judge a hymn's mass effect:

He could form no judgment...by hearing it played or sung in private. He must see it tried in a crowd and could discover in an instant its adaptation to awaken the feelings which he needed to have in action. If it had the right ring, he used it for all it was worth. "Let the people sing!" he would shout—"let *all* the people sing. Sing that verse again. There's an old man over there who is not singing at all; let *him* sing." No matter how long it took, he would keep the people at work until they were fused and melted.¹

Ira Sankey was as unique a talent in his way as Moody. He accompanied himself at a small Estey reed organ, playing his own melodies and arrangements, which were sometimes improvised during the meeting itself.

¹ Quoted by Robert M. Stevenson in *Patterns of Protestant Church Music* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1953), p 161.

Sankey was a powerful baritone but untrained. He sang, it is said, with the conviction that souls were receiving Jesus between one note and the next. A typical revival service included a musical program to stimulate the sensibilities of the people and prepare them for the rousing address which followed.

The extraordinary success of these meetings not only brought fame to Moody and Sankey, but produced a great demand for the songs, both in the United States and in many other countries. Expanding collections of Sankey's songs and those of some of his associates were published and widely used by evangelistic groups such as the Salvation Army and the YMCA. The Gospel Song became the standard type of music for mission use and the growing Sunday school movement. In 1903 Sankey published *Sacred Songs and Solos*, a compact volume of 1200 songs. Unfortunately, Sankey's collections also spawned hundreds of imitative publications, increasingly marked by monotonous repetition and commercial excess. The most famous writer of Gospel Hymn texts was Fannie Crosby Alstyne (1820-1915), who authored more than 8,000 hymns. In addition to Sankey, some of the better composers of Gospel Hymn tunes include Sankey's associate, Philip Bliss, and Robert Lowry, William Doane, and George Stebbins.

The demise of the Gospel Hymn has over the years been prophesied or announced with some regularity. After more than a century, however, the Gospel Hymns are alive and well and still being written. They rest, mostly unchanged, in the hymnals of the Southern Baptist Convention and in songbooks of many evangelistic organizations.

So the beat goes on. Various movements to elevate the literary and musical tone of public worship are met with complete indifference by a large group of people whose taste is simply for emotional verse and light music. So it has been, and so it will likely continue.

Erik Routley calls the Gospel Hymns the "nursery rhymes of Christian hymnody and designedly slight in musical content."² In his view these hymns are sometimes impressive but indigestible in large doses because of the low theological protein content. Waldo Pratt, writing around the turn of the century, also expresses a negative opinion. He says:

The defenders of this popular hymnody...very often gravely underestimate the capacity of the popular mind to rise above vulgar embodiments of truth and to shake itself free from perverted sentimentality, and they constantly mistake the zest of animal enjoyment in a rub-a-dub rhythm or the shout of childish pleasure in a "catchy" refrain for real religious enthusiasm.³

In the consideration of this genre of hymnody, or at least of specific examples, the WELS Hymn Committee after considerable discussion voted to reject most of the suggested Gospel Hymns. Originally the committee had placed Gospel hymns in a special category and did not rate them because it was felt that they would not survive the theological, literary, and musical guidelines of the committee. They wished to leave open the possibility, however, that some might be included for other reasons.

Are there "other reasons" for their inclusion in our hymnal? Let us permit Louis Benson to set the stage for the defense by citing another quotation from his book, *The English Hymn*. He writes as follows:

They [the Gospel Hymns] were first sung in unison with a great throng of deeply moved people. Something of the spiritual impression they made was reflected from the simple and sincere personalities of the evangelists. They were plain men, employing the arguments and illustrations, the music and verse, that appealed to themselves in the conviction that such preaching and song was best adapted to appeal to the hearers.

Why, then (so the argument runs), since the great majority of people who came under the revival influences, whether of Moody or his successors, are likewise plain and uncultivated, is not the Gospel Hymn best adapted to the ends of evangelistic work? And if happily these people are brought into the worshiping congregation, why should they be asked to forego the sentimental

² Erik Routley, *The Music of Christian Hymns* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1981), p 137.

³ Quoted in Louis Benson, *The English Hymn* (New York and Philadelphia, 1916), p 489.

verse and popular melody that appeal to them in favor of a more literary hymnody and more artistic music? That there is some force in the argument is beyond doubting. Many hearts have been quickened through these hymns that seem to the critical to be crude in sentiment and unrefined in expression. And the editor of one of the choicest of modern musical hymnals has admitted that through the compositions of the Gospel Hymns school "music" has become the expression of the spiritual life for thousands who before were without a voice in public worship, and, as suppressed feeling easily does, were often without any share in public worship.⁴

Here Benson touches upon what I believe is the real issue: Are the Gospel Songs a good and useful thing for the Lutheran worship service today? Erik Routley makes the following point which provides a partial answer: The Gospel Songs "were very much used by the Salvation Army (in England) whose mission was to penetrate to all those places where religion had been squeezed out of life by artificial ugliness and poverty. But in America...the communities that have most espoused them [the Gospel Hymns] are not necessarily underprivileged communities whose religion needs rescuing from ugliness. They may be very prosperous communities whose religion needs rescuing from infantilism (which is the disorder of wanting to remain a child when one should be growing up)."⁵

True enough. But we must be concerned if we are to pursue our synod's outreach. We have to be concerned about worship materials for outreach among the Black community, who have adopted the Gospel Songs, usually via the Baptist church. Also, what about the mission prospects, the catechumens, the new Christians, and those who enter our church from other church backgrounds where the Gospel Song is the norm? Will a scattering of Gospel Songs in our hymnal help them to have some comfortable part in the worship and help make the transition to Lutheran liturgical worship? We make a good deal from time to time of the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers. Can the Gospel Songs be a kind of temporary worship music, a stepping stone to the chorale and standard hymnody?

Perhaps the Gospel Hymn can be looked at also, however, as a kind of *Gebrauchsmusik* for certain times or occasions or for certain groups within our church. In one of the Anglican hymnals a small section of Gospel Hymns is included which is headed, "Not for Ordinary Use." Though this sounds patronizing and probably is, there is intended something like the above. And "regular" Lutherans also need something more than the formal church hymns or chorales to hum or whistle around the house, or to sing at social gatherings, church dinners, youth organizations, and similar occasions.

Our new hymnal is strongly oriented to serious worship and to hymns which carry the gospel and "proclaim the wonders God hath done" (*TLH*, 387:1). The dimensions that art adds to our Lutheran worship are also precious, but a discussion of that would take us too far afield.

Gospel Hymns do not fit very well in the liturgical service which we have. They are oblivious to the church year and tend to be a kind of interruption in the flow of the service (as much of our choral music also is). On the other hand, the chorales for the most part do not whistle very well and "Wake, Awake" does not fill the bill around the campfire. A judicious selection of Gospel Hymns can perhaps serve these needs without embarrassment and without the risk of tempting today's passive listeners and those who are looking for some sort of entertainment from the music in the service to feel they have found it in the Gospel Hymn.

Typical Gospel Songs

Blessed Assurance
Bringing in the Sheaves
God Will Take Care of You
He Leadeth Me
* How Great Thou Art

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Erik Routley, *op. cit.*, p 137.

I Love to Tell the Story
I Need Thee Every Hour
In the Garden
Jesus Loves Me, This I Know
Leaning on the Everlasting Arms
Let the Lower Lights Be Burning
O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee
Oh, How I Love Jesus
Old Time Religion
Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior
Rescue the Perishing
Revive Us Again
Shall We Gather at the River
Standing on the Promises
Take Hold of the Life-Line
Take My Hand, Precious Lord
The Old Rugged Cross
Though Your Sins Be As Scarlet
Throw Out the Life-Line
To God Be the Glory*
When the Roll Is Called up Yonder
When We All Get to Heaven
How Great Thou Art

Typical Negro Spirituals

Deep River
Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel
Do, Lord, Remember Me
Down by the Riverside
Every Time I Feel the Spirit
Go Down, Moses
He Never Said a Mumbling Word
I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray
Know the Lord Has Laid His Hands on Me
I Shall Not Be Moved
I've Got Peace like a River
Let Us Break Bread Together
Lord, I Want to Be a Christian
Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen
Standing in the Need of Prayer
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
This Little Light of Mine
We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder
Were You There*

* Included in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*