



Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association

OUR GOSPEL MUSIC HERITAGE

Over the centuries, thousands of great hymns have been written which have been a vital part of our Christian faith. From the earliest times, the church has been a *singing* church. Nothing in Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Islam, or any other religion, even begins to compare with it. Jesus has provided the theme for more songs than anyone who has ever lived.

To start, we will consider some of the great old hymns from years past, hymns which have stood the test of time. The dates when written should be carefully noticed.

A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD (1529)
AT THE CROSS (1707)
THE DOXOLOGY (1709),
CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY (1739)
HALLELUJAH CHORUS (1742)
ROCK OF AGES (1776)
AMAZING GRACE (1779)
ALL HAIL THE POWER OF JESUS NAME (1780)
PRAISE HIM, PRAISE HIM (1869)
MASTER, THE TEMPEST IS RAGING (1874)
CHRIST AROSE (1874)
TO GOD BE THE GLORY (1875)
O WORSHIP THE KING (1883)
AT CALVARY (1895)

An elderly Christian man I knew quite well died. His family asked the young, new pastor at the church he had attended, to conduct his service. He had requested that the hymn **THE OLD RUGGED CROSS** be sung. The young pastor was a good man, had a heart for God, but in his church background, old hymns were seldom (if ever) sung. He had never heard the hymn **THE OLD RUGGED CROSS!** I think this is unfortunate.

Some years ago, I heard a guest speaker (who preferred newer worship type songs), actually say that the church should *throw away the hymn books!* We can appreciate new songs that are written, but (in my view) this is no reason to cast aside old hymns that have stood the test of time. They are “Christian classics.”

Songs with words directed to God have been categorized as **Worship** songs. Songs with words addressed to one another are **Testimony** songs. Each type can serve a valid purpose.

In Psalm 119 the words are addressed to God: “Your word I have hid in my heart, that I might not sin against you...Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things.... Forever, O LORD, your word is settled in heaven....your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

Other Psalms are in the testimony category: “I was glad when they said...Let us go into the house of the LORD” (Psalms 122:1).

“I will enter his gates with thanksgiving” (Psalm 100:4) or “Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised” (Psalms 145:3).

The early believers, as clearly stated in Scripture, used both Worship and Testimony songs and were certainly not limited to one style: “...teaching and admonishing *one another* in **psalms AND hymns AND spiritual songs**, singing with grace in your hearts *to the Lord*” (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19; cf. Acts 16:25).

“Music” has been defined as vocal **or** instrumental sounds (**or both**) combined so as to produce beauty of form and harmony.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) had a great appreciation for music, played a lute and flute, and wrote songs like **AWAY IN A MANGER**, still often heard at the Christmas season, and of course:



***A mighty Fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing,
 Our Helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing:
 For still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe;
 His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,
 On earth is not his equal.***

Luther affirmed: “Next to theology there is no art which can be compared to music; for it alone, after theology, gives us rest and joy of heart.”

When King Saul suffered from severe demonic depression, “David took a harp and played it....Then Saul would become refreshed and well” (1 Sam. 16:23).

Music in various forms goes clear back to ancient times. Early in the book of Genesis Jabal is mentioned as “the father of all those who play the harp and flute” (Gen. 4:21). In Exodus we read that Miriam and other women played tambourines as they sang praises (Exod. 15:20, 21). David appointed people to be “singers with instruments of music, psalteries [stringed instruments], harps and cymbals” (1 Sam. 16:23; 1 Chron. 15:16). Near the end of David’s life, 4,000 priests and Levites “praised the LORD with musical instruments” (1 Chron. 23:5).

No one disputes that musical instruments were part of *Old* Testament worship. But some groups oppose the use of musical instruments in gatherings of *New* Testament Christians. I respectfully disagree. Paul wrote about “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our **gathering** together to Him,” that he would “descend from heaven with a shout...and with the TRUMPET of God,” “for the TRUMPET will sound, and the dead will be raised” (2 Thess. 2:1; 1 Thess. 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:52).

If using a musical instrument at a Christian gathering is out of order, how could a trumpet be involved in the greatest Christian **gathering ever**? It is generally understood that “trumpet” is here used as a symbol. A **good** symbol does not symbolize something **bad**. The same can be said regarding the **thousands** of “harps” that are mentioned in a worship setting (Rev. 5:8; 14:2).

**Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever will be.**

**Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!**

Notice how this hymn, written 100 years ago, is deeply rooted in Scripture. The phrases: “Great is thy faithfulness,” “thy compassions fail not,” “they are new every morning” and God’s “mercies,” are from Lamentations 3:22,23. “No shadow of turning,” and phrases about God being the same and changing not, are from James 1:17, Malachi 3:6 and Hebrews 13:8.

From 2010 to 2021, my ministry activities included serving as pastor of a church in (nearby) Indio, California. At a Christian conference in San Diego, a pastor asked where my church was located. I told him Indio. He thought I said **India**—causing him to think that would be a long commute! I quickly clarified that from Palm Springs to **Indio** takes about 20 minutes on the I-10 freeway!

It was at the church in Indio that something unexpected happened when we sang **GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS**. A man we had never seen before came in, took a seat toward the back, and opened the hymnal to this song (as we discovered later).

Near the back door on a table was a basket for offerings. At this point in the service, only two offerings had been placed there: a check and an envelope with cash marked \$200. He would have passed this coming in. Before we finished singing this hymn, the temptation to steal this offering got the best of him. He quickly got up, grabbed the offerings and fled. He did not want to deal with the check, apparently, so discarded it a short distance away. He wanted the *cash* in the envelope. But what he mistakenly thought was \$200, was actually only \$2.00!

Some years ago, I had several friendly conversations with Ron, a Jehovah’s Witness who was, as I understand it, one of their leaders in this area. Despite our doctrinal differences, I liked him and I believe he liked me.

On one occasion I opened a hymnbook and showed him the words of the **AWAKENING CHORUS**, written in 1905 by Charles Gabriel. Because Jehovah’s Witnesses place emphasis on the name “Jehovah,” His “reign,” and they publish “Awake!” magazine, there was nothing in this hymn that would conflict with their beliefs.

**Awake! Awake! and sing the blessed story...
Awake! Awake! the earth is full of glory...
The Lord Jehovah reigns and sin is backward hurled!
Proclaim His sovereign power to all the world,
Jehovah reigns! Rejoice! Rejoice! Jehovah reigns!**

Ron agreed. There is nothing in these words that is contrary to the beliefs of Jehovah’s Witnesses. But it would **never** be sung at a Kingdom Hall. Why? *Because it was not written by a Jehovah’s Witness!*

Even the Mormons—despite their differences with what is considered mainstream Christianity—are not *that* narrow! The famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir has not hesitated to sing hymns like **A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD, HOW GREAT THOU ART, IN THE GARDEN, and JOY TO THE WORLD**—even though the writers of these hymns were not Mormons.

I had noticed that the *New World Translation of the Scriptures* (published by the Jehovah’s Witnesses), does not use the word “grace.” Ron said that in his 50 years of door-to-door witnessing, I am the only one who ever mentioned this to him! Instead, their translation uses “unmerited favor.” Nothing wrong with that wording, but why the objection to the word “grace”? Perhaps because The Three Graces in Greek mythology were the daughters of Zeus? That really has no connection.

When I asked if the hymn **AMAZING GRACE** would ever be sung at the Kingdom Hall, Ron was emphatic: “NEVER!”

Written by John Newton (1725-1807), **AMAZING GRACE** was a testimony of his own experience. Growing up with no religious convictions, he served in the Royal Navy, and later was involved in the wretched Atlantic slave trade. He was ultimately converted and entered the ministry. He went from the mire to the choir, by the *grace* of God.



**Amazing grace how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me,
I once was lost but now I'm found,
was blind but now I see.**

The tune to **AMAZING GRACE** is unique in that it can be played using only the *black* keys. Anyone who plays the piano, organ, or other keyboard instruments, can easily test this out.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) wrote thousands of hymns. At a time when some religious songs were morbid, songs by Wesley were upbeat, victorious!

**O For a thousand tongues to sing, my great Redeemer's praise!
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace!
He breaks the power of cancelled sin, He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.**

Fanny Crosby (1820-1915), despite being blind, also wrote thousands of hymns. One of my favorites is:

**Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.**



Little could she have realized in 1873 when she wrote this song, that it would (in time) be known by millions of people, not only by being sung in churches, but through recordings and even as the theme song of the 1984 Sally Field movie: “Places in the Heart.”

O Happy Day, written by pastor Philip Doddridge (1702—1751), also spoke of Jesus *washing sins away*.

**O happy day, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away!
He taught me how to watch and pray, and live rejoicing every day:
Happy day, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away!**

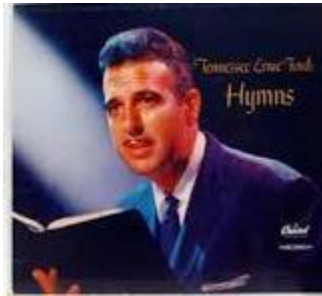
In a time when records, radio and television were unknown, who could have imagined that nearly two-and-a-half CENTURIES later, these words would be recorded by many singers—including Glen Campbell (in 1970)—and would, as a result, be heard by millions! Had pastor Doddridge realized this, I think it would have been *overwhelming* to him!

Truly, “God...does *great* things which we cannot *comprehend* ...great things past finding out, yes, *wonders* without number” (Job 37:5; 9:10).

When I was a boy, Tennessee Ernie Ford (1919-1991) was a DJ at a tiny radio station near Riverside (California), where I grew up. Later, in the early days of television, he was a regular on Hometown Jamboree, as a comedian wearing bib overalls—as well as a singer. He went on to have hit songs like “Mule Train” (about a mule train carrying items like “rheumatism pills for the settlers in the hills” and “a Bible in the pack for the Reverend Mr. Black”), and his signature song: “Sixteen Tons.” In time he became very well-known. In his later years, his residence was in northern California, but he also had a house here in Palm Springs.

Being raised in a Christian home in Bristol, Tennessee, hymns were especially meaningful to him. Each episode of his 5-year television series closed with a hymn. The network had initially frowned on this, but he insisted.

His first (of several) hymn albums—including **ROCK OF AGES, SOFTLY AND TENDERLY, LET THE LOWER LIGHTS BE BURNING, THE NINETY AND NINE, SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER, IN THE GARDEN** and **THE OLD RUGGED CROSS**. It came out in 1957 and was, in that year, *the second-best-selling record in the United States!*



Toward the end of their lives, perhaps thinking more seriously about the life to come, Andy Griffith, Porter Wagoner, Jerry Lee Lewis, George Jones, and others, recorded hymn albums.

Some Christians question whether country or pop singers should record gospel songs, especially if their lifestyles are in question. This is understandable. But, on the positive side, through these recordings, thousands—who might not otherwise hear these hymns—have heard words that can change their lives! Who is to say that the Holy Spirit cannot use these words, despite who sings them? The *message* is more important than the *messenger*.

Suppose someone warns about a dangerous fire that is headed our way. If the **message** is true, it is true regardless of whether the **messenger** is male or female, black or white, gay or straight, Democrat or Republican, Christian or non-Christian!

Consider an incident that occurred at Philippi, a pagan Greek city, where Paul and Silas were jailed. Because God intervened in their behalf, the jailor (who almost committed suicide), cried out: “Sirs, what must I do to be *saved*?” *How* did he, a rough, tough, jailor in a pagan city, come up with wording about being “saved”?

There was in that city “a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination, who...cried out, saying, ‘These men are the servants of the Most High God, who show unto us the way of *salvation*.’ And this she did for many days” (Acts 16:16-18). It

seems probable that THIS is how the jailor heard the word “salvation” and, also, that *these* men could show him how to be saved! It was a true message, even though (strangely) it involved demonic activity.

We recall that “even the demons believe and tremble!”—and demons openly acknowledged that Jesus was “the Holy One of God” (James 2:19; Mark 1:23,24).

“A messenger of Satan” played a role in the effectiveness of Paul’s ministry, by blocking pride (see 2 Cor. 12:7).

God once used a female donkey to rebuke a prophet, and used the crowing of a rooster to humble an apostle! (Num. 22:28; Matt. 26:75).

God “anointed” King Cyrus, *even though he did not know the LORD*, to make decisions that blessed many people (Isa. 45:1-13).

The book of Job is a back-and-forth dialogue between Job and Eliphaz (and two other friends). In the concluding portion we read: “The LORD said to Eliphaz...My wrath is aroused against **you** and your two friends, for **you** have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). But this does not mean Eliphaz was wrong on “everything.” Paul did not hesitate to quote some of his words in First Corinthians 3:19: “For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness’”! (Job 5:13).

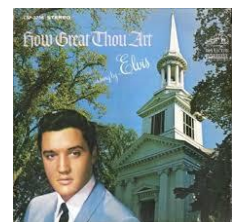
Job (the man) is mentioned *one* time in the New Testament—people had “*heard* of the patience of Job” (James 5:11). The word “heard” reminds us that most did not know how to read—cf. Rev. 1:3; Rom. 10:17. As to the *one* New Testament *quotation* from the book of Job, it is not the words of Job (as we might suppose), but the words of **Eliphaz!**

When Jesus sent out the Twelve, some heard about Jesus through the preaching of **Judas Iscariot!** (Matt. 10:1-4). Though the “messenger” later betrayed the Lord, the “message” he had preached remained true.

Even after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, not all who preached Christ measured up. Paul wrote, “Some indeed preach Christ, from envy and strife...from selfish ambition, not sincerely.” **Wow!** *But*—despite this—he went on to say: “CHRIST IS PREACHED; *and in this I rejoice*” (See Phil. 1:15-18). Evidently, he believed the **message** was greater than the **messenger**. It seems this *principle* could also apply to those who sing gospel music.

When he was about 13 years old, a friend of mine (who later became a pastor), went with some people from Oklahoma to Mississippi to attend a revival meeting. He met a couple other boys there. One of them played a guitar. The pastor told them to practice and that he would let them sing as a trio at the service that night, which they did. The boy with the guitar, who seemed somewhat shy, was also about age 13. His name: Elvis Presley!

Years later, they met again a number of times, including when it was just the two of them, to pray together and talk about spiritual things. Bodyguards were told not to interfere, no cameras, etc. Elvis loved gospel music, as is well confirmed by a Bill Gaither video. It is believed that Elvis was a believer, but that the world and fame, like a huge magnet, pulled him the other way. (For seven years, until his death in 1977, Elvis owned a house here in Palm Springs at 845 W. Chino Canyon Road).



Starting back in the 1930s, Stuart Hamblen (1908-1989) became a well-known radio personality, sang and wrote songs, and acted in motion pictures with cowboy stars including Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and John Wayne. But, as described in *Wikipedia*, his drinking, gambling, and destructive behavior severely affected his life and career, sometimes even landing him in jail.



In 1949, when he came to Christ in the Los Angeles Billy Graham Crusade, his life was dynamically changed. A lot of people were talking about it. Later, during a visit at John Wayne's home, there was some discussion about this change. If something like this could happen to him—someone so well-known—it seemed clear: it is no secret what God can do. John Wayne suggested he turn that line into a song.

That night, when Stuart and his wife Suzy arrived back home, the wall clock was striking midnight. Stuart took a piece of paper and wrote words that would go around the world and be sung millions of times!

*The chimes of time ring out the news, another day is through.
Someone slipped and fell, was that someone you?
You might have asked for added strength,
your courage to renew, do not be disheartened,
I bring news to you. It is no secret what God can do...*

When Billy Graham held his New York Crusade in Madison Square Garden (1957), he invited Stuart Hamblen to sing **IT IS NO SECRET**, backed by a 5,000-voice choir. That must have been a thrilling time for him! When Stuart Hamblen died in 1989, Billy Graham conducted his eulogy.

Like the writer of the book of Hebrews—who had to *shorten* things up (Heb. 11:32)—I will briefly say that Hamblen blessed the church by writing many fine gospel songs, including **HOW BIG IS GOD? THEY THAT WAIT UPON THE LORD, KNOWN ONLY TO HIM, THIS OLE HOUSE, UNTIL THEN**, etc.



Years ago, in Los Angeles (where she directed the well-known Sky Pilot Choir), I met Doris Akers (1923-1995), with whom I visited, howbeit briefly. She wrote some fine gospel songs, like **SWEET, SWEET SPIRIT**. In preaching, to illustrate Psalm 46, I have often used these words from one of her songs:

*This old world may toss and tumble, this old world may rock and roll;
The sun above may turn to ashes, and all fury may unfold,
Every star may fall from heaven, and the moon may take a stroll,
But the Lord will never leave me, He's the lover of my soul!*

Biblical prophets commonly used analogies about sun, moon, stars, sheep, rivers, clouds, trees, fruit, harvest, fishing, buildings, etc.—things that were familiar to the people at that time. The thought occurred to me: What about things that are known to us *today*, like modern inventions? Might these also serve to illustrate spiritual realities? Yes, indeed. The invention of radio, for example, provided the basis for Albert E. Brumley's **TURN YOUR RADIO ON** in 1938:

Come and listen in to a radio station

Where the mighty hosts of heaven sing...

Turn your radio on, and listen to the music in the air

Turn your radio on, Heaven's glory share.

Turn your lights down low, and listen to the Master's radio,

Get in touch with God, turn your radio on.

The point is that God is speaking—*broadcasting*, as it were—are we tuned in?

The phrase “turn your lights down low” always reminded me of my grandparents (see photo). They never had television, but at night, with only a dim light on, they would listen to the radio preachers on stations like XERB. Grandma, it seemed to me, listened to obtain inspiration from their messages; Grandpa, though also a believer, listened to see where he *disagreed* with them. (He wasn't always wrong!)



The telephone also provided a good analogy for gospel song writers, like **THE ROYAL TELEPHONE**, written in 1919:

Central's never busy, always on the line

You may hear from heaven, almost any time...

Telephone to glory, oh what joy divine

I can feel the current moving on the line

Built by God the Father for his loved and own

You may talk to Jesus through this royal telephone.

The coming of the railroad was also noticed by song writers: There was a song made popular by Woody Guthrie: “This train is bound for glory...don't carry nothing but the righteous only...no gamblers, pickpockets, or hobo rambles”; and one by Charles D. Tillman:

*Life is like a mountain railroad, with an engineer that's brave;
We must make the run successful, from the cradle to the grave;
Watch the curves, the fills, the tunnels; never falter, never fail;
Keep your hand upon the throttle, and your eye upon the rail.*

We know that God is in the NOW (Exod. 3:14). That concept was captured by the writer of this virtually unknown hymn (words used by permission):

**God of concrete, God of steel, God of piston and of wheel,
God of pylon, God of steam, God of girder and of beam,
God of atom, God of mine, All the world of power is Thine!**

**Lord of cable, Lord of rail, Lord of motorway and mail,
Lord of rocket, Lord of flight, Lord of soaring satellite,
Lord of lightning's livid line, All the world of speed is Thine!**

**Lord of science, Lord of art, God of graph, map and chart,
Lord of physics and research, Word of Bible, faith of Church,
Lord of sequence and design, All the world of truth is Thine!**



RALPH WOODROW

PO Box 21

Palm Springs, CA 92263

Phone: (760) 327-6049

Email: ralphwoodrow@earthlink.net