



## Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association

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### “PSALMS and HYMNS and SPIRITUAL SONGS”

(Colossians 3:16)

I recently brought a message to our local church on the impact of gospel music. I recalled the words of Martin Luther who said: “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.”

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 of Miriam and other women who played tambourines as they sang praises (Exod. 15:20, 21). David played a harp, and 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 his life, 4,000 priests and Levites “praised the Lord with musical instruments” (1 Chron. 23:5).

I realize there are Christian groups that oppose using musical instruments in their worship services. They believe that only singing is proper for a New Testament church. That belief, in my view, fails to line up with Scripture. Also, on a personal note, my initial open door to be out and about in the Lord’s work was as a piano player for a Canadian evangelist. I was 18 years old. Instrumental music was not a negative for me; it was a blessing.

Those piano lessons I took as a boy from Miss Yeager—75 cents a lesson in those days!—became a ministry asset that continues to this day!

In recent years, many fine worship songs have emerged which use words directed to God. “Worship” songs are sometimes distinguished from “testimony” songs. “What a Wonderful Change in my Life has been Wrought Since Jesus came into my Heart!” That is a testimony song. Each type serves a valid purpose.

In our text (Col. 3:16) it is quite clear that the early church had a variety: “Psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual

songs.” We notice also these were not just songs with words addressed to God, but to one another: “...*teaching and admonishing one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”

Even in the book of Psalms, both worship songs *and* testimony songs are included. In Psalm 119 the words are addressed to God: “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against you...Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things from your law...Forever, O LORD, your word is settled in heaven...Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,” etc.

But many Psalms are in the testimony category and have provided words for choruses we sing today: “I was glad when they said unto me, 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).

For some reason, I know not why, some churches are hesitant to have what we have long referred to as special numbers. In stark contrast to this, I have preached in a large church in Texas that may have as many as ten “special numbers.” Instruments include piano, organ, keyboard, violin, guitar, etc. Styles may range from opera to blue grass. While some members, of course, prefer one style over another, they “prefer one another” (cf. Rom. 12:10; 1 Tim. 5:21) in such matters, allowing for diversity because of their unity in Christ.

As long as songs and styles are scriptural and glorify the Lord, why not have something for everyone?

A friend of mine once attended a group that believed *only* words from the Bible should be sung, mainly from the book of Psalms. While I do not believe this is God’s requirement, I do believe the words of the songs we sing should reflect what the Scriptures teach.

Some may be familiar with the country-style song “The Great Speckled Bird” which likens the church, with her high standards, to a speckled bird. From hearing the song, one might suppose this bird is a symbol of purity and

holiness. But when God said, “My heritage is unto me as a *speckled bird*” (Jer. 12:9), it was not a *compliment*. It was a *criticism!* God’s heritage had corrupted the divine worship with heathenish rites, had become like a lion roaring against God, so he *hated* it (verse 8)! Strong words! The bird had been speckled by sin.

Another song says: “Lord build me a cabin in the corner of Glory-land, in the shade of the tree of life that it may ever stand...” The writer had a good thought, but the words do not fit biblically. The tree of life is mentioned as being “in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7). If the cabin was built in the shade of this tree, it would have to be in the center—not the corner—of Glory-land!

The words of the song “Peace in the Valley” say, “Well the bear will be gentle, and the wolf will be tame, and *the lion shall lay down by the lamb.*” But the careful reader of Scripture will note a difference: “The *wolf* also shall dwell with the *lamb*, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young *lion* and the fatling together” (Isa. 11:6).

While the wording of the song is not untrue, in Scripture the the wolf is placed with the lamb, and the lion with a calf. It is a technical point, and certainly one we would not press too far. Fortunately, nearly all gospel songs are built solidly on biblical truth.

I heard an evangelist (who preferred newer worship type songs) actually say the church should throw away the hymn books! But there is a rich heritage and scriptural depth in the old hymns that should not be forgotten or cast aside.

Martin Luther (1483—1546) was musical, played a lute and flute, and also wrote songs like “Away in a Manger,” still often heard at Christmas time and, of course, “A Mighty Fortress is our God”:

*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.*

Isaac Watts (1674 –1748), sometimes called “The Father of Hymnology,” was an English non-conformist Christian minister. His hymns have stood the test of time—like “Joy to the World,” “We’re Marching to Zion,” “Alas and did My Savior Bleed”—and have appeared in a wide variety of hymn books ranging from those of the Christadelphians, Lutherans, Christian Science Church, Latter Day Saints, and many more!

Charles Wesley (1707—1788) wrote over 8,000 hymns. At a time when some religious songs were morbid, songs by Wesley were upbeat, victorious!

*O For a thousand tongues to sing  
My dear 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.*

Often heard at the Christmas season, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” was also written by Wesley who, along with his brother John (1703—1791), founded the Methodist Church.

A story is told of a pastor who had chosen GOSSIP for his sermon topic. When he learned the song leader planned to use “I Love to Tell the Story” at the close, he suggested a different title!

Often *how* a song came to be written, though usually little-known, has a great message within itself.

*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.*

These words written by John Newton (1725-1807) were based on personal experience. Growing up with no religious conviction, he served in the Royal Navy, later was involved in the Atlantic slave trade, was ultimately converted and entered Christian ministry. He went from the mire to the choir, by the *grace* of God.

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.

Horatio Gates Spafford (1828—1888) is best known for penning the words to “It is Well with My Soul.” While crossing the Atlantic, his wife survived a steamship accident, but all four of his daughters, ranging in age from two years to eleven years old, drowned. It is significant that soon after this tragedy, he wrote:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.  
It is well (it is well),  
with my soul (with my soul),  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Songs by Philip Bliss (who wrote the tune to “It is Well”) include “Wonderful Words of life,” “Hold the Fort,” and “Let the Lower Lights be Burning.” But in 1876 his life ended in tragedy. In bad weather, flood waters had weakened a railroad bridge, causing the train on which Bliss and his wife were riding to plunge 75 feet into a ravine where the wooden coaches caught fire. He was able to crawl to safety, but his wife was pinned under the ironwork of the seats. In his attempt to free her, the flames took their toll. No bodily remains were ever found.

Fanny Crosby (1820—1915), despite being blind from shortly after birth, wrote over 8,000 hymns and gospel songs. One of my favorites is “To God Be the Glory,” and there is also:

*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.*

She wrote this song in 1873. Little could she have realized that it would be known by millions, not only by being sung in churches, but through recordings and even a noted movie like “Places in the Heart.”

Hymn writers who have lived more recently come to mind: Ira Stanphill with “There’s Room at the Cross for You” and “I Know who Holds Tomorrow.” Also Bill Gaither with “Because He Lives” and “He Touched Me.” Great songs.

Stuart Hamblen (1908—1989) who came to Christ in Los Angeles through the Billy Graham ministry, wrote many fine gospel songs, including “How Big is God?” “They that Wait Upon the Lord,” “Known Only to Him,” “This Ole House,” and probably his best-known: “It is no Secret What God Can Do.”

John Wayne, howbeit indirectly, had a part in the writing of this song. During a visit at the home of John Wayne, there was some discussion of how Hamblin’s life had been changed, that it is no secret what God can do. Wayne said, in effect, that would be a good title for a song.

When the Hamblins arrived back home that night, 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,  
what he’s done for others, he’ll do for you....”*

The first time I ever sang and played the piano in church, at about age 15, the song was “It is no Secret What God can Do.”

Doris Akers (1923—1995), whom I met back in 1960 and we spoke briefly, wrote some fine gospel songs. I have especially liked the words of her song below which, in preaching, I have linked with Psalm 46:

*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, goats, water, springs, rivers, clouds, trees, fruit, planting, harvest, fishing, building, etc.—things that were familiar at that time. Over the centuries hymn writers, basing their thoughts on Scripture, used the same. The thought occurred to me: What about things that are known to us today, like modern inventions, might these not 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, turn your radio on.  
If you want to hear the songs of Zion  
Coming from the land of endless spring  
Get in touch with God, Turn your radio on.  
  
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 reminds me of my grandparents. They never had television, but at night, with only a dim light on, they would listen to the radio preachers. Grandma, it seemed to me as a boy, listened to obtain inspiration from their messages; Grandpa, though also a believer, listened to see where he disagreed with them!

Like radio, the telephone, provided some good analogies for gospel song writers: “When My Lord Picks up the Phone,” and “The Royal Telephone,” written in 1919 by Frederick M. Lehman:



*Central's never busy, always on the line  
You may hear from heaven, almost any time  
It's a royal service, free for one and all  
When you get in trouble give this royal line a call.  
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 gospel song writers:

“This train is bound for glory, this train...don't carry nothing but the righteous only...no gamblers, pickpockets, or hobo rambles” was made popular by Woody Guthrie.

Charles D. Tillman made this analogy:

*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 quail;  
Keep your hand upon the throttle,  
And your eye upon the rail.*

Years ago Roy Acuff wrote a gospel song about an automobile:

*Some people are just like an automobile  
They'll run fine when everything's right  
When the roads are all clear  
And there's plenty of sunshine and light...  
Look out for the tires for the blowouts will come  
On a dangerous curve deep and nigh,  
But if you'll let Jesus take hold of the wheel  
You'll make it to heaven on high.*

Because God is the Creator of all things, because he is the I AM THAT I AM, we can think of Him—not only as the God of things past—but of the *present* as well. This concept is reflected in the following unique, though little-known, hymn:

*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 pow'r 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 map and graph 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!\**

**“The earth is the LORD'S, and all its fulness”  
(Psa. 24:1).**

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