

January 23, 1983
Psalm 95:1-7

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"THE MINISTRY OF MUSIC"

A little over 10 years ago, I walked into a hospital one day, approached the volunteer at the desk, and asked if I could see John Paul Jones. She, in return, replied, "Are you pulling my leg?"

Those who have been in this church more than 10 years will know that John Paul Jones was, indeed, the director of music here a few years prior to Lee Jacobi and, like Lee Jacobi, he, too, was a fine musician and a loveable man. It was John Paul Jones who, one day, while speaking at a New Member Dinner and encouraging those new members to join one of the music groups in the church, admonished, "Join the choir and get your faith lifted."

If I were to give this morning's sermon a sub-title, it would be "How To Lift Your Faith", for music, I sincerely believe, can strengthen faith, put joy into one's mind and heart, and make life morally and spiritually better. Music is a means of grace.

Although there are pleasant sounds in nature and perhaps such a thing as "the music of the spheres", if that is what one desires to call the harmony in the universe, in reality music is an invention of man. Birds sing, but have little, if any, choice as to what they will sing. Through the evolutionary process, God has given man vocal chords with which he can make a large variety of sounds and ears which can distinguish them. Music is the art of putting those sounds together in such a way as to produce an arrangement which, most of the time, at least, is pleasing to the ear. Only humans can do that and some can do it well and become great benefactors of the race.

II

Although music has been associated with religion for thousands of years, it is mainly about one kind of religious music I wish to speak here. Church choirs give us elevated examples of church music when they sing anthems written for trained voices. However, I want to speak about hymns, which, by definition, are songs of praise or adoration to God composed for congregational singing.

Sometimes, I think, we treat hymns and hymn singing rather casually. I have concluded that church members can be divided basically into two classes; those who come to church for the music and those who come for the sermon. But if hymns are carefully chosen, they can add immeasurably to the message of the sermon. As Congreve put it,

"Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast,
To soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak."

I am acquainted with a number of strong and virile men who often shed tears at the sound of great music. The words of hymns also often carry great messages in the form of beautiful poetry. One of the best examples are the words of William Cowper:

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform:
He plants his footstep in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

In the words of that hymn, there is probably as much as can be humanly said about the problem of suffering.

III

But let me now give you a very brief run-down of the history of hymns with a special emphasis on hymns written by authors and composers of Congregational background.

Long before there was any Protestantism, in the 4th century the Bishop of Milan, Ambrose, by name, ushered in a great era of singing which lasted three hundred years. It was really he who introduced congregational singing.

Then, in the 6th century came Pope Gregory the Great who introduced Gregorian chants and instituted liturgical and musical reforms which were to last down to our own day. Unfortunately, the Gregorian chants required trained voices, so congregational singing virtually disappeared until Martin Luther reinstated it. All Protestants know and love his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

One hymn which we sing every Palm Sunday, "All Glory, Laud and Honor To Thee Redeemer King" (page 155, Pilgrim Hymnal) is over 1,000 years old. It was written by a man named Theodolph of Orleans while he was in prison. When King Louis I heard it sung, he immediately ordered Theodolph freed.

A contemporary of Martin Luther, John Calvin, who lived in Geneva, Switzerland, and whose theology greatly influenced our Pilgrim forefathers, published in 1562 the Geneva Psalter, which popularized the singing of metrical versions of the Old Testament Psalms. In the Pilgrim Hymnal which we use weekly, over 30 passages from the Psalms are set to hymn tunes.

Meanwhile, in England, the Baptists, under the leadership of John Bunyan, who wrote Pilgrims' Progress, were debating whether hymn singing was proper. They were finally convinced by a passage in the Gospel of Matthew which tells us that following the Last Supper and before going into the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn (26:30).

IV

And now we come to the Congregationalists. America's first book of any kind was published in 1640. It was a hymnal, The Bay Psalm Book, printed without music. A copy of the 1698 edition which contained music as well as words, sold in 1947 for over \$150,000. If you find one of those in your attic, cherish it. It became the "official" Congregational hymnbook.

Perhaps the greatest of all hymn writers was Isaac Watts, who wrote over 600 hymns. He was raised a Congregationalist and became an independent non-conformist, and so we will claim him as one of ours. He departed from the Psalms and wrote New Testament hymns. Many of them are still favorites, including "Joy To The World" and "O God, Our Help In Ages Past."

Many other Congregationalists, laymen as well as clergy, wrote hymns. Among the hymns so authored and found in the Pilgrim Hymnal are

- "Lead On O King Eternal" by Ernest Shurtleff (No. 375).
- "Once To Every Man and Nation" by James Russell Lowell (No. 441)
- "My Faith Looks Up To Thee" by Ray Palmer (No. 348)
- "Still, Still With Thee" by Harriet Beecher Stowe (No. 37)
- "O Master Let Me Walk With Thee" by Washington Gladden (No. 418)
- "God Be With You 'Till We Meet Again" by Jeremiah Rankin (No. 62)

All of these hymns remain in our hymnal, but there are two familiar hymns written by Congregationalists, which are no longer there. They are "Sweet Hour of Prayer" by William Walford and "The Little Brown Church In The Vale" by William Pitts. I do not know exactly why they have been omitted but possibly because the music is not considered up to standard and the words are a bit syrupy and sentimental.

V

Our modern church services would be bare, indeed, without music. Look down the order of worship any Sunday and note how much music is used. It is a source of joy and inspiration. It can often be educational. It is, indeed, a means of grace granted us through the love of God. Use it, enjoy it, and let it minister to your spirit.

(Much of the information in this article was obtained from the book, One Hundred and One Famous Hymns, by Charles Johnson, Hallberg Press, Delavan, WI, 1982.)