

What's In A Song? Tuning Our Hearts

By Kevin Twit

“Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without thinking.” Romans 12:2 paraphrased in The Message. 1

Recently public television aired a documentary entitled, “The Merchants of Cool.” The program revealed how the various media conglomerates shape our understanding of what “cool” is, and then steer the buying taste of our youth in this regard. Working with college students, I found this very relevant and so I invited some students over to watch the program. The show featured people like MTV’s vice president of brand strategy who described how they go about identifying what “cool” is, and then how they sell that message to our youth. After watching the program, one student said something I found quite perceptive. We were talking about how we as Christians can be set free from slavery to the culture’s idea of what it means to be cool. This student raised his hand and asked, “How can we can be set free from trying to be cool when churches seek to hire ‘cool’ youth directors? All I could say was, “That’s a good question.” It is an excellent question!

The culture does squeeze us, even in the Church. When we come together in worship it is to have our sanity restored. It is about the restoring of what God says is true about life, rather than being squeezed by the message our culture preaches. Worship is about restoring our sanity because we so often live in a sort of insanity! When we believe that we earn God’s favor by what we do, when we believe we can manipulate God to do whatever we want, we are not living in line with reality. That is living in a fantasy world. The world we actually live in is the world in which God loves us because of His great mercy in Christ. Yet we rarely live like that.

Worship is about opening our eyes to see Jesus for who he is, as beautiful and believable. This is what changes us! Worship is formative. It molds us and shapes us as the people of God. In Romans 12, Paul urges us to no longer be conformed to, or squeezed into the mold of, the world in which we live. The basis he gives for this is the mercy of God. As the mercy of God in the person of Jesus Christ sinks into our hearts, we are changed.

Thomas Chalmers was a great pastor, seminary professor, and leader in the Free Church of Scotland in the 19th century. He mentored men like Robert Murray McCheyne and Horatius Bonar (the hymnwriter), and he preached a landmark sermon entitled, “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.” It is a wonderful sermon in which he points out how we never lose our hold on one love until a new love comes along. 2 He says that the only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one. I often talk about this with my college students. A person never really gets over a crush until a new love comes along. Our hearts can be drawn from one affection to another, but they will never lose their longing to cling to something.

This is why John Calvin said that our hearts are like idol factories. We will worship something. We will love something and until a new more beautiful, more believable, love comes along, we will inevitably cling to idols! But the Gospel comes to us and it brings an expulsive power—the expulsive power of a new affection. A new affection comes in, as we see Jesus as more beautiful and believable and it drives out these other affections! It is in

worship, through the preaching, the singing, and the sacraments, that our hearts are drawn from other “beauties” as our eyes are opened to see Jesus for who He really is.

During my time in the ministry, I have come to appreciate the power of hymns to help us meditate upon the reality of God’s grace in worship and mold us as the people of God. When my students actually begin to read the words, they can’t believe that they used to regard hymns as lifeless and dull. As one student put it, “These songs convey emotion. Sorrow, loneliness, surprise, overwhelming joy! They are all here, and my generation doesn’t associate any of those qualities with hymns.” Unfortunately, sometimes this rich theological poetry is connected to tunes that fail to express the emotion of the lyric to my students. The words are so rich that we have begun to write new tunes for some of them. And I take whatever opportunity I can to urge gifted composers to search out powerful hymns that have tragically dropped out of use, or even to write new hymns.

Hymns take a truth from Scripture and let us sit in it for a while. They engage intellect, imagination, and emotion. The hymns are mini-meditations upon the mysteries of the Gospel that drive us to worship. They offer a story, something very attractive to postmodern people, and invite us to come in and see if it might be our story, too. For instance, I love to introduce students to the hymns of Anne Steele. She was an 18th century English Baptist hymn-writer who spent 50 years as an invalid. I believe she wrote some of the most remarkable hymns about the power of the Gospel in the midst of grief and pain that you will ever find. Yet her hymns unfortunately have vanished from almost every modern hymnal. When people sing her words they find themselves in her story. They find they can fellowship with a woman who lived 300 years. Suddenly the Kingdom of God becomes huge to them!

Hymns are theology on fire. They are theology expressed in beautiful, poetic language that gets at the heart, and engages the imagination. They help us to sit for three or four minutes in the mysteries of the Gospel that fill us with wonder. The hymn-writers really glory in these paradoxical statements. One of my favorite examples is in a hymn by Augustus Toplady (the author of “Rock of Ages”). He writes, “O love incomprehensible, that made Thee bleed for me. The Judge of all hath suffered death, to set His prisoner free.”³ To sit in that thought, even for a little while, changes you! And the more you meditate upon it, the more it overwhelms your heart.

C.H. Spurgeon once said “When I cannot understand anything in the Bible, it seems as though God had set a chair there for me, at which to kneel and worship; and that the mysteries are intended to be an altar of devotion.”⁴ These mysteries are what the hymns love to dwell upon. Hymns are mini-meditations on the ironies of the Gospel that drive us to worship. They are an opportunity to meditate upon a mystery like “And can it be, that Thou my God should die for me?”⁵ until it begins to really sink into our heart.

If we ever lose our sense of wonder, we will be conformed to the culture. If we ever lose our sense of the beauty and the amazement, we will be conformed to the culture, we will be conformed to the flesh. Hymns, you see, are not only opportunities for our meditation, they were often the result of meditation. It used to be that it was the pastors who would write the hymns. Often they would write a hymn at the end of a week of meditating upon their sermon.

For instance, John Newton's hymn Amazing Grace is actually a result of his meditating all week upon 1 Chronicles 17, God's covenant with David. We even have the notes from Newton's sermon the day that he first taught his people that hymn! ⁶ You might remember how David wants to build a house for God, but God tells him, "You aren't going to build me a house – I'm going to build your house! I have been traveling in a tent with my people and until they are settled, I won't be settled! David, I'm putting my house on hold because I am putting you first!" ⁷ Isn't that the heart of the Gospel – that God puts us first? As David sits in that, he is blown away, and as Newton sits in that, he too cannot help but cry "Amazing grace!"

Hymns are powerful. They sneak into our soul. As William Cowper sings, "Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings; it is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings." William Cowper was well aware of the power of hymns as he writes in a letter to a friend, "It is a noble thing to be a poet. It makes all the world so lively. I might have preached more sermons than even Tillotson did and better, and the world would have been still fast asleep. But a volume of verse is a fiddle that puts the universe in motion." ⁸ Hymns have this ability to sneak in undetected and surprise us! And we desperately need the truth of the mercy of God to break through, to reform us, to restore our sanity, to open our eyes to help us see Jesus as beautiful and believable — in short, to shape us as a people of God. The hymns have power to do just that.

In her book, *A Royal Waste of Time*, Marva Dawn tells of Vaclav Havel, a playwright who is also the president of the Czech Republic. He was asked, how the revolution to overthrow communism in the Czech Republic was bloodless and yet had experienced real staying power. He simply replied, "We had our parallel society. And in that parallel society, we wrote our plays and sang our songs and read our poems, until we knew the truth so well that we could go out into the streets of Prague and say, 'We don't believe your lies anymore!' And communism had to fall." ⁹

Isn't that a beautiful picture of what worship should be about? We gather to sing our songs so we will know the truth so well that we can go out into the world and we say, "We don't believe your lies anymore! We won't be squeezed into your mold!" And so we can speak to our fearful heart and say, "Heart, I don't believe your lies anymore!" (or as Charles Wesley put it, "Arise my soul arise! Shake off your guilty fear!") because Jesus can trump even what my heart says! And Jesus does trump our hearts as He becomes beautiful and believable to you. That is why we gather in worship. That is why I urge you, use the hymns of the church! God is using them to mold us to the truth, restore our sanity, and open our eyes to see Jesus as beautiful and believable.

1 Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), 328.

2 From Tim Keller's unpublished syllabus, "Preaching The Gospel in A Postmodern World," 2000, pg. 18 quoting from Thomas Chalmers "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection" from *The Works of Thomas Chalmers*, Vol. 2, (New York: Robert Carter, 1830).

3 *Diary And Selection of Hymns of Augustus Toplady* (Leicester, England: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust Ltd., 1969), 99.

4 W. Williams, *Personal Reminiscences Of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (London, The Religious Tract Society, 1895), 198.

5 Charles Wesley.

6 Richard Cecil, *The Life Of John Newton* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2000), 365.

7 Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999) 71.

8 William Cowper and James Thomson, *The Works of Cowper and Thomson* (Philadelphia: J. Grigg, 1845), 290.

9 Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" Of Time* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 334.

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