

RUF Worship Seminar

By Rev. Kevin Twit, GA 2006

Introduction: We don't *only* sing hymns in RUF meetings, but we do sing quite a lot of hymns and exploring *why* this is gives us a doorway in to understanding some of our presuppositions about worship and ministry.

- **We want to build the church for the next generation** – part of the DNA of RUF campus ministers is to be thinking about the church down the road 20 years from now. How will the songs we sing today strengthen the church 20 years from now? As John Witvliet asks in his book “Worship Seeking Understanding” how does our worship prepare our people for their encounter with death?
- **These things I'm talking about should be transferable, they are not specific to college ministry**, although I think working with college students gives us a glimpse of the future and a chance to try new things that a more established church may not always be able to do.
- **My comments are born out of noticing how hymn texts were resonating with my students and reflecting on why they were resonating so deeply with these texts.**
“Coming from a typical praise chorus-reliant high school youth group I sort of turned my nose up as I was handed a notebook of hymns at my first visit to RUF. I didn't understand a lot of the poetic and imagery-driven lyrics and the word hymn automatically meant boring music. But as the weeks passed, I found myself falling in love with the old hymns and the idea of putting new (and very beautiful) music to them. The words are so profound and full of truth one can't help but be broken. Singing hymns has seriously changed my life and freed me from feeling frustrated by surface lyrics that focus on how I feel about God, which is always changing. Hymns have allowed me to center my worship on the Gospel, which in turn compels me to love the God I am prone to hate and wander from.” From a post on a website by “Lori” (one of my students)
- **What's going on?** See “The Younger Evangelicals” by Robert Webber, “Bobos in Paradise” by David Brooks, and “The New Faithful” by Colleen Carroll. Webber writes, “I find three trends in the worship of the younger evangelical. They are (1) a reaction to entertainment worship, (2) a longing for an experience of God's presence, and (3) a restoration of liturgical elements of worship.”
- **“My grandmother saved it, my mother threw it away, and now I'm buying it back!”** In many ways this captures the way younger evangelicals regard their Baby Boomer parents and church traditions.
- **So, why do we sing so many hymns in RUF?** Because of the principles that drive our understanding of ministry and spiritual formation.

I. We Believe Worship Is Formative And This It Matters What We Sing

- **We want Christ to be displayed so that He becomes more beautiful and believable in our eyes.** In poor writing you say “the heroine was beautiful.” But in good writing you describe her in such a way that the reader exclaims “She is beautiful!” We believe with Thomas Chalmers that spiritual change happens through the expulsive power of a new affection and thus we want everything we say and sing and pray to support this.
- **Hymns focus us on God’s promises more than upon ours!** We grow by feeding on God’s character revealed and by feasting on His promises. Many modern choruses, with their almost constant emphasis on what *we* want to do, (“Lord I just want to ...”) fail to teach us to rely on God’s love for us as 1John 4:16 says (“We know and rely on *God’s* love for us”). We need to recall Augustus Toplady’s hymn “Rock of Ages” (originally titled “A living and dying prayer for the holiest believer on earth”): *“Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone, thou must save and thou alone!”*
- **Hymns stretch us!** Postmoderns despise a watered-down, content-less gospel! We need solid theology rather than just a constant diet of fluff and fads. Hymns are theology on fire! Hymns are a great way to wrestle with theology because they connect theology to life and worship rather than allowing theology to just puff us up as disconnected truths.
- **We believe that we mustn’t be afraid of content in our worship services!** Sometimes we might even have to ask someone what a line means. But who says that everything we sing must be instantly accessible? Is there no value to learning songs that take some work? Why is “Henry Lyte’s “Jesus I My Cross have Taken” one of my students favorite hymns?
- **Hymns offer a more full emotional range of expression.** Dan Allender (Christian counselor) has said that if we sang more Psalms we would have a lot less need for Christian counselors. I think a similar thing could be said for hymns because they help us work through emotions and they cover a wider range of emotions than modern choruses. This is often a surprising point because we associate hymns with a lack of emotion and modern choruses with emotional excess at times, but careful study will reveal the emotional range touched on by modern choruses is really rather narrow.
- **Hymns tend to engage our imagination, intellect, and will together!** Many praise choruses go directly for the emotions, but good hymns (unlike many of the melodramatic gospel songs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries), give us rich language and images that require us to think and imagine as the way to stir the passions. While praise choruses do use imagery, many times they are stuck in the same limited number of clichés that no longer engage our imaginations. The scriptures are full of diverse images and our songs should reflect this creativity too! For example, *“I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain”* (from “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go” by Matheson) recalls the covenant with Noah *and* applies it to our current situation in a rich way.
- **Hymns broaden our range of metaphors.** Modern choruses tend to be pretty limited in the metaphors used, in contrast to the rich range of metaphors we find in scripture and in the classic hymn tradition. The reason this matters is that as Peter Matheson argues in “The Imaginative World Of The Reformation”, *“When your metaphors change, your world changes with*

them.” Postmodern people think more in terms of metaphor and image than linearly, and in the hymn tradition we have a great resource to engage this generation!

- **Hymns are great art!** The arts, stories, poetry, music all combine to sneak into the heart by the backdoor – something increasingly important for our ministry to the coming generations. *“How will you reach this post-modern generation – a generation that cannot conceive of objective truth, cannot follow your linear arguments, cannot tolerate anything (including evangelism) that smacks of religious intolerance?”* (Kevin Ford)
- **Hymns tell a story and walk us through the gospel.** I would say modern choruses are often more like “images” that flash on the television screen for but a moment. They do stir us, but they don’t take us anywhere. (Although I will say that a skillful worship leader can string together choruses to take us from somewhere *to* somewhere. Unfortunately though because choruses are rather limited in the themes they address, the journey is more restricted and often less interesting.) In a good hymn, the writer offers their story and invites you to try it on and see if it might be your story too!
- **Hymns help us connect with a generation that longs for an experience of God.** Hymns are some of the richest expression of Christian experience we have – they are a doorway into sensing the truth on our hearts! Wesley’s “Arise My Soul Arise” is a great example of crying out to God to sense what we confess.

II. We Want To Focus Students On Justification, Sanctification, Glorification and Scripture

- **Hymns remind us that we can only approach God through the shed blood of Jesus (1Pet 2:5)** It is amazing how little the gospel is celebrated in some modern choruses. The idea that we only approach God as Christians through the blood of Christ is (I hope) assumed but it is too rarely mentioned! And when the cross is mentioned, it is only mentioned, it is never explained or unpacked or gazed upon. **We need deeper and richer, and longer, looks at the cross and all that it means!** As Luther advised, *“For every one look you take of your sin, take 10 looks at the cross!”* But we rarely look at our sin, perhaps because we don’t look at the cross enough! If you really look at your sin without seeing the cross as huge – it will devastate you!
- **Hymns often have a law/gospel dynamic at work in them.** They teach us the way a mature Christian looks at things like trials which challenges us, but they also remind us often of the fullness of grace which reaches us where we are.
- **Hymns are mini-meditations on the “paradoxes” of the gospel that drive us to worship.** 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.”* I think that is good advice. And hymns are an opportunity to sit in a mystery like *“And can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?!”* until it begins to enter into our heart!
- **Many hymns actually are born out of meditation upon scripture – an art we desperately need to relearn!** Hymns take their theme and turn it over and let us gaze upon it from all different angles. And they often will suggest (though by no means do they ever exhaust) ways in which this truth should change our lives.

- **Hymns help us connect dots, not just between our head and heart, but they help us connect scriptural truths to various situations and stages of life.** And we need to help students connect the dots between head and heart and between the gospel and all of life, throughout all the stages of their lives – modernism and postmodernism drive us to live disconnected lives where we try on different identities like hats.

III. We Want To Give Students A Bigger Picture Of The Kingdom Of God

- **Biblical worship is not the property of any one culture. We look forward to worship with people from every race, tribe, and tongue (Rev. 21)** The kings of all the earth bring their splendor before the Lord! *“If our churches are really going to reflect the diversity that makes up the body of Christ then everybody is going to have to sing songs they don’t like.”* Marva Dawn
- **Practically this can be difficult to do because it means we are always having to submit our preferences to the kingdom which is bigger than one culture.** There is a church music application for “Fathers don’t exasperate your children!” (Eph 6:4a) as well as for “be submissive to those who are older” (1Pet 5:1)
- **We want students to know that they are rooted in a church that is bigger than our own time.** *“The challenge is to provide roots and wings – to bring young people into a sense of connectedness with the past that doesn’t rob them of their vision of the future.”* (Gerard Kelly “Retro-Future”) When we come before God in worship the Bible says the angels are there and so are those Christians who have went before us! (Hebrews 12:22-24) By the way, we don’t only sing hymns with new music. The RUF hymnbook is half old hymns with traditional tunes.
- **We don’t mind some archaic language because it helps remind students that the church is bigger than their generation and even includes people who don’t think and talk like them.** C.S. Lewis’ essay “On The Reading Of Old Books” is helpful to consult on this point. Two things drive real worship. One is awe and reverence (transcendence.) The other is the security we have in the gospel (the unshakable kingdom.) This produces intimacy. True worship is marked by both reverence and awe *and* intimacy. Unfortunately, most Christians emphasize one or the other. But looking at God through the eyes of people who lived in past centuries can correct some of the skew of our modern outlook. Old hymns can help.
- **But we must beware of worshipping tradition and hymns themselves.** Hymns are not beyond critique, though many of the poor ones have dropped out of sight.

For more on this topic I would direct you to my audio lecture on “Why We Still Need Hymns” available as a free download at www.covenantseminary.edu and the resources available at www.igracemusic.com as well as the “Sounds” page at www.ruf.org

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