

Music in Worship

Singing has always been a feature of the Christian faith. Early Christians were encouraged by the apostle Paul to sing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." The oldest known hymn is attributed to Clement of Alexandria in about A.D. 170.

Shepherd of tender youth,
Guiding in loving truth,
Through devious ways;
Christ our triumphant King.
We come Thy Name to sing,
Hither the children bring Tributes of praise.

One of the most significant eras of hymnody, both musically and textually, was the period between the third and the seventh century. Under the leadership of Bishop Ambrose of Milan (340-397), old tunes were revised and set to uniform rhythmic patterns which corresponded with the rhythm of speech.

The Protestant Reformation became a dynamic force behind several new trends in church music. Luther and Calvin tried to restore the theological place of music in the worship service and in the daily fellowship with God.

Charles Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, wrote approximately 6,500 hymns. His hymns were designed to express personal faith and the Christians responsibilities. Hymns have also been, and for that matter still are, important in the proclamation of the gospel. Evangelist of the gospel with his musical associate Ira D. Sankey began using gospel songs in their world wide ministry. Sankey's "Sacred Songs and Solos" are still used in many evangelical churches across North America. Fanny Crosby (1820-1915) wrote the astonishing number of more than 8,000 religious poems; many of them became hymns.

A well known Canadian hymn writer is Dr. Oswald J. Smith. Once someone mentioned to Dr. Smith: "I want a hymn, depicting the change that took place in the lives of men when Jesus came." Dr. Smith made a mental note of that request, and the next day he had the poem, "Then Jesus Came" ready. Appropriate music was written for it, and it became a great favourite. It has often been sung by Rev. Shea.

When Jesus comes, the tempter's power is broken,
When Jesus comes, the tears are wiped away;
He takes the gloom and fills the life with Glory,
For all is changed when Jesus comes to stay.

The experience of faith and the gospel proclamation through singing has been one of the strongest elements of a living church.

But how can we sing when Jesus tells us that we must bear the cross and share His suffering? It is rare that a separated Christian receives praise on this side of the grave. The Wesleys are a good example of this strange phenomenon. They were derided and scorned; even worse, they were treated as lepers. Their irrepressible joy in Christ embarrassed people and made them look away and hurry out of their presence.

But now we sing their hymns. Trials and persecution have resulted in great singing. When the first fires for the martyrs were lit during the Reformation and the smoke curled up to heaven, the condemned followers of the "new teaching" sang "Te Deum Laudamus."

Gerhard Tersteegen, in a lovely hymn, seeks to comfort the pilgrims who go unnoticed through the wilderness of this life. The last stanza reads:

We follow in His footsteps; What if our feet be torn?
Where He was marked the pathway
All hail the briar and the thorn!
Scarce seen, scarce heard, unreckoned,
Despised, defamed, unknown
Or heard but by our singing, On, children! ever on!

The line "heard by our singing" gives the true spirit of church history. The historians tell us of councils, and doctrinal strife, but in the midst of all these happenings, a few never lost sight of the Eternal City and managed to walk on earth as if they had nearly reached heaven.

These were the ones who neither gained fame nor were deemed worthy of a reference in church history tomes. Their talents may not have been many, but their song was heard. You have understood something of the message of the Christian faith when you can sing while going through difficulties and trials.

John Milton lost his sight and mourned that loss in touching verse in the third book of *Paradise Lost*.

Darkness had fallen and never again would he see
Day, or the sweet approach of even or morn,
Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
Of flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
But cloud instead, and everduring dark

But despite his physical handicap, he refused to be downhearted. He still could think and communicate with the God who is there. He could "feed on thoughts that voluntary move harmonious numbers." Despite the darkness all around him, he could sing:

... as the wakeful bird Sings darkling, and shadiest covert hid,
Tunes her nocturnal note.

The world is big, confused, troubled and dark, When you read your newspapers you hardly feel like singing. Often Christ's followers stand under the shadow of the world's displeasure. Perhaps the busy world does not even notice that a Christian is there - except that he is heard by his singing.

Johan D. Tangelder
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