

Scripture, Shekinah, and Sacred Song: How God’s Word and God’s Presence Should Shape the Song of God’s People

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The song of God’s people plays a crucial role in the faith formation and doctrinal understanding of the church because the content of worship shapes the worshiper’s view of God. The content of congregational song must therefore be carefully scrutinized so that the songs on the lips of God’s people do not promote vain or even false worship. The words must be doctrinally sound, so they must reflect biblical truth in all that they teach. Christian worship proclaims, celebrates, and enacts the Gospel of Christ, so congregational songs must present the truth of God’s goodness in all that he says and does. The most outstanding feature of God’s people at worship actually has nothing to do with the worshipers themselves, but is instead the presence of God among them. Therefore, the words and music of corporate worship should reflect the truth of God’s beauty, for, as J. I. Packer so eloquently stated, “knowing God is a relationship calculated to thrill a person’s heart.”²

In this paper I will argue that God’s Word and God’s Presence should directly shape the song of God’s people in at least three specific ways. First, the words and music of corporate worship songs should be biblically based and should therefore reflect God’s truth; they should be Christ-centered and so should reflect God’s goodness;³ and they should be skillfully crafted and performed as an offering in God’s holy presence and should therefore reflect his beauty. Section one of the paper explores the relationship of Scripture and shekinah to Christian worship, section two explains how the truth, goodness, and beauty of God ought to be reflected in congregational song, and section three provides an analysis of three hymns in light of the truths presented in the paper’s first two sections.

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²J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 36.

³I am not suggesting that every hymn or praise song must be specifically about Jesus. Rather, if we understand the Scriptures as all pointing to Christ (Luke 24:44) and all of history unfolding around his Gospel (Rom 8:19–23; Col 1:15–20), then the overall thrust of the songs we sing in worship will be Christ-centered.

God's Word and Presence in Worship

All truth about worship resides in God's Word. In the Old Testament, to ignore God's commands through his Word brought disastrous consequences.⁴ For example, King Rehoboam abandoned God's law and God abandoned him to the Egyptian army (2 Chr 12:1–8). Worse, when the leaders and priests of Israel did not continue in obedience to God's Word, the Israelites were left without teaching or direction and became a stench in God's nostrils (2 Chr 15:3–6; Jer 2; Mal 2). Their worship inevitably suffered (Amos 5:21).

Likewise today, worship frequently seems to conform more to the spirit of this age than to the decrees of almighty God. Too often, biblical worship is something to which evangelicals pay lip service rather than something that is a passionate pursuit. Evangelical worship often fails to be saturated or even to be shaped by Scripture.⁵ In the name of "reaching people," all manner of forms and content are incorporated into public worship without considering whether they will please Jesus Christ, the one through whom all true worship is offered. Sociologist Christian Smith has labeled the prevailing religion of America "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," and his study and others like it suggest that most young people (and by extension their parents), do not believe in absolute truth or conform their lives to the teachings of Scripture because the true Gospel is not being preached, taught, or sung even in evangelical churches.⁶ Regarding the state of evangelical worship William Willimon commented some thirty years ago, "Rather than calling such worship idolatry or apostasy, all too many of us label it 'contemporary' and 'relevant.' At least no one calls it faithful."⁷ In contrast to worship that reflects *culture*, worship that pleases God reflects the *glory of God* through fidelity to his Word.

The Bible is not only authoritative for Christian living, it is also sufficient for Christian worship. The Bible essentially fulfills two primary functions in the life of God's people: it reveals who God is, and it calls people to obedience. Scripture opens with the declaration that God existed before all things and that he created all things (Gen 1–2). He spoke the world into existence that all of creation would magnify his great and awesome name (Ps 19:1–4, Rom 1:18–32, Ps 95:1–6; Luke 19:37–40). Through his Word God reveals his divine attributes, including his holiness, righteousness, omniscience, omnipotence, goodness, and beauty. He manifests his Divine authority as sovereign King over all that he has made and he demands a response of obedience to his revealed will in his written Word.

⁴See, for example, Deut 27:26; 28:58–63; 29:21.

⁵Reggie Kidd, "10 Words: Worship Practitioners Are Always Theologians," *Worship Leader* 21:3 (May 2012), 23; Cf. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 3–4, 17ff., 41–42, 279–285 and Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship from the Garden to the New Creation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 35–40.

⁶Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); see also Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

⁷William H. Willimon, *The Bible: A Sustaining Presence in Worship* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1981), 15.

“To disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God himself.”⁸ The good news for God’s people is that “the secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut 29:29, ESV).

Through the Bible, God reveals himself and commands a response of obedience. Those two functions of Scripture also form the basic definition of worship. At its heart, Christian worship is communion with God in which God reveals himself to his people and they respond in loving obedience. This two-fold action of God’s self-disclosure as God, the only acceptable object of worship, and his graciously calling people to himself that they might love and obey him is at the heart of the covenant formula expressed throughout the Old and New Testaments: “I will be your God and you will be my people.”⁹ No wonder that James B. Torrance concluded, “The Bible is supremely a manual of worship, but too often it has been treated, particularly in Protestantism, as a manual of ethics, of moral values, of religious ideas, or even of sound doctrine.”¹⁰ God’s written Word ought to form the foundation for all Christian worship, including the content of our songs and the manner in which we use those songs because the Bible is sufficient to address the church on this and every other issue we may face.

Rather than looking to culture or even to other churches for guidance in how to worship God, worship leaders must look to the fount of wisdom that is God’s Word and use scriptural norms to choose and evaluate every element of corporate worship. Such a point should not need to be made in evangelical churches, which often claim to be “people of the Book,” but my experiences as a worship and music minister and as a worship and church music professor convince me otherwise. One objective of this paper is to contend for the truth of God’s unchanging Word and to make an appeal to pastors, church musicians, and congregants to take seriously their responsibility to worship under the Word and to evaluate every worship service and every song in worship by the Bible.

To evaluate congregational songs according to biblical norms, pastors and other worship leaders must not merely know the Bible, they must know God. The objective of Scripture is not simply an intellectual assent to its claims about God or about worship, but a living relationship with the Triune God to whom it all points.¹¹ God’s Word is like a skeleton that provides the proper framework for Christian worship, but it is God’s Spirit that gives life to what would otherwise be the dry bones of religious observance (John 5:39–40; Ezek 37:14). Once, the church was not God’s people, but by the blood of Christ and the Spirit who

⁸Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 81–82.

⁹See, for example, Exod 6:7, Jer 7:23, 11:4, 30:22, Ezek 36:28; 2 Cor 6:16, Heb 8:10; for a fuller treatment of the relationship of the Covenant Formula to the worship life of God’s people, see Jonathan Blackmon, “Revelation, Response, and Relationship in the Covenant Life of the People of Yahweh: Worship As Metanarrative,” (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007).

¹⁰James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 9.

¹¹Packer, 23, 37.

gives new birth, the church has become the people of God (1 Pet 2:9–10). Without the sustaining, evaluative structure of the Bible, however, a congregation is like a dismembered body whose every prayer and every song is an abomination to God (Prov 28:9; Amos 5:21–23).

The presence of God defines the worshipping congregation more than any other feature. It is not the people themselves, nor any external rites that they perform (including songs), and certainly not their own righteousness that makes them fit to worship as citizens of God’s kingdom, but the glory of God that dwells in their midst sets God’s people apart, demonstrates his favor, and sanctifies their communion with him (Exod 25:8, 33:16, 40:35). The term shekinah stems from the Hebrew word “*shakan*,” meaning to settle or reside, abide, continue, dwell, or inhabit¹² and it refers to a special manifestation of the glorious presence of God.¹³ The shekinah glory was present with Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exod 24:16) and with the children of Israel in the pillar of fire by day and the cloud by night (Num 9:17–22). So crucial was God’s indwelling presence to the identity of the Hebrews as God’s chosen people that Moses prayed that God would not even bother to lead them out of the wilderness into the promised land if his presence did not go with them (Exod 33:15). Yet the shekinah glory also raises important questions about the identity of Yahweh, the nature of biblical worship, and the role of congregational song.

God’s indwelling presence, the shekinah glory, manifests itself in the context of covenant because God only tabernacles with his own people. The people of Israel met with God on the mountain where he covenanted with them through Moses (Exod 19–24), took them as his people, and became their sole object of acceptable worship. “I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. They shall know that I am the LORD their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God” (Exod 29:45–46, NASB). The purpose of Israel’s redemption from Egypt was so that they would become a people for God’s own possession and glory and therefore worship the one, true God who came to live in their midst (Ps 74:2).

The shekinah glory revealed important truths about the character of God to his people. When God manifested his presence to his people by dwelling in their midst through cloud and fire, he guided them to the promised land, the place where he caused his name to dwell (Deut 12:5).¹⁴ God’s name and presence were often intertwined in his dealings with his people because the name of God speaks to his identity, as, for example, when God made his glory to pass in front of Moses:

¹²Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson, Study edition, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), II:1496–99; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 1014–15.

¹³Victor P. Hamilton, “Shakan,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1980), II:925; Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), II:1943–44; Cf. George Foot Moore, “Intermediaries in Jewish Theology: Memra, Shekinah, Metatron,” *Harvard Theological Review* 15:1 (1922): 41–85, 55–57.

¹⁴Cf. Deut 14:23; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2; Jer 7:12; Ezek 43:7.

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exod 34:6–7, ESV)

God, whom the highest heavens cannot contain (1 Kgs 8:27), revealed his immanence and lovingkindness through his divine presence.¹⁵

The shekinah also showed God's holiness and glory. When the Israelites built the tabernacle, they had to cleanse the holy place with a blood sacrifice prior to its use as a place of worship (Lev 16:16), and the inner sanctuary where the ark resided was called the holy of holies because God's presence was there. At the dedication of the tabernacle (Exod 40:35) and again at the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8:10–11), God's presence was so holy, glorious, and powerful, that no one was able to come near it. When Moses saw the mere remnants of the shekinah, described as “God's back,” the luminosity of his face was such that it frightened the people (Exod 34:30). The divine presence among the community of faith was no cute thing and certainly not to be taken for granted because God's holiness and glory require humble worship from his people, as Moses demonstrated when he quickly bowed to the ground in humble homage to the Lord (Exod 34:8).

The shekinah glory signified God's presence, proclaimed God's name and character, and demonstrated his holiness and glory, but it culminated in communion between God and his people that was characterized by God's glory on the one hand and the spiritual cleanliness of God's chosen people on the other. The psalmist asked who may ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in his holy presence; the answer—the person with clean hands and a pure heart (Ps 24:3–4). Remarkably, the shekinah glory gave the covenant community the opportunity to see the invisible God,¹⁶ but not in visible form. God prohibited graven images of any kind and did not allow Israel to use them in their worship because they did not see any kind of physical form in the fire on the mountain (Deut 4:14–20).¹⁷ Rather, their vision of God and their communion with God were spiritual in nature.

God blesses the pure in heart with spiritual vision to behold his glory through the eyes of faith. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the shekinah was a special manifestation of the presence of God, but the light and glory were not God himself.¹⁸ In Jesus, however, all the fulness of the Godhead dwells in bodily form (Col 1:19; 2:9; Heb 1:3). The shekinah glory now resides permanently in Christ, the light of God, who is full of grace and truth (John 1:1–5, 14; 2 Cor 4:4–6). God still tabernacles with people in the context of the covenant

¹⁵Hamilton, 925–26; see also Leonard S. Kravitz, “Shekinah as God's Spirit and Presence,” *The Living Pulpit* 5:1 (Jan–Mar 1996): 22–23, 22.

¹⁶See for example, Exod 19:16–20; 24:9–11; 34:5–8; Acts 9:3–6; 2 Pet 1:16–18.

¹⁷David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 31.

¹⁸Hamilton, 925; Peterson, 32–33; Foot, 57.

community (2 Cor 6:14–18) but acceptable worship now takes place only through Jesus Christ, the mediator and perfect reflection of God’s glory. As the shekinah, Jesus is the tabernacle of God, the light of God, and the voice of God to his people.

When God’s manifest presence fills the community of faith, their worship takes on several important characteristics. Christian worship must be characterized by holiness and purity because God’s presence requires it. The objective of Christian worship ought to be the glory of God and its outcome joyful obedience that grows from the knowledge of God. Since Jesus is the both the Word of God made flesh and the light of God dwelling among his people, true worship should be Christo-centric. In such a context, the word of Christ indwells believers who cannot help but burst forth into jubilant song (Col 3:16).

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Song of God’s People

The music churches use in their corporate worship ought to reflect the truth, goodness, and beauty of God both in terms of the content of the lyrics and the construction of the music. The composition, selection, and performance of music for Christian worship merits serious and careful reflection because it is intended as a musical offering for almighty God.¹⁹ God’s Word and presence ought to fill and shape the music of worship because the Church is the temple of the living God (1 Cor 3:10–17; 2 Cor 6:14–18) and it matters what kind of offerings we present to the Lord, music included.

Whether we realize it or not, all of creation, and all forms of media within creation, communicate something. God created them to proclaim his glory, but creation groans under the curse caused by the Fall and is subject to misuse. Music, as an act of creation and as a form of media, communicates through the way in which a composer treats the elements of pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and timbre and certainly through the text. It also communicates through the manner of performance. Music is an emotive art form designed to express thoughts, ideas, and emotions both for the composer and the performer. Music, especially music for worship, may express the beliefs of the congregation that participates in it, but it also shapes them.²⁰ Part of the pastoral task in selecting music for worship lies in putting appropriate songs on the lips of worshipers that will not only express their hearts and minds, but will also help to form them into biblical Christians who are transformed more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

Music in worship ought to reflect the truth of God. The Word of Christ is the true word, the right word, and the sanctifying word that ought to fill the music of corporate worship (Col 3:16; Jn 17:17, 2 Tim 2:15, Jas 1:18). The corpus of Psalms, hymns, and canticles recorded in Scripture persistently testify to who God is and what he has done on our behalf. Psalm 95 opens with an exhortation to sing for joy to the Lord. Why this joyous strain? Verse three provides the answer: “For the LORD is a great God And a great King above all gods.” In Psalm 48 the psalmist declares, “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be

¹⁹T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2010), 25–27.

²⁰John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 231.

praised.” Corporate worship music functions in part as a proclamation of God’s attributes and actions by people who delight in him.²¹ God is majestic and glorious (Isa 24:14–15), mighty (Isa 42:13), redeemer (Isa 44:23), a strong fortress (Ps 59:16–17), faithful (Ps 71:22), savior (Ps 98:1–3), righteous and just (Ps 67:4; 95:13), powerful (Ps 21:13), and awesome in holiness (Ps 68:4–5, 32–35). The musical sources in Scripture indicate that the subject of worship is God. Churches desiring to follow biblical norms in their worship music will choose songs that reflect the truth about God and make much of him—and not just some of the truth, but the whole counsel of God.

Music in worship ought to reflect the goodness of God. Music for worship that follows biblical standards consistently strikes a tone of joyful trust in a sovereign God no matter what the circumstances of life may be. The Psalms do not take a glib or superficial approach to happiness in God, yet even when crying out to God in lamentation the psalmists almost always turn to praise.²² The psalmist may be surrounded by people who are like lions and fiery beasts (Ps 57:4), with seemingly no way out of difficulty (Ps 59:1–3, 6–7), but the psalms consistently turn to praise because of God’s great lovingkindness.²³ Christians can rejoice in the Lord always and in all circumstances because God is good and his steadfast love never fails. Musical sources in the Bible teach worshipers to meditate on God’s greatness and goodness, on his unsearchable attributes and his acts of lovingkindness toward his people and to do so as an act of worship in response to him (Ps 145:5–7). The music of corporate worship should provide the body of believers with an opportunity to respond to the acts of God. “O sing to the LORD a new song, For he has done wonderful things” (Ps 98:1a). Whenever the Israelites experienced deliverance, they sang. Even Jonah, who prayed from the belly of the great fish, sang a song of thanksgiving for deliverance (Jonah 2:1–9). The Bible repeatedly speaks of singing with thanksgiving in your heart to God because he is good.

The days may be evil, but God’s chosen people must sing with thankfulness in their hearts to God. Not only can believers thank God for his numerous acts in history and his countless blessings in their own lives, they should always celebrate Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross and his ongoing High priestly ministry (Heb 7:24–27). “Whatever else our worship is, it is our liturgical amen to the worship of Christ.”²⁴ In corporate worship, the community of faith responds to God through Christ and extols him for his mighty deeds; music is an appropriate tool for such a proclamation. As the musical material in the Scriptures demonstrates, biblical worship celebrates the truth of God’s goodness through song.

The music of corporate worship ought to reflect the beauty of God, not just in its words but in the construction and performance of the music. The prevailing thought in

²¹Paul Westermeyer, *The Heart of the Matter: Church Music as Praise, Prayer, Proclamation, Story, and Gift* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001), 31–33.

²²The only exception of which I am aware is Psalm 88.

²³The references in the Psalms to God’s lovingkindness are too numerous to list here, but see the following for example: Ps 57:7–10; 69:16–17; 89:1; 90:14; 101:1.

²⁴Torrance, 14.

modern Christianity seems to be one of aesthetic relativism, that music is merely a matter of taste. This paper rejects such a notion as unbiblical. Jesus proclaimed, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6a). Absolute truth resides in God and in his Word: God is truth and therefore there are objective standards of truth. The psalmist exclaimed, “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps 34:8a). The measure of what is good resides in the Lord whose lovingkindness never fails: God is good and therefore there are objective standards of goodness. In Scripture, the closer that worshipers drew near to God in faith, the more intense was their desire to behold his glory (Exod 33:18, for example). No one can see God and live (Exod 33:20; 1 Tim 6:16), but Creation silently proclaims God’s glory and bears witness to his beauty (Ps 19:1–4). “If the world is indeed created, it follows that the beauty, goodness and wisdom of its creator are reflected, however dimly, in the world around us.”²⁵ From the manifold truth and wisdom of the Scriptures to the rationality and aesthetic beauty of the universe, the beauty of God is evident: God is beautiful and therefore there are objective standards of beauty. Music in worship ought to reflect biblical norms for beauty just as it reflects God’s truth and goodness.

Since the Enlightenment, people have thought about beauty in very different ways than they did previously.²⁶ Before, art for its own sake did not exist; artists were skilled craftsmen who created what we call “works of art” for functional purposes.²⁷ Beauty was not something that was simply pleasing to the eye or judged according to personal taste.²⁸ On the contrary, beauty was understood in terms of how well the art—whether painting, sculpture, music, metalwork, *et cetera*—fulfilled its function and followed the rules for working skillfully in a given medium.

Music or other works of art may be pleasing to the eye in the sense of being pretty (at least on the surface), but that does not make them beautiful. Christians need to come to terms with beauty from a biblical perspective (which may be closer to the pre-Enlightenment view than post-Enlightenment), because without a theological conception of beauty,

[People] will see in the Christian faith only what strikes them as flat, moralistic and platitudinous compared to the troubling, haunting depths of Mahler or King Lear. Unless the experience of beauty in nature and the arts is encompassed and affirmed the Christian faith will seem to have nothing of interest or importance to say. This is not, however, just a tactic to win the allegiance of the lost. The fact is that God is beautiful and the Church is hiding this. . . . For without a positive theological

²⁵Alister McGrath, *Glimpsing the Face of God: The Search for Meaning in the Universe*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 51; see also McGrath, *The Passionate Intellect: Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 74–75.

²⁶H. R. Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* (Downes Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 5–12; Cf. Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence, 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life*, first Perennial ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 68–71; Rookmaaker and Barzun both argue that the transition to the Enlightenment view of art began sometime during the Renaissance.

²⁷Rookmaaker, 7; Barzun, 70.

²⁸Rookmaaker, 9; Barzun, 71.

evaluation of beauty there is no motive to delight in God and no compelling reason to love him.²⁹

Beauty, as it relates to corporate worship music, requires skill, craftsmanship, attention to detail, and an understanding of how to work with the essential elements of music in a way that ignites the imagination of worshipers. Perhaps the quintessential example is Johann Sebastian Bach.³⁰ Bach understood music as the living voice of the gospel and wrote music that did more than just accompany the text: his music consistently provided a theological commentary on the text in ways that were both intellectually stimulating and emotionally powerful.³¹ Isaac Watts crafted hymn texts that were accessible to the congregation yet stand out for their rich theological metaphors, structural integrity, and poetic beauty. If one takes creation as reflective of God's beauty and how it demonstrates that order is good, then it may be wise to rethink our conception of beauty as it relates to music for worship in terms of integrity of form and structure, skillful use of the essential elements of music and language, and quality of craftsmanship.

In the last several decades, the style of musical forms in worship has been at the heart of many conflicts and divisions in both the church universal and individual congregations. Everyone has an opinion. Unfortunately, pastors, worship leaders, and congregations too often choose sides and make choices without giving serious considerations to biblical norms for music in corporate worship. In reality, style should be such a peripheral issue when it comes to congregational song and larger issues should take precedence, such as the theological and liturgical purposes for which the music is written.³² Without a solid foundation for music in worship, the people will be tossed about with every wind of doctrine (Eph 4:14). Consequently, pastors and pastoral musicians must first establish a theology of music in worship based on scriptural truth and instruct the congregation in it. Then they can consider what musical forms to use, but style is not the real issue and it never will be. A better approach would be to choose music that reflects the beauty of the Creator, whatever the style of music may be.

When God's people gather in worship, their music expresses a common faith and helps them to vocalize their collective praise, thanksgiving, sorrow, and trust.³³ Many congregational songs contain great theological truths, but even the ones that teach falsehood have formative capacity. Pastors ought to make sure that the musical diet of the

²⁹Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God: A Christian Understanding* (London: Mowbray, 1993), 5–6.

³⁰A fuller treatment of all of the musical implications of this study needs to be done, especially as it relates to cross-cultural and cross-historical ramifications, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

³¹Robin A. Leaver, "Motive and Motif in the Church Music of Johann Sebastian Bach," *Theology Today* 63 (2006), 39–40, 47; Leaver gives several specific examples of how Bach's theology informed his compositional techniques.

³²Leaver, 39.

³³Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: the Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 90.

congregation builds them up to full maturity in Christ (Eph 4:12-13) both in terms of music and text. Writing, selecting, and performing music that is beautiful, in the sense of being well-crafted and artfully composed, requires a great amount of training, skill, and work. “Cliché, whether verbal or visual, takes what is unthought out, unfelt, in short, acceptable at a superficial level. But all apprehension of beauty involves a struggle to apprehend the truth and all artistic creation involves a struggle to express it.”³⁴ It is much easier to bypass the way of the cross in our corporate worship music, but we must not offer unto God that which costs us nothing (2 Sam 24:24).

True worship always involves a response of the believer to God. Luke 19:10 states that Jesus came to *seek* and to save sinners. John 4:23 clarifies that mission by explaining that the Father is *seeking* true worshipers. Jesus’ mission is to turn sinners into true worshipers. Therefore, God is the initiator of all true worship and Christian believers respond to his initiative.³⁵ Music can be a powerful medium through which the congregation responds to God in worship when it reflects the truth, goodness, and beauty of the God to whom all worship is due.

An Analysis of Three Representative Hymns

In the interest of promoting biblical music-making in churches, this paper provides a brief analysis of three hymns that reflect the truth, goodness, and beauty of God in terms of their content and craftsmanship. Since Christianity centers on the gospel of Jesus Christ, I chose one hymn each on the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ: “Glory Be to God On High” by Charles Wesley, “How Shallow Former Shadows Seem” by Carl P. Daw, Jr., and “The Lord Is Risen Indeed” by Thomas Kelly. For the purposes of this study, only the texts will be considered.³⁶

Glory be to God on high
And peace on earth descend!
God comes down; he bows the sky
And shows himself our friend;
God the invisible appears!
God the blessed, the great I AM,
Dwelling in this world of tears—
And Jesus is his name.

³⁴Harries, 11.

³⁵Bruce H. Leafblad, *Music, Worship, and the Ministry of the Church*, third printing (Portland: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1979), 42.

³⁶Analyzing only the texts is incomplete at best and problematic at worst because joining words to music to make a song changes the way in which worshipers experience the texts. The liturgical and congregational setting of a hymn may also contribute to or detract from the meaning of a congregational song. Analyzing the text is at least a start, however, and will hopefully spur greater depth of thought in this area on the part of theologians and musicians.

He whom angels all adored,
 Their maker and their king,
Is their news, the humble Lord
 Whose name to earth they bring.
Emptied of his majesty,
 Of his dazzling glories shorn,
Being's source begins to be
 And God himself is born!

See the eternal Son of God,
 A mortal Son of man,
Set to walk this earthly road
 Whom heaven cannot contain!
Stand amazed, you heavens, at this;
 See the Lord of earth and skies,
Humbled to the dust he is
 And in a manger lies.

We, the earthborn tribes, rejoice,
 The Prince of peace proclaim,
Joining heaven to lift our voice
 And shout Immanuel's name.
Knees and hearts to him we bow;
 Of our flesh and of our bone,
Jesus is our brother now
 And God is all our own.³⁷

“Glory Be to God on High” presents a magnificent picture of the incarnation of Christ through the use of poetic device, stanzaic structure, and the crafting of language. The hymnic meter is 76 76 77 76. The extra syllable in the fifth line of each stanza (at approximately the golden mean), serves to heighten the tension and provide a greater sense of fulfillment as each strophe comes to its denouement. Wesley used mixed poetic meters, primarily trochaic and iambic, alternating line by line. Trochaic meter is generally used with more forceful or commanding texts, such as “Glory be to God on high” or God comes down; he bows the sky.”³⁸ Iambic meter, on the other hand, conveys pleading, questioning, or supplicatory texts, such as “and peace on earth descend!” or “and shows himself our friend.”³⁹ The incarnation of Christ is perhaps the greatest paradox in human history—Jesus came as fully God and fully human. The trochaic lines mostly emphasize the

³⁷Charles Wesley, “Glory Be to God on High.”

³⁸William J. Reynolds and Milburn Price, *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, fourth ed., rev. and enlarged by David W. Music and Milburn Price (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1999), x.

³⁹Ibid.

glory, majesty, and divine nature of Christ, while the iambic lines generally speak of Jesus's humanity, humbling, or of the meaning of the incarnation for the human race. The juxtaposition of trochaic and iambic meters captures beautifully the message the hymn conveys.

Wesley used several poetic devices that can deepen the worshiper's understanding of the profound mystery embodied in the Christmas message and thereby heighten their love for God. Antithesis appears throughout the text, but especially in stanzas two and three, where nearly every line contrasts dramatically with the one that came before. Paradox and metaphor also help to capture the meaning of the text and fire the imagination. The first stanza states, "God the invisible appears!," which recalls the shekinah glory of God now dwelling with believers through Jesus, the Light of the World. Stanza two declares that the good news is to be found in the identity of the baby who is the "humble Lord." Then, in stanza three, Wesley wrote the poignant lines, "See the Lord of earth and skies, humbled to the dust he is and in a manger lies." Not only are the Gospel writers in view here, but also Philippians 2:5-11. What a paradox! Christ laid aside his glory, the glory of the only begotten from the Father, and took on the dust of human form and lay helpless in a dusty stable for the sake of sinners. Wesley's hymn makes a powerful impression on the imagination of worshipers because it articulates biblical truth about the incarnation in a way that makes this hymn a beautiful work of art.

"How Shallow Former Shadows Seem" paints a vivid picture of Christ on the Cross:⁴⁰

How shallow former shadows seem⁴¹

Beside this great reverse

As darkness swallows up the Light

Of all the universe:

Creation shivers at the shock,

The Temple rends its veil,

A pallid stillness stifles time,

And nature's motions fail.

This is no midday fantasy,

No flight of fevered brain.

With vengeance awful, grim, and real,

Chaos is come again:

The hands that formed us from the soil

Are nailed upon the cross;

The Word that gave us life and breath

Expires in utter loss.

⁴⁰Carl P. Daw, Jr., "How Shallow Former Shadows Seem."

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Yet deep within this darkness lives
A Love so fierce and free
That arcs all voids and—risk supreme!—
Embraces agony.
Its perfect testament is etched
In iron, blood, and wood;
With awe we glimpse its true import
And dare to call it good.

Daw's portrayal of the crucifixion draws on the accounts of the Gospel writers as well as references to English literature in a way that brings together the doctrines of creation and redemption and captures many of the ironies in Christ's death for sinners. Daw used three primary metaphors for Christ: Light, Word, and Love. Stanza one refers to Christ as the Light of the world, the one in whom is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). John 1:5 states that the Light came into the world, shining in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it; and yet, as Daw's hymn puts it, when the sky went dark as Jesus died, "darkness swallowed up the Light of all the universe." Daw used personification of the Temple and of creation in order to emphasize the point.

Stanzas two and three refer to Jesus as Word and Love, respectively, and Daw linked the ideas in these two stanzas through the use of irony and metaphor in a single line. The hymn pleads with the worshiper throughout to consider the awesome mystery embodied at the Cross by its use of iambic meter—except for one line. At exactly the midpoint of the hymn, Daw inserted the verse, "chaos is come again," which is in trochaic meter. Through the change in poetic meter, the line communicates its message through form. Daw borrowed the line from Act III of *Othello*, where Othello states of his wife, "But I do love thee! and when I love thee not, Chaos is come again."⁴² Through instruments of hatred, we crucified the Lord of glory, but God will not have wrath or hatred be the last word; the last word is reserved for his steadfast love as Daw points out so vividly in stanza three.

Daw's hymn culminates with the final line of the hymn, which calls attention to the fact that Christians can call the day of Christ's death "Good Friday" because they understand its true meaning. Through form, structure, poetic device, and the crafting of language, Daw captures the mystery and irony of the crucifixion in a way that helps worshipers to meditate on God's great love for his people.

Thomas Kelly's hymn impresses worshipers with a profound sense of the meaning of Jesus's resurrection:

The Lord is risen indeed!
And are the tidings true?
Yes, we beheld the Savior bleed,
And saw him living, too.

⁴²Carl P. Daw, Jr., *A Year of Grace: Hymns for the Church Year*, (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1990), 70.

The Lord is risen, indeed!
Then Justice asks no more;
Mercy and Truth are now agreed
Who stood opposed before.

The Lord is risen indeed!
Now is his work performed;
Now is the mighty Captive freed,
And death's strong castle stormed.

The Lord is risen indeed!
The grave has lost its prey;
With him is risen the ransomed seed
To reign in endless day.

The Lord is risen indeed!
He lives, to die no more;
He lives, the sinner's cause to plead,
Whose curse and shame He bore.

The Lord is risen indeed!
Attending angels, hear!
Up to the courts of heaven with speed
The joyful tidings bear.

Then take your golden lyres,
And strike each cheerful chord;
Join, all ye bright celestial choirs,
To sing our risen Lord.⁴³

Kelly's hymn recalls the words of 1 Corinthians 15 where the apostle Paul makes the case that without the resurrection, the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ would be meaningless and so would be the Christian life. Just as at the angels' announcement of the birth of Christ to the shepherds, the good news of the resurrection seems unbelievable at first, but the eyewitness accounts of the disciples proclaim the power of the Gospel of God. The repeated refrain, "The Lord is risen indeed!" relentlessly impresses on the minds of believers the truth of the Easter message.

Kelly also used paradox and antithesis to balance the incomprehensible tidings. The atonement brought together mercy and truth, conquered death, and purchased sinners for God. The hymn emphasizes Christ's role as prophet, priest, and king through references to tidings, reigning in endless day, and interceding for the saints. The hymn ends with a charge to the angelic choirs to sing Jesus's praises just as they did at the announcement of

⁴³Thomas Kelly, "The Lord Is Risen Indeed."

his birth. Kelly's craftsmanship conveys the message of the resurrection in vivid terms that bring together Christ's identity, work, and the whole of the gospel story.

These three hymns serve as examples of how hymn writers can proclaim the truth of God's Word and celebrate his goodness in a manner that glorifies him through the beauty of language. Would that all pastors, worship leaders, and congregations desire and select biblical songs for worship that fire the imagination of worshipers and ignite their love for God with truth in artistic form.

Conclusion

Congregational songs should be evaluated by the truth of God's Word and by how they will sound as musical offerings from the hearts of worshipers in God's presence. Congregations at worship need songs that are biblical in content and artistically excellent so that they will have appropriate sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to offer unto God that will, in turn, encourage their joy and progress in the faith. Churches need songs that reflect the truth, goodness, and beauty of God in their content and in the way they are constructed and, thankfully, many such songs exist in a variety of musical styles from traditional to modern. If churches will be faithful to preach and teach the true Gospel of Christ and if theologians and musicians will think and work together to realize the implications of the Gospel for congregational song, then perhaps God's people will begin to expect a more healthful musical diet when they come to worship in God's presence.