

How Hymns Do Theology

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This article, drawn from my book, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*, was written in honor of Harry Eskew, Professor Emeritus of Music History and Hymnology, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, a scholar musician with a gentle spirit.

From time to time, theologians show an interest in hymn lyrics.ⁱ Such a theologian is like an American visiting Australia: the language is familiar, yet foreign. Though the Christian story is told, doctrines elaborated, and theological viewpoints expressed, a hymn-lyric's theological work - if any - is done within the rhetorical and structural options of English verse. To say anything sensible, the theological critic must understand the possibilities and limits of the medium, treat lyricists as partners rather than suspects, and have a wider definition of "theology" than the traditional. I shall outline the structural options of English verse, offer a wider definition of theology, and consider how hymn lyrics do theological work.ⁱⁱ

Poetic Structure

To summarize what is widely, but not universally known, a hymn lyric is a sequence of identical units (stanzas), each with the same line length, rhythms and rhyme scheme (if rhymed) as its predecessor, so that it can be sung, stanza by stanza, to the same tune. A lyric's pattern of rhyme and speech rhythms is its *poetic meter*,ⁱⁱⁱ and has two major variants: the number of syllables in a line, and their speech rhythm, which in English is a pattern of loudness and softness called stress. The stress patterns of English verse are described in terms borrowed from ancient Greek poetry. In a given line, the most common rhythms are:

Iambic: Two syllables, the second stressed - I slip, I fall, I rise, I limp.

Trochaic: Two syllables, the first stressed - Chas-ing, pac-ing, run-ning, rac-ing.

Dactylic: One stressed, two unstressed - Fing-ers are wag-ging and beck-on-ing.

Anapestic: Reverse of Dactylic - In a hop and a skip and a jump.^{iv}

In hymnals, a hymn's syllable count is indicated by numbers. The iambic couplet

The King of love my Shepherd is,

whose goodness faileth never (Henry Williams Baker, 1821-1877),

would be marked "8.7." The same syllable count applies to the trochaic couplet:

Glorious things of thee are spoken,

Zion, city of our God (John Newton, 1725-1807).

A complete description would have the following information:

"The King of Love My Shepherd Is" - Words: Henry Williams Baker (1821-1877). Tune: ST COLUMBA, Ancient Irish Hymn Melody. 8.7.8.7. (Iambic).

"Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken" - Words: John Newton (1725-1807).
Tune: ABBOT'S LEIGH, Cyril V. Taylor (1907-1991). 8.7.8.7.D. (Trochaic).^v

Form and Freedom

Rhyming verse makes strict demands on the writer, and sets limits to what can be said.^{vi} The word "love," for example, is a strong "Christian" word, and sounds resonant at the end of a line. Unfortunately, its perfect rhymes are limited to "above," "dove," "glove," "guv," "of" (pronounced "urv") and "shove."^{vii} "Guv" and "of" are too colloquial for most hymn-lyrics. "Glove" and "shove" have few relevant contexts in a hymn. "Above," and "dove" have been worked and overworked. It is hard to use them with freshness and surprise.

On the other hand, a well-chosen rhyme enhances its lyric. Here, again, is Henry Williams Baker:

Lord, thy word abideth
and our footsteps guideth;
who its truth believeth
light and joy receiveth.^{viii}

The short lines and two-syllable rhymes add impact to the message. A longer line scheme, or prose rendering, would weaken it. Who would want to sing, “Lord, thine everlasting word guides our footsteps. Whoever believes its truth receives light and joy?”

Poetic meter is freeing as well as constricting. Each metrical form has its own character, “which shapes the material and becomes part of the meaning.”^{ix} A given meter empowers a writer in some directions, even as it prevents progress in others. Short Meter, or SM (6.6.8.6.) occurs frequently in English hymnody. It steers the writer towards short opening phrases, followed by a longer statement leading to a conclusion, as in John Wesley’s translation of Paul Gerhardt:

Give to the winds thy fears,
hope and be undismayed:
God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears,
God shall lift up thy head.

Paul Gerhardt, 1565, trans John Wesley, 1739

Three verbal imperatives (give, hope, be undismayed) are matched by three divine responses (hears thy sighs, counts thy tears, shall lift up thy head). After the pithy opening lines, the third line expands in two parallel phrases (hears...// counts...) conveying assurance. The final line is both development and summary.

Thus, Short Meter encourages the lyric to go, “One, Two, Climax, Conclusion.” A different treatment is possible, however. Here is an accomplished hymn-writer, journalist James Montgomery (1771-1854), using Short Meter to make the last two lines a single statement, building and expanding through fourteen syllables:

Stand up and bless the Lord,
ye people of his choice,
stand up and bless the Lord your God
with heart and soul and voice.

God is our strength and song,
and his salvation ours;
then be his love in Christ proclaimed
with all our ransomed powers.

Common Meter, or CM (8.6.8.6.) came into congregational song from the English ballad, which flows through several stanzas as it tells a story or elaborates a theme. Common Meter was used first in metrical versions of the psalms, then in hymns. Compared with Short Meter, the extra two syllables in the opening line make a big difference, because both halves of the stanza can open out into fourteen syllables, or be broken into smaller units. Here is Isaac Watts, using several variations:

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
let earth receive her King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing.

The first line is broken in half by an exclamation mark. The second half of the line stops at a semi-colon, from which hangs a six syllable sentence unit, followed by another of fourteen syllables, split by a comma. In Watts' second stanza the last couplet sweeps on without interruption:

While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains / repeat the sounding joy .

Long Meter (8.8.8.8.) is more expansive still. Each line can be a complete sentence, standing by itself, or as part of a series. Here is Fred Pratt Green (1903-2000), with a stanza whose four phrases form one sentence:

The church of Christ in every age,
beset by change, but Spirit led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.

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By contrast, the final stanza of William Kethe's paraphrase of Psalm 100 has four lines, each containing a verb. All but the last are capable of standing on their own:

For why, the Lord our God is good,
his mercy is for ever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.^x

Other meters have their own character, limits, and possibilities.^{xi}

Public Poetry

Hymn lyrics are written for a group of people to say, or more commonly sing, together. Their purpose is public utterance, not individual self-expression. Thus, their poetic genre is most accurately described as classical, rather than, say, romantic. As Thomas Troeger observes, when 'classical' poets draw on their feelings and experience, it is from the viewpoint of their likeness to the feelings and experience of others, rather than their difference or particularity.^{xii} In the words of Alexander Pope, a contemporary of the first notable English hymnwriter, Isaac Watts:

True Wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed,
Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find,
That gives us back the image of our mind.^{xiii}

It follows that, if hymn lyrics do theological work, their work is communal and public.

Theology

Though times are changing, the standard understanding of "theology" prioritizes knowledge gained by reasoned enquiry.^{xiv} A short article leaves little space to argue for a wider definition, so I offer the following for consideration:

Christian Theology is done when anyone attempts, by artistic skill and creativity, the interplay of intellect and imagination, and/or the methods of reasoned enquiry,

to grasp, know and understand the meaning of God's creating, self-disclosing and liberating activity centered and uniquely focused in Jesus Christ.^{xv}

At their best, hymn lyrics work by the interplay of intellect and imagination. Their brevity and form are unsuited to systematic reasoning. A four-stanza lyric gives insufficient space for reasoned argument, and even in a longer format, only a Milton or Donne can rise above the sing-song pitfalls of the medium and craft arguments that are weighty without being dull. Moreover, though not lacking in rationality, a hymn-lyric's primary goal is commitment: it invites us, not to step back from faith and examine it, but to step into faith and worship God.^{xvi}

Epigram and Metaphor

Because it has few words to play with, one way in which a hymn can do theology is to state, pithily and vividly, theological viewpoints whose claims are argued elsewhere, or to frame praise, thanksgiving, longing, lament, trust, commitment, and other God-centered responses based on such viewpoints. In doing so, a hymn-poet uses the techniques of verse writing (see above) and the tools of epigram and metaphor. By "epigram" I mean economy of phrase, as in Isaac Watts, writing about the cross:

Here his (God's) whole name appears complete,
nor wit can guess, nor reason prove,
which of the letters best is writ,
the power, the wisdom, or the love.

In the second line, the whole activity of the human mind ("left" and "right" brain) is expressed in seven words, with contrasting nouns ("wit" [= intuition] and "reason") and verbs ("guess" and "prove"). In the final line, three nouns with different meanings epitomize God's nature: wisdom, power, love.

By “metaphor” I mean “that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.”^{xvii} Consider the following lines from a widely-published hymn by Walter Russell Bowie:

O holy city, seen of John,
where Christ, the Lamb, doth reign,
within whose four-square walls shall come
no night, nor need, nor pain.^{xviii}

The *subject* - what the writer is talking about - is a set of conditions where God’s gracious love is fully accepted, or prevails, among human beings, within and beyond the continuum of space and time. Because we have not experienced this, and it is beyond our capacity to describe it, we can either grope for abstract precision, as I have just done, or use images, word pictures drawn from human experience, as Bowie is doing. Two common ways of doing this, known classically as tropes, are the simile, which compares one thing with the other (“God’s new reality will be like a beautiful, safe, well-ordered city”) and the metaphor, where we speak of one thing (God’s new reality) in terms that suggest the other (a safe, well-ordered city), *so that the image of the city fuses or “intersects” linguistically with the subject.*

Walter Russell Bowie begins with a biblical image of an ancient, walled city, idealized and surrealistically conceived as cube-shaped in Revelation 21: 10-27^{xix}. His hymn then describes the harsh realities of poverty and exploitation in the modern city, and prays for strength “to build the city that hath stood too long a dream,” believing that God’s new reality is not an otherworldly hope, but can come near, and come true, in human life:

Already in the mind of God
that city rises fair:
lo, how its splendor challenges
the souls that greatly dare;
yea, bids us seize the whole of life
and build its glory there.

Here is a different metaphor on a similar subject, from the sixteenth century Puritan pastor and spiritual leader, Richard Baxter:

As for my friends, they are not lost:
the several vessels of thy fleet,
though parted now, by tempests tossed,
shall safely in the haven meet.^{xx*}

Baxter's theme is the communion of saints on earth and in heaven. Death and other trials separate us, but we shall be reunited. The intersecting image is of a fleet, perhaps a fishing fleet, perhaps pilgrims seeking a new world, which puts out to sea from a coastal town, and is scattered by a storm. In real life some of the boats might well founder, but Baxter uses the image to affirm that the storms of life and death will not divide us: all the boats will meet again in the harbor.

If we accept them, both metaphors organize our thinking, and encourage us to transfer the associations and feelings evoked by the intersecting image to the main subject, so that we respond to both in the same way.

Bowie's metaphor encourages us to think of city life at its best, and transfer those positive associations to our understanding of God's new reality. Through the image of the holy city, we may understand God's new reality as, for example: social, ordered, diverse, cosmopolitan, peaceful, and exciting; having varied options, possibilities, and levels of relationship; growing, developing, and evolving; a delightful, beautiful place where we shall live, grow, and flourish.

Baxter's metaphor invite us to think of the Christian community as individuals or small groups, each making their own life journeys, but with a common purpose. The play of chance, circumstance, trouble and death separate us from our friends, relatives, and partners in Christ, but the metaphor enables us to make sense of those separations and see beyond them to an eventual reunion. The trials and anxieties of living and dying may terrify us and make us feel as helpless as in a storm at sea, but our fears will not overwhelm us if we are inspired and persuaded by the image of the fleet coming safely home.

Not all writers have the skill of Baxter and Bowie, but at their best, hymnic metaphors organize our thinking, generate insights as we transfer ideas and associations from intersecting image to main subject, help us express and make sense of powerful feelings, and move us at a deep level by their appeal to the senses and the imagination. In doing so, the hymn-poem does theological work as valid and important as the reasoned article, lecture, or book. Naturally, both genres have limitations. Reasoning can be manipulative and perverse. Metaphors present viewpoints without justifying them as, by highlighting some themes, a given metaphor screens out others. The image of the city speaks more of human interaction than our devotion to God. Though it is said that the Lamb reigns there, we may need the equally powerful metaphors of thousands singing in adoration before the throne, to highlight God's new reality as a set of conditions in which we encounter God's presence in all its fullness, and respond, as creatures, with praise and adoration. Moreover, though the city image includes some references to non-human life (trees, and a river), neither it nor the throne image is able to highlight the equally important conviction that all life on earth, and the whole of the cosmos, are included in God's new creation.

Janet Martin Soskice shows that metaphor can be cognitive, meaning that sometimes a metaphor can say something inexpressible in any other way, "not as an ornament to what we already know, but as an embodiment of a new insight."^{xxi} For minds open to such possibilities, let me offer a poem of my own for consideration:

We are the music angels sing:

short or long,

each life a song,

a treasured offering.

A child, brief skylark, soaring young,

fell from sight,

yet all that flight
by Gabriel is sung.

The melody, though short it seems,
deeper grows:
heav'ns music flows,
developing its themes.

Discordant grief and aching night,
love-transposed,
will be composed
in symphonies of light,

And every human pain and wrong
shall be healed,
for Christ revealed
a new and better song.

We are the music angels sing,
short or long,
each life a song,
a treasured offering.

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The poem commemorates Thoma Mark Rietberg, who died at the age of eight. Though life-spans vary widely, and have no guaranteed duration, our knowledge of potential life-span and assumptions about life-quality dispose us to say of one person that their death is “untimely,”

of another that “they had a full life and it was their time,” and of a child or youth that their life was “cut short.” Such beliefs jostle uneasily with the conviction that the length or brevity of a life does not determine its value in the sight of God.

What happens to a life that is “cut short?” How can we express a conviction that in some way, God receives it and brings it to fulfillment? Thomas’s parents, for whom the poem was written, have a knowledge and love of music, so it was appropriate to look for musical metaphors. Musing on this, I got the idea of the human life span as a melody, augmented with a companion image of a skylark’s short, soaring, singing flight, whose song ceases abruptly when the lark dives on its prey. In music, a melody is defined as a coherent succession of pitches, where “pitch means a stretch of sound whose frequency is clear and stable enough to be heard as not noise, succession means that several pitches occur; and coherent means that the succession of pitches is accepted as belonging together.”^{xxii} By calling someone’s life a melody, we claim it as music, not noise, and as a meaningful sequence of events.

Some melodies are short, others extended. Unlike a melody, the human life span cannot be extended once ended. Yet even a short melody can be treated in many ways. It can be sung, or played on a solo instrument, and every instrument and rendition will interpret it differently. It can be harmonized, orchestrated, played at different tempi, set in different time-schemes, and transposed into different keys. It can be made into a theme with variations, each faithful to the melody yet yielding new insight. A classic example is Ralph Vaughan Williams’ “Variations on a Theme by Thomas Tallis.”

My poem draws on some of these possibilities, to celebrate a life cut short, express the conviction that every life is eternally valid, and suggest how the divine purpose might elaborate and develop a life-span we might regard as incomplete. Since a melody needs singers and instrumentalists, my poem summons angels to perform it. I have an open mind about angels, but if you can’t accept them, even as metaphors, the saints in heaven can step into their role.

How far the theme and metaphors in the poem can be expressed conceptually is for the reader to decide. Even if the theme can be fully expressed in non-metaphorical language, the

metaphor still has value as it organizes thinking, articulates belief, presents its theme in twenty-four short lines, and views one human life in terms of the complexity, variety, beauty, enjoyment and inspiration associated with music. If the poem's subject-matter resists full conceptual articulation, then some aspects of the metaphor are cognitive, yielding insights unattainable in other modes of discourse. The relationship between theological metaphor and theological concept is neatly expressed by Sallie McFague:

“Images feed concepts; concepts discipline images.

Images without concepts are blind; concepts without images are sterile.”^{xxiii}

Not surprisingly, she articulates her viewpoint with metaphors (feed, discipline, blind, sterile), which themselves invite critique, or prompt further elaboration.

I conclude that the best hymns act as worthy partners to other theological work by expressing Christian faith in metaphor, epigram, and descriptive imagery which combine impact with economy, and whose metaphors may sometimes be cognitive, expanding our knowledge in ways inaccessible to reasoned exposition.

Notes

- i. S. Paul Schilling, The Faith We Sing (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983) is well-informed, aware of musical issues and (though dated) still valuable. Gabriel Fackre has critiqued “inclusive language” changes in recent hymnals, especially The New Century Hymnal. See his article, “Christian Teaching and Inclusive Language Hymnody,” The Hymn, 50/2, April 1999, pp. 26-32, and his contributions to Richard L.
- ii. The music of hymns is also part of their meaning. For a non-technical discussion of how music has meaning, see my book, Praying Twice (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), chapter 2.
- iii. I use “poetic meter” for accuracy, because “meter” is also often used to denote the pattern of rhythmic pulses, or “beat,” in a piece of music. Speech and music rhythms are distinct, though related.
- iv. If derivations aid your memory, “trochaic” is from a Greek word meaning “running”; “dactyl” is Greek for finger, used because a finger has one long bone followed by two short bones; and “anapest” means “struck back, reversed,” in other words the reverse of dactylic.
- v. In Baker’s lyric, the numbers “8.7.8.7.” indicate that each stanza has four lines. Newton’s hymn has eight lines, and its meter is indicated as “8.7.8.7.D” (= Double), to save writing “8.7.8.7 8.7.8.7.” Because several tunes can often be sung to the same text, each tune has its own name, usually printed in capital letters. For a detailed discussion of poetic meter, see Willard R. Espy, Words to Rhyme With, For Poets and Song Writers (Macmillan Press Reference Books, 1986 - Part I) and John Hollander, Rhyme’s Reason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

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- vi. Unrhymed verse is often appropriate, but no easier. Stanzas need to be metrically consistent; opening lines must convince the singer that there ain't gonna be no rhyme, no how; and the remainder must avoid sound-similarities close to rhyme - otherwise singers will think the writer wanted to use rhyme, but didn't know how
- vii. Espy, Words to Rhyme With, p. 177, "UV," adds compounds, which do not significantly expand rhyming possibilities: hereof, whereof, thereof; mourning dove, ringdove, rock dove, turtledove; foxglove, ungllove; lady love, light-o'love, puppy love, self love and true love.
- viii. For this example, I am indebted to J. R. Watson, The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 31.
- ix. Ibid, p. 32.
- x. For the example, and my analytical framework, I am indebted to Watson, The English Hymn, p. 33. See also Madeleine Forell Marshall and Janet Todd, English Congregational Hymns in the Eighteenth Century (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982, p. 13.
- xi. The visual appearance of hymn-lyrics on the page also makes a difference to how they are perceived and understood. Hymns printed as poems, beneath the tune or melody line, are more likely to be appreciated as poetry. See Praying Twice, chapter 8.
- xii. Thomas H. Troeger, Borrowed Light: Hymn Texts, Prayers and Poems (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 183-185, following T.S. Elliott. Troeger rejects the sharp contrast between poems and hymns often made by modern hymn writers, arguing that it springs from identifying poetry with romantic and post romantic poetry.
- xiii. Alexander Pope, Essay on Criticism, 1711, quoted by Carl P. Daw Jr. in "Approaches to Hymn Writing" (with E. Margaret Clarkson and Fred Pratt Green), The Hymn, 35/2 (April, 1984), pp. 78-82.

xiv. See, for example, theology as “the rational account given of Christian faith” (S.W. Sykes, “Theology,” Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology); “the systematic study of the fundamental ideas of the Christian faith.”(Alister E. McGrath, Christian Theology: An Introduction , Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1994, p 119); and “the conscious and methodical explanation and explication of the divine revelation received and grasped in faith.” (Karl Rahner, quoted by McGrath).

xv. See Praying Twice, chapter 10.

xvi. Though a hymn-poet’s work can sometimes be quite comprehensive, it is neither systematic nor complete. Hymn poets also write within a collegial community whose work complements their own, so that when someone else says something well, we typically say “Amen,” not try to duplicate or outdo it.

xvii. Janet Martin Soskice, Metaphor and Religious Language (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 15. Though the word “metaphor” is often bandied about more loosely, it is more useful, because more precise, to reserve it for the particular trick of language (or, more accurately, trope) under discussion. Metaphors are not mental events. We may connect different situations wordlessly in our heads, but the word "metaphor" is best used for any language that results. Similarly, metaphors are not physical objects. To say that daffodils are metaphors of rebirth is to use the word in a vague, where "symbol" will do perfectly well. For a more complete discussion of metaphor and religious language, see Soskice’s book, and my own exploration in What Language Shall I Borrow? (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), pp. 85-110.

xviii. “O Holy City, Seen of John,” by Walter Russell Bowie, 1909. See for example the United Methodist Hymnal # 726; Presbyterian Hymnal #453; New Century Hymnal #613.

xix. For “four-square,” see Revelation 21: 16: “The length and breadth and height of it are equal.”

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- xx. Stanza 3 of “He wants (= lacks) not friends that hath thy love.” For an analysis of the whole hymn, and its original typography, see Watson, The English Hymn, p. 119-120.
- xxi. Soskice, Metaphor and Religious Language, pp. 47-48.
- xxii. New Harvard Dictionary of Music, s.v. “melody.”
- xxiii. Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 26, developing a sentence in Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press 1929), p. 93: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind...The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only through their union can knowledge arise.”