

**More than Words Between the Notes:
Hymns as Poems of Faith
by Brian Wren**

This article is drawn from my book, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, June 2000).

Australians, Brits, and New Zealanders mostly see hymns printed as poems, beneath their tune or melody line. Americans mostly experience them as a sequence of syllables, cut to fit beneath the notes of music (“interlined”). In American hymnals, for example, my hymn, “Christ is Alive!” looks, in part, like this:

1. Christ is a - live! Let Chris - tians sing. The cross stands
2. Christ is a - live! No long - er bound to dis - tant
3. In e - very in - sult, rift and war, where col - or
4. Wom - en - and men, in age and youth, can feel the
5. Christ is a - live, and comes to bring good news to

Format affects comprehension. When I invite audiences to read a hymn in both poetic form and interlined, the overwhelming majority find the poetic form easier to follow, and more readily experience hymns as poetry.

Public Poetry

As I am using the word, “hymns” are a particular kind of Christian poetry developed during the Protestant Reformation, but with many precedents. Hymns are poems. At their best, they contain memorable words, metaphors, and phrases: language that delights and inspires. Hymns are poems of faith. They express whatever a congregation needs to express in the presence of God. The hymn-form is used in varied ways, but its genius is its capacity to develop a theme, tell a story, and take us on a journey as it unfolds.

Hymn lyrics are designed to be corporately sung.

They express group conviction, not just the author’s state of mind. They are accurately described as classical, meaning that, unlike romantic and much modern poetry, the hymn-poet is not preoccupied with her own, unique vision. In classical poetry, wisdom has primacy over inspiration, and the focus is more on the human condition than on the author’s self-expression.

This understanding of poetry is well expressed by Alexander Pope, a contemporary of the “founder” of English hymnody, 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. (Essay on Criticism, 1711)

As a communal utterance, a hymn is poetry in the service of its singers. Hymn singers need poetry that expresses their faith, and enables them to be truthfully themselves in the presence of God.

Because of its communal purpose, a good hymn is a poem under three monastic vows: clarity, simplicity, and obedience to strict rhythm. Singers can't stop to consult a dictionary, and it is hard to identify with sentiments imperfectly understood.

Yet a lyric must be deep enough to give inspiration through life's changes and reveal new meanings through repeated singing. Simplicity is a hard-won achievement. Isaac Watts describes it well. “I have endeavored at ease of numbers and smoothness of sound,” he writes, “and to make the sense plain and obvious.” If cultured minds find it “so gentle and flowing as to incur the censure of feebleness, I may honestly affirm that sometimes it cost me labour to make it so.”

Poetic Meter

In form, a hymn lyric is a sequence of units, each having the same line length, rhythms and rhyme scheme (if rhymed) as its predecessor. Such units are called stanzas, distinguishing them from units of varied form, called strophes. As a piece of stanzaic verse, a hymn lyric can be sung, stanza by stanza, to the same tune. Its pattern of speech rhythms is its poetic meter. Poetic meter should not be confused with “meter” meaning the rhythmic pulses, or “beat,” in music: though related, they are distinct.

Poetic meter has two major variants: the number of syllables in a line, and their speech rhythm, which in English is called stress. English verse has a variety of stress patterns. The couplet,

The King of love my Shepherd is,

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

has eight syllables followed by seven, in a pattern called iambic, where the stress, or emphasis, is on the second of every two syllables. By contrast,

Glorious things of thee are spoken,

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

has the same syllable count, but a different speech rhythm. The first line is trochaic, where the stress falls on the first of every two syllables, but in the second the author varies the stress by using the soft, or unstressed syllable, “of,” so that three unstressed syllables come before, and highlight, the emphatic line-ending word, “God.” Many hymn-writers vary a hymn's basic speech rhythms, to prevent a “sing-songy” effect. The rhythms of English verse are described in terms borrowed from ancient Greek poetry. In hymnody, 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.

Meter and Meaning

English-language hymns mostly use rhyme. Unrhymed verse is sometimes 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.

Rhyming verse sets limits to what can be said. The word "love," for example, is a "Christian" word, and sounds resonant at the end of a line. Unfortunately, its perfect rhymes are limited to "above," "dove," "glove," "guv," "of" (pronounced "UV") and "shove." "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 overworked. It is hard to use them with freshness and surprise. Some writers give up, and hope for sympathy, as if to say, "I've been consistent in the first two stanzas - can't you give me the benefit of the doubt on this one?" However as composer Carl Schalk pithily puts it, piety is no substitute for crafting.

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.

The short lines and two-syllable rhymes add impact to the message. As J. R. Watson observes, "the meaning is in the echoing sounds: it is a rhymers's way of seeing the gospel." (The English Hymn, OUP, p. 31). A longer line, 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?"

The Freedom of Form

Poetic meter is freeing as well as constricting. Short Meter, or SM (6.6.8.6.) 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.

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 parallel phrases 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 James Montgomery (1771-1854), making 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.

Common Meter, or CM (8.6.8.6.) came from the English ballad, which flows through several stanzas as it tells a story or elaborates a theme. The extra two syllables in the opening line allow both halves of the stanza to 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 its King;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing.

The first line is broken in half by an exclamation mark. Its second half stops at a semi-colon, from which hangs a six-syllable sentence unit, followed by another of fourteen syllables, split by a comma. In the 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 phrase, or part of a series. Here is Fred Pratt Green, 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 every sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

Other meters have their own character, limits, and possibilities.

New Songs for Old

Because hymn lyrics are communal, they change with their communities, by alteration, deletion, or addition. During the past fifty years there has been an outpouring of new, English-language, hymn lyrics. A renewed emphasis on the humanity of Jesus and the seasons of the Christian year, and the increased use of lectionaries, has prompted new hymns for Advent, Epiphany, the Baptism of Jesus, the Transfiguration, and Jesus' life and ministry. New hymns also reflect a wider and deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit; the greater need for adult baptism; and the centrality of Holy Communion.

New Bible translations, and dissatisfaction with archaic and narrowminded language, have also stimulated new writing. The tendentious double meanings of "man" and "men" led many writers to modify their early work, and prompted new texts making women and children linguistically visible. The language debate broadened to include the claims of different ethnic groups, and of people "differently abled." The debate about God language has prompted many recent hymnals to include lyrics naming God in more varied ways.

"Creation" hymns now speak more about caring for the earth, and less about conquering it. Decolonization spurred "western" churches to stop singing imperialist hymns about benighted heathen, write "world church" hymns, and sing songs from Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world. The twentieth century's legacy of radical evil and social injustice made earlier hymns look piously escapist: the cry for justice and freedom, and readiness to lament before God (not simply confess our sins) are hallmarks of recent hymnody.

Examples

One of my early hymns, "Christ is alive," was written during the week before Easter 1968, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Asking what we (an English congregation) could appropriately sing, I looked through the Easter hymns in our 1951 hymnal, but found only triumphal imagery of things long ago, far away, and high above. So I wrote "Christ is alive," to affirm that Christ is alive today ("here and now"), involved with us ("in the midst of life"), and with an aliveness that can, and will, bring us through suffering and evil ("suffers still, yet loves the more"). The trumpet call, "Christ is alive!", heralds the first stanza, and is repeated, elaborated, and reiterated in conclusion.

The earliest version of the hymn had "man/men" language and images of Christ conquering and commanding.

My later revisions recognize that Jesus refused to domineer over others, and use stronger images of care, pain and hope ("saving, healing, touching," "drowned in death," "lives where even hope has died"), and awareness of Easter's cosmic meaning ("till earth and sky and ocean

ring”). The latest revision (1993) praises the aliveness of Christ in women and men, old and young, everywhere.

The gifted New Zealand hymnwriter, Shirley Murray, has a sharp awareness of the world’s pain, suffering, and evil, and the ability to craft powerful hymns in unusual meters. Here is the first stanza of a hymn on ecological responsibility, in 5.5.10.D., already widely published:

Touch the earth lightly,
use the earth gently,
nourish the life of the world in our care:
gift of great wonder,
ours to surrender,
trust for the children tomorrow will bear.

The rhythm is unusual: the first two, five-syllable, lines are dactyls each followed by an iamb, giving a feeling of something said, but only half complete. They are followed by a ten syllable line which brings completion by uncurling in three dactyls stopped by a final stressed syllable. If “/” denotes a loud (stressed) syllable, and “x” a softer (unstressed) syllable, the rhythmic pattern sounds like this:

/ x x / x,
/ x x / x,
/ x x / x x / x x /.

The opening line is taken from an Australian aboriginal saying. Like all good first lines, it claims attention, states the theme, and sets the tone for what follows. The “light” unstressed endings of the four five syllable lines (by sexist grammarians still mis-called “weak” or “feminine” endings), give gentle sounds as well as gentle meanings (lightly, gently, wonder, surrender). In mid-stanza comes a paradox: the “gift of great wonder is ours” - not however to keep, but to surrender, a word suggesting that we let go of it, reluctantly or willingly, only for the sake of our children. This first stanza is couched in imperatives: “do this!” The second is a confession of the human race’s failure as planetary guardians:

We who endanger,
who create hunger,
agents of death for all creatures that live,
we who would foster
clouds of disaster,
God of our planet, forestall and forgive!

The first two lines now use their rhythms more insistently, as the dactyls (Greek: fingers) are pointed in accusation. The fourth and fifth lines vary the pattern by becoming, in effect and rhythm, an extra ten-syllable line, building a long petition that climaxes in the final line with the alliterative, and dramatic, “forestall and forgive.” The two final stanzas continue the prayer, mostly reverting to the light, gentle endings of the first (greening, garden, children, living, loving), reinforced by other words choices (blesses, sweet, health, hope, seedling, snow, sun):

Let there be greening,
birth from the burning,
water that blesses and air that is sweet,
health in God’s garden,
hope in God’s children,
regeneration that peace will complete.

God of all living,
God of all loving,
God of the seedling, the snow, and the sun,
teach us, deflect us,
Christ, reconnect us,
using us gently, and making us one.

(Shirley Murray, 5.5.10.D, Chalice Hymnal #693, New Century Hymnal #569, Voices United #307. Copyright © 1992 by Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL 60188, USA. All Rights Reserved)

Other word choices are worth noting. In the third stanza, the word “birth” has overtones of Christian “new birth” language. It is followed and paralleled by “regeneration,” a technical term whose five-syllable length also suggests that the process takes time. The opening stanzas also invite us to play with the related meanings of “trust,” “agents,” and “foster”: parenting, legal guardianship, financial management, and stewardship for example. In the second and final stanzas God in Christ opposes our destructive mismanagement, not violently, but as a skilled judo instructor, who “forestalls” and “deflects” us. The phrase “use . . . gently” links the opening and closing stanzas. As we are called to use the earth gently, so we can trust Jesus to use us gently, and make us one.

[put in a box, somewhere]

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.

In every insult, rift and war,
where color, scorn or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.

Women and men, in age and youth,
can feel the Spirit, hear the call,
and find the way, the life, the truth,
revealed in Jesus, freed for all.

Christ is alive, and comes to bring
good news to this and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring
with joy, with justice, love and praise.

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