

The Teaching Ministry of Congregational Song

I would like to thank Dr. Bradley, Dr. Ingalls, Dr. Mortenson, and Mrs. Northcutt for the invitation to deliver the—as it turned out, long-delayed and now virtual—Northcutt Lecture. I was both surprised and honored to be asked to give this lecture: surprised because, to this point, the lecture has always been given by a person from outside Baylor, and honored because the previous presenters have been among the most distinguished figures in church music for the past several generations. That I should be included among their company reminds me of the common saying about real estate—it is OK to be the worst house on the best block. I may be the worst house, but at least I am on the best block!

Permit me a moment of personal privilege to say a few words of appreciation. It was my pleasure to work with some of the most exceptional people at this great university.

Melinda Coats served as a long-suffering administrative assistant during my term as Graduate Program Director in the School of Music. She not only rescued me from egregious errors on many occasions but has also been a good friend.

Dr. Monique Ingalls is an outstanding scholar and teacher who has brought national and international attention to what is happening in Church

Music at Baylor. The future of the discipline is bright because of her presence here.

Dr. Terry York and I and our wives have known each other since the late 1960s when we sang together in college choirs. Dr. York is a hymn and anthem text writer, author, and preacher of the first rank, and to reconnect with him on the Baylor faculty has been a rare privilege.

Then there is Dr. Bradley. Dr. Bradley has directed the Church Music program at Baylor with rare insight and creativity. It is because of him and the sacrifices he makes that the rest of us have been able to accomplish much of what we have done. He served as my sounding board on many occasions and is an encourager who both seeks and brings out the best in people. One of Dr. Bradley's passions is bringing people—particularly church musicians—together, and this passion shows in nearly everything he does. I am very grateful that he has been my friend and colleague.

I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge my best friend, the very model of a Christian educator in the public arena, and the love of my life, my wife Doris. Her support has helped and guided me in ways too numerous to mention, but are gratefully acknowledged.

It is a bit ironic in these days of Covid-19 that the subject of my lecture is “the teaching ministry of congregational song,” since the pandemic

has all but shut down congregational singing for the past year. Nevertheless, this situation will not last forever, and perhaps there may be a nugget or two in my talk that can help even in our scatteredness.

The singing of the congregation fulfills many different functions. Historically, the functions of the church have been described as {slide} worship, evangelism, education or teaching, ministry, and fellowship.

One of the unique features of congregational song is its usefulness in each of these functions. While my topic today is the teaching ministry of congregational song, it behooves me to say a few words about its relationship to the other functions.

As an act of worship, congregational song provides opportunities for people to speak directly to God, for God to speak directly to people, and for people to speak to one another. On our own, we may have difficulty knowing exactly what we should say to God, but hymn and song writers provide words that help us express these inexpressible thoughts. Likewise, through the words of the songs we sing, God can give us both instruction and inspiration.

There is a bit more that needs to be said about this worship function of congregational song. First, hymn and song writers have—appropriately—been rather hesitant to have God speak to us by putting words into his

mouth. There are, of course, some songs that do this, such as Dan Schutte's "Here I Am, Lord" and John Bell's "The Summons." As long as the writer stays within the parameters of the biblical revelation, this is a perfectly appropriate way of writing. Generally, however, the most effective way of accomplishing this line of communication from God to people is through the singing of direct or versified Scripture.

By the same token, hymns that allow people to speak to God are often best employed as a response to Scripture or its exposition. Certainly, we can tell God that we love him any time, anywhere, and in any manner, but we need to be careful to ground our worship in divine revelation to make sure we are praising and praying to the right God and not one of our own making.

As an act of evangelism, congregational singing provides a non-threatening environment for the proclamation of the gospel. Putting words of witness and commitment into the mouths of unbelievers is a powerful means of sharing the gospel message with them. Congregational singing can also be a time when believers are reminded of their responsibility for the conversion of those for whom Jesus died.

As an act of ministry, congregational song allows people to speak to one another by way of encouragement, to give them words of healing and

comfort, and to serve as an outlet for grief or joy. It can also be a motivator for congregants to engage in other types of ministry activity.

Many hymns and songs speak directly to the fellowship of believers, encouraging unity in the body of Christ and promoting mutual love. But, in truth, the very act of singing together is one of fellowship. In group singing, each person must play his or her part and we rely upon each other to carry the song. Even in cases where people cannot sing because of illness or for other reasons, the congregation can carry the song for them. To paraphrase a common saying about prayer in families, “The church that sings together clings together.”

And so we turn to what I believe is the most neglected aspect of congregational song in today’s church, its teaching ministry. Let me begin with several caveats and explanations. I will be speaking primarily of songs that are stanzaic in form, that is, ones that contain several stanzas with or without a refrain. This limitation is not to deny the validity of other forms—such as doxologies, or cyclic songs like choruses—or to say that short forms cannot teach us something about the Christian faith; far from it. However, it seems to me that, because of their larger scope, stanzaic forms better fit a teaching function, while short forms perhaps better fit other functions—such as praise or prayer. (This is also not to say that stanzaic forms cannot

function as praise or prayer, for quite obviously they can.) But since my topic is the teaching ministry of congregational song, I will concentrate on the form that I think best fulfills that function.

This includes many of the songs that go under the label Contemporary Worship Music. Though these songs may often be looser than the traditional hymn form in their application of metrical structure and rhymes, they still typically consist of stanzas that are sung to a repeating melody—essentially the same form that has been in use since the development of Ambrosian hymnody in the fourth century.

Because the term “congregational song” can become clunky when repeated too frequently, I will often use the term “hymn” in a generic sense to describe any type of stanzaic Christian song that is sung by a congregation, be it chant, traditional hymn, gospel song, global song, or contemporary worship piece.

Another factor to be considered is the manner in which I am using the phrase “teaching ministry.” By this term I mean not just the teaching of complex or esoteric doctrines such as the Trinity or the eternal security of the believer—though those are included—but also the simpler ones that affect our daily lives, such as faith, hope, love, and trust in God.

A final caveat is that the songs I will use for illustration were almost all written by Isaac Watts. {slide} This is because he was one of the pioneers of the form, is one of its acknowledged masters, and has been the subject of some of my most recent research.

Throughout the Bible and Christian history, it has been recognized that song is one of the best and most effective means for teaching the fundamentals of the faith. The thirty-first chapter of Deuteronomy describes Moses' preparation for his own death. This was an event that would leave the children of Israel without the leader who had guided them from the Exodus to the Promised Land. Recognizing this fact, the Lord gave a command to Moses to provide something that would help the people remember how God had delivered them. What did God tell Moses to do? Write a book? No. Preach a sermon? No. He told him to write a song that would remind the people of God's deliverances, promising that the song "shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed" (v. 21). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul encouraged the Colossian believers to "teach and admonish [or correct] one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

Augustine of Hippo, in an oft-quoted passage from the *Confessions*, noted that the songs of the church "poured into my ears and dissolved truth

in my heart.” Martin Luther said that, by means of song, “God’s word and Christian doctrine may be instilled and practiced on a regular basis.” John Calvin compared songs to “spurs” that can “incite us to prayer and to praise God, to meditate on his works, in order to love, fear, honor, and glorify him.” John Wesley called his *Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* of 1780 “a little body of experimental [or experiential] and practical divinity.”¹

So what is it about congregational singing that makes it such a widely-acknowledged and powerful teacher of the Christian faith? I would suggest that there are six principal reasons.

First, hymns are effective teaching devices because {slide} they combine theological ideas with the emotional power of poetry and music. Words convey rational meaning. Certainly, words can often be imprecise and vary in meaning; this is something I found to be especially true in undergraduate term papers. Nevertheless, words provide a certain amount of concrete information. When you say the word “tree” {slide} it conjures up a particular image or meaning; trees come in many different sizes, shapes, and varieties, and the simple word “tree” may not indicate any specific one, but it does at least tell us that—as the dictionary puts it—we are talking about “a perennial plant with an elongated stem or trunk supporting branches and

leaves,” something other than what we would understand if we said the word “bear.” {slide}

Words are also combined to provide us with a way of communication that is more or less rational and concrete. It is through words that we express and shape our beliefs by the reading of Scripture, the saying of creeds and confessions, preaching, and the writing or reading of theological commentaries. Our understanding of Christian belief is largely formed by words. As the Scriptures themselves put it, {slide} “In the beginning was the Word.”

Just as in Scripture, creeds and confessions, preaching, and theological writings, hymns also make use of words, but they do so in a way that is different from each of these, for congregational song uses words in the form of poetry. Metrical stress, rhyme, poetic devices, form, and other features give poetry an emotional component that is often missing from plain speech. Poetry tends to heighten—or even create—sensations of joy or sorrow, pain or pleasure, sensations that ordinary conversation or speech can seldom accomplish. The result of the combination of rational thought (that is, words) with emotional arrangement (poetry) creates a unity that makes memorization and thus internalization easier and more long-lasting. As Isaac Watts put it in the preface to his *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language*

for the Use of Children, “What is learnt in Verse is longer retain’d in Memory, and sooner recollected.”

Poetry also often expresses ideas in an indirect manner that allows scope for expanded meaning. It is one thing to say that Jesus’ crucified body bled on the cross. It is another to express the same thought in the following stanza by Watts: {slide}

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Watts’s stanza paints a vivid picture of the blood flowing down from the head, to the hands, to the feet, yet he never mentions the word “blood.” Instead, he substitutes the terms “sorrow” and “love,” picturing for us that Jesus’ shed blood is a symbol of his sorrow and love for those he came to save.

But there is more to this stanza than immediately meets the eye. The third line reverses “sorrow” and “love” to become “love” and “sorrow” {slide}, a poetic device that is known as *chiasmus*, the “crossing”—catch the implication there—of words or clauses. The Greek letter *chi* is a symbol of the cross, but is also the first letter in the word “Christ.” This suggests that

Watts has placed both a symbol of the cross and of Christ's name in the very heart of this stanza. And, since, in Watts's original publication of this hymn, this was the middle of the five stanzas, this symbol of the cross and the Messiah who was hung on it are literally at the very center of the text. This goes far beyond merely saying that Jesus shed his blood on the cross.

Poetry is also able to hold things in tension. Christianity is full of paradoxes: there is one God who exists in three persons, God is simultaneously immanent and transcendent, death was destroyed by death, and so on. Poetry can often express these paradoxes in a meaningful way, as we can see from another portion of Watts's famous hymn. {slide}

My richest gain I count but loss

And pour contempt on all my pride.

Here I would place a caution about the relationship between plain speech and poetry, and that is not to be overly literal in our interpretation of hymn texts or to read into them things that they do not say. In writing or speaking prose, we generally strive above all for clarity and precision of meaning.

Poetry, on the other hand, often works by metaphor, simile, and allegory, in which words may be used to stand for something other than their literal meaning. When we do only a surface reading, try to read them too literally, or make them say what they do not, we miss the point entirely.

Here is an example: particularly after hurricane Katrina, some criticized the fifth stanza of Watts's "I sing th'almighty power of God."

{slide}

There's not a plant or flower below
 But makes thy glories known,
 And clouds arise and tempests blow
 By order from thy throne.

The suggestion of the critics was that the third and fourth lines of the stanza say that God sends natural disasters to kill people, perhaps as punishment for their sins or simply as an act of wanton cruelty. But the hymn does not say that at all, and this is an example of reading into a text something that is not there.

First of all, there is no mention of sin, punishment, or even people in the stanza. Second, Watts was not referring to God sending specific storms but that God ordered "Let there be clouds and tempests" much as he said "Let there be light," without at first specifying the sources or target of that light.

Third, lines three and four must be read in the context of lines one and two: the plants and flowers that make God's glory known have to have water, which he provided for in clouds and tempests. Finally, if natural

disasters overtake humans, it is usually because *we* are in the wrong place. If you make your home in places that are frequented by blizzards, drought, earthquakes, tornados, or hurricanes you are pretty likely to encounter one of them.

I say all that simply to note that we must sometimes give hymns a little leeway in interpreting and understanding what they mean. As I will suggest later, this does not mean that “anything goes,” but that we must understand that poetry cannot be—indeed, should not be—as prosaic as, well, prose.

So, in hymnody we link the rational content of words with the emotional content of poetry. But obviously there is another element, and that is music. I will say more about music in the teaching role of hymns later; here let me simply note that music, like poetry, provokes an emotional response that heightens the impact and the memorability of what we sing.

This combination of rational content and emotional engagement is powerful. People tend to remember things better when there is both a rational and an emotional component in what they are doing. If we want people to know and understand the principles of the Christian faith, one of the best ways to do so is to combine those truths with the emotional expression provided by poetry and music.

A second aspect of the teaching ministry of hymnody is that it is couched in an intentionally memorable form. {slide} ~~To some degree, this overlaps with what has already been said, but there is more to be mentioned.~~ Here we are concerned principally with forms that are specifically intended to aid memorability. These include stanzaic structures, refrains, poetic and hymnic meters, rhymes, strophic tunes, and other features.

The use of such mnemonic forms is something that is well known in elementary education. How is it that many children learn the alphabet? “abcdefg—hijklmnop—qrstuv—wxy and z—now I know my abc’s—next time won’t you sing with me.” Several things should be noted about this alphabet song. First, the letters have been grouped in such a way that they are sung using a steady beat. Also, these stresses have been arranged into four groups of four beats each: “abcdefg” followed by “hijklmnop,” then “qrstuv,” and finally “wxy and z.”

Rhyme has been applied, with the first two groups of letters ending with “g” and “p,” and the last two groups with “v” and “z.” There are other subtleties in this song that enhance its memorability, particularly the way that the letters “s” and “x” are in the same beat position and both begin with an “eh” sound. By placing the letters in a recurring rhythmic framework and making them rhyme, the memorability of the alphabet is enhanced. The

melody to which the letters and words are sung is repetitive, with the opening and closing phrases sung to the same melody and the middle lines also repeating. Nor does it hurt that the melody is familiar from a nursery rhyme, “Twinkle, twinkle, little star.”

Hymnody does a similar thing for the church’s teaching. For example, take the following stanza from “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” {slide}

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.

Note how the regularly recurring rhythm and the rhymes give a sense of forward motion in much the same manner as the alphabet song, pulling the reader or singer along to the next thought. These features help the singer anticipate the next line or rhyming word, enhancing the memorability of the text and ultimately its meaning—that God was infinite before there was an earth, and he will still be infinite after this world is gone.

Certainly, not every congregational song has to have a regular metrical rhythm or rhyme or any of the other typical features of hymnic poetry to be memorable. One thinks, for instance of “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” which is highly irregular metrically and contains not a single

rhyme, yet is widely known and teaches important fundamentals of the Christian faith. However, such songs tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

The music of congregational song, of course, also plays an important part in the form's memorability. The singing of a group of stanzas to a repeating melody ingrains the music into the memory, which—in a bit of turnabout—then helps the words themselves to be recalled. This is especially true when the words have a “proper” tune, that is, one that is almost invariably associated with that particular text. For example, if I sing this phrase—[the first phrase of “Joy to the World” on “ta”]—it calls to mind a specific line of text, which then will almost inevitably lead to completion of at least the first stanza in our minds.

A third aspect of hymnody that makes it an effective teaching device is its use of what I call “compression” **{slide}**, expressing profound theological truths in brief form. Compression puts these truths into what might be called a “digestible” form for more ready consumption. In classes, I sometimes asked students, “When was the last time a member of your congregation read a theological treatise? Indeed, when was the last time *you* read a theological treatise?” Yet, when we're not in a pandemic, every Sunday morning we sing theological treatises in a nutshell.

In this sense, hymns are often like aphorisms or pithy sayings. Think, for instance, of Benjamin Franklin's "A penny saved is a penny earned." This simple statement is actually rather profound. If you have a penny, you can either spend it or save it. If you save it, you still have the penny, whereas if you spend it you will have to earn another one to replace the penny you spent. I just used 40 words to explain what Franklin said in seven. His seven short words open up a whole realm of expanded meaning.

Consider these two lines that end one of Watts's versions of Psalm 23 {slide}; when we "dwell in the house of the Lord," we will be:

No more a stranger or a guest,

But like a child at home.

These fourteen syllables provide a summative picture of the progression of faith. In God's house, we will not be a stranger (someone who is unknown to the occupant) or a guest (someone who is known but unrelated to the occupant), but a child at home (the occupant's own offspring). The words "no more" suggest that at one time the singer *was* a stranger to God, and a guest who received an invitation, but is now God's own child, a resident of the home and an heir to all that God has.

Consider the depth of meaning in the following short phrases from hymns by various writers:

“I once was lost, but now am found, / Was blind but now I see”

“Very God, begotten, not created”

“God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform”

“He wraps himself in light, / and darkness tries to hide”

“Those wounds yet visible above / In beauty glorified”

“No guilt in life, no fear in death, / This is the power of Christ in me”

“Ours the cross, the grave, the skies”

“Amazing love! how can it be / That thou my God shouldst die for me”

“Love so amazing, so divine / Demands my soul, my life, my all”

Such concentration of thought into a few short words drives the ideas into our minds and hearts to be recalled as we need them.

There is a fourth component of congregational song that makes it a valuable tool for Christian teaching, and that is its call for active participation. {slide} It is a well-known dictum in education that we learn best by doing. You can read books all day long about how to write a sonnet, play the violin, or throw a curve ball; you can read sonnets by other people, hear violinists play, and watch a pitcher throw curve balls—but you cannot really know these activities until you have been physically involved in them. It takes your own physical and mental exertion truly to learn these skills.

This is a further secret of the alphabet song—children are actively engaged in singing it, and that physical exertion plays an important role in its effectiveness.

Perhaps an example from my family will also be instructive. When I was teaching at a seminary in Fort Worth, my son was attending the same school, studying theology. One night, my wife and I had gone out. When we came home we found our son marching around our living room reciting Greek. Perhaps without even knowing it, he understood that physical activity while he was studying would help him learn and retain the information.

By the same token, we learn Christian belief best when both our minds and our bodies are actively engaged. Singing requires physical exertion—at a minimum, we must take and expel breath, and make vocal sounds; perhaps we will also be standing or holding a hymnal as we do so. The mind will be engaged as we read words and perhaps notes, and try to read or remember what comes next. Indeed, consider the number of senses that may be involved in congregational singing—certainly hearing, usually sight, perhaps touch if one is holding a hymnal, and (if the hymnal is old enough) maybe even smell! Only taste is left out, but we will leave that one for Communion.

This combination of mental and physical exertion is almost—if not indeed—unique in the teaching of religion. It is an important factor in making congregational singing memorable.

A fifth aspect in the teaching ministry of hymns is that they can be repeated frequently. {slide} People seldom read the same theological books over and over again. Preachers who preach an identical sermon seven or eight times in a year will soon be looking for a new pulpit. However, people do not seem to tire of singing the same songs many times over. In fact, the more they are repeated the more quickly they seem to become “old favorites.” Now there is obviously a limit to this, but it is nevertheless true that most people do not mind repeating songs.

It is certainly no secret that frequent repetition helps ingrain information into people. Think of the songs that you know best, whether Christian or not. Invariably, there will have been frequent repetition of them in some form or fashion. Frequent hearing—or, in our case, singing—of songs is indeed like what John Calvin described, a funnel that pours the message of the song directly into our hearts, and, I would add, also into our minds.

There is a sixth item that makes hymnody memorable, and that is the possibility of association with past experience. {slide} When a song or hymn

is connected in our minds with a previous event or time in our life, it can be a powerful stimulus for remembering that song and its message.

We do need to be a bit careful here, making sure that such associations are based on emotional and rational responses rather than mere sentimentality. Dr. Donald Hustad, one of our former Northcutt Lecturers, defined sentimentality as “emotion that is not based on full reality.” Emotion is a God-given gift to us that is part of what makes us human {slide}—as Mr. Spock and Data were quite aware. Sentimentality forgets the reason for the emotion and simply wallows in the emotion itself. To avoid mere sentimentality, we need to link to the objective content of what the song says as well as the occasion on which it was sung. {slide}

I hope I have convinced you by now that congregational song is a valuable tool in catechizing into the faith. It is certainly not the only tool, and song has usefulness in other areas of the life of the church, but it is without a doubt one of the most effective teaching devices at our disposal.

With that in mind, it is important to remember that we as leaders of the church’s song have some responsibilities in ensuring the effectiveness of this teaching. Let me suggest several things to which we must pay attention.

In the first place—and perhaps most obviously—our songs must have something to say. {slide} As I noted before, there is a place for songs that

are minimalistic in our services. I have written songs of this sort myself. One says “So be it, Amen, Amen, Amen; So be it, Amen, Praise the Lord.” As a song of praise or fellowship, it is unparalleled—OK, I’m kidding about that!—but the song has little to say about what we believe or should believe. As a teaching device, it falls short. As we choose songs for teaching, as we have a responsibility to do, we should always ask ourselves, does this song have a message? What does it tell us about the Christian faith?

Second, it is critical that what the song says is true. {slide} The fact that a song is popular or was written by a great hymn writer does not necessarily mean that it is true. Our songs do not have to be theologically profound but they at least need to express truth. They must be measured against the Scripture and the theological formations of our faith to ensure that what we are singing and learning is accurate and correct.

At the same time, I need to make a caution that we not place too much theological weight on a single hymn. In a legal proceeding, a witness is admonished to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” Our hymns should certainly tell the truth and nothing but the truth, but I don’t believe we can expect any single hymn to tell the “whole truth.” One could readily criticize Watts’s “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” because it contains no mention of the Resurrection or “Joy to the World”

because it has no references to Bethlehem, baby, stable, manger, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, angels, Wise Men, star, gold, frankincense, or myrrh. Such critiques would be entirely true, but beside the point, for Watts's purpose in the first hymn was to emphasize Jesus' sacrifice and in the second to affirm the universal reign of Christ.

It is important to recognize that no song—indeed, no song, sermon, prayer, book, or all of them together—contains the whole truth of God. That truth is to be found only in the person of Jesus Christ, and in a song we can only hope to capture some aspects of it. When we lay any of our songs, even the most profound of them, next to Christ, they will always come up short. But to return to and reiterate my main point, it is critical that our songs contain the truth about God and about ourselves.

Third, we must teach our people and our song writers to pay more attention to the words. {slide} It is important for the songs we sing to be attractive musically, to have tunes that make people want to sing them. However, if we stop there, we are shortchanging both the song and the people, not to mention the Lord. If it is the music that gives life to the words, it is the text that gives meaning to the music and ultimately is the reason for its singing. People need to be encouraged to sing, as the apostle Paul put it, “with the understanding” as well as with the “spirit.”

Fourth, the teaching ministry of hymnody is most effective when the songs are memorized {slide}, when they have become internalized and can be called to mind as needed without hymnals, song sheets, or screens. The practice of hymn memorization should be encouraged, particularly among children and youth, but really among all age levels.

Fifth, and directly related to memorization is repetition. {slide} As leaders, we tend to want to sing new songs all the time, but congregants need significant repetition for the songs to become internalized and become meaningful carriers of belief and doctrine.

Those of us who lead the song ministry of the church have both a great responsibility and a great opportunity to help people know and understand the truth and mercy of the Lord. {slide} As biblical literacy declines in both the general and church populations, as doctrinal preaching and teaching is abandoned, and as private devotional reading dwindles, it may well be the songs of the church that offer the best hope for the continued growth of God's people in the faith. We have in our hands a powerful tool. May God grant us the grace and the wisdom to use it in a meaningful and effective manner. I say these things in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, to whom be all glory and honor, both now and for evermore. Amen.