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Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal

by T. David Gordon.

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This contribution toward the “worship wars” that infect American churches (or rather toward resolving them) is written by a non-musician for non-musicians. More specifically, Gordon is a professor of media ecology¹ at Grove City College in Pennsylvania. Previously he served as the pastor of a Presbyterian church, in which the worship was traditional and liturgical, with frequent communion, and he taught Presbyterian worship at Gordon-Conwell seminary.

Gordon’s basic premise in *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal* is that the ubiquity of pop music in our contemporary media-saturated culture has affected sensibilities in such a way that traditional music of every sort sounds foreign and inaccessible to many people. The result is that many people effectively cannot sing traditional hymns, cutting off an entire generation from the traditional musical canon of the church—impoverishing congregational praise. In a society saturated with pop music, many churches have taken on the norms of contemporary culture—to the detriment of true worship.

This echoes his concerns in his earlier book, *Why Johnny Can't Preach: The Media Have Shaped the Messengers*, in which he argued that the movement from a typographic (book) culture to an electronic and image-based culture in the latter half of the twentieth century had very negative consequences for preaching. Because people do not read texts as carefully as they once did, nor do they compose as often as they once did, nor are they exposed to those (poets, especially) who are devoted to the aural properties of language, their comfort and ability to relate to good, traditional preaching is compromised.

In a similar way, changes in music and in the ways in which it is distributed have changed the way people think, and the way they worship—and even the way in which they are able to worship. The musical culture we are immersed in has altered our ability to understand other genres of music so much so that we find these forms of music strangely unhelpful. This means that worship has become a conflict area, rather than a source of unity. Gordon sees this as a critical issue, because how we sing affects how we live.

¹ Media ecologists study the media as social constructs which reflect cultural values and as social constructors which shape cultural values. Media ecology is a sub-branch of cultural anthropology. Take the example of a hoe. The society or person who invented the hoe was probably engaged in agriculture, but the availability of the hoe would turn more people to agriculture.

The cultural change that shifted the worship equation was the phenomenon of media saturation that began in the mid-20th century. Both religious and popular music played an important role in the lives of Christians of every previous generation, but each occupied relatively limited and usually separate niches in their lives. There was no round-the-clock bombardment. The change that differentiates this generation from previous generations is musical saturation by the media. Instead of gathering with other people to sing and to listen to music at appointed intervals of life, people are now exposed to an almost continuous stream of market-driven music as they work, as they shop, as they ride an elevator, as they drive their cars or fly in a plane, and even as they walk or run. Even when they are watching TV or listening to a radio program, the pop music of commercials is a constant, repetitive imposition. As a result, the present generations are in danger of becoming “musical idiots” (think Greek etymology here), that is, people who understand no musical idiom but their own.

Gordon’s prime assignment to himself is to be descriptive of this cultural phenomenon, but he is not shy about being prescriptive in advice for the church. And he does not see too many shades of gray. Of the 800 hymns in the hymnal of his Presbyterian church, he judged about 150 to be good, worthy hymns. As his prime example of an appropriate hymn for worship he cites “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” as transmitted across culture and languages by Bernard of Clairvaux, Hans Hassler, Paul Gerhardt, James Alexander, and, yes, even Johann Sebastian Bach. “Abide With Me” is another worthy hymn, which focuses on an unchanging God.

He makes it clear that in these discussions the term “contemporary” is not a matter of age but of character. Gordon is not against songs just because they are new. All previous generations of Christians used hymns from the generations before them, but they were not “traditional” in the sense that they discouraged new hymns in contemporary idioms. They wanted the best of both. So does Gordon. “In Christ Alone” is very contemporary, but it is not lightweight (I am not sure where he would place it on the singability scale). Gordon is for contemporary hymns. It is shallow contemporary praise choruses that are his nemesis.

Gordon is not against repetition per se, but he finds it strange that people who would find it strange and objectionable if we repeated the *Gloria Patri* four times in a service, don’t seem to find it strange if they repeat the refrains of praise choruses many times.

Gordon is not for old hymns just because they are old. He is not a big Fanny Crosby fan. Charles Wesley wrote 6500 hymns, but relatively few have stood the test of time. Only forty-one are included in the United Methodist hymnal. He is not a fan of old hymns that are hard to sing. If the words are worth saving, the hymn must be arranged in a singable form in regard to melody, rhythm, key and pitch. Good hymn music for congregational singing is a form of folk music in the wide sense of the term. The African-American spiritual, for example, is a genre of folk music.

Gordon is not against seeker services per se, but he is against so-called seeker services as a replacement for regular worship that focuses on a dialogue between believers and God. Our target audience for outreach is unbelievers, and most unbelievers are not seekers and thus cannot be reached by shallow seeker services. If an irreligious person begins to get serious about religion, as likely as not, he wants religion to be serious.

Gordon's target, thus, is not newness, but "contemporaneity" which dismisses the past as irrelevant and trivializes worship because it lacks a sense of the sacred.

He laments what he sees as an almost total loss of contact with previous generations of the church catholic in some worship circles today. When he asks students to name a traditional hymn, one of their first examples that would come to mind would be "How Great Thou Art." Gordon asks how a hymn that did not exist as an English hymn until 1953 can be a classic. (The Swedish version is more venerable, appearing in 1885).

Only an artistically arrogant generation could think that nothing that came before them is good, and that their generation can make the best works of generations of Christians obsolete in one fell swoop. In part, this conclusion is due to an invalid transfer from the sphere of technology to the sphere of culture. Few would argue that we need to preserve a role for the quill pen or the manual typewriter in our daily production of documents. But it is quite a different matter to think that a generation that has the ability to Tweet has arrived at a superior stage of culture and is producing a superior product than a generation that could only write sonnets with a quill pen.

Gordon is not exactly aiming for a bland, middle-of-the-road presentation of his case. He gives evidence of this when he longs for the good old days when newspapers came out only every other month since significant events worth knowing about don't happen much more often than that. Marketing a daily newspaper requires manufacturing a lot of news. Relatively little news is worth knowing.

Another aspect of his concern is our culture's loss of a sense of the sacred and a loss of the sense of the importance of ritual (at least as it applies to religion). It is the double standard that troubles Gordon. Young people who wear t-shirt and jeans to the Lord's Supper go to great expense to provide tuxedos and gowns for their wedding. Rick Warren presides at worship in an open collar shirt, but wore a suit and tie to President Obama's inauguration (perhaps the protocol officer told him he had to). Does this convey an implicit message about the relative seriousness and importance of the incarnation and resurrection and those personal events that we celebrate as our accomplishments? Why is it appropriate to wear a gown for graduation but stuffy to wear one to preach?

Some of these things may be matters of taste, but Gordon contends they often are not. They convey values and attitudes. Few of us would wear a clown suit to a funeral or mourning clothes to a wedding.

Gordon also contends that the choice of musical instruments in worship is not “just a matter of taste.” Some instruments are inherently superior or more appropriate for certain uses. The president of the United States is not ushered in to a state dinner by kazoo. Would a kazoo be appropriate accompaniment to the *Te Deum* or *Dies Irae*? This true enough observation leads Gordon to a blanket rejection of guitars in worship (perhaps he is reacting to an overdose of this in the worship he sees around him). It is not fair to compare the leading power of a piano or organ with that of a single guitar. After all, an organ is not an instrument, it is an orchestra.

What Gordon is attacking is worship as amusement. A-muse-ment is something produced without deep thought or inspiration. Muse-ment on the other hand would be something that flows out of deep thought and reflection. Gordon wants to see more muse-ment and less a-muse-ment in today’s worship. He wants to see good hymns that have the qualities of good prayer. How would the song sound if it were prayed in the service without music? Would there be a balance between joy flowing from God’s deeds of salvation and sorrow over sin?

Readers can benefit from evaluating Gordon’s descriptions of the cultural phenomena which he feels underlie the worship wars without agreeing with all of his prescriptions for remedying the perceived problem. Though Gordon paints with a broad brush in producing a picture of the problem, one is left with the impression that he would follow a very evangelical practice in trying to remedy the problem. When he set out to introduce frequent communion in his congregation, he had a five-year timetable within which he wished to accomplish his goal. Diagnosing the problem is one thing—working patiently for a solution is another.

John F. Brug