

Baptist Hymnal 2008 as a Window into Baptist Worship Culture

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Introduction and Scope

You probably remember the old joke: how do you catch an elephant? You need a telescope and a pair of tweezers. You look in the large end of the telescope (and the elephant appears tiny). Then you pick him up with the tweezers. The purpose of this presentation is to take a look back through the *Baptist Hymnal* published in 2008 by LifeWay Christian Resources to see what it tells us about the worship culture of Baptist churches today. Unlike the person looking backwards through the telescope, however, we want to maintain a proper sense of perspective as we attempt to discern worship culture by examining a hymnal.

Naturally, looking in through windows can be dangerous. It does not always provide proper context, and wrong conclusions can be drawn about what is seen. And not everyone appreciates it when someone else looks in their windows uninvited. Perhaps the most dangerous thing is to try and classify Baptists themselves. Mike Harland is the director of LifeWay Worship and he was the driving force behind the *LifeWay Worship Project*, of which the pew edition of this Baptist hymnal is just a part. He acknowledged this pitfall when he noted that the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* title is deliberately missing the definite article. Harland said there was another group of Baptists producing a hymnal at the same time, and the Baptist hymnal produced by LifeWay should not be considered “the” hymnal representing Baptists.¹

It must also be admitted that hymnals in and of themselves may not always be good indicators of worship culture and practice, thus complicating a study of this type. Editorial

¹ Mike Harland, presentation to consultants, Glorieta Conference Center, July 13, 2008.

preferences, printing costs, and copyright issues can sometimes drive the publication of a hymnal more than worship culture. Contemporary hymnals may also be just as representative of worship leaders as of the worshipers they serve. These leaders are often the gatekeepers, having huge influence over the book chosen, based on their preferences and needs regarding worship planning. So, for the purposes of this brief study, a few assumptions will be made. First, it will be assumed that the contents of the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* produced by LifeWay is representative of the worship culture of the Baptist congregations who will use it and respond to it. Conversely, this implies there may be Baptist worship cultures that would not respond to this hymnal. The focus here will be on those who would use the book with satisfaction and consistency. Secondly, it will be assumed that editorial decisions and research which helped design the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* were focused primarily on the worship culture of the churches. Indeed, that was one of the main goals of the *Project* as it was conceived and developed. The idea, according to Terry Terry of LifeWay, was to capture, if possible, what Southern Baptist churches were singing -- not necessarily what they perhaps should be singing compared to other groups or other criteria, but to determine what songs were currently “in play” (as it were) in Baptist worship.² Finally, the definition of the term “hymnal” will be stretched to new parameters. Generally, this connotes a book with a finite number of songs confined to one time of publication. However, the *LifeWay Worship Project* includes more than a printed pew edition, also depending on digital resources and online technology to organize and present its musical materials. In fact, the original concept of this 2008 hymnal was to go entirely digital. But research indicated that over half of Southern Baptist congregations still hold a hymnal in their hands.³ So a printed pew edition was produced with more songs available online or CD-ROM. In addition, new songs

² Terry Terry, interview by author, Nashville, TN, June 10, 2009.

³ Mike Harland, presentation to consultants, Glorieta Conference Center, July 13, 2008.

would continue be added in coming years, expanding the songbook's content. "A hymnal without a back cover" was the phrase used as the book was being introduced.⁴ To get the best view looking through this window, then, the entire "hymnal" – both printed and digital – must therefore be considered.

Description of the Hymnal

The *LifeWay Worship Project* consists of 674 hymns and choruses resident in the pew edition, and an additional 301 titles available online or CD-ROM, for a total of 975 songs.⁵ However, there are not actually 975 different songs. 80 of the songs found online are repeated rearrangements of songs contained in the 674 printed songs. Some of the rearranged songs have as many as three different versions. When all of the versions are counted, there are 92 total titles (matching text and tune) which are repeated, making for an actual total of 883 total songs or settings of texts.⁶

Multi-media is a fact of life for many worshiping congregations and the *Worship Project* has integrated video and audio options into the array of related resources. This is the first hymnal that has been recorded in its entirety. Some other books of contemporary material have had CDs of recording artist's renderings of the songs, but these often differed from the actual published arrangements.⁷ LifeWay endeavored to create recordings that would mirror the actual music in the publications. This means that in addition to demonstration recordings, there are also accompaniment tracks available. All the songs are available in PowerPoint. There are also

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ www.LifeWayworship.com

⁶ When this paper was originally presented, it was noted that some copyright owners had not agreed to allow downloadable files on their music since purchasers could reprint files from their media library at will (thus, not all titles were available for download). However, LifeWay has now reached agreement with all copyright owners of songs in the pew edition, thus making all songs and their ancillary resources available for online download.

⁷ For example, *More Songs for Praise and Worship*, vols. 2-4, published by Word Music.

videos in MPEG1 format which integrate images and song text, or provide video loops to put behind lyrics, or contain pre-arranged song medleys with video.

In contemplating the permutations of the *LifeWay Worship Project* that will have the most bearing on this study, the presence of video formats and actual song content are perhaps the most significant and provide the best data regarding worship culture. But helps for worship planners also provide clues to worship culture. The *Resource and Planning Edition* contains some fresh ways of organizing the material, such as an index of church life, index of service use, and an index of worship perspective.⁸ The Index of Worship Perspective, in particular, may say something significant about current Baptist worship.

Some comparison to the previous hymnal from 1991 will be instructive. *The Baptist Hymnal* (1991) contained 145 songs unique to that Southern Baptist hymnal, roughly 23% of the content. The 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* contains even more unique material, about 35% of the publication.⁹ One interesting category of hymns in the 1991 hymnal were six hymns of non-Caucasian ethnic provenance: “All Day Long,” “Children of God,” “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands,” “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me,” “I’ve Come to Tell,” and “Oh, How Good Is Christ the Lord.” None of those hymns were included in the 2008 hymnal. Aside from a few traditional spirituals that are accepted in a number of other hymnals (such as “Go, Tell It on the Mountain”), the 2008 hymnal has only three hymns of ethnicity that have not been published before in a Southern Baptist hymnal: “Give Me Jesus” (#486), “O the Blood of Jesus” (#226), and André Crouch’s “Through It All” (#629). While the singing or inclusion of ethnic hymns does not provide definitive data on worship culture, it may be an indicator of a cultural trend.

⁸ Terry Terry, ed., *Resource and Planning Edition for Baptist Hymnal and Worship Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Worship, 2009).

⁹ http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF_CRD_mus_worship_project_comparison_of_musical_content_in_baptist_hymnal.pdf, “A Comparison of Musical Content in *Baptist Hymnal*(1956), *Baptist Hymnal* (1975), *The Baptist Hymnal* (1991), and *Baptist Hymnal* (2008), LifeWay Worship, 2008.”

By far the largest percentage of new songs in the 2008 *LifeWay Worship Project* could be considered contemporary. For the purposes of this study the copyright cut off to qualify as “contemporary” was in the early 1970’s and was somewhat dependent on style. Also, was this a song that would have been considered a “chorus” in the minds of traditional worshipers when the song first appeared and, therefore, not proper for regular worship? Using those loose guidelines, it was determined that there are 193 contemporary hymns and choruses in the 2008 hymnal project. Some of these are indeed in the category of the rock-style choruses from recent years, such as “Enough,” “Everlasting God,” “Blessed Be Your Name,” or “How Great Is Our God.”¹⁰ However, there are several new contemporary hymns, such as “Good Shepherd, Take This Little Child” by Claire Cloninger (#648) and “I Thank the Lord for You” (#396) by Ken Bible. Some contemporary worship songs use a traditional hymn as a platform, either adding a fresh refrain or completely resetting the text with new music. Examples include “Amazing Grace, My Chains Are Gone,” “The Wonderful Cross,” and “My Savior, My God.”¹¹ Incidentally, the latter song is based upon the hymn “I Am Not Skilled to Understand” by Dorothy (Dora) Greenwell, which is set to her tune GREENWELL in *The Baptist Hymnal* (1975), but not included in the 1991 hymnal. Thus, this hymn text can be found in two diverse musical settings in Southern Baptist hymnals two generations apart.

One final consideration is the use of scripture in the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal*. Like many previous hymnals, there are still readings at the back of the book. However, they are specifically attached and integrated with sets of songs and called Connective Worship Scripture Readings. In

¹⁰ “Enough” by Chris Tomlin and Louie Giglio (#114), “Everlasting God” by Benton Brown and Ken Riley (#121), “Blessed Be Your Name” by Matt and Beth Redman, “How Great Is Our God” by Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, and Ed Cash (#5).

¹¹ “Amazing Grace, My Chains Are Gone” original text by John Newton, new lyrics and music by Chris Tomlin and Louie Giglio (#767), “The Wonderful Cross” original text by Isaac Watts, original music by Lowell Mason, new music and lyrics by Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, and J. D. Walt (#239), “My Savior, My God” original text by Dorothy Greenwell, new music and lyrics by Aaron Shust (#287).

addition to the Connective Worship Index, there is also an index to all of the scriptures which are found beneath the hymn titles.

Implications

So, what can be discerned or implied about the worship culture of Baptists who would choose to use the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* and respond to its contents? A few of the following implications are clearly related to one another, like either side of a coin. Yet each on its own is a unique perspective of the characteristics and form of some Baptist worship culture. Here are the “top ten” things that may be discerned through the window.

1. **There is great musical and stylistic diversity in their worship.** The Baptist worshipers using the 2008 *Worship Project* may be more musically and stylistically diverse than any group of Baptist worshipers in history. The musical homogeneousness of Southern Baptist worship in particular, which was present in the mid-twentieth century, has virtually disappeared.
2. **There is perhaps less cultural diversity among the worshipping community.** Though the worship culture of these Baptists is diverse in musical style, cultural diversity in worship music may be harder to find. This does not mean these worshipers are not mission-minded or not welcoming to different cultures. However, the overall mix of music in the 2008 hymnal is oriented to hymns (older material) or contemporary songs (newer material) popular among mostly Caucasian worshipers of varying age group demographics and musical tastes. Music distinctive to the worship of other Christian ethnicities is not and has not been well represented in Southern Baptist hymnals, and, therefore, perhaps not in their worship.

3. **Traditional hymnic performance practice is being challenged.** The 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* contains many options for altering a hymn's performance by offering contemporary versions of classic hymns. These musical settings are built around the soft rock combo of the piano, trap set, and bass guitar, plus other instrumentation from the standard rock band. This instrumentation has now become the assumed and "ideal" accompaniment for many congregations during worship. No longer do the piano and organ accompanying duo reign supreme (assuming a functioning organ or organist is even still available). Younger worshipers who fall in love with classic hymns routinely repackage them in a contemporary format, departing from traditional hymnic performance practice.
4. **Traditional hymns and their performance practice is surviving.** When asked what he thinks the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* says about Baptist worship culture, Mike Harland's first response was that it demonstrates the remarkable "staying power" of the hymns.¹² There are 232 songs common to all four Baptist hymnals published by Southern Baptists, much of that material being classic hymns and gospel songs.¹³ The 2008 hymnal has even gone back and included fermatas which reflect the old-style performance practice of some congregations.¹⁴ In addition to classic hymnody, newer contemporary hymns in traditional style are being written and are finding a place in Baptist worship, such as "In Christ Alone," "The Power of the Cross," and "How Deep the Father's Love".¹⁵ The online portion of the hymnal also contains more traditional arrangements of

¹² Mike Harland, interview by author, Glorieta Conference Center, July 30, 2009.

¹³ http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF_CRD_mus_worship_project_comparison_of_musical_content_in_baptist_hymnal.pdf

¹⁴ Examples include "Open My Eyes, That I May See" (#443), "Jesus Is All the World to Me" (#475), and "In the Garden" (#476).

¹⁵ "In Christ Alone" by Keith Getty and Stuart Townsend (#506), "The Power of the Cross" by Keith Getty and Stuart Townsend (#232), "How Deep the Father's Love" by Stuart Townsend (#101).

contemporary choruses. Just as a point of interest regarding traditional hymnody, appearing for the first time in a Southern Baptist hymnal is the Charles Wesley hymn, “Soldiers of Christ, Arise,” set to George J. Elvey’s tune DIADEMATA (#658).

5. **There is a greater emphasis in worship on the visual.** Of course, looking at a hymnal in the hand is visual, but the emphasis here is on the use of images and projected text sans music during worship. The everyday life of many Baptist worshipers, especially younger ones, is filled with visual stimulation via television, computers, the internet, and gaming. Churches of many sizes and styles have begun to use projection in worship, and the 2008 hymnal reflects that usage.
6. **Repeated texts in worship songs are more common in their singing.** A number of songs employing repeated texts are found in the new contemporary material of the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal*. And contemporary musical style itself encourages textual repetition. Performance practice usually dictates that each time a verse is repeated, the musical treatment changes, often ratcheting up the intensity of the song, and thus changing the mood and response to the text. Younger worshipers in particular (and even some Boomers) are steeped in a musical pop culture that values this additive musical treatment of a repeated text almost as much as the text itself.
7. **A common core of traditional hymnody is less apparent in their worship.** A comparison of public domain material contained in previous Southern Baptist hymnals tells an interesting tale. In the 1956 *Baptist Hymnal*, approximately 82% of the book is gospel songs and traditional hymns that are in public domain. In other words, musical and textual material that would be freely available and likely being shared with other

hymnals (and, therefore, other worshipers) of the day.¹⁶ The *Baptist Hymnal* published in 1975 contained 66% public domain material, and in 1991, *The Baptist Hymnal* reduced the number even further to 52%. However, the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal*'s public domain percentage fell to 28%.¹⁷ If this public domain material represents a shared core of traditional hymnody, then that core has significantly dwindled in the 2008 hymnal. And that implies something else has taken its place.

8. By and large, these congregants are singing song texts that are theologically solid.

When Mike Harland was describing the theological process of producing this hymnal, he referenced the upcoming generation of twenty-somethings. He said they want theology in their worship and they are frustrated when the generations before them settle for less.¹⁸ Whether the song is old or new, a classic hymn, or a repetitive chorus, the congregation is singing solid biblical truth, though some texts will go deeper than others or communicate more truth.

9. Their worship may be taking on more biblical functionality. If the Index of Worship Perspective and the Index of Service Use found in the *Resource and Planning Edition* are any indication, worship planners may be moving their congregations away from revivalistic worship of the twentieth century, instead organizing worship around more biblically-oriented functions such as the call to worship, confession, praise for God's attributes, or re-telling the story of God's actions. And if worship planners are using the

¹⁶ A comparative study of public domain hymnody in a variety of mid to late-twentieth century hymnals was not conducted. However, the conclusions of this study were based on the supposition that music and texts in public domain represent a significant core of hymnic material shared in the cultures of various worshiping congregations.

¹⁷ It should be noted that the 2008 hymnal does have more songs than previous Southern Baptist hymnals and this contributes to the resulting smaller percentage of public domain material. However, this is also offset by the significant number of songs available online which are copyrighted arrangements of public domain hymns.

¹⁸ Mike Harland, presentation to consultants, Glorieta Conference Center, July 13, 2008.

Connective Worship Scripture Readings to invigorate the public reading of scripture, then the use of scripture in worship (outside of the sermon) may also be on the rise.

10. **These Baptist worshipers are still people of the hymn book.** Holding the hymnal continues to be important in worship for over half of Southern Baptist worshipers. The tactile sensation of turning the pages and the musical satisfaction of following the notes on a staff are still appreciated. And even if a small percentage of a congregation facing a screen of words actually pulls the hymnal out of the pew, anecdotal evidence supports the notion that some worshipers continue to value at least having the hymnal in the pew, whether it is drawn out and held by everyone or not.

Conclusion

Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrases Paul's words in 1 Corinthians this way:

"We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the mist clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly as he knows us."¹⁹ Looking back through the 2008 *Baptist Hymnal* to see Baptist worship culture may not be like looking backwards through a telescope, but it is indeed a foggy sort of way to see a worshiping community. Yet there are glimpses in the dimness of some important traits. That said, worshipers, both Baptist and non-Baptist alike, should look forward to that time when we do indeed see our Lord face to face, see all things more clearly, and worship together around the throne.

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 13:12 (*The Message*).