



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Gifts of New Music
(*Singing Our Lives*,
pp. 43-55)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

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Gifts of New Music

A prophetic song that lifts our hearts to adore God, awakens us to confess the disorder in our lives, or inspires us to share God's love for the hurting world is a wonderful gift. Three new hymns and their stories inspire us to employ our own gifts with words and music to edify the body of Christ.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-8

Responsive Reading: Psalm 96:1-5

O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.

**Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.**

Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.

**For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.**

For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.

Meditation†

Naught exists without voice:

God hears always in all created things his echo and his praise.

Reflection

When Paul urges us, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds," he warns that discerning "what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" must be a communal, not an individual, achievement. Our differing gifts of prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, or compassion must be offered humbly to the body of Christ. Only within that new community, where we become truly "members one of another," can our thoughts, desires, and behavior be renewed and transformed.

When we create songs that weave the landscape of Scripture and fabric of Christian character into the pressing moral issues of our culture, we are using musical gifts to help the body of Christ prophesy, teach, and minister. We asked Mark Hill, Mary Louise Bringle, and Kyle Matthews not only to write texts that examine how this practice of singing our lives can bind us to other believers and morally form us as disciples, but also to demystify the art of hymn writing by describing how they approach the task.

Hymn: "Fill This Holy Place With Music"

We are transformed by the texts and music we carry with us from worship. Pianist Mark Hill was inspired by a Habitat for Humanity project week. "This is what church worship should be like," he thought, "serving together with strangers only to discover they are part of God's family." The Habitat experience reminded him that the attitude of worship must pervade our lives: "worship does not end when the last 'Amen' is spoken; in fact, worship has just begun. Both worship and service look toward the day when all people live in peace and all creation joins to sing



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a song of praise to its Creator.” He wrote in a popular meter (8787 D) so that his text could be paired with familiar tunes.

Hymn: “We Sing!”

“My hymn writing is essentially word-watching,” notes Mel Bringle. “Words are like shy forest creatures: they often seem more willing to come into view if they do not think they are being sought. Thus, when I began working on this hymn, I sent a question (‘Why do we sing in worship?’) into the thickets of my unconscious and settled in to wait.” As she was reading some short stories, “a line of hymn text began appearing at the edges of consciousness.” Soon it was followed by the words of the first verse, which established the metrical form and suggested themes for the other verses. She invited her friend Jane Marshall to compose a tune suitable to the rare meter (88444) and rhyme scheme.

Hymn: “Hear Our Hearts, O Lord”

Kyle Matthews wonders how we can sing our lives to the Lord of life. We “attempt to speak a spiritual language that transcends words alone. It is not merely what we mean to say, it is how we feel about it and how we attempt to make our meaning beautiful to God,” he says. “The ultimate hope of our singing is that God will hear beyond our presentation to our heart’s intention, thus, ‘hear our hearts.’” As a text unfolds, he composes music to emphasize the most important and “singable” words. “The melodic phrases rise and fall, but the third phrase...reaches a penultimate point that...essentially is passionate—a cry. The musical resolution of each verse is common in order to suggest the peace that follows the catharsis of spiritual song.”

Study Questions

1. What similarities do you notice in how Mark Hill, Mary Louise Bringle, and Kyle Matthews approach the task of hymn writing? How do they employ their diverse gifts?
2. Mark Hill’s “Fill This Holy Place With Music” is a prayer to God. For Hill, what is the ultimate source of our music? What does this suggest about the art of hymn writing?
3. In Mary Louise Bringle’s “We Sing!” what reasons do we have to sing our lives before God? How is this content mirrored in the poetic form of the verses?
4. According to Kyle Matthews’ “Hear Our Hearts, O Lord,” what are we doing when we sing our lives? How do these actions change us and how do they impact the world?
5. What qualities should a really good hymn have?
6. What are your gifts in writing text or music for worship?

Departing Hymn: “Behold the Glories of the Lamb”

Behold the glories of the Lamb
amidst his father’s throne.
Prepare new honors for his name,
and songs before unknown.

Isaac Watts (c. 1688)

Suggested Tune: NEW BRITAIN

†*Angelus Silesius* (1624-1677)

Gifts of New Music

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore through three new song texts how the practice of singing our lives can bind us to other believers and morally form us as disciples.
2. To demystify the art of hymn writing by exploring how three writers approach the task.
3. To consider how we can use our gifts of poetry and music to edify the body of Christ.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Singing Our Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. The new hymns “Fill This Holy Place with Music” (pp. 45-47), “We Sing!” (pp. 49-51), and “Hear Our Hearts, O Lord” (pp. 53-55) are found in the focus article, “Gifts of New Music,” in *Singing Our Lives*. For the departing hymn “Behold the Glories of the Lamb” locate the familiar tune NEW BRITAIN in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org; it is often paired with “Amazing Grace.”

Begin with a Comment

“Writing either the words or music of a hymn is one of the greatest challenges possible,” writes the noted composer Alice Parker in *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church*. “That tiny form, all self enclosed: How does one get the words in a natural flow, expressing a cogent idea in language that is rich with the images of scripture, which are really the images of human life? How does one get a tune in which not one note is out of place?” (quoted in *Singing Our Lives*, p. 43).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking members to think of one or two musicians who have deeply influenced their discipleship and to thank God for their gifts and their service to the body of Christ.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 12:1-8 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Meditation

Provide a period of silence for members to reflect on the thought from Angelus Silesius.

Reflection

This study introduces three new hymns that explore the theme of singing our lives before God. Each hymn also is featured as a departing hymn in another study guide in this series, but this is an opportunity to examine the texts more closely and enjoy them together. Group members might sing each hymn before they discuss the material in the reflection and the question related to the hymn (e.g., questions 2, 3, and

4, respectively).

The departing hymn, the first verse of “Behold the Glories of the Lamb,” is a fitting conclusion to this study of new songs. Composed in about 1688 when he was only fourteen, it was the first hymn written by Isaac Watts, the Dissenting minister who revolutionized English hymn writing for public worship.

Study Questions

1. Hill, Bringle, and Matthews describe a similar creative process—choosing a theme or idea to mull over and then waiting patiently, or ‘listening,’ for a phrase or verse to emerge at the edges of consciousness. The initial verse sets a form (poetic structure, rhyme pattern) and suggests themes for ‘completing’ the poem. Instead of a theme or idea, a biblical passage or a phrase or statement from Christian spiritual writing might provide the inspiration. Hill developed his theme in a creative way during a meaningful experience of a Habitat for Humanity work week. The writers also showed their texts to others for suggestions.

Hill restricts himself to a meter that is common in music, so that he can match his text to a familiar tune. Bringle gives herself more poetic freedom in writing, and she turns to a friend to compose the music. Matthews works on the music and text together. What are the advantages of each approach? Members might discuss which approach they would use.

2. Each verse credits God as the ultimate source of music—“may your music fill this place,” “Let your music fill each heart,” and so on. Various people provide the texts and tunes and lead our singing, but God is their inspiration in composing and ours in singing. This suggests that hymn writing involves our welcoming a number of complex gifts—especially gifts of poetry, music, prayerful sensitivity to the needs of the body of Christ, prophetic leadership, and wise proclamation—that must come together to produce a song for worship.
3. We sing about the suffering we witness or cause (v. 2), the deep ties of thought and feeling that bind us to saints of past years (v. 3), and our shared visions and dreams (v. 4). “Unthinkingly, I had mirrored form and content,” Bringle says, for “normally, each line of hymn text is a self-contained unit, so that meaning will not get distorted when singers inevitably take a breath between musical phrases. Yet, I had violated this ‘rule,’ letting full hearts not be ‘contained’ within their eight-syllable unit, but ‘burst their bounds’ (‘breathlessly,’ at that!) to flow over into subsequent lines. I decided I was happy with the transgression.”
4. “Our ‘singing’ is more than singing,” Matthews writes, “it is responding to inspiration (v. 1), bringing prayers to God (v. 2), offering praise (v. 3), and telling our story (v. 4).” As we confess our sinfulness and neediness (v. 2) and live in reverence (v. 3), we find that our life becomes “a witnessing life (v. 4), motivated in real ways by the crazy hope that our way of life, our stories themselves, can be tools in God’s hands to do God’s will in the world.”
5. Members might mention qualities of the *music* (a memorable and singable melody; interesting harmony parts; music that is distinctive, rather than ‘pop’ sounding; music that ‘fits’ the text; etc.), the *text* (phrases that are poetically arresting and rich in images; thoughts that are theologically solid and central to the Church’s proclamation; words that are memorable), or the *context* (fits into the order of Christian worship—welcomes God’s presence, confesses sin, corrects distorted thinking, or proclaims the gospel; is valuable in private as well as public worship; ministers to need in life’s turning points). What hymns do members value in all these ways? What are the strengths of the new hymns in this study?
6. Members may write short poems for service music or tackle the demanding poetic formats of hymn writing. Others can be ‘sounding boards’ for aspiring writers or can suggest texts for musicians to set to music. They may compose music for hymns (old or new) or be skilled at matching new texts to familiar tunes. Some may enjoy searching through hymn books or websites like www.cyberhymnal.org to ‘rediscover’ old tunes and texts for the congregation. ‘Encouragement’ is a gift that many people can offer to aspiring writers and composers.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.