

The Weight of Glory: Hymns or Praise Choruses?

Introduction

Since the earliest days of the church the presence of music in worship has been a topic fraught with debate. Currently, there seems to be no abatement in the debate between hymns and praise choruses. There are those who argue that hymns are outdated, stodgy, and boring. This certainly seems to be the *zeitgeist* of most churches these days.

Perusing church mailings one can find the following statements: ‘What do you look for in church music? You won’t find pipe organs and massive choirs . . . but you will find a live band and contemporary music.’ Another church writes: ‘Our worship, music, video and lighting, will blow you away!’ Churches typically advertise that they have ‘upbeat music,’ which, although not explicitly stated, implies that hymns are the antithesis—antiquated and arid anthems of a bygone era. Do most churches have it right? Are praise choruses, the staple of contemporary worship, superior to hymns? To answer this question we will briefly survey the biblical data regarding singing in worship. With this information, we will then compare praise choruses to hymns to see which one meets the biblical mandate.

Biblical purpose of singing in worship

When we turn to the Song of Moses (Exo. 15.1-21) we see that Yahweh is both its object and subject. It is a celebration and praise of God for His mighty and saving acts in the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The Psalter is another example of singing in worship. Here once again we find celebrations of God’s mighty acts of creation, providence, and redemption. We see this captured in Psalm 105.2: ‘Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works!’ Singing in the worship of God is therefore primarily centered upon the celebration of God, His attributes, and His mighty works, especially as they are revealed in the person and work of Christ. There is a second element that we find in the use of singing in worship, namely the participation of the one who sings. The one who sings should do so from his heart, but we also see from Paul that singing must include the intellect: ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord’ (Col. 3.16; cf. Eph. 5.19-20). Notice that Paul says that the Colossians should teach and admonish, or counsel or warn, one another. This, of course, tells us that there should be significant intellectual content to what people sing in worship. Now, while this is of course only a cursory treatment of the teaching of Scripture on singing in worship, we can nevertheless see that the works of our triune Lord are at the center of our singing. Our singing should involve both the heart and mind in the praise of God. We all agree that God is glorious in all His ways and attributes. What, therefore, can bear the weight of His glory? Hymns or praise choruses?

Bearing the weight of glory

When we compare the content of hymns to praise choruses, we should first note that all hymns are not perfect, ‘In the Garden,’ or the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic,’ come to

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mind; conversely, all praise choruses are not necessarily weak. Nevertheless, How do two of the top 5 selling praise choruses compare to hymns on similar subjects? In Rick Founds' 'Lord I Lift Your Name on High,' the number 1 praise chorus, based on licensing agreement sales statistics, we read:

Lord, I lift Your name on high.
Lord, I love to sing Your praises.
I'm so glad You're in my life.
I'm so glad You came to save us.

You came from Heaven to earth to show the way,
From the earth to the cross, my debt to pay;
From the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky;
Lord, I lift Your name on high.

At first glance one might think that we have a nice summary of the work of Christ, especially in the second verse. Upon closer inspection we discover deficiencies. Recall that one of the purposes of singing is to instruct one another about the work of Christ. Should we generalize Christ's work by saying that He came to earth merely 'to show the way'? This obliterates some crucial truths about 'the way' one is saved—by grace alone through faith in Christ alone (Eph. 2.8-9). Notice that Christ goes to the cross to pay 'my debt.' What exactly is this 'debt'? There is no mention of sin. Christ goes from the 'grave to the sky.' Can we accurately describe the ascension, inauguration, and enthronement of the King of kings at the right hand of the Father to rule the nations with a rod of iron as 'going to the sky'? How does a hymn compare on these points?

There is a massive difference when Horatius Bonar speaks of Christ showing the way, paying a debt, and going to the cross in his 'Not What My Hands Have Done':

Not what my hands have done can save my guilty soul;
not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do can give me peace with God;
not all my prayers and sighs and tears can bear my awful load.

Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin;
thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within.
Thy love to me, O God, not mine, O Lord, to thee,
can rid me of this dark unrest, and set my spirit free.

Now, keep in mind there are three more stanzas to this hymn. Nevertheless the point stands—there is a qualitative and substantive difference between the hymn and praise chorus. If we wanted to sing about the ascension of Christ in a biblically responsible way there is also the Psalter. While these are not technically hymns, they were once a common staple of historic Protestant worship. We can further illustrate the substantive difference between hymns and praise choruses by looking at another top 5 praise chorus.

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The number 5 praise chorus, 'Breathe,' by Marie Barnett, states:

This is the air I breathe
This is the air I breathe
Your Holy presence living in me

This is my daily bread
This is my daily bread
Your very word spoken to me

And I, I'm desperate for you
And I, I'm lost without you

In this chorus there is a resounding presence—the personal pronoun, 'I' and 'me.' The one who sings this chorus gets as much representative word count as the one to whom it is sung. There is another deficiency; a Muslim or Buddhist could sing this chorus with no alteration. By contrast, Reginald Heber's 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' has a much greater depth and precision:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee
Holy, holy, holy, Merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

In the first stanza alone, we know from the outset that we worship our thrice holy triune Lord. A Buddhist or Muslim would not sing this hymn.

On the whole, there is unquestionably a massive theological difference between praise chorus and hymn content. There are, however, two other considerations that we should examine.

Further considerations

First, in years past, bad hymns disappeared from the stage of history. Good hymns, those marked by sound theology, a positive concatenation of text and music, have endured because they are timeless and because they are based on scriptural truth. Praise choruses, on the other hand, sometimes have good musical quality but often seriously lack theological and scriptural content. Why, then, are they so popular? Because the Christian music industry has paved the way for the praise chorus with marketing, distribution, and radio air-play. The industry brings what is mediocre or worse to the forefront. Hymn writers did not market their work, yet here we are hundreds of years later singing their hymns in worship. In the end, praise choruses often get noticed because of the money invested in their sale and distribution. It should also be no surprise that most of the Christian music companies are owned by secular parent companies. In fact the top three Christian music companies, which account for 93 percent of all Christian music sales are owned by secular parent companies. EMI Music Group owns Chordant; AOL Time Warner owns Word; and, BMG owns Provident Music Group.

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Yes, the same people who bring you Madonna also bring you ‘High Praises: Songs of worship, celebration, and ministry.’ While most Christian musicians have well intended motives, the bottom line for these secular companies is not good theologically sound music for the purpose of praising God but the almighty dollar.

Second, there is also a misperception about what constitutes ‘contemporary’ music. Praise chorus advocates claim they bring a genre of music that is contemporary, which is appealing and effective for outreach purposes. Praise chorus music, however, often has greater similarity to soft-rock of the 70’s and 80’s. It is not all that contemporary. Compare praise chorus music to what is truly contemporary; turn on MTV and compare what you hear with Limp Bizkit, Eminem, Madonna, Blink-182, or Britney Spears. These musicians and singers are truly contemporary and on the cutting edge of popular musical evolution. Praise chorus music, however, is some twenty-years behind. The accusation might be leveled that the music genre of hymns is even more outdated. Rather, hymns have a specific genre; they are written for the purpose of congregational singing. One can easily demonstrate this by trying to get a congregation to sing Elvis Presley’s ‘Jailhouse Rock,’ or more germane to our subject, Michael Card’s ‘El Shaddai.’ They are difficult for a group of people to sing—the music and tempo are geared for solo performance. Or, try to get a congregation to sing Handel’s ‘Hallelujah Chorus’—chaos usually ensues. The ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ was not written for congregational worship but for a trained choir. Therefore, whether a piece of music was written four hundred years or ten minutes ago, it must be written for congregational use in order for it to be most effective rather than based upon music styles, whether of the 70’s, 80’s, or current popular music.

Conclusion

When we consider the debate between the use of praise choruses versus hymns we must determine the purpose of singing in worship and ask, as a whole, which genre meets the criteria better. As a whole, hymns and psalms, meet the biblical requirements. They are written specifically for corporate worship, have a better ability to handle the breadth and depth of biblical teaching, and are not driven by marketing and sales. There is, of course, an implicit challenge here: there is a need for Christian musicians to continue to write great hymns of the faith rather than trite and empty choruses. If there are any doubters, make your own comparison between hymns and praise choruses and you will find that hymns are better equipped to bear the weight of glory.