

# Preaching and Teaching from *Glory to God*

*This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.*

## Introduction

Collections of hymns, songs, and spiritual songs give voice to the church's core beliefs and theological convictions. Their texts are "compact theology," and the selection of hymns and songs, the order in which they are presented, and even the ways in which they are indexed shape the theological thinking and ultimately the faith and practices of the church.<sup>1</sup>

These opening sentences from the "Theological Vision Statement" found in *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* speak to the theological significance of hymnals and songbooks. The selections of texts and tunes, the organization and arrangements of them within a collection, even the indexing provided, have an impact on the worshiping community. Over time, hymnals and songbooks play a powerful role in shaping faith and practice. In this essay we will explore the theological potential of *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* for preachers and teachers in local congregations.

## I Love to Tell the Story

Katherine Hankey penned a poem on the life of Christ in 1866 as she was recovering from a seri-

ous illness. Drawn from the second part of the poem are the familiar words of the hymn "I Love to Tell the Story" (#462). The first verse of the hymn continues to speak a relevant word for the church in the twenty-first century.

I love to tell the story of unseen things above,  
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.  
I love to tell the story, because I know 'tis true;  
*it satisfies my longings as nothing else could do.*  
(emphasis added)

*Glory to God* serves a church in the twenty-first century "in which trust in human progress has been undermined and where eclectic spiritualities often fail to satisfy deep spiritual hungers. It will be used by worshipers who have not had lifelong formation by Scripture and basic Christian doctrine, much less Reformed theology. . . . Moreover, it addresses a church divided by conflicts but nonetheless, we believe, longing for healing and the peace that is beyond understanding."<sup>2</sup>

Given these realities, the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song was very intentional in organizing *Glory to God*. The "Theological Vision Statement," beginning on page 926, is worth reading. In this statement, the committee

explains their intent: “To inspire and embolden a church facing these formidable challenges, the overarching theme of this collection will be God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. It will also bespeak the human responses that God’s gracious acts make possible. In other words, the framework for this collection of congregational song will be the history of salvation.”<sup>3</sup>

The history of salvation. God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. *Glory to God* tells a story, a story that, in the words of Katherine Hankey, author of “I Love to Tell the Story,” satisfies our longings as nothing else could do. Preachers and teachers, as they incorporate *Glory to God* into their ministries, will find a rich resource for telling the story of God’s ways in the world from creation to final consummation. As we sing of God’s mighty acts, we are invited to offer our response.

In a sermon I preached to my congregation as we dedicated *Glory to God* into our worship life, the theological outline of *Glory to God* was very briefly explained as we turned the pages of the hymnal together and sang. Preachers and teachers can serve their congregations well by inviting people into the intentional organization, the intentional story, of *Glory to God*. The following example suggests one way, using hymns and songs, in which engaging the theological organization of *Glory to God* in a sermon may be approached. Other hymn and song choices could accomplish the same effect in a way perhaps better suited to your particular context. Teaching contexts would allow several additional selections that a typical sermon time allotment would not allow.

- Praising the triune God (#1, “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!”)
- Christ’s birth and life (#160, “A Stable Lamp Is Lighted”)
- Our response as disciples (#743, “O God, You Are My God”)

## Don’t Overlook the Indexes!

Organization, themes, and the story told in section headings and actual text provide a rich resource for preaching and teaching from *Glory to God*. Moving from a broad overview of the framework, preachers and teachers can highlight themes with particular hymns and songs studied and sung. The extensive topical index beginning on page 949 is invaluable to preachers and teachers desiring to explore different theological themes over the years. Additionally, the complete lectionary index, beginning on page 968, provides suggested hymns and songs for each Sunday and special liturgical day designated in the Revised Common Lectionary. At the end of this essay I list several examples of specific hymns and songs paired with selected theological themes.

## The Language Used to “Tell the Story”

Because preaching and teaching will involve work with the texts of hymns and songs, it is also useful for preachers and teachers to become familiar with “A Statement on Language,” which begins on page 928 of *Glory to God*. In this statement, the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song addresses the two primary concerns for any hymnal committee: language used for the people of God and language used for God. “The committee seeks a songbook that is characterized, as a church document formulates it, by ‘inclusive language with reference to the people of God, and expansive language with reference to God.’”<sup>4</sup>

Preachers and teachers, as they engage specific texts of hymns and songs found in *Glory to God*, will be able to foster meaningful and deepening conversation on issues of language for the people of God. While the language used for humanity is inclusive, certain poetic and copyright requirements mean that on occasion the generic masculine in reference to humanity, though no longer universally understood to

include persons of both genders, is present in *Glory to God*. Such texts are limited in *Glory to God*, and preachers and teachers will find the majority of texts that speak of humanity natural and hospitable in regards to gender.

Expansive language used for God draws from “the full reservoir of biblical imagery for God and God’s gracious acts. The final product will include both metaphors that are comfortable in their familiarity and those that are enriching in their newness.”<sup>5</sup> *Glory to God* does, in fact, explore biblical imagery for God in comfortable and enriching ways. At the end of the essay several examples will be shared for preachers and teachers seeking to incorporate the breadth of biblical imagery for God and God’s gracious acts.

“A Statement on Language” also raises two important theological decisions of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song. On pages 929 and 930 are brief explanations for the intentional and continued use of “Lord”—which many contemporary writers avoid for its masculine gender connotations—and the continued inclusion of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” along with less gender-laden terms in reference to the Trinity. Both brief explanations are concise and insightful and therefore easily quoted and referenced in preaching and teaching.

So far this essay has highlighted the usefulness for leaders of the organization and section headings, the “Theological Vision Statement,” “A Statement on Language,” and topical and lectionary indexes. Often overlooked in hymnals and songbooks, these sections and materials are filled with treasures for preachers and teachers. *Glory to God* is especially rich in this respect.

Naturally, though, it is the texts of the hymns and songs contained in the pages of *Glory to God* that will be given voice by congregations over the next decades. The words we sing and our reflection on them shape our faith and practice. Let’s turn to several examples of specific texts and sug-

gestions for preaching and teaching opportunities within congregations.

## Preaching and Teaching from Specific Texts

The first section heading in *Glory to God* is “The Triune God.” Traditional language for the Trinity is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Ghost). A large number of texts that reference the Trinity contain this traditional language. See for example, “Holy God, We Praise Your Name” (#4) and “Praise to God the Father” (#605). Language references for the Trinity that include masculine and feminine language are plentiful. Intentionally placed on facing pages, “Come, Thou Almighty King” (#2) and “Womb of Life and Source of Being” (#3) are both “comfortable in their familiarity and . . . enriching in their newness.”<sup>6</sup>

The enriching newness of “Womb of Life and Source of Being” comes from the mixture of old and new metaphors drawn from throughout Scripture. With references and allusions to Psalm 23; John 1:14; 14:26; 20:19–23; Hebrews 5:1–10; and Genesis 1:1–2, terms like “womb of life,” “brother Jesus,” “Brooding Spirit,” “Source,” “Word,” “Mother,” and others lead us to the affirmation that “we would praise your name forever, one-in-three and three-in-one.”

A third text rich in biblical names and images is Thomas H. Troeger’s “Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud” (#11). Set in three verses, the text in each stanza addresses one person of the Trinity. Using a wealth of biblical imagery, story after story from the pages of Scripture creates a rich tapestry for reflecting on the Trinity. The recurring refrain “May the church at prayer recall that no single holy name but the truth behind them all is the God whom we proclaim” provides a preaching and teaching point of both the abundance of names for God and the ultimate limitations of language for God.

In the section titled “God’s Covenant with Israel,” the hymn “To Abraham and Sarah” (#51)

offers preachers and teachers a condensed telling of the Genesis 17:1–22 narrative highlighting the covenant relationship between God and God’s people. The third verse invites us, in our own twenty-first-century context, to remember and claim our place in covenantal relationship with God. “We of this generation on whom God’s hand is laid can journey to the future secure and unafraid, rejoicing in God’s goodness and trusting in this word, ‘That you shall be my people and I will be your God.’” This text accomplishes both formation in the scriptural narrative of salvation history and formation in Christian doctrine by highlighting covenantal theology.

Reflecting on hymns and songs in particular seasons of the church year can provide creative and memorable moments to continue formation in the riches of Scripture and Christian doctrine. By placing the liturgical year in the context of Jesus Christ (his advent, birth, life, passion and death, resurrection, ascension and reign, and return and judgment), they hymnal makes strong connections between the liturgical seasons and salvation history. *Glory to God* offers expanded selections for each season of the liturgical year.

The expanded section on Advent, for example, reveals a wealth of preaching and teaching opportunities. This is magnified when considering the multiple familiar themes of Advent (waiting, expectation, light, hope, etc.) as well as the often-overlooked themes of Christ’s reign and return. When viewing the hymnal in its entirety, one can find Advent texts under the headings “Jesus Christ: Advent,” “Jesus Christ: Ascension and Reign,” and “Christ’s Return and Judgment.”

Preachers and teachers could easily explore the richness of Advent themes drawing from all three sections of *Glory to God*. “Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah” (#85) includes the familiar themes of watching/waiting and light/darkness in the first two phrases of each verse. The final two phrases of each verse draw on scriptural

references from Isaiah, the Psalms, and Matthew that are familiar in Advent studies.

Expand the Advent themes in “Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah” by also studying the hymn “The Days Are Surely Coming” (#357), which uses images from Jeremiah and the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke). The expansion of images in this hymn, found in the section “Christ’s Return and Judgment,” creates an opportunity to preach and teach Advent as a season that looks forward to Christ’s second coming as well as his first coming.

The season of Lent naturally invites reflection on the meaning of Jesus’ life and death. Drawing from several sections of *Glory to God* as evidenced in the topical index beginning on page 949, one could easily bring together several hymn and song texts to illustrate the essential theological topic of the atonement. For example, substitutionary atonement, as well as penal substitution imagery, can be found in the first verse of “Sign Us with Ashes” (#433). “Surely, you alone can save us. You pay our price with precious blood.” This imagery is also present in verse 2 of “To My Precious Lord” (#704). “Jesus, who for my sake had his feet nailed to the cross, with his blood has washed and healed me, paid the heavy cost.”

The church has articulated that Christ’s atoning death on the cross marks victory over evil in the atonement theory known as *Christus Victor*. The hymn “On a Barren Hilltop” (#217) is based on John 19:17, 30 and Hebrews 4:14–16 and highlights the understanding of Christ’s redeeming work as triumph over evil.

The moral influence theory of atonement is expressed in “The Church of Christ in Every Age” (#320). As is stated in verse 4, “For Christ alone, whose blood was shed, can cure the fever in our blood, and teach us how to share our bread and feed the starving multitude.”

In addition to reflecting on doctrines and liturgical seasons, *Glory to God* focuses on a consideration of God’s works and how they

affect the world. The first major section in the hymnal is “God’s Mighty Acts,” and the last is “Our Response to God.” Numerous hymn and song texts found in the final sections of the hymnal provide preachers and teachers with ample opportunity to explore the life of Christian faith and discipleship in response to God’s grace. The section “Dedication and Stewardship” challenges Christ’s disciples to open their hearts ever more deeply to God’s love in the songs “Spirit, Open My Heart” (#692) and “Change My Heart, O God” (#695). The spiritual “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me” (#700) speaks of a full life of discipleship in which we live, work, pray, and sing. Stewardship of resources dedicated to God’s mission in the world resonates in “We Give Thee but Thine Own” (#708) and “As Those of Old Their First-fruits Brought” (#712). Stewardship of creation and the call to socially responsible living forms the text of “Touch the Earth Lightly” (#713).

A final resource to mention for preachers and teachers is the classic spiritual formation texts, as well as contemporary paraphrases, found in *Glory to God*. St. Patrick’s breastplate, a fifth-century text, is in full form as “I Bind unto Myself Today” (#6). A contemporary paraphrase is included with “God, Be the Love to Search and Keep Me” (#543). Texts from Peter Abélard (eleventh and twelfth centuries), Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century), Francis of Assisi (twelfth and thirteenth

centuries), Teresa of Avila (sixteenth century), and many others are easily located using the index of authors, composers, and sources beginning on page 991.

*Glory to God* provides preachers and teachers a significant resource for use in worship, preaching, classrooms, retreats, and small groups. By taking advantage of the theological organization of the hymnal, the theological resources included in the appendixes, the extensive indexes, and the texts of the 853 hymns and songs, preachers and teachers can use this resource, along with their own creativity and faithfulness, to shape and form the faith of disciples of Jesus Christ in ways that truly give glory to God!

## Endnotes

1. *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 926.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 929.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

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