

Social Justice Themes in *Glory to God*

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

Introduction

What does the new Presbyterian hymnal have to say about the church's ministries of peacemaking and social justice? One way to find out would be to turn to the section titled "Justice and Reconciliation" (#749–#774). But this would be to miss the way in which God's call to justice, righteousness, and peace resounds *throughout* this collection of congregational song, from beginning to end (#1–#853).

Think of the structure of the hymnal as a sonata with three movements: "God's Mighty Acts," "The Church at Worship," and "Our Response to God." Each of these movements pulses with the rhythms of other kinds of movements—marches from discrimination to dignity, journeys from oppression to justice, pilgrimages from conflict to peace. Each one rings, in the words of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (#339), "with the harmonies of liberty" and beckons us to "march on, till victory is won."

This brief essay highlights one hymn in each of the subsections that make up *Glory to God*, focusing on new songs about peacemaking and social justice in this collection. Readers should have a copy of the hymnal handy in order to read the full texts for themselves—and even sing along! Of course, there is much, much more to explore and discover. Hopefully these examples will inspire you to embark on your own pilgrimage through the hymnal. Among these hymns and songs you will find many old friends and many new companions for the journey into God's realm of justice and peace.

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God's Mighty Acts

The first movement of *Glory to God* (#1–#384) tells the story of God's mighty and gracious action throughout the history of salvation. It begins with

a section containing hymns and songs about the triune God. It continues by following the chronology of the biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation, with these subsections: “Creation and Providence,” “God’s Covenant with Israel,” “Jesus Christ,” “Gift of the Holy Spirit,” “The Church,” “The Life of the Nations,” “Christ’s Return and Judgment,” and “A New Heaven and a New Earth.”

The first section is titled “Triune God.” Alongside well-known Trinitarian hymns, such as “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” (#1) and “Come, Thou Almighty King” (#2), *Glory to God* offers new texts with expansive yet deeply biblical imagery for the triune God, such as “Womb of Life and Source of Being” (#3). The third stanza includes this prayer to the Holy Spirit: “Labor with us; aid the birthing of the new world yet to be, free of servant, lord, and master, free for love and unity.”

Next is “Creation and Providence.” “God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens” (#24) celebrates the gifts of creativity and scientific discovery while warning of the dangers of the nuclear age: how we have “probed the secrets of the atom . . . facing us with life’s destruction.” *Glory to God* includes a stanza omitted from the version in the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal*, one that contrasts the “stately buildings” of “our modern cities” with the plight of the poor and lonely who inhabit their streets.

In “God’s Covenant with Israel” the narrative of salvation history continues with the biblical story of ancient Israel. As it moves through the major themes and stories of the Old Testament, *Glory to God* features a number of musical meditations on the hopes and dreams of God’s prophets for justice and peace. One of these is “Light Dawns on a Weary World” (#79), which draws its images from Isaiah: “light dawns” when all people find dignity, “love grows” when the hungry are fed, and “hope blooms” when creation is restored.

The largest section in *Glory to God* is “Jesus Christ,” and it sings of Jesus’ advent, birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and reign. No single selection can do justice to the diversity and depth of this part of the collection, of course, but a notable example is “Blest Are They” (#172), a paraphrase of the Beatitudes that encapsulates Jesus’ mission to people who are poor and lowly, hungry and thirsty, or despised and rejected.

The “Gift of the Holy Spirit” follows. With the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, God offers us a new way of understanding one another, the possibility of a new community that crosses cultures and transcends divisions. “As the Wind Song” (#292) exemplifies this Spirit, bringing together the gifts of a composer from Singapore and a poet from New Zealand. They share a vision of hope “born again” like “the rainbow after rain” by the power of the Spirit of God, “making worlds that are new, making peace come true.”

The next section is “The Church.” In that same Spirit, “Let Us Build a House” (#301) sings of the church as a place where “all are welcome.” In this sacred home, all people live in safety from danger and fear; forgiveness is practiced and divisions are broken down; strangers are recognized as sisters and brothers in God’s image; disciples are nurtured and nourished to serve those who are in need; and the promise of God’s realm of justice and peace is fulfilled through the love of Jesus Christ.

We believe that God is sovereign in all the earth and that the Spirit of God is at work not only in the church but in the affairs of nations and the sphere of geopolitical events as well. “The Life of the Nations” addresses these beliefs. The Caribbean hymn “The Right Hand of God” (#332) expresses this faith, singing of how God’s hand writes human history, points to the way of truth and life, strikes down oppressive powers, heals brokenness, and plants seeds of hope for the future.

The next section is titled, “Christ’s Return and Judgment.” African American spirituals, such as “Steal Away” (#358), connect the biblical story with the history of slavery, segregation, and racism in the United States. This song demonstrates how the promise of Christ’s return and judgment is good news for those who are longing for liberation. The sound of the trumpet signals the coming of the day when Christ will establish justice and set all captives free.

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“A New Heaven and a New Earth” follows. What are we hoping for in God’s new creation? As one hymn asks, “When All Is Ended” (#376), what will remain? The fourth stanza of this song challenges the church to live into God’s promises here and now: “Then do not cheat the poor, who long for bread, with dream-worlds in the sky or in the head, but sing of slaves set free, and children fed.”¹ The tune for this hymn is named YOGANANDA, after a teacher of Mahatma Gandhi.

The Church at Worship

The middle movement of *Glory to God* (#385–#609) is, appropriately enough, centered on the event at the heart of Christian faith and life: the common worship of the people of God. This part of the hymnal is organized around major actions and themes in the service for the Lord’s Day with the following subsections: “Gathering,” “Confession,” “Forgiveness,” “The Word,” “Prayer,”

“Baptism,” “Lord’s Supper,” and “Sending.” It also includes a collection of service music—settings of the *Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus*, etc. from a variety of musical sources and cultural contexts.

The first section is “Gathering.” The psalms are an important source of biblical prayers for justice and peace. *Glory to God* does not confine the psalms to one section but scatters them throughout the hymnal. (A psalm index on pp. 989–990 provides an easy reference for all psalm settings.) This section

includes “I Rejoiced When I Heard Them Say” (#400), a setting of Psalm 122 that describes the gathering of the people of God as a community of justice and peace: “*Shalom, shalom*, the peace of God be here. *Shalom, shalom*, God’s justice be ever near.”²

Next comes “Confession.” Our confessions of sin should not only include personal failures but also acknowledge our participation in systems of

oppression and greed. Thus songs like “Forgive Us, Lord / *Perdón, Señor*” (#431) ask God’s forgiveness for our many injustices and frequent indifference to human need: “*por tantas injusticias . . . por tanta indiferencia: perdón, Señor.*”³

“Forgiveness” follows. As God forgives us, we are called to forgive one another—particularly where histories of injustice, violence, and misunderstanding make it hard for us to find common ground. “Peace of God Be with You / *As-salaamu lakum*” (#448) is a musical setting of a common Arabic greeting appropriate for singing at the passing of the peace.

“The Word” contains “As Dew Falls Gently at Dawn” (#461), a Korean hymn that connects the gift of the Word with the beauty of nature and promises of God’s grace. The words of Scripture offer guidance for all “who wander in sin,” sustenance for all “who hunger and thirst,” and abiding peace for all “who suffer and sigh.”

The next section is titled “Prayer.” When we pray for the world God so loves, we express our hearts’ desire to share in God’s saving work—liberating the oppressed, lifting up the lowly, healing the sick. “There Is a Longing in Our Hearts” (#470) boldly asks God “for justice, for freedom, for mercy.”⁴ This hymn works nicely as a musical prayer of intercession, with the option of a cantor singing the stanzas and the congregation joining on the refrain.

“Baptism” follows. In the water of our baptism, all status, privilege, and power dissolve. By the grace of God we are made one in Christ, a new community of freedom and love. Quoting Galatians 3:28, “Now There Is No Male or Female” (#493) celebrates this sacramental gift: “Christ has set us free for freedom: we no more sing slavery’s creed; old submissions cannot claim us; Christ has set us free indeed.”⁵

Next comes “The Lord’s Supper.” At Christ’s table we are made whole, nourished, and welcomed as children of God; *from* Christ’s table we are sent to heal, feed, and welcome others. Songs like “In Remembrance of Me” (#521) make this connection abundantly clear, telling leaders to “heal the sick,” “feed the poor,” and “open the door,” all in remembrance of Christ.

“Sending” includes hymns that can be used at the close of worship, when we are blessed so that we might go out and be a blessing to others. “Go, My Children, with My Blessing” (#547) reflects this call to Christian service in its third stanza: “Go, my children, fed and nourished, closer to me. Grow in love and love by serving, joyful and free.”⁶

This movement of the hymnal ends with a section called “Service Music.” We don’t often think of hallelujahs and hosannas as songs of peace and justice, but they certainly are when they point to the good news of God’s love and grace for all people. “Holy, Holy, Holy, Holy” (#594), a setting of the *Sanctus* from the *Misa Popular Salvadoreña* (Salvadoran People’s Mass), praises

the God “who accompanies our people, who lives within our struggles” and sings the blessing of those who proclaim “the good news that our liberation comes.”⁷

Our Response to God

The final movement of *Glory to God* (#610–#853) turns to human action: our grateful response to God’s gracious initiative. This part of the hymnal is composed of three sections, each containing three subsections: (1) “Praising the Triune God,” including “Adoration,” “Thanksgiving,” and “Celebrating Time;” (2) “Joining in the Spirit’s Work,” including “Dedication and Stewardship,” “Discipleship and Mission,” and “Justice and Reconciliation;” and (3) “Hoping for Christ’s Return,” including “Lament and Longing for Healing,” “Living and Dying in Christ,” and “Trusting in the Promises of God.”

Praising the Triune God

Hymns in “Adoration” give us countless reasons to sing glory to God: we praise God’s goodness and grace, majesty and beauty, faithfulness and truth. “Great Are You, Lord” (#614), a popular contemporary praise and worship song, also lauds the *justice* of God: “Great are you, Lord: you are holy and just; by your power we trust in your love.”⁸

The next section is “Thanksgiving.” *Glory to God* includes many songs from Taizé, an ecumenical monastic community whose members strive to be signs of reconciliation in their ministry with the poor and marginalized throughout the world. One example in the Thanksgiving subsection is “Sing Out, My Soul” (#646), a simple canon based on the revolutionary *Magnificat* sung by Mary, the mother of Jesus (see Luke 1:46–55).

“Celebrating Time” follows. The Hebrew Scriptures suggest two related reasons for keeping the Sabbath: in commemoration and consecration of God’s work of creation (Exod. 20:8–11) and in remembrance of the people’s liberation from the

labor of slavery (Deut. 5:12–15). “It Is Good to Sing Your Praises” (#682), a setting of Psalm 92, reflects both of these understandings of Sabbath rest.

Joining in the Spirit’s Work

The next section is “Dedication and Stewardship.” One part of joining in the Spirit’s work is our stewardship of the many gifts God has entrusted to us: our lives, our resources, our talents, and the earth itself. Inspired by an Australian aboriginal saying, “Touch the Earth Lightly” (#713) sings of our calling to care for creation and protect the earth from ecological destruction.

In “Discipleship and Mission,” “Will You Come and Follow Me” (#726), a popular song from the Iona Community, gives voice to Jesus’ call to discipleship and mission. Jesus challenges us, as his followers, to “care for cruel and kind,” “set the prisoners free,” “kiss the leper clean,” and ultimately “reshape the world” through acts of faith and faithfulness. In the last stanza, we respond with our commitment to answer Christ’s call.

By now you have seen that *Glory to God’s* hymns and songs about peacemaking and justice overflow the category titled “Justice and Reconciliation.” The first hymn in this section, “Come! Live in the Light!” (#749), provides a good introduction to the hymns and songs that follow with its refrain, which is based on Micah 6:8: “We are called to act with justice; we are called to love tenderly; we are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God.”⁹ Other notable songs in this section include “Goodness Is Stronger than Evil” (#750), based on the words of Desmond Tutu; “For the Troubles and the Sufferings” (#764), made popular at the 2006 World Council of Churches meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil; “Somos el cuerpo de Cristo” (#768), a bilingual hymn for reconciliation; “I’m Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table” (#770), a song of the civil rights movement; and the well-known canon “*Dona nobis pacem*” (#752), with words in Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic.

Hoping for Christ’s Return

The next section is “Lament and Longing for Healing.” Songs of lament teach the church to sing *with* those who suffer oppression, illness, and despair, crying out to God for help, healing, and hope. A good example is “Hear My Cry, O God, and Save Me!” (#781), a twenty-first-century paraphrase of Psalm 77 set to the tune used for the same psalm in the 1551 Genevan Psalter.

“Living and Dying in Christ” follows. Because Christ is our hope in life and in death, we continue to sing, even when tumult and strife surround us. “My Life Flows On” (#821) expresses this sense of unshakable faith in the peace of Christ. Better known as “How Can I Keep from Singing?” this song was popularized by Pete Seeger and others in the 1960s.

The final section is called, “Trusting in the Promises of God.” While we hope for Christ’s return, we also watch for signs that God’s realm of justice and peace is near. Set to the familiar gospel tune of “I’ll Fly Away,” “When the Lord Redeems the Very Least” (#852) sings of the joyful day to come when “the hungry gather for the feast” and “the earth is given to the meek.”

The Movement Continues

The final hymn in *Glory to God* is a song from the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa: “We Are Marching in the Light of God / *Siyahamba*” (#853). As the church continues its pilgrimage into God’s realm of justice and peace, let us go marching, dancing, praying, singing . . . bearing witness to the light of Christ, good news for all people.

Endnotes

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