

Teachings on Salvation in *Glory to God*

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

Introduction

“Hear the good news of salvation!” These words (*Wotanin waste nahon po* in their original language) open a hymn written by the first Native American Dakota ordained as a Presbyterian minister (#441). They might well be inscribed above the entrance to every sanctuary and on the flyleaf of every hymnal. Without the gospel of Jesus Christ—who was born; who suffered; who was crucified, died, and was buried; and who rose again—we would have no churches at all, and certainly no collections of Christian songs to sing within them. So, it is centrally important to ask of any hymnal what it has to say about this good news. Below are eight teachings on salvation illustrated by hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs from *Glory to God*.

1. Human beings are sinners who regularly need to confess our sin.

Not every group in the Christian family places as strong an emphasis on confession as Presby-

terians do. In some denominations, a prayer of confession figures only occasionally—for example, in a communion liturgy to help people prepare to receive the sacrament. But according to the pattern of Reformed worship (found in the liturgical materials in *Glory to God*), a time for “Confession and Pardon” appears in *each* Service for the Lord’s Day at the close of the time of “Gathering,” immediately prior to the proclamation of the Word. The Reformed tradition teaches that before we can receive what God has to offer us in Scripture, we need to cleanse our hearts and our hearing.

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Consequently, the section of *Glory to God* devoted to “The Church at Worship” contains twenty hymns specifically labeled “Confession.” In fact, the very middle hymns of the whole

hymnal—numbers 426 and 427 out of the total of 853—fall within the Confession category: a haunting Taiwanese refrain echoing Psalm 139, “Search Me, O God”; and a Pashto hymn from the regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, “Jesus Knows the Inmost Heart,” whose first stanza admits: “This our sinful hearts require: flame of God’s refining fire.” The need for confession of sin is, therefore, quite literally a *central* teaching of *Glory to God*.

In addition to songs from the global church, other genres also offer confession in song. *Glory to God* includes three different settings of Psalm 51, the text traditionally attributed to King David, written after his sins in seducing Bathsheba and arranging for her husband’s death in battle. Two of these—“Create in Me a Clean Heart” (#422) and “Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God” (#423)—have a contemporary musical flavor. The third, “Have Mercy, God, upon My Life” (#421), is a twenty-first-century text set to an eighteenth-century-tune, falling squarely within the tradition of metrical Psalms out of the Genevan and Scottish Reformations.

But confession, according to Reformed theology, is not simply for individual sins. While we may well sing in the first-person singular, “Create in *me* a clean heart,” we also acknowledge that sin exists in the first person plural, at the bitter root of *our* failure to create communities of justice, peace, and love. “Forgive Us, Lord (*Perdón, Señor*)”, (#431) appears in *Glory to God* in both English and Spanish, and begs forgiveness for an array of sins that we commit both as individuals and as societies: “grievance and injustice,” “aloofness and indifference.” Further texts confessing our failures to follow God’s will, tend our human neighbors, and care for our natural environment appear throughout the section of the hymnal titled “Justice and Reconciliation.”

2. Like our ancestors in the faith, we have fallen out of right relationship and “deserve God’s condemnation,” to use words from the PC(USA)

Brief Statement of Faith that appears in the front section of *Glory to God*.

Glory to God does not ignore the judgment we merit. “Judge Eternal, Throned in Splendor” (#342, a hymn from the 1955 *Hymnbook* that makes a comeback in 2013) uses imagery like that of the Pashto hymn referenced above (or like Malachi 3:2), praying: “with your living fire of judgment / purge this land of bitter things.” A metric version of Psalm 2, “Why Do Nations Rage Together” (#758), acknowledges that “God’s wrath is quickly kindled” against those who do not “serve the Lord.” The sin of our forebears who forsook the covenant is brought into the present with “In an Age of Twisted Values” (#345), a hymn confessing our “struggle for possessions,” our “prejudice and fear,” our conflict-riddled communities and families—and, we might add, our divisive and divided churches. “All Who Love and Serve Your City” (#351) powerfully announces that “all days are days of judgment” and prays that God come quickly as “our judge, our glory” to a waiting and a wanting world.

3. Because our forebears violated God’s covenant, God gave the gift of the law and sent prophets repeatedly to call them—and us—back to obedience.

Glory to God follows the narrative of salvation history in its presentation of hymns, particularly in the first major section, which focuses on “God’s Mighty Acts.” This outline allows a full section for sustained consideration of “God’s Covenant with Israel.” “Deep in the Shadows of the Past” (#50) sings of our nomadic ancestors who “by their tents, around their fires in story, song, and law” recorded God’s revealed promises. “I Long for Your Commandments” (#64), a portion of Psalm 119, voices our need for God’s wisdom, without which we “stumble in the dark.” The law, thus understood, does not restrain our freedom in burdensome ways; rather, as John Calvin points out in his “third use” of the law, it rescues us from

chaos, training us and enabling us to flourish as individuals and communities. A metric version of Psalm 19 further exclaims, “Your Law, O Lord, Is Perfect” (#61), celebrating the life and health to be found in teachings whose taste is “like sweet honey.”

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Yet, despite this sweetness, we spurn God’s law, for which reason prophets have been sent to call us back to paths of right living. The teaching of Micah 6:8 finds its way, almost word for word, into a popular, three-part round newly included in *Glory to God*, “What Does the Lord Require of You?” (#70): “to seek justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” Even with such teachings to guide us, though, we persist in sin. The second stanza of a hymn detailing what “Isaiah the Prophet Has Written of Old” (#77) provides a sad commentary on our disobedience: “nations still prey on the meek of the world, and conflict turns parent from child. [God’s] people despoil all the sweetness of earth. . . .” Or, as we affirm in our Brief Statement of Faith:

Ignoring God’s commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and
ourselves,
.....
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to
our care.

4. Continuing to seek us out, God sent Jesus into the world to be the Messiah, the long-awaited Savior.

Advent and Christmas texts in abundance illustrate this point. Numerous beloved carols and hymns extol the mystery of God’s birth among us, prompting us to rejoice: “Love has come, a light in the darkness!” (#110); “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!” (#134). Wonder and thanksgiving for the matchless gift of Emmanuel are the predominant motifs in hymns illustrating this fourth theological point.

In addition to such notes of celebration, however, a few texts in *Glory to God* also anticipate the costliness of the incarnation. Versions of the Annunciation and the Magnificat warn of the price to be paid by the powerful of earth. In “No Wind at the Window” (#101), the visiting angel cautions: “This child must be born that the kingdom might come: salvation for many, destruction for some.” In “My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout” (#100), Mary warns that tyrants will be cast from their thrones, and “the spear and rod [will] be crushed by God.” Boldly, she cries out to the Holy One: “Let the fires of your justice burn.”

But in the process of establishing justice, this Holy One will also pay a price. In its section of hymns on the birth of Jesus, *Glory to God* contains the version of William Chatterton Dix’s “What Child Is This” (#145) first published in the *Oxford Book of Carols*, in which the stanza, “Why lies he in such mean estate” goes on to proclaim: “Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.” Richard Wilbur’s captivating hymn in the section on Jesus’ life, “A Stable Lamp Is Lighted” (#160), moves in the space of three stanzas from stars that herald a miraculous birth

to a sky that will “groan and darken” as Jesus is “forsaken and yielded up to die.” Given the number of people for whom the relentless cultural pressure for cheeriness around the holidays causes deep pain (because, for example, they are dealing with personal losses or grieving over circumstances in the world), a hymnal can offer helpful reminders of God’s presence with us as one who has also known grief, who comes bringing light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

5. Jesus preached, taught, and healed, commanding us to follow him into lives of mission and service.

Just as the salvation history framework of *Glory to God* opens new space for songs devoted to God’s covenant with Israel, it also makes room for more texts about Jesus’ life—the words he spoke and the wonders he performed between the climactic moments of his birth and his death and resurrection. He called disciples: “Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?” (“Will You Come and Follow Me,” #726). He pronounced blessing on those who “show mercy,” “seek peace,” and “suffer hate” for his sake (“Blest Are They,” #172). He ministered to outcasts (“The Woman Hiding in the Crowd,” #178; “Ten Lepers Facing Constant Scorn,” #179). He challenged the powerful elite of his day, “danc[ing] for the scribe and the Pharisee,” who refused to countenance his unconventional ministry (“I Danced in the Morning,” #157). He charged disciples to carry forth his work in the world (“Go to the World!” #295; “Lord, You Give the Great Commission,” #298).

In turn, *we* are “Called as Partners in Christ’s Service” (#761), in the words of a much-loved text carried forward from the 1990 hymnal: “Christ’s example, Christ’s inspiring, Christ’s clear call to work and worth, let *us* follow, never faltering.” In a song from the recent Roman Catholic liturgical renewal, we are bid

to “Come! Live in the Light!” (#749). A rousing gospel arrangement following the African American practice of adapting earlier hymn texts (in this instance, Charles Wesley’s “Hark! The Herald Angel Sing,” #119) proclaims Jesus to be the Light of the World, responding: “We’ll walk in the light” (“Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” #127). In a hymn by a Cuban Pentecostal pastor—“The Lord Now Sends Us Forth (*Enviado soy de Dios*)” (#747)—*we* affirm in both English and Spanish:

The Lord now sends us forth	<i>Eviado soy de Dios,</i>
with hands to serve and give,	<i>mi mano lista está</i>
to make of all the earth	<i>para construir con él</i>
a better place to live.	<i>un mundo fraternal.</i>

6. This same Jesus died on the cross for our sake, put to death by sinful human beings.

Countless classic hymns of the faith embed this teaching deeply in our hearts. The spiritual “Were You There” (#228) carries the implication that each of us in some way *was* at the cross, complicit in the suffering of innocence through our sins of commission or omission. The chorale, “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded” (#221) admits: “mine, mine was the transgression, but thine, the deadly pain.” “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me” (#438), restored from the 1955 *Hymnbook*, implores: “Let the water and the blood from thy wounded side which flowed be of sin the double cure.” (Interestingly: Baptist and Methodist hymnals have traditionally ended that stanza: “Save from wrath and make me pure.” Presbyterian hymnals since 1874 have opted instead for the line: “Save me from its guilt and power.”)

Newer hymns, as well, carry forward this theology. From the contemporary praise and worship canon in the United States, Twila Paris’s “Your Only Son: Lamb of God” (#518) confesses, “Your gift of love we crucified; we laughed and scorned him as he died.” From the praise and worship tradition out of Korea, we sing of Jesus

who “with his blood has washed and healed me, paid the heavy cost” (“To My Precious Lord,” #704). A twenty-first-century neoclassical hymn text, “Rejected and Despised” (#222), provides a sung version of the Suffering Servant passages from Isaiah 52–53, further locating God’s compassionate presence alongside “all the victims of our age” and concluding: “In scourge-marked flesh we find our Christ, and by his stripes are healed.”

7. God raised Jesus from the dead, conquering death itself, breaking the hold of evil over our lives and our world.

Throughout its history, Christian theology has held many views of how God accomplished our salvation in Jesus. The great ecumenical councils never came to a single position on atonement as they did for the Trinity or for Christology. As the PC(USA) Confession of 1967 teaches, “God’s reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery which the Scriptures describe in various ways. . . . [As] expressions of a truth which remains beyond the reach of all theory” (*Book of Confessions*, 9.09). So, in addition to the imagery of Jesus’ dying for our sake (taking our punishment, paying our debt), another theological perspective—sometimes referred to as *Christus Victor*—speaks of the cross and resurrection as a conquest of evil powers. The exemplary hymn of this genre is “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (#275), which exults in the fact that we need no longer tremble at “the Prince of Darkness grim”: “his doom is sure,” as Christ “must win the battle.”

Newer hymns and songs also reflect the *Christus Victor* motif. John Bell of the Iona Community has put to music a text from Archbishop Desmond Tutu that proclaims “Goodness Is Stronger than Evil” (#750) and voices the bracing affirmation: “Victory is ours, through God who loves us!” An Easter hymn from Tanzania, “Christ Has Arisen, Alleluia” (#251) focuses

more on the victory over death than that over evil, with the exultant refrain:

Let us sing praise to him with endless joy.
Death’s fearful sting he has come to destroy.

The “Service Music” section of *Glory to God* contains two contemporary settings of the “Memorial Acclamation” sometimes used in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper: “Dying you destroyed our death; rising you restored our life” (#567, #570). All such musical offerings enable us to sing what we believe in Christ’s death and resurrection: God has triumphantly ushered in the new creation that will come to full flowering when Christ returns in glory.

8. Jesus will come again, bringing a day of judgment that is also a day of joy.

The “God’s Mighty Acts” section of *Glory to God* closes with subsections labeled “Christ’s Return and Judgment” and “A New Heaven and a New Earth.” Hymns in these sections command us to stand “in fear and trembling” as Christ our God descends to earth, demanding our full homage (“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” #347). They warn us that God “is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored” (“Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory,” #354, alluding to Isaiah 63). In the words of a popular praise chorus, “Our God Is an Awesome God” (#616), whose reign combines wisdom, power, and love. This power is not to be trifled with.

Yet, the love of God is what prevails. The bridegroom flings open the doors, inviting us to a wedding feast (“Sleepers, Wake! A Voice Astounds Us,” #349). “We Fall Down” (#368) before “the greatness of mercy and love at the feet of Jesus.” “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (#366) completes the new creation, making us “pure and spotless” at last. A text by nineteenth-century Scottish minister John Ross Macduff, “Christ Is Coming!” (#360), fittingly gives the final word to hope:

Christ is coming! Let creation
from its groans and labor cease;
let the glorious proclamation
hope restore and faith increase:
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Come, O blessed Prince of peace.

Earth can now but tell the story
of your bitter cross and pain;
we shall yet behold your glory,
Lord, when you return to reign:
Christ is coming! Christ is coming!
Let each heart repeat the strain.

Let the church say: Amen!

About the Writer

Mary Louise Bringle is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Brevard College in Brevard, North Carolina. The winner of numerous international hymn-writing competitions, she now serves as President of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada and Chair of the new hymnal committee for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She is a member and elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, North Carolina, where she teaches an adult Sunday school class.