

The Theology of *Glory to God*

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

Introduction

Carl Schalk, composer of the music for “God of the Sparrow” (#22) and numerous other hymns, once dryly remarked: “The problem with that song, ‘I Love to Tell the Story’ [#462], is that it doesn’t tell the story!” He has a point. The lyrics by Katherine Hankey that were set to music by William Fischer in 1869 do not themselves detail the story of salvation. Instead, they describe the joys of sharing that story with others, whether those who “have never heard” or those who already “know it best.”

To proclaim the salvation story in full would require significantly more than a single three-stanza hymn—but, to be fair, Hankey’s original poem was over fifty stanzas long! Since modern-day congregations are unlikely to sing that many verses, we might propose instead that we need an entire *collection* of hymns to capture the magnitude of what God has done for us.

Glory to God is such a collection. The plotline of the 2013 hymnal follows the outline of salva-

tion history, beginning with 380-some songs celebrating “God’s Mighty Acts.” The final 250 or so songs detail “Our Response to God.” This dialogical framework reflects an insight expressed by twentieth-century Swiss theologian, Karl Barth:

Grace always demands the answer of gratitude. Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth.

Grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightning.¹

Christians of all ages could grow in our worship and prayer lives by expanding the ways in which we name the One who is above all names.

Mediating these two sections, the center portion of the book focuses on the occasions where God’s grace and our gratitude preeminently meet, in “The Church at Worship.” Running as a steady theme through all these sections is “the old, old story of Jesus and his love.”

The Triune God

The first subsection of “God’s Mighty Acts,” “The Triune God,” fittingly includes texts exemplifying the most classical definition of a “hymn” as a song of praise or thanksgiving addressed to God. (Later definitions expand the category to include religious songs addressed to God’s people, instructing them *about* God or about their responsibilities to one another and the rest of creation.) Most hymns in this section sing to God in the second person, using both traditional and contemporary pronouns: “Early in the morning, our song shall rise to *thee*” (“Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” #1); “Holy God, We Praise *Your* Name” (#4). The mood of the music stretches from the awesome majesty of Isaiah’s vision of holiness in the temple (Isaiah 6) to the shimmering delight of an early Christian image of *perichoresis*, according to which the three persons of the Trinity dance (*chore-*) around (*peri-*) one another in the perpetual interchanges of love (“The Play of the Godhead,” #9).

Language used for the triune God is comparably diverse. In keeping with the “Statement on Language” crafted by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (which serves as an appendix to the hymnal and which is discussed in greater depth in a separate article), hymns and songs draw from “the full reservoir of biblical imagery for God and God’s gracious acts,” employing both “metaphors that are comfortable in their familiarity and those that are enriching in their newness.” “Come, Thou Almighty King” (#2) honors the Trinity with stanzas addressed to the “almighty King,” the “incarnate Word,” and the “holy Comforter.” “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” (#8) sings to the “Father,” “Savior,” and “Holy Spirit.” Doxologies appearing later in “The Church at Worship” sing to God as “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” (#606) and as “Creator, Word, and Spirit” (#609).

Such familiar names are complemented by

other images. “Mothering God, You Gave Me Birth” (#7) picks up on allusions to God as a birth-giver (see, for example, Deut. 32:18). “Womb of Life and Source of Being” (#3) acknowledges the places where Old Testament references to God’s “compassion” and “pity” play on Hebrew root words related to heart, womb, or inner parts (see Jer. 31:20 or Ps. 103). “Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud” (#11) catalogs multiple images for the three persons of the Trinity: among them, Fortress, Fountain, and Judge for the first stanza; Word, Wisdom, and Vine for the second; and Storm, Breath, and Dove for the third. “God the Sculptor of the Mountains” (#5) amplifies this list even further, identifying God with vivid biblical images such as “nuisance of the Pharaoh,” “dresser of the vineyard,” and “table-turning prophet.” Children’s sermons could elaborate for weeks on each of these images; youth could be challenged to scavenger hunts to find them all in the Bible. Christians of all ages could grow in our worship and prayer lives by expanding the ways in which we name the One who is above all names.

Creation

The Christian theological plotline teaches that this triune God created the world in love and continues to guide and care for it. In texts that are familiar to us from the Presbyterian hymnal of 1990, God as Creator is honored as author of both the “sparrow” (#22) and the “spangled heavens” (#24). A hymn originally intended by its author/composer Natalie Sleeth for use with children sings to the “God of Great and God of Small” (#19) and honors the paradox that the Sovereign whom we worship is a “God of never-ending power, yet beside [us] every hour.”

This paradox of transcendence and immanence captures an overarching perspective in *Glory to God’s* creation hymns. God is the powerful ruler over the forces of nature: “The Mighty God with

Power Speaks" (#13) opens a version of Psalm 50, continuing with the line "and all the world obeys." The closing stanza of Isaac Watts's hymn "I Sing the Mighty Power of God" (#32) professes the faith that "clouds arise, and tempests blow, by order from thy throne." Yet, we might ask, even tempests like Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina? Are such devastating natural phenomena also expressions of God's purposive will?

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Such troubling questions require theological treatises for fuller discussion. But hymn writers and hymnal compilers have their own ways of responding. For *Glory to God*, this response takes the form of hymns in the "Creation and Providence" section that, like Natalie Sleeth's text, highlight God's intimate knowledge and protection of God's children, in and through the troubles we face. "Like a mother who has borne us" and "like a father who has taught us" (#44), God is our steady companion through life; God bears us up "on eagle's wings" (#43). Echoing the author of Lamentations 3:22, who wrote during his own time of national calamity, hymnist Thomas O. Chisholm encourages us to join in affirming: "Morning by morning, new mercies I see. . . . Great is thy faithfulness!" (#39).

As children of such a faithful Creator, we also have our responsibilities toward the creation. These are detailed more fully in the section of the hymnal dealing with "Our Response to God"—particularly in hymns focusing on "Dedication

and Stewardship." "Touch the Earth Lightly" (#713) and "The Earth Belongs to God Alone" (#715) stand out as examples of texts calling us to care for the world God has made and commanded us to treat with respect.

Covenant

But the God we worship is not just a God of nature. God also called a covenant people and entered into intimate relationship with them in history. In *Glory to God*, we sing of our forefather in "The God of Abraham Praise" (#49) and of our foremother in "To Abraham and Sarah the call of God was clear" (#51). We celebrate the exodus from Egypt in the traditional spiritual, "When Israel Was in Egypt's Land" (#52), with the familiar refrain "Go down, Moses." We also acknowledge

the gift of the law in a metric setting of Psalm 119, "I Long for Your Commandments" (#64). Indeed, many of the Psalm settings in *Glory to God* can be found arranged topically in the section on God's covenant, giving voice to the ways our ancestors in the faith praised the God whom they knew to be active both in their individual and their national lives. Many settings of prophetic texts also appear in this section: "Surely, it is God who saves me" (#71) from Isaiah 12; and "Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (#76) from Isaiah 41; "You thirsty ones, come to the spring" (#78) and "You shall go out with joy" (#80), both from Isaiah 55.

Christ

God fulfilled the promises spoken through the prophets in the coming of the Christ child. Thus, hymns for the liturgical year, beginning with Advent, follow appropriately on the heels of hymns giving voice to covenant hope, and continue throughout the sections of *Glory to God* dealing in turn with Christ's birth (Christmas), life

(Lent), passion and death (Holy Week), resurrection (Easter), and ascension and reign. After the Hebrew people had waited long years for a Messiah, Mary conceived and bore a son and named him Jesus, a name rooted in the Hebrew verb meaning rescue or deliver, for “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). This work of salvation is too centrally important to confine to a few paragraphs, so it is discussed more fully in a separate essay, “Teachings on Salvation in *Glory to God*.”

The Holy Spirit

The story of salvation moves from Jesus’ first coming in the incarnation to his second coming as judge and redeemer in the last days. In between those two climactic advents, we celebrate the sending of the Holy Spirit to give birth to the church. Two hymns in *Glory to God* sing about the momentous day in Jerusalem when the Spirit came with the rush of a mighty wind and descended on the apostles in tongues of flame: “On Pentecost They Gathered” (#289), which also appeared in the Presbyterian hymnbook of 1990, and “O Day of Joy and Wonder!” (#290), which is new to Presbyterian hymnals in 2013. In closing stanzas, both these Pentecost hymns ask for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit on believers in our day.

Numerous other songs from around the world also invoke the Spirit. Interestingly, the most frequent “first word” in the hymnal’s first line index—after the multipurpose exclamation “O” (occurring sixty times)—is the verb “come,” with thirty-four appearances. Many of these appearances are prayers for the Spirit’s presence within and among us: “Come, Holy Ghost, Our Souls Inspire” (#278); “Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove” (#279); “Come, O Spirit, Dwell Among Us” (#280); “Come, O Holy Spirit, Come” (#283). The last mentioned of these, also titled *Wa wa wa Emimimo*, hails from Nigeria by way of the musical transcription and English translation of a musical

scholar from Taiwan. A further invocation of the Spirit, though with a different first word, has Tanzanian origins: “Gracious Spirit, Heed Our Pleading” (#287), with the refrain *Njoo, njoo, njoo, Roho mwema*.

The last two hymns named above join many other songs from the global church to illustrate the truly pentecostal nature of *Glory to God*. Thirteen percent of the hymnal’s contents originate from musical traditions whose songs were not available to the compilers of prior Presbyterian collections. In fact, music from six continents is represented in the book; texts and tunes from Asia, Africa, Australasia, and Latin America now complement the hymns and carols we have long loved to sing from the United States and Europe. This diverse body of music reminds us of a key teaching from the “Theological Vision Statement” of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (included as an appendix to the hymnal):

The framework of the history of salvation offers a theological rationale for asking us to learn songs that come from cultures different from our own: Pentecost teaches us to speak and hear the gospel in many tongues and languages and only thus, “with all the saints,” to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ (Eph. 3:18). We do not sing hymns and songs because they were birthed in our culture; we sing them because they teach us something about the richness that is in God.

The Church

The frequency with which the word “come” is used as a first word in hymns illustrates more than a heartfelt longing for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. It also speaks to a hunger in our day for community, for the body of believers called into being on that first Pentecost to “come together” as a family of welcome. “Come All You People” (#388, *Uyai mose*) from Zimba-

bwe invites all to “come and praise [our] Maker.” “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy” (#415) from the U.S. folk tradition joins forces with “Come, Ye Thankful People, Come” (#367) from the ranks of beloved Victorian hymns and “Come to the Table” (#508) from the contemporary Korean American Presbyterian community. “Come Sing, O Church, in Joy!” (#305)—the hymn that won the competition for a text celebrating the bicentennial of the Presbyterian church in this country in 1988–1989—calls us to celebrate our ongoing journey “in bold accord.”

Such accord is surely needed. Some analysts have said that our current cultural climate in the United States is as polarized as during the Civil War. When caught in such tensions, we can be helped—and perhaps, to a degree, healed—by singing together: “We Are One in the Spirit” (#300) or “We Are One in Christ Jesus” (#322, *Somos uno en Cristo*). Singing elevates our endorphin levels, sending small surges of natural body opiates through our bloodstream. This is why listening to music gives us chills, and singing together can make us feel for a moment as if all is right with the world—that we might truly live, metaphorically as well as literally, *in harmony* with one another. Singing of God’s welcome becomes in itself an act of welcome. Brought together into one body, shored up by “The Church’s One Foundation” (#321), which is Jesus Christ, our Lord, we are also strengthened for mission and discipleship. “Lord, You Give the Great Commission” (#298), we sing; or putting Jesus’ command onto our own lips, we exhort one another, “Go to the World!” (#295).

The Life of the Nations

When we go to the world, we discover that God is still present with us, as with our forebears in the covenant, working to bring about the long-awaited reign of justice and peace. As in the hymnals of 1933 and 1955, so in *Glory to God*, “patriotic” hymns occur within this broader

context of the anticipated “kingdom of God on earth”: hymns like “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” (#337), “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies” (#338), and “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (#339). When we sing our way through this chapter of the story of God’s mighty acts, we find prayers for our homeland complemented by prayers *for* all nations—“This Is My Song” (#340) and “For the Healing of the Nations” (#346). We find, as well, prayers *from* all nations—“From All That Dwell Below the Skies” (#327), with a text from Great Britain and a tune from Germany, and “Praise God, All You Nations” (#328), with a text from the Psalms and a tune from Ghana.

A New Heaven and a New Earth

As we sing of our national life, we not only profess our praise to God but also confess that we live “In an Age of Twisted Values” (#345). So we yearn for that coming day when the “Judge Eternal, Throned in Splendor” (#342) will “cleanse the body of this nation through the glory of the Lord.” Hymns further anticipating Christ’s return and judgment are discussed in the separate essay on salvation.

But that judgment is ultimately transformed into joy, because it heralds God’s new creation. As in hymns found earlier in the subsection on “God’s Covenant with Israel,” here again images from the prophets stir our hearts. “O day of peace that dimly shines” (#373); “Dream On, Dream On” (#383) from Korea; and “We Wait the Peaceful Kingdom” (#378) all develop the incomparable poetry of Isaiah: the wolf will dwell with the lamb, spears will be hammered into pruning hooks, and a little child will lead the way. *Glory to God* balances hymns that celebrate a this-worldly realization of shalom with those that anticipate a heavenly realm—a realm where we “gather at the river; where bright angel feet have trod” (#375), and “We Fall Down” (#368) and “lay our crowns at the feet of Jesus.”

Here, we enter into a realm beyond our wildest

imaginings, a world where words ultimately fail and all we have left is song: “And we cry, holy, holy, holy.” It is the best possible ending to the greatest story ever told. Glory be to God!

Endnote

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, 41.

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 recently served as President of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada and was 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.