

Read It and Weep

or the Modest Newsletter achieving it's purposes

Mental Musings Regarding Doctrinal Delineations

by Philip Barnes

Preliminary consideration...

One famous driver's ed teacher daily chants the phrase to his students, "Never, never stop in the on-ramp to the interstate." This truth, though arguably subtle to the average teenager, should nevertheless ring true to all experienced drivers. For they, I mean, we all know that the whole point of the on-ramp is to merge at 55 m.p.h., not the annoying 45!

Listen. Next week, Gravitas meets to discuss weighty matters, one of which concerns the theological criteria which an open membership entails. This discussion is an interstate where words, ideas, and well, Ryanisms for lack of a better term, travel at speeds reaching the 55 m.p.h limit, sometimes exceeding it. A word to the wise: Consider this week the on-ramp and spend some time pondering the matters which we propose to discuss, reading if necessary, writing even, for the purpose of maximum participation.

The need for exclusion...

In the desire to become "as fully Christian as possible," we members of gravitas come together with several essential values in common. This week, we plan to discuss the first value that we share, namely, our commitment to fidelity in doctrine.

At the mere mention of fidelity in doctrine, no doubt, several questions present themselves to your mind. Fidelity to what doctrine? Are we talking about one doctrine or a body of doctrine? If a body, which one? And how broad should it be?

Interestingly, the flow of questions usually ends up with the latter question. For we instinctively know that to include those who hold doctrines in common is also to exclude those who don't. And no one likes to exclude, especially not today. Then again, maybe inclusivism is not our problem. After all, our fundamentalist heritage guards us perhaps from such compromise and establishes for us a residence, too comfortable, too smug, too far away in the esoteric land of exclusivism.

Every group does exclude, however; it must, in order to maintain its identity and further its pursuits. If this is true for the local bowling club or the Chesterton Conference, then it is also true for the covenant of Christians, par excellence. My mind is made up. We must exclude. Yes, but who and on what basis?

Choosing a working model...

The question we are really asking, then, is what kind of doctrinal boundaries we should set before ourselves if we wish to meet this two-fold purpose: (1) to exhort one another to stay true to the right doctrinal commitments, and (2) to exclude those who would jeopardize our identity, and by the same token, our usefulness as sharpening irons.

But perhaps you do not like the idea of a clearly delineated boundary. And, like the

prominent missiologist Paul Hiebert, you think this preference for a “bounded set” merely gives away your Western origin. You prefer the concept of a centered or “extrinsic well-formed set” with the Gospel as center. Membership to the group flows from one’s relation to the center. Grenz proposes such a model for the Evangelical Theological Society to which he belongs, while admitting that it has no place in the Church (JETS 45/2, June 2002). Perhaps you also favor this model. If so, how specifically do you describe your center?

But no, many of you will betray your “Western” origin (and maybe your scorn for postmodernism) and chose the bounded set, the circle perhaps. Might not the circle be a little too one-dimensional? How about the model of the multi-dimensional funnel? Ah, but none of these models please you. You would like to think of our doctrinal boundaries as just a big, big tent.

Well...

If you are now confused, I have at least attained one of my goals. Your brain is finally starting to gather speed...You have now entered the on-ramp...The highway is coming up ahead. Good. Keep up the speed. And especially, remember: “Never, never stop in the on-ramp of an interstate.”

Gospel Songs and Singers¹

The term “Gospel Songs” is applied to a certain class of sacred lyrics, chiefly of an evangelistic character, composed for us in popular gatherings of a heterogeneous character. The term is distinctly associated with the work of Mr. Moody, but is not confined to the music which he and his associates were chief in promoting. There has always been more or less music of this character, though in its modern form it was the distinct outgrowth and concomitant of that lay evangelism which came in with Mr. Moody. It must therefore be understood and interpreted in this connection. What lay evangelism was to the ordained ministry, the Gospel Song is to regular church music. If the right relations of the form be determined, so also will the right relations of the latter. If lay evangelism is a proper, permanent system, so also in the Gospel Song. If it is exceptional and temporary, so also is all that which necessarily goes with it as part and parcel of the same general movement.

The Gospel Song was born in Newcastle, England, in 1873, during the Moody and Sankey campaign.² The evangelists had been using Philip Phillips’ book, “Hallowed Songs,” supplemented by such original compositions as Mr. Sankey supplied. Before long a demand was created for the publication of these original pieces and on the personal guarantee of Mr. Moody, Morgan & Scott published a pamphlet of sixteen pages, entitled “Sacred Songs and Solos,” September 18, 1873. From time to time additions were made to the volume until the pamphlets were discontinued and their combined contents printed in a single book.

Meanwhile Mr. Moody’s friend and lieutenant, Major D. W. Whittle, was conducting evangelistic meetings in America. Following Mr. Moody’s example he, too, had associated with himself a musician much beloved by all who knew him – the lamented P. P. Bliss. These evangelists, still copying their leader, issued for Americans a book similar to that which Mr.

¹Rev. David R. Breed D. D., *The History and Use of Hymns and Hymn - Tunes*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1903. He was at the time of publication of his book the professor in the Western Theological Seminary.

² See W. R. Moody’s *Life* of his father.

Moody has prepared for the English, entitled “Gospel Song” – the name by which such compositions were there after to be known. When Moody and Sankey returned in 1875 the double set of partners decided to combine their compositions in one book, which was accordingly published. Its title-page reads, “Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs, by P.P. Bliss and Ira D. Sankey, as used by them in Gospel Meetings.” This title has been maintained ever since. The book became immensely popular; many writers and composers joined together to extend its circulation, edition followed edition, and addition followed addition, until a No. 6 was finally reached. It was a series of hymn and tune books whose extent and popularity was unparalleled in the history of sacred songs, and with a circulation surpassed only by “Hymns Ancient and Modern.”

There has been much debate concerning the character and place of these Gospel Songs. Some hold that they have done great mischief in vitiating the taste and corrupting the manners of worshiping congregations. Others insist as strenuously that they have been mightily influential in promoting true praise and positive devotion. The best judges seem to take a middle ground. Humphreys, in his *Evolution of Church Music*, says: “The character of piety they cultivate is somewhat superficial, not to say hysterical; but it cannot be denied that they stir the heart of the common throng. The refrains which are generally attached to them are readily caught by the ear; and that wave of emotional sympathy, easily started in large audiences, soon sweeps over the meeting and choir and congregation are at once drawn into close accord . . . No doubt the participants are moved by profound and genuine feeling, yet was are unable to approve of the introduction of such melodies into church services.” Curwen says, in his *Studies in Worship Music* (second series): “After the musician has vented his spleen upon this degenerate psalmody, an important fact remains: music in worship is a means, not an end, and we are bound to consider how far these tunes serve their end in mission work, which, after all, has not musical training for its object, so much as the kindling of the diving spark in the hearts of the worshipers. Without doubt these songs touch the common throng; they match the words to which they are sung and carry them.” Professor Dickinson, in his *Music in the History of the Western Church*, takes somewhat different ground. He says: “Those churches which rely mainly upon the Gospel Songs should soberly consider if it is profitable in the long run to maintain a standard of religious melody and verse far below that which prevails in secular music and literature . . . The church cannot afford to keep its spiritual culture out of harmony with the higher intellectual movements of the age. One whose taste is fed by the poetry of such masters as Milton and Tennyson, but the music of such as Handel and Beethoven, and whose appreciations are sharpened by the best examples of performance in the modern concert-hall, cannot drop his taste and critical habit when he enters the church door. The same is true in a modified degree in respect to those who have had less educational advantages. It is a fallacy to assert that the masses of the people are responsive only to that which is trivial and sensational.” Yet he adds: “In all this discussion I have had in mind the steady and more moral work of the church. Forms of song which, to the musician, lie outside the pale of art may have a legitimate place in seasons of special religious quickening. . . . The revival hymn may be effective in soul-winning; it is inadequate when treated as an element in the large task of spiritual development.”

These opinions of eminent experts should receive most respectful considerations; but as they furnish no adequate basis for mature judgment we may give attention to certain considerations which may help us to our own decisions.

1. As to the poetic material of these songs this much is certain – *they are not hymns*. If

the definitions upon which we have already fixed, after the most careful study in hymnology, by accepted, we are compelled to deny them this quality. They are exactly what they are generally called, "Gospel Songs," and it was a mistake to change the title to "Gospel Hymns." This was probably done because in the first edition of the Bliss and Sankey book – as in subsequent ones, certain hymns of the church were added. But still the addition of the words "Sacred Songs" indicated their character.

This is not to say that there are no hymns among them. There are a few that we may call such. Yet even those that rank as hymns do not fully conform to the standard. They are such as Mrs. Hawks' "I need thee every hour" and Fannie Crosby's "Jesus, keep me near the cross." But the characteristic Gospel Song, like "There were ninety and nine," Hold the fort, "Tell me the old, old, story," and "What shall the harvest be?" is not a hymn in any proper sense of the word.

Some of these poems are very beautiful and effective, like "Almost persuaded," "Safe in the arms of Jesus," and "Rescue the perishing"; but a poem does not become a hymn by virtue either of its beauty or its effectiveness, any more than a drama becomes a sermon or a meditation a prayer for like reasons. If we do not confine our words to certain meanings we open the way to endless confusion; and if we do not limit, even with some severity, the proper agency to its proper sphere, we invite abuses which it will be very hard to correct. A hymn is one thing; a sacred song is another thing. Each has its distinct character and uses. Sometimes they overlap, but they never lose their distinct character and their appropriate purpose. A true hymn is worship; a sacred song is not. The ultimate objective point contemplated in a hymn is God himself; in a sacred song it is the hearer. A hymn co-ordinates with prayer. A sacred song co-ordinates with exhortation. This consideration goes far in fixing the quality of the Gospel Song. It also serves to determine its proper use.

2. As to the quality of the music, so far as known to the author, *no one has ever claimed that it is up to the standard of our best hymn-tunes.*

Curwen reports that Mr. Sankey said to him in London, "I am no musician; indeed, I am no singer," and there was no reason for Curwen to disagree with him. Mr. Sankey well knew his abilities and his limitations. He claimed to be no more than he was. Indeed, we may claim for him even more than he claimed for himself. He was a great artist in his peculiar line – as much so as the technical virtuoso. He was an expert musical elocutionist, and communicated his skill to vast audiences whom he taught to sing simple melodies with unusual power. He and his companions are sometimes called "singing evangelists." The term accurately describes them. Musicians they were not

Take the four leading Gospel singers who were associated in the publication of the series of Gospel Hymns – Bliss, Sankey, McGranahan, and Stebbins – and judge their work by the only competent standard to which we are at liberty at present to appeal – the authoritative permanent collections. *In Excelsis* does not contain a single tune by any of them. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* selects but one out of the vast number which they have published – "Evening Prayer," by George C. Stebbins. If this is any reflection upon their attainments it is to be laid at the door of these compilers. But really it is no reflection upon them in the line of their special work. It is only that their gifts and their compositions were abnormal; that is, aside from the permanent purposes and required grade of congregational worship. As the songs to which they set their music were not as a class hymns, so their melodies were not as a class hymn-tunes. Some particulars may be mentioned in which they are defective.

[1.] *The solo and chorus feature is objectionable.*

Let us carefully guard this remark. Remember we are dealing with congregational music in stated worship. Our choirs render music in this form; but the Gospel Hymns are surely not intended for the use of the choir; and just as surely this style of music cannot be employed in the services of congregations that gather only once a week.

Moreover, many of these pieces are such simply because of the musical incapacity of their authors. It requires much less skill to write a solo with a simple refrain than to write a good hymn-tune. The Gospel singers were not masters of counterpoint and harmony. They did the best they could.

[2.] *The imitation of the fugue-tune which prevails in these tunes is objectionable.*

It was a revival of the style of music which the church had, by common consent, abandoned. But it was a very weak imitation. The same limitations which compelled the frequent use of solo and chorus restricted the composers to that which was little else than simply antiphony—mere repetition without real accord.

These Gospel fugue-tunes were used with great effect. “Deep answered unto deep” in the emotions which stirred the gathered multitudes. The occasion justified the means. But sung in the times of ordinary religious feeling, and by smaller congregations, these tunes are weak and meaningless.

[3.] *The structure of these tunes—even when the above features do not appear—is loose and prosaic.*

The better hymn-tunes introduce a fundamental harmony with even beat; they move with stately steps and majestic strength. But the very simple harmony of these Gospel tunes generally changes once in a bar. The lower parts are little else than an accompaniment to the soprano. This gives a very attenuated effect and renders them exceeding cheap and common.

[4.] *But the most objectionable of all features has been the dissociation of old standard hymns from the stately tunes to which congregations have been accustomed to sing them, connecting them with trifling melodies.*

This has been done in some cases in which unwarranted liberties have not only been taken with the hymn, but the tune which has been joined to it is altogether out of keeping with the words.

So it has been with two of Watt’s most serious hymns, “Alas, and did my Savior bleed” and “Come we that love the Lord.” In both cases a chorus has been added that we hesitate to characterize. The words of the chorus are a deep and pitiable decline and the music is almost sacrilege. This is a serious charge; but the let tunes be examined. How can any devout worshiper, before the cross of his crucified Savior, take up such a strain as that which this Gospel chorus furnishes. It is inexplicable. The other chorus is simply tawdry, picnic music—unworthy of pilgrims to the heavenly city.

[5.] *The fact that a number of the standard hymns of the Church are always added to the editions of Gospel Songs is sufficient criticism.*

The exceptional and temporary are thus made to pass current; an imprimatur is attached to them. Frequently in Gospel meetings, at the very climax of interest the standard hymns were used. They compelled their own adoption. The audience had reached a spiritual frame to which they alone could give expression.

[6.] *The multiplication of these Gospel tunes settled into a mannerism.*

This would have been an evil, even if the mannerism itself was not specially obnoxious. The old Scotch tunes, as we have seen, were good tunes; but their inflexible style was disheartening. The error in the case of the Gospel tunes was more serious. They created a

musical idiom which was undesirable. They degenerated into a kind of musical “slang,” which while it was eminently sincere and pious, yet operated to deprave the purity of praise as its counterpart in language operates to deprave purity in speech. Many a worshiper has been misled with regard to the qualities of a true hymn and the nature of sacred music. Reverence degenerates into familiarity, and solemn worship is displaced by musical harangue. The best effects of these songs were therefore local and temporary.

And yet the Gospel Songs have had this permanent influence; they have served to suggest a better use of the better tunes. Our congregational singing has been much improved by observing their methods. It might still more improved, would we only heed the lessons we have been taught. There is by far too much sameness in our praise. We sing most of our tunes at the same rate and with the same degree of force. The minister and the choir care all too little whether any attempt is made to interpret the sentiment of the hymn or to express the meaning of the tune to which it is set. The great congregations which sang the Gospel Songs were taught to “shade” them. There was always an interacting sympathy between choir and congregation, which we might continue to cultivate as well as not; and the variety introduced in the method of singing the same song might often be introduced in our church services—particularly at evening worship—to the greater pleasure and profit of the worshipers. If the same interest were taken in the proper rendering of our solid church tunes as was shown in the Gospel Songs their great and manifest superiority to the Gospel Songs would quickly and emphatically appear.

Notwithstanding what has been written above, the student ought not entirely to neglect the study of Gospel Songs. After all, the proportion of good hymns and good tunes to the whole number does not reveal a great disparity to that displayed in those of the church at large. When we consider that some four hundred thousand hymns have been published, of which not more than five hundred are in common use, and not more than one hundred and fifty attain to the first rank, we should be somewhat sparing of our criticisms.

Still further, there are, and ever will be, occasions when the best Gospel Songs may be wisely and effectively employed, and the student should seek, by careful examination, an intelligent judgment of their respective merits. He is already sufficiently familiar with them. They have been so generally sung that we need not attempt a detailed notice of the authors, either of hymns or tunes. His judgment will be materially assisted by inquiring which have been received into permanent collections, and it should be matured by a review of the material, which his studies now render him more competent to pursue.³

A Quotation

Discovered by Todd Mitchell

"The Christian call to the intellectual life is not just to an elite, a chosen few. . . . No Christian, however pious, will ever grow intellectually if he feeds his mind on trash, on the third-rate; if he never on his own reads some hard books, listens to some great and profound music, or tries to converse seriously about difficult subjects."

Frank E. Gaebelien, "The Christian, The Arts, and Truth," (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1985), 152, 155.

³The text was typed into this format by the indomitable Ryan Martin, our minister of propaganda.