

# **Let the People Sing:**

## **A BLUEPRINT for Hymn Singing<sup>1</sup>**

by

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### **Abstract**

*Using the acronym BLUEPRINT, the authors offer practical guidance for selecting and presenting hymns in a way that maximises the power of Christian worship as both an expression of praise to God and a vehicle of instruction for His people.*

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<sup>1</sup> This article emanates from Dr McElwain's MTh Thesis completed through the South African Theological Seminary under the supervision of Dr Woodbridge. The title was *Singing the Word: The Role of the Old Testament in Selected Hymns of Charles Wesley and some implications for the Twenty-first Century Church*.

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## 1. Introduction

For 2000 years, hymns have played an important role in the theological and Biblical teaching of the Christian church. From early Christian hymns such as Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20 and Ephesians 5:14, to Ambrose's Trinitarian hymns, theologically sound hymns were part of the worship of the early church.

The Medieval era saw a decline in congregational participation in hymn singing as choral singers trained in the *Schola Cantorum* performed service music without the involvement of the lay worshipper. Reflecting their belief in the priesthood of believers and in the value of hymns as tools for teaching theology, the Reformers returned hymn singing to the people.

Unfortunately, for many Christians, hymns no longer provide a primary tool for learning the Bible or theology. In a reversal of the Reformation, the art of song has been returned to professionals as the assumptions of our performance-oriented society have infiltrated the church. Whether replaced by trained choirs, soloists or praise teams, congregational song is at risk in many churches today.

Hymn-writer Brian Wren laments the loss of congregational song: “‘Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God,’ said Isaac Watts. Many people know God quite well and refuse to sing. Some say they cannot; others cannot see why they should” (Wren 2000:47) With the loss of congregational song, the church loses a vehicle for teaching the Bible and theology to laymen.

This article examines the role of the worship leader in encouraging the congregation to sing hymns (whether traditional or contemporary) that teach Biblical truths in a memorable manner. This article suggests a BLUEPRINT for more effective hymn singing. The BLUEPRINT model can be divided into two sections. Part I provides principles for the careful *selection* of hymns, while Part II offers principles for the careful *presentation* of these hymns to the congregation. Each of these aspects can contribute to a more effective use in hymns in today's church.

## 2. The BLUEPRINT Model, Part I: The Selection of Hymns

One of the most important tasks of the worship leader is the selection of hymns that express sound theology in the language of the congregation. By choosing hymns that are theologically sound and Biblically based, the worship leader can contribute to the education of the entire church.

Unfortunately, many worshippers have seen leaders who choose hymns in a careless manner. Whether the choice is based on the popularity of “old favourites” or simply at random, little thought is given to this part of the service. Just as a church deserves a pastor who gives prayerful thought to the sermon, the church deserves a worship leader who gives prayer thought to the selection of music.

Charles Wesley provides a model for effective communication through poetic language. In his hymns, he communicated Biblical themes in the language of the worshippers of his day. Wesley used Biblical language, but he was careful to relate his text to the understanding of his audience. He composed songs for miners, fishermen, and prisoners, tailoring his vocabulary for each audience.

For iron workers, he wrote:

See how great a flame aspires  
Kindled by a spark of grace (Wesley 1983:#29)

For fisherman, Wesley (in Brailsford 1954:147) used fishing imagery:

Teach me to cast my net aright  
The Gospel net of general grace.

Wesley communicated theology in the language of the people, the language of “Everyman.” He possessed a genius for making Scripture and theology comprehensible to the layperson. Because of his effectiveness in communicating theology in the language of the common person, this article will use Wesley’s hymns as a model. This is not to suggest that today’s worship leaders should use only hymns that are 200 years old; rather, Wesley’s hymns serve as a model for the selection of hymns from our day. Many hymns by such contemporary composers as Timothy Dudley-Smith,

Stuart Townend, Matt Redman and others communicate Biblical themes in today's language.

The BLUEPRINT model encourages the worship leader to choose hymns that use:

## ***2.1 Biblical Language***

Even a brief survey of Wesley's hymns demonstrates his preference for Biblical language. In his analysis of more than fifty Wesley hymns, Lawson (1987) found few lines that do not use the words of Scripture. Charles Wesley was so attuned to the language of Scripture that his poetry speaks that language with ease.

Wesley spoke the language of the Bible as fluently as he spoke the English of the street. Wesley "had only one language, the language of Zion. The scriptures were his native tongue" (Kalas 1984:25). Wesley communicated in a language that he knew fluently, the language of the Bible.

Some of the most popular contemporary praise music is based entirely on the words of Scripture, particularly the Psalms. These are often metrical adaptations of the Psalms with few or no textual changes. "Be Exalted, O God" (Fettke 1997:#32), "Thy Loving Kindness" (#706), "I Will Sing of the Mercies" (#161), and "Let the Redeemed" (#208) are all adaptations of Psalm texts.

The Psalms are not the only scriptures suitable for singing. Jimmy Owens and Claire Cloninger both paraphrased 2 Chronicles 7:14 in memorable prayer hymns (Fettke 1997:#803 and #805). Michael O'Shields combined the words of Psalm 18:3 ("I will call upon the LORD who is worthy to be praised") with the proclamation of 2 Samuel 22:47 ("The LORD liveth; and blessed be my rock") to create a powerful song of confidence in God's sufficiency (#530). These songs allow the worshipper to sing the words of Scripture, making the Bible memorable for today's Christians.

## 2.2 *Literal Interpretation*

Though Charles Wesley occasionally used allegorical interpretation, he rarely ignored the historical meaning of the Scripture. Instead, the literal meaning became his text for a hymnic sermon. Wesley did not discount the historical sense of Scripture; he began from the text and then responded from the perspective of the New Testament. Rattenbury (1941:93) evaluated this use of allegory:

With very few exceptions, the allegorical interpretations of Charles Wesley are convincing.... His evangelized Old Testament is a great devotional commentary on Scriptures, written by a man who was both a poet and in the strictest sense a Biblical scholar....

Contemporary composers such as Fred Pratt Green have composed hymns that are faithful to the principle of literal interpretation. In Green's hymns, Scripture is interpreted literally, and then applied to contemporary life. In "Seek the Lord," based on Isaiah 55, Green emphasizes the call to repentance central to this passage. Faithful to the Isaiah text, Green offers a universal invitation to all humankind:

Seek the Lord who now is present,  
Pray to One who is at hand.  
Let the wicked cease from sinning,  
Evildoers change their mind.  
On the sinful God has pity;  
Those returning God forgives.  
This is what the Lord is saying  
To a world that disbelieves  
(United Methodist Hymnal 1989: #124).

Worship leaders in today's church have access to a wealth of hymn literature that is faithful to Scripture. In order to use hymns to teach Scripture, the worship leader should utilize hymns that reflect the principle of literal interpretation.

### ***2.3 Unambiguous Theology***

Methodist historian Albert Outler noted that “...the Methodist people learned at least as much doctrine from Charles’ hymns as they did from John’s preaching. What is crucial is that it was the same basic doctrine” (Whaling 1981)! Early Methodists learned theology from the sermons they heard and from the hymns they sang. An analysis of Charles Wesley’s hymnody shows that his hymns addressed every major theological theme of early Methodism in a clear and unambiguous manner.

Referring to the Pentecost hymns of 1746, Timothy Smith (1983:1012) wrote, “Clearly John and Charles Wesley meant these hymns ... to teach Biblical theology and to do it more effectively because the people sang in joy what they were being taught.” Like Ambrose and Luther before them, the Wesleys knew that hymnody is an effective tool for teaching theology to the unlearned layman.

Finding contemporary hymns that teach unambiguous theology may be one of the greatest challenges to worship leaders. While many theologically based hymns survive from earlier eras, the ecumenical trend of contemporary worship has fostered hymns that avoid controversial doctrinal issues. Much of contemporary hymnody addresses only areas of near-universal agreement in the church. While the irenic aim of many hymn-writers is admirable, churches should sing hymns that reflect their doctrinal identity. Today’s church should not be afraid of pastors who will unashamedly preach doctrine; it should not be afraid of hymnody that unequivocally teaches that same doctrine.

### ***2.4 Experiential Tone***

Charles Wesley often related theology and Biblical interpretation to personal experience. His hymns existentially related Biblical narratives and themes to the life of the contemporary believer. Wainwright (1980:204) sees this as a primary strength of the 1780 Hymnbook.

Wesley was not satisfied with any reading of Scripture that failed to relate the ancient text to contemporary experience. In hymns such as “Wrestling Jacob,”

Charles related the Biblical text to the daily experience of the worshipper. Rogal (1991:92) observed that Wesley's hymns "reflect and then universalize the experiences of thousands of believers and an equal number of souls struggling to believe."

Many contemporary choruses place the worshipper in the role of the psalmist, achieving an experiential interpretation of the Psalms. These choruses modify the Biblical text to encourage the singer's existential understanding of Scripture. In Nystrom's popular "As the Deer," the worshipper seeks a relationship with God:

As the deer panteth for the water,  
So my soul longeth after Thee.  
You alone are my heart's desire,  
And I long to worship Thee

(Fettke 1997:#548).

Such experiential readings are common in contemporary choruses. In a creative blending of Old Testament imagery and New Testament theology, Steve Fry identifies the believer with the Temple. Using the testimony of 2 Chronicles 5:14 ("The glory of the Lord filled the temple of God," NIV) and Solomon's invocation ("Now arise, O LORD God, and come to your resting place," 2 Chr 6:41, NIV), the worshipper, God's "temple," invites His presence:

Oh, the glory of Your presence,  
We, Your temple, give You reverence.  
Come and rise to Your rest and be blest by our praise  
As we glory in your embrace;  
As Your presence now fills this place

(Fettke 1997:#226)

Eddie Espinosa's "Change My Heart, O God" combines Biblical terminology with an experiential interpretation to create a powerful prayer for personal cleansing. In singing this chorus, the worshipper becomes the pray-er who seeks cleansing. Espinosa blends the spirit of Psalm 51 with Jeremiah's image of God as the potter:

Change my heart, O God,  
    Make it ever true.  
Change my heart, O God,  
    May I be like You.  
You are the Potter,  
    I am the clay;  
Mold me and make me,  
    This is what I pray

(Fettke 1997:#654)

Through the use of hymns that are experiential in language and style, the worship leader can encourage worshippers to visualize their personal participation in the promises and commands of Scripture. Rather than reading the Bible as an onlooker, the worshipper can apply the text to their daily Christian life.

### **3. The BLUEPRINT Model, PART II: the presentation of hymns**

The second part of the BLUEPRINT model relates to the presentation of hymns to the congregation. Gourmet cooks know that it is not enough to select delicious ingredients for a meal; an important part of the dining experience is the presentation of the meal in an attractive way. Effective pastors understand that a sermon's impact is based only partly on the preparation of a sound exegetical message; the sermon's impact depends on an effective presentation to the congregation.

After the worship leader has selected hymns that speak the language of the Bible, that interpret the Bible literally, that are unambiguous in their theology and that relate to the experience of worshippers, care should be given to the presentation of the hymns. An effective presentation of the hymns can spell the difference between enthusiastic involvement by worshippers and apathetic participation in a weekly ritual. The second part of the BLUEPRINT model is concerned with the careful presentation of hymns to the congregation.



The BLUEPRINT model encourages the worship leader to:

### ***3.1 Plan Services Carefully***

Planning of the musical portion of the service is essential to the effective use of hymns. John Wesley (in Jackson 1996:217) described music planning for early Methodist services:

What they sing is therefore a proper continuation of the spiritual and reasonable service; being selected for that end (not by a poor humdrum wretch who can scarce read what he drones out with such an air of importance, but) by one who knows what he is about, and how to connect the preceding with the following part of the service.

Without careful planning, the congregational singing can devolve into a mere formality rather than a meaningful part of worship. Effective planning of congregational songs will include consideration of the number and length of hymns as well as consideration of the message of the hymns.

In an age of “sound-bites” and quickly changing visual images, worship leaders may have to omit stanzas of longer hymns, in order to avoid exceeding the congregation’s attention span. When stanzas must be omitted, the leader should retain those stanzas integral to the meaning of the hymn. Hymns that devote a stanza to each person of the Trinity, such as “Come, Thou Almighty King,” cannot be shortened without destroying the Trinitarian message. Similarly, hymns that paraphrase familiar Scripture passages, such as “The Lord’s My Shepherd, I’ll Not Want,” cannot be shortened without disrupting the original text (Sydnor 1982:89). This danger is particularly real in free worship traditions that combine hymns and praise songs into “worship medleys” or “worship sequences.” Such medleys must not distort the meaning of the songs by careless selection of stanzas.

One of the worship leader’s most important tasks is the thoughtful planning of congregational singing. Inattention to this task results in perfunctory singing that adds little or nothing to worship; conversely, thoughtful planning can

encourage meaningful singing that encourages the active worship of each singer.

### **3.2 *Research Hymns Thoroughly***

A challenge to the use of Biblically based hymns in worship is the distance between the Biblical knowledge of the hymn-writer and that of today's worshipper. Charles Wesley could assume a broad Biblical knowledge among eighteenth-century worshippers who sang his hymns. This is not often the case among today's Christians who have not grown up with the regular exposure to Scripture that previous generations enjoyed.

Because of this, many Biblically based hymns are omitted from modern hymnals. In other instances, hymns are altered to avoid unfamiliar references. *The Celebration Hymnal* (Fettke 1997#11) includes the eighteenth century "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" but omits its Biblical allusion to "Ebenezer." The stanza is changed from:

Here I raise mine Ebenezer;  
Hither by thy help I'm come...

To a less obscure, but perhaps less evocative:

Hitherto Thy love has blest me;  
Thou has brought me to this place...

Worship leaders should find ways to educate congregations to the meaning of hymns. Through research of the Biblical texts underlying hymns, worship leaders can assist congregations in better understanding the message of the hymns.

Brian Wren suggests "recontexting" hymns by alternating stanzas of the hymn with readings from the original Biblical context (Wren 2000:214). Thus, the chorus "Bless the Lord, O my Soul" (Fettke 1997:#58) can be interspersed with verses of Psalm 103 from which the chorus is drawn. This draws the congregation's attention to the Biblical source for the hymn and shows the historical context for praise, a context that is often lost in the singing of

choruses. By restoring the Biblical and historical context of a Scripture chorus, the church grounds praise in the Biblical narrative of God's creative and redemptive acts.

Collections of hymn stories provide Biblical and historical information about hymns that can assist worship leaders in introducing hymns. Robert Morgan's *Then Sings My Soul* (2003) gives biographical and historical background to hymns ranging from the Old Testament blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 through a new hymn from 2002. William Reynolds' *Songs of Glory* (1990) gives the background for 300 hymns and gospel songs. Kenneth Osbeck has written numerous volumes of hymn stories, including *Amazing Grace* (1990) that includes devotional readings on 365 hymns. With the help of these and similar resources, worship leaders can show the Biblical basis for hymns through notes in the bulletin or verbal comments.

Very few hymns need to be omitted entirely from today's worship due to the difficulties of their Biblical reference. Well-chosen comments from the worship leader can greatly improve the congregation's understanding of difficult hymns. By researching the Biblical background of hymn texts, a worship leader can gain a better understanding of the message of the hymns. In turn, the leader can educate the congregation regarding the deep truths contained in hymn literature.

### ***3.3 Involve the Congregation Fully***

Congregational hymn singing is valuable for its inclusiveness, providing an opportunity for the entire church to join in a collective offering to God. It is the responsibility of each member to participate fully in this offering. "Hymn singing requires the work of the pastor, the musicians, and above all, the congregation" (Johannson 1992:139).

John Wesley encouraged the involvement of all believers with his "Directions for Singing" that introduced the *Select Hymns* of 1761:

Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness

hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing (The United Methodist Hymnal 1989:vii).

Similarly, Charles encouraged every believer to join in songs of praise:

Meet and right it is to sing,  
    In every time and place,  
Glory to our heavenly King,  
    The God of truth and grace;  
Join we then with sweet accord,  
    All in one thanksgiving join,  
Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
    Eternal praise be thine!

(Wesley 1983:#212)

More recently, hymn-writer Fred Pratt Green challenged believers:

Let every instrument be tuned for praise!  
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise

(The United Methodist Hymnal 1989:#68)!

Congregational song is at risk in an age that values soloistic music over participatory music making. “Although singing can be a joyful experience, it is fast becoming a spectator sport.... Music has become something that is listened to, not something people participate in” (Stevenson 1992:295).

This spectator approach to music has changed the role of music in the church; in many churches, only those with special talents participate in the musical portion of the service. However, congregational song should be seen as the responsibility of every worshipper, regardless of talent.

One key to congregational involvement is recognition of the importance of hymn singing. When singing is perceived as unimportant, “worship is diminished and congregational participation undermined. People won't fully participate—heartfully, soulfully—if they see the leaders treat music as an appendage to worship” (Stevenson 1992:295). Hustad (1993:476) places some of the blame for a spectator attitude at the feet of musicians when he charges

that many church musicians have an improper sense of values in which “they would rather lead choirs than congregations.”

The worship leadership should do everything possible to create a “comfort zone” for congregational singing in which untrained singers can sing without undue pressure (Stevenson 1992:298). If the church has a choir or praise team, this group should realize that their primary role is to help the congregation sing better (Dawn 1995:203). This, not the beauty of the anthem, is the major test of the choir’s effectiveness in assisting worship. Music directors can use materials such as Hal Hopson’s *The Creative Use of Choirs in Worship* (1999) to develop the choir’s ability to lead congregational singing.

Congregational involvement in the portion of the worship service that most clearly belongs to the people is essential if the church is to maintain the Reformation principle of the priesthood of believers. Worship leaders should never allow congregational hymn singing to take second place to choirs, worship teams, soloists, or other groups. Instead, the congregation must be fully involved in hymn singing.

### ***3.4 Introduce New Hymns Judiciously***

To maintain a freshness in the congregational worship, leaders should encourage congregations to learn new hymns. Whether they are contemporary hymns or unfamiliar hymns from an earlier day, the introduction of new hymns can be a difficult challenge.

Many factors are involved in the successful introduction of a new hymn. The music leadership should learn the hymn before teaching it to the congregation. The leaders should know the new hymn well enough to lead with confidence.

It is important that the first introduction of a hymn be positive. New songs must be introduced “with enthusiasm; never with an apology” (Wren 2000:117). The leader should be patient and encouraging, not scolding (Stevenson 1992:297).

Wise worship leaders will pay attention to the “pre-learning” stage by preparing the congregation for a new hymn. A brief historical background may

pique the interest of the congregation in the new hymn. The use of the hymn tune in instrumental preludes can reinforce the melody for the congregation and improve the worshippers' ability to learn the new hymn. Similarly, the use of the hymn as a solo or anthem may serve as a good introduction for a hymn. Since many worshippers learn tunes by rote, such opportunities will prepare the congregation for learning the new song quickly and enjoyably. After the hymn has been learned, it should be repeated regularly until it becomes a familiar part of the congregation's repertoire.

While serving as a missionary in Taiwan, I observed a practice that may be useful for introducing new hymns. Taiwanese churches often have a congregational rehearsal prior to the service. This allows worshippers to learn unfamiliar hymns in an informal setting. By learning hymns in this rehearsal, worshippers can join enthusiastically in congregational singing without the awkwardness of learning a new hymn during worship.

Regardless of the particular approach used, the introduction of new hymns enriches worship. Whether informally or through a regular process, such as a "Hymn of the Month" plan by which one new hymn is taught each month, worship leaders should make the effort to expand the congregation's hymn repertoire.

### ***3.5 Choose Themes prayerfully***

Thematic services encourage a better understanding of the role of hymnody in worship and involve the entire congregation in musical worship. Such services offer an opportunity to focus attention on the wide range of Biblically based hymn literature available. Although this recommendation is not drawn from Wesley's own practice, the availability of multiple Wesley hymns on selected Biblical topics suggests the feasibility of thematic services using Wesley's hymns. In addition, John's practice of appending hymns to his sermons reflects his awareness of the value of selecting music that supports the theme of the preached message.

Thematic hymn services allow the choir and congregation to join together in a festival of praise. Many contemporary composers write arrangements that

incorporate the choir and congregation in joint performance of familiar hymns. In addition, the use of instruments beyond the normal piano or organ accompaniment can add to the festivity of a hymn service (Hopson 2002:15).

For the ordinary service, pastors and worship leaders can coordinate the hymns and the sermon in a way that reflects a common theme and allows the hymns to contribute to the central message of the service. Although little information exists regarding the hymns that were sung in early Methodist worship, John Wesley's published sermons include many quotations from hymns by Charles, suggesting his concern for the thematic unity between the hymn and the sermon.

In his study of the use of hymns for "preaching" doctrine, DeLaurier (2003:61) shows that eighteenth century hymn-writers wrote hymns "to accompany the sermon in the process of instruction, growth of faith, godliness of lifestyle, and soundness of world view." The practice of the Wesleys was consistent with others who saw the opportunity to "preach" through hymns that shared a theme with the sermon.

Thematic hymn services encourage a deeper awareness of the meaning of hymns. In addition, they encourage a realisation that the congregation is the church's most important choir. As these services reveal the value of congregational singing, weekly hymn singing may improve as members gain a better understanding of their responsibility, and privilege, as worshippers.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Corporate hymn singing is a vital part of worship. The Reformation returned the gift of song to the people; today's church must not squander this gift.

Both as an expression of praise to God and as a vehicle of instruction about God, hymns can and should play a central role. Because of the importance of hymn singing to Christian worship, worship leaders should take congregational singing seriously. Both the preparation and the presentation of theologically and Biblically sound hymnody should be done carefully and prayerfully. This BLUEPRINT provides a model for fulfilling this responsibility.

## A BLUEPRINT for Hymn Singing

As worship leaders take seriously their role in this important part of worship, hymnody can recover its place in theological and Biblical education in the church. In the twenty-first century as in the Reformation, “Let the people sing!”



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