

Why Do We Sing What We Sing: The Reformation Era
Grace Abounds
Romans 5:1-11
The Rev. Nancy Conklin
Sunday, July 17, 2022

Before and during the Reformation, worship music consisted of elaborate choral works, Gregorian chant, and responsive singing of the Psalms. The Protestant reformers sought to change what they perceived to be the “dangers of overly theatrical performances, the unwarranted expense of elaborate ceremonies and enormous pipe organs and the uselessness of text unintelligible to the common man.” Yet, as noted in the bulletin, each of the Reformers took different approaches as to what was appropriate music for worship — all of them cohesively rooted in the Reformation battle cry, if you will, *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia* (scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone).

Luther maintained anything not specifically prohibited in scripture was appropriate in worship. Calvin, on the other hand, believed God laid out very specific directions in the Bible on how we are to worship. Initially, he allowed the use of instruments in worship music, while “advocating for a careful and skillful use” of them. It wasn’t long before he banned instruments, claiming that they were too strongly tied to “antiquated and unorthodox methods of worship from before the Reformation.” In selecting hymns for church services, Calvin avoided anything that may have invited “sensuality and self-gratification.” To this effect, many of the songs which received his approval were simple in both lyrics and music.

One element which Calvin added to worship music was children’s choirs. Calvin was deeply concerned for the piety and the religious devotion of his parishioners. He believed that children could “teach adults simplicity, childlike devotion, and a sincere heart when singing.” While many Protestants, including followers of Martin Luther, objected to Calvin’s rather staunch approach to music, Calvin did much to develop a new form of music separate from hundreds of years of Catholic doctrine and ritual. His use of the vernacular in the recitation of the Psalms made worship music more accessible and comprehensible to the public. His simple melodies and inclusion of children’s choirs encouraged congregational participation in worship services.

Both Luther and Calvin were in strong agreement that the hymns we sing reflect the faith we believe. It’s why we still sing hymns such as these standard Reformation hymns we are singing this morning. Though some of the language and metaphors are outdated, they locate us in the larger story of God’s faithfulness to God’s people. For many people, their own theological education and their images of God have come right out of the hymnal. That’s why, as Calvin admonished, great care is taken each week in choosing hymns. They are chosen to proclaim the scriptural message of the day. What we sing isn’t only a matter of do we like this song or is it set to good music but, more importantly, how does it teach the faith we profess. Theology-filled hymns are an excellent tool for teaching children and young people the Christian faith.

This isn’t to say that singing doesn’t involve our emotions, or that theology shouldn’t be experiential — it should be. But if our singing is *merely* experiential, we run the risk of becoming, as Calvin wrote, “mindless, uninformed — more like “pagans” — prone to be *led astray to mute idols*.” Our first hymn, “I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art,” is the only hymn Calvin wrote. It expresses the fundamental assertions of our Protestant faith: the absolute sovereignty of God and that, as we heard in our scripture reading, our salvation is by grace alone through faith.

Of all the letters Paul wrote, his letter to the Romans is thought to be his theological masterpiece. Martin Luther called it “the chief part of the New Testament and “the purest gospel” urging that “every Christian should know it word for word by heart.” Paul wrote this letter in the year 56 BCE to a congregation of believers in the city of Rome. Yet, interestingly enough, Paul had not yet ever been to Rome. All the other letters he wrote were to churches he had founded in communities to which he had traveled. Those letters focused on issues related to each specific church. But not Romans. Romans is this magnificent, sweeping proclamation of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Why did Paul write it?

In one sense, it’s a letter of introduction. His lifelong dream was to preach the gospel in the western regions of the Roman empire all the way to Spain using Rome as the base for his missionary operations. Presumably, he sent this letter presenting his credentials as an apostle of Jesus Christ to preach the gospel. From his day on, Paul’s words have transformed the lives of some of the church’s greatest leaders, including St. Augustine, who was brought to Christ in the 4th century by reading the verses we read today. As was Martin Luther, who called these verses “a gateway to heaven.” John Wesley, the founder of Methodism felt his heart “strangely warmed” while listening to these words in 1738, and from his own conversion came the great awakening of the 18th century that swept across England and this country. In the 20th century, the direction of our modern theology was profoundly altered (or as many would say corrected) when, in 1928, Karl Barth published his book on Romans. No one who studies Paul’s letter to the Romans comes away unchanged. I, too, would testify to that fact.

Romans conveys the most powerful and precious truth of the gospel — we are loved by God unconditionally as we are. God’s love is a passionate and holy love that will never give up on us, never stop reaching out to us, never abandon us or lose hope in us. We have the assurance that we do not have to win or earn or be worthy of God’s love. It is a gift of grace given to us through our faith in God through Christ. A gift we can receive and a gift we can freely refuse. We can separate ourselves from God’s love for a while, or even for an eternity. Whatever our response, all during our lives at every moment of our life God will be offering us this gift of gracious love and acceptance. Yet, when confronted with a crisis, I’ve heard more than one person say to me, when I sought to assure them of God’s love for them, “that’s the one thing I want most to believe.” What proof do we have that this is true?

Paul reminds us of two different kinds of evidence. The first is our inner experience of God’s love poured into us by the Holy Spirit. Especially in our times of sorrow or suffering, the Spirit comes and pours into our aching hearts a full measure of the love of God. God’s unconditional love is also proven to us as a matter of historical fact. God proves his love for us in that, while we were sinners, Christ died for us. The cross is our indisputable proof of God’s unconditional love because it stands in stark contrast to our human love. The highest of human love is to die heroically for a loved one — like how that father died shielding his little boy in the Fourth of July shooting in Highland Park. That is the highest form of human love — to lay down your life for someone you love. For whom was Christ willing to die? Hear again Paul’s description: “the weak, the ungodly, sinners, and enemies.” We are all of those, and so we sing:

*I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer Art
My only trust and Savior of my heart
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake
I pray thee from our hearts all cares to take.*