

### ***What to Sing in Today's Church?***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church

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When people speak about what Lawrence Park Community Church is like, they say things like, “well, that is one friendly church.” Or they might say this congregation is generous because it gives tens of thousands of dollars to many worthy causes. They might mention the children’s and youth programs, the beautiful facilities, or the way the church fills up daily with community activities. But the comment I hear most often is, “Lawrence Park Community Church has great music.”

And we do. The choir sings beautifully. Its soloists—like Glyn, who has been singing with us for forty years—are amazing. The choir sings an incredible range of music, from the classical church repertoire to Broadway; from John Lennon to Dixieland Jazz. Besides the choir we have Pancake Lunch and Sundays with Kenny and Rockin’ Dawgs and handbell ringing and children’s choirs. Quality. Aesthetic delight. No wonder we’re having a celebratory luncheon after church!

Music makes worship sing. Psalm 150 says the Jews praised God in the temple with trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, strings and pipe. The Apostle Paul tells the Ephesians that they should speak to one another with Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing from the heart.

Music, when it is the road taken, brings us to the sacred mountain. Music voices our hopes and prayers. Music gives us opportunity to give praise or weep together, to confess our shortcomings and show gratitude. It reinvigorates our souls.

Part of the beauty of church music is that it is its own thing. Church music has a commercial side for the support of composers, singers, and instrumentalists, but church music isn’t held hostage to the power brokers of the popular music industry in Los Angeles or New York. In fact, at its best, church music is a loud “Amen,” to the counter-cultural values we have as Christians.

But, you know, besides all this, there is one more important facet of church music that is only very rarely present in popular music. Where popular music is mostly for entertainment, church music is about instruction. We sing church music, in part, to teach ourselves the story of Jesus and his love, the story that satisfies our longings as nothing else can do.

From, “Jesus loves me this I know,” for the children, to “The Lord’s My Shepherd,” in times of sorrow, from “Silent Night,” at Christmas to “Up from

the Grave He Arose,” at Easter, we learn our faith from the hymns and psalms we sing.

That’s what makes our text for this morning so interesting. The words of our text are the oldest known hymn in the Christian church. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ,” and then these lyrics:

Who, though he was in the form of God,  
Did not regard equality with God  
As something to be exploited,  
But emptied himself  
Taking the form of a slave  
Being born in human likeness  
He humbled himself . . .

What I find fascinating about these ancient lyrics is that we don’t remember the tune that Paul was humming to himself when he wrote those words. Still, even though that music has died, its teaching, its theology remains, even after 2000 years.

Paul used the first ancient Christian hymn to teach his congregation how to be Christian, something they had no experience with. Paul’s hymns teaches us that Christianity is about imitating Jesus, about humility, and about how to live this life with and for others.

However, learning theology from the music we sing can also be a bit—well—disconcerting, even confusing.

This is what I mean. Many of you will remember that at Ron Lougheed’s funeral, just as many of us continue to remember and miss both Ron’s and Fern’s presence in our church. I visited Ron many times in the hospital before his passing, and we talked about many, many things. He was good company.

Not long before his death, while discussing his wishes for a Memorial Service, Ron said that he wanted the congregation to sing, “Onward Christian Soldiers.” I was taken aback. “Onward Christian Soldiers? Marching as to War? Forward into battle?” The song where, “Satan’s legions flee” and “hells foundations quiver?”

“Yup,” said Ron, tongue firmly in cheek, and with a big smile on his face. “That’s the one.”

I was surprised by Ron’s choice, even though I knew he was poking me, for fun, even from his death bed. You see, the United Church dropped this hymn from its current hymn book, *Voices United*. It isn’t hard to understand why. “Onward Christian Soldiers,” doesn’t have much of Jesus’ “turn the other

cheek,” and “love your neighbours,” in it. The song is full of the shadows of religious violence and Christian triumphalism. It is designed to put the fear of hell and Satan into the hearts of those wavering.

Now, none of these, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” themes appealed to Ron either. Besides playing with me, he wanted to sing the song at his funeral because, for him, it called to mind the bustling, active church he grew up in, as well as the triumph he wanted to feel upon the completion of his life. In his own mind, Ron edited out all the disagreeable aspects of this hymn, and focused on the positives that resonated with him—especially, I think, his confidence that he had run the race as well as he could with the people he most wanted to be with.

But it doesn't change the fact that most of the song's theology is wrong.

In fact, a lot of the theology contained in the anthems the choir sings and the hymns we sing isn't really very good. As the Christian faith has changed—as it has tried, at least, to be more inclusive, less judgmental, less focused on the myths and more focused on the ethics—our church music hasn't always kept pace.

Consider just these few examples. According to “Amazing Grace,” we are all wretches, and what we will do in heaven for tens of thousands of years is sing. According to “Blessed Assurance,” we are all waiting on earth looking above for angels descending and the final rapture of our bodies to heaven when Jesus returns. According to William Blake's Jerusalem, Jesus used to walk upon England's mountain green. According to “How Great Thou Art,” God intentionally sent his son Jesus to be crucified. According to “Away in a Manger,” Jesus didn't cry. According to our hymns Jesus rose from the grave in the flesh, and now walks with us and talks with us even though he bodily ascended to heaven. In our first hymn this morning, Jesus' name has an almost magical power and we had to be ransomed or saved on account of Adam and Eve's first sin. I could go on.

So what now? I wish I could tie this all up, neatly and easily, but it is hard. Mark and I talk about this a lot. One of his projects for his sabbatical, in fact, is to find us and the choir a dozen new hymns that are not only aesthetically excellent and thrilling to sing, but fit with our progressive theology.

Listen. I am not the least interested in ditching two thousand years of beautiful traditional music in order to make sure that it all fits with what we believe today. In fact, if it was up to me, everyone in church would be able to both learn the history of Christian theology from what we sing, and be able to critique it with understanding and appreciation. We're not there yet.

In the meantime, when we sing, revel in the music, as Ron did. But sing with the same warm, yet critical attitude you have when you listen to my sermons. When you hear something that doesn't seem right, use that as an occasion to reflect on what you do believe, more deeply. We may well learn Christian theology from what we sing. That's great. But it doesn't mean we have to accept it all. Because, sometimes, the best way to praise God is to open your mouth while firmly planting your tongue in cheek.