

Perhaps Contemporary Music is Not That Contemporary

*Comparing Classic Evangelical Hymnody and the Hottest
CCLI Worship Songs*

Part II: Verbs

(What They Say about Divine and Human Activity)

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Challenging a Common Opinion

- A common opinion is that hymns and choruses are very, very different.
- My goal is to challenge that opinion, noting where there are common strengths and weakness in both bodies of song and suggesting some things for pastors and musicians to do make up for those weaknesses.

The Two Bodies of Song

- The most republished Evangelical hymns (hereafter EH) from 1737 to 1860:
70 hymns from 86 hymnals
- The most used contemporary worship songs (hereafter CWS) from 1989 to 2013 on the twice-a-year Top 25 lists from CCLI: *100 songs*

Here are the Lists of Songs

Note: In slides which follow CWS=list of 100 contemporary worship songs and EH=list of 70 historic hymns

This Session's Focus: Verbs

- Specifically, how do the two bodies of song speak about divine and human activity?

Main Questions

- What range of verbs are used with respect to divine activity and in what numbers? How does this compare across the bodies of song?
- What range of verbs are used with respect to human activity and in what numbers? How does this compare across the bodies of song?
- How is divine activity portrayed as singular (of a single Person of the Godhead) or cooperative?

Main Questions

- What is the portrayal of divine activity from the broad biblical narrative or history of salvation? What verbs are used for and interpretation given to divine activity regarding Christ's crucifixion?
- How dynamic is the sense of time within the economy of salvation? Specifically, what is the relationship of the singer to events of the biblical narrative?

Notes on Method

- Multiple uses of a verb within a single song was counted as one “instance.”
- Nouns, e.g., “Savior,” with clear sense of action were counted as an verbal “instance.”

EV and CWS on Divine and Human Activity: Who Acts?

- Humans get more actions and a wider range of actions than does God (or any of the Divine Persons of the Trinity).

Comparison

Greater Number and Range of Human Actions/Verbs

- Total verb instances:
 - EH: Human, 850; Divine, 445
 - CWS: Human, 562; Divine, 380
- Total number of different verbs:
 - EH: Human, 276; Divine, 188
 - CWS: Human, 179; Divine, 163

Comparison

Divine Activity

- *Primary actor: Son*
- *Primary action of the primary actor: redemptive death*
- Similar balance in saving aspect of the death (theories of atonement)

Comparison

Divine Activity

- Divine Persons don't act in concert for the most part; there is a sense of compartmentalized action.
- Apart from creation, there is little sense of God's historical activity with Israel prior to the coming of Jesus Christ.

Differences

Usually relative, not absolute, differences

- Movement along a spectrum
- These are indeed related bodies of song deriving from pieties that overlap in multiple respects.

Difference

Key Divine Verbs



Difference

Key Human Verbs



Difference

Connecting with the Divine

- The direction of the human connection to God: sojourn toward vs. ascent up

“I will enter his gates...” (“He Has Made Me Glad”)

“We bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord” (“We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise”)

- EH: Traveling on faith-guided pilgrimage as a primary human action

“Wayfaring men to Canaan bound / Shall only in this way be found” (“Jesus, My All, To Heaven Is Gone”)

How Heaven is Used

EH: Heaven as destination

- We travel to heaven.

CWS: Heaven as dwelling place of God and the site for perpetual worship

- We participate in heaven.

A Home Above

Two words (home and above) reinforce the distinction on this point:

- EH instances of “above”: all references to heaven, usually with connotation of destination
- CWS instances of “above”: divine abode or measure of comparison for noting divine greatness (e.g., Jesus is above all others.)

Difference

To People or To God

- Relative weight: exhortation/invitation (EH) vs. prayer (CWS)
- Understanding this relative weight gives a different take on singing “about God” to singing “to God,” which is often seen as a feature of contemporary worship.

Difference

Mediated vs. Immediate Praise

- Sustained, mediated reflection vs. immediate adoration
 - e.g., “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” does not immediately address Jesus Christ in praise.
- Adoration/worship/exaltation related to greater abundance of prayer

“Pure” Worship and Adoration Songs

- A much more recurring aspect of CWS
- Even when expressed in EH most worship and adoration songs are framed and mediated by some context or situation.

Difference

Dynamic Time

- A nod to a more dynamic sense of time in EH with respect to the relationship of the singer to the biblical story or divine saving activity.
- Dynamic relationship of the time of action
 - Present tense
 - Typology and allegory
 - More of biblical narrative

Difference

The Human Condition

- Decreasing frequency and contemplation of sinful humanity from EH to CWS
- The greater frequency and the wider range of forms of “sin” in EH.
- EH: a greater sense of mortality: “we die.”

Hark! from the tombs a doleful sound,
My ears, attend the cry,
“Ye living men come view the ground
“Where you must shortly lie.

Difference

Dependence on God Even to Be Able to Worship

- From the most republished EH hymn (“Jesus My All to Heaven Is Gone”):
 - “Nothing but sin I thee can give / Nothing but love would I receive.”
- The need for divine empowerment for humans to be able to relate to God.
- EH: some instances of petitioning the Holy Spirit to act to enable righteous human activity.

Accounting for the Differences

- Context shapes piety
 - Rise of modern medicine has undercut the sense of human mortality, the constant fear of human frailty, and thus a dread for the coming wrath of God.
 - Rise of consumerist culture reinforces sense of possibility of immediate fulfillment: We don't sojourn, we arrive. We now flee from meaningless, not an impending judgment. CPR and superstores have changed everything.

Pastoral Thoughts & Suggestions

- Are the things held in common necessarily good attributes? And the things which changed poor developments?
- Because there are some significant differences, there can be difficulties in cultivating congregational cross-genre song singing.
- Respect liturgical roles of congregational song beyond prayer for EH (a song can be more than be direct address to God)

Pastoral Thoughts & Suggestions

- Recognize different sense of time (tied to song structure but also beyond structure), space, and primary images (delayed vs. immediate).
- Recognize critical difference between immediate adoration and mediated, commemorative adoration.
- Recognize different views of the nature of human condition and the improvement of the same.

Learning to Use Both Types of Song

Using Hymns

- Be patient: hymns are like stories; they take time to unfold and gain intensity by the end
- Savor the words: the abundance of words allow the song to explore in more detail why God is loved
- Savor the words, the sequel: finely crafted lyrics in meter and rhyme are part of the beauty

Using Contemporary Songs

- Contemplate a single facet: choruses are like diamonds; the goal is to settle in on a single facet and peer deeply into it, going beyond the words; intensity is gained by how the diamond is turned through the verses, chorus, and bridge
- Look for the “hook”: focused words catch the singer to contemplate one mighty thing about why God is loved
- Beyond the words, the sequel: choruses use common, accessible words and lyrics to love an uncommon God

Specific Pastoral Suggestions

- Use materials from both bodies of song as contemplative poetry without music. Learn to appreciate each genre for its own beauty and strength.
- Let people get familiar with a genre outside of immediate use in worship and name the differences so they have right expectations.

For Help in Using Both Hymns and Choruses Together

- Constance Cherry, *The Worship Architect*
(available in an electronic Kindle edition)

Questions and Discussion