

Column

Songs make a difference. They cheer, encourage, foster thought and, in the case of those we sing in church – hymns – are vehicles for worship.

In Ephesians 4:11, Paul highlights a number of ministries in the Church. “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers,” he writes. Is this list exhaustive or representative? I rather think the latter is true and don’t think Paul would mind if we added to his list, “hymn writers”. They too are God’s ministers.

Thomas Obadiah Chisholm was one such. He was born in a small Kentucky town in 1866. Because educational opportunities were limited, he was largely self-educated. Yet, at the age of 16 he became a teacher and at the age of 21 the editor of his hometown weekly newspaper. Later he was ordained to the ministry of the Methodist Church.

As remarkable as these achievements are, Chisholm is remembered for none of them, but for his hymns. Two in particular have stood the test of time: "Living for Jesus" written in 1917 and "Great is thy faithfulness" in 1923. Both have been translated into a number of languages and are still sung today.

I called these two ‘hymns’ but in many respects they fall into the category of gospel songs. Instead of praising God directly for His person and nature as hymns do, gospel songs are more personal and experiential. They focus on what God (often the Second Person of the Trinity – Jesus) has done for ‘me’ and on my response, as illustrated in the chorus to “Living for Jesus”:

"O Jesus, Lord and Saviour / I give myself to thee / For thou, in
Thy atonement, / Didst give thyself for me; / I own no other master, /

My heart shall be thy throne, / My life I give hence forth to live, / O
Christ for thee alone."

Needless to say, both hymns and gospel songs have a place in the worshipping life of God's people. Objective praise of our great triune God cannot be divorced from a subjective response. Martin Luther, the German reformer of the 16th century, got it right when he said:

"Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in this world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts and spirits. This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself of the fact that God has created man for the express purpose of extolling and praising God."

God gave us lips to praise Him, but people like Thomas Obadiah Chisholm gave us words with which to do this. Christians are people of the book -- the Bible -- yes -- but also of the hymnal. Let's keep singing!

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love; Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above. Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away; Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day! Amen. (Henry J. van Dyke).

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