

Column – Keep singing!

Thomas Obadiah Chisholm 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 three achievements are, Chisholm is remembered for none of them, but rather as a gospel song writer. 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.

Gospel songs were immensely popular in this country in the late 19th and early 20th century. They differ from hymns in that, instead of directing praise toward God, they focus on what God (often the Second Person of the Trinity -- Jesus) has done for *me* and often on *my* response. Of course, there is often an overlap between the two genres, but on the

whole gospel songs are more personal and experiential, as seen in the chorus of "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. Both need to be sung and celebrated. Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the 16th century, wrote:

"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."

The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:28: "And God has set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." Might we not pencil in: hymn writers?

God gave us lips to praise Him, but people like Thomas Obadiah Chisholm gave us words with which to do this and do it with others. More than that, hymns, at least those that are solid and scriptural, provide a resource for daily living. In moments of uncertainty and trouble, as well as in those of great blessing and jubilation, their time-honored words and memorable melodies rise to the surface like cream on milk bringing strength and encouragement.

Tragically, in some places today, hymns have been jettisoned by repetitious, theologically vaporous choruses sung to second rate, here-today, gone-tomorrow tunes. Solid food for the soul has been replaced with a mouth full of straw.

Let me hasten to say, lest I be misunderstood, not all new songs are bad, just as not old ones are good. We should support and give encouragement to hymn writers in the present day who seek to give fresh expression to Bible truths and wings to the aspirations of Christians in the 21st century. At the same time, we should be on our guard against those who churn out drivel driven by commercial interest.

As in all things, holy discernment is required. “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold” must remain the watchword for Christians until Jesus comes again.

Cast out what is tawdry. Embrace what is excellent! 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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