

Column

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: songwriters?

God gave us lips to praise Him, but people like Thomas Obadiah Chisholm gave us words with which to do this and do it together with others. 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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