

# **A Vision for Christian Song**

by Ken Bible

LNW *hymns*.COM

(*A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG*, by Ken Bible; p.2)

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## Section 1

# Glimpse the Possibilities

*Praise the Lord.*

*How good it is to sing praises to our God,  
how pleasant and fitting to praise him! (Psalm 147:1, NIV)*

*Come, let us bow down in worship,  
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;  
for he is our God  
and we are the people of his pasture,  
the flock under his care. (Psalm 95:6-7, NIV)*

*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus. (Ephesians 5:19-20, NIV)*

## About This Book

A few years ago when we were compiling the *Sing to the Lord* hymnal for the Church of the Nazarene, we sent out a massive Hymnal Usage Survey to approximately 2,600 people. Completion required approximately three hours. The response: fifty percent of the recipients finished and returned the massive document. That is an unheard of percentage for any survey, much less one so demanding.

Believers care deeply about the songs they sing.

As I write these pages, Christians are generating lots of emotional heat over the musical style of our congregational songs. Should we sing traditional hymns, time-honored and substantial? Should we sing praise and worship songs, using a contemporary style to point a new generation to God? Or should we sing some combination?

This book skips all that controversy. Instead, it assumes that Christian singers of every style want to glorify Jesus Christ and draw people to Him. They want to truly worship God. They want to know Him better.

Starting on that common ground, this book casts a vision for what congregational singing can be in the Body of Christ. No matter what your stylistic preference, I want to stimulate your thinking and point you toward new horizons. Creative room to grow is plentiful in all styles, and I believe you want to grow. I believe you will grow.

This book is intended to help you grow.

## Learn a New Definition of “Hymn”

When some people hear the word “hymn”, their hearts are warmed. They think of songs that have proven deeply meaningful to them through all the storms and seasons of life, songs of lasting truth passed down from earlier generations. “Hymns” are dear friends and precious treasures.

To others, the word “hymn” suggests a song that is dated and stodgy. “Hymns” seem to plod along stiff-legged, like a horse with no knees.

Whatever your associations with the term “hymn”, forget them. Following is the definition we’ll use in this book, and I hope you’ll adopt it as your own. I believe it can expand your vision of what *hymns* can be.

A hymn is a Christian congregational song, period. It is any song that God’s people sing for themselves, as opposed to songs they simply listen to or have performed *to* them. *Hymns* are all the songs we sing together, regardless of style. They include:

praise & worship songs

traditional “hymns”

gospel songs

choruses

global music--congregational songs from Africa, Asia, South America, the Caribbean,  
and elsewhere

spirituals

...and more.

(*A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG*, by Ken Bible; p.9)

*Hymns* are the congregational songs of the entire Body of Christ. The term isn't owned by Christians of one particular stylistic preference.

Expand your thinking! As a believer, you are far richer in *hymns* than you thought!

## No More New Hymns?

“Please! NO more new hymns. What’s wrong with the inspiring hymns with which we grew up?  
When I go to church, it’s to worship God, not be distracted with learning a new hymn.

“Last Sunday’s was particularly unnerving. While the text was good, the tune was quite  
unsingable and the harmonies were quite discordant.”

*--From a letter written in 1890. The hymn that aroused the complaint:*

*“What a Friend We Have in Jesus”*

## **Why Are Hymns Important?**

### **Hymns are built to last.**

Each generation receives them as a heritage and passes them on to the next.

### **Hymns are rich.**

They combine the depths of human experience with the timeless wealth of scripture.

### **Hymns express God's wisdom for all areas of life.**

Hymns nurture faith, love, service, sacrifice, perseverance, hope, and holy living.

### **Hymns are not a thing of the past.**

Quality hymns are being written today.

## The Value of Singing

I love singing hymns--hymns of many types and styles. Singing is such a beautiful way of expressing the Word that Christ has planted in us. As we sing, we share that Word with each other. We affirm it together. And we lift it in praise to our God and Savior.

Augustine (and later, Martin Luther) said, "He who sings prays twice." I never understood that statement until I began singing as part of my prayer life. Singing involves the entire being. It starts from the heart and catches up the mind and body as well. When we sing, we embrace God's Word physically, mentally, and emotionally. Prayer rises from our whole selves.

As we trust the Word that God speaks to us, joy overflows, and singing is one spillway for that joy. Singing is the music of faith. I've long felt that if we have the truth, *saying* it is not enough. The truth longs to come to life. It cries out for full expression. It yearns to sing and dance, to celebrate with life and feeling and physical joy.

Singing does that. Singing sets the truth free.

Singing unites us. Think of what's happening when we sing together in worship. The Word of God is in our hearts and minds and on our lips. We lift it to God together. We unite with each other and with Him.

Hymns express our beliefs about God--our theology--but they do so in terms that are heartfelt and life-centered. Yes, abstract, factual hymns have been written, but they generally don't last.

*(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.13)*

The hymns that God's children love to sing are those that speak their faith with warmth and vitality, in a way that resonates with personal experience.

Hymns are a feast for the body, mind, and spirit. Enjoy them completely! Don't just listen to hymns. Sing them! The most life-changing songs are not the ones we hear but the ones we sing. As Paul urged the young church in Colosse, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16, NIV).

Sing! Sing to God! Sing from your heart!

## Make Every Song a Prayer

My Lord,  
it's not the words I say or sing.  
You hear my heart.  
Praise rises from within,  
carried not by sound,  
but by love that longs to be heard.  
When my love quits singing,  
my prayer is ended,  
my praise is done,  
even though the noise goes on.

Precious Jesus,  
Loving Father,  
focus my heart  
not on myself,  
not on the song,  
but on You alone.

Make every song  
a prayer,  
a praise,  
a sacrifice pleasing to You.

## Emotion and Beyond

Music is emotional. Music arouses passion. Who would want it otherwise?

Not!! As a child of God and as a hymn writer, it's my goal to be fully responsive to the truth. That includes being emotionally responsive to the wonderful truth of Jesus Christ. Who can believe what God has done for us in Christ and not be emotional? How can we grasp that truth and not be passionate about Him?

That's why music is such a magnificent gift. It is an emotional medium. To freely adapt an observation from C.S. Lewis, music calls passion to the aid of reason.

But the Church is not the only party speaking to people through emotion and the senses. We minister to a people on sensory overload. Communications media saturate their senses and coddle them with entertainment, desperate to get a hearing for their products. Radio, TV, recordings, billboards, everything is designed with maximum sensory appeal and maximum entertainment value.

When we in the Church attempt to communicate with these people, we sometimes use the same tactics. We feel our music must have maximum energy level to break through to people accustomed to high-appeal communications.

So in our church music, we turn up the emotional volume to maximum. And why not? What is more deeply emotional than the truth we are communicating?

But there are negative effects. We further addict our congregations to high-energy emotional appeals. We feed them salt, increasing their thirst for emotional stimulation and entertainment. More and more, entertainment values saturate our expectations and our judgments of quality. “Good” Christian music is music that excites and impresses us, whether or not it improves our lives and draws us closer to the Living God.

With this increased desire for music that emotionally stimulates us, some themes--critically important themes--are minimized in our songs because they don't readily lend themselves to musical thrills. Topics like holy living, prayer, perseverance, and self-sacrifice tend to be edged out of our church music. I've spent over 30 years in church music publishing, and I can assure you that this is true.

For hymns, the problem grows worse because of a blurring of the line between performance music and congregational music. Choirs, ensembles, and soloists believe that their music has to generate enough emotional energy to jump the gap to static listeners and stir them to emotional involvement. And remember, these are listeners numbed by constant, high-energy sensory appeals all around them.

Whether performance music actually needs such emotional levels, congregational music should not need them. The emotional dynamic is completely different. Hymns don't have to jump a gap from performer to listener. They don't need to stir static listeners to involvement. In congregational singing, performers and listeners are one and the same. As they sing, they are already physically involved in the music. With performance music, the congregation has to be jump-started into involvement. In congregational singing, they are already involved. No jump-start is needed. That involvement advantage, along with simpler tunes, should free hymns to focus on meatier words.

But the performance and entertainment mentality has so pervaded our congregations that congregations approach their hymns looking for emotional stimulation as the measure of value. Additionally, as performance increasingly pervades congregational music, singability becomes less and less important. The discipline of simplicity is often lost.

There's more fall-out. With our church music addicted to high emotional energy and focused on narrow, high-emotion topics, our songs get further and further away from day-by-day, moment-by-moment Christian living. We talk less and less in daily, believable tones about daily, practical issues. And let's face it: happiness, holiness, and the salvation of needy people are won or lost more on Monday morning than Sunday morning.

None of this is doom and gloom, nor is it intended as an indictment of any particular style of music. The solution is not easy, but it is simple: remember and refocus. Christianity is less about *feeling* better than about *being* better. For yourself and for your people, do you want to *feel* better temporarily or *be* better every day through a closer relationship with Jesus Christ?

In our society, music is usually focused on temporary emotional stimulation. Music makers gauge their success by how much they can stir their audience to excitement or sentiment, though only for passing moments. Music can do much more than that. Expect more from your church music. Expect more from your hymns. As you sing, look to the Living Christ. Desire to know Him better and to live closer to Him. Let emotion be only an overflow of your faith in Him.

## **Sing to Nurture a Relationship with God**

I believe that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is the key to joy, satisfaction, fruitfulness, and meaning, now, every moment, and forever.

I believe such a relationship is available to every human creature. Personality doesn't matter. Intellect and education don't matter. Culture doesn't matter. Age doesn't matter. Financial and social status don't matter. Every person can have a satisfying and meaningful life through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Further, God is always, everywhere calling everyone into this relationship with Himself. What's more, He gives us the privilege of participating in His call to others.

That's why I believe so passionately in hymns. A personal relationship with Christ is the key to life for every person, and hymns can nurture that relationship.

Some worship leaders focus on creating "an experience" for their worshipers or trying to "make a moment" for them. Experiences with God can be important and formative, but only as they contribute to an ongoing relationship with God. That relationship is the key.

I suggest that our hymns and worship services focus on nurturing our ongoing relationship with God rather than on creating a temporary "experience" with God. Our services last one hour or so. What about the other 167 hours? Sundays should focus on the week, not the moment. Their purpose should be to prepare people for daily living. When that is the emphasis, substance becomes far more important than style.

As many suggest, it is vital that our worship services remind people of the reality of God's presence. But remember, God is always with us, not just on Sunday morning, and we realize His presence, not by emotion, but by faith.

For example, consider how Christ mentored His disciples. Was it by leading them into a big emotional worship experience? Perhaps once, on the mount of transfiguration, with only three disciples, immediately before His death. But His focus was on nourishing their faith and a constant relationship with the Father. Jesus' strength was fed, not by emotional pit-stops, but by a life of prayer and by constant trust in His Father. That's what He wanted for His disciples as well.

That should be our deepest desire, both for ourselves and for those to whom we minister. Refocus your worship on nurturing a relationship with the Living God, a relationship of faith, for that relationship is life's greatest treasure, now and forever.

## Creation's Prayer

*All you have made will praise you, O Lord.*

(Psalm 145:10, NIV)

On a Saturday morning in spring I was trekking through woods near my home. At one point, a dead tree caught my eye. It was taller than the green trees around it, and its branches were high, close to the trunk and pointing upward. Against the clear blue sky, the tree seemed to stand in solemn silence, lifting praise to God in an endless liturgy.

That one glimpse helped me see again that all creation is God's temple, quietly but constantly reminding us that

He is here;

He is great, beyond our imaginations;

He is love. He lavishes Himself upon us, holding nothing back.

When I look at creation and believe that He shaped it all for His purposes, I realize I am surrounded by many liturgies to God. Each tells us about Him in ways that are more universal, more lasting, and more tangible than human language. I look into the night sky and am awestruck by His vastness. I swing through the round of day and night, season after season, and experience His unchanging faithfulness. The incredible network of life that packs every layer of our world, from water drops to endless oceans, paints Him as a fountain of rich, unbounded life. And every breath I take reminds me that He shares His eternal life, Himself, with me.

(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.21)

I live in a natural world that stands in a constant attitude of prayer to God. Its attitude is dependence:

*All look to you to give them their food at the proper time. . . . When you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.* (Psalm 104:27-28, NIV)

Creation's attitude is praise:

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*  
(Psalm 19:1, NIV)

Creation reminds me that the purest faith, the most profound prayer, the deepest worship we offer God is not expressed in words. Such prayer is expressed in being and doing. It is not heard in church services or read in books. It is seen in the faithful lives of His people, living to God and for God and in God, day after day, age after age.

I want to be part of that prayer. I want my whole life to sing trust and praise and love to Him, faithfully and constantly, forever and ever.

## Unworthy

Lord, as I come to You and think toward singing, I hesitate. I sense that my songs are unworthy of You. They are, Lord. All our songs, all our understandings, all our expressions are unworthy of You.

But You want my praise, Lord. You ask for it. And I remember that praise doesn't come from my song. It comes from me. Trust doesn't come from my words, but from my heart. True worship and submission don't come from my singing, but from my doing.

Holy Father, Son, and Spirit, fill me with yourself. Cleanse my thoughts. Purify this temple completely, Lord. Sanctify me to Your use.

Then make me a vessel of Your praise. Make my entire life an instrument of worship, giving glory to You throughout all the ages, forever and ever. Amen, Lord. Amen.

## Expand Your Expectations

Wherever you are in your current use of hymns, look beyond. Hymns can do more in our spiritual lives than we are allowing them to do. Expand your expectations. Consider new possibilities.

Are you primarily using short, repetitive hymns? Hymns can effectively express more complex ideas. Give them a chance to do so. Gradually expand to include hymns with more substantial texts.

Are you using lots of “heavy” hymns, with many words? Don’t forget to occasionally mix in shorter hymns. When the context is right, give yourself and your people the chance to reflect on fewer words and fewer thoughts. You’ll find such hymns in a wide variety of styles to suit your situation.

Look at the themes of the hymns you use in worship. Do most of them tell God how great He is? That is so important. All true worship is God-focused, and looking to Him should always be central. But remember, worship encompasses every response to God in faith. Prayer, holy living, loving others, Christian responsibility, perseverance in trial, resisting temptation--all are worship. All are responses of faith, and all are vital to our ongoing relationship with God.

These responses involve many different moods--sometimes joyful praise, sometimes reflective worship, sometimes thoughtful challenge or deep consecration, sometimes brokenness, repentance, and humble prayer. We need all these in our worship, and hymns can help provide them.

God's beautiful truth for us comes in many different emphases, styles, forms, and flavors. Sing His truth, and sing a full range of responses to His truth. Remember God's promise:

*As the rain and the snow  
come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it  
without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11, NIV)*

God's Word is powerful and always accomplishes His purpose. Embrace the fullness of His Word in your life and ministry. Embrace that fullness in your hymns.

## Section 2

# Look to Jesus

*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:2, NIV)*

*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. (Hebrews 1:1-3, NIV)*

*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done. (John 13:15, NIV)*

*Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did. (1 John 2:6, NIV)*

## The Greatest Commandment

In our worship and in our living, what is most important to God? What does our loving Father want from us and for us? Jesus said it clearly:

*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"*

*Jesus replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:34-40, NIV)*

Loving Him completely, with all that we have and are--that is what our Father wants for us.

If loving Him is the sum and center of His desire for us, our hymns should have the same goal. Their purpose should help be to help us *love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind.*

But let's be specific and practical. What did Jesus have in mind when He said that life's highest goal is to *love God with all our heart, soul, and mind*? Is He talking about wholehearted worship when we gather together? Is He urging us toward emotional freedom in our worship? Or does He mean something more?

Look at Jesus' own life. He is our living example (John 13:15). We are to walk as He walked (1 John 2:6). How did He love His Father with all His heart, soul, and mind? By His words and His example, how did he teach His disciples to follow this greatest commandment?

Read the gospels. Read them hungrily, asking God to enlighten you. You'll see that for Christ, loving God was far more than telling God how great He was. Worship was not an experience. It was a life. He loved and worshiped His Father through daily prayer, faith, obedience, self-sacrifice, holiness, and patient endurance. He prized His Father's approval, not seeking His own will nor the praise of other people. Hearing and obeying the Father was His constant goal and source of strength.

*"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."* (John 4:34, NIV)

For Jesus, the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) was a lifestyle. He sought only His Father's glory, Kingdom and will. He depended on the Father constantly and completely. He forgave all who wronged Him, even His murderers, and He turned away from evil, keeping His eyes on the Father.

The life of Jesus teaches us the meaning of the word *worship*. Our church services are only the smallest part of it. Worship is 168 hours per week, not one hour on Sunday. Worship is far more than telling God how great He is. Worship is a full life response to Him. It is daily walking with Him in faith, love, and obedience.

*(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.28)*

That should be the goal of our hymn singing. Our hymns should help us worship as Christ worshiped and walk as He walked, denying ourselves, taking up our crosses daily, and following Him.

Our hymns should also help us live out the second greatest commandment: to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus said this commandment was very close to the first, and indeed it is. We cannot love God without loving and serving those He loves so much. Our hymns should encourage us and guide us to Christian relationships in our homes, our workplaces, our churches, and in our world at large.

## Father, Help Me Worship You

Father, help me worship You

With a pure devotion,

Not alone with lofty words

Stirring sweet emotion.

Plant in me the heart of Christ

Clinging to His Father,

Trusting You for every breath,

Drinking every word.

Help me walk His daily path,

Living as You lead me,

Empty, Lord, of all but You,

Joyful as You feed me,

Giving every breath to You,

Ever simply praying.

Then when life is sacrifice,

I will follow on.

Father, help me worship You

With a pure devotion.

Let my song be living praise

(*A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG*, by Ken Bible; p.30)

Deeper than emotion.  
Help me live the life of Christ,  
Loving as He loved You  
Till our love is face to face,  
There forever one!

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For a musical setting of this hymn, visit [LNWhymns.com](http://LNWhymns.com)

## Which Worshipers Pleased Jesus?

**John the Baptist** (Luke 3:1-20; 7:18-35)—He responded to God's Word boldly and wholeheartedly, with singleness of mind.

**The woman with the alabaster jar** (Matthew 26:6-13)—She loved Jesus so much that she poured out on Him the very best she had.

**The Canaanite woman** (Matthew 15:21-28)—Out of love for her suffering daughter, she humbled herself and refused to be deterred from seeking Jesus' help. Her faith and perseverance secured her daughter's healing.

**"His mother and brothers"** (Luke 8:19-21)—Jesus said that His mother and brothers were anyone who heard God's Word and put it into practice.

**The centurion in Capernaum** (Luke 7:1-10)—Even in the most pressing need, he trusted Christ's authority simply and humbly.

**Mary, Martha's sister** (Luke 10:38-42)—She put aside everything else and sat at Jesus' feet, listening to what He said. Jesus said she had chosen "the good part".

**Children** (Matthew 19:13-14)—Jesus said the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who come to God as little children.

**The Samaritan leper** (Luke 17:11-19)—When the 10 lepers were healed on their way to the priest, he alone turned around and came back to thank Jesus.

**The widow with her offering** (Mark 12:41-44)—Her offering was completely insignificant in human terms, but Jesus said that in God's eyes, her gift was the greatest. She lovingly and humbly gave everything she had.

**Zacchaeus** (Luke 19:1-10)—He put his repentance into action, giving away his wealth to the needy and to those he had wronged.

**The twelve apostles** (Matthew 19:28-30)—Most were common working people, with faith and understanding that were often imperfect. But Jesus said that because they had left all to follow Him, they would reign with Him on twelve thrones, judging the tribes of Israel.

**The thief on the cross** (Luke 23:39-43)—While everyone around was sneering at Jesus, the criminal humbly trusted Him and thereby secured a place with Him in paradise.

Which worshipers pleased Jesus? Those who expressed their faith and love by their actions.

## Jesus' Relationship with His Father

We often think of the earthly Jesus as a superman, with power flowing from His fingertips. But that's not how the Apostle Paul describes Him:

*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8, NASB)*

Listen to how Jesus describes Himself:

*"I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does...By myself I can do nothing. (John 5:19, 30, NIV)*

*"The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work...These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me." (John 14:10, 24, NIV)*

It wasn't Jesus' own power that made Him what He was. He had emptied Himself of all that. He made Himself dependent on His Father, constantly and completely, for every word and action. *Jesus was what He was by faith.* His strength lay not in unique abilities but in His relationship with the Father.

Jesus longs to share that relationship with us. He wants us to have the same fellowship with the Father that He enjoys. He longs for us to participate in the deep love that flows unhindered among the Father, Son, and Spirit:

*“I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him...we will come to him and make our home with him.”* (John 14:20-21, 23, NIV)

Study the life of Jesus. As you see how He lived, all through faith, the hunger will grow in you to share His beautiful, simple relationship with the Father. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit all deeply desire to share that relationship with you.

To enjoy Jesus’ relationship with the Father, worship as He worshiped. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him. Trust. Obey. Such a relationship is the reward and the fruit of worship—true worship that is not one hour a week but every hour; worship that is not just spoken or sung but lived.

The highest purpose of our hymns is to nurture such a relationship with the Living God. It is the key to our happiness and fruitfulness, now and forever.

## Empty

He emptied Himself—that's how Paul describes Jesus' preparation for ministry. As He came to earth, He emptied himself of the power, privilege, and glory that were uniquely His. He began His ministry here by going into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and temptation. The first act of His public life was to humble himself and line up with the sinners for baptism.

Jesus emptied Himself. When He spoke or acted, it was only by His Father's will and through His Father's direct provision. He became transparent. When we looked at Him, we saw only the Father—His authority, His tenderness, His wisdom, the very loveliness of His character.

Jesus laid aside His own will:

*“By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.”* (John 5:30, NIV).

In this emptying, Jesus made himself totally dependent. All that He was, all that He did, was by faith in His Father. He made Himself an open vessel, holy and yielded. Thus His weakness was His great strength. His helplessness was His constant sufficiency. The Father's words in 2 Corinthians 12:7 are fully embodied in Christ:

*“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* (NIV)

As we begin to grasp this truth, hope and excitement rise in us. If Jesus' life was total dependence, if all that He was, He was by faith, then the horizons of our lives and ministries are

formed by the beauty of Christ himself. Our lives can speak of God's greatness and glory. They can make His love a reality to people all around us. But this is possible only as we empty ourselves and depend constantly and completely on the Father.

If emptying was Jesus' preparation for ministry, it shouldn't surprise us that emptying is essential for us. We shouldn't feel persecuted when experiences in life and ministry wring out of us every last trace of self-sufficiency, ambition, and personal agenda.

Emptying involves pain, humiliation, frustration, failure, defeat, dead ends, despair, and giving up on dreams we thought were absolutely central. Emptying involves more of Christ and less of everything else.

*Right now, Lord, this moment,*

*by Your power and at Your call,*

*I release to You all my drives,*

*all my ideas, all my ways.*

*I lay them down, Lord, and put them aside.*

*I turn away from them.*

*Flush them out of my heart, I pray.*

*I will accept anything You send into my life*

*to separate me from lesser things.*

*From this point on,*

*I only want to move at Your call and at Your word,*

*relying on Your power alone.*

*Ambitions, ministries, hopes, dreams,*

(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.37)

*I release them.*

*My only desire is You*

*and to follow You as Your lowly servant.*

*I love You, Lord.*

*I seek You alone.*

## Each Moment by Faith

From glory descending,

Completely depending,

You trusted Your Father

And lived to obey.

In speaking and doing,

His pleasure pursuing,

You joyfully listened

And followed by faith.

Through weakness came power,

A strength every hour.

Though empty, You gave with

A heart unafraid,

Secure in the knowing

And full in the flowing

Of God in His fullness

Each moment by faith.

Lord Jesus, You lead us

To faith that can free us,

So trusting and humble,

We bow and obey.

In speaking and doing,

Your pleasure pursuing,

(*A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG*, by Ken Bible; p.39)

We joyfully listen

And follow by faith.

Through weakness comes power,

A strength every hour.

Though empty, we give with

A heart unafraid,

Secure in the knowing

And full in the flowing

Of Your mighty Spirit

Each moment by faith.

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For a musical setting of this hymn, visit [LNWhymns.com](http://LNWhymns.com)

## **Christ Alone**

When I'm alone with my wife, she wants my mind to be alone with her, listening to her, focused on her, not a million miles away.

I've found that Christ is no different. I tend to get wrapped up in my work, even in my service to Him, elbow-deep in the present and dreaming into the future. But He keeps bringing me back to himself.

He reminds me that no matter what happens or doesn't happen in my life, the only lasting joy I will ever have is the joy of being in His presence in the present moment.

Jesus wants us to build our world, not around our work, but around Him.

## Satisfied in You

My thoughts gravitate to  
familiar concerns.

I start thumbing through the list.

But, Lord,

I will be satisfied in You.

My concerns are legitimate,  
but I will be satisfied in You.

When days appear good  
or appear contrary,  
when I seem successful  
or lacking,

You will be happiness,  
my peace,  
my rightness.

Life is not some great achievement  
plus You  
or some wonderful gift  
from You.

Life is You, my Lord,  
and You are wonderful.

You are happiness.

You are the fullness of all that is beautiful.

*(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.42)*

You are heaven

then and now.

Lord, in this moment

and forever,

I will be satisfied in You.

## **Give Them Jesus**

We wrestle with musical styles, techniques, and technologies. But let's face it: what the world needs is not another singer, another song, another style, or another star. Its problems are far too serious and far too deep.

The world needs Jesus. When you sing, give them Jesus. When you play, give them Jesus. When you speak to your neighbors, family, or friends, give them Jesus. Every day and in every personal encounter, give them Jesus.

## Section 3

# The Body of Christ

*Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. (Romans 12:4-5, NIV)*

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4, NIV)*

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17, NIV)*

## Sing as Members of the Body of Christ

*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6, NIV)*

When we sing hymns, we sing as members of the Body of Christ. As we receive God's Word, as we respond in faith, as we praise our Eternal Father in song, we join with all members of Christ's Body, stretching out through all places and all times. If we miss that unity, we miss one of the greatest blessings of living *in Christ*.

In hymn singing, let's **treasure the past**. Cherish the witness of those who have gone before and now encourage us from that great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1).

Let's **build to last**. When future generations sift through what we've left behind, may they find hymns they want to keep—hymns that still express their faith and praise, hymns that transcend changes of style.

While we're reaching out to those behind us and before us in the Body, let's reach out to those around us now. In our hymn singing, let's make the effort to include our varied brothers and sisters in Christ. With the mixture of ages and preferences in most of our congregations, that won't be automatic. But Christian love demands it and will richly reward our efforts.

In this section we'll be looking more closely at each of these important ideas.

## Treasure the Past

Here in my office are two old harmonicas. My great grandfather, William Asbury Graves, used to play them in his little church in Chariton, Iowa. As a hymn writer, I treasure these reminders of my musical heritage.

The harmonicas were passed on to me through my Uncle Melvin. He served in the U.S. Navy in World War II. On January 5, 1945, his ship was struck by a kamikaze plane and sank within an hour. He was picked up by another ship, which was then also sunk by a kamikaze plane. Within 24 hours, Uncle Melvin had had two ships blown from beneath him.

In the predawn darkness he floated and swam, sustained by a life jacket. I can only imagine the fears that swirled around him in those hours. But old hymns came to mind, and he began to sing. Imagine the deep meaning of these prayers as they welled up in his heart:

*My Faith looks up to Thee,*

*Thou Lamb of Calvary,*

*Savior divine!*

*Now hear me while I pray;*

*Take all my guilt away.*

*O let me from this day*

*Be wholly Thine!*

*May thy rich grace impart*

*Strength to my fainting heart,*

*My zeal inspire.  
As Thou hast died for me,  
O may my love to Thee  
Pure, warm, and changeless be,  
A living fire!*

*While life's dark maze I tread,  
And griefs around me spread,  
Be Thou my Guide.  
Bid darkness turn to day;  
Wipe sorrow's tears away;  
Nor let me ever stray  
From Thee aside!*

And:

*Fairest Lord Jesus!  
Ruler of all nature!  
O Thou of God and man the Son!  
Thee will I cherish;  
Thee will I honor,  
Thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown!*

*Fair are the meadows;  
Fairer still the woodlands,  
Robed in the blooming garb of spring.*

*Jesus is fairer;*

*Jesus is purer,*

*Who makes the woeful heart to sing!*

After several hours he was rescued by a destroyer escort. The skipper said that in the darkness, he had found Melvin because he heard him singing.

Such stories remind me that we didn't get here alone. We didn't earn the right to live in this country, worship in our beautiful, well-equipped churches, and enjoy such rich hymns. All these were gifts, a priceless inheritance received from so many who have gone before us. We cannot...we must not...ignore such a heritage. We cannot squander our inheritance and fail to pass it on to the next generation.

When you hold a hymnal, do you know what you have in your hands? It is the world's greatest treasury of worship and devotion, outside the sacred scriptures themselves. In it you'll hear the heart of the Psalmist, the faith of the early church fathers, the powerful witness of Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, the blind Fanny Crosby, and hundreds of others. Countless believers have sung these hymns and lovingly memorized them, finding them true to scripture and experience. They lived with these hymns and died with them, carefully passing them on to their children.

As each generation discarded some hymns and embraced others, the hymns in your hands were chosen and treasured, century after century. What an incredible gift! What a precious legacy has been lovingly placed in our hands by the generations of believers gone before us!

(*A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG*, by Ken Bible; p.49)

The witness of our generation is important. But it is so much more meaningful if it is added to the witness of all the generations before us. Don't limit yourself to current songs. If you only use expressions of faith from our narrow slice of time and culture, you miss most of the rich truth available to you. You miss the discipline of other ages confronting us with differing viewpoints. You miss a broader perspective that stretches our narrowness and challenges our assumptions. Older hymns remind us of realities that we dare not forget.

In our diverse culture, with so many varied people hungry to find their place in this world, the experience of our forebears *is* relevant. Reach back. Enrich yourself and those to whom you minister. Don't serve the same food meal after meal. A banquet of tasty, nourishing foods is available to you. Just open the pantry!

## Build to Last

*No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:11-15, NIV)*

Music is inherently appealing. Musicians, desiring to please their audience, tend to try to maximize that appeal. The more favorable people's response to the music, the more the musician's ego and/or pocketbook are fed.

So what has happened? Music is increasingly guided by the present tastes of the audience or congregation. Freshness and innovation are set aside. What is worse, the musician's motivation, which at the beginning was perhaps to serve people for their good, is now to appeal to people for the musician's own good. Sounds like a description of the popular music industry, doesn't it?

We Christian musicians face the same temptation. We too want to please people. We too can become self-serving in our ministry. Instead of offering them what is valuable and lasting, we feed them temporary pleasure. Instead of communicating what is timeless and true, we simply stimulate their emotions. Instead of giving, we take.

How do we resist the pull of such temptations? Should we ignore the musical preferences of the people to whom we minister? Is that the answer?

No, it isn't. As in all temptation, the key is to stay focused on the Father. That was how Jesus resisted temptation in the wilderness. Satan tried to turn His eyes away from the Father to look to His own needs. Jesus kept His attention on the Father. His connection with the Father was His strength. It is ours as well. Spend daily time with God. Keep your heart fixed on Him so that He is your guide, your inspiration, your enabler, and your only motivation. Stay tuned to His Spirit, and use all your energies to glorify only Him.

When we seek to appeal to people, we are easily sucked into fads. Our focus turns to the current taste, whatever it is. Such fads are a quick fix in the perpetual human search for true life with all its stimulations. Fads cannot touch the deeper, more lasting, more pressing needs. Their goal is pleasure. Their desire is to feel better, not to be better. Their focus is other people, not God.

This is not a condemnation of any particular style, be it contemporary or traditional. We all face this same temptation, whatever our style. We are all tempted to appeal to people, to entertain them rather than to minister to them. What begins as a means to a good end so easily becomes an end in itself, and a selfish one.

Stay tuned to Jesus Christ. Spend enough time with the Shepherd that You recognize His voice (John 10). As you listen to Him and live in Him, the Creator will create through you.

Innovators, and those who build to last, are not so much *ahead* of their time as *out* of their time. They are more free from the tyranny and narrow blindness of *now*. Instead, they are often driven

(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.52)

by the most powerful creative force in our world: love. God's love working through us. Love leaves no room for fear, pride, or selfishness. Love longs to serve. Love gives itself completely to meet other people's needs.

Live in Christ, and His love will grow in You—love for Him and love for people. His love will energize you and focus all your God-given abilities on life's greatest goal and highest privilege: to glorify our Lord and draw people to Him.

*Love never ends.*

*But as for prophecies, they will come to an end;*

*as for tongues, they will cease;*

*as for knowledge, it will come to an end.*

*Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;*

*and the greatest of these is love.*

(1 Corinthians 13:8, 13, NRSV)

## **Sing of the Living Christ**

I thank God for praise and worship songs. For millions of worshipers, these songs focus our minds on God and His greatness. They give us a new vision of Him. They encourage us to respond to Him in faith.

The praise and worship movement has been the work of the Spirit of God. Praise to Him for His faithfulness in drawing people to Himself!

I also love the old hymns. Charles Wesley has taught me more and stirred me more profoundly than any other hymn writer.

And I love the new hymns. For decades I have studied, sung, and enjoyed the work of Fred Kaan, Brian Wren, Fred Pratt Green, Timothy Dudley-Smith, and others.

But still, sitting amid the wealth of all this great hymnody, so much remains unsaid and unsung about the Living Christ. We have not yet expressed His full reality, and the human spirit cannot be satisfied with any less. Our songs about Him will always be incomplete. They will forever be a work in progress. Believers are too varied in personality and culture. God is too great and too far beyond all boundaries and descriptions. His purposes are as broad as human need and as rich as His own life. He is determined to permeate every aspect of human existence, now and forever. Thus He cannot be captured by any song or any one body of songs. Every new movement within the Church makes its contributions but inevitably falls short of fully expressing God's glory, His magnificent love, and the wonderful possibilities of simple faith.

*(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.54)*

The more we know Him, the more we long to sing of Him and lift Him up before others. We long to draw them to this magnificent, merciful, intriguing, tender, eternally lovely Jesus Christ.

This is the joy of singing, leading, and writing hymns. Our generation, our children, our grandchildren, and uncounted generations to come can know Him better if we fill our congregational song with the Living Christ.

## Simplicity

When I sit at my desk, a large sign stares me in the face, shouting this reminder: *Simplicity*. It's a reminder I constantly need. Simplicity is a discipline, and a challenging one. Yet it is vital to effective congregational song.

Congregational singing involves people from a broad range of ages, cultures, stylistic preferences, and personalities singing together. Most have little or no musical training and usually no rehearsal. Further, the music must be easy enough to be sung comfortably and naturally, leaving the singers free to focus on the words. The music must serve simply as a vehicle for the text.

What happens if the tunes fail the simplicity test? At best, the tune soaks up so much attention that the words are ignored. At worst, the singers grow frustrated and fold their arms in stony silence.

Often the problem is trying to use performance songs as hymns. Lacking the discipline of simplicity, such songs are more suited to be performed by a well-rehearsed artist than to be sight-read by a highly diverse, untrained congregation.

With performance songs, the leaders are counting on people's ability to sing back almost anything they hear, no matter how complex. Go to an artist concert, and you'll hear it happen. Fans will sing along with the band or soloist, no matter how intricate the song. But that doesn't make the songs congregational. Devotees can join in songs they have heard many times. But what about the people not immersed in such styles? They cannot follow. They are left out. And

eventually, the ever-changing music scene will leave the songs unsupported by constant recorded exposure. Complex songs, when not heard regularly, ultimately prove too forgettable. Left unexposed, and by that time, out of style, most of the songs will die.

Hymns must cross barriers of time and culture to serve the diverse and enduring Body of Christ. Musical simplicity is a must.

Does that mean that the styles themselves are unsuitable for our hymnody? Do we have to abandon popular styles and limit our hymns to traditional styles? Absolutely not! Down through history the Church has regularly enriched its hymnody by adapting popular music. But our congregational songs must submit to the discipline of simplicity. Our hymns must appeal across cultural and stylistic lines, and they must endure beyond the recorded support provided by popular music.

If you are choosing and leading congregational songs, consider your entire congregation. The Church has a wealth of quality hymns in a wide range of styles. It may take some looking and careful thought to integrate them into your service. But approach the task prayerfully, and the Spirit will faithfully enable you to do what He wants you to do.

For you writers, accept simplicity as a creative challenge. Composers have usually had to write within the limits of their own situation. Such limits have often become a creative stimulus rather than a hindrance. Many great masterpieces have flowed from narrow circumstances.

No, it isn't easy to compose hymn tunes that are expressive and musically interesting yet comfortably singable by a diverse group of untrained singers. Yet for two millennia now, the

Holy Spirit has been helping Christian composers do that very thing. If you want to compose hymn tunes, do what successful composers have usually done:

1. Prepare yourself musically. Learn the basics.
2. Learn from the best. Go through a good, diverse hymnal and study the tunes that are the most expressive, memorable, and broadly used. Note their use of form and repetition. Look at how they balance predictability and surprise. (Hint: many current congregational songs lack predictability and thus are too complex.) Immerse yourself in the finest tunes. Absorb their qualities.
3. For now, forget being published and just write for your local situation. (Many of my early hymns were written for my Sunday School class.) Listen to how people respond to your hymns. Be your own toughest critic. Learn from your successes and your failures.
4. Practice, practice, practice. Writing is like basketball or playing piano. It requires skills that come only through repetition.

Be bold! Write hymn tunes in a variety of styles. But submit to the discipline of simplicity. Keep the tunes easy and enjoyable enough for the Body of Christ to sing together.

## One in Christ

*There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-5, NIV)*

Communion was being served at our local church. Servers stood at the head of each aisle with a plate of bread and a cup. All the church rose and filed down together, waiting to receive the elements and hear the words, "This is my body. This is my blood."

Being on the far side of the sanctuary, I looked across and saw all those people standing together, filling the aisles--people of every shape, size, and personality imaginable--the elderly and the children, the brilliant and the mentally handicapped, every background, every life situation, every problem and struggle. Each had been personally invited by Jesus Christ, and there they were all together, coming to Him.

What a stunning picture of redemption! For each of us, Jesus has become the bread and wine of life. We have come together in Him. We are one body and one Spirit in Him. We have been lifted to one hope. We cling to one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father who is over and through and in us all.

Unity is largely unexplored territory for us. It is an undiscovered blessing. Let us pray that the Lord will burn into our hearts its possibility and its glowing promise. More and more let us see other people in Him. Let us react to them in Him and love them in Him.

Remember, this picture of redemption is just a glimpse of a day soon to come:

*I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:*

*"Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb." . . .*

*They are before the throne of God  
and serve him day and night in his temple;  
and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.  
Never again will they hunger;  
never again will they thirst...  
For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;  
he will lead them to springs of living water.  
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

(Revelation 7:9-10, 15-17, NIV)

## Accept One Another

*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.*

(Romans 15:7, NIV)

I was at a Christian music conference. With the variety of performers, approaches, and styles that were there, I found myself growing critical.

God checked me. He pointed out that He himself had shown His grace and mercy to each of them, just as to me. He reminded me that each of them needed His continuing grace, mercy, and guidance just as much as I did.

Lord, those who have trusted You come in every personality and level of maturity. Help me to see each of them as one who has received Your grace and who needs Your grace. I turn away from the sin of judging my dear brothers and sisters. Help me to love and accept them just as You, Jesus, have loved and accepted them.

## Broaden Your Appreciation

I had been in church music publishing for years and had learned to appreciate a wide variety of styles and songs. But there were some songs I just didn't respect, to the point that I hesitated to include them in publications. For example, I read the words to Mosie Lister's "Where No One Stands Alone" and the Gaithers' "There's Something About That Name" and found nothing substantial. Yes, there was emotion, but what were the songs *saying*? All I saw was sentimental drivel.

Then one day I realized that when I examined a song in that way, I was only experiencing half of it. I wasn't hearing the praise that arises from the hearts of believers for whom these songs are poignant expressions of faith. I wasn't hearing the genuine worship these songs release when sung from a heart of worship. In the mouths of many God-fearing, Bible-believing brothers and sisters in Christ, these simple, sentimental words become powerful expressions of faith and praise to the Living God. "Where No One Stands Alone" becomes a profound and moving statement of our loneliness without God and our deep, inexpressible hunger for Him. (It also helps to know that the song was inspired by Psalm 51.) "There's Something About That Name" verbalizes that indefinable attraction we feel for the man Jesus Christ.

A song is just marks on a paper or a sequence of sounds until some believer brings it to life and lifts it as an offering to God. Then it becomes a hymn. Only part of it can be read on paper or heard on a recording. God often uses very humble means to speak to people and do His work. He often chooses lowly expressions of childlike faith to glorify Himself. Almighty God continues to confound the wise and to break out of whatever boxes we put Him in.

As a young person starting in music publishing, I was very negative about southern gospel music. I watched its performers. I was annoyed that so many of its songs harped on a very few emotional themes, like heaven. They made the whole style seem shallow and artificial. But working with gospel songwriter Mosie Lister, I began to appreciate southern gospel as true folk music. Its strength was its simplicity and natural exuberance. I learned to look beyond the seeming shallowness of some of its practitioners and see its tremendous potential for ministry.

On the other hand, some evangelicals hear more liturgical styles and write them off as cold, boring, and emotionless. What they don't realize is that these believers want to hear God and exalt Him just as much as evangelicals. But they seek truth that is deeper than emotion. They long for thoughtfulness in worship. They want to taste the mystery of God. For many, quietness brings God nearer than does wild emotion.

As a hymn-lover and hymn-leader, beware of pride and narrow-mindedness, no matter what your educational level or musical style. Remember, God calls all His servants to minister with humility and compassion, to be people-centered and people-sensitive in all they do. Like Paul, we must be willing to be all things to all people so that we might reach as many as possible with the boundless love of Jesus Christ.

## Remember

Remember, we hymn lovers and hymn leaders are part of a Body with many members. We are not an isolated entity pursuing our own ends. We must always think and work as one small member of the Body, with Christ as the head.

Remember, God isn't fundamentally interested in songs, styles, pleasing sounds, emotional thrills, applause, or any of the other human commodities that so preoccupy us musicians. God is interested in *people*. As His servant, love *people*. Minister to *people*. Draw *people* to Him.

Remember, when a hymn is sung, the hymn is not the focus—not for the pastor, the worship leader, or the congregation—and certainly not for God. God's Word is the focus. The response of His people is the focus. The hymn is simply a vessel that must stay out of the way. It should never intrude or distract.

If God is speaking, the hymn should present His Word with the clarity and power it deserves. If God's people are responding to Him, the hymn should voice their response with all the energy and honesty that God's living presence demands. A hymn should never drain off attention for itself.

And finally, remember that much of your ministry will be helping people remember. Help us remember what we must never forget. Most of us in the Church already know the vital truths that lead to a fulfilling life in Christ. But in the press of daily obligations and competing priorities, we desperately need to be reminded—regularly, clearly, compassionately, firmly reminded. Through hymns, help us remember that God is our Father. Draw us back to faith, worship,

*(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.64)*

confession, love, and self-sacrifice. Teach us again that perfect peace is always ours in Jesus Christ.

## **Just Help the Team Win**

In any endeavor, there are times when we can't do what we'd like. Sometimes we can't muster the ability. Sometimes we aren't given the opportunity.

When that times comes--and it will come--remember that ministry is always a team sport, not a solo event. Don't focus on what you can't do. Just do whatever you can to help your team win.

Keep the heart of a humble servant. Accept the role your Lord has given you, and do so with joy. You'll find that team thinking will stretch you in new directions and provide a brand-new challenge you'll find exciting.

## Praying for Fellow Workers

*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

(Ephesians 5:21, NIV)

*I urge... that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone--  
for ... all those in authority.*

(1 Timothy 2:1-2, NIV)

We all have to work with other people, whether on our jobs, at home, or in the church. Some are our co-workers. Some are our supervisors. In both cases, our work is interconnected with theirs. If the other person doesn't do a good job, our work is damaged.

This is particularly true in music. Singers, instrumentalists, writers, directors--none of us is an island. The quality and effectiveness of our work is dependent on other people. That can be very stressful!

In dealing with such situations in my own life, the Lord has brought me back to what the Bible says about submitting to one another and praying for one another. I'm discovering that is great, practical advice.

Instead of fretting about whether another person will do a good job or whether a supervisor will make the right decision, I'm learning to pray for them. I pray that God will guide them and work through them to accomplish His will.

Then, having prayed for them and trusted the Lord to work through them, I can more easily rely on them and be submissive to them. And when I still feel I must disagree, I can do so in a non-defensive, non-territorial manner, remembering it is God's work, not mine, and He will accomplish it.

Sometimes we feel that if everyone would just leave us alone, if we weren't so dependent on others, everything would be terrific. The Bible declares that that simply isn't so. Each of us has a particular role to play. By ourselves, we are so limited. We were designed to work most efficiently and productively in relationship to others. We are each like one part of the body that must work with other parts if the whole body is to function successfully. God created us to be dependent not only on himself but on each other.

Prayer is the best way to make such relationships work. Through prayer, we lift up those on whom we are dependent. Through prayer, we maintain the right attitude toward them. Prayer for fellow workers fosters the unity and interdependence essential for all of us to be and do our best together.

And through prayer, we keep our faith focused on God's will and on His ability to accomplish that will through *us*, not just through *me*.

## **Toward Your Leaders**

During a lifetime in Christian service, I've worked with thousands of others also in Christian service--ministers, ministers of music, and leaders of various types. I've worked for leaders, and I've been a leader.

Together we are as human and as imperfect as anyone else. We pray and try to keep our motives pure. Though we give our best, sometimes our job performance is less consistent than we wish. We try. We fail. Our abilities are narrow and are regularly stretched beyond our talent and training.

Yet the God who called us is faithful. Somehow He uses what we do to help people and to glorify himself.

When our humanity is apparent, don't condemn us. Forgive us. Don't gossip about us. We know our failures better than you do. Pray for us.

And when we do something that works marvelously, give God all the glory. He's the only one who deserves it!

## The Value of the Hymnal

I have no interest in revisiting the whole debate about hymnals versus projection. But whichever one you are presently using, it is constructive to remember the continuing value of the hymnal.

For those of us who choose and lead hymns, we need to keep at hand a large and varied collection of hymns. Not only is it a useful source, but it challenges us and holds us accountable. When we were compiling the *Sing to the Lord* hymnal, we sent out a usage survey for its predecessor, the *Worship in Song* hymnal. We asked worship leaders to tell us how often they had used each hymn in *Worship in Song* in the past 12 months. Respondents told us over and over again that, having been forced to go through the entire hymnal, they were shocked and disappointed at how few of its riches they had been enjoying.

Without a hymnal to stretch us, we are more likely to take the path of least resistance. We draw from our limited memories and reuse the same familiar hymns again and again. A hymnal disciplines us and draws us deeper into the wealth of wonderful hymns that are always at our disposal.

The hymnal is also a priceless devotional book. We've hinted at that above (*Treasure the Past*, p. 46), and more will be said later.

As you look to the future, are you hoping for improvement of projection technology, or are you planning for a hymnal purchase? In either case, it's helpful to remember the advantages unique to a hymnal. Here's at least a partial list:

(*A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG*, by Ken Bible; p.70)

- With a hymnal, we can see the music and visually follow it, even if our musical ability is limited. For some of us, trying to sing a melody we can't see is unnerving.
- Part-singing is a beautiful tradition in the church. Current projection systems will make it extinct.
- With a hymnal, a glance at the page shows us the size and shape of the hymn. As we head into the hymn, we can see where we're going.
- With a hymnal, we can also look back. If a verse stirs us or puzzles us, we can read it again and ponder it.
- Most hymnals tell us not only who wrote the hymn but when. Readers want to know when and by whom a book is written, and the same information is helpful to singers.
- A hymnal can go places a projection system cannot. Hymns need to reach beyond our church sanctuaries, and a hymnal helps make that possible. Again, more about that later.

As we move forward, let's not leave behind those treasures that are still irreplaceable. No matter how useful our projection systems, a hymnal remains one of those treasures.

## We or I?

In our desire to worship God with one heart and one voice, some suggest that “we” language is more appropriate in worship than “I” language. As a hymnwriter, I believe that stance is well-intentioned but misguided.

Yes, a “we” perspective in worship is a worthy and constructive goal. Both scripture and experience point us toward that synergy where worshipers join in heart and voice. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

But individual worship is still the essential component. Though “we” language is highly appropriate and expressive in some hymns, in others it can hold the truth at arm’s length. It can lessen the impact of the hymn on the individual worshiper. When it does, corporate worship is weaker, not stronger. A.W. Tozer said it this way:

“Someone may fear that we are magnifying private religion out of all proportion, that the ‘us’ of the New Testament is being displaced by a selfish ‘I.’ Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship. Social religion is perfected when private religion is purified. The body becomes stronger as its members become healthier. The whole Church of

(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.72)

God gains when the members that compose it begin to seek a better and higher life.”

(from *THE PURSUIT OF GOD*, by A.W. Tozer, © 1948 by WingSpread Publishers)

To underscore this point, look at our classic hymns. The following powerfully corporate hymns were all written as “I”:

*Amazing Grace*

*And Can It Be?*

*Arise, My Soul, Arise*

*Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*

*Great Is Thy Faithfulness*

*Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah*

*How Great Thou Art*

*I Sing the Mighty Power of God*

*O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing*

*Our Great Savior*

*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*

*This Is My Father's World*

*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*

...and many more

Through these “I” hymns we experience a powerful “we” in worship. Would we be drawn closer together by eliminating such from hymns from our worship? Certainly not. It is our common experience with God’s universal greatness and love that binds our hearts together. Shared personal faith is what unites us, not imposed “we” language.

## Section 4

# Beyond the Worship Service

*After [Paul and Silas] had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. (Acts 16:23-25, NIV)*

*When [Jesus and his disciples] had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Matthew 26:30, NIV)*

*It is good to praise the Lord  
and make music to your name, O Most High,  
to proclaim your love in the morning  
and your faithfulness at night.  
(Psalm 92:1-2, NIV)*

## Unchain Our Hymns!

If hymns are important, they are too important to limit to an hour a week on Sunday. If hymns can nurture our personal relationship with God—and they can!—then why not take them beyond our worship services?

Hymns need to spill out of the sanctuary into our daily lives. Hymns can enrich our devotional practice and nourish prayer. *Hymns need to go wherever prayer goes.*

Paul and Silas had had a difficult day. A good deed got them attacked by an angry crowd, dragged before a magistrate, stripped and beaten and then thrown into prison with their feet in the stocks. So what were they doing at midnight? Moaning in pain? Complaining about injustice? Feeling sorry for themselves? They were praying aloud and *singing hymns!* No piano or organ. No band. No recordings. Just two believers, sitting in the midst of suffering, darkness, and injustice and *singing hymns*. Read the whole story in Acts 16:16-40 and find how it all turned out.

A similar story comes to us from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Crossing the Atlantic, the ship in which John Wesley was sailing was caught in a storm. Though an Anglican priest, he was terrified, afraid for his life. While having his crisis of faith, he heard a group of German Moravian believers calmly singing their hymns. The experience had such a profound effect on him that it would change his life.

In both cases, hymns were a natural, deeply personal expression of the believers' faith. They bubbled to the surface in life's most difficult hour. The hymns gave them a way to mentally and

*(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.75)*

emotionally affirm their confidence in God. They were thus able to face their trials with joy and unshakable peace.

Their hymns also became a life-changing testimony to the unbelievers around them. Note that musical style wasn't what appealed to the listeners. The stories don't even mention it. The attraction was the joy and faith of the singers, not the songs themselves.

So don't leave our hymns locked up at church. Don't let our hymnals stay nailed to the pew. Up until the last hundred years or so, hymnals were a personal item. The Bible and the hymnal were the believer's most treasured devotional possessions. Whether or not you use hymnals in your church services, get your own hymnal and keep it with your Bible. That will be the first step toward getting hymns into your heart and into your daily life where they can do the most good.

## Hymns and Spiritual Formation

Do people want to live better lives?

Yes, we do!

Do people want to live closer to God?

Yes, we do!

Do people want help praying?

Yes, we do!

In the press of daily living, it's difficult to stay on focus. It's difficult to keep our eyes on our heavenly Father, to remember His presence, His power, His goodness, and His unfailing promises. It's hard to think, feel, and be the persons we need to be.

Singing hymns can help. They plant truth in our minds, hearts, and imaginations. They immerse us in the realities of God and His faithfulness, of Jesus Christ and His life within us, of the Holy Spirit and His empowering, guiding presence. Hymns help us embrace the truth physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The truths we sing weave themselves into our thoughts, feelings, and perspectives.

Remember, it is vital that we *sing* the hymns, not just listen to them. If you want to be entertained, listen. If you want to be transformed, sing! (See *The Value of Singing*, p.12.)

(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.77)

Hymns draw us to Jesus Christ. Hymns encourage us to trust God and approach Him *with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith* (Hebrews 10:22). Hymns strengthen us to *stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured* (Colossians 4:12). Hymns help us *comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God* (Ephesians 3:18-19, NRSV, adapted).

That is the power and potential of hymn singing. Don't get sidetracked! Singing is not about enjoying a pleasing sound or emotional stimulation. Hymns are not fantasy music. Hymns are reality music. They nurture our relationship with the Living Christ. They turn our attention to His constant presence and interaction in absolutely every aspect of daily life. Hymns help form Jesus Christ within us.

## Hymns in Small Groups

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German Christian jailed and executed by the Nazis during World War II, found great strength in prison through singing hymns with fellow prisoners.

Hymn singing was a key element in the Methodist class meetings in 18<sup>th</sup> century England. These hymns fueled the Methodist revival, which is still bearing fruit today.

Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and other small groups can benefit tremendously by hymn singing. Spiritual formation is often the main focus of such groups, and hymns are a powerful spiritual formation tool. (See *Hymns and Spiritual Formation* above, p.76.)

For hymns to be usable in small groups, simplicity is essential. Sometimes a keyboard and keyboardist are available for accompaniment, and sometimes recorded accompaniment is an option. But in many situations, the singing will either be unaccompanied or it will not happen at all. Hymn tunes that are easy and familiar will work best.

Someone should take care to choose the hymns ahead of time. The right hymn in the right spot is a powerful tool. A meaningful context is a hymn's best friend. As much as possible, prepare hymns that fit the lesson hand-in-glove. When the match is right, hymns are a perfect way to drive home a scriptural lesson.

Since necessity is the mother of invention, singing hymns in your small group might be just the opportunity needed by some budding hymn writer among you. I started writing hymns for that

*(A VISION FOR CHRISTIAN SONG, by Ken Bible; p.79)*

very circumstance, to use with Bible studies I was teaching. I regularly close my Sunday School class with a carefully chosen hymn.

So take the time to make hymns part of your small group gatherings. You'll find your efforts richly rewarded, and perhaps in some surprising ways!

## Hymns in Personal Devotions

To plant hymns in your heart, sing them as part of your daily devotions. Hymns are wonderful devotional aids. They express timeless truths in ways that are heart-felt and life-centered. They declare God's Word and make it easy to understand and apply. Hymns lead us into praise. They provide words for our prayers and express our deepest longings for God.

Go out and buy your own hymnal, and keep it with your Bible. Start at the beginning of the hymnal and sing your way through it. During each day's devotions, sing through one or more hymns. Don't skip any hymns or any verses.

Don't let a lack of musical ability hinder you. Sing as best you can. If you don't know the music to a hymn, just read the words, aloud if possible.

You'll be amazed at the wealth of wonderful devotional material you find. The hymns will become your own. Then when you sing them in public worship, it will be like visiting an old friend.