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## On Hymns in Christian Worship

The work is a commentary on the Preface to Joseph Stennett's Hymns for the Lord's Supper. It examines the history of the use of hymns in the English speaking Sabbath-keeping Churches and the biblical base of hymn singing not only in the Lord's Supper but in its general application. It shows the insidious infiltration of our early systems of Sabbath-keeping worship and theology by false doctrine.

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## The Preface to Joseph Stennett's Hymns for the Lord's Supper

Probably one of the most influential figures in the development of the hymn in seventeenth-century England was Rev. Joseph Stennett (1663-1713). He served the Pinner's Hall Seventh Day Baptist Church as its pastor for the last 23 years of his life. Upon entering the pulpit in 1690, one of the first things he did was to institute the practice of the congregational singing of hymns. At first, the practice was limited to the occasion of baptism and the Lord's Supper, but Stennett himself produced hymns for the Sabbath as well as for some other purposes.

There is no evidence that any hymns but those of Stennett were ever sung in any of the Sabbath-keeping churches of London in the seventeenth century. Considering the times, one might conclude that no singing at all was practiced in the General Baptist congregation that became known as Mill Yard. Pinner's Hall, a Particular Baptist congregation, may well have congregationally sung the Psalms from its founding.

The justification for the avoidance of congregational singing was that, since singing was an expression of faith, it was hypocritical to engage in singing a public congregation which might include people present who made no profession of faith.

The opposition to congregational singing was so strong in the 1690s that Stennett refers to it in the introduction to his hymnal, and goes to the length of asking another person to write a defense of the practice. Both of these pieces of writing appear within this study.

The Scripture texts referred to in footnotes in the original are given in the text in parentheses. The Bible texts in the original are given in regular type, while the commentary was in *italic* type. I have kept the *italics* throughout, and made my own comments on the text in ordinary type.

The anonymous defense of congregational hymn-singing that appears at the beginning of the Stennett hymnal is perhaps one of the most careful and clearly expressed defenses of the practice to be found. One might suspect Stennett of having written it himself but for the laudatory phrases of the hymn-writer. It would be undignified to claim that Stennett praised himself so highly even under disguise. Furthermore, the treatise closes with a poem so inferior in expression that it is impossible to have been written by a poet of Stennett's quality.

The works of the late Reverend and Learned Mr. Joseph Stennett. Vol. IV. London: Printed in the Year M.DCC.XXXII, pages 56-71.

...The love of truth, and a charitable regard to some very serious and pious christians, whose minds have been so perplexed with scruples about the lawfulness of singing in the service of

God, that they wholly omit this so very useful and agreeable part of divine worship, mov'd me to desire a very worthy and ingenious friend to prefix to this book of hymns some arguments on that subject, with the substance of which he had before entertained me, in giving me an account how those prejudices against singing of psalms, &c. himself was formerly under, had been removed.

It is clear that there was a good deal of opposition to congregational singing. There must have been such opposition even in the Pinner's Hall Church, or it would not have been necessary to write this justification of it. The opposition came especially from General Baptists, who at the time were much like Quakers in their liturgy.

His friendship, and the hope I endeavoured to make him conceive that what had convinced him, might (by the blessing of God) have the same effect on some other persons under the like circumstances, made him willing not to refuse my request; tho he has not given me the liberty of mentioning his name... Joseph Stennett (page 56)

The Preface: By another hand.

I have, at the request of the reverend author, prefix'd this brief discourse to the following hymns, in vindication of the practice of singing the praises of God, as a part of christian worship. And I the more readily complied, because I have myself laboured under the prejudices of education to the contrary; till convinced of what I now esteem my duty, by the highest authority, viz. that of Christ and his apostles.

Reference to the prejudices of education shows how deeply

entrenched was the opposition to congregational singing. This was before the time of the Methodist Awakening and the great hymn traditions of the Wesleys, to say nothing of Isaac Watts, who had not yet appeared on the scene when Joseph Stennett instituted congregational singing of hymns at Pinner's Hall.

I will not doubt of a becoming reception from those christians who have different sentiments. I shall only intreat the favour, not to say justice, of any such (page 58) who shall read this preface, to think it possible for them to have been mistaken, and to be equally willing to receive the truth, on which soever side of the question it shall appear to be.

The author intends to use truth as criterion and appeals to the reader to lay prejudice aside and be willing to admit that it is possible that his ideas are mistaken. What a wonderful challenge!

One that reads over the new testament with any attention, must observe a frequent mention of singing psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs.

The evangelists (Mat. 26. 30. And Mark 14. 26. And when they had sung an hymn, &c.) Matthew and Mark both inform us, that our blessed Saviour, together with his disciples, sung an hymn at the conclusion of the Lord's supper, then instituted a standing ordinance in the church.

The Great Hallel from Psalms 111-118 is still used among Jews for several of the annual feasts. Given that the fifth book of the Psalms, Psalms 107-150, shows evidence of

being compiled in its present order as a hymnal for the annual feasts, there is every likelihood that Jesus and his disciples "sang an hymn" from this collection at the time of the Passover supper. The author implies that the Lord's Supper then instituted as a standing ordinance in the church included congregational singing as a part of the instituted ordinance.

The author's inference seems valid to a certain extent. If we admit that the ordinance includes congregational singing on the basis of this text, we must also admit that the ordinance includes the singing of precisely the hymn implied, that is, the whole or a part of the Great Hallel from the book of Psalms.

There is nothing in the text to imply the singing of anything else.

St. Luke in his history of the acts of the apostles tells us, that Paul and Silas being in prison, and having been scourged on account of the ministry, at midnight prayed and sung praises to God, so that the prisoners heard them. (Acts 16. 25).

The apostle Paul reproving the Corinthians for a vain ostentation of their gifts, particularly that of speaking in foreign languages, (I Cor. 14. 15. I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.) tells them, that they ought to sing with understanding; which could not be, whilst they were ignorant of the language sung, tho it might be (page 59) understood by the precentor, or person who dictated to the rest.

The author makes some

assumptions here which may not be acceptable to some Baptists today.

He assumes that the gift of tongues is the capacity to speak true and understandable foreign languages, not ecstatic utterances in an incomprehensible speech. He assumes that the problem Paul addresses is the use of such languages before an audience knowing a different language, for the purpose of "vain ostentation".

The author infers from this that singing in the congregation ought to be in a language used and understood by the people. The inference again goes beyond what is stated in the text. I Cor. 14 in fact provides for the translation of a text cantillated in a foreign language.

The Pauline text does not imply that Hebrew should not be used liturgically, as was done in some synagogues and churches, with the parallel reading of a Targum or explanation of the text in the common language. The Pauline text only states that incomprehensible portions of the liturgy should be translated.

The same apostle exhorts both the (Ephes. 5. 19, 20. Speaking to yourselves in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs; singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things to God and the father, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.) Ephesians and (Colos. 3. 16,17. Let the word of God dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual

songs; singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the father by him.) Colossians to sing psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs.

The author does not address the issue of what psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are meant by Paul. It is not possible to suppose that there are no limits at all on what may or may not be included in the congregational meeting.

Presumably Paul is referring in these texts to the cantillation of the Biblical Psalms, whose titles in the Septuagint include the three Greek expressions Paul uses here, "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs". Those three classes of songs are thus the Biblical Psalms. The author does not recognize at any later point in the study that the songs Paul refers to must have been in existence at the time of Paul, and his words cannot be construed to give carte blanche to songs written at a later time.

The apostle (James 5. 13. Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray: is any merry? Let him sing psalms.) James also exhorts the scatter'd christians of the twelve tribes to whom he writes, to express their joy on all occasions by singing psalms of praise to God.

James also clearly commands the singing of the Biblical Psalms.

Now what is to be collected from all these examples, precepts, and regulations of this practice, but that

singing the praises of God is a part of divine worship in the christian church?

And certainly any one would make this conclusion from reading these passages, who had never heard of any controversy about it. It is indeed possible to raise objections against any thing. Grammatical criticisms may be pretended, and a forced construction may be put on the plainest words: but if (page 60) the same rules be allowed for the interpretation of scripture in general, as must be made use of to evade the force of the texts I have mentioned; the plainest precepts may be rendered doubtful, and the clearest doctrines overthrown. However, since there are some who still remain unconvinced of this duty, I shall endeavour, without stating them particularly, to obviate all their objections, and confirm the truth, by shewing,

The author is addressing the issue of singing or not singing in worship. He does not take into consideration at this point what should and should not be sung in congregation. On the issue addressed, his arguments appear valid. The Biblical texts he refers to clearly imply or even state congregational singing.

1. That the singing mentioned in the several recited texts is proper.
2. That it was practised as a part of divine worship.
3. That it was perform'd by joint Voices.

1. That the singing mentioned in the several recited texts, must be understood in a proper, and not a metaphorical sense. To this there can no objection be made, but from some pretended criticism on the original: for every one that understands English, knows that to sing is to express words with a tuneable voice, according to the rules of musick; as proper speaking is

to express words according to the rules of grammar: both being to be performed by imitation and practice, without an acquaintance with (page 61) the theory of either; for they are equally natural, tho both reducible to artificial rules. Singing in English is taken in no other sense; nor can any bare English reader doubt whether this be the meaning.

As to the original: the word made us of by the (Mat. 26. 30 'Umnhsantej. Mark 14. 30 'Umnhsantej. Acts 16. 25. Umnoun.) evangelists is deriv'd from a verb, whose primary signification is to sing an hymn or song of praise.

Sometimes indeed it is taken absolutely to praise, without determining the manner. But this is a certain rule in the interpretation of all writings; to take words in their first and most proper signification, unless some good reason be assigned why that sense cannot be admitted in the place in question. Now in the instances under consideration no such reason can be produced; and therefore it ought to be rendered, as in our translation, they sung an hymn or song of praise.

In the epistle to the (I Cor. 14. 15. Yalw tw pneumati, yalw de kai tw noi.) Corinthians, and that of (James 5. 13. Euqumei tij; yalletw.) St. James, the word used in the original signifies properly to sing. It is also sometimes used for singing to or playing on a musical instrument; but when (page 62) applied to the voice, is never taken in any other sense than that of strictly singing. In the epistle to the (Colos. 3. 16. Adontej.) Colossians we find another word which also signifies properly to sing, but is sometimes used to express the writing a poem or copy of verses; which is a sense of the word that I suppose no body will contend for in this place, and besides which no other sense can be put on the word, but that of proper singing.

In the epistle to the (Eph. 5. 19. Adontej kai yallontej.) Ephesians both the words last mentioned are made use of. So that had St. Paul ever so much designed to speak of proper singing, it was impossible for him by words to have expressed himself more clearly and determinately.

All this, I think, amounts to a full proof, that our translation is in this matter every where just, and that proper singing is spoken of in all the instances given. As to the particular tunes in which the words are to be expressed, they are left as much at liberty as the tone or different elevation and accenting the voice in speaking. Decency is the only limitation: and as the tone of the voice ought not to be wanton and ludicrous, so neither should the musical tunes be light and (page 63) airy: both ought in divine worship to be grave and solemn, becoming our addresses to God.

The author's argument appears valid that proper singing is intended by the texts he refers to. He goes beyond the implication of the Scripture however, in his other inferences. He states that the particular tunes are left at liberty to the same extent as speaking. There is no such implication in the text. On the contrary, the apostles are clearly referring to the Biblical Psalms and perhaps the cantillation of other Biblical texts.

The implication is therefore that they be sung to the tunes traditionally known at the time of the apostles.

There is no permission given to use other tunes. The author's final inference shows clearly, at this early

date, what the result of allowing non-Scriptural practices to infiltrate the worship service must be. So long as the Biblical cantillations alone are used, there is no question of what is decent, wanton, ludicrous etc. As soon as "decency" becomes the only limitation, the church is laid open for constant contention about what music and what words are appropriate. This is the present situation in Christianity.

The author's final inference must seem outrageous to any modern person. He demands that all music in worship be "grave and solemn", and never "light and airy". There is every likelihood that even the "light and airy" music of his time would be too stuffy for modern Christians.

2. That this singing mentioned in the several recited texts was performed and enjoined as a part of divine worship.

The eucharistical hymn performed by our Lord and his apostles, is acknowledged, even by those who deny that it was sung, to have been an act of praise and thanksgiving to God. For it is agreed on all sides, that hymning is praising, whether by song or without; and to be sure God was the object with whom they were then conversant.

In the instance of Paul and Silas the words are express, they sung praises unto God.

To the Ephesians the apostle thus expresses it: speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs; singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And to the Colossians he says, in almost the same words: let the word of God dwell

in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs; singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord: and whatsoever you do in word or deed, do (page 64) all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the father by him. In both which places we may observe the action, giving thanks or praise; the object, God, thro' the mediator; and the external mode, singing.

The apostle James has it, is any among you afflicted, let him pray? Is any merry, let him sing psalms? (Jam. 5. 13.) Which amounts to thus much - that as prayer is a proper manner of expressing our wants and griefs to God, so is singing a proper way of expressing our joy and gratitude. And indeed musick and poetry are both proper to express and move the passions. They heighten and improve the affections of love and joy, whilst they gently calm the uneasy sensations of grief and sorrow. Thus we find the royal psalmist singing one while lofty hymns of praise, anon a mournful penitential song, and again fervent prayers and supplications for needful blessings. So that nothing which is fit to be addressed to God, can be unfit to be sung before him.

What St. Paul says of this matter to the Corinthians; I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with understanding also; (I Cor. 14. 15.) plainly appears to be spoken of the publick worship in the church, being joined with prayer: which had suffered the same abuse with singing, from the vanity (page 65) and affectation of some in the church, who had received the gift of tongues, and prided themselves in speaking before the people in an unknown language; whereas they ought both to pray and to sing the praises of God in such a tongue, as that all present might understand, and join in the same act of worship with a sincere devotion and a due knowledge.

Again, Paul does not speak against the liturgical use of Hebrew, but against lack of understanding of what is being said. The chapter provides for translation, as was the practice in both church and synagogue to use a Targum parallel of the text in the common language.

The author goes too far in his conclusions.

Now from what has been said under this head it appears, that in all the recited places singing is spoken of as being performed to God as the immediate object: which is all that is necessary to constitute any action religious, or a part of divine worship.

The author assumes that all that is necessary to constitute any action a part of divine worship is that it be performed to God as the immediate object. In this he agrees with the majority of Baptists today. His view is a mere assumption, however. It is perfectly reasonable to demand a Scriptural basis for everything admitted to congregational worship.

3. I now come to shew that singing the praises of God was performed by the conjoint voices of several persons together. It is said of our Lord and his disciples, by both Matthew and Mark, that they sung an hymn (in the plural number) whereas Christ's blessing the bread, and giving thanks when he took the cup, are both expressed (in the singular number) as performed by Christ speaking singly, and the rest joining mentally only. And that they did so join with Christ in that action, I suppose no body doubts; tho it be said, he gave thanks and he blessed, that is, he in the name of them all, and on their behalf as well as for himself, (page 66)

solemnly pronounced their joint supplications and thanksgivings to God.

But here the phrase is altered, and the evangelists tell us, that they sung an hymn; that is, with joint voices, as well as with united hearts. Which as it is the plain and obvious meaning of the expression, so there can no other reason be assigned for the variation of the phrase.

The author's inferences are valid, since the text does refer to the prayer in the singular "he" and the singing in the plural "they".

St. Luke tells us, that the prisoners heard Paul and Silas both performing their joint devotions to God. I suppose no body imagines they pronounced their prayers together. It must therefore be the praises which they sung jointly, and that with a voice so raised, as that their fellow prisoners heard them.

The author draws an unwarranted conclusion regarding the prayer. There is every possibility that Paul and Silas recited their prayers together, which would imply that they prayed in Scriptural words which they both knew and could recite. The author's inference is based on his Baptist experience of spontaneous prayer, which may very well be valid, but which is not stated or implied in the text. His major inference, that of joint singing, on the other hand, appears valid.

There is another passage in the history of the Acts, which, I think if duly considered, is to this purpose. In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter the 24<sup>th</sup> verse it is said, that they (i.e. the apostles that were then at Jerusalem, and the believers that



consorted with them, being assembled together) lift up their voice to God with one accord, and said, &c. From the context it appears, that the worship then offered was a solemn thanksgiving (tho concluded with a petition) and that on a very eminent occasion, the deliverance of Peter and John from the rage of the Sanhedrim; by whom, after examination, they were (page 67) dismissed without punishment, and this in accomplishment of 'David's prophecy,' Psalm 2. 1.

Now the matter being praise and thanksgiving, and that expressed with united voice as well as heart, I see no room to doubt but that it was performed as an hymn or sacred song: unless it should be thought that they pronounced a bare oration with united voices; which is a sense I believe none ever yet contended for. We nowhere read of a prayer being pronounced by joint voices, but of praises being sung by joint voices I have already given instances. And the action here being solemn praise offered up by joint voices, tho it be not said they sung, yet it is more than probable that they did sing; for tho all saying (which is the word used) be not singing, yet to be sure all singing is saying.

The author's contention is not absolutely certain, but appears reasonable.

These instances, I think, are sufficient to prove, that singing by conjoined voices was practiced in the christian church.

Despite some weaknesses in the expression of his arguments due to the neglect of issues he did not intend to address, his major thesis, that the Scriptures undoubtedly contend that congregational singing

was practiced in the apostolic church, is validly established.

The sum of what has been said, is; that from divers texts of scripture, collected out of the new testament, it does appear, that the praises of God were sung by conjoint voices in the christian church, as a part of divine worship; and that this duty is on several occasions regulated, enjoined and recommended to the several churches to whom the apostles (page 68) wrote their epistles. From all this it naturally follows, that it is now the duty of all christians to sing the praises of God, both in their publick assemblies, and in their more private religious exercises.

From the demonstrated premise that congregational singing was an apostolic institution, the author draws the conclusion that congregational singing is a present duty. His conclusion appears valid.

To this account from scripture, I shall add one foreign testimony, to prove that it was the constant practice of the primitive christians, in their religious assemblies, to sing with conjoint voices, hymns or songs of praise to Christ as God. And that is of Pliny the younger: who was governor of all Pontus, and Bithynia in Asia Minor, together with the city of Byzantium; not as an ordinary proconsul, but as the emperor's immediate lieutenant with extraordinary power.

This great man had for some time, in obedience to his master's commands, exercised his authority in a vigorous prosecution of the christians: but finding that if he proceeded to punish all that acknowledged themselves christians, he must in a manner lay waste his provinces, he thought it necessary to write a letter to the emperor himself about this matter: wherein after having given a particular

account of his procedure against the christians, and of their obstinacy in persisting to death, and of the great numbers that had embraced this new (page 69) superstition, as he calls it; he relates what upon examination he had found to be the sum of the christian practice. (*Affirmabant autem hanc fuisse sumnam vel culpæ fuæ, vel erroris; quod essent soliti stato die ante lucem convenire, carmenque Christo, quasi Deo, dicere secum invicem, seque sacramento, non in scelus aliquid obstringere, sed ne furta, ne latrocinia, ne adulteria committerent, ne fidem fallerent, ne depositum appellari abnegarent: quibus peractis morem sibi discedendi fuisse, rursusque coeundi ad capiendum cibum promiscuum tamen & innoxium. Plin. Ep. Lib. 10. Ep. 97.*) "They affirmed, says he, that the whole sum of that offence or error lay in this: that they were wont on a set day to meet together before sun-rise, and to sing together a hymn to Christ as a God, and oblige themselves by a sacrament, not to commit any wickedness, but to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery, to keep faith, and to restore any pledge intrusted with them; and after that they retired, and met again at a common meal, in which was nothing extraordinary or criminal." This epistle was written to Trajan then emperor, about seventy one years after the death of our blessed Saviour, A. D. 104. And in the seventh year of Trajan's reign. By this unquestionable authority we see what account the christians of that time gave of their own practice: viz. that in their religious assemblies (page 70) they sung songs or hymns to Jesus Christ as God.

As evidence that Christians in A. D. 104 sang congregationally, Pliny is undoubtedly valid, assuming the authenticity of Pliny's epistle. Ostensibly, this was the intention of the author. However, he slips in an inference that he does not establish

or discuss, that Christians sang hymns to Jesus as God.

Firstly, it is unlikely that Pliny was capable of making theological inferences of that kind. We may trust him on the matter of congregational singing as such, but not on the theological content of the hymns. Yet the author does not apply any historical criticism whatever.

Secondly, in A.D. 104, the doctrine of the Trinity had not yet been defined. The author goes beyond the statement of Pliny in implying that the Christians referred to sang hymns to Jesus as God, that is, as a Person of the Trinity.

Although Stennett's hymns are carefully couched in Biblical phrases, there are two or three references to the pre-existence of Christ (Hymn 29, line 5, page 121), and at least one reference to Christ as "the eternal Son of God" (Hymn 36, line 7, page 131).

Although pre-existence does not generally imply Trinity, in this case, coupled with the expression "eternal Son of God", it does. The latter expression is an historical Calvinistic formula in opposition to the Unitarianism of Servetus. Stennett and his anonymous defender are Trinitarian in the Calvinist sense. Reliance on Pliny in defense of the Trinity is an anachronism.

The author appeals to the Bible to institute congregational hymn-

singing. His purpose in introducing hymn-singing has finally become apparent. A Scriptural liturgy is not sufficient to sustain Trinitarian doctrine. He leaves the matter of the content of hymns open, as long as they are "decent", implying that the Bible accepts anything at all.

After proving that congregational singing existed in the early church, he jumps to the conclusion that Trinitarian hymns are not only permitted, but enjoined by Scripture. The argument is not even discussed, much less demonstrated. The speciousness of this casuistry ought to be apparent to honest and dishonest alike.

Thirdly, there is no Biblical support for a pre-dawn congregational institution. It is even possible as early as A. D. 104 that Pliny is observing a Sunday morning service. That being the case, the Christians in question can hardly be examples to Sabbath observers, since they engage in practices not having Biblical precedence.

Concerning the following composures I shall only say, that the subjects are well chosen, and admirably adapted to the occasion, proper to excite becoming affections at the great feast of love, the Lord's supper, instituted in commemoration of that perfect sacrifice, by which alone we are delivered from everlasting destruction, and intitled to eternal blessedness. The poetry is chaste and polite, the expression clear and just, in every respect becoming the noble theme: as such I recommend it both to the publick and private use of those devout christians, whose breasts are warmed

by a heavenly fire, and whose souls are transported with a lively sense of divine love.

The author's praise of Stennett's hymns is undoubtedly in function of their true content and poetical worth. Some of Stennett's hymns have stood the test of centuries. The author appeals to devotion, nobility, a heavenly fire, and a lively sense of divine love. Note that all of these criteria are eminently subjective.

They would all be fine if one more criterion had been added: the criterion of Biblicality. But Stennett has been very careful. There is a Bible quotation in almost every line of his hymns.

References to unbiblical doctrines, such as the Trinity, are very few and difficult to find. The result is insidious, insinuating false doctrine in texts largely free of it.

This early hymnal is but the first step in an historical development described by the prophet Amos as the temple songs being turned into howling (Amos 8:3). It took three and a half centuries to be complete, but finally the rock mass that has infiltrated essentially all of Christendom is the final fulfillment of Amos' words.