



Rollicking Advice for Evil Days: A Biblical Rationale for Christian Singing¹

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Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:15-20)

While singing Christian hymns and songs is traditional and often enjoyable and inspiring, the purpose of this article is to make the case that such singing is important and, indeed, necessary for Christian communities. The biblical basis for this case is drawn from the passage above. The argument is made on the basis of this passage and on the basis of the impact of singing in Christian and other experience. The article ends with some practical implications that are intended to stir the reader to think of additional implications. In the end, however, the point of this essay is not to convey information as much as to enhance our singing and our appreciation of the importance of singing for Christian faith.

I. SING!

The focal scriptural passage is lodged in the midst of the practical teaching that follows the soaring theology of the first half of Ephesians, in which God is said to have revealed the whole mystery of the divine will in Jesus Christ. Jesus is said

¹Both the title and many of the ideas in this essay came from a sermon I heard on this text many, many years ago, preached by Pastor Henry Horn.

to be the one in whom God will unite all things in heaven and earth, and it is Jesus into whom we all have been sealed.

In light of that, the apostle writes, “Be careful how you live, not as unwise people but as wise” (or, as the Phillips translation puts it so well: not as those “who do not know the meaning and purpose of life but as *those who do*”²), “making the most of the time” (buying it back, redeeming or ransoming *this* moment) “because the days are evil.” So don’t be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is. Don’t get drunk with spirits, for that is lewd and full of

self-hate, but instead be intoxicated with the Spirit of God, “as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts.”

The days are evil, no less so for us than for those early Christians. Yet from the apostle we do not get handwringing or even sympathy but instead we get the seemingly absurd suggestion that we should *sing*. Really? That’s right. Sing. The days are evil. Temptation is everywhere. But there is no call to arms, nor a cry to retreat; but full-speed ahead, with a song!

It seems a bit crazy, but it’s not an altogether uncommon experience. In the old days of sailing ships, only as the sailors sang together the “Yo-o-heave-ho” of the sea chanteys could they manage to raise the great sail. Or for the prison chain gangs of the nineteenth-century American south, where people bore terrible heat and humidity and the oppression of forced labor, singing as they worked helped humans who were treated more like animals to keep mind and body together. Or, more recently, during the freedom movement of the 1960s, black persons attacked by white mobs and police and dogs managed to endure in part by singing “We Shall Overcome,” eliciting astonishment from a watching nation, and faith and courage among their own numbers.

Singing in evil days is not unheard of. When the effort of life is overwhelming, yet the purpose of life is clear because it is given in Jesus Christ and in our belonging to him, what else is there to do but sing? After Moses had led the people out of Egypt and they faced a barren wilderness, it says that he sang. When the angel announced to the frightened young Mary that she would bear a son who would save the world, she sang. When St. Paul was imprisoned because of his compulsion to tell a hostile world about Jesus Christ, he sang. Such songs were expressions of faith by which the word of God was made explicit and believers were strengthened and knit together in evil days.

A good example of the way that songs “work” in this way is Christmas carols. The earliest Christmas carols were born as a response of people who knew the ultimate purpose of life in spite of what was happening to them. In his book *The English Carol*,³ Erik Routley insists that genuine carols are *world-affirming*. They are neither a Puritan denial of the goodness of life nor a Romantic escape into some nostalgic past. As much as we might feel good about roasting chestnuts on an open fire while dreaming of a white Christmas and being home for the holidays, that’s not what real Christian carols are about. Rather, authentic carols such as “Joy to the World,” “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come,” and “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” don’t point us to somewhere else but bring the

²*The New Testament in Modern English*, trans. J. B. Phillips, rev. ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960).

³Erik Routley, *The English Carol* (New York: Oxford, 1958).

truth of the gospel precisely into *our* evil days, making the most of this time. Almost as a sacrament, the profound but simple words are added to the joyful and singable melody, and the carol becomes a vehicle of Christ’s presence for all who hear. They bring *his* light into *our* darkness.

Carols work on us, they don’t merely well up within us. We sing them, but their words create a faith and hope in us that was not there before. We enter into carols with a sort of playful or childlike abandon, not worried about their literalism or their simplicity or their difference from what occupies so much of our lives. Somehow we know that it is not the point that they should

say what *we* mean, but that in our singing we should come to mean what *they* say.⁴

Christmas carols are a familiar example of what is true of Christian singing in general, I think. “The days are evil”—that is the biblical understanding of our context in a fallen world—but that is no reason to lose heart, because it is God’s world, finally. God creates it, God redeems it in Christ, God will reclaim it all. That clarity of purpose, that light in the darkness, is reason enough for singing. But singing is more than only whistling in the dark. In the Bible, singing is a way of opposing evil, not only of living in the midst of it.

II. SING WITH THE ANGELS

The best biblical example of this, even if a surprising one, might be that of the angels. In addition to being God’s messengers (the literal meaning of the term “angel”), angels are most often portrayed in Scripture as doing two other things: singing and fighting. *They sing*. The multitude of the heavenly hosts, the angels, are portrayed as constantly singing praise to God, whether around the throne in heaven or in the fields near Bethlehem or with us in the words of psalms (e.g., 103:20-21; 148:3). And *they fight*. The angels fight for God, against the evil powers and principalities, against Satan and his angels, to protect the people of God, to vindicate the elect, to exercise judgment, and to destroy the enemies of God.

The angels of God fight and sing. And apparently the same angels do both! They are not specialized. They are a warrior choir. Singers with swords. Soldiers with perfect pitch. The image of a warrior choir may seem anomalous to us, where choirs are associated with sanctuaries and reverence and good taste, while war is blood and destruction in some place far away. But with the Bible’s understanding that the world is not a neutral place but the object of a struggle between the power of God and the power of evil, there are no evil-free sanctuaries, no conflict-free moments of reverence. The angel choir praises God precisely as it fights evil and it opposes evil precisely as it praises God.

From a biblical viewpoint, we ought to conceive of our faithful singing as taking our place at the side of the angels: opposing evil by praising God. Some of the hymns we sing at funerals make this point most clearly because the evil of death is such an implacable enemy. Hymns expressing pious wishes will not do; nor will those that are full of exhortations or that portray God as a generic deity removed from the Jesus Christ who lay in death’s strong bands. At a funeral the deceased’s mortality has triumphed; immortality has no status. Neither do

⁴This paragraph draws on some thoughts on worship that Richard Neuhaus develops in his *Freedom for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) chap. 8, esp. p. 127.

achievements in life or the lack thereof. Only resurrection from the dead will do. Singing in the face of death must proclaim or confess or cry out for the God who has promised to raise us with Christ. Other hymns will strike us as hollow or trivial at such a time, as they actually may be at any time. Some Easter hymns will serve very well at funerals—those that are not too triumphalistic; but also those hymns that are centered on God’s justifying the sinner by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone will be appropriate. (Examples include “Jesus Sinners Will Receive,” “God So Loved the World,” “My Hope is Built on Nothing Less,” “Out of the Depths I Cry to You,” and many other hymns that stress God’s mercy and forgiveness.) The point, in any case, is that our singing praise to the God who conquers even

death is our involvement with the angels in fighting evil.

In like manner, opposing evil in other ways is also to praise God. The call to “make melody to the Lord in your hearts” was a metaphor then, just as “a song in our hearts” is now. The advice to sing in evil days calls us to break loose from our prosaic, monotonous picture of life and do other equally foolish and spontaneous things, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the lonely, comforting the afflicted, and welcoming the outcast. According to Ephesians 5, hymns and songs are part and parcel of our whole life of faith. Singing is one of the ways God’s Spirit equips the saints, uniting us through melody, words, and rhythm into a deeper unity that will sustain us in evil days and that will lead us to actions that also praise God. Such things literally put us on the side of the angels and at *cross*-purposes with evil.

III. SING OUTSIDE OF OURSELVES

What about those times, though, when we cannot sing? When we are so caught up in grief or anxiety or despair or pain that words stick in our throats and no sounds except crying can get out? (Or what of those few persons who really are unable to sing at all?) Then isn’t it ridiculous to be told to sing? Yes. However, these words were not addressed primarily to individuals but to the believing community. And have not many of us experienced in times of great distress, when we could not sing, that the singing of others did get through? The rhythms, melodies, and firmness of the church’s faith even in the midst of our own lack of faith came to us, and despite ourselves God reached us through the singing of others.

The history of the church is full of examples of music being a means of pulling us outside of ourselves into the battle against evil at the side of the angels, although it should not surprise us that the forces of evil also have learned of the power of music to enlist people on the wrong side (cf. Nazism). To look at some examples from the reformation tradition, when the emperor made Martin Luther an outlaw because of his rediscovery of the gospel and the criticisms of the church that followed from it, Luther’s hymns carried the message far and wide. When during World War II the Nazis took over the government of Norway, they tried to install Quisling (Nazi) bishops and pastors in the state church, but the Norwegian people refused to cooperate. When the Nazis forced the Bishop of Trondheim to allow a Nazi pastor to preach in place of the dean on Sunday, Feb. 1, 1942, at the 11:00 a.m. service, only a handful of Nazis attended. The dean was rescheduled to preach at an added service at 2:00 p.m. So many people came that the Nazis

refused to allow most of them inside and many thousands gathered outside in the freezing cold. There they sang from memory Luther’s hymn “A Mighty Fortress” against the Nazis.⁵ Rereading only the words to verse three should give us insight into the reason that the Nazis could never really bring the Norwegian people under their control.

Though hordes of devils fill the land
All threat’ning to devour us,
We tremble not, unmoved we stand;
They cannot overpower us.
Let this world’s tyrant rage;
In battle we’ll engage!

His might is doomed to fail;
God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.⁶

It is not only that authentic Christian music draws us outside of ourselves; many things do that. The point is where it draws us. A familiar if tiny instance of this happens for many Christians at each reception of holy communion, when in the Thanksgiving the presider invites us to “Lift up your hearts.” At first glance the focus might seem to be on *our* hearts, but the prescribed response—“We lift them up to the Lord”—makes it clear that we are being drawn out of ourselves so that we can abide in the Lord (who, it might be added, is our true self; cf. Gal 2:20).

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR WORSHIP

Thinking of Christian singing as our participation with God's angels in the fight against evil, in and through which God's Spirit builds up, unites, and directs the Christian community, suggests all sorts of practical implications. I will mention a few here, but the reader is invited to carry on with this task.

Genuine or well-wrought Christian music must have both words and music that are appropriate. If one or the other is wrong, it just doesn't work. Certain sets of words have been betrayed by poor melodies. For years I hated “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” because of its whiny melody by Charles Converse. Then one day a worship leader had us sing it to the tune of “Once to Every Man and Nation” (known as “Ebenezer”). And although it seemed like a bad idea at first, suddenly the power of the words came alive. The alternate melody, with its sturdy and uplifting arrangement, freed the words from their imprisonment so that we heard the strength of this divine friend who bears all our sins and griefs and to whom we can take everything in prayer. It is a testimony to the power of the words that they survived the traditional melody well enough to have become a “favorite hymn” despite being undercut each time they were sung.

To continue on this point, the “Ebenezer” melody is an interesting example. Its power made people enjoy singing James Russell Lowell's theologically suspect “Once to Every Man and Nation,” even as the words drove them crazy, with the

⁵This story is told in a book smuggled out of Norway while the outcome of the war was still uncertain. See Bjarne Høye and Trygve M. Ager, *The Fight of the Norwegian Church against Nazism* (New York: Macmillan, 1943) 76-77.

⁶Translation by *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, and Philadelphia: Board of Publication, 1978) Hymn 229.

talk of “new Messiahs,” “new Calvaries,” and the God of the shadow. The recent pairing (in, e.g., the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, No. 233) of the melody with Martin Franzmann's powerful poem, “Thy Strong Word,” seems to be a much more suitable and inspiring union. Great words may manage to survive a bad melody and powerful music may manage to help inadequate words endure, but Christians need to be concerned about suitable words and fitting melodies.

A second area for consideration is why people like to sing certain hymns. Commonly when members are asked to list their favorite hymns, they will cite primarily Sunday School

songs or hymns of “Old Time Religion.” And this often drives pastors and church musicians crazy: the theology is bad; the music is trite; and such hymns don’t seem to be suited to congregational worship. Why, then, are these the hymns people like? Because they know them; because they can all sing them; *because they have been taught them*. I do not remember the music historian who first said this, but his point is almost self-evident when you hear it. People like best those hymns they have been taught, and for most people the only hymns they have been taught are Sunday School hymns. My conclusion is that if you want people to like other hymns you need to teach them; and you need to teach them the way Sunday School hymns were taught, by rote. Most people cannot read music but they can learn the music by singing it over and over, the way children learn.

In 1958, I was a college freshman in a Lutheran campus congregation when the new *Service Book and Hymnal* was published. The pastor, Henry Horn, took about five minutes at the beginning of worship for nearly a year to have us practice new hymns and new chants. Horn was a good singer, but choir members and organists could also have led us in this way. The essential thing is that we were taught, so that we could actively participate in worship—and even enjoy it (a new experience for me)!

Twenty years later I came to a congregation as its new pastor when a subsequent *Lutheran Book of Worship* was published. The other pastor and I, along with the worship committee, resolved to take the time to have all our members learn every part of the liturgy and the melodies to any new hymns that were scheduled. We did this both prior to and during worship for the first year and sporadically thereafter. In order to conserve time, we would sometimes leave out part of the service in order to learn other parts. After we had spent two or three Sundays learning to chant psalms (an entirely new experience for this congregation), we left out the psalm on the next Sunday in order to learn something else. At the doors after worship both pastors were struck by the many people who asked why we hadn’t chanted a psalm. As we analyzed who asked, we realized almost all were men and almost all could not read music. But they could chant psalms now and they liked doing so! We hardly ever omitted the psalm after that, but we did work at matching the psalm tones to the words, and we regularly practiced these chants.

Finally, worshipers often seem to feel as though hymns are only transition points in the service between the more important parts. Often, in ill-conceived Protestant worship services, this may be true; the people have no other part in the service so the clergy give them some hymns. People are rightly offended by this. If worship is what we do in God’s presence, then hymns need to be an integral part of worship itself. But if we do not have a theological rationale for singing hymns, there is a risk that even pastors will use hymns to fill (or save) time, to placate

special interest groups, to challenge those who resist calls to social action, or to do something other than the Bible portrays as the purpose of Christian singing. Singing and making melody to the Lord is the Christian’s way of living wisely, of making the most of the time, precisely in the midst of evil days. Songs of thanksgiving, praise, joy, hope, and even pleading for help are an essential way that God’s Spirit fills us and sustains us in the struggle. If this is true, then it needs to inform our worship planning and push many other considerations to a lower priority; more than that, people need to know why we are commanded to sing and what it is intended to

accomplish—in us and through us.

So then, be careful how you live, not as those who do *not* know the meaning and purpose of life but as those who *do*, making the most of the time (redeeming the time, buying it back, setting it free), by psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.