

Singing our salvation

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The American revival movement that began with the crusades of Charles G. Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and Ira Sankey, and continued with the Billy Graham crusades, greatly affected the Mennonite church, even as we produced our own Mennonite evangelists.¹ As a young girl growing up in Berne, Indiana, I attended evangelistic services every year. The culmination of each service was the call to come to Christ as we sang “Just as I am,” a hymn that seemed to be the definitive expression of what it meant to receive salvation, one through which I must have accepted Christ dozens of times before it finally stuck.

The beloved gospel songs of this era were identified as songs of salvation in many hymnals. But to see the revivalism of the late

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nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century as defining salvation for the Anabaptist faith community would be incomplete. For Anabaptists, the biblical understanding of salvation is broader, and our church music expresses this breadth of understanding.

The power of song among us has long been recognized but rarely analyzed or articulated. We just know what singing does as we experience it. Martin Luther once said, “What then shall I say of the voice of human beings, to

which naught else may be compared?” Music is to be praised as second only to the word of God because by music are all the emotions swayed.”² What we sing is not to be taken lightly. Words of biblical truth and understanding find their home in our hearts and minds if they are given rhyme, meter, and melody. The durable music of the church can bear repetition, and what we repeat we learn by heart and internalize. And what we rehearse—

week by week, year by year—defines our identity and shapes our faith.

In the hymnals of the Mennonite Church USA and Canada (former General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church) in the past century, certain hymns stand out as those that define our faith—and therefore our salvation—in Jesus Christ. In what follows, I will identify these hymns as those through which we sing our salvation. The hymns have been included in a published body of material widely owned and used in congregational worship, and it is to this corpus of the church's song that I look to

represent who we are as an Anabaptist faith community in North America.

Anabaptists have always understood that the church carries on the ministry of Jesus. To sing our salvation is to be open to the Christ who brings together those who were far apart.

Two German hymns

“*Gott ist die Liebe.*”³ “For God so loved us, he sent the Savior. For God so loved us, and loves me too.” Four-part harmony, voices moving together in rich texture with folk-like simplicity, the revelation of a simple, yet profound truth: God loves all people, because God is love, and the God of the universe

cares for each of us personally. Although the origin of this beloved children's hymn is Germanic, the message is not geographically confined. God does not love only us, or only those who are like us, but God's love calls to everyone. God's nature is love, and this love is made known and extended to us through Jesus Christ.

“*Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe.*”⁴ This testimony to the power of divine love forms an exquisite counterpart to the folk hymn above. It reveals the tender compassion of a loving God, primarily through the language of its music. The compelling love of Jesus calls forth an answering response from the depths of the human spirit: “To thee my life and soul be given; thou art, in truth, my highest good. For me thy sacred side was riven, for me was shed thy precious blood. O thou who art the world's salvation, be thine my love and adoration.”⁵ In this hymn, the life and heart of the singer are offered in loving service and devotion, which bring great joy. A central Anabaptist theme is evident in this highly personal text: the response to God's salvation is a life of loving and serving God in yieldedness (*Gelassenheit*).

The Mennonite Hymnal

“*I bind my heart this tide.*”⁶ With our beloved “606,”⁷ through *The Mennonite Hymnal* of 1969 emerged a new hymn from among us, composed by Hesston College professor J. Randall Zercher. This hymn stands alongside a number of hymns that marked a rediscovery of the hymnody of the early Anabaptists; a significant characteristic of this 1969 collection is its inclusion of some of these sixteenth-century hymns. The melody of this new hymn was plaintive, its harmonies hauntingly beautiful and of an ancient character. And its call is unmistakable: “I bind my heart this tide to the Galilean’s side, to the wounds of Calvary, to the Christ who died for me.” The words “I bind” speak a yes to God’s salvation. But this yes to Jesus, whether one’s experience of it is simple or profound, carries with it a yes to following Jesus. Here is the Anabaptist concept of *Nachfolge*. It is a yes to the way of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the vulnerability of Jesus, and the love of Jesus. This is the heart of the Anabaptist understanding of Christ and the scriptures.

In the words of the second verse, “I bind myself today to the brother far away, and the stranger near at hand, in this town, and in this land.” Anabaptists have always understood that Jesus calls us to the here and now, that the church carries on the ministry of Jesus and the prayer of Jesus through the gift of the Spirit. To sing our salvation is to be open to the Christ who brings together those who were far apart—because of geographical distance, relational distance, cultural distance—and makes us one family. Salvation is a communal reality.

The fourth verse makes a final affirmation: “I bind myself to peace, to make strife and envy cease. God, knit thou sure the chord of my thralldom to my Lord! Amen.” Here, we sing the great truth of God’s salvation: to bind oneself to Christ is to bind oneself to peace; to commit ourselves to a life of peacemaking and peacebuilding. Christ’s redemption of all things includes all peoples, and the restoration of the earth (Romans 8). It is the same truth Menno Simons wrote about in the mid-sixteenth century: “True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all people.”⁸

Hymnal: A Worship Book

*What is this place?*⁹ The hymn that for many Mennonites has become a pillar of our song since the issuing of *Hymnal: A Worship Book* in 1992 is “What is this place.” In this hymn of Dutch origin, the understanding of the song, and of singing the song of salvation, is that it is not sung in isolation. Nor is salvation lived out as a private expression of faith. Those who come to salvation become the body of Christ, the living presence of Christ on earth. This presence reflects the understanding that God’s reign has already begun on earth, even as the church and all of creation long for that reign to come in its fullness.

We sing of “dreams, signs, and wonders sent from the past” (v. 2), the story narrated in scripture of God’s saving acts from the beginning of time, which continues in the present. A full understanding of salvation is to be linked with a vibrant history of God’s activity, which nurtures the church of the present as that story is retold.

To accept Christ—to accept the bread and the wine (v. 3)—is to be nurtured by Christ as the church lives and gives itself for the world in Christ’s love. The church comes to Christ’s table to receive what it needs to carry on the ministry of salvation that Christ gives it, the ministry of peace and justice.

Lord, you have come to the lakeshore.¹⁰ At the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1990, Mennonites came to know and love this simple, beautiful song from the church of Latin America. It soon found its way into both *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and the Mennonite Brethren collection, *Worship Together*.¹¹ For Mennonites, coming to faith often happens in the place where we hear Jesus’ words and teachings, within the church. The response to Jesus is a natural one as Jesus’ call is issued to all people. Again, strong Anabaptist themes are present in this text, which reveals the way of Christ as one of living simply and nonviolently: “My boat carries no gold and no weapons, but nets and fishes—my daily labor.” The intentional inclusion of hymns and songs from the global faith community in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* reflects a firm understanding that God’s revelation and wisdom are present in all peoples around the world who come to faith in Jesus Christ. Although American Christianity’s popular song has spread to many places, especially in giving expression to salvation’s personal dimension, we as a contemporary Anabaptist

community respect and value the diversity and richness of the many cultures that make up the global family of faith.

Sing the Journey

Our newest collection, *Sing the Journey*, carries forward the strong theme of the body of Christ present in the world.¹² The song is incarnational; it does not seek to escape to an otherworldly place. Rather, the song of salvation expresses the life and witness of Christ present here and now through the church. As long as our salvation remains purely personal, the church will never find its life and witness as a community of faith. Text after text in *Sing the Journey*, paired with tunes suited to congregational singing, support the voice of the faith community and nurture it as it proclaims God's salvation and Christ's ways on earth. A sensitive setting for "Just as I am," in a folk idiom, is a gift of this collection.

How shall we choose the salvation songs that we sing?

Scripture reveals to us the God who cares for each of us and yet seeks the reconciliation of all peoples and of creation to God's ways. We must look for the larger biblical story of salvation even as we nurture a deepening spirituality in our personal lives.¹³ Second, we must nurture a corporate spirituality whose foundation is Jesus Christ and whose mandate is the ministry Christ has given the church: the ministry of reconciliation. We must take for ourselves the model and the understanding of the book of Psalms. As Eugene Peterson observes in *Answering God*, the expression of the individual (of the "I") in the Psalms is never an isolated exclusive statement. It is always understood as coming from within the community, as lodged within the community, and as influenced and nurtured by the community at worship.¹⁴

How one feels on any given day is influenced by many things in life's experiences. Expressing feelings to God or about Jesus can be a personal offering. But feelings have their focus in the experience of the individual. Worship's focus must be on God, on listening for and receiving God's word through the scriptures and through the Spirit. The spirituality we nurture must be one that can bear the weight of all of life's experiences, and the entire world. We will need to remember the words of the wise ones, such as these by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

The words are often the givers, and we are the recipients.... We do not know what to pray for. It is the liturgy that teaches us what to pray for.... It is good that there are words sanctified by ages of worship, by the honesty and love of generations. If it were left to ourselves, who would know what word is right to be offered as praise in the sight of the God or which of our perishable thoughts is worthy of entering eternity?

It is not enough, therefore, to articulate a sound. Unless one understands that the word is stronger than the will; unless one knows how to approach a word with all the joy, the hope or the grief we own, prayer will hardly come to pass.¹⁵

Our sung prayer—of praise, adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition, witness, and sending, needs more than we know. To learn to pray at all in worship will require our full-throated, full-bodied commitment. Unless we bring all the joy, hope, and grief we own, our praise and our prayer will become totally interiorized; it will not mature to its voice in the transformation of the world.

Song lives within our being and emerges from that deep place where spirit and will, intellect and passion come together. Singing is embodied and is the commitment of the whole body as it is engaged. Singing within the community calls forth spirit, resolve, intellect, and passion—focusing them with one heart, one voice, and one will. The single proclamation that emerges is the life and witness of the church. It is the song that calls us to God, to one another, and to our world. Singing must be understood as a powerful communicator and must be given careful attention in any setting for worship.

So let us sing our salvation, knowing the power of Christ, who is the Song living among us. Let us awaken our hearing, as St. Bernard wrote,¹⁶ and train it to receive the truth. And let us have the courage to proclaim the truth in our song. Let it continue to transform our lives as we work out our salvation through the power and presence of Christ's Spirit living and moving among us.

Notes

¹ *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House; Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office; Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren

Publishing House, 1956), 269–73.

²Quoted in Alice Parker, *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 62–63.

³“For God so loved us,” #167 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (HWB) (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

⁴“O Power of love,” #593 in HWB. Text: Gerhard Tersteegen, *Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe*, 1757. Music: Dimitri S. Bortniansky, ST. PETERSBURG, *Choralbuch*, 1825.

⁵Verse 3.

⁶“I bind my heart this tide,” #411 in HWB. Text: Lauchlan M. Watt, *The Tryst, A Book of the Soul*, 1907 (alt.). Music: J. Randall Zercher, 1965, *Mennonite Hymnal*, 1969.

⁷Singers using *The Mennonite Hymnal* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1969) came to refer to hymn #606, a 1830 Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection setting of the doxology “Praise God from whom all blessings flow” simply as “606.”

⁸*The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 307.

⁹“What is this place,” #1 in HWB. Text: Huub Oosterhuis, *Zomaar een dak boven wat hoofden*, 1968; tr. David Smith, ca. 1970. Music: Nederlandsche Gedenckclanck, 1626, harmonized by B. Huijbers. Text and harmonization copyright © 1984 TEAM Publications.

¹⁰“Tú has venido a la orilla” (Lord, you have come to the lakeshore), HWB #229. Text and tune: Cesareo Gabaraín, 1979; tr. Gertrude C. Suppe et al., 1987. Translation copyright © 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House.

¹¹*Worship Together* (Fresno, CA: Board of Faith and Life, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1995).

¹²*Sing the Journey* (Scottsdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, 2005).

¹³Marcus Smucker, “A Rationale for Spiritual Guidance in the Mennonite Church” (unpublished paper, May 2002 revision). Seven themes cited in this article suggest seven areas of formation for Mennonites who seek a spiritual development congruent with Mennonite thought and life: (1) true spirituality bringing us into encounter with the fullness of God—God, Christ, and the Spirit; (2) following Jesus in life; (3) worship and prayer; (4) a discipleship of love and nonresistance; (5) living in community; (6) living in the global village; (7) a life a generosity and hospitality.

¹⁴Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

¹⁵Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 31–32; 27. Quoted in Gabe Huck, *How Can I Keep From Singing? Thoughts about the Liturgy for Musicians* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989), 62–63.

¹⁶Quoted in Alice Parker, *Melodious Accord*, 99.

About the author

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