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INVITATION THROUGH SONG: 
EVANGELISM AND DIVINE DISCOURSE IN ARKANSAS REVIVALS

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Abstract

For over a century, Protestant evangelists have held revivals to spread their beliefs. The invitation song is the culmination of these meetings; a sermon ends with an invitation to the unsaved to come forward and publicly accept the faith of the revivalists during the “invitation song.” This hymn is not just a traditional means to allow converts to declare their faith; Christians view this time of congregational singing as an intensely personal declaration of their own conviction, a discourse between themselves and the divine. The singers believe their music can be a powerful instrument of change because of a fundamental belief that the divine is present in their singing. Through archival research and field study of modern Arkansan revivals, this paper examines the evangelical Christian’s perception of the invitation song as both a means of spiritual discourse between laity and divine and as a vital persuasive device.

I. INTRODUCTION

For over a century, revivals have been a significant factor in Protestant evangelism in the American south. The primary purpose of these evangelical meetings, held typically in the spring or fall, is to spread the beliefs of those hosting the revival by converting the nonbelievers in attendance to Christianity. Music, especially the singing of hymns, plays an integral role in these revivals. Over the years, many revivalists have believed that the music is just as effective as the actual preaching in the overall atmosphere and purpose of the event. The resulting emphasis on the musical portion has made revivals well known for their music. Thus, revivalists are careful to ensure that the music is well done and to the level the participants expect, often bringing in special guest song leaders.

The musical format in revivals has remained largely the same over the last century, a reflection of the revival’s unwavering purpose. Revivalists have crafted music into a format that harnesses its full persuasive capabilities, thus giving them no reason to make alterations. Like the revival itself, the music is intended to help lead nonbelievers to conversion, working both as a vehicle for doctrine and as a persuasive device. Based on the intensity to which the music serves this purpose, revival music can be divided into two categories: general music and the invitation song.

Occurring before the sermon, the general music allows audience members to recognize important text-music relationships that enhance what they are being taught. The invitation song, which occurs immediately following the sermon, is both the musical and spiritual pinnacle of the revival. During this time, nonbelievers who are choosing to convert make their conversion known, a convention that is more fully explained in the second half of this paper. Invitation songs are a vital part of the conversion process in a revival and thus must accurately represent
the revivalists’ theology. Though the format in which they are used remains the same, the specific hymn used as the invitation song can often denote amendments to salvation doctrine.

Though music is an ideal medium to instill doctrine into nonbelievers, it is hypothesized that its persuasive power is the reason it remains largely unchanged from one century to the next, particularly through the use of the invitation song (Downey 124). While music is generally recognized as a crucial component of the overall revival structure, the actual role of the music needs to be addressed. By combining research of documented past musical practices with an ethnographic study of modern Arkansan revivals, the goal of this paper is to explore the role of the invitation song in revivals, past and present, as both revealing church’ approaches to evangelical theology and aiding in the conversion experience of those attending the revival.

II. PRIMARY SOURCES AND FIELD WORK

Music used and reused in revivals can offer a wide range of evangelical strategies and their outcomes. Several analyses of commonly used hymns demonstrate such points within this paper. Much of the research centers on an early 20th century handbook entitled *How to Promote and Conduct a Successful Revival*, published in 1901 and compiled and edited by R.A. Torrey. Each chapter of the book is written by a different preacher or evangelist and is intended to educate revivalists of any Protestant denomination. The chapter on music clearly demonstrates various aspects of structuring in early 20th century revivals through the selection of music, the use of soloists and choirs, and the teaching of new songs. This step-by-step guide allows for a comparison of the modern day revival with its predecessor, a comparison that indicates a surprising degree of constancy.

This research includes an archival study of Mary Hudgins’ “Gospel music research files and song books” collection (July 1992). The collection is a rare and valuable resource that focuses on revivals in Arkansas. What Torrey’s text (1901) explains regarding the progress of revivals, Hudgins’s collection explains regarding the development of gospel music in Arkansas over the last century. Hudgins carried out her own personal research of Arkansan shape-note singing and gospel music between 1937 and 1974. Her collection includes hymnals printed in Arkansas between 1891 and 1973, interviews with Arkansan choir members, composers, church musicians, and research on singing schools and camp meetings over a 40-year span. Hudgins’ work allows for direct correlations between the hymns used in Arkansas throughout the mid-1900s and those used (a) earlier at the beginning of the 20th century, and (b) today in Arkansas.

Using both Torrey and Hudgins as guides, field work was conducted to examine more extensively the current use of revival music in Arkansas. I attended four revivals in the late summer and fall of 2010 and one revival in August of 2011. Four of the five revivals were in the northwest corner of Arkansas, and one took place further south in Arkansas. Hymns and copies of the music and service were recorded whenever possible. Attending revivals allowed the researcher to note the use of instruments, soloists, choirs, the involvement of the congregation in the music, and the transmission of music via books, memory, and/or screen projectors. Careful notes of the choice of music in relation to the sermon were made, including an examination of whether the music content was similar and projected a distinct theme.

By attending several different revivals, I became familiar with the general layout of a revival service and was able to identify differences from or alterations to what might be considered the norm. However, for the purposes of this paper I largely focus on one specific revival. The size of the congregation and the methods of worship and organization in this
particular revival emerged from the fieldwork as best representing what is now regarded as a typical Arkansan revival.

Figure 1, color-coded to delineate service elements, depicts a generalized structure of a revival service, formulated on the basis of my knowledge and experience with revivals. In the center of each section is the average number of minutes spent on each element. The service begins with congregational singing followed by announcements and an opening prayer. More singing precedes the sermon. This section is comprised of a combination of communal singing and a “choir special” – a more difficult song that only the choir sings; additionally, a soloist may be featured. The preacher, usually a special guest speaker, presents a sermon, challenging both believers and nonbelievers to follow more closely the teachings of Christ – most importantly to accept the salvation offered through His death on the cross. The sermon ends with the preacher extending an invitation to the unsaved to publicly accept the invitation by walking to the front of the assembly. Occasionally, a pianist will heighten this spoken invitation by playing softly in the background. The “invitation song,” usually a hymn sung by the entire congregation, follows the preacher’s invitation. Congregational singing follows the special invitation song, and a prayer signifies the end of the service.

Figure 1. A typical revival service.

I attended a specific revival for two subsequent years, August 22 – 25, 2010, and August 14 – 17, 2011. During both years the revival took place over several days, with services held during the evening Sunday through Wednesday.

III. THE INVITATION SONG

The first 25 minutes of singing prepares the congregation for the sermon; the singing and the sermon prepare for the invitation song. The invitation song is arguably the most significant use of music in a revival: the culmination of the revival’s evangelical goal is to convert nonbelievers (Downey 116). The concept and practice of the invitation song are quite simple; the evangelist finishes his sermon and, in his own words, invites the unsaved to move to the front of the gathering to accept salvation as the congregation sings an invitation hymn (Figure 2). By then doing so the unsaved are signaling their decision to accept the salvation being offered. Though neither audibly nor in any other way explicitly expressing this, by moving to the front of a gathering during the invitation song a nonbeliever is in effect making a public declaration of faith and agreement with the doctrines preached.
The invitation song has been particularly effective in revivals and serves as a long-standing tradition. D. B. Towner demonstrates how little revival methods have changed by summarizing the move from sermon to invitation song in his instruction for revivalists of the early twentieth century:

A suitable solo or duet or even chorus often serves to clinch the message and bring people to immediate decision…Music can also be used very effectively while all the Christians are standing, by asking all those who wish to be saved to come forward while we sing, “Just as I Am,” or some similar hymn of invitation. (Towner 196-197)

Present-day revivalists conduct their invitation almost exactly as Towner suggests. Like Towner, they believe the presence of music makes it easier for nonbelievers to decide to convert to Christianity. While the text of the invitation song continues with the themes presented in the sermon, the music contributes an emotional element that translates into a spiritual experience. A century later Greg Laurie, a pastor whose evangelistic “Crusades”, attract thousands of attendees each year, demonstrates the enduring lack of change: “We just celebrated 25 years of ministry for our church, and I started [preaching] a couple of years before that. My invitations haven’t changed dramatically. If anything, as the years pass I rediscover the importance of keeping things simple” (Laurie). In other words, an individual may be influenced by the sermon, but effective music could make the decision to convert to Christianity clear and easy for him.

For revivalists, the invitation song is much more than an effective tool. They commonly attribute its influence to the workings of the Holy Spirit. Reverend Joshua Stansfield wrote, “Success is not primarily nor principally by either intellectual, numerical or organized advantage, but by the spirit of God in the workers” (Stansfield 248). Laurie states: “It’s important to realize this is a work only the Sprit can accomplish” (Laurie). That the revival’s structure has barely
changed is not coincidental; revivalists have historically and consistently seen results from this method and consequently see no need to change it.

This short part of a revival service is binary in structure and function; the congregation invites people to accept salvation and the nonbeliever decides to accept that salvation. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit works through the music to move a nonbeliever to decision. In this way the music moves beyond a convenient time for the nonbeliever to move forward and becomes an integral part of the salvation experience.

**IV. THE PRESENTATION OF THEOLOGY IN THE INVITATION SONG**

An intrinsic quality of the invitation song is that it is the last venue to present salvation theology before the window to accept salvation closes (at least during the revival service). Thus the song leader chooses this particular hymn with care. Though the methods have not changed, findings from this research study suggest that revivalists have replaced once commonly used invitation songs with hymns that better reflect new doctrines. For example, the revival I attended used the hymn suggested for the invitation by Towner in 1901, “Just As I Am.” While this hymn has survived since its original publication in 1836, this representative revival did not place it in its typical invitation song position. Revivalists consider “Just As I Am” important enough to be used in the service, but they no longer see the hymn as an entirely accurate call to salvation.

Towner recommended “Just As I Am” in 1901 because the hymn placed special emphasis on Christ’s role in a person’s acceptance of salvation. Susan Vanjanten Gallagher discusses domesticity in hymns: “‘Just as I am’ affirms the fact that Elliott’s [the composer] salvation rests… on the shed blood of Jesus Christ…This hymn is not a simple sentimental effusion but rather a sound theological declaration about the inability of domestic good works to provide salvation” (Gallagher 246). The hymn asserts that only through Christ’s death can one be saved and refutes any belief that works contribute to salvation. This clear theological statement made “Just As I Am” an appropriate invitation song, and the continued agreement with this idea has kept it a staple in hymn repertoire.

Though “Just As I Am” appeared in the revivals I attended, the revivalists chose to use the hymn “All to Jesus I Surrender” as its invitation song. It is hypothesized that this replacement is significant because it demonstrates a shift in salvation theology (Figures 3 and 4, respectively). The following textual analysis illustrates the slight, yet vital, difference between the two hymns.
HISTORY: Chelsea Hodge

Just as I Am

1. Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me,
2. Just as I am, and waiting not To rid my soul of one dark blot,
3. Just as I am, though tossed about With many a conflict, many a doubt,
4. Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind; Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
5. Just as I am, Thou wilt receive, Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
6. Just as I am, Thy love unknown Hath broken every barrier down;

And that Thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
Frightenings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
Yea, all I need in Thee to find, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
Be cause Thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.
Now, to be Thine, yea, Thine alone, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Figure 3. “Just As I Am”
While both hymns are sung from the viewpoint of one who wants to give his life over to God, the verses of “Just As I Am” end with “O Lamb of God, I come! I come!” signifying the role of the singer. However, the majority of the text addresses God’s willingness to accept any person, with such lines as “Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind” and His active role in leading the singer to salvation - “Because Thy promise I believe” and “Thy love unknown / Hath broken ev’ry barrier down.” The text gives greater prominence to the active role of God in receiving the sinner: “Just
as I am, Thou wilt receive, / Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve.” The singer relinquishes to God in every verse, yet it is God who takes the active role by creating the pathways to acceptance.

“All to Jesus I Surrender,” though still about accepting salvation, takes a slightly different approach. Van de Venter’s text does not address God’s willingness to accept the sinner; rather it is a declaration of a worshipper’s personal decision to accept salvation, as stated in the first verse and chorus:

All to Jesus I surrender,
All to Him I freely give;
I will ever love and trust Him,
In His presence daily live.
I surrender all, I surrender all.
All to Thee, my blessed Savior,
I surrender all (Van de Venter)

Unlike “Just As I Am,” this text gives the singer the active role in his salvation. In this song, the person’s choice is the most important part of the salvation process.

The difference between the two songs reflects the theological beliefs of the times during which they were given prominence. The beliefs of early 20th century revivals are documented by the Southern Baptist Convention, the governing body of Southern Baptist churches, in “Baptist Faith and Message.” This creed, first published in 1925, has been revised twice, in 1963 and again in 2000. The first version (1925) appeared closest in time to the publication of Torrey’s book, which recommends the use of “Just As I Am”. This early creed states the following concerning Christian salvation: “This blessing [God’s acquittal of sins] is bestowed, not in consideration of any works of righteousness which we have done, but through the redemption that is in and through Jesus Christ” (Comparison). The text of “Just As I Am” directly supports this assertion, in that it suggests that salvation is not attained by works but through God’s acceptance of all people just as they are.

In 2000, the creed was again revised; this version continues to be used today. The sentence quoted above from the 1925 version is deleted, and one sentence is altered. Originally the sentence was written “It brings us into a state of most blessed peace and favor with God, and secures every other needed blessing,” but was then revised as follows: “Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God.” This change from a “state” to a “relationship” stresses the importance of the believer’s active role in his or her salvation. The text of the modern “All to Jesus I Surrender” thus reflects the change within the theological underpinnings of the revival movement.

The shift in theological thinking is further supported by the following Southern Baptist Convention Position Statement:

We affirm soul competency, the accountability of each person before God. Your family cannot save you. Neither can your church. It comes down to you and God. Authorities can't force belief or unbelief. They shouldn't try. Against this backdrop of religious freedom, it's important for us Baptists to set forth our convictions. By stating them in a forthright manner, we provide nonbelievers with a clear choice. (“Soul Competency”)

Particularly important is the last phrase, providing “nonbelievers with a clear choice.” This philosophy is stressed in “All to Jesus I Surrender” – the narrator chooses to surrender his life to God and to enter into a relationship with him. The entirety of the revival service up to this point - the opening songs, prayers, and the sermon - are all ways for the revivalists to state their
convictions, only then to leave the choice to the nonbeliever during the invitation song. By using “All to Jesus I Surrender” as the invitation song, the revivalists make it clear to the nonbeliever that with his choice comes accountability and an active decision to “surrender” everything to God.

These two hymns were originally published in the mid-1800s and have been appropriated for the respective era revivals. These songs were not written for the purpose of declaring these specific beliefs. Though various editorial changes have been made since then, the bulk of the compositions are the same as when they were originally written. A modern revival may still use “Just As I Am” in its service, because its message is relevant to modern thought. However, the revivelist no longer gives the hymn the most important place in the service, the invitation following the sermon, because it no longer depicts the core of Baptist salvation theology.

V. THE EFFECTIVE TRADITION: AN ANALYSIS OF AN INVITATION SONG

The invitation song must be theologically sound while still simple in its message since simplicity is necessary for the invitation’s purpose (Downey 121). The invitation is a time of decision and action for the nonbeliever and should not be cluttered by complex theology. The pre-sermon hymns and the sermon itself provide the necessary teachings to bring a nonbeliever to a decision. The accessible text of the invitation song plays an essential role in this respect. When accompanied by simple, repetitive music, the invitation song is designed to serve as an effective call to salvation.

While hymns used elsewhere in the service may address substantial theological views in a quick succession of texts, the invitation song is simple and straightforward. In terms of “All to Jesus I Surrender,” the song used as the invitation in the revivals under study (Figure 4), this hymn is a declaration of complete submission. The singer expresses his decision to live in “His presence daily” (Verse 1 Line 2) and forsake all “worldly pleasures,” (Verse 2 Line 2) surrendering and giving everything to the Lord “freely” (Verse 1 Line 1). The final verse reveals the expected return for this dedication; the singer requests to be “filled” with God’s “love,” “power,” and “blessings” (Verse 3 Line 2).

A simple musical structure reinforces the transparent meaning of the text. “All to Jesus I Surrender” is a relatively short hymn, consisting of three verses that are each two repetitions of a four-measure phrase and an eight-measure chorus. The verses have a lulling, cyclic melody that is almost entirely stepwise, within a range of only a fourth. The four-bar phrase in each verse contains a sequence that moves by step down to the tonic: beginning on F# (measure 1), the motivic pattern is first transposed to E (measure 2) and then to D (measure 3). The final repetition of the pattern (measure 3) enlarges the interval between the first two notes (from a second to a third) in preparation for the cadence that follows in measure 4. This sequence from scale degree 4 to 1 repeats exactly in another four-bar phrase. The repetition of the entire phrase strengthens the feeling of a cycle.

The verses do not have strong cadences; the somewhat ambiguous harmony oscillates between tonic and subdominant (the verses begin on a tonic in second inversion without the root, a vague way to use that chord). In this way a lulling effect is created by the cyclic harmonic pattern combined with the narrow melodic range. The verses are not meant to be assertive; there is no presentation of new ideas in the text, and this is reflected in the reiterative music. The three verses remind nonbelievers of what they have learned and attempt to influence their decision.
The chorus is yet more demonstrative as the melody reaches a much higher tessitura, the harmonic movement is stronger, and the texture becomes progressively thicker. The melody reaches D5, the highest note of the hymn, twice achieving a range of an octave on the chorus. The chorus’ melody also incorporates more leaps four, in all, including the leap from the end of the verse to the beginning of the chorus. While the verse had only two-part (thus ambiguous) harmony, the chorus expands into four. It begins with a call and response: two parts in the first measure (soprano and alto) and then two other parts responding (tenor and bass) in the second. Although the four parts overlap here, one does not finally hear four parts homophonically until the last four bars. This is the only phrase that is not repeated elsewhere. The chorus’ strong harmonic movement establishes the key, with a strong presence of IV and V chords and a distinct absence of any minor chords.

Without adding much complexity to the song, the chorus intensifies the hymn. As the melody gets higher and the texture thickens, the dynamic gets louder. This, combined with the greater harmonic movement, gives the hymn momentum as it approaches the end. Yet the very last phrase is a long swelling sigh; the melody moves up to a D5 and then falls by step to the octave below, encompassing the hymn’s entire range. The building intensity seems to fall away right at the very end – a musical surrender.

The uninvolved melody and harmony are designed to let the nonbeliever participate in the song without getting confused by complexities. The text is an emphatic profession of the singer’s commitment to the faith, but its real purpose, like any invitation song, is to gently persuade a nonbeliever to make the choice to go forward by reiterating the act of surrendering. The word “surrender” is used six times in one cycle of verse and chorus. The text “I surrender all” is accompanied three times in the chorus by a descending melodic line, a musical sigh to accompany a mental relinquishment.

The last line of the chorus changes in function; now the singer speaks directly to Jesus rather than about Jesus. This shift is reflected by intensified melodic movement; the verse reaches scale degree 4 (G) at “Jesus,” but the chorus jumps to scale degree 6 (B) on “Thee.” As a consequence this last supplication is much more personal and is, perhaps, an invitation to the nonbeliever to share in this discourse with their “Savior”.

Though overtly simple, the message of this hymn is striking. The words signify a great commitment to Jesus on behalf of the singer. When considered in the context of an invitation to a nonbeliever to accept the faith, the hymn conveys solidarity and community. One must commit all to the Lord, but, hypothetically, every singer has made that same commitment as he or she invites the nonbeliever to so do as well. The final chorus, with its strong harmonic development and higher tessitura, evokes a feeling of proud proclamation. In other words, it suggests that the singer gladly makes these sacrifices in return for God’s blessings.

VI. BEYOND TRADITION: DIVING DISCOURSE AND THE INVITATION SONG

Christians’ motivation for using a song during the invitation, a tradition that has spanned over a century, is much deeper than as a vehicle to present a theological basis for the salvation a nonbeliever is being invited to accept. It is hypothesized that the collective singing of the congregation is as powerful as the words of the sermon because of the spiritual investment being made by the singers themselves. Thus the actual invitation extends beyond the initial invitation.
of the preacher into the singing itself. Through their singing Christians are inviting the divine to take a part in their persuasive discourse because of a firm belief that the divine has an ability to reach nonbelievers through their music. Believers perceive the singing itself as a vital and immutable part of the invitation experience.

Towner discusses the traditional method of “asking all those who wish to be saved to come forward while we sing” (196). He also suggests a method that is different from that traditionally used today, yet clearly demonstrates how the singing might be interpreted as a continuation of the invitation. He recommends the preacher first inform the congregation that a song will be sung and he then says, “when the song is ended I will give all who wish to accept Christ an opportunity to arise or come forward and say so in that way” (196). Perhaps Towner recommends waiting to give people the opportunity to come forward, because he realized the song was an extension of the invitation rather than punctuation separating verbal invitation from eventual physical acceptance.

Towner evidently believed that the singing was capable of performing a function beyond that of the sermon or of a spoken encouragement; he states that music “often serves to clinch the message and bring people to immediate decision” (196). The texts of invitation songs primarily deal with the following concepts essential to Christian salvation: Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, accepting the invitation before it is too late, and the power of Christ’s love and mercy to change your life. These themes make the invitation song a cajoling, persuading, and sometimes intimidating medium. Although the words are sung, they reflect the words and thoughts of the preacher, but with the added power of multiple people speaking, or really singing, them all at once. According to Towner, the effect can be quite moving, emotionally and literally, for a person wavering between going forward and not.

The words themselves, though saturated with theological teachings and spiritual significance, are only part of the entire experience. The vocal music carrying them is also key. A sermon could be followed by silence, a gap giving nonbelievers a quiet time to reflect on the preacher’s spoken offer and to consider their decision, or it could be followed by the same texts in spoken or chanted form. But instead, for more than a century, Christians have chosen to have this part of the service sung, thereby using a persuasive religious art form.

This suggests that the perceived power of the invitation extends further than the text; in other words, that perceived power is imbued in the actual act of singing. In effect, not only are the preacher and the song’s words doing the inviting, but the music itself is inviting the wayward soul to accept the salvation being offered. The notion that music can be spiritually penetrating beyond the message of the words invites a third party into the invitation experience. An invitation implies a two-part connection, that of the invited and that of the one doing the inviting. The preacher speaks the invitation first, by asking the nonbelievers to respond to his sermon during the song. The congregation sings the invitation by collectively singing the song’s words. If the music, separate and apart from the text, is extending a spiritual invitation, a third party must be extending the invitation through the music – that of a holy deity.

Spiritual discourse and connection between layman and deity is not an unfamiliar concept, though it is often studied from the direction of the believer communicating with the divine. In a recent article, Marin Marian-Balasa proposes that, “When (some) Westerners say or believe that ‘music is prayer (worship or holy offering)’ … they do not imply or think of it metaphorically. They trust in a most tangible, physical, physiological, psychological, emotional, and intellectual way that such art forms do function as religious gestures and experiences, as direct means or agencies putting the humans and the transcendental in direct contact” (129). Through the
invitation song, believers trust that their music is a divine discourse with God, and He in turn communicates with them and with the nonbelievers to whom they petition.

In support of Marian-Balasa’s words, most Protestant denominations find their musical roots in disciplines that believe singing and music to be a commanded and required part of church service. Yet many now see their role in music-making as a functional and tangible form of discourse with God. However, this discourse is not one-sided; they also firmly believe that God is, in turn, communicating with them through the medium of music. Thus the invitation song remains a critical part of every revival and church service because of the belief that God can and does speak to nonbelievers through music.

During the music, specifically during the invitation song, the entire church body has the opportunity to share their convictions with non-believers through congregational singing. It is the only part of the service in which the congregation actively participates. This communal acceptance of what they know to be real is what makes the presence of God tangible for all of those assembled, or as Marian-Balasa puts it, “music is the medium through which people make the presence of God real, actual, powerful, and through which they share and partake in the holy” (131). Through collective singing, the faithful are expressing their common beliefs, both in the gospel being shared and in their belief that God has a powerful presence in the assembly.

VII. LOST TO POSTERITY: CHRISTIAN INVESTMENT AND THE INVITATION SONG REPETOIRE

Christians take part in the invitation song for the purpose of making the “presence of God” real for the nonbeliever. They believe the song can serve as the deciding point in a nonbeliever’s decision to accept salvation. Christians exhibit this belief by adamantly utilizing a small and uniform repertoire of invitation songs, even though hundreds of new songs have been written and published over the last century. Christians disregard these new songs in favor of those they know well and feel comfortable investing in emotionally. This disuse ultimately forces newer songs out of hymnals, even though many of the songs Christians regularly sing are more than a century old (Eskew). Furthermore, the repertoire of invitation songs is not large. In one popular hymnal with over 1000 hymns, only 50 of these are “songs of invitation calling people to respond to the gospel of Jesus” (Howard). Christians maintain this small canon, most of which was written 50-100 years ago, because of a need to be familiar enough with what they are singing to allow for emotional investment.

This tendency to disregard the majority of new compositions is illustrated in a piece from Hudgins, who seemed especially fond of writing to women, who are often the wives of composers or preachers who had died. One such letter resulted in a response from Mrs. Dick St. John, who told Hudgins about a composer who had recently died. Consequently what Mrs. St. John says about his works and what has happened to them is very intriguing:

Luther Cummings, who died this past winter at the age of 92, composed gospel and sacred music all of his long and illustrious life…I have just talked with his daughter, Mrs. Ralph Edwards, 1213 Hickory, Mena, and have explained what you are looking for. She says that many of the father’s songs were printed in the Stamp-Baxter hymnals used for the “singings.” Unfortunately literally hundreds of the songs he composed are lost to posterity. Mr. Cummings had a great gift, really. Something that is now lost. (St. John, Mrs. Dick Letter to Mary Hudgins, 30 April 1969)
Mrs. St. John might have written that last sentence referring to the death of a great composer, but on a deeper level she is also referring to the many hymns Mr. Cummings wrote that fell to the wayside.

Present-day Christians’ practice of eschewing new compositions in favor of traditional songs is further confirmed by Cara Stevens, the music minister of Southern Heights Baptist Church. Ms. Stevens explains a practical reason why her congregation, like many others, consistently sings older songs, though they might occasionally branch out into newer music. In the following quote she speaks about ensuring congregational involvement in a revival by choosing familiar music.

I think that part of that is picking music that they do like. Picking music that is familiar to them as well as incorporating new. If you’re constantly doing those new songs it’s hard to learn and sing songs that are familiar to you. (Stevens, C. Personal Interview. 12 Nov. 2010)

She confirms and maintains the practice of spurning new songs for older songs by encouraging the use of hymns that people already know and like.

While many churches see a practical reason not to introduce new music, one reason for their continued reliance on older hymns may go beyond this practicality. While religiously and spiritually it makes sense, particularly when referring to songs used for the invitation, believers avoid new music for the simple reason that it is unfamiliar. They invest, intellectually, mentally, and spiritually, in the words they sing, in how they sing them, and what specifically they are hoping to achieve when the invitation is sung. Thus they cling to their established repertoire to ensure that the music will carry the full weight of their intentions.

Christians view singing as a viable method of helping the nonbeliever feel the presence of God, or as Marian-Balasa writes, while singing they find “the mind focused on the ultimate reality that takes place while singing: the presence of God. The presence is no longer imaginary, because music/singing makes it psychologically and sensorily experiential” (139). When experiencing music that is unknown to them, or when struggling to find the pitches or follow the words, Christians often feel that they are not infusing the music with the power that they know and believe can be present. Ultimately they believe the presence of God must be felt emotionally to change the hearts of the unsaved.

The invitation song is not just a tradition, nor a convenient device to ease the transition out of the sermon. The invitation song is a vital part of encouraging lost souls to come to the “other side.” Christians feel its importance on the following levels: their role in personally inviting a nonbeliever; their perception of a divine presence that is felt through the power of music; and their belief that music can be a powerful instrument of change.

VIII. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Revivals have long been a part of southern religion and society. Their presence through the decades has established a long-standing yet effective tradition of music. Though theology has been modified and new songs are continually replaced, the methods have not changed, nor has the mission. Through revivals, evangelical Christians facilitate an integral part of their faith by actively seeking and converting nonbelievers. Music allows the faithful to take an active role in this process. Yet even beyond the role of the believer, the music itself is designed to contribute its own persuasive power, evoking a divine discourse and adding its metaphysical voice to the call.
New believers, in turn, identify music as a significant factor in their conversion, and the revival in its entirety becomes a collective gesture of Christian faith.

Yet music’s role does not end here. Evangelical Christians are influenced by their religion and by the stigmas attached to them, making their position in society a complex one (Temperley). Revival music serves as a snapshot of evangelical Christian faith, contextualizing evangelicals within their society by epitomizing many of the things central to their beliefs. By using their music to reflect as a voice of faith, scholars can better understand how evangelical Christians connect theology with worship and conviction with society. Although this research study suggests that revivals play a deeply historical and spiritual role in the lives of southern, evangelical Christians, it does not exhaust the many other possible variables, including but not limited to denomination, location, ethnicity, and economic background. Further analysis could help expand the understanding of revival music as an expression of faith, culture, and society.
HISTORY: Chelsea Hodge

Works Cited


Elliot, C. “Just As I Am”, 1835. Print.


Stevens, Cara. Personal interview. 12 Nov. 2010.


Van de Venter, Judson W. “All to Jesus I Surrender.” 1896. Print.
Dear Mary,

I am going to be lazy and ask you to call Inez Cline and thank you for the delightful talk that she gave us. Tell her, please that we are all inspired by her and are starting to get to work.

It was so nice to meet you and we all felt that you added so much to our meeting. I have the address of Mrs. Claude Willifred who was the one I told you wrote a song about Arkansas and who tried (unsuccessfully) to have it adopted as the State's song.

Mrs. Claude Williford, 2226 Terwilliger, Tulsa, Okla. Her first name is "Opal".

I also came up with another name for you. Luther Cummings, who died this past winter at the age of 92, composed gospel and sacred music all of his long and illustrious life. He also conducted "singings" and he was one of the Star's oldest regular contributors with his inspirational sayings, etc.

I have just talked with his daughter, Mrs. Ralph Edwards, 1213 Hickory, Mena, and have explained what you are looking for. She says that many of her father's songs were printed in the Stamps-Baxter hymnals and used for the "singings”. Unfortunately literally hundreds of the songs he composed are lost to posterity. Mr. Cummings had a great gift, really. Something that is now lost.

I hope that this will be helpful to you. Probably if you were to come to Polk County and "dig" you would find many more who composed songs.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Dick St. John
Box 5
Mena, Arkansas