

“Sing With Me: How Great Is Our God”

1 Timothy 3:16

Introduction: 1) What we sing when we worship should matter, because what we sing should reflect our theology. From its beginning the Church of Jesus Christ was a singing Church, and what they sang was spiritual and theological. Their singing expressed the love they had in their heart for their Savior, and their singing expressed what they believed in their souls about their Jesus.

2) E. P. Sanders notes at least the following should be recognized as early confessional hymns to Christ found in the New Testament: Ephesians 2:14-16; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16, and 1 Peter 3:18-22.

3) Now, the question should be raised, “what purposes did these hymns serve and what insights do we glean from studying them? I would note at least 4.

- 1) The hymns reveal the kinds of Christological affirmations made in the earliest days of the church.
- 2) Because the hymns are earlier than their citation in the New Testament, they are even more primitive than their New Testament record.
- 3) The hymns represent “Christological explosions of worship” and adoration in the early church.
- 4) The rich Christological content of the hymns suggest that from the first days of the Church, the believing community in praise, worship, and confession embraced a very high Christology. Ralph Martin says it like this, “Christian compositions appeal to God whose nature is known in Jesus Christ ... [indeed] the New Testament teaching on the person of Christ is virtually contained in its hymns.” He then adds, “The hymns are essentially soteriological in their purpose, and set

forth the person of Christ in relation to his world as reconciler and world ruler.

But in as much, as he accomplished what God alone can do ... it was but a short step for the early Christians to set him on a level with God in their worship (*Dict. Of Paul and His Letters*, 420-422).

- 5) 1 Timothy 3:16 is a concise yet powerful one verse hymn in our English Bible. It has been called Paul's "How Great Thou Art." It is the high point, the very heart of this letter, wedding beautifully how we behave (v. 15) with what we believe (v. 16). Various divisions of the six line hymn have been offered (Kostenberger sees 3 couplets, *EBC*, 531), but for our purposes we will simply walk thru it phrase by phrase discovering how it beautifully unfolds for us a chronological portrayal of the life of Christ.
- 6) Paul prefaces the hymn with the declaration, "without controversy great is the mystery of godliness." The *NIV* renders it, "beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great." Christians are unanimous in their affirmation; "the mystery of godliness is great." "Mystery" (*musterion*) speaks of a truth previously concealed now revealed. It is now an open secret, a newly revealed truth available to all. "Godliness," in this context, I believe, stands for the Christian faith as revealed and embodied in Jesus, who He is and what He has and is accomplishing. Both confession and conduct are contained in what Paul means. This is made evident by the six line stanza which the early church sang to and about the Savior. I can hear their voices calling us to join them in praise to the one Augustine said was "beauty ever ancient, ever new" (*Discovering the Biblical Jesus*, 6).

I. Sing About The Incarnation of Our Lord.

“He was manifested in the flesh.” The *NIV* says, “He appeared in a body.” The *NASV*, “He who was revealed in the flesh.” The word “flesh” is *sarx*. That He was manifested or revealed implies at the least a previous concealment and location. Unlike the pagan God’s of the Greek pantheon that often masqueraded as men, the Son of God became a man adding to His divine nature a true and genuine human nature. As John 1:14 so strikingly affirms, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Born of a virgin, living a perfect sinless life, Jesus was as Colossians 2:9 says, the fullness of deity in bodily form.” He was God in a bod! The song “Here I Am To Worship” captures it well, “Light of the world You stepped down into darkness ... Humbly You came to the earth You created, all for love’s sake became poor.”

II. Sing About The Resurrection Of Our Lord.

- 1) Secondly, He was justified or, better, vindicated in the Spirit. In Romans 1:3-4 Paul will exclaim, “Jesus Christ our Lord was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead.”
- 2) Most students of Scripture rightly see this 2nd line as a reference to the resurrection of King Jesus from the dead. Such an understanding also finds support in 1 Peter 3:18 where the apostle writes, “[He was] put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit” (or “in His spirit.”)
- 3) David MacLeod a teacher at Emmaus Bible College nails it when he writes,
Christ’s earthly manifestation (“in flesh”) culminated in a

criminal's death, accompanied by horrible violence. But the Cross was not a defeat; it was a triumph over death and hell. By His death He defeated death, and His resurrection was His vindication. His name was cleared of all blame and suspicion, and He was shown to be the Christ, the Son of the living God.

On earth ("in flesh"), He was charged with blasphemy (Mark 14:64). But in the realm of His spirit He stood before a more august tribunal and was "made sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21), that is, all the punishment for sin was laid on Him by God, the Judge of all humankind. In His spirit Christ endured His most intense suffering, as He experienced the curse of sin as the great Sin-Bearer. And His resurrection vindicated His claim that He is the sinless Son of God.

- (*BibSac* 159, 2002, p. 342).

III. Sing About The Ascension of Our Lord.

1) Thirdly, He was "seen by angels." Here Paul addresses our Lord's glorious ascension back to heaven and the wonderful witness and reception He received by the holy angels. The word "seen" has the idea of "beheld." Vindicated in the realm of the Spirit by resurrection, he ascends as a delightful spectacle for angels to behold. Christ twice passed by the holy angels of heaven. First, he descended far below them in humiliation, but then He rose far above them by glorious ascension!

2) Again, I draw on the spiritual insight of David MacLeod,

"One can well imagine the tremendous interest with which these angelic potentates followed the steps of Christ's humiliation from the throne of awesome majesty to the cross of agonizing shame. And as the infernal plot against Jesus thickened, they must have witnessed in amazement the nonintervention of God the Father on His behalf. Far more than twelve legions of angels (Matt. 26:53) must have waited breathlessly for a signal to flash across the sky for them to snatch the Son of God from the "power of the dog" (Ps. 22:20). They must have stood in stunned silence as God the Father allowed His Son to be nailed to a stake. Surely, therefore, the angelic host shouted for joy at

the sight of one of their number rolling away the stone to reveal an empty tomb (Matt. 28:2) and when, squadrons of angels escorted “the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8) back to His heavenly home” (p. 343-44).

IV. **Sing About The Proclamation of Our Lord.**

- 1) Fourthly, He was “preached among the nations.” (*NIV*)

He was “proclaimed among the nations.” (*NASB; ESV*)

He was “proclaimed among all kinds of people.” (*The Message*)

- 2) Witnessed in heaven by the angels, believers now bear witness on earth to King Jesus to the nations. One is supernatural but the other is natural. One is superhuman but the other mere mortal. This Jesus is adored in heaven but He must be proclaimed among the nations. The latter is a divine assignment given to you and me.
- 3) Jesus commanded the preaching of the gospel with his last words before ascending back to heaven in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). And, as this hymn makes crystal clear, there is a definite, and specific content to the message we proclaim among the nations. Scripture repeatedly calls it the “gospel of Jesus Christ” and the “gospel of God.” In Revelation 14:6 there is a flying angel who calls it “the everlasting gospel.”
- 4) Paul, I believe, was meditating on the magnificence of this of this gospel as he closed that incredible theological treatise we call the book of Romans. Listen to how he brought that great letter to a close:

“Now to Him who has power to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the

revelation of the sacred secret kept silent for long ages, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God, to advance the obedience of faith among all nations—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ—to Him be the glory forever!” Romans 16:25-27 (HCSB)

V. Sing About The Salvation of Our Lord.

- 1) “He is believed on in the world” (*kosmos*). When Paul went to evangelize the city of Corinth he must have had some fears and anxieties. He may have doubted that his efforts in proclaiming the gospel would bear any fruit. Our Lord, however, knew different, and appearing to Paul in a vision said, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.”
- 2) God did have many people in that city, and our Lord has many people in this world. Revelation 7:9-10 contains an eschatological promise that should inspire us to go and compel us to preach. Listen to this great missionary promise: “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”
- 3) In heaven they sing about the salvation of our Lord. On earth, we must do no less. Indeed with the angels above we join our voice and sing Revelation 5:12, “Worthy is the lamb who was slain, To receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing” (*evlogia*).

- 4) The order and promise is plain: If we proclaim Him among the nations (line 4) He will be believed on in the world! (line 5).

VI. Sing About The Exaltation of Our Lord.

- 1) The final phrase is debated as to its meaning. Some, even most, see it as another reference to the ascension and that could certainly be the correct understanding. However, I think a different interpretation fits the flow of the hymn. Paul is addressing the climatic exaltation of Jesus in the same vein as Phil. 2:10-11. There Paul writes, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”
- 2) If this view is correct, and there is certainly no need to fight over it, this majestic hymn ends on an eschatological note of victory and triumph celebrating the universal Lordship of Jesus. He is Lord over all. He is the Lamb upon the throne.
- 3) Thus thru the singing of this hymn we confess that our Lord:
was revealed by His incarnation and resurrection (1&2).
is witnessed by heaven and earth (3&4).
is honored on earth and in heaven (5&6).

Conclusion: How then do we respond to this our Great God? The hymn written by Phillip Bliss says it as well as any I know. Its title:

“Hallelujah, What A Savior!”

1. “Man of Sorrows! What a name. For the Son of God, who came.
Ruined sinners to reclaim! Hallelujah, what a Savior!

2. Bearing shame and scoffing rude, In my place condemned He stood—
Sealed my pardon with His blood: Hallelujah, what a Savior!
3. Guilty, vile and helpless we, Spotless Lamb of God was He;
Full atonement! Can it be? Hallelujah, what a Savior!
4. Lifted up was He to die, “It is finished!” was His cry;
Now in Heav’n exalted high: Hallelujah, what a Savior!
5. When He comes, our glorious King, All His ransomed home to bring,
Then a new this song we’ll sing: Hallelujah, what a Savior!