

Key Insights in Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns by T. David Gordon

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In Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns¹, Dr. T. David Gordon (professor at Grove City College), tackles the question of what types of music are most appropriate in the worship of the Christian Church. Music has always played a vital role in Christian worship. The topic of which music to use in worship is a very hot one. Gordon's book is a much needed addition to the discussion. (In fact, I hesitate to even use the word *discussion*, because often the question of what music to use in the worship of the Church is not a real discussion at all. It often comes down to a *worship war* waged merely on the basis of personal taste or intuitive commitments that everyone feels strongly about one way or the other but no one manages to intelligently articulate. Sadly, there is comparatively little critical thought or

well-reasoned debate on the question of music in the Church, no matter what the source, or what view is held.) Gordon discusses content (the words to be sung) and also form (the music itself.) I believe what sets this book apart, what makes it so valuable, is Gordon's careful thought and study on the question of the form of music itself. This is so often ignored or dismissed as a mere matter of personal taste unimportant for careful reflection. Refuting "aesthetic relativism", (the view that all forms are equally beautiful, or that there is no superiority of one form of music over others for worship in the Church,) Dr. Gordon writes from the perspective of someone who loves the old hymns of the Church which have been composed down through history, who favors instrumental accompaniment (within certain practical and aesthetic guidelines which he articulates in the book.) Though I do not see eye to eye with Gordon on everything that has to do with music in the Church, his book is a great resource as an introduction to critical thought on the currently debated topic of musical selections for worship in the Church. I would recommend it even for those churches which just sing Psalms or do not make use of instruments. Even in their case, there are important considerations to be made over what metrical versions and what musical settings are appropriate for the worship of the Church.

After laying some philosophical groundwork and establishing why it is important to reflect critically on the music of the Church, Gordon comments on the difficulties that younger generations have in relating to the great hymns of the Christian faith. Throughout the book he backs up, (or, at least, he skillfully attempts to back up) all of his arguments with objective evidence. I think he does a very thorough and persuasive job at it. One very helpful aspect of the book is the criteria which Dr. Gordon lays out to provide guidelines for deciding what music should be utilized, and what should be rejected, when it comes to Christian worship.

I would like to highlight those key criteria which Dr. Gordon identifies as criteria for what music (the words, tunes, and instruments) should be used. These criteria may serve as guidelines to help determine whether or not a particular form of a hymn or song is appropriate for worship in the Church of God. In my opinion, his criteria are by no means exhaustive, (meaning that more criteria should be added, for example, what about the Psalms?) Yet they form a good starting point for many churches today considering the issue of music. I think this summary could be useful in spurring further reflection, and I also hope that some who read my summary of his criteria will go ahead and read the book. Here they are (in my words):

1. Timeless quality of the musical settingⁱⁱ

Was the music to which the song is sung written centuries ago and has it been appreciated by many successive generations in the Christian Church? If it was composed more recently, does it sound like it could have been? Can we expect our grandchildren to sing the same tune in worship? What about two hundred years from now—will Christians still be using this music? The point here is that Christianity is an old religion. Its doctrines are ancient. Its God is without beginning and without end. Its gospel promises to sinners everlasting life with the eternal God on his terms. The music that is selected to worship him needs to support this message by having a timeless quality to it. If a tune sounds like it will be outdated ten or twenty years from now, its form is detracting from the unchanging message of the gospel, (which worship music is meant to support and carry.)

2. High quality lyricsⁱⁱⁱ

If we took away the music, would these lines (the lyrics) make a good Christian prayer? Would we say this prayer in public worship? The historic hymns of the Church are of a high devotional quality. They are often quoted as illustrations in sermons and Christian books. They may be used as prayers in public or in private. What about the hymns we are suggesting for use in Christian worship? Do they share this quality, or are their words too mundane, too juvenile, simplistic, and too empty to be used as public prayers?

3. Engaging the Mind^{iv}

Do the songs we sing in worship engage the mind, speaking intelligently of God's mighty works and his character attributes? Or do they go straight for sentimental emotionalism? Christian worship should engage the whole person, body and soul, including the intellect and emotions. Following in imitation of the Psalms, the hymnbook of Israel, the most prevalent hymns of the Christian Church (when songs have been written in addition to the Psalter) have followed the same patterns as the Psalms. They

praise God not just with a vapid emotionalism, but with detailed thinking on his works and attributes. How about our songs? Do they engage the mind as well as the emotions?

4. Formality^v

Acknowledging that we live in an extremely informal culture, Gordon notes that there are occasions when modern Americans still get formal. He uses the example of weddings. Most Christians even today would dress formally for their own wedding, and would even choose (at least one or two) formal-sounding hymns or musical pieces to mark the importance of the occasion. But if formality is appropriate for a wedding, why not for the most important meetings this side of glory, when we come together to meet God and to pay homage to him, when Christ is met by his bride? Likewise the musical selections should reflect the high importance of that awe-inspiring occasion which is weekly public worship on the Lord's Day.

5. Suitability of the music for congregational singing^{vi}

Is the music written in such a way that is conducive to the whole congregation singing it together? I am not listing this point in the same order that it occurs in the book, but I wanted to bring it out as a criterion because it is very useful. Songs that were written to be sung by a large chorus (and a congregation is a chorus) are within a reasonable vocal range and not too difficult for the singers. They should ordinarily be presented with a musical score and harmonic parts to aid those who don't know the tune well but can read music. (This point of Gordon's is near to my heart. One of my pet peeves is lyrics presented on the wall without the music! How am I going to sing the correct bass part?) Gordon also gives a pointed critique of contemporary worship's obsession with the guitar. While the guitar is a fine instrument, Gordon ably points out that the guitar is better suited to accompany a solo voice or just a few singers than a large chorus of singers. It's either too soft to be heard over the chorus, or it drowns out the singing if you crank it up. Its particular rhythm and chords both limit the hymns that may be used and rule out singing in 4-part harmony. Gordon favors the use of instruments which are musically better suited to accompany the singing of a large chorus (the congregation in this

case) such as the organ and piano. This ought to be an important consideration for churches which choose to make use of instrumental accompaniment.

Finally, Gordon gives advice on what to do about younger generations that have no taste or no familiarity with music that fits the above criteria. He asserts that they may be taught to sing and appreciate music which now seems foreign to them, with the right amount of patience and careful instruction. He provides insightful tips from a pastoral perspective on how to go about making the change, how to teach the younger generation to love and sing hymns^{vii}.

Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns by T. David Gordon is heartily recommended as a welcome addition to the discussion of what music should be used in the churches. His keen arguments are persuasive. They will provoke thoughtful reflection on a topic which too often only elicits emotional knee-jerk reactions. It is recommended for all Christian Churches, no matter what their current worship music entails.

ⁱ Gordon, T. David. Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing. 2010.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, chapter 8, p. 103.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, chapter 9, p. 129.

^{iv} Ibid, chapter 10, p. 133.

^v Ibid, chapter 11, p. 141.

^{vi} Ibid, chapter 7, p. 95.

^{vii} Ibid, chapter 14, p. 179.