

HYMN INTERPRETATION

MARY KAY BEALL

"I Love to Tell the Story!"

While we recognize that the one thing we can count on in life is "change," I think it's crucially important that as we create and experience new forms of expression in the music of faith, we continue to value the music of the past. I grew up on gospel hymns and although I have moved a long way from my early tradition, I firmly believe there is much to be cherished in the hymns of our past and, in particular, in the gospel songs of the evangelical tradition. With that in mind, I want to explore some particular ways of interpreting a well-loved gospel song that might enable those who read this article to come to regard this song and others of its genre with renewed enthusiasm.

I Love to Tell the Story

*I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.
I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true;
it satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.*

Refrain:

*I love to tell the story,
'Twill be my theme in glory
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and his love.*

*I love to tell the story—more wonderful it seems
than all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams;
I love to tell the story. It did so much for me,
and that is just the reason I tell it now to thee.*

Refrain . . .

*I love to tell the story, 'tis pleasant to repeat
what seems, each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet.
I love to tell the story, for some have never heard
the message of salvation from God's own Holy Word.*

Refrain . . .

*I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.
And when in scenes of glory I sing the new, new song,
'twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.*

Refrain . . .

The Gospel Song as an Historical Entity

"I Love to Tell the Story" is a product of the powerful evangelical movement which began in England in the mid-eighteenth century. The popular ministries of such preachers as George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, initially reached the lower and middle classes. However in the nineteenth century, the movement began to appeal to the upper classes as well. Many of these individuals maintained membership in the Anglican Church but were strongly influenced by the gospel message with its focus on the need for personal conversion and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.¹

(Arabella)² Katherine Hankey, (1834–1911) was born in Clapham, England, the daughter of a wealthy family who were prominent members of the Anglican church. Katherine and her banker father were caught up in the evangelical movement and at age 19, Katherine began to organize Sunday School classes throughout the city of London and to publish numerous written works and religious poetry. At age thirty she suffered a serious illness and during her lengthy recovery she wrote an extended 100-verse poem centering on the life of Christ. The text for "I Love to Tell the Story" grew out of this epic work.³

The initial tune for the text was written by Katherine herself and later a second tune was created by the noted American gospel musician, William H. Doane. The hymn, however, remained relatively obscure until 1869 when William G. Fischer created still another melody for the text, adding the traditional refrain. Fischer's tune was first published in a pamphlet, *Joyful Songs* in 1869. In 1874 this new version of "I Love to tell the Story" with Fischer's tune appeared in Phillip Bliss' publication *Gospel Songs* (1874) and the next year, in a collection by Phillip Bliss and Ira Sankey entitled, *Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs*.⁴ The rest is history as it became one of the best known and best loved songs of the gospel song tradition.

Among the many hymnals which include this popular gospel song are the following: *African American Heritage Hymnal* (2001), *American Service Hymnal* (1968), *The Baptist Standard Hymnal* (1973), *The Celebration Hymnal* (1997), *The Chalice Hymnal* (1995), *Christian Science Hymnal* (1937), *The Covenant Hymnal* (1996), *Hymns for the Family of God* (1976), *Hymns of Heritage and Hope* (2001), *Joyfully Sing* (1968), *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), *The Methodist Hymnal* (1966), *The Hymnbook Presbyterian* (1955), *Pilgrim Hymnal* (1958), *This Far By Faith* (1999), *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), *Voices United* (1996), *Wor-*

ship and Rejoice (2001), *Worship the Lord* (1989), and *The Christian Virtual Hymnal* (an online computer program).

The Gospel Song as a Theological Statement

I believe that one of the reasons gospel songs have waned in popularity in our generation is that the theology they represent is often characterized as simplistic and is based on a literal understanding of the Bible. Also the prevailing “Jesus and me” focus tends to make some Christians uncomfortable. Some may feel that these songs are beneath them or that the texts and/or tunes are unworthy in today’s twenty-first-century milieu. Still, we must not forget that the theological content of the gospel song originates from the heart and mind of individuals whose experience of Jesus Christ and faith *was* genuine and often emotional, individuals for whom scripture *was* understood literally and individuals who may not have wrestled with the complexities of theology that trouble some more learned believers.

The text of “I Love to Tell the Story” is in essence a personal testimony and though the writer refers again and again to “the story” she doesn’t actually include the particulars of “the story” in the text. (It may be worth noting that printed versions often omit the second stanza.) Phrases such as “unseen things above,” “Jesus and his glory,” and “the message of salvation” are characteristic of evangelical language and doctrine.

I firmly believe that gospel songs such as “I Love to Tell the Story” have a theological integrity of their own and I hope that they can be respected for that and for the powerful impact they have had on countless lives throughout the ages. In James Sydnor’s book, *Hymns and Their Uses*, he says, “The final arbiter of greatness in a hymn is the test of long, satisfactory use by the church.”⁵ So while “I Love to Tell the Story” might not meet the particular requirements of today’s standards with respect to inclusivity, musical sophistication and/or correctness of theological content, we cannot deny that it has survived and stood the test of time which, according to Sydnor, grants it a certain worth and merit.

The theological understanding of any believer is rooted in experiential context and as a believer matures in faith, we may expect that their theology will mature as well. However, if some Christians are rooted in a very personal “Jesus and me” theology and others are centered on social justice issues or an inclusive world view, who is to say that one is more valid than the other? The intent of the gospel message; *i.e.*, “the old, old story,” is that each individual encounters God and therein finds a relationship that is valid and grounding and transformative. I believe that God can and does use all kinds of music to draw us to faith. It is not nec-

essary that the theological content of “I Love to Tell the Story” satisfy *every* believer. It is enough, I think, that it satisfy some.

The Gospel Song as an Outreach Tool

In the heyday of the gospel song, the texts and tunes were likely criticized by the traditionalists in much the same way as some criticize contemporary worship songs today. But we cannot deny that the advent of the gospel song in the context of the evangelistic tent-style meeting became the order of the day for reaching lost souls. The text of “I Love to Tell the Story” can still be a viable message for evangelism. If we take the Great Commission seriously, “I Love to Tell the Story” can be thought of as a straightforward musical expression of Jesus’ imperative to all believers. How many of us Christians today feel compelled to “tell the story of Jesus and his love”? Is it possible that education and sophistication may actually dilute the fervency and fire of our faith? Is it possible that education and sophistication may convince us that “to tell the story” is somehow not politically correct these days?

In today’s culture, praise songs appear to be dominating the worship scene. While many decry the praise song genre for simplistic sugar-coated texts and endlessly repetitive performance practice, we must admit that, if we evaluate Christian music from an outreach perspective, it is the praise songs that seem to have the greatest and most visible appeal to the seeker today.

I am a writer and I have written a number of hymns of my own. My personal taste in hymnody these days leans toward hymns that are provocative and that enable me to think of my faith and practice in new ways. But I cannot deny my strong attachment to and love of the old gospel hymns because they provided the musical impetus that drew me to faith. If God indeed calls us to “tell the story” and draw others into the circle of faith, then, whatever our personal preference, we cannot afford to ignore or casually dismiss any songs that seem to speak the most powerfully to unbelievers today.

The Gospel Song as a Memory Album

Paul Oakley writes in his article “Singing Hymns: Integrity and Witness”:

If the Holy Bible is the “story book” of the church’s history and indeed it is, then the hymnal contains the “picture album” of the Christian church. The singing of hymns is actually the family of God looking together at the times, people, and places that have shaped its faith and practice.⁶

I contend that if we dismiss the old hymns and gospel songs of the past from our worship repertoire today, we may become orphans of a sort, and lose an

important link with the past. Some pastors refuse to allow the old gospel songs to be sung in worship, categorizing them as unworthy musical vessels for today's congregation. And, of course, the issue of inclusive language hangs like a thundercloud over us all and makes us fearful of singing *anything* that might offend *anyone* in *any* way. Nevertheless, most of us are aware these days of these fundamental and important language issues so can we not on occasion choose an old gospel song on the basis of its message for the moment and honor it for its value as a piece of our musical faith tradition? Whatever the old songs may lack in sophistication or politically correct language, we cannot deny that they often evoke powerful memories in worshippers of times and people now past and in that way they provide a valid piece of our individual and communal faith history. So, why not sing "I Love to Tell the Story" now and then and allow those who will to travel back in time through the singing and recall those fond memories of the past?

The Gospel Song as a Medium of Prayer and Meditation

There are countless ways to develop a stronger inner life, a closer association with God and an attentiveness to God's voice and call. Some believers kneel or sit in silence to commune with God. Some read the scriptures aloud or silently and then meditate on what they have read. Some use visual imagery to find a place of solitude with God. Some repeat a mantra. As a writer and musician I find that music or a musical text can often provide an effective entry into God's presence. So I would like to suggest that "I Love to Tell the Story!" might be read silently, or aloud, or sung alone in a time of prayer and that the text or the text and tune together could in this way provide a pathway to communion with God.

The text is well over two hundred years old but Katherine Hankey's words are still relevant today. When we find ourselves curiously dissatisfied with the things we have worked so hard to achieve or win, it is good to remember that there *is* something that "satisfies my longings as nothing else can do." When we forget how important it is to share the good news, we need to be prodded by the compelling reminder that even today "some have never heard the message of salvation." When we feel unloved and devalued, it is always affirming to recall the never-changing message of "Jesus and his love." And if we fear the future, per-

haps we lovers of music can find comfort in the thought of an afterlife in which we may be able to ever and always "sing the new, new song"!

The Gospel Song as a Community Builder

I have been a church musician most of my life and I can say with confidence that, in spite of the ongoing "worship wars," the music of faith *can* be one of the most powerful, unifying, community-building activities we participate in as Christians. With the *right* song, we can cross the troublesome barriers of education, race, denomination, sex, age, theology, worship practice, and even language. There will always be certain songs we share by tradition that make this possible. Shared songs of faith have an undeniable power to bring a diverse group of people into community.

When we sing "I love to tell the story of Jesus and his love," we not only join our voices but we join our hearts in the affirmation that, whatever our differences, we Christians continue to find joy in sharing the message of the gospel, in telling others about God's Son and God's unfailing love and mercy toward us all.

I firmly believe that gospel songs have an intrinsic charm and validity all their own. It is my sincere hope that we who create and prepare and teach and lead the music of worship will be broad enough in our perspective to include songs like "I Love to Tell the Story," to find ways in which these early musical treasures may be celebrated and renewed in our own lives and in the lives of our respective congregations. ☪

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Notes

¹Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 109.

²Gene Claghorn, ed., *Women Composers and Hymnists (A Concise Biographical Dictionary)* (Metuchen, NJ; Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984), 109.

³*Ibid.*, 110.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵James Sydnor, *Hymns and Their Uses* (Carol Stream, IL: Agape, 1982), 25.

⁶Paul Oakley, "Singing Hymns: Integrity and Witness," *Creator* 13 (November/December, 1991), 5.