

"Christ Is Alive" Mine, Yours, or Ours?

Brian Wren

Did I say "one of my own hymns?" Yes, insofar as I wrote the hymn in question. But again, no, because when a hymn is used in worship, it belongs also to the worshipers. It means different things at different times, and its metaphors and phrases help us to express our varied experience.

Thus, "Christ Is Alive" may have one set of meanings at Easter and other (though related) meanings at a funeral or an ordination. Within the hymn, I chose words like "insult, rift, and war," believing they would evoke different things for different people—an insult is different from a compliment, but your experience of being insulted may be different from mine.

Alive Today

Because I've had to rework it over the years, the hymn now has three related layers of intent.

The foundation was laid on Easter Day, 1968, for the congregation I served in Essex, England. Asking what we could appropriately sing some ten days after Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered in Memphis, Tennessee, I looked through our hymnal. Finding only triumphal imagery of things long ago, far away, and high above, I wrote "Christ Is Alive" to express our faith that Christ is alive today ("here and now"), involved with us ("in the midst of life"), and with an aliveness that can, and will, bring us through suffering and evil ("suffers still, yet loves the more"). The trumpet call, "Christ is alive!" heralds the first stanza, is repeated, then elaborated in stanzas two through four, and reiterated in conclusion.

Saving, Healing

In 1968 I spoke of Christ's aliveness in inherited language of command and control (whereby Christ conquers, rules, and reigns). Realizing that Jesus refused to domineer over others, I rebuilt the 1989 revision on the 1968 foundation, with stronger images of care, pain, and hope ("saving, healing, touching," "drowned in death," "lives where even hope has died"), and awareness of Easter's cosmic meaning ("till earth and sky and ocean ring").

Freed for All

The 1993 revision takes a further step by praising the aliveness of Christ in women and men, old and young, everywhere. The Spirit of God could not be contained in the life of Jesus, but (as it were) escaped the confines of that one human life, coming alive in all who believe. To keep the hymn within bounds, I omitted a stanza and moved stanza four to become stanza three.

Tunes

TRURO (for which I wrote the hymn) is fine—but encourage more thoughtful singing of "In every insult," etc. As a variant try DUNEDIN. ■

1989

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.

Not throned afar, remotely high,
untouched, unmoved by human pains,
but daily, in the midst of life,
our Savior in the Godhead reigns.

In every insult, rift, and war
where color, scorn, or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.

Christ is alive, and comes to bring
good news to this, and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring
with joy, with justice, love and praise.

1993

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing.
The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
Love, drowned in death, shall never die.

Christ is alive! No longer bound
to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now,
and touching every place and time.

In every insult, rift, and war
where color, scorn, or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.

Women and men, in age and youth,
can feel the Spirit, hear the call,
and find the Life, the Way, the Truth,
revealed in Jesus, freed for all.

Christ is alive, and comes to bring
good news to this, and every age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring
with joy, with justice, love and praise.

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Editor's Note: The following interpretation of his own hymn was written by Brian Wren at the request of the Editorial Advisory Board

If I review someone else's hymn, I can suggest what it means without saddling you with my interpretation. Knowing that I am not the author, you will hopefully feel free to differ, knowing that what I say is incomplete.

Interpreting one of my own hymns carries the risk that you will limit your understanding to what I say about it. In spite of deconstruction, we still ask what the author intended. In the prestigious world of science and technology, we expect words to have one, and only one meaning, and it may be hard to accept the idea that this does not, and should not, apply to other forms of speech.

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