

Thomas E. Talley and the Context of His Hymn Texts

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Freed men and women, share croppers, domestic servants, school teachers, porters, and laborers came together to worship according to the dictates of their hearts. Some had lived to witness the end of slavery and the beginning of Reconstruction. The post-Civil War period ushered in challenging economic, social, and cultural changes for people of African descent. Reveling in their constitutional guarantee of the freedom of religious expression, a group of Christian believers predominately of African descent came together with purpose and determination. In 1886, this group organized the Holy Church of North Carolina.¹

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Holiness Movement took root in North America. Holiness as a denomination was an offshoot of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. When the Holy Church of North Carolina (HCNC) formed in the town of Method, North Carolina, its founders of various doctrinal backgrounds came together on common ground "to worship the Lord in beauty of holiness." Later, after its membership grew and congregations proliferated, the HCNC renamed itself the United Holy Church of America (UHCOA). Once known as the oldest African-American holiness church in the United States, the UHCOA embraced the tenets of Pentecost and the Pentecostal Movement during the first quarter of the twentieth century. From this exciting motif came a people who brought with them—in the main—borrowed music which they adopted.

For the overwhelming majority of newly formed holiness Pentecostal churches throughout North America during the early twentieth century, congregational song was a musical collage: primarily Methodist, Baptist, and Lutheran hymnody with gospel songs of the era. Several holiness organizations produced their own hymnody and song books. For example, the predominately African-American denomination Church of Christ Holiness, U.S.A., produced its signature hymnal, *Jesus Only*. It was developed by the founder and first presiding prelate, Bishop Charles Price Jones, who also was a hymnwriter.

Creation of New Songs

From time to time in these congregations, worshipers spontaneously developed lyrics, tunes, or complete compositions during their services. These occurrences evolved into a normal practice. The texts were seldom, if ever, written down. Often they were sung just at that moment as a part of the worship experience. Frequently the oral tradition preserved texts for posterity. An example I witnessed in the Apostolic Faith Church of God, an African-American Pentecostal denomination, went like this:

I Want to See Jesus

I want to see Jesus when I die
He saved me from ole Satan's lie
My Lord's Spirit rained on me
His salvation set us free
I want to see Jesus when I die

I want to see Jesus when I die
He saved me from ole Satan's lie
When I see God, I will shout
No more worry, no more doubt
I want to see Jesus when I die

I want to see Jesus when I die
No more sorrow, nor tears to cry
He brought me 'cross the river high
Now I'll wave the world good-bye
I want to see Jesus when I die

The refrain, "I want to see Jesus when I die," was repeated with text variations following. Multiple "refrain stanzas" became a distinctive feature of this congregational song and others like it. None of these original lyrics will be found in a hymnal.

Frequently, during the formative years of holiness Pentecostal churches, most in-house songs

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were peculiar to a certain congregational or group of congregations. Often no one within the group attempted to have the compositions penned and printed, let alone copyrighted. This tradition is alive and continues today.

Thus, creating text and composing music have not been the exclusive province of selected writers or musicians. Instead, parishioners have been encouraged to "sing from your heart; sing what's in your heart." As a result, music of early holiness Pentecostal "reformations" was a compilation of selected traditional hymnody and new denominational music. This generalization yet applies to most congregational song in the United Holy Church of America.

Thomas E. Talley, Leader and Hymnwriter

Born in Norlina, North Carolina, Thomas Edison Talley (December 31, 1915–February 21, 1996) was reared and educated in Richmond, Virginia.² He was born again spiritually in the UHCOA. During his more than 50 years of Christian ministry, Talley rose through the ranks from dedicated brother to consecrated presiding bishop of the United Holy Church of America, an intercontinental organization with hundreds of member churches throughout the United States and four other countries.

A devoted husband and father of two daughters, Talley initially supported his family by working as a porter for a railroad company. Later he worked at the Norfolk Naval Shipyard. From there, in 1973, he retired as a general foreman and supervisor, after 32 years of service.

Talley's humanitarian concerns and personal convictions moved him to civil activism. He became an active member of many organizations, including the Portsmouth Economic Development Task Force; Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce; Portsmouth Public School Board, NAACP; Kirk-Cone Rehabilitation Center; and the International Ministers Forum, which he served as president.

Nevertheless, Talley's first love was Jesus Christ and His Church. Lay members and clergy officials noted Talley's developmental early in his life. After approving his qualifications and spiritual lifestyle, the UHCOA ordained Talley. He was the pastor of two UHCOA churches in Virginia: Gospel Light, Newport News, and Twine's Memorial Holy Temple, Portsmouth.

In addition to his other interests and talents, Talley was a unique poet. During his 25-year tenure as founder and president of the Virginia District Convocation UHCOA (1969-1994) and subsequent ministry, his poetry and lyric themes focused on the family and church. Talley was most lauded for his lyric that became accepted as the Hymn of the Church about 1973. It was originally penned as the theme song for the Virginia District Convocation, but the General Convocation of the UHCOA officially adopted it by acclamation.

About 20 years later, in May 1992, as a guest during the 24th Quadrennial General Holy Convocation, I saw Talley voted into the office of president and presiding bishop. The entire text of his hymn was printed in the official program and joyously sung by the international delegation several times during the six-day event.

Hymn of the Church

(Sung to MARCHING TO ZION)

Come ye that love the Lord, and join our
holy cause,
With doctrine sound and love that's pure,
Faith in God and Heaven sure,
Pentecostal fire and birth, the United Holy
Church.

*United and holy, We are united and holy,
We are united and holy, On to the city of
God.*

If those refuse to come whose hearts have
ne'er been changed,
We'll help them to seek the Lord,
Give Him their hearts and follow His call,
We'll help them His Word to search, the
United Holy Church.

*United and holy, We are united and holy,
We are united and holy, Up on the King's
highway.*

Let us our song abound, And raise our
anthems high,
Holiness and purity,
The church of joy and liberty,
Our Father's place of peace and mirth, the
United Holy Church

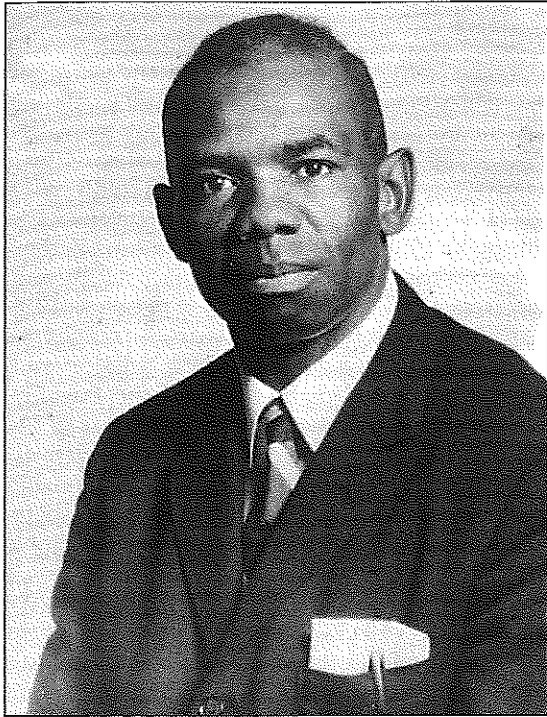
*United and holy, we are united and holy,
We are united and holy, Traveling the
sanctified way.*

Our convocation we love, We'll strive to do
our part,
With Fellowship and hand in hand
Divided we fall, together we stand,
Faith in God and our fellow man, the
United Holy Band.

*United and holy, We are united and holy,
We are united and holy, Nearing the city
of God.*

Although Robert Lowry composed the tune for "Marching to Zion" in 1867, just after the Civil War, Talley deemed the tune appropriate for his "Hymn of the Church" more than 106 years later.

Talley's texts were often written for particular occasions, sometimes after reflections upon certain events. This was very evident in his poem "Bermuda the Beautiful," written after his participation in a Holy Convocation UHCOA in Bermuda. Some of his contemplative musings of general appeal were revealed in his verses titled "If I Had Not Been Born." The scope and significance of his works generally are not widely known



Thomas E. Talley (1915–1996)

beyond the thousands of UHCOA adherents; however, there is both denominational and universal appeal in his writings. One example might be this poem, written in 1979:

A Home is Built by God³

A house is built by men of skill
With strength to do the job
A place to live, with land and till
But a home is built by God.

A house is a place where children roam
At night with stars above
A place to rest from dark til dawn
But a home is where there is love.

A house is a place to rest your hat
But strivings never cease
A dog, a cat, and this and that
But a home is where there is peace

So the house remains because it's strong
And the family must soon regard
that peace and love must be its song
For the home is built by God!

To mother and daughter God has given
this Home
To live and love and pray
Let nothing defile its virtue,
A place where God may stay!

During the 1980s, the UHCOA by consensus used the colors purple, gold, and white. With member churches in agreement, these colors were adopted by the General Convocation. Once again the pen of Thomas Talley led the delegation in congregational song.

The Flag Song⁴
(Sung to BRINGING IN THE SHEAVES)

Planting for the harvest, Soon that day shall
come,
When the Saints are gathered 'round the
great white Throne,
Children there Rejoicing with PURPLE,
GOLD AND WHITE

Purple, Gold and White
Sing with all your might
Sing it loud for Jesus,
Purple, Gold and White
Raise the standard high,
Watch the Flag go by,
Raise it high for Jesus
Purple, Gold and White

These are our colors, chosen by the
Church.
Children marching in the light, of Purple,
Gold and White.

Although his poems and hymn texts number fewer than two dozen, Talley's literary works have had a lasting impact upon their intended worldwide constituency. ■

¹Wardell J. Payne, ed., *Directory of African American Religious Bodies*. 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995), p. 187.

²"Service of Triumph," *Wakes and Final Service for Bishop Thomas Edison Talley*, February 25-27, 1996.

³*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴Beverly R. Talley. Interview. Washington, D.C., March 3, 1997.