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# Shared Meaning and Significance in Congregational Singing

Russell M. Yee

What meaning is shared when the faithful sing together? In our post-modern age, it is commonly asserted that meaning is indeterminate and relative, a private experience of each individual rather than anything objective that can be shared. I believe that this view of shared meaning is faulty and wrongly pessimistic. In its place, I would like to offer a view of shared meaning that clarifies and supports the possibility of real sharing in congregational singing.

I divide "shared meaning" into two components: 1) *meaning* (proper), the meaning intended by the author/composer and potentially re-intended by the congregation; and 2) *significance*, the import of the meaning to particular people at a particular time and place.<sup>1</sup> This distinction between meaning and significance can help bring clarity to questions of what is shared in congregational singing. I will discuss meaning and significance in relation to general texts and to congregational singing. Then I will discuss the possibilities of shared meaning and significance in contemporary praise music specifically.

## Meaning versus Significance

As I write this article, I am generating a text that can communicate my intended meaning. The success of that communication depends on the skill with which we collaborate as author and reader in our use of shared linguistic conventions. Access to my meaning requires interpretation on your part: you do the routine, subconscious work of decoding and understanding in the course of reading; you may also have to do some conscious work, such as looking up an unfamiliar word or pausing to sort out my reasoning. But if we are successful at all, then I have shared my intended meaning with you. The important thing to note is that my intended meaning is *determinate*: once I have expressed that meaning in writing it is as fixed for me as it is for you. That fixity holds even if I have other thoughts on the subject; or if you know more about the subject than I do; or if my meaning includes complexities and ambiguities; or if some of my meaning is subconscious; or if I have a dozen different reasons for writing this; or if I later change my

mind about what I have written; or if tomorrow the whole world of congregational singing changes completely. The meaning I am intending here remains.<sup>2</sup>

What does change, what is different for me than for you, what will be different tomorrow from today, what is open to an infinity of possibilities is the significance of my meaning. And this significance is what is ordinarily sought by the question, "What does it 'mean' to you?" If you are a classically trained organist fortunate enough to accompany an appreciative congregation on a worthy instrument, the significance of this article to you will be different than if you are a self-taught keyboard player who uses the latest programmable synthesizers in your church praise band. If you are in a church that is agonizing through a civil war of unreconciled musical styles, this article will have a different significance for you today than it would if you picked it up ten years from now. If I made my living as a musician, writing this article would have a different significance to me than it does writing it as a pastor. In short, significance includes the implications, imports, effects, and affects a meaning generated throughout the course of time and across the range of lives that encounter that meaning.

When Paul wrote "sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God" (Col. 3:16b), his intended meaning was that the Colossian believers should worship God through the shared singing of various types of songs. However, the significance of that meaning has changed for each generation of Christians in each locale across 20 centuries of church history, different even for each individual believer at different times and in relation to different aspects of each individual's life. Even while the basic significance of Paul's meaning persists—that believers should employ a rich variety of music in their worship—the real-life application changes, if only because the available variety of music and people's relation to that music are always changing.

Significance is like that: it is ever-changing, ever-nuanced, ever-subject to qualification and expansion. The author's intended meaning remains fixed; the significance of that meaning changes with every different question put to it.

<sup>1</sup> This distinction between meaning and significance is made by E. D. Hirsch in *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> Intended meaning is determinate regardless of genre. Poets intend to convey certain meanings just as essayists do. A poem intended to convey nature's beauty but read as conveying the futility of life is either being misread or is the product of an incompetent poet. What differs between genres is some of the linguistic conventions being used.

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## Congregational Song Versus General Text

In the case of congregational singing, this distinction between fixed, determinate meaning and infinitely variable significance also holds, though with a somewhat different general dynamic from a general prose text. I will point out three major differences between a congregational song and a general written or spoken text with respect to meaning and significance.

First, a song differs from a general text in that a song is necessarily set to music. How do melody, harmony, and performance relate to the intended meaning of a text? Music clarifies, amplifies, supports, and helps express the meaning, but it does not determine that meaning. Otherwise, the meaning of a given text could change with every different melody and arrangement it was set to. If it were possible to jam the text of "Ein' feste burg" into the melody of "In the garden," Luther's intended meaning would stand unchanged—though obscured and trivialized by an infelicitous setting. Music can help or hinder a congregation's ability to understand and express the original author's meaning, but the music cannot change that meaning.<sup>3</sup>

What the music *can* change, of course, is the significance of the text to a given congregation or individual. The first three notes of an introduction to "Ein' feste burg" can bring a flood of associations before the congregation even gets to the first words; those associations might be entirely absent if the same text were sung to a different setting. Music has a powerful effect on shaping the significance of a song, even though it cannot change the meaning of the text.

Second, a song differs from a general text in that the author of a song is not the only one who intends its meaning. The author intends a song's meaning in the act of writing it; a congregation "re-intends" that meaning in the act of singing it. The congregation stands beside the author, "re-meaning" the text as its own. It is as if one went to a bookstore for a reading by an author, but instead of the author reading solo, every patron read aloud too, enthusiastically, from his or her own dog-eared copy, affirming and expressing the author's meaning together. In the same way, the meaning of a congregational song is intended by both the original author and everyone who sings it. There may even be a sense in which the Church becomes a co-author of a text, especially an ancient and much-used text, intended and re-intended over and over through the centuries until its primary intender is the Church as a whole, along with the original author.

But does the congregation really intend what it sings? This leads to the third difference between a song and a general text. It seems to me that, very often, the immediate significance of singing often overwhelms the significance of the intended mean-

ing of a text. We are perfectly capable of singing just because we like the music, or to go along with the crowd, or to feel pious, or out of sheer habit, all without necessarily re-intending the author's meaning. As a former professor of mine once quipped, "We're always singing things we don't mean, aren't we?"

Let me set out three cases of "not meaning" (that is, not intending) what we sing. First, if we are simply singing without much noticing the words—that is, decoding the words without understanding them—then we are being inattentive, or perhaps re-intending the meaning passively, especially if it is a song we already know. Second, if we understand the meaning and want to intend it but are also resisting it (singing "Let goods and kindred go..." while struggling with covetousness), then we are being hopeful and prayerful, working to have our wills and hearts conform to the meaning of the text. Third, if we understand the meaning but willfully intend something quite different (rebelliously clutching goods and kindred for dear life), then we are simply lying, like an author writing what he or she does not believe, but knows will sell more books. I suppose these categories also overlap: we may lie inattentively, or resist both rebelliously and regretfully, and so forth—such is human nature, with all its inner conflict and messiness. Whatever the particular case is, in much congregational singing, the original author's intended meaning is not re-intended by the congregation.

And nobody pays much attention. We are usually more worried about performance: getting the singing going, on key and in time, getting the right stanzas sung, getting something going that sounds enthusiastic and engaged, keeping our jobs. It is easier for us to worry about the significance of the singing as a performance than its significance as an act of worship. We are more readily preoccupied with the significance of the singing to how people are generally feeling than we are to the significance of the singing to what they are intending. It gets to the point where it only vaguely matters to us what the text says, as long as it gets sung reasonably well. It is inertial singing, singing out of sheer habit. Only when other issues press us to pay attention, say, inclusive language or inculturation concerns, do we stop to ask whether we intend what we are singing. Otherwise, it is good enough just to get something sung, chosen because it is familiar and well-liked, or happens to fit the season or day.

So, while a song has intended meaning just like any other text, it is different in having its significance shaped by its musical setting; in being intended by an author and then re-intended by those who sing it; and in possibly being sung without being re-intended at all. With these dynamics in mind, we are now prepared to ask what is shared in congregational singing.

<sup>3</sup> I realize that in saying this I am privileging verbal meaning over other possible types, such as musical or kinesthetic meaning. I will leave it to those more qualified than I to ponder this aspect of musical/communicative theory.

## Shared Meaning and Significance

If, as I have argued, texts have the meanings their authors intend, those meanings are determinate, and those meanings can be re-intended by a congregation, then it is clearly possible for a congregation to share the meaning of a song. Ordinarily, we hope that the author has done a competent job of conveying his or her intended meaning, that we have understood it, and that we are singing it because we wish to re-intend that meaning together in our worship that day.

If meaning can be shared, can significance be shared also? Since significance is inherently indeterminate, different for every individual in every time and place, it might be tempting to say "No." And I think that is what is often meant by those who say there is no shared meaning in congregational singing: they mean that it is impossible for a given song to have the exact same significance to every individual in a group singing it. But it must be possible for all the individual significances to overlap substantially, or why would we sing together at all? Just for the convenience of enhancing our private experiences of a song? Furthermore, the overlap of those individual significances must also overlap with the enduring core significances of Christian faith and worship: that the praise of the Creator is joyful for us the created; that our faith in Christ enables us to live at peace with God; that the Holy Spirit empowers us to love and good deeds, and so forth. While our faith journeys are unique, we share these realities and themes, and are thus compelled to sing about them together. While the exact significance of a song will be different for each worshiper, that significance overlaps enough with its significance to other worshipers to make corporate worship a possibility.

Indeed, one mark of a congregation's maturity is the degree to which those individual significances overlap in the shared life of the community. My singing "A mighty fortress" may have significance not only to my general faith in God as my defender against evil, but specifically to my effort to trust God in the midst of a struggle against drug-related crime in my neighborhood. You know this about me and care about me as a fellow church member, and you share that significance and that faith with me. And so we sing together. That I can hum Bach's cantata setting of the hymn; that the hymn reminds me of a funny story about my second-grade Sunday school teacher; that singing "let goods and kindred go" makes me think of volunteering at the local homeless shelter this week—all this you probably do not know and need not know for us to substantially share the significance of singing this hymn together. So, while significance can probably never be shared to the same degree meaning can, it can and must be substantially shared if our congregational singing is to be anything other than an individualistic exercise in private devotion.

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## Contemporary Christian Praise Music

It's Sunday morning. The faithful have gathered for worship. Before them emerges the "worship team," consisting of a "praise band" (soft-rock combo), several back-up vocalists, and a "worship leader," all volunteers who make this their ministry at the church. The worship leader takes a microphone and says, "Let's begin our worship this morning with a song of praise." The lyrics to Jack Hayford's "Majesty" are projected onto a large screen. The band strikes up.

After two or three times through "Majesty," including an expansive repeat of the ending line, the worship leader guides the congregation through the rest of the set, anywhere from half a dozen to a dozen songs and choruses, either segued or tied together by brief readings from Scripture, some devotional patter, or a prayer. Most of the congregation stands for the full 15 to 30 minutes the set lasts. There is some clapping and a smattering of hands lifted up, sometimes with eyes closed and bodies swaying gently. Since the next portion of the service, a prayer time led by the pastor, will include some tragic news—a death in the church family, and the worsening condition of a church elder who is in the hospital—the worship leader has chosen to end the set "down," with quiet songs, perhaps Karen Lafferty's "Seek ye first" and Martin Nystrom's "As the deer."

At the end of the service, after the sermon, the worship team returns to lead the congregation through the closing set, consisting of two or three songs chosen to complement the theme of the sermon. There is a closing prayer, the faithful make their way out to their Christian education classes, and the worship team members make arrangements for their next rehearsal later that week.

Welcome to the world of contemporary Christian praise music.<sup>4</sup> It is a large and growing world. More and more churches are becoming more invested in the praise-music genre, signaling a shift away from traditional hymnody and its organ/piano accompaniment. It may also become an irreversible shift in some quarters, as congregations build worship spaces with room for a praise band and built-in screens for lyric projection, but with no organ at all—nor any desire for one, except perhaps as a push-button voice on the MIDI synthesizer; and sometimes no hymnal or even a place to put one.

## Praise Music: Bane or Blessing?

To those heavily invested in traditional hymnody, with its centuries of achievement and unquestioned depth, refinement, and grandeur, the proliferation of praise music may simply be one more sign that our culture in general and church music in particular have gone to the dogs. Praise music, so it goes, belongs with sitcoms, video games, and shopping malls in the "junk food" category of our

\* "Contemporary Christian music" is usually used for album-oriented, professionally performed folk/rock music, though it may also include praise music. "Praise music" is usually used for folk/rock music suitable for congregational singing, some of which originated on CCM albums. There is also a large body of professionally recorded praise music, such as the 15+ album series of "Maranatha! Praise" music originating from Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, a megachurch born in the Jesus People movement. In a newer development, such recordings are often presented as "live worship" sessions, with a studio choir, band, and worship leader. Examples include the 64+ album series by Integrity's "Hosanna!" music, and the 12+ album "Song of the Vineyard" and 21+ album "Live Worship" series from the Anaheim-based Vineyard Ministries International. Much praise music is disseminated and learned as such albums are bought, shared, played on Christian radio stations and sung-along to. There are also software packages such as CCLI's "Song Select," and a World Wide Web site (<http://www.grmi.org/ministry/worship>) to help with song selection and printing.

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cultural diet. Adolescent rhythms and melodies, narrowness of themes and shallowness of treatments, a maddening tolerance for musical hack work and lyrical doggerel—all these are undeniably widespread on the praise music scene. Our culture is addicted to the kind of transient entertainment value and quick gratification that praise music does share, at least in part, with the Top 40 playlist. That some of the success of praise music has come at the expense of more nourishing and enduring genres is a cause for discouragement and regret.

And yet, there is an undeniable vitality in the world of praise music. In communities with few, if any, fully qualified organists serving the local churches, the band members and vocalists that lead praise music are often standing in line for opportunities to take part. Whatever its long-term prospects, praise music is currently providing a workable idiom for the musical worship life of a large number of churches. It is attracting and focusing a huge amount of devotion and sheer energy towards the support and improvement of congregational singing—surely a worthwhile effort, regardless of the shortcomings of the genre and repertoire.

Praise music shares its vitality with some of its direct antecedents, especially the gospel choruses of the revivalists, the folk/rock music of the Jesus People movement in the '60s and '70s, and the celebration music of renewal movements in the mainline denominations. Praise music also has many commonalities with African-American gospel music, such as the use of extended singing, indeterminacy in repetition, chorus or verse-and-chorus structure, kinesthetic involvement, and freedom to improvise.

Perhaps praise music is viewed as particularly threatening in some quarters because it is flourishing precisely where standard hymnody was most recently the staple: middle-class, largely Anglo, largely suburban congregations. Praise music has become the "ethnic" music of mainstream church culture. And in so doing, it has become the musical staple of congregations that have fading or no memories of singing anything else.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier I argued that texts have the meanings their authors intend, that those meanings are determinate, and that those meanings can be shared and re-intended by a congregation as an act of worship. I also argued that significance, though indeterminate by nature and different for every individual in every time and place, can also overlap enough so that singing together is a genuinely shared experience. How does this apply to praise music?

## Meaning and Significance in Praise Music

In the case of praise music, this process of intending and re-intending is no different from that of standard hymnody or any other genre of congregational song. The difference between praise music and hymns, at the level of meaning, has to do with the range, quality, and quantity of the meanings being intended. When praise music is criticized for being shallow, it is probably because praise songs often have very short texts; because the meanings of those texts are too often circumscribed to the point of becoming trivial; and because the range of prominent themes in praise music is fairly narrow, focusing on God's triumphal reign, Jesus's tender love, and our own act of worship. In other words, there just is not enough being meant. It remains to be seen whether praise music will mature into a more adequate expression of the full range of meanings central to Christianity. Meanwhile, it must be remembered that praise songs are not sung individually, once through each in the course of a service, as hymns are. If they were, they would indeed be unbearably shallow. Rather, they are sung in sets, often interspersed with Scripture, prayer, and comments. The intended meanings of these various elements combine like the several stanzas of a hymn. And those meanings can be shared by the congregation as it worships.

Earlier I noted that a song's music clarifies, amplifies, supports, and helps express the meaning of the song's text, but does not determine that meaning. I will now qualify that statement by suggesting that not all meanings can be equally well expressed by all different genres of music. One could not sing texts with complex, lengthy meanings to music that is characteristically brief and repetitive, at least not in a way that would help communicate those meanings well. Similarly, one could not sing texts with meanings involving spontaneous excitement to music that is slow and regular.

Part of the debate over the suitability of praise music for worship is about whether the folk/rock genre can clarify, amplify, support, and help express enough of the various core meanings that make up Christian worship. Can we sing well about God's constancy to music that is heavily syncopated? About God's grandeur to music that is taken from the current pop style? Yet, in the same vein, can we sing well about God's fresh grace and surprising joys to music that is centuries old? About the tension in God's creation and the revolutionary nature of the Gospel to music that is predictable and resolved? Various musical genres and settings may limit our ability to express a given meaning and to share that meaning.

Can praise music engender a range of shared, overlapping significances adequate to sustain a worshipping community? Some would argue that

<sup>5</sup> For an extended history of Gospel music including Contemporary Christian Music, see Don Cusic, *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel Music*, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990). For a musical history and analysis of popular music, see Peter Van Der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style: the Antecedents of Twentieth-Century Popular Music*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

praise music's folk/rock style, with all its associations to secular pop music, youth-oriented culture, and commodified entertainment, dooms its significance to a sub-Christian level.<sup>6</sup> It is unredeemably shallow, addicted to novelty, and immediately self-gratifying. It signals a rejection of the Church's heritage and an uncritical embrace of the worst of secular culture. Praise music is seen as a symptom of prolonged adolescence inimical to a life of spiritual maturity.

And yet, for others, the folk/rock style has a positive significance based on its vitality, freshness, intimacy, and a connectedness with this generation's culture.<sup>7</sup> It signals a commitment to make singing accessible and relevant, a raising of the energy and involvement level in celebration, and an encouragement of creativity and freshness in worship. Praise music is seen as a move away from forms of worship that had become too disconnected and distant from everyday life, and a move towards forms that speak to this (un-churched) generation and enable it to speak to God.

Perhaps this interpretation is partly the result of this generation's narcissism, that we are so concerned to find our voice rather than being content with the voice of our ancestors. But for too many, impenetrable hymns groaned from yellowed pages accompanied by fuzzy electric organs have simply spoiled that genre and made an alternative like praise music more positively significant. (How much hymn-singing is stupefying, sentimentalized, and ultimately sub-Christian?)

Thus, detractors and proponents of praise music disagree because the significance of the genre to them is unshared rather than overlapping and shared. And thus they cannot agree on whether the genre is appropriate for worship.

I assume that every musical genre is capable of supporting at least some of the meanings we wish to intend as Christians and of engendering some of the overlapping significances we want to share in worship. I am thankful that standard hymnody is a time-tested and time-honored way of supporting those meanings and fostering those significances. I remain hopeful that if praise music is developed skillfully, thoughtfully, and with musical integrity, it may too be an enduring and worthy genre of congregational song. Whether that happens—whether the significance of praise music to the church's history is ultimately positive—remains to be seen.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, see Calvin M. Johansson, *Music & Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint*, (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984), pp. 55-60.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Graham Cray, "Justice, Rock and the Renewal of Worship," *In Spirit and in Truth: Exploring Directions in Music in Worship Today*, ed. Robin Sheldon, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), pp. 1-28; more generally, as "functional" rather than "art" music in Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate! Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing Co., 1981); and, more ambivalently, in Quentin J. Schultze, et. al., *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), ch. 6.