

God talk and congregational song: An interview with Brian Wren: A hymn writer's convictions

Cover Story in the [May 3, 2000](#) issue

*Brian Wren is an internationally known hymn writer. After completing his doctoral work at Oxford University, he was a pastor in the United Reformed Church of Great Britain and then a consultant on world poverty. Living in recent years in the U.S., he has led workshops and taught courses on worship, hymnody, and gender issues. In the fall he will join the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. We spoke to him recently about church conflicts over worship forms and musical styles, and about his own theological and musical convictions.*

**On one side of today's "worship wars" are people who like very traditional forms of hymnody. On the other side are people who want a form of worship that reflects contemporary culture. Where does your work fit into all this?**

When I first went to church, when I was about 15, I found myself in a hymn-singing tradition. When I began to write hymns in the 1960s it was natural for me to follow that tradition. I think that a congregational song, or a hymn—which is a lyric that develops a theme or tells a story which unfolds over more than two or three stanzas—can be in any kind of musical style. I would love to have the opportunity to use multimedia to revitalize traditional hymnody. I'm quite hospitable to using a variety of musical styles. I just haven't had lots of opportunities to work with them, since people usually ask me to do traditional hymns.

The songs that my wife, Susan, and I write together have a kind of gospel-folk style, a much more informal style. And sometimes I get the opportunity to do a lyric that breaks out of traditional boundaries. I work with several composers who will move into something more rhythmic or jazzy musically if I ask them to and they want to.

**So you would be happy to write hymns for people who want more popular forms of worship?**

I think that mainstream churches should give a critical welcome to popular styles of music. I don't think that music can be divided into the sacred and the secular. There

is simply music. When people speak of good contemporary music, they're thinking of music with a very strong beat, a strong rhythmic note. It's the music many of them grew up with. I think it's reasonable, good and right to be hospitable to it.

One kind of contemporary liturgy is the call-and-response form that comes from post-Vatican II Roman Catholic churches. It's musically eclectic, and it's easy singing rather than harmonically rich. Primarily it appeals to people over 30 and under 50—to baby boomers. The people over 50 say, "This is terrible, trite stuff" and the people under 30 call it "granddad music." There are also musical styles that appeal to a younger age group, though they aren't yet widely commercially published.

Almost all the churches I write hymns for are wrestling with the issue of styles of music and worship. I have a great admiration for classically trained musicians, and there are many fine musicians and composers in our churches. Some of them were taught to disparage popular music. Not many places teach the skills involved in popular music, which requires improvisation and the ability to work with instruments other than the pipe organ and piano. To look down on popular music is a class-based prejudice which we need to unlearn. My ideal church musician is a person who can play a Bach prelude or a Messiaen piece and then turn to something more popular, like a praise chorus.

I happen to be color blind, but I know there are people with excellent color perception who see color in more complex ways than I do. In a similar way, there are people who are better able than the rest of us to appreciate complex melody and harmony. To someone who is trained in music, who is able to appreciate the richness of classical music, whether ancient or modern, popular music sounds trite. It's not that they decide to consider it trite; they hear it that way. But if some people look at New England's fall colors and see 16 more shades than I do, that doesn't mean they have the right to tell me what I should be seeing or that their perceptions are morally superior to mine. Nor does it mean that I see the world in monochrome. It's the same with music.

**At some of the "seeker" churches, the congregation is an audience and the musicians are performers on stage. What do you think of that kind of worship, as opposed to congregational singing?**

I do believe that the songs people sing together, whatever their style, are a vehicle for their encounter with the divine. In most traditions, singing is a basic part of

Christian worship, at its best if it's seen as self-expression rather than as a performance. People with all kinds of voices can sing hymns. It shouldn't matter whether they have trained or untrained voices, nice or off-key voices. In that sense, worship should be inclusive. Some people say, "I love to sing even though I know I'm not always on key." And if you sat next to them you'd know it was true. But they need to express their faith and to be part of a congregation through singing.

There's a social and theological value in common song that's been recognized since the earliest days of the church. People agree not to be soloists, not to compete with each other, not to outperform each other but simply to be together in the song. It's a way of saying that we belong together in Christ. I will not try to sing louder than you. I will blend my voice with yours.

Of course, you have to have a song leader who knows how to encourage people to sing. I did the pilgrimage to Willow Creek a year or two ago. During the seeker service there everyone is invited to join in one song. It was the most lamentable failure. Hardly anybody sang because the people up in front didn't know how to lead songs—they were performers. There is an art to bringing people into a song, to enabling them to join in.

Singing is also a very bodily experience. You can't sing with just your head. When I first began going to worship services, singing was the only active thing the congregation did at worship other than pass the collection plate. Singing is a very corporeal experience. If you sing with full voice, with everything you've got, the diaphragm draws in, the rib cage expands and air is expelled through the larynx. It's possible to sing without believing a word of it, but if you do believe in what you're singing, then body, mind and spirit come together.

When I was part of the peace movement in Britain during the '80s, singing together was an absolutely basic part of nonviolent direct action. Without it you couldn't sustain your commitment to the movement. We sang simple songs that we could memorize. We didn't have books, so we were kind of back with the oral tradition. Singing was a way of binding ourselves together into a common identity and of keeping ourselves in a peaceable frame of mind. In times of great crisis or great rejoicing, sometimes the only thing you can do is sing.

**What do you mean when you recommend the critical appropriation of certain musical forms in the church? Are you talking about rhythm, or**

## **about themes and cognitive issues, or both? Can even styles like rap be used by the church?**

Yes, I know churches that use rap. When you do a hymn in rap, you simply emphasize its spoken rhythms: “Praise **God** from **whom** all **blessings** flow,” for example. The rhythm is already there in the poetic structure. When you rap a metrical form, you get a more emphatic rhythm than you would in speech or in simple song.

It’s my impression that most popular music—including rap—is meant for solo singing, for performance. My stepson follows the rock band Phish. It’s concerts are multimedia events. People sing along to all the songs—it’s a very important bonding experience. But the songs aren’t designed for group singing. You sing along only if you know them well, if you really follow the band. If you try to turn some of these kinds of popular music into congregational song, you have to modify them musically. There are certain things—like not having too many strange leaps and changes of pitch, or like using a certain amount of repetition in the melody—that make a song easy to sing. But any musical style, if it’s shaped right, can be arranged for congregational use.

## **Could you say more about how your own work might fit into seeker services and contemporary worship services?**

I haven’t had the opportunity to work with churches that have such services. I would love to be able to work with a really good group of rock musicians. I think I could probably improve on the lyrics of many of those groups. In principle, methods of writing a congregational song lyric do not differ radically between hymns and other forms of song. There are certain constraints in writing a hymn that might not be present in other forms, but you still have the same challenge of writing something that’s clear, colorful, sharp and imaginative, and that makes the most of metaphors.

## **As a hymn writer, you are probably best known for your use of inclusive language and emphasis on social justice.**

I try to cover the whole spectrum of Christian theology, of which social justice is certainly an important part. I try to write lyrics that a Christian congregation will want to sing. I want to use what I write as worship, and I have a continuing interest in how God is spoken to and of in worship. I don’t use the masculine pronoun or words that have been worked to death. I don’t use divine kingship or lordship

language because that's out of tune with what I believe and with the world we live in. The use of that language is one of the concerns I have with a lot of so-called praise and worship songs.

### **What is it about lordship and kingship language that's problematic?**

Divine kingship was once a meaningful political symbol because most governments were monarchies. It made sense to speak of God as king or monarch (it was, of course, always as a male monarch). People understood it to mean, for one thing, that since God is king you'd better obey God's earthly representative, the church.

Nowadays the kingship of God is not a meaningful symbol. In our conception of the universe, there is nowhere for a divine king to sit. It's not possible to speak meaningfully about divine monarchy in the context of our understanding of an expanding space-time continuum. It has no meaning in terms of the kind of political system most of us inhabit or aspire to inhabit. In a democracy the metaphor of God as king gives us no clue as to how to vote, how to live, how to be a citizen. Those who use such language doom themselves to thinking of God as influential only in their personal lives or in the life of the church. Though still colorful, this language doesn't resonate except at a very privatized level.

### **Are there elements of what that language tries to grasp about God that you would want to retain?**

I don't think there are widely accepted ways of speaking of God that reinterpret the notion of divine rule. William Everett has tried to use "president" as a metaphor for God's rule (in *God's Federal Republic: Reconstructing Our Governing Symbol*), but I don't think it works. The verb *to preside* might do it, but the noun is much too tied up with the ambiguous reactions people have to presidency. Still, Everett was right to try to forge new symbols. And Douglas Meeks has talked about God as "the economist."

Somehow our culture has not yielded symbols that speak of sovereignty and leadership in a way that's widely accepted. In the interim, probably the best way to think of God's relationship with the world is in terms of Christ's crucifixion by the powers of the world and his triumph over them through the resurrection. That way of thinking is less liable to cause us to admire the world's power structures. It's an old language, but it has found new life recently. I'm impressed with Walter Wink's very coherent critique of the powers of the world, the powers that be. In my recent

writing, that's the line of thought I've been following.

**In moving away from terms like *king* and *monarch*, what happens to the God who inspires awe—the terrible god, the fearful God?**

There's a well-known praise chorus that goes, "Our God is an awesome God/ He reigns in heaven above." That image comes from Deuteronomy, in which the context implies that God is awesome because God is impartial and does justice to the orphan and the widow. The idea of God's awesomeness isn't of some general, mindless, Arnold Swartzenegger kind of power. It's particular and historic, and it refers to the way in which God defends the defenseless. The burning bush is never simply something that makes you fall down in wonder. It sets people free, it liberates the oppressed.

Those categories of awesomeness and holiness are also found in the experience of deep personal relationships. There's something awesome about knowing somebody well. And there's a sense in which God, the divine spirit, is awesomely intimate.

**Would you say that your hymns tend to speak collectively of the church as a group of people rather than focus on the "I," the first-person pronoun?**

Sometimes it's necessary to use first person, but I prefer using it in the sense of "I in common with you" rather than "I as different from you," or "I as having a unique experience with God or Jesus." Most of the psalms are written from the first-person-singular point of view. We sometimes have to say "I" rather than "we" in order to feel really committed to something. "We'll praise our maker while we have breath" doesn't have the same impact as "I'll praise my maker . . ."

The personal is valid if the focus is more on God or Christ than on me, the speaker or singer. I have a spoof chorus which kind of satirizes the focus on the isolated self. It goes, "I'm thinking of me praising Jesus and loving the feelings I feel when I think of his touch that I'm feeling so much that tomorrow I'll praise him for real."

**Is one difference between your hymns and popular praise hymns the degree of personal emphasis? Do you think that our culture is too preoccupied with the personal?**

I'm not against the appeal to personal experience, but I think we're in danger of going too far in that direction. Many people hunger for some sense of personal

contact with the divine, a contact that involves the heart as well as the head. That is entirely valid, although it's unwise to be too confident that what you feel is the divine. But the negative side to this search is that it can become a preoccupation with "my own journey, my own feelings," as if they were unique and quite separate from everybody else's. That preoccupation encourages simply a private view of life, a private view of the world.

A lot of Christian worship is too inward-turned, too nostalgic or escapist. That inwardness can mean that we focus only on ourselves and on our immediate community. We'll do some missions and we'll do some giving, but we won't really think about the wider society in which we live and the systems of which we're a part. The language that people use in worship partially correlates with the degree to which they're insular. But that correlation isn't complete or direct. Some congregations with extremely conservative liturgies are socially involved.

### **Do you find that your work is accepted and used more in some churches than in others?**

There's a core of things I've written that have been published widely across the congregational spectrum. Other things are more likely to be used by one kind of church than another—not necessarily along confessional lines but in terms of what the church sees itself as being. Some of my hymns would be more likely to be used by socially active, involved churches.

I'm very fortunate that I've had the freedom to write over a period of time, and that people have used what I've written and found it acceptable. That means that sometimes I have been able to push the boundaries a bit. I don't write about social justice or about ecology or about whatever. What I see myself as doing is writing a lyric that a group of people living in a certain kind of world might sing in the presence of God.

If I try to write something that is "about" a particular thing, it will show. Some of the hymns written during the temperance movement haven't survived because they were saturated with the issue rather than with worship. "Goodbye old booze, goodbye" is the kind of thing you get when you focus too closely on issues. I may have written things that sound like that, but I try not to. An example of what I write is a recent hymn that begins "In Christ we live, whose life was more/than teaching love and doing good." That's a statement of faith. It's not "about" anything. It's

written from the perspective of being in Christ.

I got the idea for what I consider the crucial lines in that hymn, “In Christ we vow to serve the weak/and lobby for the dispossessed./And if we find out how and when/to show that they are not alone,/we will not proudly be their voice,/but humbly help them find their own,” from a group of people whom I taught in a Writing for Worship course at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. I hope the hymn will help the people who sing it to be a little more clear about what they’re doing or not doing. I try to find language that will help people see their own journey.

**Some of the social gospel hymns have survived—for example, Harry Emerson Fosdick’s “God of Grace and God of Glory.”**

The genius of that hymn is that its images are so apt. The line “a wanton, selfish gladness/ rich in things and poor in soul” is even more meaningful today than it was when it was written. It holds up a mirror to our own society. Though in some ways the language is dated, the thought makes it possible still to sing it. That’s the kind of longevity I hope my hymns will have.