

The First Step: A Response to Dr. Steele's Feast *AND* Famine

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Sociologist Dean M. Kelley was the first scholar to document a church growth phenomenon many of us had long believed to be true– the specific doctrines taught by a church have a direct correlation on the growth of that church.¹ As an institution that strives to impact and produce healthy churches, the question of proper doctrine is, and should be, of monumental importance to us. Indeed, doctrinal integrity is one of our five core values and this lecture today represents a tangible expression of its importance to this confessional institution.

In my humble opinion, improper doctrine is, in most cases, only found in three areas of the church; the preaching ministry, the teaching ministry, and the music ministry. While the doctrinal soundness of preaching and teaching is a subject which warrants our discussion, the confines of this particular lecture force us to forego that tempting dialogue and focus our attention instead on the last area mentioned above– the music ministry.

I would like to begin by commending Dr. Steele's wisdom in identifying the most significant component amidst the many debated issues concerning worship, that being the doctrines expressed by our songs. Discussions of modern church music too often yield to the temptation to focus on the form and method of delivery– guitar and drums vs. organ, video

¹Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row), 1972.

screens vs. hymnal, or traditional vs. contemporary style. The only issue of spiritual significance for the church is the content that is being delivered, not the means used to deliver it. A doctrinally correct sermon delivered while standing atop the pulpit is still a doctrinally correct sermon. Likewise, a doctrinally anemic song is anemic with or without organ accompaniment. I applaud Dr. Steele for avoiding the land mines surrounding the insignificant issues, and taking us directly to the heart of the matter– the doctrine expressed by our songs.²

²Before approaching the specifics of Dr. Steele’s paper, I would be remiss as a student of Baptist history if I did not first note that there was a time when this discussion would be out of place within the Baptist church. Indeed, a golden age does exist in our past (the seventeenth century to be exact) when Baptists did not fight or struggle with what type of song to sing, for our ancient Baptist forefathers did not allow singing in church. This refusal to incorporate singing in Baptist churches emerged out of the practical concerns related to maintaining the secrecy of Baptist meeting places, as such conventicles were illegal in England until 1689. In addition, our Baptist forefathers expressed doctrinal concerns related to allowing females in the congregation to sing (for Paul’s command to Timothy clearly states that “women are to remain silent in church”). It was only through Benjamin Keach and John Bunyan’s strategy of introducing singing to children and then waiting for those children to mature into adulthood that Baptist churches began to practice congregational singing. Thus your church today would be firmly planted in ancient Baptist tradition if it were to do away with singing altogether and thus avoid this current controversy.

Dr. Steele has presented us with a paper in which he seeks to evaluate the theological content of choruses and hymns by comparing two printed collections of choruses to the 1991 *Baptist Hymnal*.³ He accomplishes his basic goal of surveying the doctrinal topics addressed in the three collections by comparing the topical indices of the collections. While Dr. Steele should be commended for accomplishing his task, I feel that perhaps he has left us with more questions than he has answered and has only begun a process which can and should be further developed. In other words, I see Dr. Steele's contribution presented to us today as just the first step of a venture which will need to be followed by successive steps if we are to find substantive answers to the questions that have been raised. I would therefore like to commit my time to illustrating one area within Dr. Steele's work which might be examined and discussed in order to more completely address this problem in his subsequent studies: methodology.

Let me begin by noting that several of these methodological points were mentioned by Dr. Steele himself, yet their presence did not deter him from pursuing his task. While I appreciate Dr. Steele's work and the significance of the questions he has raised, I personally fear that these methodological limitations collectively serve to weaken his project as it is currently configured. Thus my analysis is intended to be constructive and helpful to Dr. Steele such that his continued work in this area may be greatly improved. The methodological issues themselves are:

³For the simple purpose of clarity and consistency, I will refer to all choruses, praise and worship songs, and/or contemporary songs as choruses.

First, Dr. Steele made use of the topical indices of the three collections in order to make his comparisons and so analyze the theological content of the collections. As Dr. Steele noted, the indices which were used as the primary means of comparison were constructed by the various editors at the different agencies responsible for the publication of the works studied. Thus each group of editors independently determined which doctrinal topics a various song addressed— making the process of doctrinal classification a thoroughly subjective enterprise in which no standardized criteria were used to group songs into specific topical categories. For example, the popular song *Majesty* by Jack Hayford appears in all three collections compared by Dr. Steele.⁴ The 1991 *Baptist Hymnal* lists the song under the topic of “Praise and Adoration- Jesus Christ,”⁵ the Maranatha collection lists it under the topic of “Lordship of Christ,”⁶ and the Word (*Songs for Praise and Worship*) series lists it under the topic of “Christ-Lordship and Reign.”⁷ While these three categories may be similar, their differences still illustrate the lack of

⁴The fact that the three collections do share common songs ought not to be overlooked and considered when comparing the content of the three.

⁵This doctrinal topical is the only listing of the song in the *Baptist Hymnal* of 1991.

⁶The song is also listed under the topics “Majesty of God” and “Wonder and Awe.”

⁷The song is also listed under the topics “Adoration and Praise” and “Celebration.” The differences in these two categories and the additional categories referenced in footnote 4 illustrate the subjective nature of the classification process and foreshadow difficulties related to proper comparison, which will be discussed in the next section of this work.

a universally accepted criteria for topically classifying songs and therefore may distort efforts to compare the three collections.

Second, in addition to lacking a standard criteria, the various collections often classify a song in more than one category. An example of this practice can be seen by examining the song *Majesty* referenced above. The Baptist Hymnal classifies it in only one category while both the Maranatha collection and Word series each list the song in 3 different categories (see footnotes 6 and 7). The editors' practice of placing a song in multiple categories skews the overall breadth of the collection because a single song may be counted in multiple topical categories in one volume while the same song is placed in a single category by a different volume. In other words, the topical indices are twisting the true breadth of the collection by listing individual songs multiple times. This practice (carried out by the editors) has inadvertently caused distortions in Dr. Steele's numbers (represented in his appendix). For example, in his paper Dr. Steele notes that the Word series makes use of three separate categories for songs that speak of the church (Church: Fellowship of Believers, Church: Nature and Foundation, and Kingdom of God: see also Church: Nature and Foundation).⁸ Dr. Steele combined these three categories, since they all three corresponded to the hymnal's topic of "Church" (so as to compare the Word series with the Hymnal's emphasis of the doctrine of "Church"). Once combined, he determined that the

⁸ Ed Steele, *Feast AND Famine: Doctrinal Topics Addressed in Published Collections of Contemporary Choruses*, 8.

Word series has 27 songs (7% of the collection) which address the doctrine of the church.⁹ However, several songs, such as *Because We Believe*, *Shout to the North*, and *Rise Up and Praise Him*, were listed in more than one of the categories which Dr. Steele combined.¹⁰ Thus the Word series actually contains 22 individual songs which deal with the church (in the opinion of the editors). Likewise, Dr. Steele combined the four topics related to praise (Praise--see also Adoration and Praise, Adoration and Praise— Jesus our Savior, Joy, and Thankfulness) to demonstrate that the Word series emphasizes Praise in 195 songs, or 53% of the collection.¹¹ However, when duplicate songs such as, *Shout to the Lord*, *Shout to the North*, *We Will Worship the Lamb of Glory*, and *Once Again*, are removed the number of individual songs addressing praise (as categorized by the editors) is closer to 135 songs, or 37% of the collection.¹² These

⁹Ibid., 22.

¹⁰A further illustration of this problem may be seen by examining the multiple classification of these particular songs; *Because We Believe* is listed under 15 different doctrinal categories, *Shout to the North* is listed under 18 different doctrinal categories, *Rise Up and Praise Him* is listed under 12 different doctrinal categories.

¹¹Ibid., 9.

¹²Of the songs referenced, *Shout to the Lord* is listed under 15 different doctrinal categories, *Shout to the North* is listed under 18 different doctrinal categories, *We Will Worship the Lamb of Glory* is listed under 10 different doctrinal categories, and *Once Again* is listed under 21 different doctrinal categories.

examples demonstrate that the appendix, which provides the basis for Dr. Steele's analysis, may contain significant distortions because the editors have listed songs in multiple topical categories which have then been combined by Dr. Steele.¹³

In all fairness, it must be pointed out that the hymnal is not immune to this same practice. In the *Baptist Hymnal*, songs such as *Amazing Grace* (Hymn #330), *At the Cross* (Hymn #136), *Jesus, Lover of My Soul* (Hymn #180), *God, Our Father, You Have Led Us* (Hymn #454), and *Believers All, We Bear the Name* (Hymn #339) are all listed in eight different topical categories. While these songs vary in their popularity and usage, yet they would seem to be deemed by the editors of the hymnal to be some of the most doctrinally heavy hymns, as they address 8 different doctrinal topics. From a differing perspective, the well known songs *We're Marching to Zion* (Hymn #524) and *When We Walk With the Lord* (Hymn #447) are each only listed in one topical category. Does this mean these songs are theologically inferior to the former list of hymns?

Third, this issue demonstrates another potential difficulty, to which Dr. Steele alludes, that being actual song usage. A collection of songs which is perfectly balanced in terms of its doctrinal emphases must be used in a balanced way, otherwise some doctrinal areas will be neglected while others will be overemphasized. All of the collections studied by Dr. Steele contain both songs which are seldom, if ever, actually used in church and songs which are sung on (what seems to be) a weekly basis. Hence, a study of the songbooks themselves may not be

¹³The Maranatha collection engages in the same practice, although not as vociferously, as songs such as *Change My Heart O God*, *Jesus, You Are My Life*, and *I Come to the Cross* are all listed in 6 different topical categories.

giving us an accurate picture of the doctrines which are actually being communicated in the church through music. In order to answer correctly that question, an entirely different study centering on song usage, rather than printed collections, would seem to be in order.

Fourth, the indices are not organized according to categories that are traditionally accepted by systematic theologians. A deeper study of this topic might be done by placing the songs within broader theological categories such as God, Salvation, Man, Worship, etc. However, to accomplish this monumental task, one would either have to begin the process by re-classifying each song using a standard criteria which limits song placement to just one traditionally accepted category or use the current topical indices to group the complementary categories together to better reflect the broad categories of the systematic theologian, being careful to exclude duplicate listings so as to count individual songs only once.

My fifth and final methodological concern relates to a fundamental assumption made by comparing hymns and choruses without considering the differences related to their genres. I would like to pose the question, with the hope of hearing your thoughts and reflections, are hymns and chorus part of the same genre with the same purpose and intent? By comparing the doctrines of the two, we have assumed that the two groups of songs are essentially the same. How appropriate is it to compare choruses and hymns? Is the comparison of hymns and choruses a comparison of apples and apples or apples and oranges? While noting some structural differences, Dr. Steele primarily delineates the two groups on the basis of time— songs written before 1991 are in the hymn collection while songs written after 1991 are in the

contemporary collections.¹⁴ There is no denying that in practice we have used choruses in the same way that we used hymns. In fact, many of our churches have merely substituted hymns with choruses. Because we have used them in the same way, have we assumed that choruses serve the same purpose that hymns do? If so, is such an assumption warranted?

While I readily admit that I am not an expert in either hymnology or chorusology (yes, I did make that word up), I have to consider if a study of church music must not first begin by defining and distinguishing the two genres or by demonstrating that the two styles are expressions of the same genre. Rather than designate choruses which elevate “personal experience” as gnostic and expressions of heretical thought, consideration ought to be given to the differences between these songs and hymns.¹⁵ My personal hypothesis (and at this time I have absolutely no research to document this thought) leads me to believe that perhaps hymns and choruses are two distinct genre—hymns tending to engender worship through theological exposition¹⁶ and choruses tending to engender worship by expressing an existential encounter

¹⁴Ibid., 5. It must be noted that several songs are listed in both the hymnal and one (or both) of the contemporary collections.

¹⁵Ibid., 17.

¹⁶By “theological exposition” I mean that hymns illustrate why God is worthy of praise and worship and/or relate exactly what God has done for us redemptively. They evoke praise of God by relating all that God has done which is worthy of praise— a pattern which was first established by the Bible itself. Another way to express this thought is to say that this genre

with God.¹⁷ We would all benefit greatly from a future study that might definitively address this question for us.

If my theory is correct that hymns and choruses are distinct genres with significant differences, then the theological content which they will address is going to differ markedly. Furthermore, the endeavor to compare choruses and hymns may be demonstrated to be fundamentally flawed. Interestingly, the current practice of “blending” the worship experience by singing both hymns and choruses might be validated as a means to obtain both theological exposition and existential encounter with God. If my hypothesis is incorrect and choruses and hymns are demonstrated to be identical in purpose and aims, then I hope that I have at least given some helpful methodological suggestions and have illuminated points which can serve as a starting point for our conversation.

Lastly, I would affirm that the particular theology of all songs, hymns and choruses alike, should be evaluated on an individual basis. Usage or popularity should not serve as the basis for

engenders worship passively—hymns relate theological truths about God to which we respond in worship.

¹⁷By “existential encounter with God” I mean that choruses tend to be intensely personal reflections and expressions of our experiences with God. The instruction in theology is secondary to spiritually encountering God through the worship experience—hence the emphasis on worship itself and the use of familiar, intimate language in reference to God, which is typical of choruses.

accepting a given song into our liturgy. Our songs should all reflect an orthodox theology derived from a proper use and interpretation of scripture, be they hymns or choruses.

Dr. Steele has presented us with vitally important questions which demand both our attention and definitive answers. It is my hope that he, or others, may continue the work he has initiated because indeed, the health of any church is affected by the doctrine found within its preaching, teaching, and music. I thinking it is fitting to suggest that the work Dr. Steele has presented us with is just the tip of the ice-berg and there is much study left to be done to determine its entirety. It is my sincere hope that our efforts to wrestle with the questions raised by Dr. Steele will produce in us and the church the ability truly to worship God “in spirit and in truth” through our music.