

Both Evangelical and Progressive Christians Called to Rethink Conversion

The Wired Word for the Week of July 31, 2022

In the News

Though evangelical Christians are more likely to talk about conversion than are progressive Christians, the latter shouldn't give up on conversion, declares an article this month in *The Christian Century*, a progressive Christian publication.

The writer, Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, articulates some reasons why many mainline churches speak of conversion little or not at all, including the assertion that "conversion is all about the airport and silent about the trip," and the claim that a demand that one must be converted to enter the Christian faith is manipulation by those who wield religion as power.

But Wells goes on to point out that "Christianity is a priceless blessing and a profound good," that can heal the wounds of our past, dismantle our anxiety about the future and enable us in the present to love others. "This isn't the thoughtless imposition of an imperialistic agenda," said Wells, "it's the humble sharing of deep truth" Thus, the invitation to convert is "not shouting, 'You have to believe this to belong.' It's saying, 'Try this; it actually works.'"

Wells further said that the invitation to convert shows that Christians place trust in the notion of change. "Conversion is the name for the way a person's heart and soul and actions can change for good when they encounter the embrace of God's ever-loving arms," said Wells.

Further, noted Wells, conversion affirms that out of the deepest hostility the greatest good can come. "Through conversion the Holy Spirit takes the worst in the world, the worst in our society, the very worst parts of ourselves and turns them into the principal instruments of God's kingdom and channels of Christ's peace," Wells said.

Progressives are not the only Christians who are being called to rethink conversion. In recent years, many evangelical churches are also moving toward a broader understanding of that subject that leaves behind what might be called "revivalism."

Gordon T. Smith, president of Ambrose University and Seminary, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, has written about this in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, an excerpt of which is reprinted in the *Christianity Today* article below. (*Christianity Today* is an evangelical Christian publication.)

In the past, "Evangelicals took for granted that the language and categories of revivalism were the language and categories of the New Testament," said Smith. "Conversion was viewed to be a punctiliar experience: persons could specify with confidence and assurance the time and place of their conversion, by reference, as often as not, to the moment when they prayed what was typically called 'the sinner's prayer,'" which is a prayer of repentance.

"The focus of conversion was the afterlife: ... so that one could 'go to heaven' after death," Smith said. "And if one had 'received Christ,' one could be confident of one's eternity with God." Smith noted that "conversion was isolated from the experience of the church. Indeed, it was generally assumed that a person would come to faith outside of the church and then be encouraged, after conversion, to join a church community."

In contrast to that, said Smith, evangelicals are re-envisioning the nature of conversion and redemption. "Increasingly, there is appreciation that conversion is a complex experience by which a person is initiated into a common life with the people of God who together seek the in-breaking of the kingdom, both in this life and in the world to come," said Smith. "This experience is mediated by the church and thus necessarily includes baptism as a rite of initiation. The power or energy of this experience is one of immediate encounter with the risen Christ ... and this experience is choreographed by the Spirit rather than evangelistic techniques."

Evangelical Christianity is a very large tent, and not every denomination within it would see its understanding of conversion as defined by Smith's description.

What's more, discussions of conversion, whether from evangelical Christians or progressive Christians, are made more complex by recognition by many that not all followers of Jesus start with a conversion experience; some people simply accept the tenets of the faith and receive Christ as part of their spiritual growth process.

Additionally, when some people speak of Christian conversion, they have in mind a *sudden* experience. But many people say that the conversion they experienced was but the final step in a process that had been going on for some time, with various thoughts, yearnings and dissatisfactions incubating in their minds that moved them toward the "decision for Christ."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Three Reasons Progressive Christians Shouldn't Give Up on Conversion. Christian Century](#)

[The New Conversion: Why We 'Become Christians' Differently Today. Christianity Today](#)

[Conversion to Christianity. Wikipedia](#)

The Big Questions

1. If you had what you consider a Christian conversion experience, do you, in retrospect, think you would have eventually made the same commitment without that experience? Why or why not? If you have not had a Christian conversion experience, but consider yourself to have "grown into" the faith, do you feel you missed anything, spiritually speaking? Why or why not?
2. To what degree was your decision to receive Christ a sudden one? To what degree was your decision the next step in a growth process?
3. Why is, or is not, the absence of a personal conversion story in a believer's life a shortcoming in terms of that person's acceptance by God and Christ?
4. What do you take this criticism of conversion to mean: "Conversion is all about the airport and silent about the trip"? Is the criticism valid? Why or why not?
5. Preacher and author Frederick Buechner says "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'" In what way does this make sense to you? In what ways does it not make sense to you?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Isaiah 55:7

*... let the wicked forsake their way
and the unrighteous their thoughts;*

*let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

(For context, read [Isaiah 55:6-9](#).)

Acts 3:19-20

Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus ... (For context, read [Acts 3:17-21](#).)

In the Bible, conversion and repentance are often linked. The text from Isaiah was originally written in Hebrew, and the Hebrew word for conversion is *shub*, which means "to turn" or "to return," which is how it is translated in the Isaiah verse.

The Acts passage was originally written in Greek, and the Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, which means "to think differently." It's rendered in Acts 3:19 simply as "repent." But that verse also uses the Greek word *epistrepho*, which means "to turn toward." It's rendered as "turn to God" in Acts 3.

As defined by *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, "To be converted means to have the direction of one's life shifted, so that it no longer points toward self, but points toward God."

Questions: The Isaiah verse is addressed to the "wicked" and the "unrighteous." Does that mean conversion is not necessary for those who are not wicked? Why or why not? The Acts passage is addressed to people who presumably had been in the crowd calling for Jesus' crucifixion? Does that mean others need not repent? Why or why not?

Romans 3:21-24

But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ[a] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... (For context, read [Romans 3:21-31](#).)

Romans 3:21-24 (The Message)

But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. (For context, read [Romans 3:21-31](#).)

Both entries above are the same passage of scripture from the apostle Paul, but the first is from our default translation (The NRSV) and the second is from the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*. We've used the former because it echoes phrases you've likely heard before -- "all have sinned" and "justified by his grace" -- and the latter because we believe its wording makes the passage clearer to understand. But in either version, these are words that are often used as the basis for discussions of conversion.

In short, Paul is saying that the death of Jesus has fully atoned for the sinfulness of humankind and that God's righteousness is freely offered to sinners who receive it by faith as an unmerited gift of grace.

Questions: What does "justified" mean here? Is this passage by itself sufficient to explain the gospel? Why or why not? What would you want to say is the next step beyond this one?

Acts 9:3-6

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell

to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." (For context read [Acts 9:1-9](#).)

This is from the account of Saul's (Paul's) blinding-light episode on the Damascus road, which most Bible readers understand as a conversion experience.

That requires some definition, however. It would be inaccurate to say that Saul ceased being a Jew and became a Christian. (Some people suggest this because Saul was his Hebrew name and Paul was his Roman name, and the writer of Acts uses his Roman name more often after the Damascus road encounter. But Paul was known by both names before and after that experience.) Nonetheless, Paul's blinding-light experience can legitimately be called a conversion because it was a dramatic turning point for Paul, a radical change of heart and mind, from following an extremist mindset, to serving the Lord of love, Jesus Christ.

At that time, Christianity had not yet separated itself from Judaism and there was no organized "Christianity" as such. Paul became a follower of Jesus, but still practiced the faith of his fathers and mothers. He still practiced the faith of his ancestors.

Many of the characteristics that marked Paul before his conversion continued afterward, such as his single-minded pursuit of a goal, although now, his goal changed. His acquired knowledge, of course, continued as well, but he now put that at the disposal of Christ. Paul was able to quote Greek writers such as Epimenides, Aristeus, and the comic playwright Menander in his letters, and to use athletic imagery, suggesting his exposure to athletic contests were part of a life with a foot in two worlds. (This might suggest that converts don't have to throw out their Led Zeppelin albums, or stop reading Douglas Adams, but there will be some new stuff to listen to and read as well.) Repentance means a changing of the mind and seeing the same things in a different light. Saul/Paul kept a foot in two worlds and that's why he had two names. But now that he was converted, the kingdom of God took first place.

Christianity, the Way, the Jesus movement, the church, whatever you choose to call it, involves a measure of interpretation and reinterpretation. After conversion, Jesus becomes the filter through which we see the world. As Paul wrote, "We preach Christ and him crucified." A cruciform is a different perspective on the world, and it's a perspective we invite others to join. It's the world Martha inhabits and one that allows her, despite her anger at Jesus for not coming in time to heal her brother Lazarus, still to make her extraordinary statement of faith, the kind of faith that sustains us in the midst of loss and grief.

Questions: Paul traveled 150 miles to Damascus to expand what had started as a local persecution of believers in Jerusalem. What does this tell you about Paul? Where do you see that same kind of intensity in Paul following his blinding-light encounter with Christ?

2 Corinthians 5:17

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! (For context, read [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#).)

Questions: In what ways is this verse a description of what conversion may look like? may feel like?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this: A TWW team member tells of hearing a testimony from a man who'd been converted at a Salvation Army mission. He'd been literally a "bum" (his description) when he stumbled drunk into the mission station. He came for the free dinner but stayed for the service, and when the preacher issued an "altar call," this man found himself going forward, where a Salvation Army worker counseled him and prayed with him.

That night was the "big turnaround," the man said (he went on to become a productive member of society). And though it doesn't often happen this way, he didn't drink again after his trip to the altar. But he said that in many

ways, *his conversion was only a start*. He felt that his sins had been forgiven, but in most ways, he was the same self-centered, profane, bigoted, uncaring person he'd been -- except that now, he was attending worship services where he prayed and started listening for God. He told how, one by one, God revealed things to him he needed to give up or rethink or do differently or take on if he was to continue following Jesus, and little by little, he began to make those adjustments -- more conversions, if you will. He never said he had "arrived," but he had a sense of where -- and toward Whom -- he was headed.

While not using language about "many conversions," C.S. Lewis, made a similar point using a house for a metaphor:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. ... But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of -- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage; but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

2. If you have or can borrow a copy of Kathleen Norris' book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (many libraries have it), read and discuss her chapter titled, "Conversion: The Family Story."

3. What opportunities will you seek to refuel or renew your Christian journey?

Responding to the News

This might be a good time to think about how you came to faith and to ask yourself if, in turning from something to something better, you've really completed the process. Or is more turning necessary?

Prayer

In whatever way I have come to Christ, O Lord, make me a good disciple. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Other News This Week

Centennial of Hymn Society Focuses on Global Music

The Wired Word for the Week of July 31, 2022

In the News

After a three-year hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada finally met together in Washington, D.C., for their 100-year anniversary celebration earlier this month. Using the theme, "Sing the World God Imagines," lecturers and panelists explored the power of hymns to impact faith communities as well as the broader society.

The 300+ delegates who came from around the world represented some of the more than 50 denominations that make up the society. They spoke and sang in as many as six languages, accompanied by organ, brass instruments and the djembe, a West African drum. Several dozen more participated virtually, introducing unfamiliar songs from their cultures and composers, and reimagining traditional hymns with different rhythms, tunes and lyrics.

"I have had the pleasure of watching this community grow to embrace and to celebrate the way the gospel can be preached and sung and prayed in many tongues and rhythms, calling forth an array of gifts much like the first-century church," said conference preacher Cynthia A. Wilson, a United Methodist musician.

A special focus of this year's gathering was concern about the ongoing effects of colonialism on the texts and tunes used in Christian worship. Participants noted that Western influences often play a larger role than the work of indigenous lyricists and composers in the choice of worship styles and repertoire.

"We're still in the process of decolonizing what we are singing," said Gerardo Oberman, a leader of Reformed Churches in Argentina. "We are still trying to find our own voice or trying to find our own rhythms. Because there's a little bit of a disconnect between what we sing in our homes, what we sing on the streets, and what we sing in our churches."

Iowan C. Michael Hawn, professor emeritus of church music at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology, acknowledged that Western music can dominate, but asserted that local pastors and church musicians often find ways to make such music their own. He gave as an example the traditional hymn, "'What a Friend We Have in Jesus' being sung in Yoruba ... in a style that reflects they've Africanized it, and so it's not a simple transplant; it's a reconstruction, a certain kind of hybridity."

In his recent piece for *The New Yorker*, [The Songs That Made Church a Home](#), staff writer Vinson Cunningham observed: "I think of the *Lead Me, Guide Me* [hymnal, which was the first hymnal commissioned for use by African-American Catholics] as one of the most resplendent flowerings of the Second Vatican Council, with its imperative for the church to move beyond a Eurocentric aesthetic model and begin to embrace the many styles and tongues inherent in a worldwide faith. ... the first black Catholic hymnal was necessarily eclectic and ecumenical. *Lead Me, Guide Me* put spirituals like 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' into close quarters with high-church Protestant anthems such as 'All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name' and frank, racial-pride songs like James Weldon Johnson's 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing,' often called the black national anthem."

The [Global Ethnodoxology Network \(GEN\)](#) similarly emphasizes the importance of indigenous leaders and artists contextualizing the Christian message in their own cultures, using "grass-roots, local composition and production of artistry that is culturally relevant, biblically sound, and emotionally resonant" (ethnomusicologist Katherine Morehouse).

GEN defines the term "ethnodoxology," which was coined by [Dave Hall, founder of Worship from the Nations](#), as "peoples + praise."

On its website, GEN posts as its vision: "a future in which communities of Jesus followers in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions." Elsewhere on the site, GEN states: "The global church exhibits an astounding array of worship patterns, demonstrating the enormity of God's creativity and the diversity of the Body of Christ."

In what many mission organizations may experience as a radical shift away from a colonization mindset, GEN emphasizes: "We embrace a 'Find it -- Encourage it' model of arts engagement rather than a 'Bring it -- Teach it' model."

"And now, as we prepare to go forth, may the spirit of God blow among us to bring forth new songs," said Executive Director J. Michael McMahon at the close of the Hymn Society centennial, "songs of faith, songs of healing, songs of transformation, songs of peace, songs of a world remade."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Marking Its Centennial, Hymn Society Continues Push for More Diverse Music. Religion News Service](#)
[Global Ethnodoxology Network. worldofworship.org](#)
[Global Christian Worship. Globalworship.tumblr.com](#)
[Global Song. The Hymn Society](#)

Applying the News Story

After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, Moses and his sister Miriam led the people in praising God. The women joined Miriam in celebrating with tambourines and dancing ([Exodus 15:1-21](#)).

When David brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to the city of David, the celebration was marked by acrobats, dancers and robed singers raising "loud sounds of joy on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals," as well as trumpets, directed by Chenaniah, who "understood" the music ([1 Chronicles 15:16-29](#)). David made musical instruments for 4,000 musicians to offer praises to the Lord in the work of the house of the Lord ([1 Chronicles 23:5](#); [1 Chronicles 25:1-8](#).)

The dedication of Solomon's temple featured a similar array of instrumentalists and vocalists praising and thanking God in unison for his goodness and steadfast love ([2 Chronicles 5:11-14](#)).

Many of the psalms describe corporate worship that was [centered on God](#) as the source of deliverance, protection, provision and [joy](#). [Psalm 68:24-27, 32](#) called for "solemn processions ... into the sanctuary" and urged the "kingdoms of the earth" to sing praises to the Lord. In addition to the instruments mentioned in previous texts in this section, strings and pipes are included in the list of musical instruments praising the Lord found in [Psalm 150](#).

There were times when public and personal worship focused on grief and petition, as in [Job's lament](#). And in [Psalm 101:1](#), the psalmist indicates that the theme of his song to the Lord was loyalty and justice.

In [1 Corinthians 14:26](#), Paul taught that when the people of God gather, different people could contribute to the worship experience: some with hymns, others with lessons or revelations, a message in another tongue, or an interpretation of such a message. The purpose of it all was to build up the community of faith.

Let's not lose the significance of listening to God speaking to us in languages that are not our own. If we open our ears to listen, we may be surprised by the power of the gospel message when we hear it conveyed in other linguistic, musical and artistic forms.

Congregations that employ many individuals, of different ages, genders, ethnicities, races and classes in the reading of scripture or other aspects of worship, are often amazed that the gospel comes alive in new and startling ways.

The Big Questions

1. How important is it to the building up of faith to have music that tells our story, not just God's meta-story?
2. When, if ever, have music or other elements of worship made you feel excluded or outside of the family of God? What was it about that experience that impacted you that way? How did you react?
3. Describe the most inclusive, welcoming worship you have ever experienced. Do you think other people whose life stories differ from yours experienced that time of worship the same way you did? Why or why not?
4. How important is it that worship incorporates older, traditional hymn texts, tunes and styles? How important is it that worship includes new music, lyrics and presentation? How many spiritual blessings are we missing by the neglect or purging of legacy hymns? By our resistance to new compositions by current hymn writers within our own culture and across the globe?
5. Who should decide what music is used in worship? On what basis should a hymn be included or excluded? What theological principles should guide the creation of worship experiences that honor participants from diverse communities?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Zephaniah 3:17-18

*"The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival."*

(For context, read [Zephaniah 3:14-20](#).)

The prophet Zephaniah encouraged the people of God to sing songs of rejoicing after God gave them victory over their enemies and saved the lame and the outcast. When they sing, they will not raise their voices alone, however, for God will also be singing loudly, festival songs of exultation!

In [Revelation 14:1-3](#), the writer describes hearing "a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders."

Questions: What do you imagine the voice of God singing over God's people sounds like? What do you imagine might be the content of the song God sings over his people? How does it make you feel to know that God sings over us?

John 4:21-24

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (For context, read [John 4:19-26](#).)

While traveling through Samaria, Jesus' disciples went off to find food, leaving him behind at Jacob's well where he could rest. When a local woman came to draw water in the heat of the day, Jesus struck up a conversation with her, beginning with the most mundane request for a drink of water.

You never can tell where a conversation might take you. In this case, small talk about water led to discussing the woman's deep spiritual need (for living water) and relationship challenges (she had had four husbands and was living with her fifth).

When Jesus' perception hit a little too close for comfort, the woman changed the subject, first by complimenting Jesus, and then by asking a "culture wars" type of theological question about the correct place to worship God (vv. 19-20).

As he often did, Jesus challenged the inquirer's assumptions as to what was important. He wasn't about to take sides on what was essentially an insignificant question to God. "The hour is coming when you will worship the Father *neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem*," he said. *Where* you worship is much less important than *whom* you worship, *what kind of worshiper you are*, and *how* you worship.

Questions: Why does God seek true worshipers who will worship him in spirit and truth? What does worshiping in spirit and truth look like? What is the opposite of true worship? If true worship doesn't depend on external things such as location or belonging to a particular group, on what does true worship depend?

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. (For context, read [Colossians 3:12-17](#).)

In this passage, Paul instructs the Colossian believers to practice Christlike virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness and love. Since they were called in one body in Christ, their relationships were to be characterized by harmony, peace and thankfulness.

When worshipers meditate on the word of Christ often, considering how to implement his teachings in their own lives, corporate worship is enhanced, because each returns to the gathered community with new insights to share about how Christ's word connected to their own situation. One of the ways we are to teach and admonish each other is through psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

Questions: What do you think your church is teaching people through its worship music and liturgy? Consider both the textual content and the way the music and liturgy are presented.

Romans 15:8-12

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the ancestors and that the gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

*"Therefore I will confess you among the gentiles
and sing praises to your name";
and again he says, "Rejoice, O gentiles, with his people";
and again, "Praise the Lord, all you gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him";
and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the gentiles;
in him the gentiles shall hope." (For context, read [Romans 15:5-13](#).)*

In this passage, Paul envisions a harmonious fellowship of believers from diverse life experiences and cultures, who "with one voice" glorify God (vv. 5-6). In a community of faith made up of Jew and gentile, male and female, enslaved and free persons, rich and poor, it would be surprising indeed if there were no interpersonal conflicts or disagreements. But because Christ welcomes one and all to walk with him and to eat at his table (v. 7), we also are to welcome one another.

Here, Paul affirms that Christ's ministry was to the gentiles (uncircumcised, non-Jews) as well as to the circumcised (Jews). God has shown mercy to all, which is reason for praise to God. It is noteworthy that the Jews and non-Jews rejoice and praise God *together*, not just in separate enclaves.

Questions: Where have you seen examples of corporate worship experiences that have broken down walls that separate and divide people? What could your church do to create worship spaces that feel more inclusive for diverse groups of people?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this, from Lim Swee Hong, a professor of sacred music at the University of Toronto: "In essence, not all non-Western congregational songs make their cut as global songs. Indeed, what is local may not be global. In many instances, globalization strips away what is local of the Global South to purvey Western (Anglo)-accessible global song. As a result, there is the constant concern about authenticity [in relation to] accessibility in performance practice in addressing this genre. ... Despite these hurdles, the use of global songs (non-Western songs or songs of the Others [who belong to minority groups]) in North America has helped open the parochial windows of local (Anglo) congregations, giving them a foretaste of global Christianity."

2. John Witvliet, the director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, stresses, "Much as non-Western songs are fascinating to most Western congregations, they need to be discerningly used to avoid 'ethno-tourism' that may result in unfortunate cultural appropriation and showcasing the music without understanding its *Sitz im Leben* [sociological setting or context]."

How can you discover the *Sitz im Leben* of a hymn, from one's own tradition or from a country or culture not one's own?

3. "Extraordinary things are always hiding in places people never think to look," Jodi Picoult, best-selling American novelist, wrote. How might this apply to expressions of worship from other cultures?

4. Respond to this, from [The Theology of Hymns, for Better or Worse](#) by *The Wired Word* team member, Bill Tammeus, "We must be sensitive to messages hymns send by hearing them through the ears of others. The church has hymns that are mostly a great treasure. But the job of pastors and music directors is to be aware that sometimes they can miscommunicate or throw our worship out of proper balance."

What hymns or spiritual songs have you found theologically problematic, and why?

5. Consider this, from TWW consultant James Gruetzner: "I belong to a congregation in a historically ethnic denomination: It was only after 98 years (1935) that English became the language at national conventions -- and ethnic congregations remained well into the late 1900s. There was no planned shift: The gradual changes just made sense at the time. Our current congregation has a Kinyarwanda-speaking group -- led by members of our congregation -- which uses our facilities for services in that language. (They participated in the installation of our current pastor.) We at times have a Spanish-speaking group (mariachi band) helping to lead our services. None of these developments have been due to efforts at 'diversity' or 'inclusion' or 'equity.' These are due to our sense that God calls us -- and them -- to various relationships at various times."

6. Describe a worship experience that reached you directly, using your own language and culture, even though it would not necessarily be understood by others outside of your experience or your culture. How might God use different methods to speak to different people?

Responding to the News

As a follow-up to the Zephaniah 3:17 scripture section above, you might brainstorm together what might be in the song God sings over his people. See if you can write a lyric that fits this theme.

Prayer

O God, who welcome us into your presence, may we welcome one another with the same grace and cheerful readiness. Help us to look forward with eager anticipation to the richness and wisdom we will gain from one another as we worship together, all offering our unique gifts to bless one another and build up the beloved community of faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.