



Volume 59 | Issue 1

Article 18

2016

Gray's "Hermeneutics of Hymnody: A Comprehensive and Integrated Approach to Understanding Hymns" (Critical Review)

Jason Runnels

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

The Christian Librarian is the official publication of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL). To learn more about ACL and its products and services please visit <http://www.acl.org/>

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl>

Recommended Citation

Runnels, Jason (2016) "Gray's "Hermeneutics of Hymnody: A Comprehensive and Integrated Approach to Understanding Hymns" (Critical Review)," *The Christian Librarian*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl/vol59/iss1/18>

This Critical Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Christian Librarian* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

This book is ground breaking and should be in every Christian university, Bible school and seminary in the world and as a textbook in classrooms. How we do church now is so very, very flawed. Some of the best and brightest and most active are leaving because the church is getting in the way of their spiritual development and the sharing of their faith that they so desperately want to do. May God help us to understand the dynamics described in this book so we can rescue the church and reorient our members towards the salvation of our neighbors, as Jesus taught.

Hermeneutics of Hymnody: A Comprehensive and Integrated Approach to Understanding Hymns,

by Scotty Gray. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2015.
409 pp. \$22.40. ISBN 9781573127677

*Reviewed by Jason Runnels, Assistant Music Librarian,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX*

Thousands of books have been devoted to various aspects of ministry ranging from pastoral ministry to business administration. More recently there have been upsurges in the number of books published that deal with worship and whether Christians know how to do this most basic of spiritual tasks. However, books on the study of hymns, hymnology, are less often seen. Part of the reason is that there are some that have become standards in the various colleges and universities and with good reason. Yet, there has been something missing in the literature that guides musicians in the process of selecting and utilizing hymns. Scotty Gray has given such a book to academia.

Hermeneutics of Hymnody identifies a gap in the skill among church musicians when it comes to demonstrating a knowledge of how to successfully use hymns in worship. The statement is very true and has resulted in poor choices for worship on more than one occasion. He states his primary goal is “to present foundations for a sound, comprehensive, and integrated understanding of hymnody and more objective criteria for evaluating hymns and tunes of whatever style” (p. xxi). Students have been taught the history of hymnody and some basic evaluation techniques in classes that were intended to do so but a close detailed examination is typically lacking.

The uniqueness of Gray’s approach is to take principles that are normally applied to evaluating Scripture, and using it on the various elements of a hymn. The idea, if hymnody is the voice of the church then the church should be just as careful in its use of these items as it is in its use of the Bible. To achieve this goal, Gray separates the book into nine chapters which allows a concentration on the different parts of

a hymn. Chapter 1 introduces this concept of applying sound Biblical hermeneutics to hymns. One problem does occur, not everyone has studied hermeneutics and the author therefore has a monumental task. It seems that Gray is aware of this fact but his statement of whom might benefit from such a book provides a greater challenge, “This study is devoted to a more comprehensive and integrated hermeneutics of hymnody for scholars, teachers, and serious students. It is hoped that much in this study will be of interest to hymn writers and hymnal editors as well as to worship leaders, ministers, and the singers of hymns in the many and varied theological and liturgical traditions” (p. 3). Many in this list may have never had a formal education in Church Music, much less hermeneutics.

Gray presents a list of broad principles on pages 6 and 7 that can help a curious minister to understand hymns better with this approach. He feels that it is most necessary to investigate eight different areas to fully understand a hymn: the biblical, the theological, the liturgical, the literary, the musical, the historical or sociocultural, the practical and the principle of interrelatedness. The list alone leaves the reader to wonder if even a month is enough time to read through such a book so as to gain an understanding, much less a full semester in graduate school. However, most of these areas are not foreign territory for many but the *interrelatedness* might be the greatest challenge. The author fully believes that now is the time to apply the unification of many areas of study into one concentrated focus on hymnology. To strengthen his stance he quotes from a diverse population of writers, from Friedrich Schiller to E. O Wilson to Leonard Bernstein.

While the goal is quite large, the *modus operandi* is noble and needed: “The effort here is simply to show that in hymnody we are dealing with a complex, living, moving phenomenon, a historically vital and powerful force, a confluence of many streams, a blending of many voices that continues to have great potential and that, by a careful look, might enthrall, bless, and delight us all the more and become a means of a fuller, deeper expression of worship” (p. 15).

The remainder of the first chapter is devoted to summarizing the goal of each subsequent chapter. These paragraphs are useful but unnecessary since a full chapter will be given to each section in order to explain the principle’s importance and application.

Gray examines the importance of using biblical hermeneutics to evaluate hymnody in chapter 2. He lines out some basic principles of hermeneutics, such as the linguistic/literary principle, the literal, figurative, allegorical principle, the historical principle, and the contextual principle. His next effort is to identify the differences of how scripture is used within hymns. As he explains the variances among direct quotations, mosaics and paraphrases the reader may find themselves somewhat lost

since not all of the texts are provided within the work. It would have been far more enlightening to have had a table comparing Dudley-Smith's "The Darkness turns to dawn" with the various scriptures referenced, much like he did with "Of the Father's Love Begotten."

As an example of applying biblical hermeneutic principles to hymnody, Gray chooses Prudentius' hymn *Corde natatus ex parentis* and its subsequent translations by Roby Davis and John Mason Neale. The focus is on Prudentius and the context from which the hymn was written. Gray carefully works through the scriptural references in the Neale translation to demonstrate how much biblical matter is contained within the work, and he points out that the content gives reason to use the hymn at other times than its generally allotted season of Advent/Christmas. It is most helpful that Gray includes a parallel reading of the three textual versions of this hymn as well as a musical excerpt of the first three verses as arranged by well-known hymn compiler, Charles Winifred Douglas.

Gray's third chapter delves into the topic of theological hermeneutic without fear by providing a clear explanation of how theology can depend on hymnody to be made known more fully. He writes to a great degree about the language of theology, focusing on how the poetry of a hymn has the ability "to make clear, to give the meaning, to facilitate understanding, to communicate thoughts and feelings of faith, and to inspire the mind to soar far above the limits of discursive prose" (p. 67). Of course, these works are dependent on what he calls the analogical, or symbolic, language of art.

The remaining chapters, 4 through 7, follow very similar patterns of giving an in-depth explanation of the principle followed by application to particular hymns. Gray demonstrates his very firm understanding of music, hymnology, theology, literature and hermeneutics convincingly. The author is sure to include particular terms within the body of each chapter that will prove useful. His writing style is elegant and informed and leaves the reader with little doubt of the author's expertise. Gray's level of research is also demonstrated through his ability to not only reference and cite various authors but also to synthesize the information in a way that serves to teach the reader. The author is also very sure to follow his goal of explaining the interrelatedness of the areas of study by including a section at the end of each chapter. Each section is identified as "The _____ 'Voice' in a 'Polyphonic' Hermeneutics." This strengthens the bond of a hymn to more than a text but also to a musical setting.

The final chapter focuses on applying these principles to the selection and use of hymnody. Gray makes the point clearly when he states, "hymnody is a spiritual experience, a matter related to the Holy Spirit and to the Christian's spiritual nature

or what the Bible often refers to as the heart” (pp. 330-31). A deeper understanding of hymnody can lead to this appreciation and spiritual growth.

One weakness lies in the absence of an appendix dedicated to the explanation of various terms that lie outside the normal vocabulary of church musicians. While presenting them in the body of the chapter is helpful, a glossary would allow for a quick reference even after the book has been read. These technical terms such as poetic devices found within the hymns or theological concepts and ideas would have been much easier to find and understand with a brief appendix that might have included page references to more explanation. If, by chance, the reader is unaware of what epimone is and does in chapter 2 then knowing that a thorough investigation occurs on page 191 would encourage a better understanding of the device’s role in “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” when it was mentioned.

Also, the inclusion of the hymns, music and text, are helpful but strikingly absent from the first half of the book. There are numerous times that being able to see the hymn in print could enhance the reader’s understanding. To assume the reader is able to find the hymns on his or her personal book shelf or on the web is distracting from the activity of reading the book. Again, a brief appendix would be invaluable.

As a summary, Scotty Gray’s *Hermeneutics of Hymnody* is a refreshing resource in subject area that receives so much neglect. The author maintains focus throughout the book and is aware of the purpose. This work should be on every worship pastor, music minister, church choir director’s, organist or any other church musician’s book shelf. While not a breeze to read through quickly, it will give important and useful information to enhance an individual or corporate worship experience. The challenge is set and this book will help to achieve the goal.

Thomas Grantham: God’s Messenger from Lincolnshire,

by John Inscore Essick. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2013.

246 pp. \$30.00. ISBN 9780881464610

*Reviewed by Terry L. Christian, Graduate Student,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX*

John Inscore Essick, Assistant Professor of Church History at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky in Georgetown, Kentucky, has written a comprehensive and engaging story of the life of Thomas Grantham (1633/34-1692), an important General Baptist leader of the latter half of the seventeenth century. Not much has been written on Grantham aside from including him in the larger narrative of English Baptists until