

Proper 6, Series B

Reflection on “O God, O Lord, of Heaven and Earth” (LSB #834)

Christians today, as always, face an array of daunting challenges. ISIS and other terrorists are waging a campaign of persecution against Christians. Opposition to Christianity is increasing in our country. Some groups in Christianity are neglecting the joy of the Gospel by emphasizing what we must do to be saved. There also is too much strife between spiritual leaders in the organized church. In a sense, things today are not that much different from the days of the Reformation.

Martin Franzmann penned the hymn text, “O God, O Lord of Heaven and Earth,” in 1966 in preparation for the celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in 1967. The hymn first appeared in the Worship Supplement of 1969. In the hymn text Franzmann referred to the similar challenges Christianity experienced at the time of the Reformation as well as in the present day. Reflecting the challenges is present already in the opening of the hymn, “O God, O Lord, of heav’n and earth. Thy living finger never wrote That life should be an aimless mote, A Deathward drift from futile birth.” Other phrases in the first portion of each stanza are “our fatal will,” “in prideful spite,” “this house of doom,” “our hall of death,” “our dark despair,” and “Thy cloven Church.” Were these the only phrases used in the hymn, it would indeed be a sad text.

In Ephesians 2:8-9, we are assured “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” God has taken care of us; we need not fear the negative situations in the world and in our lives. Franzmann reflects on this when he uses the positive phraseology in the latter portion of each verse. This time in verse 1, we sing, “Thy Word meant life triumphant hurled In splendor through Thy broken world. Since light awoke and life began, Thou hast desired Thy life for man.” Other positive phrases in the latter portion of each stanza include “gift of liberty,” “leads us back to God,” “great good news to man.” Thus, each stanza begins with a challenge to Christianity and ends with a positive answer taken from God’s actions.

Jan Bender wrote the tune, Wittenberg New, for this hymn for its inclusion in the Worship Supplement. The first half of each verse is decidedly angular (perhaps reflecting the ups and downs of our lives) and is set firmly in f minor, reflecting the negative nature of the text. The second half, while still angular, has a much more positive sound, reflecting the positive nature of the text in the latter part of each stanza.

As we sing and/or reflect on this hymn, we can come away with a joyful, positive spirit, especially as we are reminded in the final verse, “O Spirit, who didst once restore Thy Church that it might be again The bringer of good news to men, Breathe on Thy cloven Church once more, That in these gray and latter days There may be those whose life is praise, Each life a high doxology To Father, Son and unto Thee.” The gift of God, our salvation, has been and always will be the answer to challenging situations in our life in this world.



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O God, O Lord of heav'n and earth, Thy living finger never wrote
That life should be an aimless mote, A deathward drift from futile birth.
Thy Word meant life triumphant hurled In splendor through Thy broken world.
Since light awoke and life began, Thou hast desired Thy life for man.

Our fatal will to equal Thee, Our rebel will wrought death and night.
We seized and used in prideful spite Thy wondrous gift of liberty.
We housed us in this house of doom Where death had royal scope and room,
Until Thy servant, Prince of Peace, Breached all its walls for our release.

Thou camest to our hall of death, O Christ, to breathe our poisoned air,
To drink for us the dark despair That strangled our reluctant breath.
How beautiful the feet that trod The road that leads us back to God!
How beautiful the feet that ran To bring the great good news to man!

O Spirit, who didst once restore Thy Church that it might be again
The bringer of good news to men, Breath on Thy cloven Church once more,
That in these gray and latter days There may be those whose life is praise,
Each life a high doxology To Father, Son, and unto Thee.

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