

# Baptist hymnody largely settles for two out of three in Trinity

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Hymns sung in most Baptist churches historically have been “More About Jesus” than about either God the Father or the Holy Spirit, several church music experts agree.

“From a Baptist perspective, I don’t think the hymnody has ever been Trinitarian,” said Clell Wright, director of choral activities and Logsdon professor of church music at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene.

Baptist worship has been shaped to a large degree by the revivalist movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries, he noted.

“By nature, the focus is on Jesus and his redeeming work,” Wright said.

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Consequently, when it comes to Baptist understanding of the Godhead as reflected in congregational song, “Our Trinity is more two-point-something rather than three,” said Terry York, associate professor of Christian ministry and church music at Baylor University’s School of Music and Truett Theological Seminary in Waco.

“One way to gauge that is by looking at the index in the back of the hymnal under ‘Holy

Spirit.’ Looking at the 1991 Baptist Hymnal, for instance, there’s not much there. And I was on the committee that put that one together, for crying out loud.”

A quick glance at the recently released 2008 Baptist Hymnal reveals similar results, noted Lee Hinson, coordinator of church music studies at

Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Okla.

“It has not changed much,” Hinson said. “We struggle with singing Trinitarian doctrine. There are several categories of things we free-churchers don’t do well in worship. ... Dealing with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is one of them.”

York agreed, noting lack of emphasis on the Holy Spirit may reveal—in part—lack of clarity among Baptists about the Spirit’s role and about the doctrine of the Trinity in general.

“Baptist churches divide themselves in worship according to which Person of the Trinity gets the most emphasis,” he noted. Baptists who say they want to “worship the Father in the beauty of holiness” generally favor more formal, liturgical worship. Baptist who want to “praise Jesus for who he is and what he has done” may tend toward a more revivalist and evangelistic worship style. Baptists who say they want “the Spirit to come down and bless us” often follow a less structured worship format.

“Generally, we are less than balanced,” York commented. “Few churches stand in the middle.”

Observers differ about whether the rising popularity of praise and worship music translates into increased attention directed toward the Holy Spirit.

Wright sees a shift toward greater “recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit” in praise music.

“So much of it in the last 15 to 20 years seems very pietistic, with a strong emphasis on personal worship,” he noted.

That emphasis represents a departure from the evangelistic and revivalist tradition that has marked Baptist worship, he noted.

“Our Baptist heritage of music in the gospel tradition has defined who we

are for a couple of hundred years,” Wright noted.

Hinson sees a greater emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in Baptist worship, but he believes it is restricted to the youngest worship leaders.

“Millennials (roughly defined as the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s) want their worship to be free,” he said. Lyrics that stress the Holy Spirit exist, “but they’re not sung where the Boomers are in charge. They’re in the Wednesday night services where students lead worship.”

York, on the other hand, sees praise and worship lyrics focused primarily on Jesus, but worship leaders stressing the role of the Holy Spirit in leading them.

“They attribute being caught up in worship to the work of the Holy Spirit, who helps lead in the worship of Jesus,” he said.