

## Theological beef with lyrics

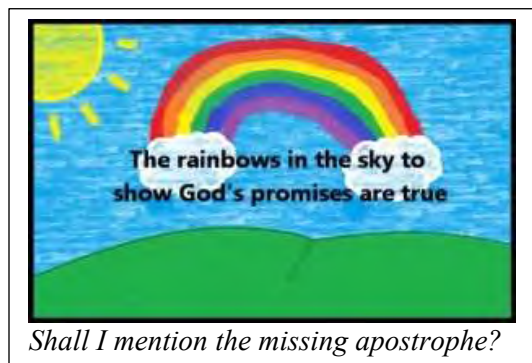
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I love congregational singing. In primary school I used to sing songs like ‘Walk in the light’, ‘Colours of day’ and ‘I have seen the golden sunshine’ during school assemblies, with the headteacher accompanying on the piano. At the time I had very little idea about the meaning of the words, yet the phrases have been buried deeply into my subconscious as a result of the infectious melodies being etched into my memory. The same is true of the many songs I sang in secondary school, again during school assembly or during the frequent masses I attended. I’m the kind of person who enjoys the harmonies and melodies of the music more than focusing on the lyrics – for most of my life I never paid much attention at all to the lyrics of the songs I enjoyed. Recently, however, I’ve been reflecting on the words of songs a little more closely.

Popular, or secular, music is one thing. Here rather I’m analysing the words of worship music, hymns and other songs with religious connotations. For example, the opening track of the Hillsong Kids Ultimate Collection (an album to which my children enjoy listening) is a song called ‘Rainbow’, which contains the following lyrics:

*It’s not a secret, it’s not a fairytale, It’s not made up, Jonah was in a whale*



I have two problems with this rhyming couplet. Firstly, the book of Jonah describes how the prophet was ‘in the belly of a fish’, not a whale. Secondly, I don’t adhere to a literal reading of many of the books of the Bible, and the story of Jonah in particular I can easily accept as allegorical. Even if there was an actual prophet called Jonah who went to Nineveh, I would interpret the 3-day trial in the belly of a fish to be an idiomatic expression signifying a period of mental turmoil, similar to the expression ‘stuck in a pickle’. The problem is, of course, that the melody is so catchy, and the rhyming would be ruined if you replaced

‘whale’ with ‘fish’. What rhymes with fish? I think I’ve just ruined this verse for my children.

Perhaps that song isn’t familiar to most folks. ‘We are the world’, however, is a song you’re likely to hear in the Mooniverse. It’s one of those songs everyone knows. You can almost guarantee that the song will be accompanied by hands slowly waving from side to side in the air, or hands held in a group circle, or lighters (or these days mobile phones) being raised to light a darkened room. The origin of the song is charitable, and the tune is rousing, but I have to take issue with the theological proficiency of Lionel Ritchie and Michael Jackson, the writers of the song. One of the song’s lines is:

As God has shown us, by turning stone to bread  
So we all must lend a helping hand.



*Try studying God’s word a little more closely next time*

The problem is, of course, that God never turned stone to bread. Moses may have brought water from a stone. But when Jesus was tempted by Satan to turn stones to bread, Jesus resisted the temptation insisting that people shouldn’t live on bread alone but on every word that comes from God. Now that’s ironic.

This is important. It’s through singing that we can actually connect deeply in heart with God. By singing beautiful and profound lyrics we are allowing holy ideas to be verbalised and internalised. Even though I haven’t sung many of my primary school songs, those lyrics roll off my tongue with ease as they have been indelibly impressed into my mind. I want to make sure that the songs I sing, and indeed the songs that my family sings and my community sings, are correct and uplifting. Needless

to say I also hope those same songs have powerful melodies that create goosebumps and send tingles down your spine, but it’s an awful shame when you realise that a dearly loved song contains content that is erroneous or even misleading.

I hope that anybody reading this post could comment with their own selection of theologically dubious lyrics.

### Image Credits

<http://himnovasion.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/breve-historia-de-los-himnos.html>