

Re-Examining A Song

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In 2007 I wrote a manuscript for the Bellview Lectures, Pensacola, Florida, titled, “Building up the Church Through Singing.” In it I briefly mentioned that some of the songs in the books we commonly use emphasize patriotism far more than praise to God and His Son. I cited the example of “America the Beautiful.” This song references God several times, but it praises our nation more than Him (if it does the latter at all).

Sung perhaps even more frequently in our assemblies is the song, “Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!” (originally titled, “Battle Hymn of the Republic”). On the surface, it appears to be a song of praise to God and His Truth, concealing a dark history. Its obvious military motif (“sword,” “trumpet,” “marching”) is employed by the New Testament at times regarding the Lord’s Cause (e.g. Eph. 6:10–17; 2 Tim. 2:3–4).

I’m confident I am among many who have sung this song, unaware (as was I until recently) of its original intent and use or of its author. I learned this information in a book by our brother in Christ, Jerry Brewer, titled *Dismantling the Republic* (which I recently read and highly recommend). He quotes at some length from a 2009 article by R. Michael Givens, in which Givens not only provides background on Julia Ward Howe, the song’s lyricist, but on her purpose in writing the lyrics. Givens states the following:

- Howe was a Unitarian and political radical who believed in neither the Bible nor the Christ.
- She therefore lifted terminology for her song from the very book she rejected – a gross hypocrisy.
- She wrote her song seven months after the War between the states began to serve as a rallying cry for the Union (both civilian and military) during that awful conflict (the Northern states were the “republic” referred to in the original title).
- Her song depicted the Southern states as despicable enemies who deserved to be trampled and put to the sword; the Union forces were the instruments of God’s wrath and judgment.
- Simply put, her song was an unmitigated Union propaganda piece and marching song that served to excuse and justify whatever its armies decided to inflict on the Southern states, whether soldier or civilian – including Sherman’s incomparable 60-mile-wide carnage from Atlanta to the Atlantic in 1864 (according to Sherman’s memoirs, describing the beginning of

this march: “Never before or since have I heard the chorus of ‘Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!’ done with more spirit, or in better harmony of time and place”).

I realize fully that most of the “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in our songbooks are written by men and women who were not Christians in any sense of the New Testament definition. However, with few exceptions, these songs express spiritual concepts and Truths that are in harmony with the Holy Word and were re-written for the purpose of exalting the Divine Author and His Revelation.

It seems fair to question, however, whether or not it is appropriate to employ a song in worship that was written for and served as a political propaganda piece and was written by an infidel, no less. To sing this song in a worship assembly seems little different from singing “Dixie” therein. I see no seemliness for either of them in the worship of our God.

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it was published in *The Lighthouse*, weekly bulletin of Northpoint Church of Christ, Denton, TX, July 29, 2012, of which I was editor.]

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