"How Sweet the Sound": The Lived Hymn Tradition

Hannah Michelle Thomas

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"How Sweet the Sound": The Lived Hymn Tradition

by

Hannah Michelle Thomas

An Honors Capstone
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Diploma or Certificate
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The University of Alabama in Huntsville

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: The Individual</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Community</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dedication:

First and foremost, I would especially like to thank Dr. Anna Foy, my advisor for this project, who held me accountable to this project and gave me the direction I needed to make this thesis possible.

Thank you to my mother, my father, and my younger sister, who have all been a source of encouragement for me, and to my father especially, for buying me all the books I could ever need, for inspiring my arguments, and for helping me to build my faith on a rock and not sand.

Furthermore, I would also like to thank my church family, Flint River Primitive Baptist Church, as well as the other Old Line Primitive Baptists who have kept track of my progress through social media, and have been my most enthusiastic supporters. In particular, Elder Ben Winslett, Sister Karen Stephens, and Sister Rebecca Thomas sent me texts, hymnals, documents, and anything else they thought would help my research, and I am so grateful for the strength that you have given me. I have worked hard to give you your voice in scholarship, and I hope to continue to give you a voice as I continue my research.

Thank you to all of the Huntsville churches, congregations, and music ministers for your assistance in my project. I hope that this project fairly and accurately represents you and your communities, and without your graciousness, this project would not be everything that it is. Thank you to the Pattons at the First Baptist Church of Huntsville and Sister Abby Warren at Heritage Primitive Baptist Church, for making me feel welcome, and for going above and beyond in assisting me in my project.

Finally, I would like to thank the Lord, in whom all things are possible, and as Paul put it, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil.4:13).
Abstract

This paper addresses the concepts of individuality and community within various Christian denominations in the Huntsville area, with a particular focus on the Primitive Baptist denomination. Two hymns, “I Am A Stranger Here Below” and “Amazing Grace” act as case studies of the larger phenomena observed within these congregations. “Amazing Grace” represents the idea of community and shared experience, whereas “I Am A Stranger Here Below” represents a perspective of personal doubt found in the Christian walk. Further, both hymns have changed over time in a variety of ways from the first publishing of the text, indicating that hymns are not cultural or historical artifacts, but are rather a lived process. The lived process of hymn singing is the main contributor to the changes to the texts and tunes of “I Am A Stranger Here Below” and “Amazing Grace.” The continual practice of these hymns and the emphasis on certain aspects of each hymn lead to a myriad of versions of the text that reflect both the communal and the personal values in each church body.
Introduction

The Old Line Primitive Baptist faith is a small community that believes in total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the preservation of the saints. While these beliefs appear on the surface to be hyper-Calvinist, they are in fact unique to the Old Line Primitive Baptist doctrine of free grace and the ineffectiveness of works in the role of eternal salvation. Dr. Jeffrey Wayne Taylor examines the identity of the Old Line Primitive Baptist faith in his book *The Formation of the Primitive Baptist Movement*. While Dr. Taylor does not define this identity based off of hymns, he does manage to accurately define the main beliefs and identity of the Primitive Baptists. Dr. Taylor contends that there are three interconnected beliefs central to Primitive Baptist theology, and by extension, their identity. These three core beliefs as outlined by Taylor, are the relation of the church to history, society, and God, wherein the Primitive Baptists are the One True Church that have been preserved from the founding of the New Testament church by John the Baptist, and worship a sovereign God that has saved the elect through His Holy Spirit. Dr. Taylor achieves this outline of self-identification through the historical periodicals associated with the Primitive Baptist faith, published and circulated during the 1830's during the Second Great Awakening.¹

However, Old Line Primitive Baptists historically remain outliers in a wide variety of scholarship that addresses religion and music, specifically in conversations about hymns. Whenever they are included, their unique theology and worship practices are mislabeled and misused. In his book *Strangers Here Below*, Joshua Guthman takes an outsider, historicist approach

approach to Old Line Primitive Baptist practice and hymnody, which has its benefits and its drawbacks. The largest drawback is that Guthman incorrectly assumes that the distinctly Old Line hymn, "I Am A Stranger Here Below," acts as a total representation of the Old Line Primitive Baptist experience and doctrine. He quotes the first lines of the hymn and asserts that "Those plangent lines distilled a quintessentially Primitive disposition of estrangement, uncertainty, and longing." Guthman interprets the personal experience of godly sorrow in a believer's life as a definitive text for the identity of the Old Line Primitive Baptist denomination.

Guthman is most interested in the connection between the hymn "I Am A Stranger Here Below" and its cultural effect on bluegrass performers Ralph Stanley and Roscoe Holcomb. He focuses on the notion that the Old Line Primitive Baptist tradition of hymnody is limited to the "high, lonesome sound" of "I Am A Stranger Here Below" and that it is a dead or dying tradition that can only be found in the past. In his epilogue he writes that "The Primitives’ subterranean river of faith is like the enigmatic lonesome sound that modern music audiences have craved – a sound drawn from the past but surfacing in the present where... it might minister anew to some uncertain soul who knows nothing of its origins." The problem with this two-fold belief – that the Old Line Primitive Baptist hymnody is dead and limited to lonesomeness – is that the hymn tradition of Old Line Primitive Baptists, and other denominations as well, is very much alive, and exists on a much wider spectrum of emotional expression. I contend that the hymn tradition is a

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source of praise as well as sorrow, and that it is a lived process, whereby the worshippers participate and find significance in the hymn that is not exclusive to the past.

**The Lived Process**

Russell Yee distinguishes meaning from significance in “Shared Meaning and Significance in Congregational Singing,” where meaning is the intended meaning of the author who wrote the text and significance is the personal meaning found in the text by the reader. Yee distinguishes the two when he writes “(1) meaning (proper), the meaning intended by the author/composer and potentially re-intended by the congregation; and (2) significance, the import of the meaning to particular people at a particular time and place.” Essentially, Yee finds within shared meaning that there is meaning inherent in the text based on the intent of the author, and that those who read or practice the text create or find meaning of a personal, individual nature within the text as well.

Yee gives the example of Colossians 3:16, where the Apostle Paul exhorts believers to worship God with “Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” an intended meaning that has remained the same over several centuries and translations of the Bible; however, the significance is based in how believers practice this exhortation, what hymns and spiritual songs they use, and the relation the believers have to the music for worship. Yee states that “Significance is like that: it is ever-changing, ever-nuanced, ever-subject to qualification and expansion.” As I began my

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The Lived Hymn Tradition.

project, the separation between meaning and significance became apparent through the personal
 testimonies of the music ministers and congregants of the various churches I attended.

Curiously, unlike many of the people that I interviewed, Dr. Billy Orton, Music Minister
at First Baptist Huntsville, wholeheartedly admitted that hymns are not static nor stationary. He
did not subscribe to the idea that some tradition has been maintained and that personal belief has
never changed. In fact, his observation was “Hymns change based on hymnal editions and
committees that select those hymns; the breadth of their expression is wider and shifts.” Dr.
Orton’s view of hymns both actively shaping belief and reflecting belief ties into his assertion
that hymns change— that hymns are a lived process. The hymns that are included in each new
incarnation of a particular hymnal thus reflect the attitudes and emphasis of the times, and they
shape those beliefs as well. The hymns that have lines cut or lines added illustrate on the micro
level how hymns are shaped by culture and practices of a particular time.

Dr. Orton’s position of hymns as dynamic texts while serving as the music minister of the
First Baptist Church of Huntsville, which is a Southern Baptist congregation, is a departure from
prior Southern Baptist approaches to hymnody. According to Walter Hines Sims,

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6 Dr. Billy Orton (Music Minister of First Baptist Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M.
Thomas, May 11, 2017.
Genuine effort has been made to preserve the many hymns and gospel songs which have been so meaningful to the worship, education, and evangelistic activities of Southern Baptists through the years. With the exception of attractive new hymns, all have become standard through the successful use and the endless testing of time.\textsuperscript{7}

The different approaches to hymnody demonstrate a shift in the past 50 years from the assertion that "hymns have been weighed, measured, and preserved" to "hymns have been shaped by their cultural environment and reflect a particular practice or philosophy at a particular time." Dr. Orton’s belief in the lived process of hymnody also acts as a signal of a culture shift within Southern Baptists, and a larger shift that I observed in several of the Huntsville congregations: the movement towards the contemporary.

**Contemporary and Traditional**

A very prevalent theme that arose during my study is the tension between the traditional and the contemporary. The traditional is the old guard of each congregation; essentially, it is the keeper of the old ways and is typically comprised of members that are aged forty or above. The contemporary is the youth of the church, which is usually members aged thirty and below, as well as young families. The tension arises out of the church’s desire to grow and attract the contemporary, but this has often been done at the expense of the traditional. According to David Louis Gregory, "The hymn texts and tunes chosen for each of the hymnals depended on the

\textsuperscript{7} Walter Hines Sims, foreword to *Baptist Hymnal*, ed. Walter Hines Sims (Nashville: Convention Press, 1956), v.
culture and worship practices of the time."⁸ Gregory’s statement succinctly summarizes how the current culture shift from traditional to contemporary is reflected in modern hymn texts and worship methods. The most salient example is at St. Bartley’s Primitive Baptist Church, where the music minister, Rodney Milton, stated that “[The congregation] has left the hymns of Dr. Watts due to the youth, because it isn’t as powerful for them.”⁹

The First Baptist Church of Huntsville holds both a traditional and a contemporary worship service every Sunday morning in an attempt to appeal to the youth and bridge the gap between their past and their future. While there were some children present in the traditional service, the congregation was largely white and elderly. Dr. Orton attempted to reassure me that there was a variety of ages in each worship service, but he even admitted that the contemporary praise and worship service was geared towards and attended by the younger crowd, while the traditional service tended to be for the middle aged and above.¹⁰ Dr. Orton’s support of the lived hymn is a part of this shift, and thus the worship of even traditional hymns takes on a new cultural moor that emphasizes the priority of youth in this day and age.

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⁹ Rodney Milton (Music Minister of St. Bartley’s Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, April 23, 2017.

¹⁰ Dr. Billy Orton (Music Minister of First Baptist Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, May 11, 2017.
The exception to this rule is First Presbyterian Church, which is the first established Presbyterian church in Huntsville and in Alabama. In my interview with Dr. Patricia Hacker, the music minister and choral director, the theme of “out with the old, in with the new” was heavily resisted. Dr. Hacker gave the example of her attempt to change the tune of “The Doxology,” which is typically sung to the tune of “Old One Hundredth,” and the congregation resisted this attempt. Dr. Hacker explicitly correlates this clinging to the traditional to the congregation’s status as the oldest Presbyterian congregation in the state of Alabama; their identity is rooted in remaining traditional, a stance that is a counterculture to their sister congregation, Southwood Presbyterian.\(^\text{11}\)

Southwood Presbyterian has very modern facilities and a very modern attitude to worship, despite their association with the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which is known for being a very conservative organization in the Presbyterian denominational spectrum. Despite the marked signs of a church dedicated to the contemporary movement, such as a band and modernized arrangements of familiar hymns, my interview with Mr. James Parker, Southwood’s Music Minister, complicated my first impressions. Mr. Parker spoke of his own personal struggles with unbelief and how it was reflected in his personal tastes, but it also gave him an opportunity to express his thoughts on the “youth culture”:

\(^{11}\) Dr. Patricia Hacker (Music Minister of First Presbyterian Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 5, 2017.
This emphasis on the youth culture has sort of lost the ability to be in touch with our emotions, because as human beings, we have this immense capacity for a broad range of emotions, because we have a lot of different experiences. The way we reflect that back to God and to our community of churches is really sad; it’s a one-trick pony. Worship ought to include joy and it ought to include sorrow.\(^{12}\)

Mr. Parker’s observation on the breadth of the Christian experience and its expression within worship was a surprising revelation in the midst of the contemporary movement. Further, Mr. Parker placed an emphasis on the importance of the role of the hymn’s text in expressing emotion, despite a more implicit attention to the music of the hymn and its influence on emotion that appeared in some of the other interviews.

Even though it was generally agreed upon by the majority of music ministers that the focus of the congregation should be on the text of the hymn, the tune and the performance of that tune played a role in creating significance for the various congregations that I observed. One of my staple questions was “What is your favorite hymn and why?” and Dr. Orton’s initial response was to name a specific tune, rather than a hymn. Even Elder Ben Winslett, Pastor of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church, selected his list of favorite hymns based on the combination of the lyrical meaning and the melodic significance, not just on text alone, and he states “For whatever reason, chords have an effect on people. A minor chord conveys more of an eerie feel, whereas a

\(^{12}\) James Parker (Music Minister of Southwood Presbyterian), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 16, 2017.
major chord has a totally different emotional reaction.” Mr. Parker further emphasizes the importance of the relation of tune to text when he comments “The tune is important and helpful... it’s pragmatic and a vehicle for the text.” Thus, Guthman’s focus on the “high, lonesome sound” of “I Am A Stranger Here Below” is not entirely without merit. However, the focus on the tune of a hymn limits the dynamic process of the text, which guides this thesis.

Methodology

My method was to attend and record services, and later follow up with an interview with either an elder or pastor, or the music minister of each congregation. Of the nine congregations that I observed, seven agreed to be interviewed. As I attended services, I made notes on my impressions, how the practice and order of services differed from Old Line Primitive Baptist ways, what hymns were selected for worship, and how worship was conducted. Rather than ascribe meaning or significance to these congregations or their hymn traditions, I sought to reflect these lived processes by gathering unbiased, firsthand accounts from congregants themselves. I used Flint River Primitive Baptist Church as my starting point and my baseline for what to expect from a typical worship service. Flint River enjoys a recognized status as the first Baptist church in Huntsville and in Alabama. It is representative of Old Line Primitive Baptists within the context of this study. I also interviewed Elder Ben Winslett, the pastor of Flint River, as Flint River does not make use of a music minister and the closest approximation was the

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13 Benjamin Winslett (Pastor of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, April 9, 2017.

14 James Parker (Music Minister of Southwood Presbyterian), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 16, 2017.
pastor. It should be noted that Elder Ben Winslett has a background in trumpet performance and music theory, which did impact several of his responses in the interview.

I observed three African-American Primitive Baptist congregations: St. Bartley’s Primitive Baptist Church, Indian Creek Primitive Baptist Church, and Union Hill Primitive Baptist Church. I interviewed Mr. Rodney Milton, music minister of St. Bartley’s Primitive Baptist Church, but I was unable to interview the music ministers of Indian Creek or Union Hill. I observed Grace Chapel Progressive Primitive Baptist Church, which holds a similar doctrinal view as Flint River; the largest difference lies in the use of a piano in the worship service for Grace Chapel. I interviewed Donna Beatty and Debbie Craig, the pianists of Grace Chapel. I observed worship at Heritage Primitive Baptist Church twice; Heritage’s congregation is the result of a split in Flint River’s congregation around 2004-2005, and the doctrine preached at Heritage is often referred to as “Reformed Calvinism” amongst many Old Line Primitive Baptists. I interviewed Elder Mike Stewart, the pastor of Heritage Primitive Baptist Church, as there is no music minister employed by the church.

In addition to the variety of Primitive Baptist congregations that I observed and interviewed, I also attended two Presbyterian congregations and one Southern Baptist congregation, as well as two Sacred Harp singings to collect further data to compare to the Primitive Baptist denomination. I elected to investigate a Presbyterian congregation, due to the association between Presbyterians and the theology of Calvinism, a moniker that Guthman often used in connection to Primitive Baptist theology. I chose First Presbyterian Church of Huntsville, associated with Presbyterian Church U.S.A (PCUSA), due to its status as the first Presbyterian congregation in Huntsville. I selected Southwood Presbyterian due to its association with Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a historically conservative
denominational body amongst Presbyterians and that most closely resembles the doctrine and practices of Old Line Primitive Baptists. Finally, I observed First Baptist Church of Huntsville because of its reputation as a Southern Baptist congregation, as well as being the second oldest Baptist church in Huntsville.

I observed the traditional service at First Baptist Church of Huntsville, and I interviewed Dr. Billy Orton, the music minister for First Baptist, as well as the director of the Huntsville Community Choir and a highly respected musician within the Huntsville community. I observed Sunday morning worship at First Presbyterian Church and subsequently interviewed Dr. Patricia Hacker, the choir director and music minister of First Presbyterian. Likewise, I attended services at Southwood Presbyterian and interviewed Mr. James Parker, the music minister and lead guitarist for Southwood Presbyterian.

Two prevailing themes, outside of traditional vs. contemporary and the concept of the lived process, arose and guided my approach to the various texts and testimonies that I encountered. On one side, Yee’s theory of shared meaning and significance became apparent through the text of “Amazing Grace” and indicated that there is a communal aspect to the practice of the hymn, as well as the arrangement and version of the text that was presented in each congregation. “Amazing Grace” was consistently named as the gold standard of theology and hymnody, but it still possessed a character that reflected the lived process of the text within each congregational community; despite being a personal testimony, it is a common experience that nearly every Christian has at some point: the conversion narrative.

On the other end of the spectrum in Christian experience and textual significance, the themes of uncertainty, longing, and estrangement that Guthman locates in the hymn “I Am A Stranger Here Below” were revealed to be aspects of a far more personal, individualized
experience, rather than representative of the community. Although many Old Line Primitive Baptists believe in a sense of godly sorrow after committing a sin, the experience of godly sorrow varies based on the sin committed, the depth of guilt as a result of the sin, and the personal relationship between the sinner and God. Therefore, the godly sorrow narrative found within “I Am A Stranger Here Below” acts at the micro-level of the individual, where the significance of the hymn varies based on the personal experience of the singer of the hymn, rather than acts as a representative of larger agents within hymn practice and worship.

“Amazing Grace” thus acts as a viable case study of the lived process of the hymn on a communal level, and “I Am A Stranger Here Below” is the case study for the hymn on an individual level. Each hymn was subjected to a close reading with an Old Line Primitive Baptist bias to better reflect the theological values found within the respective texts, as well as to give voice to a doctrine that remains largely silent and misunderstood within scholarship. The close readings also function to establish a shared meaning as defined by Russell Yee and pave the way for the comparison of the myriad of versions of each hymn. A comparison of the different incarnations of each text was also done in order to examine the lived process of each hymn, and to determine the shared and personal significance of each hymn in the present cultural backdrop of youth culture, attention to tune, and theological biases.
Chapter 1: The Individual

The individual tastes in hymns varied widely, unlike the unifying "Amazing Grace." While "Amazing Grace" exists as a defining hymn for most congregations, the individuals that I interviewed had favorite hymns that possessed a personal significance that existed outside of the accepted congregational meaning and significance. An example of how individual significance diverges from corporate worship is the preferences of Dr. Patricia Hacker, Music Minister for First Presbyterian. Dr. Hacker’s hymn selections for worship are designed to reflect the larger communal identity of First Presbyterian, which includes traditional favorites such as “Come Thou Fount,” “How Great Thou Art,” and “Holy, Holy, Holy.” On the other hand, Dr. Hacker enjoys the hymn “His Eye Is On The Sparrow,” which has a slow, solemn tune that is at odds with the joyful text. Another hymn of deep personal significance is “My Tribute,” which she states is a reflection of her own personal beliefs and gratitude, which departs from the congregational emphasis on praising God.15

Dr. Billy Orton, Music Minister at First Baptist Church of Huntsville, has a personal preference is for the tune “Hyfrydol,” a tune that is commonly sung alongside the text “Jesus What a Friend For Sinners” in the Old School Hymnal #1216; however, in terms of text alone, the most powerful and personally significant hymn for Dr. Orton is “A Mighty Fortress,” which he feels best reflects his faith. Furthermore, “A Mighty Fortress” is integrally linked to scripture,

15 Dr. Patricia Hacker (Music Minister of First Presbyterian Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 5, 2017.

16 Dr. Billy Orton (Music Minister of First Baptist Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, May 11, 2017.
which Dr. Orton asserts both shapes and reflects his belief. Despite his enthusiasm for "A Mighty Fortress" and the tune Hyfrydol, Dr. Orton’s selections for congregational worship tend towards classics of worship, such as "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "Amazing Grace," "Holy, Holy, Holy," and "How Great Thou Art." Additionally, Dr. Orton makes many of his selections based on the placement of the hymn in the order of service, such as the invitation to join or the pastoral prayer, as well as the sermon planned for the day. Thus, Mr. Orton’s selections for collective worship reflect the congregational identity, but rarely reflect his own personal identity as a believer and member of the church.\footnote{Dr. Billy Orton (Music Minister of First Baptist Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, May 11, 2017.}

Finally, James Parker, the Music Minister at Southwood Presbyterian, demonstrates just how wide a gap exists between corporate worship and personal significance. Mr. Parker’s personal favorite hymns are "Decide This Doubt For Me" and "Help My Unbelief," hymns which deal with uncertainty and personal struggles with faith. Despite Mr. Parker’s own struggle with uncertainty, his choices for general congregational worship largely do not reflect his personal preferences; rather, he chooses hymns that emphasize the sovereignty of God and the authority of scripture for corporate worship. Mr. Parker elaborates on his experience of uncertainty when he comments

My personal identity... I have always struggled a lot with certainty and things that...

Statements in songs or sermons or books that tend be excessively certain, to me, have always... I’ve always been like, ‘You’re really sure about that? You really sure you have that completely buttoned up, like, you don’t doubt anything anymore?’ I mean, I tend to
hit the BS button when I hear that kind of stuff. So I’ve never really connected well to a lot of super overt... just, super certain-sounding stuff, and I’ve connected better to things that are honest about struggle. I mean, “Help My Unbelief” - something about ‘doubt frights my soul away when I try to pray’ and I mean that’s true, that’s true for me, y’know? And at the end of “My Help Must Come From Thee,” because I sure can’t fix it myself. It’s like Alcoholics Anonymous. I can’t fix myself. That kind of stuff resonates powerfully with me because certainty just seems like a gift that I don’t have. I mean, it’s something that everybody can have, to some degree or other, but I think some people have a spiritual giftedness of certainty and I have the opposite. I’m spiritually gifted in doubt, if that could be a gift.\(^8\)

Mr. Parker’s uncertainty is a personal experience that does not get broadcasted to the larger congregation, nor is it shared by the congregation, a concept that becomes prevalent in the text and practice of the hymn “I Am A Stranger Here Below.”

“I Am A Stranger Here Below” Close Reading

The hymn “I Am A Stranger Here Below” is a hymn that is unique to the Old Line Primitive Baptist hymnody, but according to the topical indexes of both the *Old School Hymnal* #12 and *Primitive Baptist Hymnal* #2, it is categorized as a hymn detailing the Christian Experience. Guthman makes a similar claim, where he states that “When Primitive Baptists sang the words of their old hymn “I Am A Stranger Here Below” ... they sang from personal

\(^8\) James Parker (Music Minister of Southwood Presbyterian), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 16, 2017.
essentially, “I Am A Stranger Here Below” is thought to be representative of every Christian’s experience, particularly of the Old Line Primitive Baptist experience. However, I have found from several interviews amongst those who face uncertainty or who are familiar with the hymn that uncertainty and estrangement from God are experiences that are fundamentally unique to the individual, and cannot be generalized to a congregation, much less an entire denomination. Furthermore, a close reading of the text from an Old Line Primitive Baptist perspective may prove useful in illuminating the experience of uncertainty in a believer’s life, as well as how the hymn is understood by the same group that Guthman claims the hymn represents.

The most common text of the hymn is the five-verse format found within the Old School Hymnal, but to be thorough, I will review all eight lines found in the Primitive Baptist Hymnal #2 and Lloyd’s Hymnal. Notably, there is no known author of the text of “I Am A Stranger Here Below,” and thus it is credited to Anonymous or Unknown. Also of note is that the hymn is written in long meter, which requires very particular tunes in order for the text to be set to music. Additionally, the hymn is commonly sung to the tune of “Conflict” within the Old Line Primitive Baptist Church, a tune that also has no known author. The melody is consistent across the versions that include the tune, but each hymnal has a new arrangement for the harmonies based on the preferences of the compilers and editors of each hymnal.

The first line in *Lloyd's Hymnal* is “I am a stranger here below,/And what I am ’tis hard to know;/I am so vile, so prone to sin,/I fear that I'm not born again.” The first line sets the stage for Guthman’s claim of uncertainty in a believer’s life, which is a clear and valid interpretation. The speaker expresses that he/she is a stranger here on earth, and is so plagued by sin, that he/she is uncertain of his/her status as a born-again Child of God. The first line has echoes of the Apostle Paul, where Paul states “For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.” Paul bemoans the conflict that exists within himself, where he naturally sins, but desires to lead a better life that is more reflective of his status as a child of God, a struggle that makes the tune “Conflict” an apt term for the music that accompanies the lyrics. Paul’s struggle, of being naturally drawn to sin but intellectually aware of his status as a child of God, is a personal struggle that is reiterated in “I Am A Stranger Here Below.”

The notion of a believer, or child of God, experiencing a sense of opposition or insecurity in the world is not uncommon within scripture. Paul and Peter both write that the children of God are a “peculiar people.” “Peculiar” in this sense of the word means “distinguished in nature, character, or attributes from others.” A child of God, regardless of personal moments of

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20 Benjamin Lloyd, *The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship.* (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.

21 Rom. 7:19 KJV

22 Tit. 2:14, I Pet. 2:9 KJV

doubt or shame, is naturally in a state of estrangement from the things of the world, which are not of God. Elder Ben Winslett clarifies the sense of “stranger” within the hymn:

He’s a stranger, but he’s not just one that doesn’t fit in, it’s not that, y’know, I’m in a place full of people that are different than me; I’m a stranger in that I have this conviction of sin. I feel myself to be unclean, and yet, though I feel to be condemned, I don’t fit in with the world around me that is just as wicked, but sees nothing wrong with it.\(^{24}\)

The key aspect of being a child of God is that the believer recognizes the act of sin in his/her life, and so the estrangement from the world is intensified. He/she realizes that although this act of sin is not condoned by God, it is acceptable to the world, and the speaker in “I Am A Stranger Here Below” exists in this in-between state, where he/she has trespassed, but is still a peculiar person that is \textit{in} the world but not \textit{of} the world.

The second verse is “When I experience call to mind,/My understanding is so blind,/All feeling sense seems to be gone,/Which makes me think that I am wrong.”\(^{25}\) Here, the speaker laments his/her past understanding of his/her state as a sinner in need of God’s intervention. Elder Ben Winslett makes a similar observation:

\(^{24}\) Benjamin Winslett (Pastor of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, April 9, 2017.

\(^{25}\) Benjamin Lloyd, \textit{The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship}. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.
["I Am A Stranger Here Below"] is a Christian experience in moments of conviction of sin, especially after perhaps a period of rebellion. As a born-again person, you have two natures; one is the nature of Christ, one is the nature of Adam. And these two natures, being in constant warfare, one with the other, you have periods of great conviction, and sorrow over sins. The phrase that Paul wrote in Romans, “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death,” that phrase “o wretched man that I am” basically sums up that entire hymn, “I Am A Stranger Here Below.”

The speaker recognizes that in the past, he/she likely felt no conviction over his/her actions, and thus lived life without the doubt and shame that accompanies the born-again child of God when he/she commits a sin. Elder Winslett’s commentary sheds light on the relationship between sin, the sinner, and the sinner’s state as a child of God.

The third verse has a slight tonal shift, where the speaker declares “I find myself out of the way,/My thoughts are often gone astray,/Like one alone I seem to be;/Oh! Is there any one like me?” Rather than simply wallow in his/her situation alone, the speaker begins to question whether any other believer has a similar experience. The third line also likely appeals to Joshua Guthman, as it opens up the possibility that the narrator’s experience of doubt and conflict is a universal experience. However, I contend that this line is only a transient moment within the

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26 Benjamin Winslett (Pastor of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, April 9, 2017.

27 Benjamin Lloyd, The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.
personal moment of doubt for a believer. The old saying "Misery loves company" comes to mind with the phrasing of the third verse. Despite the fact that doubt and shame are personal spiritual experiences, it is normal to seek out someone who is in a similar situation to commiserate.

"'Tis seldom I can ever see/Myself as I would wish to be;/What I desire, I can't attain;/From what I hate, I can't refrain"\(^{28}\) is the fourth verse of the poem. Yet again, the text echoes the words of Paul the Apostle in Romans 7, where he remarks "For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I."\(^{29}\) Like the Apostle Paul, the speaker of "I Am A Stranger Here Below" struggles with doing the godly thing, and instead often defaults to sinning. The day-to-day struggle to maintain a godly walk is a struggle not uncommon to adherents of Old Line Primitive Baptism, where many believers are exhorted to "daily mortify the flesh"; the mortification of the flesh stems from the warring nature of original sin and Jesus Christ within a child of God's life. Elder Ben Winslett indicates the warring natures when he speaks of "the nature of Adam" and "the nature of Christ,"\(^{30}\) and the tension between these two natures is what facilitates godly sorrow in the life of the believer, specifically in the personal testimony of the speaker in "I Am A Stranger Here Below."

\(^{28}\) Benjamin Lloyd, *The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship*. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.

\(^{29}\) Rom. 7:15 KJV

\(^{30}\) Benjamin Winslett (Pastor of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, April 9, 2017.
The fifth verse reads as "So far from God I seem to lie;/Which often makes me weep and
cry;/I fear at last I shall fall;/For if a saint, the least of all." The Apostle acts as a large
influence upon the author of the text, as the line "For if a saint, the least of all" mirrors another
scripture, where Paul states "For I am the least of all the apostles." The Apostle Paul's life prior
to his conversion was the life of a murderer, but after his encounter with God on the Road to
Damascus, Paul was counted amongst God's saints. However, even after his spiritual rebirth,
Paul expresses doubt in his life as a believer, which according to Elder John Melvin of Camp
Creek Primitive Baptist Church "Is a part of his struggle, but it's also his testimony." Paul
made use of his uncertainties and shortcomings as examples in his letters in order to instruct
other believers. In spite of the weeping and crying that a Child of God may experience due to
being a sinner, or a failure, there is also the opportunity to witness God's providence and to share
that personal experience with others who may have a similar experience.

In the sixth verse, the speaker is yet again is seeking for company in his/her misery, and
to express his/her conflict to another believer who may empathize with the speaker's situation: "I
seldom find a heart to pray;/So many things step in my way;/Thus filled with doubts, I ask to

31 Benjamin Lloyd, The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly
Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine
Worship. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.

32 I Cor. 15:9 KJV

33 Elder John Melvin, "Everyday Grace" (sermon, Camp Creek Primitive Baptist Church,
Lilburn, GA, October 8, 2017).
know-/Come, tell me, is it thus with you?" The sixth line acts as an elaboration of the sentiment expressed in verse three, and it also explicitly states the speaker’s doubt in his/her faith as a result of his/her indiscretion. It is also an opportunity for the speaker to share his/her personal testimony with another sinner who may or may not have a similar experience, which allows the speaker’s experience to minister to another who may have a weak faith or feel godly sorrow.

The seventh and penultimate verse yet again references Romans 7, which begins with a discussion of the role of the “law” within the believer’s life: “So by experience I do know/There’s nothing good that I can do;/I cannot satisfy the law,/Nor hope, nor comfort from it draw.” Paul speaks of the condemnation found under the Mosaic law in particular, and modern legalistic stances found within Christianity today. Merely following the letter of the law does not procure salvation, nor does it provide assurance or comfort; additionally, to fail the law or to fall short of fulfilling the law results in the godly sorrow that Paul shares as a part of his personal testimony.

The final verse of “I Am A Stranger Here Below” succinctly concludes the message of the hymn: “My nature is so prone to sin,/Which makes my duty so unclean,/That when I count

34 Benjamin Lloyd, *The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship*. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.

35 Benjamin Lloyd, *The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship*. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.

36 Rom. 7:13-25 KJV
up all the cost, / If not free grace, I know I’m lost.” In no uncertain terms, the speaker makes his/her godly sorrow and belief in Old Line Primitive Baptist theology evident by citing a sinful nature. The concept of mortifying the flesh is reiterated when the speaker writes “Which makes my duty so unclean” – the duty of a redeemed child of God that still lives a sinful life is to fight against the sinful nature daily. The “cost” hearkens to the verse “For the wages of sin is death,” where the earned price for sinning is death, but the final line concludes that “free grace” is the only possible salvation from the speaker’s miserable state as a guilty sinner who feels the weight of his/her sins.

The concluding line of “I Am A Stranger Here Below” is where concepts such as total depravity, unconditional election, and preservation of the saints are clearly discernable. Most importantly, it unmistakably puts forward the importance of irresistible grace in a believer’s life, and the necessity of grace to procure a pardon from sin. Joshua Guthman also takes note of the meaning of the final line of “I Am A Stranger Here Below” when he writes “But in that whirling confusion, the lonely Primitive pilgrim learned the lesson announced in the “I Am A Stranger Here Below” hymn’s last line: “Without free grace, I know I’m lost.” There was a deep loneliness in that kind of knowledge.” Although Guthman acknowledges that “I Am A Stranger

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37 Benjamin Lloyd, *The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship.* (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.

38 Rom. 6:23 KJV

Here Below” has an impact on the personal life of a believer, specifically a “Primitive pilgrim,” he incorrectly glosses the result as loneliness, rather than a source of relief and comfort. The speaker of “I Am A Stranger Here Below” declares that there is no comfort to be found in the law, but there is comfort to be found in grace. Coy Thomas, an ordained elder within the Old Line Primitive Baptist denomination comments that “Amazing Grace” picks up where “I Am A Stranger Here Below” leaves off."40 The conclusion is not that the sinner is at any moment in danger of being lost; it is that grace has fundamentally changed the sinner.

It is easy to take this hymn out of its context and read the speaker’s experience as a picture of the larger Christian experience, especially the experience of the Old Line Primitive Baptist. However, it is merely a glimpse into a small section of the whole Christian experience, a conviction stated by Elder Mike Stewart, pastor of Heritage Primitive Baptist Church, when he states “I think you have to take [“I Am A Stranger Here Below”] as a particular point in time of an experience some of us have.”41 Elder Stewart likened “I Am A Stranger Here Below” to another hymn, “As Thirst the Hart for Water Brooks,” which is a hymn that has been adapted from Psalm 42 and describes an experience of depression and loneliness in a believer’s life. Both hymns relate aspects of the Christian experience where the speakers are at a low point in their respective lives, and these hymns can be useful to a believer, a thought that Elder Stewart elaborates upon when he contends

40 Elder Coy Thomas, phone conversation with author, February 25, 2017.

41 Mike Stewart (Pastor of Heritage Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 28, 2017.
“I Am A Stranger Here Below” is not the Christian experience total; it is a point in time where someone is in a low point and struggling, and needs assurance they don’t have at the moment… And I have felt that at times, that song ministered to me, but we rarely sing it, because it’s not a commonly experienced thing. It shouldn’t be. God wants his children to have a deep assurance. He wants you to cry out ‘Abba Father’ and be sure that you’re his children. We do have those occasions, so I would say [“I Am A Stranger Here Below”] is meant to pinpoint an experience on a continuum of a life of faith, not represent the whole life of faith.\textsuperscript{42}

The shame, uncertainty, and estrangement that is expressed within “I Am A Stranger Here Below” is merely a single aspect of a life of faith that differs from person to person. In this way, the hymn takes on a lived aspect that becomes more apparent in its textual revisions.

“I Am A Stranger Here Below” Comparison

The hymn “I Am A Stranger Here Below” is unique to the Old Line Primitive Baptists, and as a result, there is a limited number of versions of the hymn. I will compare its renderings in both the eleventh and the twelfth editions of the \textit{Old School Hymnal}, the second edition of the \textit{Primitive Baptist Hymnal}, the \textit{Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship} (hereafter \textit{Lloyd’s Hymnal}), and \textit{A Collection of Original and Select Hymns and Spiritual Songs: For the Use of Christian Societies}. The earliest documentation of the text appears in \textit{Hymns and Spiritual Songs, selected from Several Approved Authors, Recommended}

\textsuperscript{42}Mike Stewart (Pastor of Heritage Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 28, 2017.
by the Baptist General Committee of Virginia, which was published in 1793; however, I was unable to access this text, so the next earliest format is that of A Collection of Original and Select Hymns and Spiritual Songs: For the Use of Christian Societies (hereafter Hymns and Spiritual Songs), which was published in 1807.

The line "I am a stranger here below" does appear in several texts from the eighteenth century; for example, in Hymns and Spiritual Songs by John Dracup, "I am a stranger here below" is the first line in the third verse of Hymn LV, which is an adaptation of Psalm 39:12. The actual verse reads as "For I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner," making "I am a stranger here below" a pleasant, metered English form of a bible verse for worship. In A New Version of the Psalms of David, Fitted to the Tunes Used in Churches by Sir Richard Blackmore, the line "I am a stranger here below" is used in lieu of "I am a stranger in the earth" (Ps. 119:19). Finally, "I am a stranger here below appears in The Mother's Catechism for the Young Child by John Willison, where the line is quickly followed by the assertion that "Christ will bring me home." Each instance of the key line of "I Am A Stranger Here Below" does not go as in depth on the personal subject of uncertainty and estrangement that is elaborated upon in the hymn "I Am A Stranger Here Below."

The most interesting pattern to note is the censoring of three verses that appear in the Lloyd's Hymnal and Hymns and Spiritual Songs (see figure 1), which do not appear in either


The Lived Hymn Tradition. The three verses were reintroduced in the Primitive Baptist Hymnal, but the shift away from the original text in the Old School Hymnal requires the reader to question why these three verses were removed. Furthermore, the five-verse version does not change from the eleventh edition to the twelfth edition of the Old School Hymnal, which raises another interesting observation on stagnation in a text, and quite possibly within a church.

15

HYMN VIII.

1 I AM a stranger here below,
   And what I am is hard to know;
   I am so vile, so prone to sin,
   I fear that I'm not born again.

2 When my experience calls to mind,
   My understanding is so blind,
   All feeling seems to be gone,
   Which makes me think that I am wrong.

3 I find myself out of the way,
   My thoughts are often gone astray;
   Like one alone I seem to be,
   Or is there any one like me.

4 'Tis 'seldom I can ever see,
   Myself as I would wish to be;
   What I desire I can't retain,
   From what I hate I can't refrain.

5 So far from God I seem to lie,
   Which makes me often for to cry;
   I fear at last that I shall fall,
   For if a saint, the last of all.

6 I seldom find a heart to pray,
   So many things stop in the way;
   Thus fill'd with doubts I ask to know,
   Come tell me if 'tis thus with you.

7 So by experience I do know,
   There's nothing good that I can do;
   I cannot satisfy the Law,
   Nor hope, nor comfort, from it draw.

16

HYMN IX.

3 My nature is so prone to sin,
   Which makes my duty so unclean,
   That when I count up all the costs,
   Without free-grace then I am lost.

4 BACKSLIDERS, who your mis'ry feel,
   Attend your Saviour's call;
   Return, he'll your backslidings heal;
   O crown him Lord of all.

5 The crimson sin increase your guilt,
   And painful is your trial;
   For broken hearts his blood was spilt;
   O crown him Lord of all.

6 Take with you words, approach his throne;
   And bow before him fall;
   He understands the Spirit's groan;
   O crown him Lord of all.

7 Whoever comes he'll not cast out,
   Altho' your faith be small;
   His faithfulness you cannot doubt;
   O crown him Lord of all.

HYMN X.

1 CHRIST is set on Zion's hill,
   His righteous iniquities still;
   He will shew to them that run this blessed King,
   Come, let us all with him sing;
   His soldier sure will be,
   Happy in eternity.

Figure 1. “I Am A Stranger Here Below” as found in A Collection of Original and Select Hymns and Spiritual Songs: For the Use of Christian Societies.

Within the first line of the hymn, there is a separation between both editions of the Old School Hymnal and the three other versions presented below. In Lloyd's, the Primitive Baptist

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Hymnal, and Hymns and Spiritual Songs, the first verse reads as “I am a stranger here below,/And what I am ’tis hard to know;/I am so vile, so prone to sin,/I fear that I’m not born again.”47 In the third line, the narrator points out how he/she is “prone to sin,” whereas in the Old School editions, the narrator states that he/she is “full of sin.”48 This subtle variation indicates a different semantic meaning altogether. The Oxford English Dictionary defines prone as “Having an inclination or tendency to something,” and when used “With reference to a disposition to a particular action, behaviour, mental attitude, etc.,” it is often in relation to something that is considered harmful.49 Essentially, being “prone to sin” means having a tendency towards the harmful act of sin, and that it is a behavior as well as a mental attitude. To be “full of sin,” on the other hand, indicates that the narrator’s body has “Within its limits all it will hold” of sin, and it forms a construction that is understood to mean “the container together with its contents.”50 The Old School view is that the narrator’s body is inherently sinful and is a container that holds sin within it, while the more antiquated lyrics indicate that sin is a disposition, a behavior, and subsequently it implies that sin is a conscious choice, rather than a state of being.

Another semantic change between the Old School Hymnal and the Primitive Baptist Hymnal, Lloyd’s, and Hymns and Spiritual Songs appears in verse two, which reads as “All

47 Benjamin Lloyd, The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.

48 Old School Hymnal. 11th ed. (Birmingham, Ala.: Old School Hymnal Co., Inc., 1990), 263.


feeling sense seems to be gone, / Which makes me think that I am wrong”\(^51\) in Lloyd’s, *Primitive Baptist Hymnal*, and *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. The second half, “Which makes me think that I am wrong” reads as “Which makes me *fear* that I am wrong.”\(^52\) The separation between “think” and “fear” tie back into Guthman’s assertion of doubt and uncertainty; by thinking, or centering the mental processes, on the lack of “feeling sense” and blind understanding, the narrator conveys a more cognitive aspect of sin and doubt. However, the use of the word “fear,” in which the likely usage, “to be afraid that something is the case”\(^53\) emphasizes an emotional agony, rather than a neutral mental process. Thus, the *Old School Hymnal* revision conveys more emotional doubt, while the older versions of the text accentuate the mental process of doubt.

The final semantic difference lies in the line “If not free grace, then I am lost,”\(^54\) from the final verse in both the *Old School Hymnal* and Lloyd’s hymnal (see figure 2). In the *Old School*...

\(^51\) Benjamin Lloyd, *The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship*. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.

\(^52\) *Old School Hymnal*. 11\(^{\text{th}}\) ed. (Birmingham, Ala.: Old School Hymnal Co., Inc., 1990), 263, emphasis mine.

\(^53\) *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) ed., s.v. “fear.”

\(^54\) Benjamin Lloyd, *The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapied to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship*. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.
The Lived Hymn Tradition.

_Hymnal_, this line reads as "Without free grace I know I'm lost."\(^{55}\) The phrasing of the line found in _Lloyd's_ version gives the sense of an ultimatum, where the speaker acknowledges that he/she is "lost," or condemned to Hell, if there were no such thing as free grace, or amazing grace. When the wording is changed to "Without free grace I know I'm lost," the sentiment shifts to imply that the speaker is claiming free grace for himself/herself; the free grace that merely exists in the _Lloyd's_ version is now not only recognized, but also put to use. The use of "without" indicates a condition, that if the speaker did not already have free grace, he/she would be lost or condemned.

\(^{55}\) _Old School Hymnal_. 11th ed. (Birmingham, Ala.: Old School Hymnal Co., Inc., 1990), 263, emphasis mine.
CONFLICT.

380
L. M.

Self-abhorrence, fear and hope.

1 I am a stranger here below,
And what I am 'tis hard to know,
I am so vile, so prone to sin,
I fear that I'm not born again.

2 When I experience call to mind,
My understanding is so blind,
All feeling sense seems to be gone,
Which makes me think that I am wrong.

CHRISTIAN EXERCISES.

5 I find myself out of the way,
My thoughts are often gone astray,
Like one alone I seem to be;
Oh! is there any one like me?

4 'Tis seldom I can ever see
Myself as I would wish to be;
What I desire, I can't attain;
From what I hate, I can't refrain.

5 So far from God I seem to lie,
Which makes me often weep and cry,
I fear at last that I shall fall;
For if a saint, the least of all.

6 I seldom find a heart to pray,
So many things stop in my way;
Thus filled with doubts, I ask to know—
Come, tell me, is it thus with you?

7 So by experience I do know
There's nothing good that I can do;
I cannot satisfy the law,
Nor hope, nor comfort from it draw.

8 My nature is so prone to sin,
Which makes my duty so unclean,
That when I count up all the cost,
If not free grace, then I am lost.

Figure 2. "I Am A Stranger Here Below" as found in The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship (1858), commonly called Lloyd's Hymnal, and utilized by many Old Line Primitive Baptists, as well as Guthman for Strangers Here Below⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Benjamin Lloyd, The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship. (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.
The three verses that the *Old School Hymnal* eliminates are as follows: “(5) So far from God I seem to lie,/Which makes me often weep and cry,/I fear at last that I shall fall;/For if a saint, the least of all. (6) I seldom find a heart to pray,/So many things step in my way;/Thus filled with doubts, I ask to know-/Come, tell me, is it thus with you? (7) So by experience I do know/There's nothing good that I can do;/I cannot satisfy the law,/Nor hope, nor comfort from it draw.” From an Old Line Primitive Baptist point of view, these three verses are not theologically unsound; if the first verse calls to mind Romans 7, then the fifth and seventh verses emphasize the biblical reference even further. These lines are later included in the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal* (see figure 3), which indicates a reevaluation of the scriptural basis of these three lines, and a movement amongst Primitive Baptists to return to the traditional or old ways.

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57 Benjamin Lloyd, *The Primitive Hymns, Spiritual Songs, and Sacred Poems: Regularly Selected, Classified and Set in Order and Adapted to Social Singing and All Occasions of Divine Worship.* (Greenville, Ala.: Published for the Proprietor, 1858), 293-294.
Despite minor punctuation and wording differences, the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal*, *Lloyd's*, and *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* line up neatly in their poetic structure, with much of the variation likely attributed to printing circumstances and formatting. Similarly, there is a lack of variation between the eleventh and twelfth editions of the *Old School Hymnal* (see figures 4 and 5), despite the shift away from the original lines and the return to originality in the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal*. Although these are not one-to-one comparisons due to the differences in compilers and even in use, they are both commonly accepted amongst Old Line Primitive Baptists as the authoritative hymnals for the 21st century. Flint River Primitive Baptist Church

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makes ample use of the *Old School Hymnal* #12, while Heritage Primitive Baptist Church uses both the *Old School Hymnal* #12 and the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal* #2.

263

**I Am A Stranger Here Below**

*Cadenza: L. M.*

1. I am a stranger here below, And what I am 'tis hard to know;
2. When I experience call to mind, My understanding is so blind;
3. I find myself out of the way, My thoughts are often gone a-stray;
4. It's seldom I can ever see Myself as I would wish to be;
5. My nature is so prone to sin, Which makes my duty so unclean;

I am so vile, so full of sin, I fear that I'm not born again.
All feeling sense seems to be gone, Which makes me fear that I am wrong.
Like one alone I seem to be Oh! is there anyone like me?
What I desire I can't attain, From what I hate, I can't refrain.
That when I count up all the cost, Without free grace, I know I'm lost.

Figure 4. "I Am A Stranger Here Below" as found in the *Old School Hymnal* #1159

I Am A Stranger Here Below

1. I am a stranger here below, And what I am 'tis hard to know;
   2. When I experience call to mind, My understanding is so fine;
   3. I find myself out of the way, My thoughts are often gone away;
   4. I'm seldom I can ever see myself as I would wish to be;
   5. My nature is so prone to sin, Which makes my duty so unclear.

I am so vile, so full of sin, I fear that I'm not born again.
All feeling sense seems to be gone, Which makes me fear that I am wrong.
Like one a-tone I seem to be, Oh! is there an - y - one like me?
What I desire I can't attain, From what I hate I can't refrain.
That when I count up all the cost, Without free grace I know I'm lost.

Figure 5. "I Am A Stranger Here Below" as found in the *Old School Hymnal* #12, utilized by Flint River Primitive Baptist Church

In the *Old School Hymnal* #12, the Topical Index classifies "I Am A Stranger Here Below" as a hymn about the Christian Experience. While this may appear to support the claim that "I Am A Stranger Here Below" encapsulates the entire Christian experience, it remains only an aspect of the experience of a believer. There are 610 hymns in the *Old School Hymnal* #12, of which only 122 hymns are categorized as Christian Experience hymns. While the Christian experience comprises 20% of the *Old School Hymnal* #12, "I Am A Stranger Here Below" is one hymn out of only 20% of a cannon of hymns for Old Line Primitive Baptists. Furthermore,

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"Amazing Grace" is also categorized under Christian Experience in the *Old School Hymnal* #12, signifying the breadth of the Christian experience, which is more than uncertainty or moments of doubt. In the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal* #2, "I Am A Stranger Here Below" is one of 625, and is once again categorized under the Christian Experience; however, the Christian Experience is further subdivided into categories, such as "Assurance & Trust" or "Prayer." "I Am A Stranger Here Below" is designated under "Pilgrims & Strangers," a section of about 19 hymns and comprises about 6% of the Christian Experience category in total.

Despite the lack of major differences within the text of "I Am A Stranger Here Below," the minor word changes from the *Old School* versions to the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal*, *Lloyd’s*, and *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* do have an impact on the meaning of the hymn. Moreover, the censorship of three middle lines within the *Old School* hymnals imply that there was likely a movement or ideology from 1990-2001 within the Old Line Primitive Baptists that may have influenced the exclusion of those lines, a likelihood that opens the possibility for further research.
Chapter 2: The Community

Collective worship differs from other forms of group singing, both in experience and in significance. As a part of my research, I attended a Sacred Harp singing to gain firsthand experience and compare it to corporate Sunday morning worship. The main emotional connections forged during congregational worship are centered around the meaning and significance of the hymn, the act of worshipping God, and the bond with other participants of like faith. For Sacred Harp, the emotional connections are centered around the successful performance of the song, the vocal part that is being performed, the bond with other singers of that same vocal part, and the continuation of a tradition. Congregational worship tends towards a communal bond, wherein the participants collectively strive to praise God and to blend with one another; essentially, a harmony is sought and often achieved. Whereas in Sacred Harp, it is not about blending in or finding significance in the collective whole. Sacred Harp emphasizes personal achievement and the maintenance of a past cultural heritage that is not centered around the worship of God.

Of course, this is not to say that the past does not influence the meaning and/or significance of hymns within congregational worship. Returning to “Amazing Grace,” the text’s historical background appears to impact the meaning and significance of the hymn today, as mentioned by Dr. Billy Orton, Music Minister at First Baptist Church of Huntsville. According to Dr. Orton, “The story behind [Amazing Grace] is wonderful.”61 Another example of how the historical background of a hymn’s text influences its present significance is the hymn “It Is Well

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61 Dr. Billy Orton (Music Minister of First Baptist Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, May 11, 2017.
With My Soul.” According to the common tale, the author of the hymn, Horatio G. Spafford, suffered misfortune after misfortune, culminating in the death of his four daughters in the shipwreck of the SS Ville Du Havre. According to Robert J. Morgan, as Spafford passed over the spot where his daughters drowned, he declared “It is well; the will of God be done.” Spafford’s words are reflected in the first line of the hymn, which is as follows: “When peace like a river, attendeth my way;/When sorrows, like sea billows roll;/Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,/’It is well, it is well, with my soul.’” The knowledge of the inspiration for the text affects the significance of the hymn for many worshippers, a phenomenon that Dr. Orton draws our attention towards and invites further exploration.

The phenomenon of the background of the text influencing its significance appears in marked ways in the Flint River Primitive Baptist congregation. Most predominantly, since worship is congregation-centered, the hymns selected for worship are not thematic in nature, but are largely favorites of the congregation. These favorite hymns, which tend to be the most commonly sung hymns in worship, are favorites largely due to the meaning and the significance of the lyrics. Elder Ben Winslett of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church elaborates on this phenomenon in Old Line Primitive Baptist Churches:

Well, they’re favorites of the congregation, plain and simple. And they are for a variety of reasons. Sometimes people feel... Because they’re a Primitive Baptist church, the congregation selects based on what they want. Sometimes people feel connected to a

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hymn because the lyrics describe their spiritual experience. The composer - or the author, rather - the poetry expresses something that they can sympathize with, that touches them. And there are also hymns that, while the music is the lesser part, it is music, and God did create music and give us music as a tool. Sometimes there are melodies and chord structures that connect with us, and that move us, that enhance the hymn, that make the hymn better, more able to connect better. A variety of reasons, largely the lyrics. You have some hymns, like "Long Ere the Sun" that is an expression of doctrinal truth that we would rejoice in, as redeemed sinners, but you also have "As Thirsts the Hart for Water Brooks," which is another one that we sing. And that one is derived from the Psalms, in which the psalmist was experiencing depression and struggling with a downcast soul. And that "Why art thou cast down, o my soul," that phrase referenced a clinical depression; it’s a shepherding term for a sheep that’s stuck on its back and can’t get up, because its wool is so heavy. It takes a shepherd to pick it back up. That’s the condition of the psalmist’s soul. So if a person’s going through depression, or adversity, that hymn will connect with them in a powerful way.64

Elder Winslett’s commentary demonstrates how the congregational selection of hymns within the Old Line Primitive Baptist church reflects how the hymn is connected to the personal and the communal levels of worship and significance. These commonly sung hymns within the Flint River congregation solidify the general congregational identity by unifying individual

64 Benjamin Winslett (Pastor of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, April 9, 2017.
experiences, a part of the lived process of hymns that is best illustrated in the hymn “Amazing Grace.”

“Amazing Grace” Close Reading

A closer look at the text of “Amazing Grace” is necessary to understand its influence and staying power for so many congregants and congregations. The interpretation of the text of the hymn will have an Old Line Primitive Baptist bias for two purposes. First, it will accurately reflect Old Line Primitive Baptist beliefs and make them plain to those who are unfamiliar with the denomination. The Old Line Primitive Baptist emphasis on grace and mercy, as well as the immutable and sovereign aspects of God, are key doctrinal principles for interpretation of the hymn. Second, it should also reveal the significance of the poem on a communal level, rather than on an individual level; that is to say, the reading will be representative of the Old Line Primitive Baptist community, not any one person who may or may not be an Old Line Primitive Baptist.

The text of “Amazing Grace” exists in various forms, but for the sake of this close reading, the original and full text penned by John Newton and published in the Olney Hymns in 1779 will be the main focus of my analysis, since it is the first known publishing of “Amazing Grace.” The title, which Newton originally penned as “Faith’s Review and Expectation,” sets up the organization of the poem and the purpose for the poem. The original intent of the poem was for Newton to examine his past and his history with his faith, and draw from it his anticipation of what is to come in his faith, hence the words “review” and “expectation.” Despite the appropriateness of the original title, particularly when the hymn is read in its entirety, I find

65 John Newton, Olney Hymns. (London: W. Oliver, 1779), 53-54.
that the more common title, "Amazing Grace," is more versatile, and hearkens to the first line. Each time that the title "Amazing Grace" is uttered in modern day, it calls to mind Newton's next phrase, "How sweet the sound," and may in fact be more apt than "Faith's Review and Expectation."

The first stanza, which is the most well-known verse of the hymn, is "Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)/That saved a wretch like me!/I once was lost, but now am found/Was blind, but now I see." Of note in this rendering of the hymn are the parentheses surrounding the phrase "how sweet the sound." The parentheses evoke a sense of the phrase "how sweet the sound" as an aside, muttered to oneself after the exclamatory "Amazing grace!" and as I have already stated, is commonly associated with the force of the title and first words, "Amazing grace." The parenthetical aside reinforces the importance of grace in a believer's life, because even as the word "grace" is uttered, it is a word that is pleasing to the ear and to the wretch that Newton refers to himself as in the line that follows.

An Old Line Primitive Baptist definition of grace is necessary before I proceed any farther. Elder Winslett commented on the importance of grace and its amazing nature in the hymn: "Saved by grace. Grace that's amazing. A salvation that's earned is not amazing. It's not amazing if I get a paycheck for going to work. This is grace that's amazing because it saved wretches, not the righteous." Grace, according to Old Line Primitive Baptist ideology, is considered "As a quality of God: benevolence towards humanity, bestowed freely and without

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67 Benjamin Winslett (Pastor of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, April 9, 2017.
regard to merit, and which manifests in the giving of blessings and granting of salvation.⁶⁸ The key phrase in the Oxford English definition is “without regard to merit.” As Elder Winslett stated, grace is amazing because it is granted to those who are considered undeserving of mercy or salvation. When Newton revels in the sweetness of the sound of grace, he is reveling in the deliverance freely granted to him, despite his background as a wretched man.

The lines “I once was lost, but now am found/Was blind but now I see” emphasize the effect that grace has had upon the author, and it is a sentiment echoed in worship by singers of this hymn. Newton is still reviewing his lack of faith and his conversion, where he gained the ability to see and found his place in a spiritual sense. There appear to be differing explanations for Newton’s conversion — the metaphorical transition from blind wandering to restored vision and direction in the first stanza. According to Robert J. Morgan, Newton’s conversion came about due to his mother’s pious influence and the threat of death by a sea-storm on March 10, 1748.⁶⁹ Dr. Erik Routley asserts that the constancy of Newton’s fiancée and Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, contributed more towards his conversion, despite the fact that he does acknowledge the efficacy of the storm of March 10, 1748.⁷⁰ In spite of the disparate explanations, Newton makes it clear that God’s grace has made a lasting and irrevocable impact upon him.


Newton further dwells upon the influence of grace in his life in the following stanza, which is also the standard second verse in the hymn: "'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,/And grace my fears reliev'd;/How precious did that grace appear,/The hour I first believ'd!" The notion that grace inspires fear is an interesting concept, which raises two possibilities. First, Newton may mean "fear" as defined as "a mingled feeling of dread and reverence towards God (formerly also, towards any rightful authority)." In this sense, Newton's conversion inspired dread and reverence for God, which makes the following line, "And grace my fears reliev'd" plausible, as it indicates that grace as a source of unmerited salvation is the only relief for the sudden reverence for God that conversion invokes. The second line also reinforces the notion that those who receive grace should also revere God, and show their gratitude for the salvation that His grace imparts. The other possibility is that Newton means fear in the more general and colloquial sense, which is "The emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger, or by the prospect of some possible evil." Whether Newton's fear was for his perceived impending death during the storm of March 10, 1748 or for his eternal salvation, the result is that grace sparked understanding of his wretched state and consequently soothed his fear. Finally, Newton concludes this stanza by declaring that grace is precious to him because of its power over him in his hour of conversion.

The third stanza reinforces the notion that Newton's conversion was somewhat dependent upon his experience in the British Navy and the March 10 storm. The verse opens with "Thro'
many dangers, toils and snares;/I have already come;” which reaffirms how Newton’s early life shaped how God’s grace would later influence him, which he further gives credence to with the following lines “‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far./And grace will lead me home.”\textsuperscript{74} Newton is still dwelling upon his conversion, and still reviewing his faith, which is strengthened by his recognition of his former helplessness, particularly in times of trouble, as well as his deliverance from these “toils and snares” that only came through God’s grace. Grace as a way home can be rendered both physically and spiritually; Newton was delivered home in the physical sense after the storm of March 10, but he also was able to recognize that grace was a way home in the spiritual sense.

The fourth stanza is where a volta occurs, and the poem moves from being a review of faith to an expectation of faith, which is clearly demonstrated by the first line “The Lord has promis’d good to me.”\textsuperscript{75} Additionally, Newton makes it clear that part of this understanding of God’s promises comes from the reading of the Gospel, which the second line “His word my hope secures” reinforces. Not only has God’s grace made a fundamental impact on Newton’s heart and soul, but it also impacts his mind, habits, and day-to-day life, which can apply to believers who empathize with Newton in this poem. For the sake of clarification, the hope found in God’s word is not the modern-day notion of hope. Hope, as it is used in the original Greek, means expectation or confidence, which the Oxford English Dictionary confirms as a “Feeling of trust or confidence.”\textsuperscript{76} Furthermore, the Oxford English Dictionary notes that the usage of hope as

\textsuperscript{74} John Newton, \textit{Olney Hymns}. (London: W. Oliver, 1779), 53-54.

\textsuperscript{75} John Newton, \textit{Olney Hymns}. (London: W. Oliver, 1779), 53-54.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., s.v. “hope.”
confidence is obsolete, with the exception of it being “biblical archaism.” The notion that Newton has is that his hope, or confident expectation, of Heaven is made secure by God’s grace found in the Gospel.

Newton further develops the expectation that he has for the rest of his life as a believer in the concluding lines of stanza four, “He will my shield and portion be,/As long as life endures.” The reference of the shield is evocative of Ephesians 6:16, where Paul the Apostle writes “Above all, taking the shield of faith…” The reference to scripture reinforces the first two lines of stanza four, which is that God’s word strengthens Newton’s faith and his confidence in God. Furthermore, it returns to Newton’s original title, “Faith’s Review and Expectation.” In keeping with the tradition of clarifying the usage of abstract words, the faith that Newton expresses within this poem is not the modern conceptualization of faith, which is a belief that is not based upon discernable proof; rather, the faith that Newton is expostulating upon is “The fulfillment of a trust or promise” or “Belief, trust, confidence.” More specifically, faith is “belief based on evidence, testimony, or authority.” The notion of faith as trust or confidence based in evidence is made explicit in scripture, where faith is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Newton’s faith, and the faith of a converted Christian, is a shield, substance, evidence, and the hope or confidence, of Heaven.

78 Eph. 6:16 KJV
81 Heb. 11:1 KJV
Further dwelling on the lines “He will my shield and portion be,/As long as life endures,” Newton names the Lord as his portion. In the biblical sense, a portion is used in reference to blessings or a share of the whole. For example, when “portion” is commonly written “For the Lord’s portion is his people,” and when this verse is taken in context with the passage, the Lord’s portion is His share of the whole of humanity; essentially, the nation of Israel, descended from Jacob, is God’s share of the rest of humanity. Portion is also used in reference to an inheritance, where the wives of Jacob, Leah and Rachel, ask “Is there yet any portion or inheritance for us in our father’s house?” Their usage of portion indicates that it is synonymous with an inheritance, which is further used in this sense in the psalms, where David declares the Lord to be “the portion of mine inheritance.” When Newton states that the Lord is his portion, he asserts that the Lord is his share of an inheritance, a notion which is reinforced in the New Testament. Finally, according to the Holman Bible Dictionary “To have a portion in the Lord is to share the right of joining the community in worship of God.” Newton’s claim to a portion in the Lord signifies not only his personal relationship to God, but also his participation in a community of believers that share his faith and convictions.

After making it clear that he will live a life of faith, Newton continues on past the endurance of life to death in stanza 5: “Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,/And mortal life shall cease;/I shall possess, within the vail,/A life of joy and peace.” This stanza cannot be read

82 Deut. 32:9 KJV
83 Gen. 31:4 KJV
84 Ps. 16:5 KJV
85 Holman Bible Dictionary, s.v. “portion.”
86 John Newton, Olney Hymns. (London: W. Oliver, 1779), 53-54.
without the sixth and final stanza, which reads as “The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,/The sun forbear to shine;/But God, who call’d me here below,/Will be forever mine.”\(^87\) Taken together, they conclude Newton’s faith’s expectation, which is the fulfillment of God’s promise of the inheritance of Heaven. Newton makes it clear that he expects Heaven to be his true home, which is filled with joy and peace, and he will reach that true home at the end of his life. However, he takes this notion one step farther, and applies this premise to the earth. The earth is transient, and in connection to his former “toils and snares,” it will not last forever, but the security that Newton finds in the grace of God is everlasting.

While this reading of “Amazing Grace” is heavily influenced by one denomination’s doctrine, it should also illuminate the meaning and significance of the text for the Old Line Primitive Baptists. Despite the fact that “Amazing Grace” is a better hymn to use to define the doctrinal and theological identity of Old Line Primitive Baptists, it is also a hymn that is commonly sung and celebrated in other denominations across the board. The connection of “Amazing Grace” to so many congregations with various practices and beliefs is best stated by Elder Winslett, who remarked that “[Newton’s] story is the same one that the Apostle Paul experienced, and every single believer in Christ has experienced: being drawn from sin and brought into a vital relationship with Christ.”\(^88\) Thus, “Amazing Grace” is consistently named as being the most commonly sung or the most reflective of doctrine in congregations, such as First

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\(^88\) Benjamin Winslett (Pastor of Flint River Primitive Baptist Church), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, April 9, 2017, emphasis mine.
The Lived Hymn Tradition.

Baptist Church of Huntsville, Grace Chapel Progressive Primitive Baptist Church, and St. Bartley's Progressive Primitive Baptist Church.

"Amazing Grace" Comparison

"Amazing Grace" appears in several incarnations over time and in various congregations. Most markedly is the arrangement done by Edwin O. Excell (see figure 6), which typically contains the original first, second, and third verses of the poem penned by John Newton and first published in *Olney Hymns*. Additionally, Excell is known for including the verse "When we've been there ten thousand years/Bright shining as the sun/We've no less days to sing God's grace/Than when we've first begun," a verse that was not originally penned by Newton. The resultant four lines compose the most well-known format of the hymn, which has been perpetuated as the most common arrangement of Newton's "Faith's Review and Expectation." Even still, various hymnals find some way to break free of the standard, and the result is an emphasis on various topics and themes that may or may not be conveyed in the common format.
The original text can be easily established by examining the Olney Hymn, a hymnal published by Newton himself and can be considered as the canonical format of the poem (see figure 7). If these original lines are taken as a baseline to measure how the text has been restructured over time, we can trace how different aspects of the poem are downplayed, updated, or completely reinterpreted.

89 Baptist Hymnal. (Nashville: Convention Press, 1956), 188.
The Lived Hymn Tradition.

Figure 7. The first published version of the hymn “Amazing Grace” by John Newton in *Olney Hymns* (1779)⁹⁰

The most common edit made to the original poem is the inclusion of the line “When we’ve been there ten thousand years…” The addition of this line is likely due to the popularization of the Excell arrangement, but the actual author of the line remains fairly anonymous. Outside of the various adaptations of “Amazing Grace,” the line “When we’ve been there ten thousand years…” appears once in print in the *Old School Hymnal* #12, as the final line.

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for the hymn "On Jordan’s Stormy Banks," sung to the tune "Land of Promise." The hymn overall is credited to Samuel Stennett, so it can be assumed that Stennett is a possible author of the line. The hymn "On Jordan's Stormy Banks" is in common meter, like "Amazing Grace," which makes the transference of the line from one hymn to another easy. The only established fact is that John Newton did not pen the line, despite several attributions signifying his involvement with that particular line.

Within the context of the lines written by John Newton, the line “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...” works well when it follows the final line of the original incarnation, “The earth shall soon dissolve like snow...” because it is a transition from the expected destruction of the mortal world following the Second Coming of Christ into the anticipated experience of Heaven after death and the Resurrection. In the sermon *The Misery of Man*, Henry Gally writes “Faith points out to us a new Heaven and a new Earth, where our vile Body will be made glorious, bright, and shining as the Sun ... Mortality will be swallow’d up by Immortality.”

Gally, a contemporary with Newton, uses the line “bright and shining as the sun” to illustrate the visual many believers had of Heaven and the Resurrection that would occur after the earth ends. Gally also indicates that the key to understanding this anticipated post-apocalyptic future is faith, a similar notion as Newton’s review and expectation of faith. The addition of the line “When we’ve been there ten thousand years,” while not “pure” or true to the original incarnation of the poem, is not a scripturally unsound or heavily debated verse; and connects well with the full length of Newton’s original text.

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The arrangement of "Amazing Grace" found in *Celebrating Grace: Hymnal for Baptist Worship* (see figure 8) appears at first glance to follow the Excell arrangement; however, the original fourth line, "The Lord has promised good to me..." has been reinstated in the hymnal used by the First Baptist Church of Huntsville. Although Newton's full expectation of faith is not elaborated upon in this arrangement, it still contains one line that is dedicated towards the hope of heaven and the impact of the Gospel on a believer. Unsurprisingly, the non-original line "When we've been there ten thousand years..." is also included in this arrangement, which indicates some influence from Excell's arrangement upon the First Baptist arrangement. In fact, the editors of *Celebrating Grace* make a note of Excell's influence in the acknowledgements of the music in the lower left-hand corner of the page; they also acknowledge that the fifth line was not originally penned by John Newton.
The arrangement of "Amazing Grace" found in Glory to God: Purple Pew Edition (see figure 9) closely resembles the arrangement found in the First Baptist hymnal. The first four lines are the original lines penned by John Newton with the inclusion of the fifth line "When we've been there ten thousand years..." The editors of Glory to God also make note of Excell’s arrangement and its influence, and they also attribute the first four lines to John Newton.

However, Glory to God departs from Celebrating Grace when it attributes the fifth line to A Collection of Sacred Ballads, rather than Anonymous. Additionally, Glory to God includes three

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93 Celebrating Grace: Hymnal for Baptist Worship. (Macon: Celebrating Grace, Inc., 2010), 587.
translations of the first line into the Choctaw, Creek, and Navajo languages, which is credited to Albert Tsosie Navaho. Furthermore, it includes a brief history note beneath the Native American translations, which reads “As was his custom, the author wrote this hymn to accompany his sermon on 1 Chronicles 17:16-17, preached on January 1, 1773; he called it “Faith’s Review and Expectation.” Much of its current popularity comes from this now-familiar tune, an association that began in 1835.” Another minor difference is that *Glory to God* credits the tune to the *Columbian Harmony* (1829), but does not name the composers, Benjamin Shaw and Charles H. Spilman, while *Celebrating Grace* did. Additionally, *Glory to God* names the tune as “Amazing Grace,” while *Celebrating Grace* names the tune as the more commonly known “New Britain.”
According to Dr. Patricia Hacker, the hymns and practices associated with them have not really changed over the years; in fact, Dr. Hacker shared her observation with me that First Presbyterian has a status, as the first Presbyterian church in Huntsville, and as a result, the congregation is very resistant to change. She attempted to implement a new tune for the hymn “The Doxology” and the change did not take, despite the familiarity of the text. However, Dr. Hacker’s observations are somewhat contradictory, as she also admits that the hymns have

changed over time, largely to accommodate other cultures and to "make modern old tunes." 95 The accommodation of other cultures is clearly seen in the translations into Native American languages, and the modernization of the old is made apparent in the retitling of the tune for "Amazing Grace," as well as the arrangement for the harmonies of the hymn. However, neither of these explanations are sufficient to determine why First Presbyterian's "Amazing Grace" closely resembles the First Baptist's "Amazing Grace," nor do they explain the inclusion of the original fourth line and the exclusion of the original fifth and sixth lines of the hymn.

I observed that both Celebrating Grace and Glory to God included similar hymns, aside from the standard "Amazing Grace." Both services made use of the hymn "In Christ There is No East or West," a hymn credited to John Oxenham by both hymnals, despite employing different tunes for the common meter text. According to Dr. Hacker, the First Presbyterian Church of Huntsville has a Baptist background, due to its location in the typically Baptist-dominated region of the South, Alabama in particular. She also stated that the result of this background, First Presbyterian and First Baptist shared similar hymnals until the 1950's, when they supposedly diverged. 96 The First Baptist Celebrating Grace Hymnal is a recent publication, and yet the similarities remain; in a brief conversation after service, Dr. Orton indicated that the current

95 Dr. Patricia Hacker (Music Minister of First Presbyterian Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 5, 2017.

96 Dr. Patricia Hacker (Music Minister of First Presbyterian Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 5, 2017.
hymnal contained several Presbyterian hymns, despite its character as a Baptist hymnal. Dr. Orton's offhanded comment seems the more likely explanation for the overlap, but both Dr. Hacker and Dr. Orton's viewpoints are also colored by the congregations they serve.

James Parker, Southwood Presbyterian's music minister, stated that although he preferred not to use "Amazing Grace" as much in worship service due to his perceived overuse of the hymn elsewhere, when he does make use of it, he includes the original fourth line of the hymn, "The Lord has promised good to me..." and elects to cut out the line "When we've been there ten thousand years..." His explanation for the cutting out of "When we've been there..." is due to his philosophy of hymn purism, where the line should not be included if it was not originally penned by the poet when he/she wrote the hymn. However, The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration (see figure 10), which is utilized by Southwood Presbyterian, prints a version of "Amazing Grace" that has far more revisions made to the text than just the inclusion of the line "When we've been there..."

97 Dr. Billy Orton (Music Minister of First Baptist Church of Huntsville), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, May 11, 2017.

98 James Parker (Music Minister of Southwood Presbyterian), interview by Hannah M. Thomas, June 16, 2017.
Even though the line “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...” is included like the arrangements found in Celebrating Grace and Glory to God, it is credited to John P. Rees, rather than John Newton; moreover, the arrangement is credited to Excell, despite the fact that the Excell arrangement does not typically include the line “The Lord has promised good to me...” In the contents of The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration, “Amazing Grace” is categorized under the large topical umbrella of Jesus Our Savior, specifically the Grace, Love, and Mercy aspect of

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Christ's Redemptive Works. The emphasis on the grace expressed in "Amazing Grace" is the central focus in The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration; the importance of redemptive grace is also reflected as a key value in the community of Southwood Presbyterian, where their mission is to "experience and express grace." 100

The arrangement of "Amazing Grace" found in The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration includes the first four lines penned by Newton and the fifth line included in the original Excell arrangement; however, this version of "Amazing Grace" contains more notable differences than similarities to Celebrating Grace and Glory to God. The original third line, "Thru many dangers, toils and snares..." is swapped with the original fourth line, "The Lord has promised good to me..." The flip also switches the meaning of the place of the original fourth line in the original incarnation of the text; essentially, the line "The Lord has promised good to me...," which is a part of Newton's expectations from his faith in God, is swapped with the third line, which speaks to Newton's review of his faith. In the context of the original order of the verses by John Newton, the speaker in The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration moves from discussing his/her remaining life of faith to the deliverance out of tribulation experienced at the moment of conversion, which disrupts the intended meaning by Newton. It muddles the impact of grace upon the faith of a believer by decentralizing the experience of conversion and deemphasizing the secure expectation of Heaven and the Lord's role in a life of faith.

Thus, Mr. Parker's professed "hymn purist" stance raises the question of whether he is aware of the "Amazing Grace" and its "impure" form found in his congregation's hymnal of

choice. More importantly, Mr. Parker’s position raises a problem in the stance of hymn purism, a stance not limited to Mr. Parker. In “The Language of the Eighteenth Century Hymn,” Donald Davie glosses the problem with hymn purism when he says “For when a text like [the hymn] ceases to be “corrupted,” it ceases to be alive as a still germinating presence in the ongoing consciousness of the English-speaking peoples.”101 Essentially, whether or not Mr. Parker is aware of the inauthenticity of the purity of *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, the practice of the hymn is likely to fit this “impure” form for the sake of tradition within Southwood Presbyterian’s congregation. More simply, if it is the culture of worship at Southwood Presbyterian to sing the first through fourth lines printed in *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, then that is what is important to the meaning and significance of “Amazing Grace” within that congregation, whether or not the version of “Amazing Grace” found in the hymnal is authentic or pure, or speaks to the original intended meaning of Newton.

The largest difference among the various incarnations of “Amazing Grace” was in the *New National Baptist Hymnal* (see figure 11), utilized by St. Bartley’s Primitive Baptist Church, Indian Creek Primitive Baptist Church, and Union Hill Primitive Baptist Church. Rather than the familiar tune of New Britain, the hymn is sung to the tune of “Martyrdom” by Hugh Wilson, a tune familiar to the *Old School Hymnal* #12, but titled “Avon.” Interestingly, the tune “Avon”/“Martyrdom” accompanies the hymn “That Dreadful Night,” a hymn typically sung during communion at many Old Line Primitive Baptist Churches. Even more surprising is that

the lyrics are misattributed to Isaac Watts, despite the fact that three-fourths of the lines were penned by John Newton, and the overall arrangement was done by Edwin O. Excell. Rodney Milton, the music minister of St. Bartley's Primitive Baptist Church, stated in my interview with him that the hymns by Isaac Watts were used mainly during communion. Coupled with the misattribution in the *New National Baptist Hymnal* and the tune Martyrdom/Avon's association with a communion hymn in the Old Line Primitive Baptist congregations, it is very likely that Mr. Milton was referring to "Amazing Grace" as one of the main communion hymns.

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Figure 11. “Amazing Grace” as found in the New National Baptist Hymnal, utilized by St. Bartley’s Primitive Baptist Church, Union Hill Primitive Baptist Church, and Indian Creek Primitive Baptist Church.  

Furthermore, the misattribution to Isaac Watts is not uncommon; Davie addresses the Isaac Watts Attribution Error: “To this day, ministers of religion and choirmasters and even individual worshippers have no compunction about keeping a name like Isaac Watts at the foot of a hymn, even though in singing and often enough in reprinting that composition they habitually leave out certain verses and completely change others.” Davie argues that the hymn is a living article, that it is transmitted through an oral tradition, and despite the fact that many eighteenth-century hymns, such as “Amazing Grace,” may appear to be a canonical item that can


be traced back to copyrights and published texts, it is still vulnerable to the forces editing and revision and misattribution that come from its nature as a lived, practiced text. Even though many scholars can agree that “Amazing Grace” was in fact authored by John Newton, that fact means little to the worshippers and practitioners of the hymn who recognize it as a work that is a part of a body of eighteenth-century hymns, most of which were written by Isaac Watts.

One of the three largest distinctions of the *Old School Hymnal*, editions #11 and #12 (see figures 12 and 13), is the use of all six of the original lines penned by John Newton with a few minor changes. The sixth line, rather than the original “The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,” reads as “The world shall soon to ruin go.” The second main characteristic of both editions that distinguish them from *Glory to God, Celebrating Grace, New National Baptist Hymnal*, and *Worship and Celebration* is the use of shape notation, rather than round head notation. Finally, both editions of the *Old School Hymnal* name the tune as New Britain, and attribute the melody to William Walker. The attribution to Walker is ostensibly a reference to the tune’s origin in the *Southern Harmony*. In addition to the melody’s attribution to Walker and the *Southern Harmony*, the harmony arrangement departs from many other arrangements, as it was composed by Elder Roland Green, a hymnist popular among Old Line Primitive Baptists and one of the compilers of the *Old School Hymnal*. Aside from these obvious differences, “Amazing Grace” is categorized in both editions of the *Old School Hymnal* as a Christian Experience, a departure from Southwood’s emphasis on the redemptive work of Christ.
Figure 12. "Amazing Grace" as found in the *Old School Hymnal* #11, utilized by many Old Line Primitive Baptists.
In the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal* #2 (see figure 14), "Amazing Grace" is categorized under "The Church: Doctrine" rather than Christian Experience, which indicates a shift in the shared significance of the text from an individual experience to a doctrinal truth. Additionally, the inclusion of the line "When we've been there ten thousand years..." from the *Old School Hymnal* #12 to the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal* #2 demonstrates another shift in the practice of the hymn and what is considered canon in the space of only three years. It is profitable to note that two separate entities are responsible for the selection and arrangement of the hymns for the *Old School Hymnal* and the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal*, which also accounts for discrepancies between the two hymnals. The change from the *Old School Hymnal* #12 to the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal* is more noticeable, despite the short time in between publications; however, the lack of change

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for "Amazing Grace" from the eleventh edition to the twelfth edition of *Old School Hymnal*, with eleven years between the two publications, signifies an interesting trend.

Figure 14. “Amazing Grace” as found in the *Primitive Baptist Hymnal* #2, utilized by Heritage Primitive Baptist Church107

Not only does “Amazing Grace” have varying appearances and emphases in different congregations, but “Amazing Grace” as a cultural icon takes shape in *The Sacred Harp*, a book and a secular practice of a cappella singing for various spiritual songs. The poem of “Amazing Grace” appears twice within *The Sacred Harp*; once under the familiar tune “New Britain” (see figure 15), and once under another common meter tune, “Jewett” (see figure 16). Aside from the Old Line Primitive Baptist hymnals, the incarnations found in *The Sacred Harp* are the closest to the original text. Neither “New Britain” nor “Jewett” include the extraneous “When we’ve been there ten thousand years...” and the final verse matches the original incarnation of Newton’s poem, where he writes “The world shall soon dissolve like snow...” However, the original fifth line, “Yea when this flesh and heart shall fail...” is cut from both versions in *The Sacred Harp*.

![Figure 15. “Amazing Grace” under the familiar tune of “New Britain,” as found in the 1991 edition of Sacred Harp](image-url)

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The best possible explanation for the close similarities of the texts found in The Sacred Harp and the original poem would be the cultural phenomenon of the Sacred Harp tradition. The Sacred Harp tradition claims to be a part of the American South cultural heritage, a claim that may affect how different texts are credited, maintained, and arranged within The Sacred Harp hymnbook. The result is that both versions of “Amazing Grace” remain very close approximations to the original poem penned by John Newton. The question still remains for the author attribution of the tune “New Britain,” which claims its source as the Columbian Harmony in 1829, rather than the more well-known arrangement credited to Walker’s Southern Harmony.

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"Amazing Grace" may be a universally recognizable hymn, but how it is interpreted by different congregations and denominations does vary. The relationship between the First Baptist Church and the First Presbyterian Church creates more similarities than differences, but across the board, non-Old Line Primitive Baptist congregations tend to cut the original fifth and sixth lines from the text of "Amazing Grace," and even in the Sacred Harp tradition, the original fifth line is nonexistent. As I have already discussed in my close reading of the original text, the fifth and sixth lines work together in tandem to emphasize the expectation of Newton's faith, and the confidence he has in Heaven, based on the grace he has experienced in his life. The elimination of these lines also indicates the commonality of faith's review and the conversion narrative, but not the expectation of faith.

Another key note is the claim to authorship that exist within the *New National Baptist Hymnal*, as well as the questionable attribution of the line "When we've been there ten thousand years..." In *The Sound of the Dove*, Beverly Patterson resolves the issue of authorship in hymnals when she states

> Such claims to authorship can have a variety of meanings and have to be interpreted carefully... The compilers of these shape-note tunebooks were themselves often acting as tune collectors and arrangers rather than creators... Walker's claim, then, did not necessarily mean that "French Broad" was an original composition or would even be a tune new to his readers."\(^{110}\)

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The author and tune attributions across the various incarnations of "Amazing Grace" then demonstrate not a cannon or historical artifact, but a mutable and lived process of defining and redefining the text, even through claims of authorship.
Conclusion

The hymn not only reflects the identities that we create for ourselves, but they also shape our identities, as well as the identities of future generations. Furthermore, the hymn is a lived process of belief, identity, and significance that changes over time. The hymn is both a product and an agent in this lived process. Many scholars look to the past to define a group or assign meaning to a particular hymn; however, this method detracts from the evolution of hymns and their significance over time. Donald Davie addresses the problem of attempting to fossilize hymns by writing “We must beware of stacking away on library shelves a text of which the living place is still in tattered hymnals, on insecure music stands, and in the inexact memories of infrequent worshippers.”111 The simple act of practice, or repetition, of the hymn in everyday life and in communal worship allows the hymn to be a part of a culture in a way that differentiates it from other scholarly texts.

Within the lived process of hymnody, Joshua Guthman attempted to draw out a characterization of identity within the Primitive Baptist denomination. However, the identity that Guthman interprets is one of uncertainty and estrangement, which he ascribes to the hymn “I Am A Stranger Here Below.” The Primitive Baptist identity that Guthman finds is that “[Primitive Baptist] knew that God had decided... who among the planet’s later inhabitants would be saved and who would be damned. They knew as well that not only could they never

know or understand God's decision, they could do nothing to alter it." Guthman's claim is based on the notion that identity is located solely within a fixed text that does not represent the whole cannon of Primitive Baptist hymnody, which allows him to ascribe a sense of helplessness and resistance to God's will to the Primitive Baptist faith.

Despite the wide variety amongst the congregations that I observed and interviewed, a common thread was the hymn "Amazing Grace." The general consensus is that this hymn is an important documentation of the Christian experience and a timeless representation of God's grace, which are both integral to the individual and the congregation as a whole. For many, it is the standard of what a hymn should be and what it should reflect. "Amazing Grace" is the robust illustration of how congregations self-identify and a demonstration of how the hymn is a lived process, rather than a stationary text. Interestingly, "Amazing Grace" is a unifying hymn across the board for various congregations, despite their variant worship practices and theologies. Its significance transcends denominational boundaries, despite the personal nature of this hymn and its background.

Much like "Amazing Grace," the hymn "I Am A Stranger Here Below" has changed over time, although to a lesser degree than "Amazing Grace." Additionally, despite the fact that "I Am A Stranger Here Below" is peculiar to the Old Line Primitive Baptist cannon of hymnody, it does not necessarily represent the entire community of Primitive Baptists, much less the Old Line Primitive Baptists that exist as a smaller sub-group under the umbrella of Primitive Baptism. Rather, "I Am A Stranger Here Below" acts as an antithesis to "Amazing Grace,"

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The Lived Hymn Tradition.

wherein “I Am A Stranger Here Below” operates at the micro-level of identity, found in the personal experience of the individual member of the congregation. “Amazing Grace” then operates at the macro-level of identity, in the realm of the congregation and occasionally, the denomination.

My project sought to resolve the inaccuracy of the representation of Old Line Primitive Baptists in academia by utilizing the Old Line Primitive Baptist perspective as a critical lens for close textual readings and textual comparisons. It also sought to demonstrate the dynamic nature of the hymn, which exists as a part of the lived process of hymnody by its integration in the daily life of the individual and the congregation. The significance of the hymn, or the cultural context by which the hymn is practiced and shared, is heavily influenced by the congregations and the individuals, and in turn heavily influences the congregations and individuals.

Several other possible themes arose in the course of my research that were not sufficiently elaborated upon within this thesis, which includes the oral tradition of hymnody, the folkloric nature of hymns, lived religion, and a comprehensive explication of Primitive Baptist doctrine. Other themes, such as stagnation, authorship claims, and hymnal institutions, are only briefly touched upon for the sake of brevity. Additionally, although the congregations and individuals discussed in this study proved to be salient examples and sources, they are not necessarily representative of the larger whole, the denomination. Finally, this study was limited to Primitive Baptist identity establishment, which resulted in the censure of other denominations and theologies that diverge more noticeably from Primitive Baptism, such as Church of Christ or Jehovah’s Witness. All of these topics are a part of the lived process of hymns and the identity-related concepts of meaning and significance; they constitute a gap in scholarship that requires a closer look in future research.
Bibliography


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