

## THE POET AS THEOLOGIAN

By Sherwood Eliot Wirt

When a person is born into the Kingdom of God he often waxes poetic. Under the overpowering stimulus of the Holy Spirit his imagination runs riot. Sometimes he expresses himself skilfully, sometimes not; but he can't help being a poet. Whether he is also a theologian is another question. Our hymnbooks are full of imprecise theological statements, a legacy from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Since T. S. Eliot a vast amount of religious poetry has been published in the English language, but much of it fails to qualify as Christian and Biblical. So often it seems to be people-oriented and earth-centered.

So we have the problem of making Christian poetry more theologically exact; but we also face the problem of making theology more poetic! For people will read poems about God where they will shun the dissertations of the theologians. Under torture by North Vietnamese interrogators, American pilots with Christian upbringing did not turn to the fifth chapter of Romans, but to the twenty-third Psalm.

Poetry is an art form and as such belongs to the orders of Creation. I would side with the purists who defend the concept of art for art's sake. At the same time I contend that when poetry exalts the Creator of art it becomes art for God's sake. Thus I draw a distinction between poetry that propagandizes or promotes a human cause, however worthy, and poetry that seeks to bring the reader closer to God. Rudyard Kipling used poetry to extol the British Empire; Yevtushenko and Langston Hughes forced poetry into the service of Soviet Communism; Hirohito and Mao Tse-tung wrote poems to promulgate their respective ideologies. Christian poetry belongs to a different sphere.

In some mysterious way, art forms seem to rise out of themselves when they are made to interpret the truth and majesty of God. Music enters into a different dimension when it glorifies the Lord. Painting acquires a certain radiance; sculpture assumes a nobler lineament; and poetry evokes a stronger image. Art for God's sake becomes a greater art.

Plenty of inferior religious poetry (and art and music) could be cited to show that just because a thing is sacred, it is not necessarily good. Yet we must be careful here. The Holy Spirit, who, as Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*, is the true muse of poetry, uses both literary masterpieces and doggerel verses. God makes use of them over and over again to snatch sinners from hell and to draw seekers into the Kingdom of God.

Artists within the Christian community will tell you that we should "give of our best to the Master," but what we give to him is not nearly so important as what he gives to us. We do not set the standards of excellence; he does. And when we dedicate and devote our art to the

primary cause for which we were created—namely, the praising of God—he does things with it that we could never do.

What is poetry? It is an attempt to capture through rhythm and meter an aspect of truth that prose can never completely express. It is the “concrete and artistic expression of the human mind in emotional and rhythmical language.” Genuine Christian poetry may be defined as an artistic response to the God of creation and redemption. It may be put to use as a teaching or evangelistic tool, but that is not why it was written. All poetry is its own justification.

Without poetry life would be impoverished. It is difficult to conceive of the Bible without the Psalms, which are read more than any other part of Scripture. The first hymnbook of the early Church was (it is believed) the Odes of Solomon, which reached a level of Christian poetry that has not been surpassed in two thousand years.

Much of the poetry in the Bible went unrecognized for centuries simply because it did not rhyme. The twentieth century, following Walt Whitman and Gerard Manley Hopkins, has returned to unrhymed poetry to such an extent that no widely recognized modern poet would think of insisting on using a rhyme scheme. This development has created much dismay in Christian circles, for rhyme is dear to the hearts of believers. When we began publishing unrhymed poetry in DECISION Magazine in the 1970s we received many complaints. Nevertheless we persisted, not just out of a desire to be contemporary, but because we found the most magnificent unrhymed poetry in Job, the Psalms, and the Song of Solomon.

Too, we have found support in no less than John Milton, who defended his unrhymed epic, *Paradise Lost*, in these words:

The Measure is English Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin; Rime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in longer Works especially, but the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter; grac't indeed since by the use of some famous modern Poets, carried away by Custom, but much to thir own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse than else they would have exprest them.

The modern poet may have a different reason for dropping rhyme. It perhaps says things too neatly, and is therefore considered inappropriate for a torn-up era. For the truth is that most able modern poets are rebels. They are in revolt against society, against the establishment, the power structure, God, Christ, the Church, and everything ecclesiastical if not spiritual.

There are exceptions. Here and there one finds a wistful poet reaching out for the vision of God, or sounding a nostalgic note over the disappearance of faith. But many, if not most, modern poets are mood people; they reflect the existentialism and nihilism and emptiness of our day. They do not challenge the meaning of life because they assume life has no meaning. They investigate instead its ambiguity, its incongruities. The best they can do is to put something together that describes life as

they see it and feel it, and the worst is to lapse into some kind of narcotic stupor. For such writers free verse makes an admirable vehicle.

Yet it is in such a time as this that God is calling Christians to write poetry that will cleanse and lift and stab awake the human spirit; and free verse makes a useful vehicle here also. Evangelical poetry at its best has an element of the rebellious in it, for no Christian is truly at home in this world. But the transcendent theme of Christian poetry should always be the greatness and goodness of God, as he is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Thus Christian poetry, whether written, read, or recited, becomes an act of worship.

How we need such poetry! How we need a renaissance of poetry writing to glorify God and to strengthen the faith of his Church!

But not to preach. Straight preaching is undesirable in any art form, including poetry; but there is an element in Christian verse that does more than merely provide enjoyment. Such poetry should seek to satisfy the reader with a revelation, a helpful insight, a truth well expressed, a hope, so that life will seem more worthwhile (if not less unbearable) after the lines have been read.

If a poem is to qualify as a Christian poem, it must have a sound theology. No matter how slight the reference, the allusion to God must be clear. Doctrinal completeness is not essential, of course, but the poem dare not express a thought that is contrary to Scripture. I do not mean that the poem cannot raise questions, but it must never give the wrong answer. The thought can range from utter simplicity to the profundity of God himself, but if it is to be truly evangelical, it cannot go off the rails.

To illustrate the poet's theological task (but not necessarily his poetic skill), let me quote in full a poem I wrote for the April, 1974, issue of DECISION Magazine. It is entitled "Easter Walk."

Lamb grazing on the warm green hillside  
 I watch you frisking white and lovable  
 but let me ask you something  
 what do you know about fabric shortages  
 or the rising demand for wool?  
 It's some world you've come to, little one.  
 I wouldn't give much for your future.  
 Save for the blood of the Lamb  
 I wouldn't give much for ours either.

This is the rueful generation  
 that painted itself into a corner.  
 Imagine no trips to the lake at Easter!<sup>1</sup>  
 These are the sidewalk people  
 of Toowoomba<sup>2</sup> and Ealing<sup>3</sup> and West Fargo

<sup>1</sup>Fuel crisis, 1974

<sup>2</sup>Queensland, Australia

<sup>3</sup>A suburb of London

who want to know who's in charge here  
 while at Louie's and Harry's and Lucky's  
 they mutter over reuben sandwiches  
 about the drop in the resort trade  
 and troubles in truck parts  
 and Christmas tree lights.  
 What can be done for these people?  
 Who can save them?

Climbing the hill to the crest  
 I look over wild distant deserts  
 and catch a glimpse of a solitary figure  
 young, thin, dressed in skins,<sup>4</sup> shouting  
 You built a tower  
 without counting the cost.<sup>5</sup>  
 You sowed the wind  
 and reaped the whirlwind.<sup>6</sup>  
 You put flags on the moon  
 and junked cars on the outskirts.  
 You ate from the tree of knowledge<sup>7</sup>  
 and blew your minds.  
 You prefabbed your temples  
 and stayed in your sins.  
 You had a ball  
 and the ball was the earth.  
 O generation of vipers<sup>8</sup>

repent  
 repent  
 repent!

And I watch as he kneels in prayer.  
 But now he stands erect head high  
 and points to One coming: 'At last he is here.  
 Come and see!<sup>9</sup> Behold the Lamb of God  
 who takes away the sin of the world.'<sup>10</sup>  
 And I see crowds flocking to the desert<sup>11</sup>  
 and I think we're not down the tube  
 yet.  
 There is hope.

<sup>4</sup>Mark 1:6

<sup>5</sup>Luke 14:28

<sup>6</sup>Hosea 8:7

<sup>7</sup>Genesis 3:6

<sup>8</sup>Matthew 3:7

<sup>9</sup>John 4:29

<sup>10</sup>John 1:29

<sup>11</sup>Mark 1:5

Walking to the other side of the hill  
 I see a tomb knocked awry  
 and soldiers lying about as if dead<sup>12</sup>  
 and in the sky flashes of lightning  
 and seven torches of fire  
 with voices and peals of thunder  
 and harpists playing on their strings  
 I see angels gathered about a throne  
 and hear them singing  
     Worthy is the Lamb that was slain.  
     The kingdom of the world  
     has become the Kingdom of our Lord  
     and of his Christ  
     and he shall reign for ever and ever.<sup>13</sup>

All this on an Easter afternoon  
 while the new lambs grazed and frolicked  
 on the warm green hillside  
 and the old world turned the key  
 on an empty tank.

But perhaps my favorite example of contemporary Christian poetry is this five-line gem by Miriam Doell:

One copper crab-apple leaf fell,  
 but before it touched the earth  
 it touched my heart  
 and whispered,  
 "God."

My hope is that more evangelical theologians will seek to express their faith in flights of poetry. If they cannot, perhaps they can at least drop some poetic expressions into their monographs, and make them more interesting and exciting—and Biblical!

<sup>12</sup>Matthew 28:4

<sup>13</sup>Revelation 4:5; 5:8, 12; 11:15