

# Malaysian Association of Theological Schools Journal

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2nd Issue

2008

Pages 74-82

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# Do We Have to Sing “Amen”?

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In issue 541 (4/15/2004) of the *Methodist Message*, I wrote an article on the issue of singing “amen” at the end of a hymn. In the article, I made a strong challenge for its discontinuation. Many people have responded either positively or negatively to my conclusion. Some were probably surprised at my conclusion. Have we been wrong all this while in singing “amen” at the end of a hymn? Since the previous article has raised some eyebrows, I would like to make a clearer explanation here in order to provide a better understanding of the issue.

## **MEANING AND USAGE OF “AMEN” IN THE BIBLE**

The word “amen” in Hebrew means “so be it” or “truly.” It is a declaration of affirmation found in the Old Testament (OT), the New Testament (NT), and in the Quran.<sup>1</sup> “Amen” has been adopted in Christian worship as a concluding formula for prayers and hymns, and the English translations of “amen” include “verily”, “truly”, “so be it”, and “let it be”.<sup>2</sup>

In the OT, “amen” is commonly used in commands, blessings, curses, doxologies, and prayers.<sup>3</sup> Fundamentally, it is used to confirm what has

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<sup>1</sup>“Amen”, *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amen>>. Date Accessed: 17/01/2007.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Geoffery Chew and Edward Foley, “Amen,” in *The New Grove Dictionary for Music and Musicians*, Vol.1, Edited by Stanley Sadie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 463-64, here p. 463.

been previously said by way of response (Num 5:22; Deut 27:15-26; 1 Kgs 1:36; Jer. 11:5; 28:6; 1 Chr. 16:36; Neh. 5:13; 8:6).<sup>4</sup> Another common use of "amen" is in the conclusion of a doxology (1 Chr. 16:36; Ps. 41:13; 106:48).<sup>5</sup>

In the NT, "amen" is always used with discretion, purpose, and meaning. It appears in benedictions, prayers, doxologies, and other religious phrasing. There are fifty-four occasions where Jesus used "amen" in the synoptic gospels, and all are translated as "truly" by the RSV. In most cases, Jesus prefaced some important statements with the term, "Truly, I say to you?" (Matt 5:18, 26; 6:5; 10:15; 13:17) while all the twenty-five occurrences of the double form of "amen" ("Amen, Amen") in the Gospel of John (John 1:51; 3:3; 5:19, 24, 25; 12:24; 14:12; etc) signify the force of the superlative<sup>6</sup> and stress both the authority of his teaching and his majesty.<sup>7</sup>

Paul usually used "amen" in his written benedictions, which appears in the body of his letters as well as at the end (Rom 15:33; 16:27; 1 Cor. 16:24; Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:20; 1 Tim. 6:16); and following a doxology (Rom. 11:36; Gal. 1:5; Eph. 3:21). Both demonstrate a liturgical and a literary usage.<sup>8</sup> John used "amen" nine times in a variety of ways in Revelation, and the term reaches its climactic application as a name for Jesus Christ, where Jesus calls himself, "the Amen, the faithful and true witness" (Rev 3:14). An "amen" concludes the NT at Revelation 22:21.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce Chilton, "Amen," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1, Edited by David Noel Freedman et al (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 184-86, here p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> G. B. Funderburk, "Amen," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1, Edited by Merrill C. Tenny (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), pp. 127-28, here p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Amen," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1, Edited by Walter A. Elwell (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> Chew and Foley, "Amen"; and Funderburk, "Amen".

<sup>9</sup> Funderburk, "Amen"; and "Amen", *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*.

From the above survey, “amen” is used basically in two ways. The first usage is as a preface to introduce or emphasize what is going to be proclaimed. In this usage, “amen” is always placed at the beginning of the statement, not at the end. The second way is used as an act of response. This is the response to what has been said by someone else. It is not a self-response to what has been said by oneself. Erik Routley<sup>10</sup> commented that this is the only liturgical use of “amen”, and this is of immense importance.<sup>11</sup>

### **THE ORIGIN OF SINGING “AMEN”**

In the fourth century AD, there were heresies which doubted the deity of Jesus Christ. To overcome this problem, Bishop Ambrose added the Doxology at the end of each hymn to affirm the belief in the Trinitarian God, and “amen” was sung at the end of the Doxology.<sup>12</sup>

During the Middle Ages, when congregational singing lost its birthright to the trained clergies and musicians, the congregation only responded with an “amen” at the end of the hymn to express their accord with what has been sung. However, during the Reformation, Martin Luther restored congregational singing, and he abolished the former practice of singing

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<sup>10</sup> Erik Routley, PhD (1917-1982) was an Englishman, an ordained minister of the Congregational Church, and President of the Congregational Church of England and Wales (1970-1971). Erik held positions in the following: first chair of the Doctrine & Worship Committee of the United Reformed Church, visiting professor and director of music at Princeton Theological Seminary, professor of church music and director of the chapel at Westminster Choir College, Princeton, which he joined in 1975. He was regarded as the most influential hymnologist of his generation. See Carlton Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 821.

<sup>11</sup> Erik Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1980), p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> Loh I-to and Ling Yi Juan, *Companion to The New Century Hymn* (Taipei: Church Music Committee of Presbyterian Church of Taiwan & Church Music Research Center of Tainan Theological College & Seminary, 2003), p. 27.

“amen.” The present implication is that we do not have to reaffirm what we have sung by restating “this is truly” or “I agree” at the end of a hymn. This non-usage continued to the nineteenth century, in both the British and American church traditions. The renowned hymnist, Isaac Watts, the Father of English hymnody, and also the co-founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley, never used “amen” at the end of their hymns.<sup>13</sup>

In 1833, the Oxford Movement was interested in medieval hymnody and regarded “the medieval culture alone was the pure, religious culture, and medieval hymnody the proper norm for all other hymnody.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the translation of hymns was done from Latin to English. Without knowing the history, the movement translated the “amen” as well. Also, at this time, the musical style of the hymns were “composed for the meters of the poetry of the texts, and the amens were usually two short syllables added to the final stanza, so the music of the hymn tune did not accommodate them. As a result, the doxological “amen” was added to the final stanza following the completion of its singing, usually set to the familiar IV-I plagal or “amen” cadence.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, even the most well-known hymnal of its time, the *Hymns Ancient & Modern*, included the “amen” at the end of every hymn. Thus, the English Church began singing “amen” again. With this inclusion, other mainline churches also picked up the practice. It was not until 1920 that the Church of England realized its mistake and thus dropped the “amen.”<sup>16</sup> Soon after this, the other churches began to drop the “amen” as well.

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<sup>13</sup> Loh and Ling, *Companion to The New Century Hymn*, p. 27; and Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>14</sup> Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith*, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Dean McIntyre, “Why Don’t We Sing Amens Anymore?” Available on: <[http://www.gbod.org/worship/music/articles.asp?act=reader&item=2773&loc\\_id=17,387](http://www.gbod.org/worship/music/articles.asp?act=reader&item=2773&loc_id=17,387)>, Date Accessed: 17/01/2007.

<sup>16</sup> Loh and Ling, *Companion to The New Century Hymn*, p. 28.

## SINGING “AMEN” AMONG THE METHODIST CIRCLES

In the circle of Methodist hymnody, Erik Routley’s book *Church Music and the Christian Faith* had a great impact on Dr Carlton C. Young, the editor of the 1966 and 1989 *United Methodist Hymnals*, and other editorial members. Thus, they followed the trend by dropping the “amen” in order to reclaim their Methodist heritage and practise a more Christian way of hymn singing. The practice of adding “amen” to hymns in the United Methodist congregations has almost totally disappeared, and it has ceased to be an issue.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the English-speaking congregations of the Methodist Church in Sarawak are using *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), thus the singing of “amen” is not an issue. However, the Chinese-speaking congregations are still using the *Hymns of Universal Praise* and the singing of “amen” at the end of a hymn is a common practice. Now with a proper understanding of the meaning and the historical background of singing “amen,” we need to reflect further on this issue. Dropping the singing of “amen” is a sensitive issue, and it could even come as a shock to many congregations. However, we need to be aware of its historical development, and reflect on this issue so as to be able to sing “in spirit and in truth.”

## WHEN TO SING “AMEN”?

When should we sing “amen” and when should we drop “amen”? Dr Young recommended the following guidelines in his *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*: “With the exception of the end of prayers and doxological stanzas or where the composer has written the music

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<sup>17</sup> McIntyre, “Why Don’t We Sing Amens Anymore?”

<sup>18</sup> Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 139. However, it seems that he does not always follow his own suggestion. There is inconsistency in the use of these guidelines. In the *United Methodist Hymnal*, “amen” is sung only in the Doxology

for an amen, the amen is recommended for deletion."<sup>18</sup> In my correspondence with Dr Young, he said:

....if you will re-read pages 581 in the *Companion*, you will see in Routley's and my views there is no theological justification for adding amens to all hymns. In the instance of SE Asian Protestant churches it's a practice that missionaries at the close of the 19th century and into the mid-20th century thought correct and worshipful, and planted it into the psyche of new Christians.

He further commented that "If adding amens strengthens a church's congregational singing, and contributes to the growth of corporate and individual piety and prayer life, then they should be sung."

If so, why sing them at the end of all hymns? For a really bad use of the "amen", see the penultimate line of "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" that reads in English, "let the amen sound from his people again." Singing another "amen" at the end of that hymn, dynamic level *mezzo piano* or *piano*, seems redundant and perhaps absurd.

I fully agree with what Dr Young has said. In one of the Methodist Theological School (MTS) Faculty meetings, some of the lecturers also pointed out that the singing of "amen" has become an expression of faith, for it unites people in harmony and reaffirms what has been sung. For Christians who have been singing "amen" ever since they joined the church, they will feel lost or that something is missing or incomplete psychologically and sentimentally if it is dropped. Under these circumstances, we should

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(UMH 70,71, 82, 91,95, 651), Lord's Prayer (UMH 270, 271), and music pieces specially composed for the "amen" (UMH 184, 668, 692). As I corresponded with Dr Young about this inconsistency, he responded in an email on 28/1/2007 admitting that the guidelines are not always observed.

sing “amen” as Dr Young has recommended. However, it is not appropriate for all hymns. So the pastor or worship and music leader should decide when to sing “amen” or and when not to.

The *Hymns of Universal Praise* (1977 edition) indicates that the word “amen” printed in the usual way after hymns of prayer and praise serves as a form of direct address to God; whereas after other hymns, some people consider its use as not so appropriate, and so it is placed in parentheses.<sup>19</sup> However, most of the church members sing “amen” all the time regardless of the suggestions.

The *Hymns of Universal Praise* (2006 edition) which was released recently seems to follow the same recommendation as *The United Methodist Hymnal*. However, there is no explanation on the use of “amen” in the preface. With this new edition of the hymnal, I think the common practice of singing “amen” at the end of the hymns will be changed. However, since most churches might not be using the new hymnal, it means the issue of singing “amen” will continue for some time!

### **SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO DROP “AMEN”**

If you have decided to drop the singing of “amen” at the end of a hymn, you will need to explain the biblical meaning of “amen” and the history of singing “amen” to the congregation before you take any action. You should also convince the congregation why and when they should drop the “amen.” The explanation could be done in the following ways: make the announcement before the worship service, print the announcement in the church bulletin, conduct seminars and workshops to educate the whole church, and teach through the pastor’s preaching from the pulpit.

During hymn singing, when the end of a hymn is reached, the pianist or organist, and the worship and music leader can purposely sustain the

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<sup>19</sup> *Hymns of Universal Praise* (Hong Kong: Chinese Christian Literature Council, 1977), Preface.



last note of the music for an extra two beats or more in place of singing the "amen."

## **CONCLUSION**

"Amen" is a strong biblical expression with different specific usages. Singing "amen" at one time in the church was an act of response. However, as the context has varied, singing "amen" was no longer required after the Reformation period in the Protestant churches. But due to a historical "mistake" that crept in during the time of the Oxford Movement, the practice of singing "amen" at the end of the hymn has continued and persists till today. Furthermore, we have seen that there is no theological basis for singing "amen" at the end of every hymn.

Since we are singing from the bottom of our hearts, we do not have to pronounce again an "amen" which would mean "I agree with what I sing." Today, as we have learnt from its historical development and usage, it is with God's wisdom that I recommend that we learn to drop the singing of "amen" at the end of most hymns and know when to use it at other appropriate times. This will ensure that we return to a more Methodist and more Christian way of expressing our faith through our singing.

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