
WORSHIP

Worship (Workshop) in a Nondenominational Tradition

Atla Annual Hymn of Praise 2024

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ABSTRACT This in-person worship service was constructed not to be a common devotional experience, but a workshop on hymn-writing. Employing an ancient method for constructing a hymn, the participants wrote down various virtues or characteristics of God and God's activities based on those characteristics. Participants focused on virtues that were reflective of our professional lives: collecting, ordering, preserving, and making accessible knowledge and wisdom. The resulting hymn was then presented orally. After the workshop, the stanzas were collected, ordered, and are now available online. The goal of the exercise was to be intellectually stimulating and fun, but most importantly, to be worshipful.

INTRODUCTION

One of my areas of interest is the compositional approaches of first-century writers. What were students taught about rhetoric in the gymnasium, which offered intellectual and philosophical formation along with physical exercises? Rather than go over a devotion based on a text, I decided to make the worship service more of a workshop; we were going to workshop a hymn. I am not a musician, but this

was not about music — it was about an ancient form of literature. My intention was to give a little explanation of *enkomyion* (Greek, “hymn writing”; Latin, *encomium*), go over one hymn written in the New Testament that follows this style (Philippians 2.1–11, the hymn of the humility of Christ), and direct the participants in writing a hymn.

THE HANDOUT AND LESSON

The handout for the workshop includes part of one lesson, “On Encomium and Invective,” written by a first century grammarian and teacher, Aelius Theon. The gist of the lesson is that when one composes an *enkomyion* (for a person), it follows a certain pattern. When one does the same thing for a dead person, it is called an *epitaphios*, and, for a god, a hymn. First, one writes about the person’s birth. This is followed by praise for the person’s virtues and actions based upon those virtues. That would be followed by praises for the person’s appearance and health. And, lastly, one writes about the person’s luck or fortune. As we were going to praise God, we didn’t need praises about God’s appearance or health, and God isn’t “lucky.” That left us with finding virtues, or aspects of God’s character, to praise, and the deeds and actions based upon those virtues. I mentioned Johannine characteristics, such as love and light. I also mentioned the characteristics from Exodus 34:5–7: *gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, faithfulness, and forgiving*. Any of those would be wonderful to focus on, but we are a collection of librarians. I wanted us to bring attention to our librarianship: we collect, bring order, preserve, and make accessible all knowledge and wisdom. Therefore, we should focus on those aspects in God as creator of all of those things.

We took ten minutes to write down a list of virtues and deeds coming from those virtues. I had written out four simple formulaic lines to demonstrate a pattern to follow. After that silent time, I explained that we would read our “verse” of the hymn and that everyone would respond with the refrain “Your steadfast love endures forever.”

THE HYMN WE WORKSHOPPED

In person, we read our lines, one at a time. Each spoken line was followed by a refrain, “Your steadfast love endures forever.” After the closing prayer, I asked to take pictures of their worksheets, so that I could put the lines all together for preservation purposes. What follows is the lines from the participants, but I have arranged their order (because honestly there is no way that I could remember the order that they were read).

ATLA ANNUAL HYMN OF PRAISE 2024

Thank you for your compassion in providing us with companions on our journey, both intellectual and spiritual, in our desire to be closer to you.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Praise you for your compassion, because you have given us your word.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Because you are ordered, you bring order out of chaos, providing systems and continuity out of which we live and function.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Praise you for your unchangeableness, because we keep your promises.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Praise you for your truth and wisdom, because you have opened our eyes and minds.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Thank you for your grace, because you have given us ears to hear, minds to ponder, and hearts to understand.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Thank you, O God. For in your art, I feel whole and purposeful.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Thank you for your Word, it is the source of life. It is powerful and the teacher of your great love.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Thank you, God, for your knowledge, inspiring your poets, prophets, and priests.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Praise you for your charity, because you have loved us into being.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Praise you for creation, because you have made wisdom known.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Thank you, God. In your absurdity you remain unknowable.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Praise you for your wisdom. You created the world in wisdom and guide the world to Jesus and its proper end.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Thank you, God. In your mercy you have made us aware of your salvation.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

Because of your steadfastness, you never let us go.

Your steadfast love endures forever.

WHERE IT CAN BE FOUND NOW

The hymn that we created now resides in a LibGuide hosted by Hope International University: https://libguides.hiu.edu/Atla_2024

The page has both the hymn and a link to a PDF of the worksheet. Feel free to use the worksheet as you wish.

REFERENCE

Kennedy, George Alexander. 2003. "On Encomium and Invective."
In *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press.