

# Safford Church of Christ

3888 S Hwy 191, Safford, AZ 85546

12 July 2015

***I will give to the LORD the  
thanks due to his  
righteousness,  
and sing praises to the name  
of the LORD, the Most High.  
Psalm 7:17, NRSV***

Pulpit Evangelist  
Ken Knowlton: 428-3494  
Elders  
Greg Briggs: 428-8756  
John Cunningham: 428-0895

Sunday Bible Class	10:00 A.M.
Sunday Morning Worship	11:00 A.M.
Sunday Evening Worship	6:30 P.M.
Wednesday Evening Class	6:30 P.M.
Thursday Ladies Bible Class	11:00 A.M.

***Great are the works of the Lord,  
studied by all who delight in them. Psalm 111:2  
Please silence your cell phones and other electronic devices.***

## Tradition and Sacred Music

M. W. Bassford  
<http://hisexcellentword.blogspot.com>  
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Tradition is the memory of any organization. It defines what that organization believes, how it behaves, and what it considers important. Many other things can be accomplished with enough money, but only time can create tradition.

All my life, I have been associated with various churches of Christ. Our tradition in worship is acappella four-part harmony. This tradition began with our conviction that Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:16 are commands from God for His people to sing, but it does not end there.

Instead, it is the product of generations of men and women of faith who determined that if singing was important to God, they ought to learn to do it well. Nothing in Scripture requires the use of four-part harmony; we have adopted it, in the words of Exodus 28:2, for glory and for beauty.

That is no small thing. The investment required to get congregations filled with untrained singers to sing four-part harmony is staggering, particularly when there is no central authority to require the investment. Instead, it is the product of countless

thousands of individual decisions, of mothers who taught their children to sing "Trust and Obey" before they could read, of fathers who steered their reluctant sons into choir classes, of families who went to Friday-night singings and hymn-learning sessions instead of flipping on the TV or radio.

No one alive today may even remember the names of these people, but like the sea creatures that die to form a coral reef, their efforts have accumulated to form our tradition of sacred song. Without even thinking about it very much, we break into four-part harmony to sing "Happy Birthday" at birthday parties, because our traditions have made us a people of song. I don't know nearly as much about the worship of other churches, but even within them, I suspect that it is possible to look back through generations and centuries, find what has been used and loved, and say, "Musically, this is who we are."

As powerful as these traditions are, they are also fragile. Perhaps their worst enemies are church leaders who are clever but not wise. In an effort to make the church culturally relevant, they adopt the music of the culture. In my own religious tradition, this has taken the form of churches adopting the praise-band format of the community church across the street.

They and I would disagree about the doctrinal

warrant for such a change, but its effect on our tradition of song cannot be argued. When guitars, drum sets, and amplified vocalists belting out unfamiliar songs dominate a worship service, they leave no room for the congregation to sing anything, much less four-part harmony. Worship has become a performance rather than a shared experience. At best, congregational participation might rise to the level of the incoherent background moaning you sometimes hear at rock concerts. It certainly bears no resemblance to “teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”.

Nor can this cultural savviness form a tradition of its own. Pop culture is a moving target, and a church that strives to match its repertoire to the culture must constantly change that repertoire. It will be as different 50 years from now as pop music itself will be.

This destroys one of the key emotional touchstones of faith. No more can worship evoke memories of singing a hymn with Grandpa or Mom and Dad. All of those hymns have been consigned to the trash heap and replaced with the unfamiliar, strange, and alien. Statistics reveal that Americans today are more likely to switch churches than ever before. Perhaps this is because even the churches of their youth no longer line up with their memories.

Of course, apathy can be as damaging to musical tradition as rejection is. You don't have to bulldoze the old homestead to destroy it; all you have to do is walk away. In a few years, wind and water will leave it useless to anyone but the mice and bats and spiders.

A tradition of sacred song is equally vulnerable to neglect. All the leaders and members of a church have to do is nothing. No more mothers and fathers teaching children. No more families investing scarce time and resources in worship. No more ordinary Christians gathering to fight their way through the harmony of a new hymn so that one day, their grandchildren can sing it easily. If no one does anything to maintain and enhance a tradition, its fabric will degrade and become rotten. Soon, the praise band lurking just offstage will seem to be the only viable alternative.

If we wish them to survive, our musical traditions must be homes, not museums. They belong to our

grandparents and our great-grandparents, yes, but they also belong to us, and if we care for them, one day they will belong to our children. They should no more pass through our hands unchanged than our homes do. It is one thing to dynamite a tradition, but it is quite another to improve it, to add our layer of tiny shells to the surface of the coral reef.

Not every new hymn is bad, and not every old hymn should be preserved. It is our responsibility to be thoughtful custodians of our worship heritage, to plant and weed and prune alike in our gardens of song. We should introduce not that which is trendy, not that which captures the spirit of the time, but that which captures the spirit of mankind, that which speaks to the joys and hopes and fears that all of us share.

A great hymn is as universal as the gospel itself. A few great hymns will mean more to those who come after us than a whole repertoire of indifferent “hymns for today.” Our role is to embrace the best from days past, while creating and learning and passing on the best of our best too. Our traditions of sacred song will always be different from the tastes of the world, but for those who have been called to “come out from among them and be separate,” nothing could be more appropriate.

## **News:**

Ken Knowlton is recovering from dental work.

Mike Cavassos' twin brother Mark is receiving treatment for a heart aneurysm.

P.J. Waller is expected to have spinal disk surgery soon.

## **Prayer List:**

*Hattie Hedrick—poor health*

*Tatyana Knowlton—macular degeneration*

*Ken Cocke—back and shoulder pains*

*Janet Radar—nursing home*

*H.L. Boling—general health and complications from leukemia*

*Mike Cavasos—constant pain, foot surgeries*

*Sandy Cavasos—degenerative disk disease*

*Nic and Ani Self—health and personal needs*

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<http://saffordchurchofchrist.org>

