



Breathe on Me

The Holy Spirit is referred to by a number of names and images. Holy Ghost, Comforter, fire, wind, and Breathe of God are but a few. Of those “breathe” is the most personal. Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity that I can take into my very being. Breath is life. Breathing is living. Breath carries whispers.

This beautiful hymn of prayer almost insists on being sung slowly and quietly. The singing of it creates a sanctuary of harmony and introspection; a sanctuary into which one would not dare rush or shout. For musicians, this is a “6” that wants to remain in six. If the prayer is forced into a “2” the two enters the sanctuary humbly. The option of “3” seems lazy, avoiding the work of six and the discipline of a slowed two. We would also do well to be reminded that singing slowly and quietly takes a great deal more breath support than robust, loud, forceful singing.

Neither should the text be prayed lightly or hurriedly. The singer is asking to be overtaken, consumed, by Holy Spirit. Think before turning over all of that. The prayer is a commitment of one’s very life. There really is no “part of me” option in this hymn. There is only sincerity or insincerity; openness or reservation. This hymn is in the book, as it should be. But I dare say it is not sung often by any one congregation. That, too, is as it should be. Keep it in the book. Know its number, its words, and its music, but don’t sing it more than it can be sung sincerely.

This is one of those rare hymns that have much to offer when simply read. Its poetry is strong enough to stand alone, but there is more to its strength than its literary structure and imagery. This hymn can stand alone because of its personal nature. Here is a congregational hymn in which “me” is exactly the right pronoun. It is also a personal hymn because we cannot make its commitment for others. Yet, its singing in a corporate setting binds the singers, heart to heart.

Holy Spirit is a wind that blows where it will. It is set in the key of E-flat Major, but accidentals blow across the melody and harmony, refusing to be boxed in. Can we see that as Spirit’s invitation to freedom within structures, to exploration, to creativity, to the harmony of intellect and emotion, to things or persons a half-step or so out of the norm?

This is a special day, indeed, if this hymn has been selected for worship.

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