

***The Sympathizing Tear:  
Making Room for Tears in Our Worship  
by John W. Nielson***

It has been my experience that when someone begins to cry in a corporate worship setting, the first thing they will say is, “I’m Sorry.” This has happened on many occasions, which begs the question, why is it that we believe that we must apologize for our tears, and thus for the deep feelings that generated them? While there are likely a variety of factors that contribute to this reality, one fundamental issue is that in much of the western church, we do not fully understand what it means to enter into the faithful practice of lament. We don't do it well as individuals, and we certainly do not know how to practice lament in community.

In 1782, English pastor, theologian, and hymn writer Rev. Dr. John Fawcett wrote, *Blest Be the Tie That Binds*<sup>1</sup>, a hymn to commemorate his decision to remain at Wainsgate Baptist Church (West Yorkshire,

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<sup>1</sup> Public Domain.

England) some ten years earlier.<sup>2</sup> At that time, Fawcett had an opportunity to move to a larger church in London (with a larger salary), and planned to accept this new assignment. In fact, he had preached his farewell sermon and had all of his belongings packed when he changed his mind and decided to stay at Wainsgate where he would serve for the remainder of his ministry—fifty-four years in all. Out of this experience, a decade after that life-decision, he wrote this wonderful hymn.

I take the time to share this background information because of the added significance it lends to the words and theme of this classic hymn that celebrates the essence of what it means to live in authentic, Christian community. This depth of relationship is echoed in its lyrics.

Take a moment to reflect on the first three stanzas:

1 Blest be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above.

2 Before our Father's throne  
We pour our ardent prayers;

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<sup>2</sup> Information on John Fawcett and the occasion of the writing of “Blest Be the Tie that Binds” obtained from <https://hymnary.org> and <https://www.sermonwriter.com>.

Our fears, our hopes,  
our aims are one,  
Our comforts and our cares.

3 We share our mutual woes,  
Our mutual burdens bear;  
And often for each other flows  
The sympathizing tear.

Central to authentic Christian worship and fellowship is that we would more fully enter into the lives of our sisters and brothers. We are called to fully live into the Kingdom perspective that embodies the instruction of Paul to “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). It is living out this vision of Christian fellowship that Fawcett highlights in his most remembered hymn.

While the topic of lament is experiencing significant renewal, there is still a fundamental gap in the understanding that lament is both relevant and needed, and the regular engagement in practices of biblical lament, particularly in corporate settings. We need to make space for the corporate practice of lament, and to give permission, as well as to provide education, language, and opportunities to do so. One obstacle is an overwhelming lack of resources available to the

church to more regularly engage in practices of lament. While there are steps that we can and should take to address this critical need, perhaps the first is an awareness of this reality, and a confession that we have failed to embody a holistic expression of authentic worship and Christian community—one that makes room for tears without apology and without judgement. It begins by confronting the fact that our practices of corporate worship and community have been mostly one-sided, out of balance, and overly focused on the celebratory to the exclusion of this equally faithful act of crying out to God from the depths. We have forgotten to allow worship to be both “funeral and fiesta.”

Yes, we need to provide opportunities for lament and to develop further resources that give it voice. Yes, we must study and teach and preach about this important topic. Yes, we must grow in our own practices of individual and corporate lament. But, perhaps, one of the most important things we can do as an act of worship is to honor “the ties that bind” and allow “the sympathizing tear” to flow.

## **Afterword:**

It is in response to this need, that a new web page has been launched. *Sacred Sorrow* ([www.sacredsorrow.org](http://www.sacredsorrow.org)) serves as an ongoing collection of lament resources that can be utilized by individuals and churches for the faithful practice of lament. Developed by Dr. John W. Nielson, this website will seek to organize a variety of lament resources in ways that will be accessible and expandable. Resources include bibliographies, sermons, music, litanies, and links to a variety of seminars, videos, and articles.

For more information about the *Sacred Sorrow* resource, or to submit resources, please contact John Nielson at [john@sacredsorrow.com](mailto:john@sacredsorrow.com) or visit the Sacred Sorrow site and click on “Contact Us.”

Note: There is also a companion Facebook group called “The Sympathizing Tear.”