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IN PRACTICE · *Volume Two*

Colleen McDannell, Editor



PRINCETON READINGS IN RELIGIONS

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PRINCETON READINGS IN RELIGIONS

Princeton Readings in Religions is a new series of anthologies on the religions of the world, representing the significant advances that have been made in the study of religions over the last thirty years. The sourcebooks used by previous generations of students, whether for Judaism and Christianity or for the religions of Asia and the Middle East, placed a heavy emphasis on "canonical works." Princeton Readings in Religions provides a different configuration of texts in an attempt to better represent the range of religious practices, placing particular emphasis on the ways in which texts have been used in diverse contexts. The volumes in the series therefore include ritual manuals, hagiographical and autobiographical works, popular commentaries, and folktales, as well as some ethnographic material. Many works are drawn from vernacular sources. The readings in the series are new in two senses. First, very few of the works contained in the volumes have ever been made available in an anthology before; in the case of the volumes on Asia, few have even been translated into a Western language. Second, the readings are new in the sense that each volume provides new ways to read and understand the religions of the world, breaking down the sometimes misleading stereotypes inherited from the past in an effort to provide both more expansive and more focused perspectives on the richness and diversity of religious expressions. The series is designed for use by a wide range of readers, with key terms translated and technical notes omitted. Each volume also contains a substantial introduction by a distinguished scholar in which the histories of the traditions are outlined and the significance of each of the works is explored.

Religions of the United States in Practice is the tenth title in the series. The forty-two contributors include many of the leading scholars of American religions. Each scholar has provided one or more selections of key works, some of which are published here for the first time. These works include prayers and songs from Christian, Jewish, and Native American traditions, accounts of visions and trances, instructions on healing and health, and rites of passage. Each chapter begins with a substantial introduction that discusses the history and influence of the work, identifying points of particular difficulty or interest. Colleen McDannell, the editor of these groundbreaking volumes, opens the book with a masterful introduction to the multiple worlds of the religions of United States.

Donald S. Lopez, Jr.
Series Editor

Early Christian Radio and Religious Nostalgia

Philip Goff

A visit to the famed corner of Hollywood and Vine in Los Angeles today will demonstrate that the golden age of radio has not only passed, it has been entombed. Huge theaters that once held audiences enthralled as radio stars stood before them and beamed dramas, comedies, and musicals out to millions of listeners now stand as empty testaments to a bygone era. Nowhere in that neighborhood do the ghosts speak as loudly as at 1750 Argyle Street, one block northeast of the famous intersection. There sits what initially appears to be an abandoned Hollywood set on two acres, including a small rural-looking church, complete with a steeple and green shutters, hidden among a confused, overgrown garden of palms, banana trees, huge balls of pampas grass, and trailing roses—all set on a tiny hill across the street from the Capitol Records building, which was created to resemble a stack of LPs, itself an obsolete survival of an earlier period in entertainment. But this is no movie set. It is what remains of the once-vibrant radio phenomenon called the Little Country Church of Hollywood.

Not surprisingly, the Little Country Church's origins are in the country. Its founder, William B. Hogg, was a rural Southern minister whose provincialism was challenged by spending a year in France as a chaplain during the First World War. Wounded, he landed in the hospital with homesick and often dying American soldiers. To entertain them, he made the sound of hoof beats with his hollow hands and spun down-home tales that comforted the young men far from home. He discovered that these positive stories could boost their morale and strengthen their spirits, as well as enable him to speak directly to the inner needs of the wounded.

Hogg returned with a greater vision of Christian ministry. By the mid 1920s, he had joined Paul Rader at the Chicago Gospel Tabernacle, which was the center of a storm of evangelistic activities in the Windy City. Rader was among the first to take advantage of radio as a medium to proselytize listeners; he developed a daily four-hour program of religious music—jazzed up to attract members of the flapper age, of course—as well as preaching and prayer on Chicago's most powerful stations. In fact, Rader and his Tabernacle musicians put together the largest

selection of Christian radio in the nation long before the advent of today's religious-owned stations. In this setting, Hogg developed the radio character of a simple, rural preacher interested in commonsensical religious values. Drawing on his experience in wartime France, he captured radio audiences with his moral stories of the simple ways of country folk.

When Hogg moved to Los Angeles in 1931 to direct Rader's new Gospel Tabernacle there, he found himself in a city filling up with rural folk seeking work and already full of broadcasting opportunities. Los Angeles was in the midst of a population boom that had started at the turn of the century with the arrival of railroads, increased during the "Roaring 'Twenties" with Hollywood's emergence, and that now found fulfillment in the "California dreams" of many Midwestern and Southern farmers who fell prey to drought and the Great Depression. Not surprisingly, Hogg used the growing medium of radio to his advantage. "He was a master at telling stories," remembered one associate, "but it was not just the stories he told—it was the way he told them." Employing both humor and pathos, as well as a love for the Bible, "His manner caught on like wildfire in the Southland, and people in the Christian world began to love him like everyone loved Will Rogers in those days."

But Hogg did not rely merely on his own abilities. He wisely employed several talented musicians who, over time, became one of the top two quartets in a city built on entertainment. With Rudy Atwood at piano and a quartet consisting of Thurl Ravenscroft (later the voice of Tony the Tiger and the Jolly Green Giant), Al Harlan, Bill Days, and William McDougall, Hogg led a half-hour daily broadcast full of uplifting music and short messages. Pianist Atwood later recalled, "Because of his rising popularity and his generosity in sharing the limelight, he was as much responsible as anyone for bringing the musical part of evangelicalism . . . to the attention of the public."

After two years together, Hogg informed his costars that he intended to create a new type of program outside the aegis of the Los Angeles Tabernacle. It was a risky move. There were very few successful religious broadcasts in those days, and this one would be like no other. He planned to recreate a country community in rural Tennessee through music and a skit that played out the lives of villagers. Local station managers were unimpressed. Given the hard times, they believed, listeners wanted positive programming filled with dance music to lift aching spirits. Finally Hogg convinced the management at KFAC that his would, indeed, be an entertaining and uplifting program. It would evoke happy memories, feelings of bygone days for those who now struggled to fit into urban Los Angeles. The music would be soothing and optimistic, not dull and dreary-sounding "church music." Likewise, the skits would be humorous as well as moralistic.

The problems before Hogg were the same ones faced by other conservative Protestants hoping to use the radio waves to spread the gospel. As a response to the myriad of religious stations that applied for licenses in the early, heady days of radio, the Department of Commerce in 1927 attempted to place restrictions on programs that could too easily slip from public service to money-making

ventures. Soon a federal commission was created to oversee radio, including religious broadcasting. Working with the Federal Council of Churches in New York, the commission created a required "sustaining time" for each station and network, which gave free radio time to mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Those who were too conservative for mainline denominations, therefore, were cut out of the free access to airtime on the major stations and networks throughout the country. Instead, conservatives had to buy time as they could afford and as they were allowed by local stations. By the early 1930s, however, even this practice had come under fire by the Federal Council of Churches, and the two major networks, NBC and CBS, began to consider whether they would continue to accept any paid-for religious programming. If Hogg's program was to survive in this continually restrictive medium, he would have to find a way to please both his conservative listeners and his moderate and liberal broadcasters.

And so, in January 1933, Hogg and his quartet began broadcasting their daily program set in an imaginary rural town where neighbors knew one another, cared for one another, and helped each other through crises. Posing as Parson Josiah Hopkins—the character he had developed in Chicago radio—Hogg used his wife to play Sarah Hopkins, his two daughters to play instruments, and Atwood and the quartet to sing, play the parts of townfolk, and create sound effects of horses, buggies, and various farm animals. The cast arrived each morning at 7:30 A.M. to practice their songs and the skit before going on live radio at 8:00. The program was such a huge success throughout the city that the program went national on the Columbia Broadcasting System in April 1934. At the height of the Depression, it drew audiences who heard in its songs and conversations a bygone era when times were better. Children, who enjoyed morning programming before school, listened as they ate breakfast, urged by their parents to take to heart the lessons of the show. With such an enviable schedule, the national listenership—although impossible to quantify today—doubtless was extremely high. Religion now sat comfortably next to children's shows, baseball, and soap operas at the dawning of radio's golden age.

Each program ran according to a set script. The quartet sang the first verse of "Come to the Church in the Wildwood," a favorite among displaced conservative Protestants who pined for the old days:

How sweet on a clear, Sabbath morning,
To list' to the clear ringing bell;
Its tones so sweetly calling,
Oh, come to the church on the hill.

Then, Strollin' Tom—played by Thurl Ravenscroft, blessed with the most resonant bass voice in Hollywood—welcomed listeners by describing the rural town and the church's central position. He then directed the audience to listen in on the conversation of Josiah and Sarah Hopkins in their buggy, pulled by Dan the

horse, as the couple talked about recent problems in the village en route to church. Along the way, they might stop to talk with others—all setting up the theme for the Parson's message to come. They usually arrived at church just in time to hear the first quartet number; then Parson Hopkins would request another song or two, telling a short anecdote—usually a moving one—about why that song is meaningful to him. Finally, the minister would give a five-minute message that drove home a nonsectarian religious truth most audiences would readily agree with: that helping others is really good for your own state of mind; that it is best to “throw away the scraps of life and let the chickens have them” rather than obsess on bad things; that your environment is not everything, rather what lies deep in your heart is what matters most; that some things cannot be learned from a book but are known only by intuition. All of this in only fifteen minutes each morning.

Given the times, it is miraculous that Hogg could get his program on the national CBS network and keep it there until his death three years later. After all, CBS was the very first network to ban sectarian and paid-for religious programming. Alert to the Federal Council of Churches' warnings against programming that was anything but mainline Protestantism, CBS agreed to keep sectarian Protestant shows away from the free time allotted each week for religious broadcasting, as well as to proscribe religious groups from buying time—in a sense, from being their own sponsor. But Hogg, a fundamentalist, had ingeniously toned down his message to a “feel good” show that struck the distant chords of memory for rural believers feeling the pain of dislocation during the Depression. Many of the songs used were revivalist standards, but only the first verse was sung, thus avoiding theological controversy with mainline churches. Humming replaced the remaining two or three verses in each song—thereby giving those sectarian believers “in the know” the opportunity to sing along, all the while explicitly following CBS's strict policy.

It worked. In fact, the show worked so well that many local listeners in Los Angeles began to clamor for a real “Little Country Church” to attend—one that replicated the rural oasis to which they escaped each morning with Josiah and Sarah Hopkins, and villagers Lige Guyton, Abe Snodgrass, Lem Gupton, and Jerry Potlucks—all members of the Goose Creek Quartet. Soon enough, they procured the property on Argyle Street and created the Little Country Church of Hollywood, complete with meandering sidewalks and climbing rose vines and a full-service radio studio inside the building. Now, not only could listeners enjoy hearing their rural friends each morning, they could join them on Sunday mornings for service. What had been merely a broadcast appealing to distant memories became, in fact, a church congregation seeking to recreate the past.

Umberto Eco referred to this phenomenon as “hyperreality,” that is, part of the American imagination that seeks the real but to attain it must fabricate the fake—witness wax museums of the Last Supper, complete with hymns in the background. Yet the reproduction is experienced as if it were real, resulting in dedication to it as the ideal. In this sense, then, the Little Country Church of Hollywood helped to sustain the romantic revivalist tradition that characterized

evangelicalism during this period. As Eric Hobsbawm points out, such created traditions hold “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” Such traditions of imagination were especially meaningful at the height of the Depression.

How did Hogg accomplish all this in such difficult times? First, the times themselves were conducive for the program. With truckloads of “Dust Bowl” migrants arriving in California daily—one of the largest in-nation migrations of the twentieth century—there existed a built-in audience for such a program. Hogg could readily employ the rural vernacular, given his own Southern background. One popular topic for discussion was food, which tied these migrants to their region as much as any folkway could. Whether it was fried chicken, or boiled greens, or biscuits and gravy, the residents of Goose Creek could invariably make listeners' mouths water and connect with their ways. So, too, Hogg entered their shared memories through language. Utilizing contractions, subject-verb disagreement, and colloquial phrases, the Parson could communicate directly to thousands of listeners immediately. But Hogg was not above poking fun at the rural ignorance of larger political issues by introducing national affairs into the village's small world. Of course, the characters usually misunderstood what was under discussion. Such scripts appealed to both urbanites, who took pleasure in the stereotype, as well as those just off the farm, for they enjoyed laughing at themselves as they sought to understand and cope with their new lives.

Second, he purposefully hewed a middle path that appealed to both displaced conservative Protestants and less sectarian listeners. The hymns are a perfect example. As each show opened with the same song, those conservatives familiar with all four verses sang along and were transported back to their roots.

There's a church in the valley by the wildwood,
No lovelier spot in the dale;
No place is so dear to my childhood,
As the little brown church in the vale . . .
From the church in the valley by the wildwood,
When day fades away into night,
I would fain from this spot of my childhood
Wing my way to the mansions of light.

Those unfamiliar with the song, who simply liked the characters, enjoyed the “morality tale” involved in each story. Never was the message heavy-handed. Yet, those inside the movement could easily pick up on the “insider's language” that defined fundamentalism during this period. By avoiding doctrinal debates and instead emphasizing positive principles with which virtually all Protestants, Catholics, and Jews would concur, Hogg took his show to the pinnacle of success on a national network.

But it was Hogg's use of nostalgia that most obviously confronted the listener. The show literally dripped with it. And whether one were at home in the city or new to it, enough of the romantic tradition of "down home," "heartland," and "simple times" remained to draw thousands of daily listeners. To the modern ear, these might sound like clichés. Constant references to rose gardens, grandma's jelly, and patriotism strike a cynical post-Watergate crowd as syrupy-sweet and belying what was truly going on. But one must listen with the ear of a mid-1930s audience, who felt their world was turning upside-down, who were anywhere from a few days to a generation removed from rural life, and who questioned whether all the "progress" made so far in the twentieth century was really progress at all. By tapping into nostalgia, sentiments that ran both deep and wide among listeners, Josiah Hogg's program rocketed to national attention.

Religious nostalgia did not die with the Little Country Church of Hollywood. Although the building on Argyle Street long outlived its religious usefulness, the emotions it drew from listeners lives on in various forms of religious entertainment. When Paul Crouch, president and host of the international Trinity Broadcasting Network, stands before his weekly audiences—estimated at fifty million people—via satellite, dressed in his country-western clothes, and shouts, "Tonight we're gonna have CHURCH!"—the spirit of Josiah Hogg is not far away. Before long, discussion on the program has covered biscuits, dogs, old-time revival, and the merits of country life—all set in Southern California.

This episode of the "Little Country Church of Hollywood" exists, like many of those early religious programs, only on a reel-to-reel recording, without the script or cues the actors used to create it. Given the players in this episode, it likely dates to 1934 or 1935.

Further Reading

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A Hint to Better Things

Quartet: [Singing opening chorus of "The Church in the Wildwood"]

How sweet on a dear Sabbath morning
To list' to the clear, ringing bell
In sounds so sweetly calling
Oh, come to the church on the hill.
[Hum through next three verses]

Strolin' Tom: Howdy folks, howdy! Hmm, strangers around these parts? Yes, this is the Little Country Church of Hollywood all right. Come right in, and welcome. The quartet and Brother Rudy's come in, and I'm Brother Strolin' Tom, so if the Parson and his good wife Sarah don't get here pretty soon, we—heh!—we might heist off and start the meetin' most anytime.

Parson and Sister Hopkins went by to howdy with Aunt Lu Salter. Aunt Lu prides herself on her preserves. So, I guess they enjoyed biscuits and preserves this morning along with a dish of fried chicken and the trimmin's. Heh! Heh! Ah, the best way to find out about it is to listen to Brother and Sister Hopkins and their old buggy horse Dan as they trot along to meetin'. Can you all hear 'em? Yeh, they're coming in on the Possum Trot Road from Aunt Lu Salter's.

[Sound of horse trot made by banging two coconut halves together]

Sarah: Oh, I intended to ask Aunt Lu for her recipe for putting up [unintelligible]

Josiah: Yes, they sure was powerful too.

Sarah: Josiah, what is your favorite preserve?

Josiah: Mine?

Sarah: Um-hum.

Josiah: Oh, well, blackberry jam is mighty good.

Sarah: Heh-heh!

Josiah: And you know plums ain't bad.

Sarah: No—

Josiah: Watermelon rind, too, that's another one of my favorites.

Sarah: Yes, that's good.

Josiah: But honey, you know the gov'nment is getting out a new kind?

Sarah: The government?!

Josiah: Yes sir! I reckon they give 'em away sorta like they do garden feed.

Sarah: Well, what kind of preserves is the government givin' away? I hadn't heard about 'em.

Josiah: Forest Preserves!

Sarah: Oh! Ha ha ha! Where did you get that idea, Josiah?

Josiah: Well, when we was all talkin' about it there in Lige Guyton's shoe shop.

Sarah: They was?

Josiah: Yes, they was! And I see they put up a thing over there at the post office, some sort of a showin' about the gov'ment furnishing forest preserves . . .

Sarah: Hmm-hmm?

Josiah: Yeh, and Bill Evans says that he thinks that the forest preserves is a mixture of all the sorts of wild berries that grow in the woods.

Sarah: You know it might be that!

Josiah: Yeah, it might. But [unintelligible], he thinks that—akerns [acorns]! You know, oak tree akerns? Put up some sort of way. But, law me, I says, you never could make no preserves that suit my tastes out of akerns.

Sarah: Nah . . .

Josiah: [To Dan the horse:] Git up there!

Sarah: Has [unintelligible] gone back to the city yet?

Josiah: Let's sit over here, honey. This here's a good quiet place right here to rest awhile and let Dan check his gut. [To Dan the horse] Whoaa! [Pulls horse off side of the road] Pretty place here under the tree, it'n it?

Sarah: Yes, it is. [unintelligible] was asking me about Brother Methuselah's uncle.

Josiah: Oh yeah. Luke said he was gonna take the hike into the center next Tuesday. That's what he said.

Sarah: Hmmm.

Josiah: You know his uncle sure is bald-headed, ain't he?

Sarah: Ha ha! I reckon he is.

Josiah: I reckon he is baldheaded.

Sarah: He hasn't got a hair, t'all, has he?

Josiah: No, he ain't. No, his head's as slick as a peeled onion! Ha, ha, ha!

[Bells ringing in background]

Sarah: What's you laughin' at?

Josiah: Ah, something Luke Mathuselah told me 'bout his uncle. Ha, ha, ha!

Sarah: Yeah? What was that?

Josiah: Yeah, you see Luke's uncle's an old bachelor.

Sarah: Yes, I know that.

Josiah: And he's powerful interested in the singin' school the [unintelligible] holdin' in the Red Onion School House everynight.

Sarah: He is?

Josiah: Yes. Well, he waxes his moustache and rubs off his shoes ev'rynight and goes to the singin'. Heh, heh, heh!

Sarah: So what are ya' laughin' at?

Josiah: Ah me. Git up there, Dan! Oh, it's the way he's a sparkin' Aunt Lu Salter. Git up Dan! What Luke said about bald-headed men in general . . .

Sarah: Luke Tate?

Josiah: Yeh. Luke said that all the bald-headed men had to do to get ready for the singin' was to straighten out his necktie.

Both: Ha, ha, ha!

Sarah: So what'ya gonna talk on today, Josiah?

Josiah: You know, I thought I'd talk on rememberin'. Git up there!

Sarah: Rememberin'. Well, where's that verse?

Josiah: Yeh, that verse is there, in Matthew, its 26th chapter and 75th verse where it speaks about, ah, Simon Peter rememberin' the words of the Lord. That's what it is.

Sarah: You better watch that bump now!

Josiah: [To Dan the horse] You slow down there. [To Sarah] I'm slowin' down right now honey.

[The couple arrives at the church, the quartet already singing.]

Quartet: [Singing]

Upon a wide and stormy sea,
Thou'rt sailing to eternity,
And the great Admiral orders thee:
"Sail on! Sail on! Sail on!"
[Refrain] Sail on! Sail on!
The storms will soon be past,
The darkness will not always last;
Sail on! Sail on!
God lives and He commands:
"Sail on! Sail on!"

Josiah: [Walking into church late] Well, howdy neighbors!

Crowd: Howdy! Hello! Howdy!

Josiah: Oh, we sure had a great time over at Aunt Lu's. Oh, she's got these preserves, and more preserves! Heh, heh!

[Crowd laughs]

Josiah: Yeh, you know I was tellin' her today that I was goin' to ask y'all to sing a few dedicated to her, . . . 'cause, . . . so in return for that big dessert eatin' we had. Heh, heh, heh! She likes that piece there . . . it's something about the hand that was wounded. Y'all got that'n?

Quartet: Oh yeah! Yes! Yes!

Josiah: Well, I wish y'all would sing that. It's "The Hand that was Wounded for Me." That's it! That's it!

Quartet: [Singing]

The hand that was nailed to the cross of woe,
In love reaches out to the world below;
'Tis beckoning now to the souls that roam,
And pointing the way to the heav'nly home.
[Refrain] The hand of my Savior I see,
The hand that was wounded for me;
'Twill lead me in love to the mansions above,
The hand that was wounded for me!

Josiah: Well, y'all done right well on that. That's a good feelin'. You know, if you just turn over there, I think it's about four pages further over there in that red book, there's a piece there that just makes my heart so tender [voice begins to tremble] ev'rytime I sing it. It gets me so homesick [voice breaking]. I'm a comin' home! Rudy, you know that, don't you? [Organ music starts] Go ahead and high step that. "I'm a Comin' Home!"

Quartet: [Singing]

Jesus, I am coming home today
For I have found a joy in thee alone.
From the path of sin I turn away
Now I am coming home.

[Refrain] Jesus, I am coming home today,
Never, never more from thee to stray.
Lord, I now accept thy precious [unintelligible]
I am coming home!

Josiah: Oh, what a lovely song. And there's a peace just comes floatin' over my mind like the perfume out of a rose garden when they sing that song. You remember there, when that Simon Peter feller, he . . . he sorta slid back and said things he ought not said and done things that he oughta not a done? Just about the time that he tore off and done something like that, it says there in Matthew 26:75, it says, "Then Simon Peter remembered the words of the Lord." I tell ya, folks, memories is put mighty deep in the human heart. And just as sure as you are born to die, they're deeper there than you think they're.

Now you take then during the war. Of course, I was sort of a [unintelligible] such as there was. I didn't know much but I done the best I could with what little I had. The thing that touched me was, them ol' boys would lay around there in those barrack places—that what they called the places where they stayed at, was the barracks. They'd find a little picture of an old gate, a picture of an old grapevine swing, and might nigh ev'rybody had a picture of a sweetest face old ladies. All off protectin' em, you see. [voice breaking] Memories of home. I don't care how bare them walls was, fellas would find some place to stick up a little memory of home.

But I think you'll understand about the tenderness in my own heart, and the most touchin', was the night that my orderly got killed. It was terribly difficult for me and I got up there and he didn't know nothin'. But you know them mem'ries had stuck in his heart? And when I come in, you see, he didn't know who I was. Who do you reckon he thought I was? Thought I was his mother. I just sort of put my hand on his forehead, you see, like that. And he said, "Mother, keep your hand there." Well, see it just got me so—I was scared. Well, I just hated to take my hand off. And then, when I did, he said, "Will you rock me, Mother? I'm so sleepy. Rock me to sleep." See he had got hit in the neck. Well, they had an old chair there. It didn't have

no rockers on it, and so I just took him up in my arms. One of the boys said, "I'd go on and humor him. He don't know no better." So just reached down and took him, and put his head on my shoulder and I rocked backwards and forwards. And you know, he smiled. I was so glad I could do that.

And that's the fella, you know, I was a tellin' you all about. He sorta come to his self just before he went away, and kinda opened his eyes, and he see'd me. And he kinda hiked his hand up and waved it, and said, "Well, I'll be seein' ya tomorrow." That is the feller. I told you all about that feller.

Yes [organ music begins in background], this rememberin' is awful kind of bidness and it's mighty deep in the human heart.

Quartet: [Singing]

[unintelligible] before the shadows lengthen,
Across the [unintelligible] landscapes of our lives,
We worship Jesus—[humming rest of verse and chorus, then next verse
and chorus]

Josiah: [Quartet humming in background] Well neighbors, we was talkin' about memories. You know what I sort of think about them? That memories is put in the human heart sorta like the needle in a compass—to point to better things. Goodbye folks.

Sarah: Goodbye, ev'rybody.

Quartet: [Singing, fading to humming] We worship Jesus . . .