

SONGS OF SUFFERING AND SANCTIFICATION:
THE HYMNODY OF ANNE STEELE

A Paper
Presented to
Dr. Michael A.G. Haykin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for 88910

by
Jacob Porter
November 27, 2012

SONGS OF SUFFERING AND SANCTIFICATION: THE HYMNODOY OF ANNE STEELE

The evangelical tradition is known for attentive preaching, an emphasis on missionary endeavors, organizational strengths, and a gospel-centered ecumenicity, but the most accessible source for understanding the identity of evangelicals is its classic corpus of hymns.¹ The influence of evangelical hymnody since the origin of the tradition is demonstrated in the way these songs and their themes have so permeated the evangelical culture. While the contributions of men such as Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and George Whitefield cannot be discounted, the contributions of the movement's hymns must not be underestimated. Noll makes this point, writing, "...ask yourself how many of the words of Edwards, Whitefield, or John Wesley you can quote, and then reflect on how much of Charles Wesley is stored away, not only in your brain, but in your heart?"²

Music's ability to engage the affections and unite mind and heart to focus upon one idea gives hymns a particularly powerful pedagogical value in the church's ministry. The promises of God expressed in vivid, metered language and set to complementing musical accompaniment are easily recalled in moments of need. In moments of suffering, the songs of one's spiritual heritage provide a sweet comfort in the midst of distress, often reminding the singer of God's sovereign purposes, Christ's sacrificial love, and the coming glories of heaven. The historical roots of evangelicalism give some insight into why this stream of Christianity has a particularly rich tradition of musical psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Born in times of trial and persecution, the predecessors of evangelicalism found hymns to be a particularly powerful

¹ Mark A. Noll, "We Are What We Sing," *Christianity Today* 43, no. 8 (July 12, 1999): 37.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

means of sustaining their faith.

The Dissenters, or Nonconformists, were among these forerunners. During the second half of the seventeenth century, the Anglican Church exercised authority over the religious life of Great Britain. Those whose consciences would not allow participation in the state church were persecuted under laws such as the 1664 Conventicle Act, which prohibited more than four adults to meet together for worship under penalty of fine or imprisonment.³ Speaking as a voice for many in the movement, John Gill enumerated eleven points for separating from the Anglican Church in *The Dissenters' Reasons for Separating from the Church of England*.⁴ Among these reasons, Gill noted its national rather than congregational governance, corrupted preaching of the word and administration of the ordinances, and confinement to the prayers and scriptural readings in the Book of Common Prayer for use in public worship. Reflected in these charges against the state church, one can discern something of the priorities of the Dissenters: strict devotion to the authority of the Bible, personal conversion by faith in the gospel, and purity and vibrant faith within the people of God. These priorities, as well as the consequences of their convictions, is reflected in their hymnody.

This paper will examine the life and work of one of the greatest hymn writers whose heritage makes her a product of this movement, Anne Steele. Her family roots grow from the Dissenting tradition; Steele was a Particular Baptists of the eighteenth century. After a brief biographical sketch, her hymns will be examined as a source for better understanding her theology and experience, both personally and as a part of the Particular Baptist denomination. Specifically, the themes of biblical authority, personal conversion, and suffering and the sovereignty of God will each be considered in Steele's life and compositions. Through

³ Priscilla Wong, *Anne Steele and Her Spiritual Vision : Seeing God in the peaks, valleys, and plateaus of life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 78.

⁴ John Gill, "The Dissenter's Reasons for Separating from the Church of England," *John Gill - The Dissenter's Reasons for Separating from the Church of England*, accessed November 21, 2012, <http://articles.ochristian.com/article12509.shtml>.

evaluation of her biography and works, Steele's spirituality can serve as an example to other believers seeking to cultivate and maintain their own personal piety.

Biography

Well-meaning biographers, in an attempt to honor the virtues of their subjects and inspire such virtues in their readers, can at times transform history into hagiography, inadvertently flattening some of the dimensions and complexities of the lives of history's greatest men and women. When this occurs in treatments of prominent figures from church history—when a writer overemphasizes one dimension of a subject's life—readers may feel they could never identify with the subject. Until recently, the most popular accounts of Anne Steele's life suffered from such treatment. The profile of Anne Steele has traditionally been built around the great amount of trial and loss she experienced in her personal life. Three episodes have particularly defined her: the death of her mother when Anne was a very young child; the continual, severe health struggles that resulted from falling off a horse as a teen; and the drowning of her fiancé just hours before they were to be married.⁵ As a result of overemphasizing her trials, many have an idea of Steele that they may admire but with which few feel they can identify. She is often portrayed as a woman of intense suffering, morose and melancholy, with a saintly piety by which she sought solace in her own writing.⁶

Steele was without question a remarkable woman, but her experience was not so removed from the experiences of most individuals that they cannot identify with her in pain and pleasure. Her faith was not without flaws. Her piety is an example for believers who, like Steele,

⁵ Cynthia Y Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable : The hymns and spirituality of Anne Steele* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 8.

⁶ Aalders cites several biographers of Steele who present the more dramatic descriptions of her suffering and piety, including Hatfield ("See gave days to works of piety and benevolence, diffusing throughout her neighbourhood the sweet savor of godliness, and attaching to herself, and more to her Saviour, the hearts of the sick, the sorrowing, and the needy.") and Emurian ("She poured out her grief in her hymns and poems and the sweetness they embody is in direct contrast to the bitterness of her heart-break.").

at times struggle to fight off doubts, despair, and bouts of spiritual apathy. The following brief biographical sketch is not meant to be extensive, but serves to introduce the times in which Steele lived and to highlight some of the more significant or representative events of her life. In the sections that follow, additional biographical information will be given to illustrate the connection between her experience and expression of piety in her work.

Steele was born in 1717 at Broughton in Hampshire into a family steeped in the Particular Baptist tradition. Her father, William, was a Particular Baptist minister, and her mother, Anne Froude Steele, was the daughter of a Particular Baptist minister.⁷ In 1720, Steele's mother died, likely due to complications in childbirth.⁸ Thus began a chain of losses that Steele would experience. Three years later, William married Anne Cator, from another prominent Particular Baptist family.⁹ Steele had one brother, William Jr., who was two years older, and one half-sister, Mary, born in 1724. The letters written among this family that have survived the centuries reveal the mutual care and devotion they had for one another. Steele remained close to her family throughout her life, not only relationally, but physically. Steele never moved out of the home of her father and step-mother until after his death in 1769, and spent the remaining years of her life living with her brother and his family.¹⁰ Beyond her immediate household, Steele developed close ties with the extended Steele, Froude, and Cator families, as well as the family of her brother-in-law, John Gay, whose roots were also deep in the Dissenting movement.¹¹

⁷ J. R. Broome and Anne Steele, *A Bruised Reed: Anne Steele, her life and times; together with Anne Steele's hymns, psalms and a selection of her prose works* (Harpending: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 2007), 13.

⁸ Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 10.

⁹ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 61.

¹⁰ Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Given her Particular Baptist pedigree, Anne's strong connection to the Dissenting churches is expected. Henry Steele (1654-1739) joined the Baptist Church in Boughton in 1680 and became its pastor in 1699.¹² The church in Boughton had been established April 3, 1653, and had therefore survived some of the worst days of persecution against Nonconformists.¹³ In 1709, William Steele, Henry's nephew and Anne's father, assumed an assistant pastoral role at the church until he became its pastor in 1739. Church life set the rhythm for the Steele family during Anne's upbringing. In her diaries, Anne's step-mother would often measure Anne's illnesses by her ability "to go to Meeting." She also noted church affairs in her personal diary—membership totals, baptisms, and death.¹⁴

This diary also gives insight into Steele's conversion. Anne Cator Steele wrote often of her children's and step-children's well-being, both physical and spiritual. In 1731, young Anne suffered from a fever that Mrs. Steele described as "the ague," most likely what is now identified as tertian malaria, and later that year was thought to come down with tuberculosis. Her health was steadily declining, but because she lived another forty-seven years the diagnosis of tuberculosis is unlikely. The chronic malaria that plagued her at age fourteen would linger throughout her life, causing anemia, fatigue, chronic bronchitis and pleurisy, stomach problems (which, given descriptions in her writings, likely developed into ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome), and a weak immune system that had great difficulty fighting off other infections. According to the diary, on November 7, 1731, young Anne was so weak that her stepmother stayed at her bedside to speak to her about "the concerns of her soul." This conversation led Mrs.

¹² Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 26.

¹³ The church's founding pastor, John Rede, had been heavily involved in the Cromwellian movement politically, militarily, and religiously. After Charles II assumed the throne and restored the Stuart monarchy, the toleration of Nonconformists was reduced until they became a targeted group. Rede was imprisoned in the Tower of London for suspicions of plotting to overthrow the government. This persecution of Rede certainly extended beyond him to other members of the church. These experiences shaped the families into which Steele would be born. (See Broome, *A Bruised Reed*, 25-31)

¹⁴ Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 14-15.

Steele “to cry earnestly on Anne’s account that as God has been pleased to make her sensible of the want and worth of a Saviour, so he would also give her a well-grounded hope that she have an interest in that Saviour that so she might be happy here and forever.” Just a few weeks later, on November 30, she wrote, “I beg the affliction may be sanctified to her and that her life may be spared.”¹⁵

The spiritual wellbeing of her stepdaughter remained a concern for Mrs. Steele’s as Anne’s health remained fragile over the next several months. In fact, on January 3, 1732, she recorded that Henry Steele, her husband’s uncle who served as their pastor, “joyning in prayer...this morning, he being drawn out to beg earnestly for the conversion of our children.”¹⁶ From what can be pieced together from Mrs. Steele’s diary and other extant records, Anne’s sicknesses, as well as the baptism of her brother William, had been used by the Lord to bring about her testimony of conversion and desire to join the church by baptism in the summer of 1732. On June 10, Mrs. Steele records that she had accompanied young Anne, who had been given the pet name “Nanny,” to speak with Henry Steele of her spiritual experience:

I have been drawn out earnestly to desire assistance and direction for Nanny, thinking she is willing, God assisting and directing her, to give in her experience tomorrow. I have had very encouraging Scriptures and have talked with her and find God have been very Gracious to her in that way also that was on my mind....I went with Nanny to Uncle Steele where I had great cause to rejoice in beholding the goodness of God to her.¹⁷

On the next day, Anne Steele stood before the congregation and gave an account of her conversion. She was baptized on July 9, 1732, at the age of fifteen.¹⁸

Steele grew up receiving from her father and stepmother not only a spiritual education of the Particular Baptist tradition, but what for women of that time was considered a rather

¹⁵ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 78–80.

¹⁶ Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 81.

extensive education in the subjects of reading, writing, and mathematics. Her father, William, was not only a pastor, but also a successful businessman in the timber industry, affording him the luxury of providing formal education for his children.¹⁹ Their own “Uncle Steele” looked with disapproval upon the amount of education Anne’s parents were providing for her and her sister, Mary. One can discern from her poetry that Steele was not unfamiliar with the great classic works of literature. In addition to her time in formal education, Steele also learned much from the circles of educated men in which she travelled. She grew up well-acquainted with prominent Particular Baptist figures, and later in life she forged personal friendship with many of these men, giving her the occasion to participate in discussions on theology, ministry, and the practice of hymn-writing. Later in her life, Steele would become an advocate for women’s education.²⁰

Steele’s early adulthood involved a series of griefs and tragedies. In 1735, her father suffered a terrible accident when he was thrown from and trampled by a horse; his recovery lasted more than six months. The following year, Anne lost her first cousin Richard Gay, who was her same age, to a sudden illness. The legendary account of the drowning of her fiancé in the hours before their marriage is placed in the next year, 1737.²¹ With recent studies of the Steele family’s letters and diaries, this story has been found to be nearly all myth. Journal entries reveal a series of discussions between associates of the Steele family and James Elcomb, a resident of the nearby town of Ringwood, that indicate the real possibility that a marriage was being arranged between Anne and James. A letter dated May 25, 1737, from John James Manfield, a friend of Elcomb and relative of the Steeles, informed the family of Elcomb’s drowning. Manfield writes, “I submit to your prudence to communicate this unhappy accident...not knowing how far he may have prevailed on the affections of Miss Steele....I wish I could say he

¹⁹ Ibid., 85.

²⁰ Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 18–19.

²¹ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 96–99.

did not deserve her esteem, but am as heartily sorry to say that nobody deserved the general esteem of mankind more...”²² Two years later, on June 19, 1739, Anne’s uncle and pastor, Henry Steele, died at the age of eighty-five, after pastoring the Particular Baptist Church at Broughton for forty years. The following year, Anne’s cousin Elizabeth, with whom she was very close, died in childbirth.²³

Steele much preferred the quietness of country life to the “continual din of a noisy town.”²⁴ The picturesque scenes of the English countryside would serve as one of the chief sources for the material of her hymns. However, her preference for solitude by no means made her a somber recluse, as she is at times portrayed. Steele would, with tongue in cheek, describe herself as a “poor solitary Nun,” who lived “lone quiet in an humble Cell.” In truth, Steele had many strong friendships, not only with family but within great literary circles of her day. Much of her encouragement to write poetry and hymns came from the Baptist pastors and writers with whom she associated. The Dissenting movement relied heavily upon strong writers to articulate and defend their beliefs, so it was common for the movement’s leaders to spend a great deal of time developing and encouraging the skill. Steele greatly benefited from this encouragement and became one of many literary successes produced from among the Nonconformists.²⁵

Hymn-writing remained a relatively new endeavor among Particular Baptists when Anne Steele began her work. Through the end of the seventeenth century, Particular Baptist churches sang metered psalms, that is, until John Bunyan and Benjamin Keach began writing hymns to be sung in their own congregations. In the first decades of the eighteenth century, Isaac Watts published his first hymnals, and with time hymnody was accepted in congregational

²² Ibid., 102.

²³ Ibid., 106.

²⁴ Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 20–21.

²⁵ Ibid., 22–23.

worship. Steele grew up in a family that practiced hymn-writing. In 1733, Mrs. Steele recorded being “very much affected with the hymn” written by Anne’s father, and in 1734, she inserted into her diary an eleven stanza hymn by Anne’s older brother William.²⁶ Steele wrote poems for her family for many years, and after she began to share some of her poems and hymns, a number of people began to encourage her to share them publically. Overcoming great reluctance, individual works were published at the encouragement of acquaintances and family in the late 1750s. Steele’s first collection of hymns and poems was published in two volumes in 1760, entitled *Poems on Subject Chiefly Devotional*, under the name Theodosia.²⁷

After her father’s death in 1769, Steele went to live with her brother’s family. Her health sharply declined such that by 1771, she was bedridden and her family was preparing for her death. Steele spent most of the remaining years of her life in a feeble state, her body crippled under the continued effects of the malaria.²⁸ In her final days, her brother wrote about “lucid moments” for his sister, indicating some degree of dementia or periods of semi-consciousness had likely set in. Word of her impending passing was spread throughout the Particular Baptist community, for prominent pastors and leaders travelled all the way from London and Bristol to visit her in her dying days.²⁹ On November 11, 1778, Anne Steele died at the age of sixty-one. Josiah Lewis, the pastor of the church in Boughton at the time of Steele’s death, remarked in her funeral sermon on the extraordinary physical pain she experienced in her last hours according to those who were there:

At one time she said, ‘It is hard work,’ and at another, that ‘she endured unspeakable pain,’ that ‘She knew that her Redeemer lived,’ and at another to a friend that stood by, ‘She entreated her to pray that her faith might not fail.’ And there is all the reason we can wish

²⁶ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 86.

²⁷ Aalders, *To Express the Ineffable*, 23–26.

²⁸ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 203–205.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 215–216.

for to conclude that her desire was granted.³⁰

One could attempt to measure the influence of Steele's life and work by examining the sheer proliferation of her hymns. One of the first collections of hymns published for Particular Baptist churches was John Ash's and Caleb Evan's *A Collection of Hymns Adapted to Public Worship*. This hymnal included 412 hymns, sixty-two composed by Steele. In 1787, John Rippon edited and published *A Selection of Hymns from the Best Authors*, a more popular hymnal used by multiple denominations. This collection held 588 hymns, and fifty-three of these were Steele's.³¹ Given the influence of hymns in her tradition, Steele's own life of piety gave shape to others' faith as she expressed her Christian experience in her work.

Scripture: "Where all thy glories shine"

Scripture permeates the hymnody of Anne Steele, reflecting the emphasis on the Bible in the Particular Baptist tradition. While she wrote a few hymns directly on the subject of Scripture or revelation, her dependence upon the Bible is seen in her frequent references to God's word in the entirety of her work. Two hymns on the subject of Scripture will be considered here in order to understand the role of the Bible and its authority in Steele's beliefs and religious practice. As will be seen, her piety was centered upon her commitment to Scripture's true revelation of God in Christ.

"Trusting in the Divine Veracity"³² is a hymn in which Steele expresses her understanding and experience of Scripture's enduring truth. In the first stanza, Steele laments her "feeble strength" which "sinks and dies away" when she is faced with "sin and sorrow, fear and pain." In response to her sinking and dying, she turns in the second stanza to Scripture:

³⁰ Ibid., 218.

³¹ Wong, *Anne Steele and her spiritual vision*, 1.

³² Anne Steele, *Hymns* (Great Britain: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust, 1967), 92–93.

My spirit asks a firmer prop,
I lean upon the Lord;
My God, the pillar of my hope,
Is thy unchanging word.

Both the diction and form of this stanza communicate elements of Steele's view of the Bible. Faith is here spoken of by Steele as trusting in the object of faith for support. Scripture can be trusted as a "pillar of hope" because it is "unchanging," fixed by the God who never changes. But the Bible is more than simply an unchanging word. Consider the parallelism of the stanza. In the first half, her feeble, sinking spirit needs a "firmer prop," which is found as she "lean[s] upon the Lord." This imagery is continued when in the third line she speaks of her "pillar of hope," which corresponds to the "firmer prop" of line one. Yet instead of identifying this pillar with the Lord, as the prop of line one was in line two, the pillar is God's word. For Steele, to trust in the word of God is to trust in the God of the word. There is little room between the Lord and his Scripture.³³

The third stanza celebrates that God's word is as fixed in heaven as it is on earth, providing "brightest joys" for "celestial beings" even as it "supports the saints below." Having spoken of the Scripture's sufficiency for angels and men, Steele writes in stanza four:

'Tis this upholds the rolling spheres,
And heaven's immortal frame;
Then, O my soul, suppress thy fears,
Thy basis is the same.

The "this" of the first line of this stanza refers back to the "unchanging word" of stanza two and "the almighty voice" of stanza three. Drawing from the teaching of texts such as Hebrews 1:3,³⁴ Steele is commending the power of God's word to her feeble, frail, and sickly soul. She can

³³ Another example of Steele equating abiding in God's word with remaining in the Lord's presence is her hymn "Pardoning Love" (Steele, *Hymns*, 55). In the first stanza, she writes of her "roving thoughts" that "depart, forgetful of His word!" The final stanza asks God to "keep me at Thy sacred feet, / And let me rove no more." Given the repetition of vocabulary and the position of the statements, forgetting God's word is the opposite of being kept at his feet.

³⁴ "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power..." (Hebrews 1:3)

“suppress [her] fears” because the same word which upholds the stars of the sky upholds her:
“Thy basis is the same.”

Having encouraged her soul with this truth, the hymn’s fifth and final stanza is written in straightforward language, without the metaphor or illustration of previous verses, giving it a tone of strength and confident assurance:

The sacred word, the solemn oath,
For ever must remain;
I trust in everlasting truth,
Nor can my trust be vain.

When compared to the despondent words of the first stanza, one can see the transformation that has taken place in the hymn-writer’s voice by the end of the song. Meditation upon the eternity, sufficiency, and power of God’s word has strengthened her heart. Significantly, at the center point of the hymn she speaks of “the brightest joys” that are built upon God’s word, joys that are shared in heaven. Her gaze is no longer fixed upon her downtrodden soul that “sinks and dies away,” but has been lifted to the heights of heaven and set upon the sacred, enduring word of God. Whereas she had judged her strength to be “vain” at the song’s beginning, in the end she declares so long as her trust is in the solemn oath of God, revealed in his word, it cannot be “vain.”

In her hymn entitled “The Excellency of the Holy Scriptures,”³⁵ Steele more explicitly recites the benefits of the Bible to the Christian. The first verse begins:

Father of mercies, in thy word
What endless glory shines!
For ever be thy name adored
For these celestial lines.

The hymn begins as a prayer of praise to God for his word, from which his “endless glory shines.” God’s name will forever be “adored” because of the “endless” shining glory revealed in his word, which is referred to in the last line as “celestial lines.” Steele celebrates the Bible’s

³⁵ Steele, *Hymns*, 36–38.

teaching that the word of God stands forever, and that in heaven this will be a source of praise. In the following stanzas—many beginning with the word “here,” pointing back to the subject of the first stanza, God’s word—reasons why God’s word brings about adoration for his name are detailed.

The third stanza extols the riches of God’s word, where “the wretched sons of want / Exhaustless riches find.” These riches are not like those found in this life, but they are “above what earth can grant.” Rather than fading, the riches of God’s word are as “lasting as the mind.” One of these riches, according to verse four, is a great feast of divine knowledge. Steele writes:

Here the fair tree of knowledge grows,
And yields a free repast,
Sublimers sweets that nature knows,
Invite the longing taste.

The Bible gives its reader “knowledge,” which grows like a “fair tree” that supplies “free repast,” a meal without cost. The truths the Christian learns of the glory of God in the Bible are more satisfying “sweets than nature knows.” Believers have a “longing taste” that the Bible alone can fulfill. This satisfaction is not found, however, in one “free repast” from this tree. Steele expects to return again and again to the Scriptures for this meal. Stanza eleven reads:

O may these heavenly pages be
My ever dear delight,
And still new beauties may I see,
And still increasing light.

Believers’ “longing taste” for the knowledge of God is not brought to an end, but encouraged by the Bible. As they come to know God in the Bible, the “heavenly pages” become a “delight” that is “ever dear.” The delight never fades because God’s word reveals “new beauties” and “still increasing light” to its reader.³⁶

³⁶ Steele uses these same metaphors in other hymns to write of the same truth. In “Christ the Christian’s Life” (Steele, *Hymns*, 123), she writes:

Then faith, and hope, and love decay;
Without thy life-inspiring ray,
Each cheerful grace declines;
Yet I must live on thee, my Lord,

The twelfth and final stanza is a petition to God to create in the believer's life the realities that have just been sung. God is addressed in line one as "Divine instructor, gracious Lord," the one who will teach the knowledge found in God's word. He is asked, "Teach me to love thy sacred word, / And view my Savior there." With these words, Steele acknowledges that such matters must be "spiritually discerned."³⁷ One cannot open the Scriptures and enjoy the feast of knowledge if God is not his divine instructor; the Bible's "heavenly pages" will not be one's "ever dear delight" if God does not "teach [her] to love [his] sacred word" and see Christ in it.

Anne Steele believed the Scriptures to be as eternal and unchanging as the God who gave them. To trust the words of the Bible is to trust the God who gave those words. The very word which created and sustains the universe is the word God has given to believers, therefore they can be assured of his promised salvation. His word reveals his glory, his beauty, and his light. It sets a feast of joy and peace for God's people, and this sweet meal is able to nourish the soul and sustain its health. The following sections deal with conversion, suffering, and God's sovereignty in Steele's hymns, yet the focus upon the Bible's role in the life of the Christian will remain in a place of prominence in these sections. Scripture was central to her faith, therefore Steele's songs of faith keep Scripture in a central place.

Conversion: "Raise my heart from earth and dust"

The personal experience of conversion was an emphasis in many denominations of Anne Steele's day. Her contemporaries include John and Charles Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield. Revival fires were spreading in many places, including Anne's own home church in Broughton. The summer she was baptized, she was one of seven young people

For still in thy unchanging word
A beam of comfort shines.

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 2:14

who gave testimony to their conversion and joined the church. Those were exciting days in the lives of the congregation, and this evangelistic excitement that marked the beginning of her faith seemed to continue with Anne throughout her life.³⁸ Surviving manuscripts of William Steele's sermons reveal a man with a zeal for the doctrine of regeneration who appealed to sinners to come to Christ in repentance and faith.³⁹ Not surprisingly, many of his daughter's hymns emulate his sermons in this way.

Steele's hymns reflect the Calvinism of her Particular Baptist upbringing, the doctrine of sin being no exception. Man's total depravity is depicted in the metaphors she employs about the effects of sin on the human heart. In "Christ the Physician of Souls,"⁴⁰ the singer begins by lamenting the powerful effects of sin:

Deep are the wounds which sin hath made;
Where shall the sinner find a cure?
In vain, alas, is nature's aid,
The work exceeds all nature's power.

Sin, like a raging fever, reigns
With fatal strength in every part;
The dire contagion fills the veins,
And spreads its poison to the heart.

Sin is a wound in the nature of man that "nature's aid...[and] power" cannot cure. The sinner who searches for this natural cure does so "in vain." Sin is also like a "raging fever." Its pervasiveness through the whole being is clear, for it "reigns / With fatal strength in every part." The language becomes more vivid as Steele describes the disease running through the veins until it "spreads its poison to the heart." While nothing in this world can heal the wound of sin, stanza four exhorts the sinner:

There is a great physician near,
Look up, O fainting soul, and live;

³⁸ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 82.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 357–82.

⁴⁰ Steele, *Hymns*, 39–40.

See, in his heavenly smiles appear
Such ease as nature cannot give!

A “heavenly smile” provides the relief “nature cannot give.” The suffering sinner is to “look up” for life-giving relief. The next stanza describes what he will see when he does:

See in the Savior's dying blood
Life, health, and bliss abundant flow!
'Tis only this dear sacred flood
Can cleanse the heart, and heal its woe.

Christ’s death for sinners on the cross is the source of “life, health, and bliss,” and the only cure to “ease thy pain, and heal thy woe.” The final stanza expresses Steele’s confidence in the work of Jesus to save from sin. Sin’s attacks are “vain” when the “sovereign cure is found.” Indeed, no transgression is beyond the forgiveness afforded by the blood of Jesus, which is a “balm for every painful wound.”

Overcoming the effects of sin in the human heart requires an act of God, a gift of grace that comes through the call of Christ in the word of God. In “The Savior’s Invitation,”⁴¹ after a lengthy appeal to the sinner to come to Christ, the hymn ends with a prayer acknowledging the need for Christ to bring the sinner to himself: “Dear Savior, draw reluctant hearts, / To thee let sinners fly.” Steele meditates on the sovereign work of grace in sinners’ hearts in “Hymn to Jesus.”⁴² After reciting how, by his overcoming death, Jesus displayed a power “which conquer’d all the force of hell,” she ponders:

Is there a heart that will not bend
To thy divine control?
Descend, O sovereign love, descend,
And melt the stubborn soul.

O may our willing hearts confess
Thy sweet, thy gentle sway,
Glad captives of resistless grace,
Thy pleasing rule obey.

⁴¹ Ibid., 99–100.

⁴² Ibid., 104–05.

The “sovereign love” of Christ can “bend” every heart and “melt” any “stubborn soul.” Yet this is experienced by the recipient as a “sweet [and] gentle sway.” This grace may be “resistless” such that those under it must obey God’s rules, but they are “Glad captives” and find those rules to be “pleasing.” Conversion, for the believer, requires a transformation by the sovereign grace of God from being one whose wounds and sickness from the power of sin are inescapable and miserable to one who has been made God’s own by grace.⁴³

The means by which this sovereign grace comes to the sinner is God’s word. In “The Influences of the Spirit of God in the Heart,”⁴⁴ Steele expresses dependence upon God’s work for a sinner to call out to him:

Whene’er to call the Saviour mine,
With ardent wish my heart aspires,
Can it be less than power divine,
Which animates these strong desires?

Only God’s power can grant desires for the Lord to the heart that has been tainted by sin. But what is the means by which this power comes? It comes only through the living, active word of God, the Bible:

What less than thy almighty word,
Can raise my heart from earth and dust,
And bid me cleave to thee, my Lord,
My life, my treasure, and my trust?

The theology of Steele’s hymns echoes that of her father’s sermons, as when he instructed his congregation, “The will is made capable by the implantation of grace to choose that which is truly good.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Another beautiful example of the theology of God’s irresistible grace in Steele’s hymns is found in “Pardoning Love” (Steele, *Hymns*, 55). In the first stanza, she laments the wandering of her “wretched heart,” but begins stanza two: “Yet sovereign mercy calls, Return...”

⁴⁴ Steele, *Hymns*, 38–39.

⁴⁵ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 195.

Though some Particular Baptists of Steele's generation fell into the heresy of Hyper-Calvinism, ignoring the biblical mandate for missions and refusing to offer the gospel to the lost, none could read the hymns of Anne Steele and charge her with this error. Here, too, she follows the example of her father, who was also her pastor for much of her life. In a sermon based on Revelation 22:17, "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come..." William Steele remarks, "O how full is the invitation, how plain is the call to that soul to come unto the water."⁴⁶ Later in this same sermon, the pastor defends the use of invitations in sermons and warns his hearers against not accepting the gospel invitation.

Many of his daughter's hymns set the gospel invitation to music and verse. In "Longing Souls invited to the Gospel Feast,"⁴⁷ Steele, inspired by Jesus' teaching in Luke 14:22, writes:

Ye wretched, hungry, starving poor,
Behold a royal feast!
Where mercy spreads her bounteous store,
For every humble guest.

See, Jesus stands with open arms;
He calls, he bids you come:
Guilt holds you back, and fear alarms;
But see, there yet is room.

The hymn continues, expounding on the idea that "there yet is room." The third stanza proclaims, "Room in the Saviour's bleeding heart: / There love and pity meet..." Anyone that "trembles at his feet" he will accept. In stanza four, the invitation continues with the personal, direct appeals: "The Father reconcil'd / Invites your souls to come." This is not a cold, heartless Hyper-Calvinism, but an earnest plea to all who hear to come to Christ. Though Steele believed that only God's elect would come to Christ upon hearing the gospel, this hymn's final verses reveal her generous view of God's electing love:

⁴⁶ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁷ Steele, *Hymns*, 10–11.

There, with united heart and voice,
Before th' eternal throne,
Ten thousand thousand souls rejoice,
In extasies unknown.

And yet ten thousand thousand more,
Are welcome still to come:
Ye longing souls, the grace adore;
Approach, there yet is room.

Though God's saving love is limited to the elect, this does not mean it is not also abundant. Salvation is a great banquet set by God for his children, bounteous and sweet. The feast is lavish, its spread is wide, for the God who sets this table provides from unsearchable riches. Sinners are invited to come, and many (more than "ten thousand thousand") will accept that invitation by grace. The emphatic and repeated "ten thousand thousand" as those presently rejoicing before God and those invited to join in that praise reveals Steele's sense of awe at the depth and breadth of the mercy and grace found in Christ.

Suffering and Sovereignty: "Thorns are mix'd with flowers"

That Steele experienced great trials in her life has been established. From the loss of family and friends to the physical pain and weakness from her own ailments, she became well acquainted with suffering.⁴⁸ Yet, even at her worst, Steele knew that the goodness of God should prevail over her gloom. She wrote with great honesty of her affliction, rarely making excuses for her depressed state:

The first attacks of a fever have so weakened my nerves and spirits, that every sprightly faculty and almost every cheerful thought is sunk in a stupid languor; a listless inattention even to common things overspreads me, conversation is tasteless, and reading and thinking almost impracticable. But alas, this is not the worst! The bounties of providence and the blessings of grace hardly excite a grateful thought, or quicken a warm desire— wretched state!⁴⁹

Steele recognized that even in pain, she ought to feel a sense of gratitude and wonder at the

⁴⁸ Far more extensive treatments of the relationship between Steele's suffering and her hymns have been written than will be provided here. For a good chapter-length summary on the subject, see Wong, *Anne Steele and Her Spiritual Vision*, chapter 3.

⁴⁹ Broome and Steele, *A Bruised Reed*, 342.

thought of God's grace in her life. She would eventually exhort herself, "Think, O my soul, hadst thou not once nobler views and brighter hopes?" Looking back to the past work of God was one way to stir up the affections she once felt.⁵⁰ Steele did not expect a perfect life, but knew that God would give to all his children both pleasures and pains. This is reflected in the hymn "Desiring Resignation and Thankfulness,"⁵¹ which begins:

When I survey life's varied scene,
Amid the darkest hours,
Sweet rays of comfort shine between,
And thorns are mix'd with flowers.

Lord, teach me to adore thy hand,
From whence my comforts flow;
And let me in this desert land
A glimpse of Canaan know.

As a rose with its thorns, so life would bring both beauty and trial. God does shine "sweet rays" amid "darkest hours." In the midst of "desert land," she could be taught to praise God still by having "a glimpse of Canaan." Steele learned to meditate upon the past work of God in her life to give herself comfort in him.

Later in this hymn, Steele turns to God's word as a source of comfort during trials. In the fifth stanza, she calls Scripture the "dear solace of [her] soul." The next two stanzas explain how the Bible acts as her solace:

When present sufferings pain my heart,
Or future terrors rise,
And light and hope almost depart
From these dejected eyes:

Thy powerful word supports my hope,
Sweet cordial of the mind!
And bears my fainting spirit up,
And bids me wait resign'd.

God's word was able to lift Steele's eyes from her worldly state and carry her spirit to her

⁵⁰ Steele devotes an entire hymn to this theme. See "Faith and Hope in divine goodness encouraged by past experience" in Steele, *Hymns*, 129-130.

⁵¹ Steele, *Hymns*, 82-83.

heavenly hope. Her sights set upon his hope, she is then able to “wait resign’d.” Resignation was a common theme in Steele’s hymn on suffering.⁵² To be resigned, for Steele, means accepting the thorns with the flowers, acknowledging that God’s hand both gives and withhold blessings, and that according to his own sovereign purposes. The hymn concludes:

And O, whate’er of earthly bliss
Thy sovereign hand denies,
Accepted at thy throne of grace,
Let this petition rise:

“Give me a calm, a thankful heart,
“From every murmur free;
“The blessings of thy grace impart,
“And let me live to thee.

“Let the sweet hope that thou art mine,
“My path of life attend;
“Thy presence through my journey shine,
“And bless its happy end.”

For Steele, the secret to peace and gratitude was resignation to God’s sovereign will in her life, recalling and thanking him for blessings given while trusting his goodness even when blessings are denied. She can walk life’s path with “the sweet hope” that God is her portion and relying upon his presence to “shine” in her journey.

In the end, God himself is enough. In “The presence of God the only comfort in affliction,”⁵³ Steele begins by pointing to “kind providence” that sheds blessings in the midst of affliction and gives beauty in the midst of her gloom. The workings of providence relieve her anxious heart because they are rays of light that reveal God is there. In verse four, she confesses the sufficiency of God to her heart:

Thy gracious presence, O my God,
My every wish contains,
With this, beneath affliction’s load,
My heart no more complains.

⁵² See also “Resignation,” in Steele, *Hymns*, 119-20.

⁵³ Steele, *Hymns*, 128–29.

God's presence is enough to satisfy this woman who was so acquainted with trials. The same sentiment is expressed in "Submission to God under Affliction."⁵⁴ She begins by addressing her "complaining, doubting heart," telling it to "adore the just, the sovereign Lord..." In the penultimate stanza, she again reminds herself of God's "sovereign hand," which is "just, and wise, and kind." Her soul ought be resigned to this, she writes. Then the final stanza concludes:

But oh! Indulge this only wish,
This boon I must implore!
Assure my soul that thou are mine,
My God, I ask no more.

Steele can endure whatever providence brings her way so long as she is assured that God is with her, that he is her God, who will save her finally. Steele turns to God's word for assurance of this promise. When circumstance cause her heart to sink, Scripture, God's "healing word," reminds her of his faithfulness and sufficiency in her life:

My God, if thou are mine indeed,
Then I have all my heart can crave;
A present help in times of need,
Still kind to hear, and strong to save.

Forgive my doubts, O gracious Lord;
And ease the sorrows of my breast;
Speak to my heart the healing word,
That thou are mine,--and I am blest.

Conclusion

Anne Steele's hymns reveal the heart of a woman who loved God and his word. Raised in a home that treasured the gospel, Steele continued to find her joy in Christ from her conversion at age fifteen until her death at sixty-one despite myriad miseries along her path. Her faith in the sovereignty of God over all things provided her hope, for she knew that simply because he withheld a blessing that did not mean he was not able. The greatest blessing of God—

⁵⁴ Ibid., 91–92.

his own presence—was surely hers as a light in the darkness of this world, lifting her eyes to heaven, where his presence would be finally and fully known. Believers today have been given the same Holy Scriptures as Anne Steele, the same gospel promises in which they can hope, and the same assurance from our sovereign God. May we, like her, face every trial with resignation to God's will and thankfulness that we have been given God in Christ.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aalders, Cynthia Y. *To Express the Ineffable: The hymns and spirituality of Anne Steele*. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2008.
- Broome, J. R., and Anne Steele. *A Bruised Reed: Anne Steele, her life and times; together with Anne Steele's hymns, psalms and a selection of her prose works*. Harpenden: Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 2007.
- Gill, John. "The Dissenter's Reasons for Separating from the Church of England." *John Gill - The Dissenter's Reasons for Separating from the Church of England*. Accessed November 21, 2012. <http://articles.ochristian.com/article12509.shtml>.
- Noll, Mark A. "We Are What We Sing." *Christianity Today* 43, no. 8 (July 12, 1999): 37.
- Steele, Anne. *Hymns*. Great Britain: Gospel Standard Baptist Trust, 1967.
- Wong, Priscilla. *Anne Steele and Her Spiritual Vision : Seeing God in the peaks, valleys, and plateaus of life*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012.