

David Ward

REVIVING THE HYMNS

I. Introduction

- A. Hymnals – a fading icon of church music?
- B. Who I am and why I love hymns
- C. Today's goal – that all those who attend will gain a better understanding and appreciation for the depth and power of hymns and will grow in their desire to use and promote them in their local churches

II. What Is a “Hymn?”

- A. Dictionary Definition – the OED defines it as any religious song of praise, especially a Christian song in praise of God. By that definition all of our worship songs are "hymns."
- B. Common Usage
 - 1. A "hymn" typically refers to a strophic song of praise to God with a common meter set to a non-syncopated tune
 - 2. The phrase "traditional hymn" is sometimes used to denote a song with traditional music that is at least one hundred years old.

We will use the terms “hymn” and “traditional hymn” in the
aforementioned senses.

- 3. Before hymnals started adding modern praise choruses, a hymn was often thought of as something that you find in a hymnal!
- C. Biblical Usage – Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

"Apparently, first-century worship included traditional (classic) as well as contemporary materials, highly cognitive as well as more emotional forms, and carefully-crafted as well as improvised compositions-psalms of praise and prayer, hymns of doctrine, and spiritual songs of Christian experience." - Donald Hustad, Jubilate II

III. Hymns Need Reviving

- A. Hymns are better than many of today's worship songs. There are thousands of treasures to be found in the body of traditional hymnody. Many of them are better poetry and songwriting than most of us will ever achieve, written by theologians and pastors who knew their Bibles better and probably knew God better than us.
1. Various influences, particular over the century, have brought about a decline in the Biblical, theological, poetic, and artistic *depth* of worship songs. The contemporary songs that are published and promoted today, *in general*, lack solid and good theology.
 - a. Personal experience and acquaintances in publishing
 - b. Case study (appendix A): songs on God's word through the centuries.
 2. Hymns cover a wider breadth of topics and emotions, more like the Psalms. Check the topical index of any hymnal versus a modern song book to see this demonstrated.
 3. Hymns typically engage the intellect, imagination, and will using diverse and Biblical imagery.
 4. Hymns often tell a story that is focused on the gospel. Storytelling is one of the most effective means of communicating truth.
 5. Using songs that have been around for a while (both text and tunes) helps to remind us of and root us in history. This will humble us and help stave off culture wars.
 6. Protestant hymns are still, in general, the most widely known body of songs around the world in evangelical churches. Teaching your congregation traditional hymn texts and tunes will serve them by giving them songs they can sing with others when they travel.
 7. Hymns are written to standard meters so you can usually find a tune that your people know to accompany an unfamiliar text. This means that you can sing more songs that cover a wider topical umbrella without having to learn new music for every song.
- B. Hymns are worse than many of today's worship songs.
1. While the lyrics of traditional hymns are full of rich truth, their effectiveness can be hampered by archaic, formal, or awkward phrases or terms.
 - a. We can and should expand the theological and Biblical vocabulary of our congregations by teaching, but the more we stop to explain lyrics the less effective they are as *songs*.

- b. When lyrics are difficult to understand we lose the already small window of opportunity our people have to grasp and be affected by the truths they are pointing to.
- c. In public worship we have academic diversity and should seek to make our communication (of every kind) clear, understandable, and accessible. We do not need to “dumb down” the message or lyrics in order to achieve this; rather we simply need to use modern language and cultural ideas well.

Conclusion: We should, in general, revive the lyrics of traditional hymns to make them clear and understandable to our people.

- 2. The tunes that many traditional hymns are set to hinder many, especially those used to popular music, from emotionally connecting with the lyrics.
 - a. Hymn tunes can be artistically dull, both in rhythm and melody. They lack syncopation, which is a wonderful way of making lyrics sing more naturally. Some hymn tunes have boring and unmemorable melodies like *HAMBURG* (When I Survey the Wondrous Cross). On the other hand, hymn tunes can be too complex for either your musicians or the congregation to successfully sing. Some tunes have melodies that jump all over the place with constantly changing chords.
 - b. Since our hymn tunes were written a long time ago, their style (phrasing, melodic intervals, rhythm) often comes across as outdated or humorous. Sometimes they even convey strange associations.
 - c. For many who grew up saturated with popular music and have little to no appreciation for classical music (which is most Americans), hymn tunes are “lifeless.” On the other hand, for those who prefer classical music or other “higher” musical forms, many of the hymn tunes will still be dribble.

“There are two musical situations on which I think we can be confident that a blessing rests. One is where a priest or an organist, himself a man of trained and delicate taste, humbly and charitably sacrifices his own (aesthetically right) desires and gives the people humbler and coarser fare than he would wish, in a belief (even as it may be, the erroneous belief) that he can thus bring them to God. The other is where the stupid and unmusical layman humbly and patiently, and above all silently, listens to music which he cannot, or cannot fully, appreciate, in the belief that it somehow glorifies God, and that if it does not edify him this must be his own defect. Neither such a High Brow nor such a Low Brow can be far out of the way. To both, Church Music will have been a means of grace: not the music they have liked,

but the music they have disliked. They have both offered, sacrificed, their taste in the fullest sense. But where the opposite situation arises, where the musician is filled with the pride of skill or the virus of emulation and looks with contempt on the unappreciative congregation, or where the unmusical, complacently entrenched in their own ignorance and conservatism, look with the restless and resentful hostility of an inferiority complex on all who would try to improve their taste--there, we may be sure, all that both offer is unblessed and the spirit that moves them is not the Holy Ghost." - C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections, On Church Music*

- d. Tunes for traditional hymns often don't seem to fit the lyrics very well. Examples are "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," "A Debtor to Mercy Alone," and "Rock of Ages" – all *phenomenal* texts with music that hinders, rather than helps, many to engage with the lyrics.
- e. From the beginning of hymnody, tunes have been written for texts by different authors, often living during successive generations. Even texts like "Amazing Grace" had various tunes until one stuck in the mid 1800s and has remained until today. This is because music (melody, harmony, and rhythm) is rooted in a culture.

Conclusion: We should (though not exclusively) continue the tradition of writing new tunes for old, beautiful texts and encourage our local musicians to try their hand at it. We should be "reviving" wonderful hymn texts by writing new tunes or playing existing tunes with fresh arrangements.

"When I first became a Christian, about fourteen years ago, I thought that I could do it on my own, by retiring to my rooms and reading theology, and I wouldn't go to the churches and Gospel Halls; [...] I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit." - C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock, Answers to Questions on Christianity*

IV. Sources for Hymns

- A. On-line hymnals can be overwhelming. Who can sort through 10,000 hymns to find those which are truly useful and well-known?

- B. Finding hymns that are in common use
1. Use good modern hymnals. The Trinity Hymnal (Great Commissions Publications – Presbyterian), The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration (Word Music), and The Worship Hymnal (Lifeway – Southern Baptist) are three I can recommend.
 2. Look for hymns that have made it into the mainstream Christian culture. This means there is a higher likelihood that Evangelicals will know the songs. For example, the album “Hymns Ancient and Modern” by Passion contains many traditional hymns arranged into popular music forms.
 3. Find articles or resource from people you know who have compiled lists of essential hymns. Bob Kauflin compiled a list of ten hymns that his church is memorizing. I published a book for my church with 52 essential hymns chosen from a broad range of topics. See appendix B for these lists.
- C. Finding the best hymn texts (whether or not they are in use)
1. From traditional hymnody – the treasure of old hymnals. See appendix C for a list of hymnals that have helped me.
 2. From modern hymn writers. When you find a good hymn in a modern hymnal, make note of the author and look for other hymns or collections of their lyrics. See appendix D for a list of modern hymn writers who I have found useful.
- D. Sources for hymn tunes: Most modern hymnals have an index by meter. Use this to find existing, traditional tunes (when they fit) for hymn texts.

V. Deciding Which Musical Styles to Use

- A. Know your people
1. The music you choose to deliver lyrics should be helpful and appealing to as many as possible.
 2. It is normally wise to provide a mix of musical styles to cross cultural barriers (usually called “blended” worship)
- B. Know the text
1. You can’t know which styles are appropriate for a text until you know the ethos of the text.
 2. Once a style comes together for a text, let the text drive the arrangement. The hymnal (not the album) “Hymns Ancient and Modern” is an example of this.

C. Know the style

1. The only way to arrange, choose, and write various styles of music for hymns is to be aware of them – you or your worship leader must listen to a variety of different kinds of music.
2. Listen to the best musicians, both in the church and outside of the church, to get to know a style so that you can more authentically create music in it.

D. Know your instrument or give guidance to instrumentalists

1. Practice new rhythms, scales, and progressions. Always be challenging yourself to expand your approach to your instrument.
2. If you are not an instrumentalist, consider giving him/her music (whether recorded or sheet music) that will feed their creative process.

VI. Writing New Arrangements for Old Tunes

Taking traditional hymns (texts and tunes) and setting them in new rhythmic and/or harmonic (chord) structures.

- A. This works well for well-loved and well-known hymns. An example is Passion's "Hymns Ancient and Modern"
- B. This can help you build a more fluid song set and avoid having the "token hymn" feeling
- C. A pet peeve – altering the rhythm of the melody for well-known hymns. In order to make the melody more appealing to some (normally younger generations), others who have sung the hymn for decades are now alienated because they can't follow the rhythm.
- D. Some live examples – "How Great Thou Art," "Rejoice, the Lord is King," "Rock of Ages," and "Amazing Grace"
- E. Songwriting tips
 1. Simplifying chords
 2. Chord substitutions
 3. Finding a groove or lick that helps set up the feel for the song

VII. Writing new tunes

Taking traditional hymn texts and writing completely new music for them

- A. This can be a wonderful way to liberate a hymn text from the stale tune it is wed to, bringing a fresh perspective and better capturing the mind and heart to direct them to worship God

B. When to write new tunes

1. The hymn tune hinders your people from being affected by the lyrics
2. A hymn does not have a tune associated with it
3. You can't find a suitable existing tune

C. Choosing hymn texts to write new tunes for

1. Look for texts that are rich in the gospel
2. Look for hymns on subjects that your church rarely sings about
3. Read old hymnals for devotional value and use those affect you.
4. While there are many gems to be found, there are also a lot of poor hymns. Look for hymns that are good poetry, have fresh ideas, are not repetitive, and develop their theme well.

D. Altering the lyrics

1. Traditional hymns will almost all be in the public domain, so you are free to alter the lyrics to fit your modern song arrangement
2. Using a verse of the hymn as a chorus often works well
3. Writing a new chorus or additional verses based on the style and theme of the existing text. Example (J. Newton)

Come, sinners, view the Lamb of God, wounded and dying, bathed in blood!
Behold His side, and venture near, the well of endless life is here.
Here I forget my cares and pains and find a drink whose pow'r remains;
Only the fountain-head above can satisfy the thirst of love.

Chorus: (Added)

So I will come and view the cross where mercy answered righteousness;
The spotless Lamb of God was slain for this unworthy, helpless sinner's gain!

E. Modernizing the lyrics. Examples:

1. Each sweet Ebenezer I have in review, confirms His good pleasure to help me quite through. (Newton) → Each time He has helped me lies clearly in view, designed to assure me He'll pilot me through.
2. How sweet and awful is the place (Watts) → How sweet and awesome is the place

F. Traditional hymns were written for congregations to sing, so write melodies that your congregations can sing!

1. Use repetition
2. Don't make the rhythm overly complicated (unless the same complex form is repeated)

3. Write in a range that's easy for a large group to sing together. Middle C (C4) to C5 is ideal, can expand to A3 to D5 or slightly wider if absolutely necessary. Lower pitches will lack energy and are a good fit for more meditative lyrics, higher pitches for celebratory lyrics.

VIII. Writing New Hymn Texts

- A. Each generation and culture should seek to learn from the past and express the gospel in their unique cultural context. The best songwriters study traditional hymns and let them affect the way they write.
- B. Hymnody didn't die with the reformers or after the great awakening! Don't limit your song selection (or reading selection for that matter) to only writers who have been dead for 200 years!
- C. *Encourage* writers in your congregation to write poetry and songs. Even if a lyric or its music isn't fit for the public assembly, consider sharing it via a newsletter or reading it.
- D. There are many groups writing useful new tunes for existing hymn texts. See [appendix E](#) for a list of groups and websites to find these new tunes.

IX. Appendixes

Appendix A: A case study of songs on God's Word since the 18th century

God, in the Gospel of His Son,
Makes His eternal counsels known;
'Tis here His richest mercy shines,
And truth is drawn in fairest lines.

Here sinners of an humble frame,
May taste His grace, and learn His Name;
'Tis writ in characters of blood;
Severely just, immensely good.

May this blest volume ever lie
Close to my heart, and near my eye;
Till life's last hour my soul engage,
And be my chosen heritage.

-Benjamin Beddome, 1787

Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life;
Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life.
Words of life and beauty, teach me faith and duty:
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life;
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.

Sweetly echo the gospel call, wonderful words of life;
Offer pardon and peace to all, wonderful words of life.
Jesus, only Savior, sanctify us forever:
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life;
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.

-Philip Bliss, 1874

Holy Bible, Book of love,
Tell me of our God above.
He who made me loves me still,
Helps me know and do His will.

Holy Bible, speak to me
Of the life that I should lead.
Help me stronger, purer grow,
And God's love to others show.

-Evone Capell, 1964

Appendix B: Two lists of “essential” hymns

Hymns for Private and Family Worship (David Ward)

(52 essential hymns to work on memorizing, one per week)

My Jesus, I Love Thee	It Is Well with My Soul
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty	Come, Thou Almighty King
Baptism Hymn*	My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less
Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners!	How Firm a Foundation
Thine Be the Glory	Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed?
Join all the Glorious Names	Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah
O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus!	Rock of Ages
Sacred Head Now Wounded	How Sweet and Awesome is the Place
When I Survey the Wondrous Cross	A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
Christ the Lord is Risen Today	Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Wretched
O God the Holy Spirit*	Love of God, How Strong and True
And Can it Be that I Should Gain	Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing
Breathe on Me, Breath of God	Rejoice, the Lord Is King
We Come, O Christ, to You	Just as I Am
The Church's One Foundation	All Creatures of Our God and King
Amazing Grace	Word of God Incarnate
My Rest Is in Heaven, My Rest Is Not Here	Be Still, My Soul
Not What My Hands Have Done	Crown Him with Many Crowns
Lo! He comes with Clouds Descending	Abide with Me
On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand	Holy, Holy, Holy
I Sing the Mighty Power of God	Great is Thy Faithfulness
This Is My Father's World	Come, O Come Emmanuel
Covenant Song*	Joy to the World! the Lord Is Come
Take My Life and Let it Be	Hark! the Herald Angels Sing
Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise	Come, all Ye Faithful
Blest Be the Tie that Binds	Our God, Our Help in Ages Past

* There are a few topics for which it was difficult to find good, widely known historic hymns, in particular the Holy Spirit, the Sacraments, and Church Membership. To cover those topics more fully, the editor has included a few of his own adaptations or original works. (These are available at ReformedPraise.org)

Ten hymns that Covenant Life church is memorizing

November - Amazing Grace
 December - Before the Throne
 January - Praise to the Lord, the Almighty
 February - Be Thou My Vision
 March - And Can It Be
 April - Crown Him with Many Crowns
 May - A Mighty Fortress
 June - Be Still My Soul
 July - How Firm a Foundation
 August - Great is Thy Faithfulness

Appendix C: Historic hymnals that have been most helpful to me (in order of usefulness)

- Our Own Hymn-book (C.H. Spurgeon, editor)
- Psalms and Hymns of Reformed Worship (by Wakeman Trust – essentially the modern version of the previous book. Peter Masters, editor)
- Primitive Hymns (Hymnal of the Primitive or Old-School Baptists, Benjamin Lloyd, editor)
- Gadsby's Hymns (William Gadsby, Editor)
- Hymns Ancient and Modern, Standard Edition (from the church of England)
- Olney Hymns (Original publication of John Newton and William Cowper's hymns and poems)
- Primitive Baptist Hymn Book (D.H. Goble, editor)

Appendix D: Modern hymn-writers I enjoy

- James Montgomery Boice
- Margaret Clarkson
- David Clowney
- Edmund Clowney
- Donald Fortner
- Eric Schumacher
- Timothy Dudley-Smith
- Stuart Townend / Keith Getty

Appendix E: Groups writing contemporary, congregational tunes for hymns

- Reformed Praise – reformedpraise.org
- Indelible Grace – igracemusic.com
- Sovereign Grace Music – sovereigngracemusic.org
- Red Mountain Music (only a few would work congregationally) – redmountainchurch.org/rmm
- Keith Getty has written a few songs that are largely older hymn texts – gettymusic.com

Appendix F: Hymns from the Trinity Hymnal that we have used at Redeemer Bible Church

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God
 A Parting Hymn We Sing
 Abide with Me: Fast Falls the Eventide
 All Creatures of Our God and King
 All Glory, Laud and Honor
 All Praise to God Who Reigns Above
 Amazing Grace
 And Can It Be That I Should Gain?
 Be Thou My Vision
 Blest Be the Tie That Binds
 Breathe on Me, Breath of God
 Christ the Lord Is Risen Today
 Come, for the Feast Is Spread
 Come, Thou Fount Of Every Blessing
 Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus
 Come, We That Love the Lord
 Crown Him with Many Crowns
 Day by Day and with Each Passing Moment
 For All the Saints
 Go, Tell It on the Mountain
 God, All Nature Sings Thy Glory
 Great Is Thy Faithfulness
 Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah
 Hark! the Herald Angels Sing
 Have Thine Own Way, Lord
 He Leadeth Me
 How Firm a Foundation
 How Great Thou Art
 I Sing the Mighty Power of God
 It Is Well with My Soul
 Jesus Loves Me
 Jesus Paid it All
 Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken
 Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross
 Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners!
 Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come
 Like a River Glorious

Man of Sorrows! What a Name
 My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less
 My Jesus, I Love You
 Nothing but the Blood
 O Come, All Ye Faithful
 O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
 O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing
 O Sacred Head, Now Wounded
 O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus
 O Word of God Incarnate
 Once in Royal David's City
 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty
 Rock of Ages
 Silent Night
 So Send I You
 Spirit of the Living God
 Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted
 Take My Life and Let It Be
 Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord
 The Church's One Foundation
 There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood
 Thine Be the Glory
 This Is My Father's World
 'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus
 To God Be the Glory
 We Come, O Christ, to You
 When All Your Mercies, O My God
 Worship Christ, the Risen King!