

My Grandmother Saved It, My Mother Threw It Away, and Now I'm Buying It Back

Why Young People Are Returning to Old Hymn Texts

KEVIN TWIT

Editor's note: In popular usage, the word hymn can refer to the text only (typical in England), to text and tune only, or to the whole combination of text and music. In this article, the desire to return to old hymns is to return to the older texts, sometimes also the tunes, but definitely not the sounds of traditional hymns. Old hymn texts are finding new life in contemporary musical settings.

Not too long ago I saw a sign in an antique store: "My grandmother saved it, my mother threw it away, and now I'm buying it back!" That little sign captures the story of church music in the last fifty years. In my work as a pastor with college students, I have been taking note of what feels like the beginning of a movement.

There is most definitely a hunger and longing among the emerging generations, college students and twenty-somethings, to connect with something real and solid rather than the faddish and ephemeral. Books like Robert Webber's *The Younger Evangelicals* (Baker, 2002) and Colleen Carroll's *The New Faithful* (Loyola Press, 2002) well document this phenomenon. Recently a college student posted this letter on a website in response to an article on hymns.

Coming from a typical praise chorus-reliant high school youth group . . . I didn't understand a lot of the poetic and imagery-driven lyrics, and the word *hymn* automatically meant boring music. But I found myself falling in love with the old hymns. . . . The words are so profound and full of truth one can't help but be broken. Singing hymns has seriously changed my life and freed me from feeling frustrated by surface lyrics that focus on how I feel about God, which is always changing. Hymns have allowed me to center my worship on the Gospel, which in turn compels me to love the God I am prone to hate and wander from.

What thrills me is to see how her discovery of hymns has affected even the way she expresses what she finds in her heart—"Come Thou Fount" has helped orient her to a richer view of what the Christian life actually feels like!

For many, the church's hymn tradition has become a treasured resource; students around the country are scouting out used bookstores for antique hymnals, searching for gems that have fallen out of use and yet resonate with their faith and longing to connect with God in a deeper way. Across the country there's been an explosion of interest in writing new tunes for old hymns. Grassroots-produced CDs like *Indelible Grace* (see RW 66, p. 42) as well as recent projects by artists including Amy Grant (*Legacy*) and Caedmon's Call (*In The Company of Angels*) have featured old hymns, many of them set to new tunes in keeping with the musical cultures of emerging generations.

It is worth pondering why hymns are connecting with young people. Few would have predicted this when baby boomers were throwing out anything "old-fashioned" or traditional. But we still need hymns in a postmodern world! In fact, the hymn tradition has tremendous things to offer the emerging generations—things they are really longing for and that are frequently lacking in the praise and chorus music so often marketed as "college worship." What's going on? Why do we still need hymns in a postmodern world? Here are several reasons:

Because Worship Is Formative

Worship shapes and molds us. Our hearts are drawn from other "treasures" as our eyes are opened to see Jesus for who he really is. Thomas Chalmers (nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian), called this the "expulsive power of a new affection." In worship we seek to

have Jesus become more beautiful and believable to us. Anne Steele (eighteenth century) captures this in a hymn text: "Thou lovely Source of true delight, whom I unseen adore; unveil thy beauties to my heart, that I might love thee more!" Worship restores our sanity so that we can live in line with the truth of the gospel rather than with the fantasy world in which we must earn God's favor. Hymns are wonderful for doing this.

Because of the Longing to Experience God

Postmoderns long for experience with God, and hymns are some of the richest expression of

Hymns are a doorway into sensing the truth in our hearts rather than just "knowing" it in our heads.



VIEWPOINT



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Christian experience we have. They are a doorway into sensing the truth in our hearts rather than just “knowing” it in our heads. Wesley’s text “Arise, my soul, arise, shake off thy guilty fears; the bleeding sacrifice on my behalf appears” is a great example of crying out to God to sense what we confess.

Because Hymns Help Us Grow Up

Hymns teach us the rich theology we really need. If we have a limited view of who God is and what the gospel is, our experience of it will be limited as well. Paul writes the longest explanation of the gospel to people who are (literally) world-famous for their faith (Rom. 1:8) because, as Luther said, we leak the gospel and it needs to be beat into our heads over and over again! Hymns really stretch us. Why is Henry Lyte’s “Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken” one of my students’ favorite hymns? Probably because it offers us orientation to what the Christian life is really all about and doesn’t sugarcoat the gospel at all:

Jesus, I my cross have taken,
all to leave and follow thee.
Destitute, despised, forsaken,
thou from hence my all shall be.
Perish every fond ambition,
all I’ve sought or hoped or known.
Yet how rich is my condition!
God and heaven are still my own.

Let the world despise and leave me;
they have left my Savior too.
Human hearts and looks deceive me;
thou art not, like them, untrue.
O while thou dost smile upon me,
God of wisdom, love, and might,
foes may hate and friends disown me,
show thy face and all is bright.

Because Hymns Are Mini-meditations on the “Paradoxes” of the Gospel That Drive Us to Worship

C. H. Spurgeon said, “When I cannot understand anything in the Bible, it seems as though God had set a chair there for me, at which to kneel and worship; and that the mysteries are intended to be an altar of devotion.” Hymns are an opportunity to sit in a mystery—like Charles Wesley’s “And can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me?”—until it begins to melt our hearts.

Because Hymns Can Teach Us the Art of Meditation on Scripture

This is an art we desperately need to relearn. Hymns help us take a theme and turn it over; they let us gaze on it from different angles. And they suggest (though by no means do they ever exhaust) ways in which this truth should change our lives. In this way they model how to meditate upon Scripture and the truths of the gospel.

Because Hymns Remind Us That We Can Only Approach God Through the Blood of Jesus (1 Pet. 2:5)

The idea that we only approach God as Christians through the blood of Christ is too rarely mentioned in most modern choruses. We need deeper, richer, and longer looks at the cross and all that it means. As Luther advised, “For every one look you take at your sin, take ten looks at the cross!”

Because Hymns Focus Us on God’s Promises More Than on Ours

We grow by feeding on God’s character revealed and by feasting on God’s promises. We need to recall Augustus Toplady’s hymn “Rock of Ages” (originally titled “A living and dying prayer for the holiest believer on earth”; see p. 25): “Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone, thou must save and thou alone!”

Here is another set of reasons to sing hymns rather than only choruses:

- Hymns offer a fuller emotional range of expression. Hymns help us work through emotions and they cover a wider range of emotions than many modern choruses do. Although we may associate hymns with a lack of emotion and modern choruses with emotional excess at times, careful study reveals that the emotional range touched on by modern choruses is rather narrow.
- Hymns tend to engage our imagination, intellect, and will together. Good hymns give us rich language and images that require us to think and imagine as the way to stir the passions. While praise choruses do use imagery, they sometimes get stuck in clichés that no longer engage our imaginations. The Scriptures are full of diverse images; our songs should reflect this creativity too.
- Hymns tell a story and walk us through the gospel. Some choruses are often more like “images” that flash on the television screen for a moment. They stir us, but they don’t take us anywhere. In a good hymn, the writer offers her story and invites you to try it on and see if it might be your story too.
- Hymns remind us that the church is bigger than the people we know, or even those who are alive today. Through hymns we connect with believers who lived centuries before us. We can have “mystic sweet communion, with those whose rest is won” (“The Church’s One Foundation” by Stone). When I introduce people to Anne Steele’s hymns, they are struck by the powerful way she dealt with her immense suffering. They find that her cries can become their cries, her tears can elicit their tears, and her faith can encourage their faith. Seeing that we can connect with an English woman who lived in a small village 300 years ago and feel what she felt is powerful. All of the sudden the kingdom of God looks much bigger! ■