

Then Sings My Soul: The Richness of Hymns
Colossians 3:16

Corralling the Cows in the Corn

There are two competing silly stories that have been making the rounds in churches since the 1990's. They go like this:

An old farmer went to the city one weekend and attended the big city church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was.

“Well,” said the farmer. “It was good. They did something different, however. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns.”

“Praise choruses?” asked the wife. “What are those?”

“Oh, they're okay. They're sort of like hymns, only different,” said the farmer.

“Well, what's the difference?” asked the wife.

The farmer said, “Well it's like this ... If I were to say to you, ‘Martha, the cows are in the corn,’ well that would be a hymn. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you, ‘Martha, Martha, Martha, Oh, Martha, MARTHA, MARTHA, the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows, the white cows, the black and white cows, the COWS, COWS, COWS are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn, in the CORN, CORN, CORN, COOOOORRRRRNNNNN,’ then, if I were to repeat the whole thing two or three times, well that would be a praise chorus.”

As luck would have it, the exact same Sunday a young, new Christian from the city church attended the small town church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was.

“Well,” said the young man, “It was good. They did something different, however. They sang hymns instead of regular songs.”

“Hymns?” asked the wife. “What are those?”

“They're okay. They're sort of like regular songs, only different,” said the young man.

“Well, what's the difference?” asked the wife.

The young man said, “Well it's like this ... If I were to say to you, ‘Martha, the cows are in the corn,’ well that would be a regular song. If on the other hand, I were to say to you,

Oh Martha, dear Martha, hear thou my cry

Inclined thine ear to the words of my mouth.

Turn thou thy whole wondrous ear by and by
 To the righteous, glorious truth.
 For the way of the animals who can explain
 There in their heads is no shadow of sense,
 Harkenest they in God's sun or his rain
 Unless from the mild, tempting corn they are fenced.
 Yea those cows in glad bovine, rebellious delight,
 Have broke free their shackles, their warm pens eschewed.
 Then goaded by minions of darkness and night
 They all my mild Chilliwack sweet corn chewed.
 So look to that bright shining day by and by,
 Where all foul corruptions of earth are reborn
 Where no vicious animal makes my soul cry
 And I no longer see those foul cows in the corn,
 ...then, if I were to do only verses one, three and four, and change keys on the last verse, well
 that would be a hymn."

I may be the only one, but I've never found those stories to be amusing. Here's why...

In Colossians 3:16, the Apostle Paul urges the church to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Psalms (which we will deal with this summer), hymns and spiritual songs are gifts from God through creative song writers to assist the church in engaging with God in worship as well as teach eternal truths. I have two children. Different as night and day. I have never considered Meredith better than Wes or Wes better than Meredith. To show partiality between your children is self-absorbed and cruel. Anyone who prefers one of their children over another should have their parent license revoked. In the same way, Christians should not shun one or prefer another of God's musical gifts to the church. Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are as different as night and day – apples and oranges. It is my hope to be able to show the distinctions and great value of both hymns and choruses in the

next few weeks. This week, we will explore the richness of hymns. In two weeks, we will consider the power of contemporary song.

Prayer

Why is Song Important?

Is singing really that important to Christians? We joke about this all the time on the deacon board because I have them close each meeting with a hymn. In the parallel passage to Colossians 3:16, Paul tells the Ephesians that singing is a mark – a by-product – of being filled with the Holy Spirit: “...be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (Eph 5:18-19). Christian songs, which include hymns and contemporary choruses, are lyrical poetry about God and his ways. They are intended to be sung. Reading them has some impact. But when you sing them... Wow! They come alive! Hymns and spiritual songs carry theological concepts with the emotional power of music. Let me give you just one example of how the music makes the text come alive.

Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord (#91)

This song is one of my favorite hymns. It isn't the most profound in its theology. But it has spoken to me many times when I've been hurting, confused, and needing to be centered on Christ rather than myself.

Teach Me Thy Way, O Lord

91

Teach me your way, O Lord; lead me in a straight path. Psalm 27:11

1. Teach me Thy way, O Lord; Teach me Thy way!
 2. When I am sad at heart, Teach me Thy way!
 3. When doubts and fears a - rise, Teach me Thy way!
 4. Long as my life shall last, Teach me Thy way!

Thy guid - ing grace af - ford; Teach me Thy way!
 When earth - ly joys de - part, Teach me Thy way!
 When storms o'er - spread the skies, Teach me Thy way!
 Wher - e'er my lot be cast, Teach me Thy way!

Help me to walk a - right - More by faith, less by sight.
 In hours of lone - li - ness, In times of dire dis - tress,
 Shine thro' the cloud and rain, Thro' sor - row, toil and pain.
 Un - til the race is run, Un - til the jour - ney's done,

Lead me with heav'n - ly light; Teach me Thy way!
 In fail - ure or suc - cess, Teach me Thy way!
 Make Thou my path - way plain; Teach me Thy way!
 Un - til the crown is won, Teach me Thy way!

WORDS and MUSIC: B. Mansell Ramsey, 1919

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Unlike some of the greatest hymns of the faith, like *Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty*, for example, *Teach My Thy Way* is a personal prayer. The general feeling and spiritual impulse is that of surrender. Interestingly, both the text and the tune were written by the same person in this hymn. That isn't usually the case. But in this hymn, the music matches the spiritual intention perfectly. Notice the rise in the melody line through the first half of the song. That is the growing intensity of the prayer. But notice the second half of the song. Here, you see the melody falling back – a beautiful expression of surrender. This hymn illustrates clearly how the content of the text is made more powerful and meaningful with the emotion that is expressed through the music. What a wonderful gift God has given us in music!

Secondly, songs are written in memorable form with their rhythm, rhyme, and poetic devices. I love the beauty and the poetic pictures attempting to describe the indescribable in the third verse of *The Love of God*:

Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made,
 Were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade,
 To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry;
 Nor could the scroll contain the whole, Tho' stretched from sky to sky.
 O love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong!
 It shall forevermore endure the saints' and angels' song!

Those are words that stick. And those are words that will last – because they are profound and in a word – beautiful.

Third, singing is important because it is active participation. I know. Some people do not sing. And frankly, that breaks my heart. I don't care if you can't carry a tune in a bucket. Sing it out! Hymn writer Isaac Watts said, "Let those refuse to sing who never knew our God!" If you know God, you must sing – even if it isn't pretty. Singing is participating. And we will learn much more when we "do" rather than just observe or listen. Singing is a powerful educational tool. Just ask any grade school teacher. And learning is part of what it means to be a disciple.

Finally, songs can be repeated frequently without becoming tiresome. Typically, we'll sing a well-known hymn two or three times a year and a contemporary song probably a bit more. We can sing *Be Thou My Vision* four times a year easily. We sang *New Hallelujah* during the Nehemiah series probably six or seven times. Why the difference? My own opinion is because the contemporary song won't be around much more than a few years until its life is used up, whereas the hymn – if it is a good one – will last through generations. We can repeat songs with good benefit. How many of you would like to hear this sermon again in nine weeks? The same can't be said of sermons.

What Are Hymns?

So what are hymns? They are lyrical poetry. Unlike the psalms, they are not divinely inspired unless they have been included in Scripture. Because they are lyrical, they are meant to be sung. Because they are poetic, they are artistic. Their meaning lies beyond just the words, but in the way the words are expressed and the pictures and emotions that they convey. Time does not allow me to detail all the wonderful poetic devices that hymn writers employ. But theirs is a craft that is carefully cultivated and cleverly employed to produce a lyric that will capture the imagination and spirit of the singer.

Hymns aren't new since the Reformation. There are several hymns quoted in both the Old Testament and New Testament. Both Moses' song and Miriam's song in Exodus 15 are examples of Old Testament hymns. Hannah's song in I Samuel 2 is one and Mary's *Magnificat* in Luke 1 is a clear echo of Hannah's hymn of praise. The wonderful words in Philippians 2 describing Jesus' humiliation and eventual exaltation are considered by many scholars to be an early church hymn. The Book of Revelation contains many jubilant hymns of praise.

What are the Unique Qualities of Hymns?

The best hymns are compressed theological statements. This is perhaps where their greatest value lies – in their rich theology. Now, not every hymn in the hymnbook is good or has this quality. But the best ones – the ones that have stood the test of time – and some of the newer ones carry rich theology. Some well-known examples include:

- Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty
- A Mighty Fortress
- Immortal, Invisible
- All Creatures of Our God and King
- O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing
- Praise to the Lord, the Almighty
- All Hail the Pow'r of Jesus Name
- O Little Town of Bethlehem
- Christ the Lord is Risen Today

...you get the idea.

Because hymns are powerful ways to teach and communicate the theology of the gospel, they have frequently come to the center stage when the church was struggling with doctrinal issues. It was in 325 A.D., at the council of Nicaea, that the church affirmed that Jesus Christ is fully divine. We can hardly imagine the intensity and division that existed in the church over the question of whether or not Jesus was equal to the Father. Our disagreements over homosexuality and marriage pale in intensity by comparison. Those who opposed the opinion about Christ that prevailed in their region were often imprisoned or worse. But it wasn't so much the arguments that were presented by theologians that convinced the Council to affirm the deity of Christ. The deciding reason was the fact that the people were already worshipping Jesus as fully divine in their liturgies and songs. Martin Luther was not only a prolific writer of theological works, he also wrote hymns in the people's language to support the Reformation that he was leading. It was in the fierce struggle over the authority of Scripture in the 19th Century that Samuel Stone wrote, "*The Church's One Foundation* is Jesus Christ her Lord." The hymn became the rallying cry for churches that would remain faithful to the Word of God.

Hymns are also valuable – and this is counter-cultural – because they are old. The modern way is to reject the old completely and always press into the future. I'm still mad at Microsoft for forcing me to go to Windows 8. That's the modern way. But it's also the arrogant and short-sided way. History has such great value. We do stand on the shoulders of those who've come

before us. Hymns, because we can trace them throughout the history of the church, keep us connected to the Story. To sing the hymns that Charles Wesley wrote, or that the people in the First Great Awakening found so powerful is very profound. These timeless hymns reminds us that our fellowship with other believers is not limited to just our time and location, but spans the world and all time. Hymns remind us that we are connected. Something resonates deep in my soul when I sing lyrics written by a blind poet: “Watching and waiting, looking above, filled with his goodness, lost in his love!”

Finally, the best hymns have stood the test of time. They have been filtered through decades, perhaps even centuries to make it to us. They have to be good – they have to be timeless – to pass that test. I cannot understand the shortsightedness or arrogance of a person who would reject such gifts from the past to us.

What are the Challenges of Hymns?

Now, if I ended the message here, some of you would be quite happy and feel quite vindicated in your preference for hymns. Sorry. Can't do that. Because of all of the reasons I've stated above, I am committed to effectively using hymns and worship and passing them on to the next generation. There are enormous challenges to that mission because the way that most hymns are presented in the hymnbook is not in the musical language of our contemporary culture. Let's be fair and let's be honest with each other. That's where the root of our problem has been. There are a few challenges that I want to mention.

First, most of the older hymns are written with archaic King James English. You know – the thee's and the thou's. It “idst's” and “ouldst's.” Some of the old language can be altered to be up to date and many hymnals have done that. Sometimes it has been with good result. Other times, the updating of the language has destroyed the poetic power of the hymn. I don't have time to give examples. But fortunately, for younger generations like the Millennials, archaic language is not that much of an issue. It was for Boomers – my generation – because we were so set against the establishment and tradition. Younger generations, however, tend to be more open to tradition – probably because their parents were so much against it. ...and that's a good thing. You know how it goes.

But the bigger challenge is the musical language of most of the hymns. Our hymns are arranged for piano and organ accompaniment, generally with four-part choral parts. That is no longer the dominant musical language of our culture. As you know, today, it's the band, driven by guitars with three-part vocal harmony. And for many of the hymns, the old arrangements are a nightmare for guitars. They're unplayable – except by the most virtuosic musicians. Let me give you an example.

All Creatures of Our God and King #77

One of the great hymns of the church is *All Creatures of Our God and King*, written by St. Francis of Assisi in 1225. In our hymnal, the chords change just about every note. This is a guitar player's nightmare. It can't be played smoothly, sustain the rhythm, and support the congregation in singing.

GOD OUR FATHER: CREATION

77 All Creatures of Our God and King
Praise the Lord, all His works everywhere in His dominion. Psalm 103:22

Unison

1. All crea-tures of our God and King, Lift up your voice and
 2. Thou rush-ing wind that art so strong, Ye clouds that sail in
 3. Thou flow-ing wa-ter, pure and clear, Make mu-sic for thy
 4. And all ye men of ten-der heart, For-giv-ing sin-ners,
 5. Let all things their Cre-a-tor bless, And wor-ship Him in

Harmony *Unison*

with us sing: Al-le-lu-ia! Al-le-lu-ia! Thou burn-ing sun with
 heav'n a-bove, O praise Him! Al-le-lu-ia! Thou ris-ing morn-ing,
 Lord to lum-inate the earth, O sing ye! Al-le-lu-ia!
 take your part, O sing ye! Al-le-lu-ia! Ye who long pain and
 burn-ble-ness, O praise Him! Al-le-lu-ia! Praise, praise the Fa-ther,

gold-en beam, Thou sil-ver moon with soft-er gleam,
 praise re-joice: Ye lights of eve-ning, find a voice!
 full and bright, Thou giv-est man both warmth and light!
 see - none here, Praise God and our Him and your care!
 praise the Son, And praise the Spir-it, Three in One!

Harmony

O praise Him! O praise Him! Al-le-lu-ia!

WORDS: Francis of Assisi, 1225; st. by William H. Doane, 1925
 MUSIC: Gerardo de Keckeringer, 1625; stave, by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1906
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There are some creative worship leaders who, like me, are not willing to let the hymn tradition die. They have made a commitment to hymns and find a way for a worship band to play them. David Crowder's treatment of the hymn does just that. He kept the melody and greatly reduced the chord changes so that a band could play it. He also added a short, repeatable bridge or chorus to make it more like a praise and worship song.

All Creatures Of Our God And King

Words and Music by
St. Francis of Assisi, William Henry Draper,
David Crowder and Drew Milligan

♩ = 100

D



1 All the things of God and King,
2 That rush and ward the air with strong
3 Let all things that live here below

Bridge



we are here and with you, O
at Christ's feet in His presence,
and all things here in His name.

G7 D



praise Him, al-le-lu-ia! Thou sum-est all with-
praise Him, al-le-lu-ia! Thou do-est more in-
praise Him, al-le-lu-ia! Praise, praise the Fa-ther, Son and

Bridge



God, the light of our souls,
and the Father, Son and

G7 D7 G7



praise Him, praise Him, al-le-lu-ia!

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We've sung settings of great hymns like that: *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name* and *Be Thou My Vision*, are just two examples. We need to continue selecting the best of the hymns and arrange them so that a worship band can play them. In that way, though the music may change somewhat, the great treasure of hymns will be passed on from generation to generation.

There are, however, a number of great hymns that will not lend themselves to an effective treatment by a worship band. They are rich treasures and we cannot afford to lose them. We are in a great advantage because we have committed ourselves to being musically eclectic and blended in our worship. We haven't, like so many have, ditched the organ. Unfortunately, the organ is a greatly misunderstood instrument. Unlike piano, which does not sustain notes (they dissipate as soon as they are struck), the pipe organ and their electronic copies are wind instruments, just like the human voice. Because of that quality, the organ is a great help in supporting singing. God does not favor the organ over any other instrument. But we are blessed to still have one and someone who can play it. We will continue to use the organ and explore ways in which we can even combine it with the worship band.

In today's contemporary worship landscape there are also writers who are creating hymns – with their important compressed theology – that can be played by a worship band. Stuart Townend and Keith Getty are one team of writers who have given us a wonderful hybrid of hymns in contemporary musical language. Some of their songs you know: *How Deep the Father's Love for Us* and *In Christ Alone* – the song we'll close this service with.

Stretch Yourself – Embrace Hymns

So what shall we say to this – this lecture – on hymns this morning? It needs to be more than informative. It needs to be more than just a lecture. It is my hope that the deeper understanding of hymns that I have tried to relay to you this morning will result in a commitment to learning and singing them. If you haven't liked hymns, I hope that you will change your mind and your heart. You can't reject them. They are God's gift to you passed down through the ages of the church. If you've always liked hymns but are averse to contemporary song, I hope that you'll be more understanding of the natural tensions and challenges between the two musical forms. I hope that you'll be open to new creative settings of hymns led by a band so that we will be able

to pass them on to our children and grandchildren, who typically no longer listen to piano and organ, but have their ears tuned to guitars, drums, and keyboards.

Friends, we are living the Father's Grand Story through Christ. Hymns, better than contemporary song (spiritual songs) shape the Story and its meaning in our lives. Aside from the Bible, hymns are the most profound shapers of our theology.

Song of Response – *In Christ Alone*