

BLOGPOST

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HOSANNA HYMNALS

WHAT MAKES A GOOD HYMN

Surprising issues to consider

By David and Barbara Leeman

What makes a good hymn?

Erik Routley, a renowned British hymnologist in the 1950s, routinely said a good hymn should be “well-written, well-chosen, and well-sung.”ⁱ For over fifty years, these words have been instructive filters for us. They’ve guided us as we’ve selected hymns for worship services, school chapels, weddings, funerals, small groups, and retreats.

But what do these three traits actually mean? Let’s explore them further.

WELL-WRITTEN

By “well-written,” we mean a hymn’s theology should be sound and its music should be well-crafted. Routley wouldn’t approve any hymn unless it passed two tests—the grammar test and the congregation test. First, it had to be grammatically correct. He wrote, “As a piece of craftsmanship in literature, it must be without blemish. It must not offend against the rules of grammar. . . . Its thought must not be such that if it were a chair or a table, it would collapse as soon as any weight was put on it.”ⁱⁱ Second, it must be appropriate for congregational singing. Routley wrote, “It is necessary that when written, the hymn shall do, precisely and in full, the thing it was designed to do. A hymn is designed to be a congregational act of praise.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Some hymns are compositional masterpieces but are hard for congregations to sing. Other hymns serve as expressions of personal devotion but do not thematically incorporate others. In either case, by Routley’s tests, these hymns fail.

When we’re discussing hymns being “well-written,” we’re not only referring to the lyrics but also the melody. Great melodies tend to gain staying power; they endure across generations. For example, “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” composed by Hans Leo Hassler with words from

Bernard of Clairvaux, is one of the world's great musical masterpieces in no small thanks to its penetrating melody. A hymn's tune cannot be overlooked.

Well-written hymns need a healthy marriage between music and lyrics. A powerful example of this union is Isaac Watts' "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." The song's words are amplified through its tune. Its melody, like a chant, moves up and down one step at a time, while its range has only five notes. Its depth and pace combine with the lyrics to communicate the private meditations of the cross' observer.

The passage of time tends to reveal the best hymns from any era. Famous hymnwriter Charles Wesley composed over 6,500 hymns; only 253 remain in circulation. A handful of our contemporary hymns may live beyond the next few generations. In either case, churches do well to exercise discretion by going after the best hymns available to them, even the ancient ones! Stuart Townend, author of "How Deep the Father's Love for Us" and "In Christ Alone," was asked if his hymns would pass the test of time. He humbly replied, "Only time will tell!"

WELL-CHOSEN

Selecting hymns may be the most challenging task for any worship leader. The process requires time and either broad knowledge of hymnody or access to indexes by topic. Because singing is a critical part of what Christians do when they gather, song leaders should be careful in their selections (Eph. 5:19). Sadly, poor selection can result in distracted or even mindless singing. The disjointedness created by misplaced music can rob a congregation of its focus. That's why hymns should fit thematically and tonally with the other elements of a service. Just as lyrics should complement melodies, song selections should complement the rest of the gathering. A particular hymn may anticipate what is coming up in the service, or it may reflect on what has just taken place. Sometimes, a congregation is well served by a brief word of introduction explaining why a specific hymn has been chosen and how the congregation might reflect on its meaning.

Special services like weddings and funerals, the time of year, or even the congregation's average age will affect what hymns are sung and where in the service they are placed. For example, when we created a hymnal for a Christian elementary school, we had our target audience in mind: the children! We found that hymns like "Come, Children, Join to Sing," "O Little Town of

Bethlehem,” “Once in Royal David’s City,” and “I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light” fit the bill perfectly for elementary students. When selecting hymns, we must keep the congregation in mind.

WELL-SUNG

There are many reasons why a congregation may not sing a hymn well. Maybe they’re simply unfamiliar with it, or perhaps the service leader is making distracting mistakes. Maybe the accompaniment and the congregation were out of step. If churches are to sing well, then song leaders need regular feedback and evaluation. During these evaluations, they can ask any number of the following questions:

- How well did the congregation sing each hymn?
- If they did not sing well, why not?
- Did the hymn need a more substantial introduction?
- Do we think repetition will help?
- Was the hymn out of context in the service so the people didn’t understand why they were singing it?

Though painful at times, these questions help leaders get to the bottom of a poorly sung hymn.

This article has attempted to shape *how* worship leaders evaluate hymns. Because congregational singing is one of our weekly privileges as Christians, we should approach it with great care. Lord willing, our singing will be a part of the acceptable worship we bring to God (Heb. 12:29).

ⁱ Erik Routley, *Hymns and Human Life* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 299.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 297.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 297.
