



Hymns

Somebody once said the best book of theology many will ever read is a hymnal. That means some of the best theologians who have ever put pen to paper are hymn writers.

We need a big worship vocabulary to worship a big God, and so I am grateful there are varied historic, contemporary, and cultural musical expressions that feed our soul. I, for one, notice a kind of vitamin deficiency in my worship if I diet exclusively on only one genre. But for today, let me speak to the nourishment that comes to my soul from hymnody. Sustenance from other worship expressions will be for another time.

I do not approach this as a musician. My entire musical training consists of one semester playing the trombone in fifth-grade band. I think I remember there are seven positions on the slide, which is six more than I could master. But approaching hymns as a worshiper, lousy singer though I be, there are three things uniquely accomplished in my life.

First, great hymns deepen my roots in the church universal. In some cases, like with “Amazing Grace,” I am singing the same songs, affirming the same truths, and plumbing the same mysteries as have nurtured untold millions through multiple generations across manifold ecclesial contexts. In others, like “Children of the Heavenly Father,” I affirm my solidarity with the spiritual lineage more closely aligned to our own particular Pietistic movement. Though not Swedish myself, “Tryggare” (the first word of the hymn when sung in Swedish) triggers something deeply connective within me. Singing a contemporary song can be an important and powerful moment of solidarity with my peers. A hymn that transcends generations puts me in solidarity with the legacy of conviction of those who have come before, lending substance and trustworthiness to my own expression.

Second, great hymns instruct me theologically with clarity and precision. Don’t get me wrong. I like an impenetrable book on the perspicuity of Scripture as much as the next person, or a nuanced enigmatic article on epistemology. But hymns are genius in crystalizing complex truths in accessible ways. Instruction has been one important contribution of hymnody through the

ages, and it retains that role today. Perhaps the proscribed limitations of form, cadence, and meter demand exactitude from the writer, but for whatever reason, hymns often encapsulate more theological potency with fewer words, greater clarity, and richer imagery than any other type of writing. I often simply read hymns as part of my devotional life, and find insight into my faith every single time I do.

Third, great hymns give voice to the unformed sentiments of my heart. There are times when we don’t quite know how to express ourselves to God. It might be a heavy heart needing to lament; a thankful heart leaping with gratitude; a penitent heart desperate to confess; a mourning heart laden with grief. When we are at a loss for words, sometimes we actually do want people to put words in our mouths. An apt hymn does just that.

As we begin this new year, let me share with you my favorite hymn, written by Isaac Watts in 1707. It does indeed root me, instruct me, and speak the sentiment of my heart.

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ, my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were an off’ring far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

(The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook, #222)

Brown. Green. Red. Blue. No matter which is your favorite edition of the Covenant hymnal, take it from a lousy-singing non-musician: God will indeed meet you there. ■

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