



Myths about Hymns

Short Guide No 26: Myths about Hymns

Here are half a dozen ideas about hymnody which may—or may not—contain a grain of truth ... as seen by a self-confessed hymn lover.

Myth: Hymns are old, songs are new

Or maybe not ... Beginning in what came to be called the “hymn explosion” in the 1960’s, huge numbers of new hymns in English have been written, and a number of hymns in traditional metres and styles are created every year. Many of the writers associated with this movement wrote from perceived necessity—they did not find material to meet their pastoral needs in established hymnody—and frequently adopted newer styles and language than what had gone before. Part of the impetus for this was, no doubt, the spread of modern-language translations of the Bible and the use of contemporary liturgies to replace those from earlier centuries; when church services contained these elements, older hymns began to look more dated in both style and content.

Alongside this creativity, however, there has certainly also been an upsurge of newer writing, much of it taking the style and structure of the contemporary pop music idiom. There were, of course, songs of a less formal nature than metrical hymns before this; and more recent years have seen an increasing maturity in songs, leading to a multi-stanza style sometimes called “modern hymns”. The overall picture is far more colourful than the black-and-white polarisation of this myth.

Myth: Hymns are usually written in old language

Or maybe not ... Some of the hymns in today’s hymnals are in “dated” language which simply reflects the vocabulary or sentence structure of their time, such as word inversions to facilitate rhymes. Other texts were written to use “thee” and “thou” and corresponding verb forms in line with older Bible translations and the Book of Common Prayer; some writers and churchgoers have maintained the habit as an expression of respect when addressing God. Yet in every generation there have been writers eager to make their writing accessible to their contemporaries.

It is also worth remembering that hymn book editors have frequently decided to adapt and update older material: perhaps, for example, because certain words or harmonies no longer seemed to resonate with congregations. As a result, many hymns are no longer sung in the authors’ original versions. That process of updating hymns raises its own questions, typically involving the balance between maintaining the integrity of the original and ensuring usability in today’s context. There is certainly no rule to say hymns have to be written in archaic terminology; there are many fine texts from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which use modern language and do so well.

Myth: Hymn tunes are dull compared to song tunes

Or maybe not ... Once again, fashions change, and what sounded fresh even a generation ago can now sound dated. A different arrangement can give new life to an old tune; having said which, there is only a certain amount that can be done to rescue a Long Metre tune comprising thirty-two minims! Yet not all song tunes are as exciting and vibrant as may seem to be the case. Some have either too limited or too great a melodic range; others have weak harmonic progressions or melodic monotony; many have structural failings such as poor handling of word stresses. A number are not written with keyboard instruments in mind, limiting their usefulness.

Ideally, the tune will always carry well the words to which it is set, emphasising the key points and capturing the underlying mood and theme of the text so that the overall impact of words and music is greater than the sum of its parts. This high standard may be more easily attained in classical hymnody where it is usually recognised that few people can produce both words and music of the highest calibre; in the “song” world, the same author often produces both, neither of which has any other partner available to them because of their unique metrical and rhythmic structure.

Myth: Songs are easier to learn than hymns

Or maybe not ... A hymn tune is generally a single melodic and harmonic structure, repeating several times as the hymn works through its various stanzas; the metrical regularity of the typical hymn establishes a pattern of predictability which can instinctively “feel” right to the seasoned churchgoer. The shape of a well-crafted melody also tells us where it is going and when it has reached a conclusion.

By contrast, tunes from the song world sometimes lack a proper ending: think how many pop songs fade out rather than reaching a final note or chord. The inherent structural originality of many modern worship songs also invites melodic and rhythmic indiscipline, resulting in strange musical phrases which are unpredictable and less likely to stick in the memory. Moreover, if a song uses separate tunes for verse, refrain and bridge, then learning it may require a noticeably greater effort than a well-structured eight-line melody in a more traditional metrical pattern.

Myth: Songs touch the worshipper more deeply than hymns

Or maybe not ... Songs and hymns could actually be designed to do different things. Shorter songs—such as the simpler Iona material or songs from Taizé—are intended for repetition, and they may function at a more emotional level than a logically structured hymn text. In this way, they can touch the singers’ hearts, releasing a more immediate emotional response. Sometimes this is a healthy avenue for adoring God, responding to his word, or participating in corporate prayer.

At other times, though, we need to be reminded of the great truths of the faith, and we benefit from having these things brought to our *minds* as we sing about them. We may find our faith strengthened through words which exploit new images or metaphors; then afterwards, we can take those thoughts with us and muse on them again. We may find our discipleship renewed because the hymns in which we commit to follow Christ are well-expressed and acknowledge the challenges of obedience as well as its joys.

Best of all, with a carefully-chosen balance of hymns and songs, we can enter a deeper experience of Christian worship in which different forms of expression each play a valid part.

Myth: Hymns have had their day

Or maybe not ... *Some* hymns have had their day; they were valuable for a time but have now served their purpose. They did not transcend their original culture and era and become a more permanent part of the church’s repertoire. (Even most of Charles Wesley’s thousands of hymns are no longer in current hymn books.) The same will be true of today’s songs and hymns: some will last, others will disappear, their place being taken by newer—and preferably, better—material.

Yet the continued publication of new books which carry both hymns and songs indicates there is still a market for hymns; that, in turn, is evidence that hymns are still being sung in many churches, week by week. As fresh material for worship is written and published, some of it breaks new ground in both content and style, and some of it will continue to enrich church life for years or even decades to come. The form of some of what endures will mirror hymnody from earlier generations, whereas other hymn writers and song writers will tread new ground, shaped by their own experience and culture and, in turn, shaping the church of which they are a part.

Overall, though, the metrical hymn has proved remarkably resilient through the three centuries or so since Isaac Watts first published his work; and there is reason to believe that good hymns which have stood the test of time will continue to be used.

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