



What is the Point of Singing Hymns?

Short Guide No 1: What is the Point of Singing Hymns?

Hymn-singing as an activity is admittedly nowhere near as common as it once was, and that is probably true inside churches as well as beyond their walls. So what is the point of singing hymns? Here are ten benefits worth bearing in mind.

Hymn-singing is Physical

This may seem a strange thing to say, yet it is true. When we engage in singing a hymn – whether in a congregation or alone in the bathroom! – we are physical beings performing a physical activity. There can be something profoundly satisfying about making music, and also something significant about committing our thoughts and feelings to words, not least when those words are uttered out loud. Formulating thoughts into words and then expressing those words as actual sounds are both steps which help to clarify and confirm what we think, feel and believe.

Hymn-singing is Emotional

Words that seem cold on the page can come to life when set to music; the use of an appropriate tune takes the words on to another level. There may be a danger of being carried away by a tune to the extent that we lose sight of what we are singing; yet when fine words are carried by a fine tune the result can be a deeper level of emotional engagement than would be possible simply from reading the same words as a poem or a prayer.

Hymn-singing is Thoughtful

It is, of course, all too easy to mouth familiar words without thinking about their meaning. Yet when sung properly, a hymn should engage the singer's mind and intellect. In part this is a matter of understanding what is said; it also involves a dialogue between the singer and the text (Do I believe this? Is this what I want to pray, to praise, to admit? What should I do if this is how I see things?). The words of the hymn then become a vehicle of genuine adoration, petition or re-commitment. In the right context, a well-chosen hymn can enable the singers to make these responses at just the right point in a broader act of worship.

Hymn-singing is Instructive

Some hymns are narrative in form; they remind us of the Biblical story and draw us into it. Others are expressive of what we may want to say to God, and give us words to do so. A good hymn will express in clear, unambiguous terms the thoughts which were loitering in our minds, providing us with phrases and vocabulary which enable us to say: Yes, that is just what I mean.

Hymn-singing is Memorable

This works in several different ways. On the one hand, a particular hymn may remind us of important events from our own past: a significant occasion such as a wedding, or a person who was dear to us. More than that, we are linked into the corporate memory of God's people, perhaps especially when we use hymns based on Biblical events: we enter into the experience of the first singers, such as the Psalmists. Yet hymns also create memories as they lodge themselves in our minds by repeated use; they become a hidden source of spiritual nurture which may come back to us in times of difficulty or give us words to express our joy on another occasion.

Hymn-singing is Personal

Even though we frequently sing them together with other believers, many hymns are written in the first person singular, and their writers invite us to make a personal expression of praise or prayer. The same remains true of those hymns which are in the plural: “we” as singers comprise a number of individuals, and if “we” praise God that should indicate that each of us individually is doing so.

Hymn-singing is Corporate

This is the complement of the previous point. When we sing hymns in a congregation, we join with others to share what we have in common: our Christian faith. Together we express what we each believe and experience. Sometimes that corporate expression touches some people more than others: one hymn may enable me to stand with others in their expression of joy and celebration, while another will help those who share my sadness to join with me in lament. The act of singing together helps us to bear each other’s burdens.

Hymn-singing is Ecumenical

Hymns take us beyond the immediate group to which we belong; most of them transcend our particular locality, our specific denomination and – in many cases – our generation as well. Those which have been written in other languages and translated for our use link us more widely still to the whole of God’s people. Through the words and music of hymns we share with Christians far and wide, and often in ways which remain difficult at too many levels. Denominational practice may prevent me from sharing communion with some of my sisters and brothers; but we may find that we actually use some of the same hymns in our different settings.

Hymn-singing is Encouraging

When we sing hymns and mean what we say, we may find that our faith is challenged and that our commitment is stretched. Equally, we may experience a much-needed reminder of the security which is offered to us in Christ; we may be made bolder by this reiteration of the hope which is set before us. We may derive comfort from seeing that we are not alone in our struggles, and feel enabled to face life’s challenge with new boldness as a result. In all these ways, hymn-singing can be encouraging – both comforting and bringing new courage.

Hymn-singing is Envisioning

Most of us are too prone to focus narrowly on ourselves and our own problems and dreams. Our understanding of God is all too frequently drawn down to our own experience and perception. But a hymn which expresses someone else’s viewpoint, understanding and experience can help to broaden our grasp of the truth. It can open us to new visions of God’s greatness, compassion and wisdom; it can help us to catch a fresh sense of the greatness of what the Lord is doing in history and around the world; it can re-invigorate our sense of belonging among his people. In these ways, the singing of hymns renews our understanding of our own experiences and responsibilities – and brings honour to God.

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