



What Makes a Good Hymn?

Short Guide No 6: What Makes A Good Hymn?

Answering this question inevitably contains a subjective element: a hymn which one person finds comforting can seem mawkish to someone else, while one believer's treasured old favourite can sound dated to another Christian. Here, as food for thought, are five balances and five contrasts which may help to identify hymns of quality ...

Five Balances

A good hymn balances ... Theology and Experience

On the one hand, the Christian faith is objective and fact-based. It is rooted in God's intervention in history, especially in Jesus of Nazareth, his life and his teaching, his death and his resurrection. Prior to that, there is the history of Israel, and afterwards the age of the church. A good hymn will be drawn on those events – yet it will also reach into the lives of today's Christians, helping the singers to understand their own experience within the broader context of God's eternal plan.

A good hymn balances ... Heart and Mind

We need songs which help us to comprehend our faith: carefully crafted lines which clarify some aspect of doctrine are a valuable aid to believing and living as Christians. However, we also need songs which express our deepest feelings as we encounter God and respond to what he is doing in us. Good hymns will give us words to express our emotions and aspirations as well as to grasp the meaning of our knowledge of God.

A good hymn balances ... Content and Structure

A hymn needs to say something: it should not be a collection of meaningless phrases or empty platitudes, but should carry reasoned expressions of truth and devotion which extend the singers' understanding. Equally, though, that content needs to be well expressed: a good hymn will use appropriate vocabulary and phraseology, with carefully chosen words which are readily understood at singing speed. Metre, rhyme, alliteration, repetition and the like should be used to enhance the content, but not to stifle it.

A good hymn balances ... Language and Music

No hymn comprises words alone, but words set to music; the pairing of text and tune is important. Good words can be lost by a tune which is musically weak, or which is unsuitable for those particular words – for example, if the tone of the music is too sombre for the lyric, or if the linguistic stresses are at odds with the rhythm of the tune. Equally, however, mediocre words (or, sadly, even those which are untrue) can be carried far by a rousing melody. A hymn of quality needs a good pairing of fine music and strong words.

A good hymn balances ... Certainty and Creativity

It is not the role of the hymn writer to indulge in pure speculation, producing something which is at odds with the teaching of Scripture and the historic faith of the church, or which is a denial of the faith. Christian hymns should build on the true certainties of our faith. Nevertheless, a hymn should aim to express, interpret and explore those certainties in ways which are fresh, distinctive and creative, giving new insights and firing the imagination to help people to grow in their faith.

Five Contrasts

A good hymn will be... Personal rather than Individualistic

The best hymns are those which we instinctively appreciate because we find that singing them touches us deeply and helps us to worship, to praise, to express our commitment to God and so on. If we cannot take the words and make them our own, then there is something lacking in the hymn. However, the best hymns are also those which we can sing together: those which retain the corporate dimension rather than over-emphasising the individual's encounter with God to the exclusion of all others.

A good hymn will be... Challenging rather than Polemical

Some hymns are challenging in the sense that they set before us the demands of living the Christian life and remind us of the cost of following Christ. Others are more subtle in their challenge: they offer us words of prayer, adoration or dedication which – if we are honest – are beyond our current experience: they give us something to which we can aspire. On the contrary, good hymns will not preach at the singers. They will not berate or humiliate the congregation with unwarranted commands, unwanted advice or narrow dogmatism.

A good hymn will be... Lucid rather than Childish

A lucid hymn will be clear in its expression, not full of bewildering ambiguities which confuse those who are invited to sing it. A lucid hymn will help the singer to express his or her thoughts and emotions towards God. A lucid hymn will enable those who hear it to understand a little more of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Yet a lack of ambiguity does not mean the singer is excused the act of thinking; words which are addressed to God should not be emptied of meaning by shallow insincerity; and hymns which explain the truth should not treat the hearers as simpletons.

A good hymn will be... Engaging rather than Glib

In moments of fervour and passion, many of us too easily find ourselves led to make declarations or promises which are less than satisfactory when viewed in the cold light of day. It can even happen as we sing ... A good hymn will encourage the singers to engage with God and to respond to him with deeper commitment and genuine praise. It will not incite us to make glib, trite or extravagant claims about what we believe, what we feel, or what we will do for Christ. Such claims could soon go beyond aspiration and into dishonesty.

A good hymn will be... Memorable rather than Obtrusive

Good hymns lodge themselves in the memory because their expression of Christian truth is clear and compelling; their verses capture some aspect of praise or prayer in a way that makes sense and that expresses what we want to say elegantly yet simply. Such writing may make us wonder why we never saw it like that before, or surprise us at how concisely the truth can be stated. By contrast, a hymn which simply amazes us with witty phrases or clever rhymes draws too much attention to itself and its writer. Good hymns are unobtrusive: natural, flowing and self-effacing, with a focus away from themselves.

Martin Leckebusch – April 2012 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
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