



What is a Hymnal?

Short Guide No 19: What is a Hymnal?

The hymnal, or hymn book, is a significant Christian book for many believers; but while it is handled frequently, we perhaps understand little of what we really hold. It is actually far more than a songbook.

- ***A good hymnal immerses us in Biblical language and the Biblical message.*** Scripture is the raw material of the best hymns. An effective and enduring hymn must be faithful to the revealed truth about God and God's mighty acts as recorded in the Bible. The great hymns of our faith are a rich tapestry of scripture and reveal a vast, profound and comprehensive knowledge by the hymn writers.
- ***A good hymnal is a handbook of theology.*** The basic beliefs and doctrinal understanding of many Christians have been shaped and reinforced more by the hymns they have learned and sung than by the preaching they have heard or the Bible studies they have attended. Themes of atonement, incarnation, sanctification, witness, stewardship, discipleship, social justice, etc., are clearly proclaimed in our hymns.
- ***A good hymnal is an important teaching tool.*** Hymns are an invaluable resource in Christian education and spiritual formation. Paul writes to the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." (Colossians 3:16; cf Ephesians 5:19) Sunday School teachers could do well to use the hymnal as a teaching resource. Think of the potential of a graded hymn curriculum where children can understand, appreciate and learn two or three age-appropriate hymns each year!
- ***A good hymnal is a key part of corporate worship.*** After the Bible, the hymnal is the primary book of worship resources in non-liturgical or free churches, and also has a part to play alongside prayer and service books in the liturgical traditions. The hymnal gives a script for worshipping God and unifies us as we sing together. Many hymnals contain an extensive Psalter, affirmations of faith, credal statements, prayers of praise, petition, intercession, thanksgiving, and words appropriate to baptism, the Eucharist, marriage, funerals and memorial services.
- ***A good hymnal is the voice of the church through history.*** We find ourselves connected with the historic church of past centuries: people of faith from many years ago who sang the very hymns we now sing. Here is the corporate memory of the church; here is a oneness with the communion of saints as we sing, praying with the church down through the ages; here is an encyclopaedia of the church's confession over twenty centuries and, by way of the Psalms, to its Old Testament roots as well.
- ***A good hymnal offers a broadly ecumenical meeting-place.*** We sing numerous hymns in common with all denominations and fellowships who confess Jesus as Lord. At times the church seems so fractured with divergent views on doctrine, the sanctity of life, moral values, marriage, issues of war and peace, poverty and hunger; yet our hymnody can become a common bond.

- ***A good hymnal reminds us of the world-wide church to which we belong.*** A globally-aware, multi-cultural collection brings together texts and music from many different places and languages. Hymns unite us with brothers and sisters of the faith in every land, with different cultures and music but the same Lord. Perhaps our hymnals are beginning to reflect what heaven will be like, where saints from “every tribe and language and people and nation” will gather around the throne of God (see Revelation 5). “In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north; but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.”
- ***A good hymnal is a repository of the church’s diverse music styles.*** So many musical voices have a part in the church’s song: plainsong, reformation chorales, Victorian tunes, African-American spirituals, folk songs, Anglican chants, Taizé music, contemporary praise songs, evangelical gospel songs, Scandinavian folk tunes, psalter tunes, Israeli melodies, early American tunes, medieval carols, and music derived from classical composers including Beethoven, Bach, Grieg, Brahms, Mozart, Haydn, Vaughan Williams, Mendelssohn and Sibelius.
- ***A good hymnal contains the literature of our faith.*** Here are statements from the spiritual journeys of fellow-Christians over many centuries: from Ambrose of Milan, St Francis of Assisi and Thomas à Kempis, through Martin Luther, John Calvin and Paul Gerhardt, to Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, Charlotte Elliott, Fanny Crosby ... and on to today’s hymn and song writers. Many hymns come from the intimate life experiences of a believer, often from suffering and affliction, and each has its unique story.
- ***A good hymnal is a unique collection of prayers.*** Here are words expressing a wide variety of aspects of Christian life and experience. The hymns give us the power of the right word at the right time: “I didn’t think up these words and phrases of prayer, but this verse is exactly what I mean to say ...”
- ***A good hymnal is a source of comfort and encouragement in trials and crises.*** Paul and Silas, while imprisoned, sang hymns of praise to God (Acts 16)—a Christian response to affliction! Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned by the Nazi regime, was sustained by the hymns of Paul Gerhardt. Many a Christian, in the dark night of the soul, has found solace, peace, and healing through the hymns of the church. It is comforting to have these words, along with Scripture, in our hearts and minds when undergoing times of great crisis and suffering.
- ***A good hymnal helps forge our convictions and strengthen our resolve.*** Hymns can be a motivating force that compels us to action. “God of grace and God of glory ... grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the facing of this hour ... shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul ...” Hymns of courage and commitment can help in the struggle against spiritual lethargy.
- ***A good hymnal helps with proclamation and witness.*** As an expression of inner faith and commitment, hymnody becomes a resource for mission and outreach. It has been said that one can tell more about what Christians believe by what they sing than by what is said. Let us sing what we believe and believe what we sing!

Royce Eckhardt – May 2015 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
Ref HSSG119. For more in this series, see the web site below.

Opinions expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

For anyone who enjoys, sings, plays, chooses, introduces, studies, teaches or writes hymns ...
The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Visit www.hymnsocietygbi.org.uk for more details.