

# **The Importance of a Hymnbook**

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“The heart of a church is revealed in its hymns.” —Dr. Frank Garlock

In today’s church, the value of the hymnbook has come into question. Congregations have swapped written harmonic worship music for a projected melody-dominant version. Sometimes in an effort to get everyone praising together, the praise/worship team becomes more of a spectator performance with the congregation the audience and not part of the worship.

In an article called “The Slow Death of Congregational Singing,” Michael Raiter tells of visiting a church that was not using hymnbooks. He commented to the friend who invited him there, “No one is singing.” His friend replied, “Of course they’re not singing: we haven’t really sung here in years.” Raiter writes, “We have substituted worship leaders with microphones and loud artificial volume for true congregational singing.” The loud volume of the worship team covers up the problem that the people are not really singing.

When the congregation does join in singing while looking at a projected hymn, we agree there can be great power in everyone singing the melody and not having their heads buried in a book. We don’t suggest omitting the melody/projection form of worship. There are, however, definite worship losses to our churches when we forsake the hymnbook.

What are benefits of using a hymnbook in corporate worship?

- The hymnbook is a wealth of sacred songs for the enrichment of the church musically and doctrinally.
- The hymnbook is full of transcripts of the lives of saints through the ages that have stood the test of time.
- The heart of our Christian faith is written in its songs, not just contemporary, but those written throughout church history.
- Our faith can be strengthened by the testimony of hymn writers.
- The hymnbook allows one generation to be joined to another by a “golden chain of praise” (Gillman)
- There is great value in teaching the congregation to read music. Nothing can replace the experience of the worshipper when voices are united together in the beautiful harmonies a hymnbook provides.
- The page of music is a visual image of a song already well-loved.

Martin Luther (1483-1546), more than 600 years ago, wrote hymns in four parts and taught them to the people. In fact, Luther’s critics said, “the people are singing themselves into the Lutheran doctrine.” Luther’s position in the history of the church is unique. His own musical skill was considerable. He is remembered for his ability in both theology and music. Luther’s idea was to teach the congregation to sing hymns with harmony, not just Gregorian Chant which was done before the advent of the first hymnbook.

In the preface to his hymnbook, Luther said, “These songs have been set in four parts for no other reason than because I wished to provide our your people (who both will and ought to be instructed in music and other sciences) with something where by they might rid themselves of amorous and carnal songs, and in their stead learn something wholesome.”

In one of his letters to a friend, Luther wrote, “[Our] plan is to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to compose psalms for the people [in the] vernacular, that is, spiritual songs, so that the Word of God may be among the people also in the form of music.”

Luther’s enemies declared, “Luther has destroyed more souls by his hymns than by his writings and speeches.” In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther “gave the German people in their own language the Bible and hymnbook, so that God might speak directly to them in His Word, and that they might directly answer Him in their songs.”

J. S. Bach (1685-1750), probably “the greatest musician of all time” included chorales for the congregation to sing in all of his works. These works include *The St. John Passion* and *The St. Matthew Passion*. The congregational songs in these works were presented in four-part style. Bach must have believed in teaching the congregation to sing.

Charles H. Spurgeon's passion in publishing his first hymnbook was to teach the church to sing harmonies and not just the melody. Spurgeon said, "We hope that in some few churches of the land we may be helpful to their service of sacred song and aid them in praising the Lord." C. H. Spurgeon (in his preface to the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Hymnbook*, 1866)

Recent history reveals many preachers and musicians have emphasized educating congregations to sing praise to the Lord. Henry Halley wrote his *Bible Handbook* encouraging Christians to read their Bible every day. In it he said, "Why not turn the whole congregation into a choir?"

Dr. Donald Hustad in his book *Jubilate* says, "Evangelicals have been known as 'people of the book.' Actually, we are a people of two books, the Bible and the hymnal."

### How Does Majesty Music choose hymns to include in its hymnbooks? (from the *Rejoice Hymnal Preface*)

*Our criteria has been that each hymn, gospel song, or chorus have:*

- *strong, biblically-correct text*
- *beautiful and memorable melodies that communicate and enhance the text*
- *music that does not mimic or identify with worldly culture melodically, harmonically, or rhythmically*

*To further explain our process, we quote a distinguished predecessor, C. H. Spurgeon.*

*"The area of our researches has been as wide as the bounds of existing religious literature, American and British, Protestant and Romish—ancient and modern... So long as the language and the spirit commended the hymn to our heart, we included it and believe we have enriched our collection thereby".*

All Christians need to recognize that the standards that once were held by Americans have deteriorated dramatically. I would like to emphasize strongly that all of us who work at Majesty Music are committed to keeping the music we produce and make available conservative in style and biblical in text. Thank you for your prayers and support!

We wish to encourage the church to incorporate the hymnbook as well as hymn projection.

"Congregational singing should be the center of any church music program. The music of a church reveals its spiritual temperature and its vision of who God is. Part of our responsibility as music ministers is to educate our congregation concerning what it means to worship the Lord together. God is our audience and we, both the music leaders and the congregation, are accountable to Him for the quality of our singing. —Dr. Frank Garlock

May God richly bless you and your congregation as you worship Him through His gift of music!