

Hymns in the Church's Teaching Ministry

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Introduction

Next to the Bible, the hymnal ranks highest in the ministry of most evangelical congregations. It is a rare church in which the congregation does not raise its voice in song at least three times during a worship service. The hymnal has exerted a profound and lasting influence upon the lives of many.

Phillips Brooks (1836–93), considered one of the greatest preachers America has ever known, memorized over 200 hymns during his childhood. It was his practice to begin each day humming or singing a hymn. From this great wealth of hymns Brooks later on was to illustrate many of his famous sermons.¹ Phillips Brooks still speaks to us today through his beautiful Christmas hymn, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

Dale Carnegie in his book *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* tells the story of a woman during the depression who had turned on the gas in her home heaters in order to commit suicide. She related that as she waited for the gas to take her life, she heard music. She had forgotten to turn off the radio in the kitchen. As the music continued she heard someone singing the familiar hymn,

What a Friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!
The impact of that hymn changed that woman's mind and

saved her life.² Although we may not have had such a dramatic lifesaving response to hymns, we can recall the sense of inner peace, the sense of awe of God's power, the motivation to help those in need, and the commitment of our lives to Christ invoked through singing hymns. This article will focus upon the importance of hymns in Christian teaching.

Most of you seminarians are not primarily musicians, but rather preachers and theologians. Did you know that theologians and preachers wrote some of our greatest hymn texts? Most of the Baptist hymnals in early America were compiled by pastors rather than by musicians. The earliest hymnology course taught in a Baptist seminary was taught as a part of homiletics by the great preacher and theologian John A. Broadus at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary over a century ago.³ Historically, preachers have been the writers of our hymn texts, compilers of our hymnals, and teachers of this heritage.

Just how important is hymn singing? Is it simply to get the congregation in a good mood or to give the provide time to get ready to take up the offering? Is hymn singing an unnecessary frill? Louis F. Benson, probably the greatest hymnologist America has known, had this to say about hymns:

. . . in the mind of the plain everyday Christian, . . . the hymns he uses devotionally, and especially those he loves do more to form his religious thinking than anything else except the Bible.⁴

Today we speak of "management by objectives" and "competency-based education" and in our Sunday school literature we have a variety of approaches. Yet for all of this, we have barely tapped the powers of one of our richest resources, the hymnal. Though Benson spoke of the importance of the hymnal in forming religious thinking, he also contended that

. . . the teaching power of great hymns remains an asset of the church hardly included in the inventory of her educational resources and in her educational practice generally disregarded.⁵

Benson wrote these words in the 1920s before the development of denominational programs of church music. I

believe that they still apply today. We have barely scratched the surface in developing the teaching potential of hymns in our church life.

In this presentation I will treat hymns in the church's teaching ministry from two angles. First, the hymnal as a textbook: what it can teach. And second, how we can bring about a more effective use of hymns in teaching?

The Hymnal as a Textbook

Although we usually think of the textbook as a book used in a formal course of study, I maintain that the hymnal can serve as an auxiliary textbook in the church's teaching ministry.

An Aid in Teaching the Bible.

First, the hymnal is a valuable aid in teaching the Bible. Much of the hymnal is scripture set to music. At one time most English-speaking churches refused to sing any hymns but paraphrases of scripture arranged in poetic meter! A paraphrase set to music can bring freshness to a familiar scripture passage. For example, consider the great message of comfort in Isaiah 40:1-8 as found in the hymn, "Comfort, Comfort Ye My People."

The book of Psalms, the hymnbook of the Bible, became in large measure the hymnbook of the early church and the chief inspiration of church song down through the centuries. Thus it is no surprise that more hymns in our hymnals are based on Psalms than any other book of the Bible. When we teach psalm paraphrases we are helping our people to sing the scriptures into their hearts. Here are a few of them:

Psalm 23 "The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want"

Psalm 27:1-3 "God Is My Strong Salvation"

Psalm 90:1-5 "O God, Our Help in Ages Past"

Psalm 100 "All People That on Earth Do Dwell"

Psalm 103:1-6 "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty"

Psalm 148 "Praise the Lord! Ye Heavens, Adore Him"

Psalm 150 "Praise the Lord Who Reigns Above"

The hymnal also contains numerous hymns based on New Testament passages. Perhaps the fullest New Testament passage incorporated into hymn form is Luke's account of the announcement of the birth of Christ to the shepherds, 2:8-14, which is a six-stanza hymn, "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night."

Other hymns related to New Testament passages include: "Break Thou the Bread of Life" on John 6:35, when Jesus said "I am the bread of life."

"Ask Ye What Great Thing I Know" on the "Armor of God" passage, Ephesians 6:10-20.

"All Praise to Thee" on the beautiful servant poem of Philippians 2 5-11 beginning with "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

One of the most important functions of hymns is their interpretation of the Scriptures. Hymns are able to take the biblical teaching and from its ancient cultural setting, interpret it and apply it to life in the present. For example, how does a person of today react to the crucifixion of Jesus? We may not have just the right words to express what this ancient event means to us, but numerous hymn writers have expressed it wonderfully well. The anonymous author of the Medieval Latin poem from which we have the hymn, "O Sacred Head, now Wounded," expressed his reaction to the crucified Savior in this hymn's third stanza:

What language can I borrow
To thank thee, dearest Friend,
For this thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever,
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to thee.

And here's how the great English hymn writer Isaac Watts depicted and reacted to the crucifixion of Christ:

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

An anonymous African American expressed his reaction to the crucifixion in the simple but moving spiritual:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

A Tool in Teaching Theology.

In addition to being an aid in Bible teaching, the hymnal is also a tool for teaching theology. The great doctrines of our faith have been incorporated into some of our greatest hymns. The easiest way to discover the potential of the hymnal for teaching theology is to study its topical index. God as the Creator can be related to the topic, "Creation," which lists 15 hymns in the Baptist Hymnal, 1975. The doctrine of the Trinity according to the topical index is mentioned in some 16 hymns in our hymnal, including such great hymns as "Holy, Holy, Holy" and "Come, Thou Almighty King." One of the most beautiful statements of the incarnation is found in the second stanza of Charles Wesley's "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing!":

Christ, by highest heav'n adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord;
Late in time, behold him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail th' incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus our Immanuel.

The subjective nature of our feelings makes music a particularly effective way to express our theology, perhaps

more so than formal statements of faith or catechisms. Benson asserts:

What poetry can do for doctrine is to humanize and clothe it with feeling. And it is this handling of doctrine that has made the church hymn book the actual creed of countless thousands of Christians who have never so much as had the historic church confessions in their hands.⁶

A Vehicle for Teaching Worship. In addition to teaching the Bible and theology, the hymnal is a vehicle for teaching worship. Sometimes when we have difficulty finding the right words to express our worship, we find that the words and music of a hymn can serve as a means of worship. Our awe and wonder at the majesty and power of God may be expressed in a hymn like “O Worship the King.” Our need of forgiveness may be expressed in such lines as Whittier’s:

Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways; . . .

Our joy in Christ is captured in hymns such as “Blessed Assurance” or “Jesus, Thou Joy of loving Hearts.” These hymns are representative of the vast treasury of inspiration to be found for our worship within the covers of the hymnal.

Although it is entirely possible to worship without music of any kind, there is something about the Christian faith that causes many of us to want to make music in worship. Novella D. Preston beautifully expresses this thought in a hymn for children:

My singing is a prayer, O Lord,
A prayer of thanks and praise;
In music, Lord, I worship thee;
Thy beauty fills my days.⁷

One reason the hymnal is so important in teaching worship is that it involves us in active participation. In these times when our TV-oriented culture teaches us to be spectators, the hymnal calls for us to be participators, to be actively involved in worship.

Singing a hymn does not automatically make us worship, for we may sing words with little understanding of their meaning and even less emotion. But if we are ready to worship and a hymn expresses the worship of our hearts and minds,

our singing will probably result in an experience of genuine worship. Even when we may not be ready to worship, a hymn may help us to put aside distractions and sing ourselves into an experience of worship.

A Source of Information on Christian Living.

In addition to its teaching related to the Bible, theology, and worship, another area in which the hymnal serves as a textbook is that it is a source of information on Christian living. In the *Baptist Hymnal's* table of contents, the largest number of subheadings for hymns falls under the heading, "Christian Life."

Many hymns speak of the Christian walk, such as "O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee" and "When We Walk with the Lord (familiar as" Trust and Obey.") Perhaps there is no better known hymn of Christian consecration in our hymnal than Frances R. Havergal's "Take My Life and Let it Be/Consecrated Lord to Thee." Other hymns deal with the courage needed for Christian living, such as "Am I a Soldier of the Cross" and "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus." The classic hymn on prayer by James Montgomery is rich in teaching. According to this hymn, prayer is not merely a matter of words but rather a matter of the desires of our hearts.

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Unuttered or expressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

In its fourth stanza this hymn teaches that prayer is just as necessary for the Christian life as air is for breathing.

Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gates of death:
He enters heav'n with prayer.

Many hymns have just the teachings needed by Christians who face difficult times. Are you fearful? Sing Paul Gerhardt's "Give to the Winds Your Fears." Are you worried? Sing B. B. McKinney's "Have Faith in God." Are you facing temptation? Sing James Russell Lowell's "Once to Every Man and Nation."

Hymns teach not only our relation to God but also our relation to others in evangelism, missions, fellowship, and

social concerns. Hymns are also motivators and activators, for they can motivate us to action. Notice the action words in the following hymn titles: “Rescue the Perishing,” and “Go, Tell It on the Mountain.” In Christian race relations we are still striving to put into practice the teaching found in the third stanza of John Oxenham’s “In Christ There Is No East or West”:

Join hands, disciples of the faith,
Whate’er your race may be,
Who serves my Father as His child
Is surely kin to me.

A more recent hymn of stewardship that also teaches social responsibility is Grace Noll Crowell’s “Because I Have Been Given Much.”

The Use of Hymns in Teaching

We have dealt with the hymnal as a textbook from which we learn much concerning the Bible, theology, worship and Christian living. Granting that we can learn these things from the hymns we sing, how can we best use hymns to teach? How can we achieve a more effective use of hymn in the church’s teaching ministry? I want to suggest three basic ways to bring about more effective teaching through hymns.

Teach Hymns and Hymn Tunes to Children.

The first and most basic way to strengthen teaching through hymns is to teach hymns and hymn tunes to children. Although there was a time when the learning of hymns by children was deemphasized and the emphasis was upon their learning song on their own level of understanding, there seems to be an increasing awareness of the value of teaching children the great hymns of the church. Specialists in children’s music have studied hymns for children and have recommended hymns appropriate for different age groupings.⁸ Although highly symbolic hymns are to be avoided, children can grow into a fuller understanding of hymns they only partially comprehend during their early years of school. Glennella Key observed that the “hymn knowledge and appreciation of many adults are limited in proportion and content to their early childhood experiences with hymns.”⁹ In a similar vein, Albert C.

Ronander proffered:

Since the preference of adults for certain hymns is largely determined by what they have learned in their formative years, the use made of the hymnal in the religious nurture of children and young people is of decisive importance.¹⁰

Hymn learning experiences are provided in the present children's choir curriculum for Preschool, Younger Children, and Older Children as developed by the Church Music Department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.¹¹ [now LifeWay Christian Resources] Preschoolers in choir become familiar with hymn tunes that prepare them for learning hymn texts later, such as NUN DANKET (Now Thank We All Our God) and ADESTE FIDELIS (O Come, All Ye Faithful). Younger children in grades 1–3 learn such meaningful hymns as “Fairest Lord Jesus,” “When Morning Gilds the Skies,” and “Holy, Holy, Holy.” Younger children also learn how to use the hymnal and develop an understanding and appreciation of some hymn writers and their hymns.¹² Older children in grades 4–6 expand their hymn singing repertory with such hymns as “God of Our Fathers” and “This Is My Father's World.” They also continue to build a greater knowledge and understanding of the hymnal and our heritage of hymns. Church with good music programs thus have excellent opportunities to teach an understanding and love of hymns to children in their choirs.

How about the large number of churches that do not have effective children's choirs? How do these churches teach hymns to children? I believe children should learn hymns in Sunday school as an integral part of their Bible-learning experiences. One of the problems in our specialized church programs is the tendency to segregate parts of the curriculum and miss the richness that occurs when its components are brought together. Hymns for children are not the exclusive concern of the church music program. Bible teachers will find hymns to be effective allies in their task. Our Sunday School lesson writers for children, youth and adults would do well to use hymns to point up scriptural truth and to relate hymn stories as illustrations. When we teach Psalm 23, why not also

teach its metrical version, “The Lord’s My Shepherd, I’ll Not Want”? When we teach about the priesthood of the believer, why not tell the thrilling story of how Luther’s beliefs in this doctrine brought about increased participation of the common people in worship, including the revival of congregational singing? When we teach the meaning of baptism, why not utilize such rich hymns as “Come Holy Spirit, Dove Divine” and “We Bless the Name of Christ the Lord”?

Encourage Family Hymn Singing. In addition to teaching hymns to children, the second way to bring about a more effective use of hymns in teaching is to encourage family hymn singing. We’ve all heard the saying, “the family that prays together stays together.” We can also truly say that the family that sings together stays together.

How do we encourage hymn singing in the family circle? First of all, family members who are old enough to read should have their own hymnal along with their Bible. Devotional materials learned in church could also be a part of family worship. Devotional materials for family worship may suggest appropriate hymns for the family to sing. Although some families will be fortunate enough to have a member who can accompany them on the piano, guitar, or autoharp, good hymn singing can be done without accompaniment. After all, many generations of early Americans worshiped through singing long before organs and pianos became common in our churches! We are blessed with technology our forebears never dreamed of to assist us in hymn singing. We can play recordings of hymns and sing along with them.¹³ The singing of hymns used at church in the homes can solve the problem pinpointed by Benson some fifty years ago:

The immediate need surely is to get the church hymnal back into the hands of the people where Luther and Calvin first put it. At present it is hardly more than a part of the furniture of the pew racks in our churches. As regards hymnody the congregation is very much where it would be in knowledge of scripture if there were no Bibles except those in the pulpit or the lectern.

Benson’s comments remain current years later:

Very few of the people now have hymnals of their own.

They do not read the poetry devotionally; they do not sing the tunes at home or in social gatherings: they have no familiarity with either and consequently little love for them. When the hymn is given out in church they often start to sing without knowing what is coming or whether it expresses their personal feelings in any way; and they can hardly be expected so to sing either in the Spirit or with understanding. For they are continually singing a strange song.¹⁴

Teach Hymns Systematically to the Congregation.

A third suggestion for a more effective use of hymns in teaching will help the congregation to keep from “singing a strange song.” This suggestion is to teach hymns to the congregation systematically—according to a regular plan. The most widely used procedure for teaching hymns is the hymn of the month plan—a plan used by a number of denominations, including our own. A church using this plan can learn 12 hymns a year, 60 hymns in five years and 120 hymns in 10 years. A leaflet of the Hymns of the Month 1977–1978 gives excellent suggestions for introducing hymns. The background of the hymn of the month, information on its author and composer, and a discussion of its content is found in each issue of *The Church Musician*.

What does teaching a hymn to a congregation mean? By and large, we have felt that when we taught our people to sing the hymns we have done what is necessary. Learning a hymn is more than being able to sing it. A hymn is truly learned when we can say with the writer of I Corinthians 14:15, “I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the understanding also.” As translated in the recent *Today’s English Version*, this verse reads, “I will sing with my spirit, but I will sing also with my mind.” When we teach the substance of a hymn in such a way that a congregation is able to sing it with spirit and understanding, we can be assured that we have helped them to have an experience of worship through singing. Furthermore, we would do well to teach hymns of

unquestioned excellence.

Through what means does the congregation learn new hymns? Certainly the choirs should be taught new hymns and should in turn help to teach them to the rest of the congregation. Congregational hymn rehearsals can be valuable if the congregation is convinced of their importance and gives them wholehearted support. The Sunday school is an important organization where new hymns can be effectively taught and congregational singing can be strengthened. The minister of music should take an active interest in music for the Sunday school and should be involved in providing it with trained pianists and song leaders. A church that has good hymn singing in its Sunday school will have good singing when its congregation gathers to worship.

Conclusion

The hymnal is a rich treasury of poetry and music with a great teaching potential. How many of the 500 or more hymns in the typical hymnal do we sing? Unfortunately, we make use of far fewer hymns than we should. L. David Miller, former president of the Hymn Society, called unused hymns the “frozen assets of the church.” According to Miller,

Three-quarters of the hymns in the average church hymnal are frozen assets. What businessman would be satisfied with no outlet for 75 percent of his products? Yet church bodies spend large budgets in preparing new hymnals and revising old ones. Congregations purchase these hymnals but many continue to repeat a few “old favorite” hymns until they become threadbare. Those unused hymns are the frozen assets of the church.¹⁵

You and I as ministers have the great opportunity to change the frozen assets of the hymnal to liquid assets by utilizing a greater portion of this rich body of song to teach the gospel in its fullness.

Your ministry, whether it is preaching, teaching, or singing, can be greatly enriched by a thorough knowledge of our heritage of hymns. The great English preacher and

founder of Methodism, John Wesley (1703–91), whose brother Charles wrote some 6,500 hymns, found hymns a great asset to his ministry. Over a fifty-year period the Wesleys published some 56 collections of hymns. It is no surprise that as John Wesley at the age of 88 was near death, he sang to those in his sick room the following hymn of Isaac Watts:

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath;
And, when my voice is lost in death,
Praise shall employ my nobler powers:
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,
While life, and thought, and being last,
Or immortality endures.¹⁶

Whether we be pastors, teachers or musicians, our ministries can benefit from a greater knowledge of hymns. When we really come to know the treasures of the hymnal, we can make a greater use of hymns in the church's teaching ministry. This glorious body of congregational song which has been such a great instrument for the spread of the gospel over many generations is ours to use today if we are willing to discover its riches and share it with others. Sing a joyful song unto the Lord!

Notes

¹ Armin Haeussler, *The Story of Our Hymns, The Handbook to the Hymnal of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1952), 568.

² Dale Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 154–156.

³ *The First Annual Catalogue, 1859–1860*. Greenville, SC: G.E. Elford, Printer, 1860, 48.

⁴ Louis F. Benson, *The Hymnody of the Christian Church*. Reprint of the original 1927 ed. (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1956), 19.

⁵ *Ibid*, 148.

⁶ *Ibid*, 147–148.

⁷ Copyright 1964 Broadman Press. Used by permission.

⁸ See, for example, James R. Sydnor, *The Hymn and Congregational Singing* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 145–148; and *The Canyon Hymnal for Boys and Girls*, Leader's edition (East Orange, NJ: Canyon Press, 1958).

⁹ Glennella Key, "Experiences with Hymnody, chap. 8 of *Guiding Fours and Fives in Musical Experiences* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1972), 131.

¹⁰ Albert C. Ronander, "Uses of the Hymnal" in *Guide to the Pilgrim Hymnal* (Philadelphia and Boston: United Church Press, 1966), xxiv.

¹¹ See the following pamphlets issued by the Baptist Sunday School Board's Church Music Department and available from state church music departments: "Preschool Choir Program and Materials, 1977–78," "Younger Children's Choir Program and Materials, 1977–78."

¹² Special study units for children are available, such as Vivian Hackney and Jimmy Key, *Hymns to Know and Sing* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1973) and Betty Woodward, *The Singing Book* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1975).

¹³ See the following pamphlets issued by the Baptist Sunday School Board's Church Music Department and available from state church music departments: "Preschool Choir Program and Materials, 1977–78," "Younger Children's Choir Program and Materials, 1977–78."

¹⁴ See the following pamphlets issued by the Baptist Sunday School Board's Church Music Department and available from state church music departments: "Preschool Choir Program and Materials, 1977–78,"

“Younger Children’s Choir Program and Materials, 1977–78.”

¹⁵ “Unused Hymns—The Frozen Assets of the Church,” *The Hymn* 28, 4 (October 1977), 173.

¹⁶ Quoted in L. Tylerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley*, vol. 3, reprint of the 1872 ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1973), 653. Four stanzas of this hymn are in *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1991), no. 35.