



“On Hymns and Our Faith”

Hymns are the primary way that most Christians express their faith and learn the theological elements of the Christian tradition. Knowledge of hymns begin with very young children and is often the part of our faith that gets us through the rough times, even the last days of our lives. Family members sit at the bedside of the dying and sing them hymns; even in states of unconsciousness, people will respond to old and familiar hymns. Just think of the number of hymns that you know by heart, especially the first stanza.

But for something that is so important to our Christian tradition, we often overlook their importance, and take them for granted. Though we sing them in congregational settings, we rarely learn about them or help those in our congregations understand what they are singing and why. Seminaries rarely offer courses in hymnody, and the field of study is often left to worship and hymn “purists,” who have some rather strange and pedantic ideas about hymns. Unfortunately, these “purists” predominate on hymnal selection committees (this is a subject for another diatribe, sometime). Notice that even the word “hymnal” has been dropped from the title of recent Lutheran hymnals! But I would like to think about some suggestions for renewal of hymns in our congregations, perhaps things that will make the purists howl (let them howl).

Talk with your fellow Christians about their favorite and most meaningful hymns, and why these are meaningful to them. You might have someone give a brief introduction to their favorite hymn before worship, and then sing that hymn in the worship service.

Teach hymns in and out of worship. I have found that people are fascinated with the stories behind the hymns. When introducing a new or unfamiliar hymn, talk about it with the congregation, or print a brief description of the hymn in a bulletin or church newsletter. When introducing a new hymn, don't just sing it once, but perhaps repeat it several weeks in a row— even have a “hymn of the month.” Hymnals often have a “hymnal companion” volume with much of this information.

Use hymns to teach the faith. This was a classic strategy revived by Luther, and historically an important part of Protestant Christianity. Again, the purists will howl (let them howl).

Certainly, you can be careful about the theology contained in the hymns selected for worship, but don't be too pedantic. We've been told, for example, not to sing Christmas hymns during the season of Advent—but that is rubbish. There are some very lovely Advent hymns which really need to be sung, but sprinkling in a few Christmas carols will not cause the Second Coming, and it will add to people's enjoyment of worship. Remember, there are rules about hymns, but at times, rules were meant to be broken. “In the Garden” may not be your “cup of tea,” musically, but it is so important to many people (and, I must admit, fun to sing!)

Use hymns as liturgy. One of the better elements of the new hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) is Setting 10 of the liturgy, which uses hymns as elements of the worship music. Use this setting, and use it as a template for your own hymn experiments. To be honest, much of the liturgical music within our recent hymnals is beyond the musical abilities of many Christians, lay and clergy alike. Substituting hymns or parts of hymns might work much better.

Have hymn-sings regularly—Sunday mornings and other times. On “low” Sundays (“the Sunday after . . .”) ditch the formal liturgy for a liturgy of hymns and readings. Tie the readings and the sermon into the relevant hymn texts—show how the hymns themselves are often paraphrases or expansions of biblical texts. Mix hymn liturgies into festival services such as Reformation Sunday, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, or others.

Having trouble with maintaining adult or children's choirs? Think of a “pop-up” choir to sing a new or favorite hymn—no advanced commitment, practice before worship, mix youth and adults. Let them

think about what hymns they'd like to contribute. Use hymns regularly in Sunday Schools and other educational settings.

This all may seem a bit much, and perhaps the purists will howl (let them howl). I think we have forgotten that the worship and liturgy are the work of the people, and that in the early church the liturgies grew out of the *ad hoc* worship of the communities. Only later were our liturgies formalized and made the province of religious professionals, and the work of the people was gradually removed from them. I am not a proponent of completely "free" worship, but I do think variety, change, and especially the "buy in" of the people is crucial. Hymns are a way, perhaps the way, that worship can truly become the work of the people of God. ⊕

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