



Hold the Hymnal Lightly

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Having introduced new hymnals in two congregations, and having studied the role of hymnals in helping people perceive the presence of the trustworthy, reliable Jesus, I can tell you from an informed perspective that congregations can have an awkward relationship with hymnals. But the relationship points to a general principle of music in worship that matters: hold the hymnal lightly, and dwell in the hymns.

A QUICK HYMNAL HISTORY (A HYMNISTORY?)

Most Lutheran congregations that were part of the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988 were using the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, published in 1978. This hymnal was also commonly known as the “Green Book” or “Green Hymnal” and was an attempt at a pan-Lutheran hymnal in the United States. Other congregations were using the *Service Book and Hymnal*, published in

Hymns shape us in ways that we can hardly imagine, but most people could not tell you, beyond the color of the cover, which hymnal they are using, and why. But familiar hymns are something that stick with a person, sometimes providing solace and faith in the good and bad times of life.

1958. This hymnal was commonly known as the “Red Book” or “Red Hymnal” and was the previous attempt at a pan-Lutheran hymnal in the United States. Still others were using *Songs for a New Creation*, published in 1982. This hymnal was commonly known as the “Yellow Book” or “Yellow Hymnal” and was specifically published for guitar-led music in worship. All the music in this hymnal—from hymns to liturgy—were annotated with guitar chords.¹

Still others may have been using the *American Lutheran Hymnal*, published in 1930, or any other of a number of hymnals from then or earlier all coming in various colors from black to brown. While never universally accepted among the congregations that formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the general acceptance of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* meant it became the standard hymnal for congregations of the denomination.

When the *Lutheran Book of Worship* was seventeen years old, Augsburg Fortress, the publishing house of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, released *With One Voice*, which was marketed as a hymnal supplement, introducing some new music settings for services and a collection of hymns not in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*—some old, some new. *With One Voice* was commonly called “the Blue Book,” and while it was not helpful for pricing used vehicles, it did contain several other jokes. For example, hymn number 711 was “You Satisfy the Hungry Heart.”

In 1999, Augsburg Fortress released three worship resources: *Libro de Liturgia y Cántico* (a worship resource in Spanish, known as the “Burgundy Book”), *This Far By Faith* (subtitled: “An African American Resource for Worship,” known as the “Maroon Book”), and *Worship & Praise* (a songbook of at the time popular praise hymns, known as the “Purple Book”). The year 2007 saw the release of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, which might be known as the “Cranberry Book” or the “Red Book” depending on the length of the congregation’s memory and how much it needs to be differentiated from the older “Red Book,” the “Burgundy Book,” and the “Maroon Book.” Although in some very particular locales *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* may be called the “Lingonberry Book.” In 2020, *All Creation Sings*

¹ For more on the interaction of these three hymnals in Lutheran worship, see Patrick R. Keifert, “Three Currents in Liturgical Renewal” in *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 41–50.

was published—another blue hymnal supplement, but a darker shade of blue. Its common name is still developing. Over the thirty-six years of the ELCA, that is a lot of hymnals!

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Through all of these hymnals, clergy types began hearing one common cry: “Stop changing hymnals!” More specifically, the story of that one member who came up to the pastor in the 1970s hugging the *Service Book and Hymnal* and lamenting the switch to the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, who then comes up to the pastor in the 1990s lamenting the addition of the *With One Voice*, who then comes up to the pastor in the 2000s hugging the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *With One Voice* (one in each arm) lamenting the switch to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, who then comes up to the pastor in the 2020s hugging *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* lamenting the addition of *All Creation Sings*. And yes, this really is the same person each time.

I take this person seriously. We become attached to what we are currently doing, to current ways of perceiving the trustworthy, reliable Jesus, and the prospect of changing what has become dear to us sparks anxiety and worry. Through my sociological research in Lutheran congregations in the Midwest, I found something surprising. A lot of people have no idea what the title of the hymnal they use is. So, hold the hymnal lightly, and dwell in the hymns.

IT’S NOT THE GREEN BOOK?

No really. It is a minority of people, but a solid percentage of people who regularly show up for worship do not know what worship resource the congregation uses. And yes, I can back that up.

My doctoral work included concurrent, embedded, mix-method sociological research in four midwestern Lutheran congregations in four different states. I worshiped with each of the four congregations as part of the embedding of the research. Three of the four used *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* as a primary worship resource, and one of

those three had *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* as the only hymnal for the congregation to use.

When asked “Which hymnal or hymnals have you used during worship?” as part of the qualitative survey, just over 30 percent of those who had *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* as the only hymnal, or as one of the multiple hymnals for the congregation to use did not select it from the list of twelve possible Lutheran hymnals.² That seems like a lot given that *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* had been out for six years and marketed for about a decade when I did my research.³

Given that the list of options for people to mark included a hymnal published in 1917, it might have been too long of a list. Even the 1917 hymnal, however, had a few people select it.⁴ Or maybe because *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* contains much that was in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* some respondents really have not noticed the change. Or maybe because the list was the names of the hymnals and not the colors some people did not recognize the titles. Or maybe that person who will hug the current hymnal every time a new hymnal is mentioned balances out with that person who will not even notice the change.

My research did not get into the why of this particular question, but the conclusions I was able to draw from the fuller context of my work point to the importance of art in a way that sheds light on what matters about a particular hymnal. It’s the hymns, of course. Hold the hymnal lightly, and dwell in the hymns.

HYMNS SHAPE ME

Two particular hymns shape my life and theology through their art and my experience of them used in worship. The first is my all-time favorite hymn. The second is one that started as a powerful moment of worship and became deeply personal.

² Eric L. Bodenstab, “The Actors Are Come Hither: God’s Promise of Vocation Given in Public Christian Worship,” (PhD diss., Luther Seminary, 2014). The quantitative question is on 171. The oddity of the responses is noted on 94–95.

³ The *Renewing Worship Songbook* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004) was part of the six-year long process that officially started in 2001 and resulted in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. It did not have a color name because it had a swirly, etched, pastel rainbow cover.

⁴ And I believe them because I, too, have used that hymnal in worship.

GIVING JESUS THE GLORY

My all-time favorite hymn is *Thine Is the Glory*, which has been largely unchanged since it was adopted as a hymn of general Lutheran usage with the publication of the *Service Book and Hymnal* and was included in both the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.⁵ Not even the language was updated for *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, so congregations that exist partly because of the insistence on being able to read the Bible in the language we speak still use thine, thou, hast, liveth, and thee when singing this hymn.

Thine Is the Glory was the sending song at my ordination. It has been the sending song on most of my last Sundays in a congregational call. It was the sending song at my wedding. It will be the sending song at my funeral.

The congregations I grew up in tended to sing *Thine Is the Glory* on Easter Sunday when we had the extra brass to enhance the celebratory theme of Jesus's resurrection. Just thinking about the refrain is enough to hear the percussive, counterpoint trumpet fanfare drowning out the fortissimo singing of the congregation and choir. The hymn took on even more meaning for me when I graduated from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary because it was the school's song and thus the sending song at graduation. *Thine Is the Glory* was the sending song at my ordination. It has been the sending song on most of my last Sundays in a congregational call. It was the sending song at my wedding. It will be the sending song at my funeral.

Thine Is the Glory marks life transitions for me and serves as a consistent reminder that the point of each call from God—student, pastor, child, spouse, parent, neighbor, voter—is all about giving glory to Jesus. Even this article carries the meta question for me of, “How does this give glory to Jesus?” because of *Thine Is the Glory*. This one

⁵ For those who like to know these kinds of things: Text by Edmond Budry, 1854–1932; tr. R. Birch Hoyle, 1875–1939. Music *Judas Maccabaeus* by George Frideric Handel, 1685–1759. Meter: 5 5 6 5 6 5 6 5 and refrain. Text and music in the public domain. This hymn was first published in English in 1925. Cf. Paul Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010), 187–188.

hymn shapes my memory and theology so deeply because of the art of those brass players who were hired for Easter Sunday and congregations that sang with gusto.

EVENING NICU THEOLOGY

Another hymn in my all-time top ten, but for very different reasons, is *All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night*.⁶ I was introduced to this hymn through the service of evening prayer in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* where it is the first hymn suggested after the opening dialogue. This structure remained the same in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. The hymn itself, however, I can track all the way back to hymnals published in 1917.⁷ This hymn has been around for a bit, long enough that there's even disagreement across different hymnals on the fourth verse and how many verses there actually are.⁸

While I am sure I sang *All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night* at some point growing up or in school, my first powerful memory of this hymn is from a gathering of roughly 600 Lutherans at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. For one of the evenings of this assembly, we gathered in the auditorium for worship. Following the hymnal and some brief instructions from the presider, we sang *All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night* in both four-part harmony and as a round. It was awesome.

As I embraced a regular praying of the hours in my personal devotions in a way that included evening prayer and *All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night* I discovered that the words of the hymn are as

⁶ Again, for those who like to know these things: Text by Thomas Ken, 1637–1711, alt. Music *Tallis' Canon* by Thomas Tallis, 1505–1585. Meter: LM. Text and music in the public domain. A short history of this hymn and its two companion hymns can be found in Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 393–395.

⁷ I found it in both the *Common Service Book with Hymnal* (the Evangelical Lutheran General Synod of the United States of America, the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America, and the United Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the South), and the *Common Service Book of the Lutheran Church* (the Board of Publication of the United Lutheran Church in America). These are functionally the same hymnal, because the United Lutheran Church in America was made from the Evangelical Lutheran General Synod of the United States of America, the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America, and the United Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the South.

⁸ Ken wrote a whopping twelve verses for this hymn! Editing is a good thing. Cf. Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 402.

close to a perfect theology as I have ever encountered. Yes, there are language issues. Yes, it is deeply rooted in problematic, privatistic pietism. Yes, it's so tied to evening prayer that it's almost useless in any other setting. But as a prayer before bed...

First, God is praised, then asked for protection. Forgiveness is sought to provide a calm conscience through the night. Then comes verse 3. Oh, verse 3—we'll come back to you in a moment, you and your call to faithful living and faithful dying. Then comes a request for rejuvenation through rest for the sake of serving God,⁹ and it finishes off with the Doxology. Need a good structure for how to pray? There is one right there.

But verse 3? I should let you read it:

Teach me to live, that I may dread
the grave as little as my bed.
Teach me to die, that so I may
rise glorious at the awesome day.¹⁰

Just, wow! Every time I read it or sing it. This verse defines a faithful pietism that opens up everyday life as the embodiment of a realized eschatology. God's call to live each day, even our last, as a person of faith reflected through these two sentences convicts me every time.

My Praise to Thee, My God, This Night came to mean even more to me in 2014 when my wife and I spent our evenings in the neonatal intensive care unit with our daughter, the surviving twin, for ten weeks. On our very first night together in the hospital, the Spirit reminded me of this hymn. For ten weeks, from the day of her birth to the day she finally came home, I sang my daughter this hymn even with verse 3 as a reminder to me and as a way of giving our daughter God's good news, that God calls her to live her life as a follower of Jesus, trusting God's promise that we will all see her twin sister again on that awesome day.

Those are two examples of art, memory, and theology all coming together through hymns to shape my understanding of God's call. I know you have these hymns in your life, too. The power of the hymnal

⁹ At least, that's what is in the version from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

¹⁰ "All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night" verse 3; *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), hymn 565.

is the hymns and how they shape you. Hold the hymnal lightly, and dwell in the hymns.

SINGING TOGETHER FOR LATER

One of the goals of worship is to bring those the Spirit has gathered to a place where they can perceive the presence of the trustworthy, reliable Jesus. Yes, Jesus is ubiquitously present, but we are not always in a place to perceive that presence. Worship, which includes but need not be limited to the regular weekly gathering, can help us get to that perceptive place through art.

One of the open-ended prompts in the qualitative survey for my doctoral research asked respondents to “Describe an experience of found worship you have had.”¹¹ The largest group of answers centered around artistic expression in the worship space. This group of 46.2 percent of the respondents reported a range of art, from windows and paintings to the songs sung by the choir and the hymns sung by the congregation. This question was an outlier in my research because everything else was pointing to relationships, which came in second in this prompt at 42.3 percent, but this prompt reveals how much art matters in worship.

Congregational hymns especially bring us into a place where the presence of Jesus seems closer. Whether you sing or just listen or read along, experiencing congregational song brings us into an awareness we might not otherwise have. And the hymns stick with us beyond the congregational worship experience.

Very rarely does anyone quote one of my sermons back to me. It’s rare enough that if the quote is any good, I go back to make sure I actually said it. On the other hand, people quite frequently tell me about a hymn from Sunday coming to mind during the week. As we gather for a meeting or a visit, at least once a week someone will be humming the tune from a hymn we sang on Sunday.

Hymns connect the weekly worship service with the rest of our lives. Many devotionals have suggested hymns or just quote part or all of a hymn as part of extending the weekly service into everyday life. These moments during our ordinary days connect the ordinary

¹¹ Bodenstab, “The Actors Are Come Hither,” 180 for the question in the member interview protocol, and 111 for the summary of the data.

to the ubiquitous presence of Jesus—hopefully making us aware of his presence in an unexpected moment of worship outside of the congregational setting.

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Hymns cross the Sunday to Monday divide like nothing else. So, when it comes time to change a hymnal, the person who comes hugging the current hymnal is telling me that the experiences created by this book have helped the person perceive the presence of the trustworthy, reliable Jesus. If the person really is a hymnal geek, then they may even have reason for concern. But what a time to remind them to hold the hymnal lightly, and dwell in the hymns.

IN OR OUT?

Any well-informed hymnal geek will search out the list of hymns when a new hymnal is announced to see if their hymn is in the hymnal. Many of us have been shocked to discover that one hymn we love isn't in the hymnal anymore or relieved to see that one hymn in the new hymnal.

One hymn that didn't make the cut between hymnals stands out. *Once to Every Man and Nation* was not included in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* after having been in the *Service Book and Hymnal*. Just looking at the title of the hymn, you can probably come up with several reasons why it did not make the cut despite being in a fair number of hymnals in the United States. While some quick concerns like masculine language when referencing all people and nationalism may have played some part, the source of the hymn complicates a simple reason.

James Russell Lowell, who was born in 1819 and died in 1892, authored *Once to Every Man and Nation*. He was a graduate and then professor at Harvard. In his day, Lowell was a vocal progressive. He publicly criticized slavery and war, including the United States annexation of parts of Mexico that led to the Mexican-American War. He is credited with writing the words for over two dozen hymns, with *Once to Every Man and Nation* being his most popular—popular enough that Martin Luther King, Jr. quotes most of the fourth verse near the end of his “We Shall Overcome” speech on March 17, 1966, at Southern Methodist University.¹²

Lowell would not have known this hymn’s popularity, as *Once to Every Man and Nation* was first published as a hymn called *The Crisis* in *The White Ribbon Hymnal*, published by the Woman’s Temperance Publishing Association of Chicago, Illinois, in 1892—the year of Lowell’s death.¹³ Over time it has appeared in over 175 hymnals, with the highest percentage coming in 1976 when this hymn appeared in 30 percent of the hymnals published that year, but with other notable high points in 1930 (20 percent), 1937 (21 percent), 1939 (25 percent), 1969 (22 percent), and 1974 (21 percent).¹⁴

So, with all this history, the role in the civil rights movement, and the actively progressive stance of Lowell, why was *Once to Every Man and Nation* left out of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* when it was published in 1978? The word “once.” Yes, we can nitpick about the use of masculine language or focus on the political use of hymns, but the idea that everyone only has one chance at faithfulness falls flat in Lutheran ears, and the hymn provides the rationale in the second half of verse 3:

New occasions teach new duties;
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth.¹⁵

¹² King’s quoting of Lowell can be found in the penultimate paragraph of the speech. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Transcript of Dr. Martin Luther King’s speech at SMU on March 17, 1966,” <https://www.smu.edu/News/2014/mlk-at-smu-transcript-17march1966>.

¹³ Harry Plantinga, “The White Ribbon Hymnal: The Crisis,” <https://hymnary.org/hymn/WRHE1892/57>.

¹⁴ Plantinga, “Once to Every Man and Nation,” https://hymnary.org/text/once_to_every_man_and_nation.

¹⁵ “Once to every man and nation,” *Service Book and Hymnal*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1958), hymn 547.

For Lutherans, every moment is the moment God calls us to side with truth over falsehood—not just once—and that ancient good of Lutheran theology means the occasion of a new hymnal left this hymn out. But you know it is still around, right?

On the other extreme, some hymns seem to be perpetually present in hymnals. One great example is *Joy to the World*. This ubiquitous December hymn—I’ll let others debate whether it’s an Advent or Christmas hymn—has appeared in most hymnals since its debut in 1719. *Joy to the World* is so deeply connected to Christmas that not singing this hymn on Christmas Eve seems sacrilegious—even if it is an Advent hymn...

Some controversy surrounds even *Joy to the World*, but grammatical concerns have not diminished the popularity of this hymn. Whether “the Lord” in the version of this hymn you know “has come” or “is come,” the adaptable verbiage probably helps its popularity, but not every hymnal includes *Joy to the World*. The ubiquity of this hymn means we have access to it even if it’s not in the pew hymnal. This shows us that whether the hymn stays in a hymnal or not, we can hold the hymnal lightly, and dwell in the hymns.

DWELL IN THE HYMNS

The hymns matter and how they help those singing the hymns perceive the presence of the trustworthy, reliable Jesus. The hymnal is secondary to this goal. Hymns that work in one place or time may not work in another, even between something like the early service and the late service in the same building. So, dwell in the hymns and take some comfort in the knowledge that the hymnal that had that hymn that you or someone else liked is not gone.

Unless your congregation has only ever had one hymnal, there are copies of the previous hymnals somewhere in the building. Check your congregation’s library, or a storage closet, or an attic. There will be either a reasonably nice copy in the library or a box with dozens of hymnals in questionable states of use stored in one of those areas. In my first call at Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran in Stuttgart, Kansas, when we celebrated their 125th anniversary, we did a service from the German hymnal the congregation used from 1889. It was still in the congregation’s library!

There are also other great resources like *hymnary.org* that catalog hymns. Unless the beloved hymn is particularly local, you should be able to find it on the internet. Since there's a reasonable chance that the old hymn is in the public domain, it can be used without having to pay any copyright fees. Make sure to double check that, but there's a good chance. If you want to have the congregation sing a hymn that's not in the hymnal anymore, it's possible. The music is out there. If you want to have a whole series of worship services including nothing but hymns that were not included when "the new hymnal" came out, you can. You might discover why some of them were not included the hard way, but you still can do it.

The hymns matter, not the hymnal, so it's okay that 30 percent of regular worshippers couldn't identify the hymnal in their pew from a lineup of hymnals. Because the hymns matter, each of us has a task to then explain why they matter. Leaders of congregations, both clergy and other music leaders can help people do this. Dwell in the hymns that are meaningful to you and your congregation. Put words to why they matter. Learn about their history, authors, and composers. Invest in the hymns, not the hymnals.

When the hymnal finally comes—and I am sure it will with at least two more major denominational hymnals likely to be published in my lifetime—when we realize *Thine is the Glory* and *All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night* lose no beats and easily adjust rhymes when they become *Yours is the Glory* and *All Praise to You, My God, This Night*, the previous versions will still be around. The updated language might even make the hymns more meaningful. When the denominational hymnal finally comes that does not include these hymns, I'll still have access to the old hymnals and hymns. So, I can hold the hymnal lightly and dwell in the hymns. ⊕

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