

Hymns Nobody Likes

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Occasionally people complain that *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* has too many hymns they don't like to sing. "They make hymnals for trained musicians," so the complaint goes, "and not for the common Christian."

It may come as a surprise to many people that hymnal committees spend many hours trying to find a balance of hymns people want and need. Unfortunately, many of the hymns that people love to sing contain teachings out of step with the Bible. Worshipers grew fond of dozens of hymns during their non-Lutheran youth or while listening to non-Lutheran radio broadcasts. Because the message of many of these hymns is confusing, or even wrong, they do not build up faith, but actually weaken it. On the other hand, Martin Luther's "From Depths of Woe" doesn't often make a congregation's list of hymnal favorites, yet its text wonderfully proclaims the Bible's message of sin and grace.

Which hymns should the church place into its hymnal? Favorites that will harm, or unknowns that can build faith?

Usually it isn't the text that makes or breaks a hymn's popularity. The tune is the issue. The hymns people don't like usually have a melody that is either "too sad" or "too difficult."

Worshipers like to feel good when they sing. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's important to remember the purpose God had in mind when he created music. Music works together with language so that God's story can be implanted in our emotions and our minds. Music is a means to carry the message of God's Word to our hearts. Someone said that music is exegetical: it amplifies and interprets a text.

Many of God's words are exciting and happy. Parts of God's message are sad, and other parts are serious. If the Bible's message is to be conveyed faithfully, its sad words need sad music. Meditative words need meditative music, or the singer can't meditate. Serious words require serious music, or the message comes off as being not very serious. We could sing serious songs to lighthearted tunes in the same way we could play baseball on a basketball court. It works, but not very well. Try this out: Sing "Amazing Grace" to the tune of "Joy to the World." The meter fits, but the mood isn't right at all.

Some people point to the music they hear on religious radio stations or on television worship broadcasts and argue that sad or serious music hardly ever appears. Perhaps they might ask how many sad or serious subjects ever appear. Should Lutherans, like so many denominations today, avoid sad subjects such as sin and guilt, or serious subjects such as fighting for the faith or dying for Christ? Certainly not! The Christianity the Bible proclaims is joyful, but not gleeful. It is glad, but not giddy. It is simple, but not trivial. And as long as this is true, not every Lutheran hymn will be bouncing with joy. We will need serious music to sing about serious subjects.

Another complaint sometimes heard is that some hymns are too difficult. The question has to be asked, difficult for whom? One of our mission pastors was preparing for his congregation's first Easter service when he discovered that his members, primarily from unchurched backgrounds, had never learned "I Know that My Redeemer Lives." Should that hymn be eliminated because it is too difficult for some people? The pastor didn't think so. He felt the hymn was worth learning, so he spent time teaching it. His little congregation sang it grandly on Easter Sunday.

The real issue with some hymns is not their difficulty, but their worthiness and their familiarity. There aren't many hymns in our hymnal that are more difficult in rhythm and melody than "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," but we sing it enthusiastically because we have sung it often and we know our faith has been strengthened by singing it. If a hymn has words and a melody that are worth learning, we need to practice it until we know it.

Once we know a hymn, it isn't difficult anymore. Isn't that true of every song we sing? Listen to a child sing a nursery rhyme for the first time; listen to an adult try to sing a Top-40 tune for the first time. In both cases, you will hear tunes that sound difficult because people are having trouble singing them. After those songs are heard and sung again and again, they become easy. It's very likely that the hymns we consider easy to sing are those we know, and the hymns we consider difficult are those we don't know.

It takes time and effort to learn anything new. Like many things we do, the worship of God takes work. Listening to a sermon takes concentration. Filling our offering envelopes with generous offerings takes willpower. We won't demand to sing only easy and familiar hymns when we remember that we have been redeemed by the very difficult suffering and death of Jesus. In one of our more popular hymns, we sing these words:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a tribute far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.
(CW 125:4)

We need hymns and songs that proclaim the message the Bible tells. Some will seem easy, some more difficult. Some will be happy, some serious, and some sad. We can work at learning them all — little by little — for the hard and serious task of keeping our faith strong and for the praise of him who accomplished the hard and serious work of winning us a victory.