

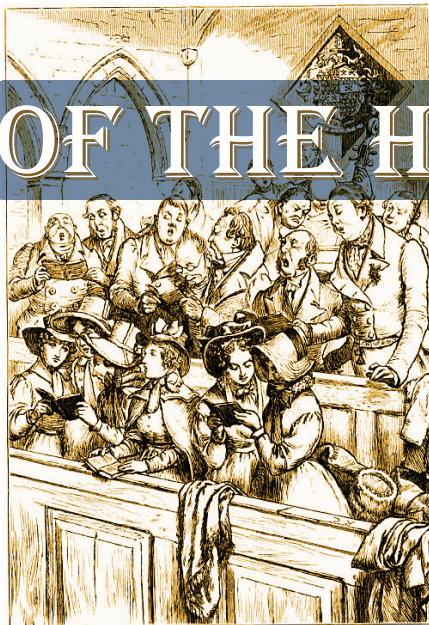
The reasons given are many.

“The words are old fashioned. People don’t understand them.”

“It’s too expensive to purchase all those books.”

“It’s a bother to have everyone turn to a page in a hymnal.”

IN PRAISE OF THE HYMN



Whatever the excuse, the result is the same: the old familiar church hymnal has become, in most churches, an anachronism in worship, replaced by the more simple and often repetitious choruses sung from memory, or from the words projected onto a screen. Along with the trend toward reaching the younger “unchurched” has come a trend away from use of the traditional hymnal in worship.

The chorus has its place. But in the process of inserting its simplicity, we have lost from our worship much of the profoundly rich and deeply Scriptural text of the hymn.

Eugene Peterson, in his fine volume *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, writes,

In the call to worship we hear God’s first

word to us; in the benediction we hear God’s last word to us; in the Scripture lessons we hear God speaking to our fathers; in the sermon we hear that word re-expressed to us; in the hymns, which are all to a greater or lesser extent paraphrases of Scripture, the Word of God makes our prayers articulate.

Second only to Holy Scripture itself, the hymns of our faith express the deep yearnings and unspoken cries of the heart. When our minds fail to form words to adequately voice the praise rising within our soul, we need only reach out at arm’s length to borrow from Fanny Crosby, Charles Wesley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Cowper, Philip Doddridge, Isaac Watts, or Philip P. Bliss.

The singing of hymns is less an exercise in community singing than the opportunity to express praise and testimony beyond our own eloquence. And it is a sad turn of events when such profound thoughts are so readily set aside because their use might be inconvenient.

Heaven forbid we should be inconvenienced in our worship.

Let us journey together through the hymnal. Let us rediscover some of the spiritual wealth contained there. Lean forward in your pew to that rack attached to the back of the one in front. Turn off that overhead projector—just for the moment; there’s no reason to throw it away—and remove the older hymnal. Blow the dust off the top and open it.

Reflections
by the Pond

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AROUND THE THRONE

So where do we begin? Most hymnals contain something more than five hundred songs. Where do we begin?

We begin where we should always: at the throne. We approach the throne of our God with confidence blended with humility, bow down before Him, and proclaim—before anything else—His holiness. Turn in your hymnal to the grand old hymn by Reginald Heber: “Holy, Holy, Holy.” Let’s sing together, declaring the sacred purity of our Lord.

*Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song
shall rise to Thee;
Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and Mighty!
God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity!*

Did you see Him? Did you see the Father upon His throne? Or were they just words mechanically sung?

Sing them again—go ahead, we’ll wait. Sing each phrase slowly, thoughtfully, taking the time to let the words paint their distinctive image in your mind. Approach Him reverently, bowing down before Him.

Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!

The day begins at the throne, raising awakening voices to our God.

*Early in the morning our song
shall rise to Thee;*

He is holy, yes, but in His unquenchable might, He is also merciful.

Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and Mighty!

Our God is a glorious, supernatural Spirit comprised of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

God in Three Persons, blessed Trinity!

Perhaps the opening stanza of this hymn of praise reminds you of a dawning day, with the sun just rising over the distant hills. Perhaps the words draw a picture for you of the three members of the trinity: the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

The first line of this hymn always takes me back to that splendid and horrific scene where Isaiah has been lifted up to the throne room of God.

In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory.”

Isaiah 6:1-3

Standing there in the presence of such purity and holiness, Isaiah is overwhelmed by thoughts of his own sinfulness.

“Woe is me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

Isaiah 6:5



And that is where worship begins: understanding who we are in relation to our God.

Oh, I’ve not forgotten our standing through the blood of Christ; one thing at a time. First let us truly appreciate who we are in Christ by realizing what we were *without* Him.

In the second stanza we are reminded that we are not alone in our worship, but part of a vast community that includes the believers around us, the saints who have gone on before, the twenty-four elders (Revelation 4:10), as well as the supernatural beings that populate heaven.

*Holy, Holy, Holy!
All the saints adore Thee,
Casting down their golden crowns
around the glassy sea;
Cherubim and seraphim falling down*

*before Thee,
Which wert and art,
and evermore shall be.*

The third stanza (and the only proper way to sing a hymn is to sing it in its entirety) is an admission of our temporal condition. Here is the picture of mankind—both saved and unsaved—living far away from the throne of God. But notice: God Himself does not change. Though the perception of Him by humans might fade, His holiness remains intact.

*Holy, Holy, Holy!
Tho’ the darkness hide Thee,
Tho’ the eye of sinful man
Thy glory may not see,
Only Thou art holy;
there is none beside Thee
Perfect in power, in love, and purity.*

Now we rise in our praise, singing together with full voice and glad hearts, the sound swelling, crescendoing upwards toward the throne...

*Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God
Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy
name,
in earth, and sky, and sea;
Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and
Mighty!
God in three persons,
blessed Trinity!
Amen.*

Reginald Heber

Next Week: *The Quickening Spirit*

