



Teach ... Your Children Well – With a Good Hymnal

The idea that we should teach the next generation the truths of our faith is nothing new. But perhaps the suggestion that we could do it by using a hymn book is. Nonetheless, this is one of the lessons of the book of Psalms. The psalms are the hymns of the Bible, and they contain a lot of theological truth. They even record some memorable instructions on teaching young people. Take Psalm 78, written by Asaph. This Levitical musician begins by exhorting Israel to *“tell the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders he has done.”* He demonstrates *how* in the rest of his psalm, by recounting some of those glorious deeds; including God’s marvellous acts of mercy to rebellious Israel in the wilderness. Over three millennia, countless children have grown up singing this psalm, and in doing so have learned many valuable historical and theological lessons.

The Psalms teach truth

When I first began to read the psalms as a young Christian, I saw them as songs of spiritual experience. There were psalms of joy, psalms of hope, fear and trust – psalms for the whole spectrum of human experience. Whatever I was feeling at the time, I could find a psalm to match my state of mind. But as I progressed in understanding, I began to notice how much truth, how much theology, they contain. I even read once that the Psalms are the Old Testament book most quoted by Jesus and Paul. Intrigued, I began to check the references, and the evidence certainly stacked up. I could see that Jesus and Paul both quoted the Psalms to make theological points, not experiential ones. That was illuminating. The Old Testament believers weren’t just singing to cheer themselves up; they were instructing themselves and one another as they sung the psalms. Paul is making this point in Colossians 3:16 when he tells the Colossian Christians to *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...”* And, with a good hymnal, we do the same thing today as we sing the truth about God back to him.

For this reason, a good hymnal that contains theology-filled hymns is an excellent tool for teaching children and young people the Christian faith. Learning by singing embeds truth in their hearts and minds, since music aids the memory. The words will stay with them for life, and will be there in old age, when many other things are forgotten. If we want our youth to learn sound theology, then we’d do well to make sure they have theologically-sound hymns to sing. This isn’t to say that singing doesn’t involve the emotions; or that theology shouldn’t be experiential – it should be. But if our singing is *merely* experiential we run the risk of becoming mindless, uninformed – more like “pagans” – prone to be *“led astray to mute idols”*¹, as Paul warns the Corinthians at the beginning of his three chapters of instruction on worship.

Active efforts

Singing together from a good hymnal in worship teaches us well; but there are other ways we can reinforce such teaching. The aim is to get to know these hymns very well, and to understand what they are saying so that we appropriate their truth and begin to live it. This could be fostered by making hymn-familiarization part of Sunday School lessons. Perhaps one hymn a week could be the focus of the class, with some brief, simple explanation of the main message of the hymn, and of any unfamiliar words. This hymn could be one that is going to be sung later during the service.

In one church I know well the minister used to visit the Sunday School classes to do this himself (which certainly underscored to those children that hymns are special and important!)

Another useful thing to do would be to add hymn-singing to your family devotions, if you don't sing already. Add a few words of introduction by commenting on the text, or the ways the text and tune match each other well. Tell a few things about the writer of the hymn, his or her trials or joys; some facts about his or her life and times. All this helps bring the hymn alive for your children, and aids their appreciation and enjoyment of singing hymns. Much of the information you'll need is rapidly found on the internet, in Wikipedia or hymn websites, as well as in books like Faith Cook's *Hymn Writers and their Hymns*. (Such a book would be a great addition to your family's home library). If you are a home schooler, getting the children to search out such information for themselves would prove a valuable project.

What are some examples of hymns that immediately lend themselves to instruction? Some of the first that come to mind are those that were deliberately written to teach children, like those of Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander. She was a Sunday School teacher (as well as the wife of a bishop) who wrote hymns to teach children the points of the Anglican catechism. They include "All things bright and beautiful", "There is a green hill far away" and "Once in royal David's city". Other hymns that are excellent teachers of doctrine are "Firmly, I believe and truly" (a basic statement of faith) and "Praise, my soul, the king of heaven". Or what about "Christians, awake, salute the happy morn", for a very full hymn on the truths about Christmas? These hymns contain many of the key teachings of the Christian faith, and they are matched with good tunes. The whole family will enjoy singing and memorizing them together.

Considering the poetry

Hymns are also poetry, and because of that a great deal may be conveyed by the writer in just a few words. Good poets take a great deal of care in choosing their words, and they often choose expressive words that have several layers of meaning. Thus, it shouldn't surprise us when we find a word in a good hymn that isn't used in casual conversation. There may be words that we have to look up in a dictionary. That is good for us – and for our children. It may mean that we develop wider vocabularies, and become more articulate and expressive as a result. Take these lines of Joseph Addison, based on Psalm 19:

*The spacious firmament on high,
With all the blue ethereal sky,
And spangled heav'ns, a shining frame,
Their great Original proclaim.*

You may think Addison could have used more basic words than *spacious*, *firmament*, *ethereal* and *spangled*. But rather than complaining that you don't know what they mean; and using your children, your other-than-English native tongue or your own conversational habits as an excuse, why not open your dictionary and investigate? "Spacious" has connotations of vastness, expansiveness, amplexity. There is a generosity and impressiveness implied that "wide" simply doesn't convey. "Spangled" is a word used to describe the effect when someone or something is decorated with sparkly jewellery. Simply to say that the sky was "starry" does not suggest (as Addison does here) that *God decorated the heavens* with the glittering array of stars. "Ethereal" is a lovely word. It suggests heavenliness, but also a spiritual, intangible, unearthly delicacy and refinement. The word "firmament" is a useful one that goes beyond the physical idea of the sky. It suggests shape – an arch or vault – as well as communicating the idea of heaven being God's dwelling place.² In the last line quoted above, Addison has managed to capture in four short words what theologians have taken tens of thousands to say: that the creation reflects the glory of God, its maker, or "Original". It is well worth taking the time with children to teach them what the words of hymns mean. Get them in the habit of using dictionaries, and go there with them to enjoy the riches of meaning to be found in some of these special words.

Appreciating the history of hymnody

Another thing that a good hymnal can teach us is chronological humility. The realisation that we are not the first to experience the truths of the Christian faith – and that others before us may actually have held to them more faithfully – is good for us. An important feature of a good hymnal is a range of hymns from the entire sweep of church history. Singing hymns that date from as long ago as the early church and up until the present is one way to join in the communion of saints that will only be more complete in heaven. A good hymnal will include the best of the hymns that come from all those periods. If we take the trouble to learn about the saints who wrote them, and their times, we'll develop appreciation for the ways they and their contemporary church have been more faithful than we have. We may learn a few things! I shall never forget first learning about the life of Henry Francis Lyte, and the circumstances in which he wrote the hymn "Abide with me". It was rightly humbling, learning about the faith with which he faced his death from tuberculosis; and ever since I have sung these words with better understanding of their meaning, and more love for their writer.

Teach them well

But because the needs and desires of young people are often raised as objections to singing older, more complex or poetically challenging hymns, I thought I would address some of the things that I sometimes hear said, in the hope that all of us would develop more appreciation for what a good hymnal can do for us.

I remember being in my teens and early twenties, and thinking and saying (somewhat rebelliously, as young people often do) that older people shouldn't impose their tastes on us, that we need to sing songs that are relevant to us, and so on. While I never enjoyed *Scripture in Song etc* myself (they were too simple and short and tended to be repeated over and over) I somehow had the idea that when the church sung, it should sing things that "the world outside" (usually meaning the younger generation!) could "relate to". But that was when I was new to the Reformed faith, when my childhood experience of what was actually good-quality hymnody had sadly been connected to dead liberalism. It was before I had learned some important things about worship, and what we should sing as we worship. In the first few years after I became part of reformational churches I learned that worship was not primarily for evangelism. I also learned that singing in worship has a teaching function. So I began to appreciate properly the good hymns I'd learned as a child and teenager that were full of biblical truth – not just short Bible verses, but extended, verse-upon-verse development of biblical teaching in well-constructed thoughts. I began to realise that Christians in earlier times had often done this better than Christians in more recent times.

All this tells me that while we ought to be concerned about young people's demands for up-to-date, contemporary songs we ought not to shift direction on the basis of their desires. Young people, by definition, are less mature, and need guidance. As they grow older they change, develop more discernment, and learn to appreciate what they didn't before. I'm convinced that the answer to these demands is to *teach* them. Teach them the biblical view of singing in worship, teach them the hymns of the faith and what they mean, teach them about the language of poetry. Young people are quite receptive to all the interesting things that can be learned from hymns. They will take their cue from you, their parents. What is *your* view of the hymns we sing? What should your view be? And what kind of Christians would you like your children to become? Make the connections, and teach your children well.

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¹ 1 Corinthians 12:1-2

² I have taken all these word-definitions from *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993)