

## Why Another New Hymnal?

*This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.*

### Do You Know the Words?

Can you finish the lines of these hymns?

- Then sings my soul, my Savior, God, to  
Thee, \_\_\_\_\_
- God of the sparrow, God of \_\_\_\_\_
- Let us talents and \_\_\_\_\_
- Lift high \_\_\_\_\_
- Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? \_\_\_\_\_

When asked, many Presbyterians know not just one following word, but a whole series of phrases. In the last example, indeed, many can unhesitatingly sing the entire refrain by heart.

What is so remarkable about this? All five of the hymns in question were unfamiliar to Presbyterian congregations when the “new blue” hymnal appeared in 1990. Had churches never adopted that resource, these five songs—and many others just as meaningful and memorable—would have remained outside the shared worship life of PC(USA) congregations.

Instead, though, within a matter of a relatively few years, those once “new” songs became “old”

favorites. “New” must, however, appear in quotation marks—these hymns were not all of recent vintage when they were selected for the 1990 hymnal. “Lift High the Cross,” sung to the tune CRUCIFER, dates to 1916, and the English translation of “How Great Thou Art,” to 1953. But these hymns had not appeared in earlier Presbyterian publications, so in the 1990s they were “new” to a particular group of people.

By the same token, “old” must also be qualified. When people say they love “the good old hymns,” they generally do not mean the third-century Greek lamp-lighting hymn (the *Phos hilaron*, translated into such English versions as “O Gladsome Light”), or the fourth-century Latin

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texts of Bishop Ambrose of Milan (like “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright”). In fact, they often have in mind something of comparatively recent

historical origin. In their minds, therefore, “old” does not so much mean “ancient” as it means often-used, comfortably familiar, or rich with personal associations. An “old hymn” is a bit like an old shoe: no matter how recently it was acquired, it is cherished in large part because it does not chafe or call attention to itself; rather, it simply helps to take us where we need to go—particularly, in the instance of a hymn, if we need to go into the presence of the living God.

## The Ongoing Work of the Spirit

Efforts to identify and define “new” and “old” hymns show that songs currently unknown to a group of worshipers can, within the next several years, rise to the status of “old favorites”—“heart songs,” songs that touch us deeply and help us experience more of who God is and what God would have us become. If we believe, as we profess in the Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith, that “the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules *our* faith and life,” then surely we should leave the way open for that Spirit to continue inspiring people to craft songs expressive of each generation’s distinctive challenges and joys.

Ultimately, one of the most important reasons for producing new hymnals is to provide access to this ongoing inspiration. Over the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century, the field of church music has witnessed an unprecedented outpouring of creativity. Experts refer to a “hymn explosion” that began in Great Britain in the 1960s and has continued unabated since that time, expanding to the United States and numerous other countries. In fact, since the World Council of Churches met in Canberra, Australia, in 1991 (the year after the “blue” Presbyterian hymnal was published), tunes and texts from all around the globe have become available for widespread use as never before.

In addition to this exponential increase in works composed in the traditional “hymn” genre—a series of stanzas, all sung to the same

tune, developing a theological theme or biblical narrative—the past generation has also witnessed an upsurge in what is variously referred to as “praise and worship” or “contemporary Christian” music. In contrast to hymns, this alternative genre sometimes assumes popular song form, with verses, a refrain, and a bridge; sometimes it takes the shape of a single chorus sung repeatedly to create a particular worshipful mood like exuberant joy or contemplative peace. Because of this repetitive structure, songs in the “praise chorus” repertoire, whether hailing from the United States or elsewhere, have sometimes been caricatured as “7/11 songs”: seven words, sung eleven times over.

But any genre can be parodied: one could just as easily (and inaccurately) characterize traditional hymns as “11/7 songs”: eleven-stanza treatises sung out of seven pound books! The fact of the matter is that many moving and powerful worship songs do simply use the same words over and over. Think of the hymns “Come, Bring Your Burdens to God” or “Jesus, Remember Me, When You Come into Your Kingdom.” On the other hand, numerous meaningful hymns require multiple stanzas to develop their ideas. These include Trinitarian hymns that have a stanza for each person of the Godhead, plus a final doxology celebrating their unity, or carols that unfold the whole drama of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection (like Sydney Carter’s “The Lord of the Dance”). Both genres, the hymn and the praise song, can be done well or poorly; a principle of charity urges us to look for the best rather than the worst each has to offer.

## The Generational Work of Hymnal Committees

A hymnal committee must take this principal of charity to heart as it scans the immense spectrum of hymns that has become available to the church in recent years. Because of the abundance of hymns that exist today, denominations wanting access to the best of the new creations have had to form

committees whose primary assignment is to “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1). Not every new song—or old song, for that matter—teaches sound doctrine or conveys its message through poetry and music suitable for giving glory to God. To survey the vast array of “hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs” (as Paul’s letters inclusively referred to the variety of church music available to the churches of *his* day [Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16]), groups with expertise in theology, music, and poetry are charged with the arduous process of selection.

## Typically, in fact, about half of the contents of one hymnal go by the wayside when its successor comes onto the scene.

Denominations and publishing houses convene such groups on a roughly *generational* basis. Anthropologists, genealogists, and biologists provide slightly different definitions of what counts as a “generation,” but the average length rests somewhere between twenty and twenty-five years. This figure seems right for hymnologists as well. Roughly every two decades church groups look back over their song collections, winnowing out those older pieces that have fallen out of common usage and those newer ones that have never quite caught on. Such winnowing makes room for a new hymnal edition to add material created or discovered since the last time such revisions occurred. The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. is no exception to this two-decade cycle, although the pattern is slightly obscured because many churches did not adopt the *Worship Book* that came out in the 1970s, in between the “red” hymnbook of the 1950s and the “blue” hymnal of 1990.

Indeed, Presbyterians are in good company in undergoing a recent generational review process.

Over the first decades of the twenty-first century, multiple denominations around the United States and abroad produced new song collections. In 2005, the Church of Scotland came out with *Church Hymnary IV*. In 2006, both Missouri Synod Lutherans and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America brought out new worship resources (the *Lutheran Service Book* and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, respectively). The Southern Baptist convention in 2008 published the *Baptist Hymnal*, whose title deliberately omitted the

definite article to acknowledge that another group of Baptists was at the same time creating *Celebrating Grace* (Mercer University Press, 2010). Responding to a Vatican-mandated new English translation of the liturgy, Roman Catholic publishing house GIA issued both

*Gather III* and *Worship IV* in 2011. The banner year of 2013 projected the collaborative volume of the Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church in America, *Lift up Your Hearts; Glory to God* from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); and *Community of Christ Sings* from the Community of Christ (which changed its name in 2000 from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints).

A pair of examples helps illustrate why hymn collections benefit from regular processes to (so to speak) wring out the old and ring in the new. Our grandparents or great-grandparents, had they been Presbyterian in either the northern or the southern church, would have likely been familiar with a hymn written by Horatius Bonar, poet and pastor of the Free Church of Scotland, “A Few More Years Shall Roll.” This text appeared regularly—in the hymnals of 1874, 1895, 1901, and 1911—before it disappeared from denominational use. Its lyrics call attention to the short time remaining between any of us who are now alive and the day of our inevitable death:

A few more years shall roll,  
a few more seasons come,  
and we shall be with those that rest  
asleep within the tomb. . . .

A few more suns shall set  
o'er these dark hills of time,  
and we shall be where suns are not,  
a far serener clime. . . .

The poetry, which continues for another three stanzas, is vivid and artful, but it sounds slightly dated now. The word “clime” is no longer in use, even by hymn poets who need a good rhyming option. The image of “dark hills of time” seems to characterize the present world as exclusively a vale of tears and not also a gift of grace and arena for stewardship and mission. The yearning for “serener” company with those “asleep within the tomb” carries almost maudlin connotations to a twenty-first century ear (or even, apparently, to hymnal committees since the first decade of the twentieth century).

Contrast to this another hymn by the same author. The moving communion text, “Here, O My Lord, I See Thee Face to Face,” has appeared in some version in every Presbyterian hymnal since 1895. Sometimes the language is pluralized (“Here, O *our* Lord”) to make the hymn sound more like the song of a community receiving the Lord’s Supper together than that of an individual partaking alone. Sometimes the pronouns for God are modernized (“we see *you* face to face”) rather than preserved in the “thee/thou” form of Bonar’s 1855 composition. Never are all eight of the text’s original stanzas included—sometimes only four appear; the Presbyterian hymnals of 1895 and of 1990 both use five stanzas, but a different selection of five. *Glory to God* (2013) follows the pattern of its most immediate predecessor: first-person plural pronouns for humanity (“our/we”), “you/your” pronouns for God, and the same five stanzas as the 1990 hymnal, in the same order.

Such examples of wringing out and ringing in could be multiplied many times over, but the point is sufficiently clear: each generation puts its own stamp onto the hymns it selects for its hymnals. An outgrowth of this generational practice is the tendency of each individual singer to assume that whatever version she or he grew up singing is “the original,” and everything else is a corruption. Such assumptions make intuitive sense—after all, the words and music we learned as children and young adults *are* “original” for us. In like manner, if we grew up with capital letters for pronouns referring to God, or with an Amen to conclude every hymn, we assume that such features have *always* been parts of proper hymnody, although in reality, they have not.

## What Stays? What Goes?

Times change, and trends in hymnody along with them. Over the century and a half since Presbyterians began singing hymns “of human composure” in worship and not just metered, rhyming versions of the divinely inspired Psalms of David, numerous texts and tunes—like “A Few More Years Shall Roll”—have come *and gone*. We have wrung out the old in eliminating such once-valued songs as “Ah! Wretched, Vile, Ungrateful Heart;” “How Condescending and How Kind Was God’s Eternal Son;” and “Quiet, Lord, My Froward Heart” (“froward,” the opposite of “to-ward,” once meant something along the lines of “perverse” or turned away from God). Typically, in fact, about half of the contents of one hymnal go by the wayside when its successor comes onto the scene.

But by the same token, about half of the contents remain. Numerous texts and tunes have also come *and stayed*, gaining such long-lived popularity that since the date of their introduction they have appeared in every subsequent denominational collection of worship songs. “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” cannot be found in the 1874 Presbyterian hymnal, but once it came to light in 1895,

it became a constant companion. “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies” made its debut in the 1927 hymnal of the southern Presbyterian church and “Be Thou My Vision,” in the northern church’s hymnal of 1933; we would be unlikely now to have a hymnal without either. “God of Grace and God of Glory” and “I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art” made their initial appearances in 1955; “Go Tell It on the Mountain” and “Lord of the Dance,” in 1975; “Here I Am, Lord” and the other examples from the introductory exercise were “new” to Presbyterians in 1990, but are already showing signs of longevity.

We do well to remind ourselves that *every* hymn was “new” once upon a time; were it not for regular hymnal revisions, our congregations would not have access to such new songs to sing. Our Sunday morning worship would still resound with strains of “Stay, Thou Insulted Spirit, Stay” from the hymnal of 1874, and not “Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me,” which was not written until 1935 and not included in a Presbyterian hymnal until 1990. Or perhaps, instead, without a steady cycle of rejuvenation, the singing of hymns would have narrowed to a smaller and smaller number of eighteenth and nineteenth century favorites until even these classics fell victim to the tedium of overuse.

Who among us, then, would presume to “quench the Spirit” (1 Thess. 5:19), bolting sanctuary doors against fresh inspiration under the assumption that the old hymns and songs are all we need? The psalmist repeatedly commands us to sing to the Lord a *new* song (Pss. 33, 40, 96, 98, 144, 149), understanding that our worship can only thus remain faithful to a God who is perennially doing “a new thing” (Isa. 43:19). Every twenty years or so, a church has the opportunity and privilege of reexamining its repertoire of

song, making prayerful decisions about what has worn well, what has worn out, and what might wear like a well-crafted and comfortable shoe, carrying current and future generations into the presence of the living God.

Like our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who lived to see the advent of new hymnals in 1990, 1975, 1955, 1933, and on back into historical memory, we can face such times of transition with eagerness and confidence. We can do so because we firmly believe, to cite again A Brief Statement of Faith, that “the same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles” continues to “rule our life and faith.” Or, to borrow words from the closing stanza of the hymn “To Abraham and Sarah (I Will Be Your God)” by Judith A. Fetter that is “new” to *Glory to God* (2013) but promises—God willing—to be among those that wear well:

We of this generation on whom God’s hand is  
laid  
can journey to the future secure and unafraid,  
rejoicing in God’s goodness and trusting in  
this word,  
“That you shall be my people and I will be  
your God.”

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