

## Hymns link us to our spiritual heritage and enrich our understanding of God

# Praising Hymn

By Kent Sanders

*“Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

*—Ephesians 5:19, 20*

**F**or many years now, the term “worship wars” has been tossed around in church circles. The term refers to the battle that has taken place in many churches over worship style. This involves the kind of instruments used (piano/organ vs. drums/guitars), the purpose of the service (preaching to believers vs. appealing to seekers) and the way song lyrics are read (hymnals vs. projected words).

An issue at the forefront of the contemporary worship debate is whether to use hymns or choruses. We could haggle over the definitions of “hymn” and “chorus,” but most of us can readily identify each one.

A hymn is an older song with several verses, usually learned from a pew hymnal. It is a song that has been passed down through generations, and the words are often eloquent and poetic.

A worship chorus, on the other hand, is a newer song that is often easier to sing, usually has lyrics that express a more intimate relationship with God, and may have only a verse and chorus. (However, some of the choruses with multiple verses actually resemble hymns in their structure.) These songs are well-suited for a rhythm section, while hymns are traditionally accompanied by an organ or piano.

I know some folks in our church believe I don’t really like hymns. They probably think I include a few hymns in the service just to pacify our older members or those who prefer the piano and organ over the worship band. They might be surprised to



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learn that I love hymns. I grew up singing hymns every Sunday in my home church, and it was there that I gained a lifelong appreciation for these songs that have nourished the souls of countless believers.

Why do I love hymns? I have several reasons.

### Doctrine

One of the greatest virtues of hymns is that they help preserve biblical doctrine, the fundamental, essential principles of the Christian faith. Consider how many believers over the years have sung “Holy, Holy, Holy,” a fantastic hymn that celebrates God’s holiness. Or what about “My Jesus, I Love Thee,” a song that moves us toward greater devotion to God? Worship choruses also contain plenty of doctrine, but hymns specialize in teaching deep truths about God and Christ.

### Heritage

Hymns also help preserve a rich spiritual heritage. There is something special about singing a

song that Christians have sung for generations or even centuries. In our culture, where people often feel disconnected from family, friends, and God, it becomes vital that we maintain a historical faith. We are neither the first nor last Christians. We are the product of a legacy of faith that stretches back thousands of years. (Some of our well-loved hymns have been sung for more than 200 years.) I would hate to think that our expressions in worship would be limited to songs that were written only in the last 30 years. I want future generations to know both the hymns and the worship songs that have played a significant role in my spiritual development.

### Unity

Hymns also are more universal than choruses. Have you ever been to another church where you knew the hymns they sang, but not the choruses? Although there are many choruses that are widely used by churches today, the selection of choruses can vary greatly from one church to another. If you visit another church that uses choruses, chances are they will sing one or two you don't know.

I'm certainly not against using new songs (since I introduce plenty of them at our church!), but I believe it is important for us to maintain a common catalogue of hymns that almost everyone knows. Just as we need hymns to help preserve the past, we also need them to maintain unity in the present. Today, there is a huge number of worship songs available (Christian Copyright Licensing International lists more than 100,000). Therefore, it is all the more important to include songs in our services that are common to all believers.

### Character

Finally, hymns remind us of God's character. Songs such as "How Great Thou Art," "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" and "Crown Him with Many Crowns" remind us that God is neither passive nor uninterested in our praise. He is the sovereign Lord, creator of the universe, and majestic king who deserves every drop of worship we can muster.

Worship choruses can occasionally distract us from the real purpose of worship, which is giving

honor and praise to God. In their efforts to draw us closer to God's heart, they often focus on how the individual worshiper feels about God. (Notice how many times the word "I" is used in some worship choruses.) In order to avoid becoming self-centered in our worship, we need to include intimate worship songs as well as hymns that remind us of God's majesty, power, and holiness.

I believe the solution to "worship wars" is to take a blended approach in our song selection. We must maintain a balance between intimacy with God vs. exalting His majesty, the individual worshiper vs. the corporate church, and our heritage vs. our need for cultural relevance.

The approach I have taken—and the approach many churches have adopted in the past decade or two—is to select a mixture of the best choruses and hymns in hopes that our music can appeal to the most people possible. This strategy is both balanced and biblical. Even the apostle Paul advocated using a variety of musical expressions in worship when he instructed believers to use "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). (Of course, any approach to song selection must take into consideration the cultural context of the church. What is appropriate for one church may not be appropriate for another.)

Once I heard a fellow musician say he couldn't stand hymns. I felt a great sense of pity for this brother—and everyone who dislikes hymns—because he is just as impoverished as those who refuse to sing worship choruses. Of course, some hymns—like some worship choruses—teach

things about God, Jesus, and the Bible that are just plain wrong. But taken as a whole, hymns still have much to offer the contemporary church: a vital link to the past, valuable expressions of worship for the present, and a means to preserve our spiritual heritage in the future.

Scripture quotes are from the *New International Version*.

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*"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."*

*-Colossians 3:16*