

CHAPTER 1: What Is a Hymn?

Let's attempt an answer to the ageless question: 'What is a hymn?' Here are some answers from people far smarter than myself:

*"Hymns are the voice of the people - first of all as prayers or praise to God, second as teaching of the faith and admonishing each other."*¹

*"A hymn can be defined as a poetic statement of a personal religious encounter or insight, universal in its truth, and suitable for corporate expression when sung in stanzas to a hymn tune."*²

*"A Christian hymn is a lyric poem, reverently and devotionally conceived, which is designed to be sung and which expresses the worshiper's attitude toward God, of God's purpose in human life. It should be simple and metrical in form, genuinely emotional, poetic and literary in style, spiritual in quality, and in its ideas so direct and so immediately apparent as to unify a congregation while singing it."*³

*"Do you know what a hymn is? It is singing to the praise of God. If you praise God and do not sing, you utter no hymn. If you praise anything which does not pertain to the praise of God – though in singing you praise, you utter no hymn. A hymn then contains these three things: song, and praise, and [reference to] God. Praise then of God in song is called a hymn."*⁴

Alexander Schreiner, long-time Temple Square Tabernacle organist and Latter-day Saint Church Music Committee Member, offered the following definitions:

"A hymn is a special kind of poetry addressed to Deity as a prayer. The ancient Greeks sang hymns to their pagan deities. We sing to the everlasting God, our Heavenly Father, and we should address most of our hymns as prayers to heaven..."

"Technically speaking, a hymn is composed of words only and need not have a musical accompaniment. The text is the hymn. That which accompanies it is the hymn tune. The hymn, or text, should always be written first. The poet selects the meter to suit his subject; then the musician writes the hymn tune. However, poets sometimes find it helpful to take a familiar tune for which to write their metered lines..."

***"The True Hymn:** The ideal hymn is a sacred song addressed to Deity. Such hymns are the most important ones in our hymnbook. They may not always be spirited in rhythm, but they are always spiritual in quality. And spiritual values are the highest of all values.*

***"Psalms:** Paul mentioned the singing of psalms. These are hymns taken from the Old*

1 - Austin C. Lovelace, "Interview with Austin C. Lovelace", HYMN Magazine, October 2004 (Vol 55 No 4) pg 16-17

2 - Austin C. Lovelace, THE ANATOMY OF HYMNODY (Chicago: GIA Publications, 1965), page 5

3 - Carl F. Price, pamphlet, "WHAT IS A HYMN?", the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, 1937

4 - St. Augustine, COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPELS

Testament. The psalms are the Western world's best-loved poems, and the noblest. The Pilgrims sang psalms, and the Puritans, in 1640, had the complete book of Psalms in rhyme and meter. The Calvinists preferred singing psalms to any other kind of hymn. Coming from the Old Testament, the psalms are addressed to Jehovah and do not mention the name Jesus Christ, although several of the psalms carry references to the life and mission of Jesus Christ. Several psalms are included in our hymnbook, such as "The Lord Is My Shepherd" and "Praise Ye the Lord."

*"**Spiritual Songs:** These are so designated because they exhort and uplift the worshipers and are addressed to them rather than to Deity. They are sung, as it were, before the Lord. Songs such as "Come, Come, Ye Saints," "Come, Let Us Anew," and "Ere You Left Your Room This Morning" come under this classification.*

*"**Chorales:** These are characterized chiefly by their even rhythm, which lends great stateliness to their performance. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and "The Voice of God Again Is Heard" are both classified as chorales.*

*"**Gospel Hymns:** The term gospel hymn is really a misnomer because these hymns rarely refer to the gospel. They were developed in the past century by enthusiastic gospel revivalist preachers. Examples of such hymns are "We Are All Enlisted," "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and "Today While the Sun Shines."*

*"Another interesting example... "The Star-Spangled Banner." It is not designated as a hymn because it is not addressed to Deity. Therefore it is called an **anthem**."⁵*

Is there a difference between a hymn and an 'inspirational' song? A simple definition would be that one is sung as a worship song at church and the other isn't. Many churches would never allow a pop song or a rock song to be sung in their worship, and yet messages of hope and inspiration can certainly be delivered through these musical forms. There are many great and spiritual inspirational songs that would never be considered as hymns by most Christians - this does not make them less of a message of hope and inspiration and praise of God - it just means they would not be considered the best choice for traditional congregational singing in our worship services.

Certainly all would agree that there are certain things required of a hymn that are not required of other songs. One, they must conform to some sort of rhyming and metering pattern so as to flow correctly and pleasingly to the ear. They must contain some form of gospel worship or message. The message and the spirit of the hymn should lift us to a higher spiritual place than where we were before singing the hymn - individually and as a congregation. And, it should make us aspire to something better.

Many Styles of Worship

There are those who believe that a 'true' hymn must be this or must be that style of music, and anything that does not fit their personal definition is not a 'real' hymn. While I certainly agree a congregation or church has the right and the need to establish the style and form of music they use in their worship services, this does not stop anyone, in private worship, from expressing themselves

5 - "[Guidelines for Writing Latter-day Hymns](#)", Alexander Schreiner, ENSIGN Magazine (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) April 1973; underlining added for emphasis

through any form of hymn or inspirational song they find written in their heart. Old-fashioned Country Gospel is just as valid as any great cathedral choir - what matters is that we are praising our God and that He can hear it and that He can know that we believe it.

A person who believes a hymn has to sound like it came out of an English cathedral with narrow, stiff pews would run for cover when Sacred Harp and Southern Harmony singers wind their voices up into their high-decibel praise of God, feet often stomping and shoulders occasionally swaying - and yet, both are singing hymns and worshiping their God. A Full-Gospel choir - robes swaying; hands in the air; sopranos reaching into the rafters - would die of boredom listening to, say, most any cathedral choir - and yet, they are both singing hymns and praising the same great Being and what He has done for us. So, we need to remember it is not what the song sounds like that makes a hymn - it is what the song makes out of its singers that makes it a hymn.

Sometimes the quickest way to ruin many good hymns is to try to make each and every one of them sound like they came from a European cathedral or a New England chapel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ embraces all cultures and peoples, and Christian hymns should reflect this heritage. Some hymns need to sound like they came from the Great Smokey Mountains, because that's exactly where they came from. Some hymns should sound like they were written by brave pioneers who conquered the West because that's *who* wrote them and that's *how* they wrote them. Some hymns should sound like they came from a Southern tent revival because that's where they were born.

Classical European hymns hold just as much worshipful validity as American Country Gospel. Gregorian Chants worship God just as much as Sacred Harp and Southern Harmony. Full Gospel is as much a form of prayer as any Folk hymn. I would reiterate something from the beginning of this rambling: it is not what the song sounds like and what its tempo is that makes a hymn - it is what the song makes out of its singers that makes it a hymn.

Songs with a Hymn Feeling

Can songs not normally considered of hymnal quality be considered hymnal in nature without being actual hymns? Most certainly! When the Mormon Tabernacle Choir made their 1995 tour of Israel and took the country by musical storm, one of the songs they performed was "Jerusalem the Golden", a folk song written by one of Israel's premier folk artists, Naomi Shemer. Knowing Ms Shemer would be in the audience for one of the concerts, the Choir called her to the stage to show their respect during the lengthy ovation they received for the song, and they presented her with flowers. She praised the Choir with these words: "I wrote a love song, and you have made it a hymn."

What can possibly change a 'song' into a 'hymn' in an individual's mind? I would suggest there could be historical or spiritual events which would change a person's perception of the song. There could be external meanings others would not understand or appreciate. Anyone who stood with my family on an Air Force base runway and sang Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" as the troops returned from war would understand the true hymnal qualities of that song. After one such homecoming my daughter, then a first- or second-grader said - "Daddy, now I understand why people cry for this song." But it took an emotional event for her to understand and feel this song in this way.

Anyone who has waved good-bye to children going off to war, to missionary service, or just plain leaving home understands "The Prayer" is in fact a prayer *and* a hymn; not just a song from a children's animated movie. Anyone who has gone through the hellish loneliness of burying a child or another loved one feels the hymnal power of "You'll Never Walk Alone" or "I'll Walk With God", and yet

neither will ever appear in a hymnal.

The manner of performing a song, varying from one performer to another, can raise the thoughts and feelings of the heart to a different plane that perhaps the song was originally meant to do. When singer Debbie Boone recorded the hit love song "You Light Up My Life", the public had no doubt she was singing of God and not just love. Her singing style and the emotional appeal of her voice simply turned peoples' thoughts towards God.

Conclusion

If I were brave enough to try to give my own definition of a hymn, I would repeat the definitions given at the beginning of this chapter and add to it this: a hymn is a song that touches your heart strong enough to cause you to praise and worship God and to strive to move closer to Him. A friend of mine responded to this question of 'what is a hymn?' with the answer: "I know a hymn when I hear it." I would like to add to his wise words: "I know a hymn when I *feel* it."