

# 15 Reasons Why We Should Still Be Using Hymnals

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Unfortunately, many churches have done this with their hymnals, but I think they are important symbols for worshiping congregations. Here are some of the reasons why.

## Musical

1. **Hymnals actually teach music.** We're making less music than ever before. Oh, to be sure, there's lots of music going on around us, but very few people are actually making it. We're just consuming it, or at the very most, singing along with music someone else made first. But even an untrained musician can look at the words and music in the hymnal and learn to follow melodic direction and rhythmic value.
2. **Hymnals set a performance standard.** Contemporary worship music is based on recording instead of notation. This is endlessly confusing, and it opens each song up to individual interpretation. Without notation, it is exceedingly hard to sing well as a congregation. Hymnals fix that. Everybody has the same notation, so we all know how the song is supposed to go.
3. **Hymnals integrate the music and text.** Words on a screen give no musical information. Hymnals fix that. Singers aren't dependent upon learning the song by rote.

## Practical

1. **Hymnals allow you to sing anywhere.** When you depend on projection to display hymn texts, you're bound to do your music making in a space outfitted with sufficient media.
2. **Hymnals allow people to take possession of the music.** I know congregants that love to find out the next Sunday's hymns during the previous week, so they can open up their hymnal, refresh the words, and work on their part so they're prepared to lend their voices. Preparation like that is one of the ways music making becomes a worshipful activity. Hymnals make it possible for people to have easy access to the best songs.
3. **Hymnals don't screw things up.** Unless some kid has ripped the page out of your hymnal, you know the hymn you're looking for is going to be there. Technology lets us down all the time, and if it happens in the middle of a song or hymn, you're sunk.
4. **Hymnals are as helpful as the singer needs them to be.** It's hard to ignore a screen, no matter how well I know the song being sung. Its mere presence sends most people into a trance. There are times I must pay close attention to the hymnal. I recently sang the hymn "Ye watchers and ye holy ones" in a service. I know of the hymn, and I know LASST UNS ERFREUEN, but I didn't grow up singing it. I had to follow the entire time. I needed the hymnal. Last Saturday, I sang in the choir for a funeral. It was a beautiful service; a reflection on a life well-lived in service of the kingdom. When it came time for the final hymn, "Blessed Assurance," I rose, opened the hymnal, and held it out, but didn't look at it once. I long ago internalized every note and word of this hymn. I was free to look out into the congregation, making eye contact, sharing the ethos of the experience with others.

## Symbolic/Theological

1. **Hymnals are a theological textbook.** There is no perfect hymnal, but well-crafted hymnals are reliable sources of theological information.
2. **Hymnals involve tactile action.** Hymnals make the people work. Picking up the hymnal, finding the right page, and holding it up to sing grounds you in time and space. Feeling the weight in your hand engages you in the activity more than staring at a screen ever could.
3. **Hymnals are not particularly distracting.** Screens are actually very difficult to follow. Whenever I'm forced to read a projected text, I am so easily lost in the colors,

backgrounds, and movements. I find myself anticipating when the next slide will be advanced. When I'm using a hymnal, none of that comes into play. I have the words and music, and I don't even have to worry about turning the page.

4. **Hymnals preserve the aesthetics of the Sanctuary.** There is rarely a good place to hang a screen. Even worse, when installed into older spaces, the result can be a visual nightmare. Don't be mistaken. It may be a secondary issue, but it's also a theological one. Here is a particularly painful before and after example from Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas.



5. **Hymnals confront us with “new” songs.** We tend to go back to our favorite songs too often. It’s easy to fall into a rut. I recently looked back at a year’s worth of bulletins, and was a little embarrassed at how much we had sung several hymns. Not that there was anything wrong with the hymns, but the congregation needs to be stretched to learn unfamiliar songs. When I was a kid, I enjoyed learning to play my favorite hymns on the piano from my mom’s 1975 Baptist Hymnal. Along the way, I would run into hymns that weren’t my favorites. After a while, while flipping through the book, I would run into these hymns again and again. Finally, I would stop and take a look. Often, these “new” hymns turned out to be great sources of encouragement to me, even though they were once unfamiliar and foreign.
6. **Hymnals give validity to new hymns.** New hymns are often defined by the company they keep. When new hymnals are published, if they’re done well, they will introduce us to newer songs to be added to the ranks of hymnody. The fact that these songs are now sandwiched in between hymns like “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty” and “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” adds to their validity.
7. **Hymnals make songs less disposable.** Okay, obviously you can throw a hymnal away if you want. Text on a screen is there one second and gone the next. There’s no visible permanence. But hymnals are symbols of consistency. They give life and breath to the great songs. They demonstrate that what we sing is worth keeping around.
8. **Hymnals give congregational singing back to the people.** Congregations watching screens are at the mercy of whoever is sitting behind the computer. Holding hymnals symbolizes the fact that the voice of the congregation is the primary instrument in corporate worship.

Are hymnals perfect? More to the point, is there a perfect hymnal? No. Still, we lose out on much benefit by getting rid of them.

## **A Call to Think about Worship**

- **The level of reactivity from those who take it upon themselves to defend contemporary corporate worship is frankly, surprising and disappointing.** The concerns listed on the initial post were repeatedly dismissed as being mere preference and taste. This is, of course, not true in all cases, but in many.

- **The level of sentimentality from those who defend traditional corporate worship is equally surprising and will largely be ineffective in any serious dialogue.** Sentimentality isn't inherently bad, but in such an important discussion, it can be detrimental.
- **We're putting too much of an emphasis on singing.** And that's a reflection of a skewed definition of worship. I think the most biblical definition I've heard to date comes from a former Wheaton professor of mine, Dan Block, who says, "True worship involves reverential acts of homage and submission before the divine superior, in response to his gracious revelation of himself and in accordance with his will." I believe he says something similar in his soon to be released book, [For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship](#), but this comes from his own handwriting in my class notes, which I now keep framed and on my desk. If this is true, what we do in a worship service only represents a precious few of our personal acts of worship. It's a snapshot of our life's worship. It's practice for the renewed Earth. And it's a response. So readings, creeds, prayers, sermons, discussing in small groups, all of these things are done in response to God's self-revelation, and they are all as worshipful as singing.
- **We've forgotten how to worship corporately.** Many responses talk about the state of the individual's heart, and how we should be able to use whatever music helped them to connect to God. (Check out [this post](#) for more reflection on that.) Whatever we do in church, the point is that we're doing it together.
- **It's not about new vs. old.** It's about best practices. Maybe we shouldn't pick music because it's new (or old), but because it's good. Now, deciding what is good is for corporate worship is a subject for another discussion, but we have to remember that "traditional" doesn't mean "old" or "stale."