

In Camelback's 60-year history, robust congregational singing has always been a priority in line with Paul's instruction to address each other "in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (Eph. 5:19). In this our 61st year, we are introducing a new hymnal to help us carry on this essential aspect of our worship services. The following article provides a brief history of Western Christian hymnody and a guide to using the hymnal in the service.

Hymn: Definition

A hymn is a lyric poem written to praise God or to be used in a religious service. It is an original poem, rather than a quotation or adaptation of scripture. Hymns are not unique to Christianity, although the hymns of other religions are very different than the familiar Christian hymn. Formally, a hymn is only a text, not music. However, the word "hymn" is used casually by most people to mean both the text and the music.

A Brief History

At the birth of Christianity, the church was familiar with the music used in Jewish services. In the Temple, Levitical choirs chanted the Psalms in unison, responsorially (a cantor answered by choral groups), or antiphonally (between two alternating choral groups). Professional instrumentalists accompanied the choir on the lyre, harp, and flute. Shofars (ram's horns) were sounded to mark holy days during the year. In smaller local synagogues, chants were sung unaccompanied. The congregation actively sang and chanted responses to a cantor. The music in the Temple and synagogues was chantlike, following the rhythm of the texts, and did not sound at all like modern melodies. In Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, we learn the earliest Christians sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, so we know that a variety of forms existed in the Christian community during the time the New Testament was written.

Later, as the Christian church was organized and formalized under the Roman empire, it became the practice to only have the priest or a professional choir sing texts during church services. To encourage uniformity throughout its empire, Rome eventually mandated that services should be conducted in the official language of Latin. During the Middle Ages, singing in church consisted of unaccompanied unison chants with no harmony (known today as "Gregorian Chant") sung only by the priest or choir. Through the second half of the Middle Ages and into the period known as the Renaissance, the music composed for the choir became increasingly complex. Members of a church choir were professional musicians who earned their living serving the church.

Beginning in 1517, Martin Luther and other prominent leaders initiated movements that sought to reform, but then ultimately broke away from, the Roman church, establishing several new Protestant denominations. The views of these early churches regarding music varied considerably. Some taught that music had no place in services, perhaps in reaction to the highly professional quality of the Roman Catholic Church's services. Others taught that only scripture, particularly the texts of the Psalms, could be sung in church. Other leaders, including Martin Luther, introduced congregational singing of psalms and hymns in German, alongside chant and choir music. Finally, some denominations allowed singing, but forbade the use of instruments.

Luther believed that hymns (German "Choräle") were a way to teach congregations Christian doctrine and engage them in the act of worship. Martin Luther himself composed a number of hymns for his new church, including the still-familiar *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God").

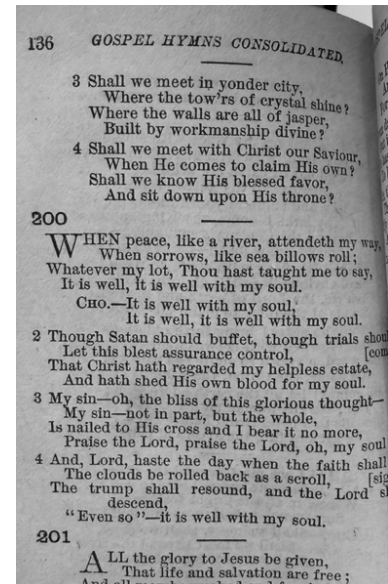
Drawing on many liturgical and German sources, Martin Luther and his contemporaries set the precedent for what would become the familiar metrical four-part Protestant hymn.

It is worth noting that Eastern Orthodox church hymns are significantly different than those of the Western church, because its traditions developed along very different lines. This article is concerned solely with the hymn form that grew out of the early Reformation.

From the 16th through the early 19th centuries, Protestant hymnals only printed the text of congregational hymns. An organist, orchestra, or song leader, sometimes also assisted by a choir, selected an appropriate familiar tune and led the congregation in the singing of that tune to the text printed in the hymnal.

The first hymnals with text and music printed together appeared in England during the second half of the 19th century. Today, hymnals always include the text printed with a tune and harmonization that the editors have chosen as being well-suited to the text. It is worth noting that most hymnals also include a number of psalm settings (e.g. "O Jehovah, Hear My Words" a metrical setting of Psalm 51:1-2), so the tradition of hymnody and psalmody both are represented in most hymnals.

Hymnals have continued to be published, revised and republished up to the present. Most denominations publish hymnals whose hymns and psalms reflect the particular doctrines and emphases of their churches. Camelback's most recent hymnal, the *Trinity Hymnal* revised and published in 1990, is used by many Reformed and Presbyterian congregations. The *Sing! Hymnal* is not designed to serve any single denomination, but follows a Reformed-leaning, historically-rooted tradition.



The Longevity of Hymns

Hymns and the music they are set to, being artistic forms, inevitably reflect the musical and poetic tastes of the era in which they are written. Some hymns have survived the legendary "test of time" due to the truth contained in their words, the quality of their poetry, and/or the persistent appeal of their music. The vast majority of created hymns eventually fall out of taste and disappear from hymnals and congregational use. Many can remember hymns from their youth which now sound old-fashioned to even their own ears.

A blanket tendency to claim that hymn poems, in general, are loftier than more current lyrics fails to recognize that the language of those hymns simply were the way people spoke and wrote, a product of their time. But as is true of all poetry, the hymns whose vocabulary, construction, and imagery rise above the other hymns are the most likely to speak to multiple generations.

Generally speaking, most hymns share certain characteristics. First, hymns are poems with multiple stanzas. The structure of each stanza often consists of four to eight poetic lines following some particular rhyme scheme. The language, imagery, sound devices, and structure of the hymn attempt to express doctrine, scriptural truths, or the Christian experience in meaningful ways.

Second, the hymn tunes are memorable and easily learned by congregations, most of whom are, and who always have been, unable to read music. Most hymn tunes contain repeated musical phrases, mirroring the structure of the hymn poem, resulting in a musical structure such as AABA, ABAB, or

AABB. Hymns use simple rhythms and have narrow vocal ranges, requiring the congregation to sing neither too high nor too low.

Third, the particular tune and harmonization that is paired with the hymn text is generally regarded as fitting or appropriate for the text. While admittedly subjective to some extent, the most popular and long-lived hymns are viewed as having melodies that match or amplify the message and tone of the poetic text. Consider examples such as “A Mighty Fortress”, “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”, and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

The Anatomy of Hymn Texts

The poetic rhythm of a hymn can be described in terms of its meter, that is, the number of syllables in each line. A hymn whose four lines contain syllables numbering eight, six, eight, and six would be abbreviated as 8.6.8.6. (e.g. “Amazing Grace”). The 8.6.8.6. meter is used so often that it is known as Common Meter or C.M. The pattern Common Meter Duple or C.M.D. contains the 8.6.8.6. pattern twice in each stanza (“I Sing the Mighty Power of God”).

Other frequently-used meters include 8.8.8.8. aka Long Meter or L.M. (“All People That on Earth Do Dwell”), L.M.D. (“And Can It Be”), and 8.7.8.7.D. (“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”), among many others.

Any melody that shares the meter of the hymn can be used to sing the hymn text. Members of this congregation have noticed that periodically we will substitute a more familiar tune for the unfamiliar printed one in order to use the hymn text in the service.

Hymn tunes are bestowed names, which can be the name of the composer, the tune’s place of origin, or the name of the hymn most closely associated with the tune. Some tunes have multiple names.

Modern Congregational Songs

Let’s take a moment to consider where modern congregational songs fit within the tradition of Western hymnody. Both are hymns, lyric poems written to praise God or to be used in a religious service. However, there are differences between the traditional “hymnal hymn” and many modern congregational songs.

The texts of most modern congregational songs are not in the form of multi-stanza, metrical poetry. The texts of contemporary songs may reflect the more common speech and structure of ordinary modern language, rather than that of poetry. The text may be in the first person more often than in hymns. Single lines of text or a single word may be repeated frequently. Modern Christian modes of speech and familiar terms for expressing Christian experiences and doctrine appear more often. Topics that are important to the contemporary American church appear more frequently in these texts, including increased emphasis on the Holy Spirit, private devotions, modern struggles, an intimate relationship with Christ, and our walk as Christians in the modern world. As in traditional hymns, the text may be a metrical setting of a scripture passage.

The musical forms of modern songs are more varied than the traditional hymn. Many modern songs are longer than typical hymns. Others are very short with frequent repetition. Some modern songs contain particularly long melodies consisting of several varying musical phrases. Some have a bridge, which is a new, short phrase inserted between major sections of the music. Many have refrains or choruses sung following each verse.

The vocal ranges of the music may be higher or lower than many traditional hymns. The rhythms and meters of modern songs often are more complex than hymns. The emphases or stress of rhythms may appear on unexpected beats (syncopation). The rhythms attempt to capture those of an original recording or performance. It matters far more than in hymn singing that the congregation already knows the song from having heard it performed at a concert or online, especially since most congregations that use contemporary songs do not print the music for the congregation to read.

The manner in which hymns and modern songs are led by leaders of the service strive to reflect the tone and character of the congregation and the service, and can vary dramatically from church to church. Traditional hymns typically are led by organ, piano, or an orchestra, with a song leader and/or choir up front. Modern songs often are led by a lead singer or singers with microphones, guitars, piano or electric keyboard, and often percussion. The leaders of hymns may attempt to model bold singing of a hymn and proclamation of the text, while leaders of contemporary music may strive to model emotional or worshipful singing of the text. At their best, both modes are trying to encourage the congregation to actively participate in the singing of meaningful, carefully chosen songs.

A principal reason for the character of much modern congregational music is that a great deal of it originated as music performed by a soloist or Christian band on a recording or in a concert. Sometimes a song may be written with eventual congregational singing in mind, but often the piece was written with a particular performer, and his or her particular vocal range and style in mind, with an eye (an ear?) to being enjoyed by audiences at Christian concerts and purchased in recordings. There often is a “hook” or specific moment in the text and music that is particularly memorable, a common practice in modern music.

All of this is not particularly new practice, and should be familiar to congregations who remember when “Through It All” was a piece performed by Andraé Crouch in concerts, but which now appears in many hymnals. This could also be said of the “Hallelujah” chorus, specifically written for an advanced professional choir performing Handel’s *Messiah*, but which also now appears in many hymnals. One might notice that these two examples are especially difficult for congregations to sing because they were not first composed with congregational singing in mind.

An unintended by-product of modern music’s variety and occasional complexity, owing at times to its origination in the performance world, is that the congregation may not expect, nor be expected to, participate as robustly during singing as is the expectation in traditional hymn singing. The music often is fairly new, and may fall out of the church music rotation after it is no longer popular to Christian listening audiences. Many modern songs simply do not have the opportunity to become as well learned as familiar hymns. The origin of the music as solo or performance music sometimes does not translate to easily singable congregational music. This may point to the popularity of the song being due more to the performance of the original artist than to the song’s inherent compositional or spiritual character. As should be true of a congregation singing traditional hymns, the quality of contemporary singing in a congregation ultimately should be judged by the active participation of everyone in the congregation, rather than what is being done up in front of the people for the people to watch.

Modern congregational songs speak to a large number of Christians who find the music and lyrics more accessible, or at least more familiar-sounding than classical hymnody. If one is apt to judge modern music as having too many songs that will not “stand the test of time,” we should keep two things in mind. First, it is not the intention of contemporary music to stand a test of time, but rather, its intention is to match the Christian listener’s current taste in music, language, and spiritual concerns. Second, it is good to remember that most hymns also have not stood the test of time. The cost and effort to curate, edit, and publish a hymnal require that only those hymns that have stood the test of time be included in the publication. Literally thousands of hymns have fallen out of favor or were of

lower quality, and have been left on the cutting room floor. A modern hymnal contains the very few hymns that have stood the test of time, while congregations who use modern music are singing songs that will fall out of fashion alongside songs that will stand the test of time.

The Sing! Hymnal

A fairly recent development in contemporary congregational music is the composition of a large number of songs that follow the form of traditional hymns. They share the poetic and musical forms of classical hymnody, and likely will be viewed by future generations as the 20th and 21st Centuries' contribution to traditional hymnody. Camelback Bible Church's new hymnal, *The Sing! Hymnal*, is the most recent of hymnals that have attempted to capture these modern songs and place them alongside older traditional hymns for congregational singing.

The Sing! Hymnal, was published by Crossway and Getty Music in 2025. Similar to those within the *Trinity Hymnal*, "the writers come from rich theological and musical traditions" (Alistair Begg). It contains most of the hymns that Camelback already uses on a regular basis, and presents on equal footing a large number of modern hymns whose origins were in the contemporary Christian world. It also contains hundreds of scripture passages and quotes by eminent Christian authors and historical figures. In addition, the hymnal was designed to be used in private or family devotions, so many Christians will choose to purchase a copy of their own to keep and use at home.

The hymnal contains the following sections:

- A foreword by Alistair Begg
- A prelude by Keith and Kristyn Getty, "Why We Sing – Why This Hymnal?"
- Nearly 500 old and new hymns (including many Psalm settings) broadly organized by the themes
 - The Worship Service
 - The Christian Life
 - The Life of Christ
- A postlude by the Gettys on leading hymn singing
- An extended section containing stories and background information on the hymns
- A list of all the authors and sources of the hymns (the texts), including a list of the hymns from each author/source
- A list of all the meters used in the hymnal and the hymns that use them
- A list of all the hymn tunes in the hymnal and the hymns that use them
- A scripture index which attempts to associate particular bible verses with specific hymn texts
- A topical index that lists hymns according to numerous Christian themes and doctrines
- An index of the hymns' titles and first lines

What Is On the Page?

When you look at a hymn in the *Sing! Hymnal* you will see the same type of information that other hymnals provide. See the following example of a hymn from the *Sing! Hymnal*.

THE WORK OF CHRIST

237 Thy Mercy, My God

Thematic section of the hymnal

Hymn number and title

Melody/Soprano
Alto harmony
Tenor harmony
Bass harmony

1. Thy mer - cy, my God, is the theme of my song,
2. With - out thy sweet mer - cy I could not live here,
3. Thy mer - cy is more than a match for my heart,
4. Great Fa - ther of mer - cies, thy good - ness I own,

the joy of my heart, and the boast of my tongue;
for sin would re - duce me to ut - ter de - spair;
which won - ders to feel its own hard - ness de - part;
the cov - e - nant love of thy cru - ci - fied Son;

thy free grace a - lone, from the first to the last,
but through thy free good - ness, my spir - its re - vive,
dis - solved by thy good - ness, I fall to the ground,
all praise to the Spir - it, whose whis - per di - vine

has won my af - fec - tions and bound my soul fast.
and he that first made me still keeps me a - live.
and weep for the praise of the mer - cy I've found.
seals mer - cy, and par - don, and righ - teous - ness mine!

Source of hymn (text)

Words: John Stocker, 1776
Music: Sandra McCracken © 2001 Integrity Worship Music / Paper News Publishing

Source of tune and harmony

MERCIFUL THEME
11 11 11 11

Meter (syllables) of hymn and tune

Name of hymn tune

Notice how the end of a musical line usually is not the end of the sentence or thought.

Singing Hymns in Church

Music can provide an opportunity for sung worship (if one chooses to worship while they sing), but it is only one of many ways that we offer worship to God during a church service. At Camelback, we do not call singing or musical offerings the “worship time,” nor should we call the music leader the “worship leader.” All the elements in a well-planned service point to God, his glory, and his work in our lives, the church, and the world, and should be considered worship.

When we sing a hymn at Camelback, each person is encouraged to sing with a loud voice “as unto the Lord.” It never matters whether you consider yourself a good singer.

As you sing, make a concentrated effort to understand the text of the hymn. The words are the reason the hymn has been scheduled into the service. Poems are funny things and sometimes the end of a phrase of music is not the end of a sentence (known as *enjambment*). Try to take in whole sentences and the thoughts each conveys. Seek to understand the overall meaning of the hymn poem, taking in all of its stanzas and the flow of the author’s thinking through the stanzas.

Do not be afraid of new or unfamiliar hymn tunes. The organ, and choir if they are up front, will be leading you. The more tunes the congregation learns, the more hymns we are able to choose from when planning services and the more texts this congregation will benefit from singing. If you try following the rise and fall of the printed melody, you will gradually begin to understand music notation, a skill that will make learning new hymns even easier.

Sometimes the director of music will choose to replace the printed tune of a hymn with an alternate tune that is more familiar to us. The bulletin will clearly indicate that this is happening. In this case, you will not follow the printed music, but will rely on your familiarity with the tune we have chosen.

So, here we go...

- To begin, the organ or piano will play an introduction that reminds us of the tune and provides the tempo, key, and starting pitch. Stand together automatically as soon as you hear the instrument begin the introduction.
- The congregation is encouraged to sing parts, with alto, tenor, and bass singing harmonies on all stanzas except the final stanza. The final stanza should be sung in unison, with everyone on the melody. The organ will play a new harmonization during the final stanza. If you were to try to sing the written alto, tenor, or bass lines of the hymn, you would notice they do not work with what the organ or piano is playing.
- If we are not going to sing all the verses of a hymn, a note to that effect will be printed in the bulletin. Also, in such cases, the organist will slow down noticeably at the end of the final verse we are singing (a musical *ritardando*).
- Occasionally, the organist may play an interlude before the final stanza, sometimes including a key change. This interlude will end with an obvious final chord (a *cadence*) so everyone knows when to resume singing.
- When the choir is in the choir loft, they will provide leadership on the melody and parts. Occasionally, the choir will participate in special ways on the final verse, such as singing high notes over the melody (a *descant*).
- At Camelback, the person at the pulpit does not conduct the congregation during singing, nor is their voice amplified through the speakers. Sing enthusiastically with each other while the organ, piano, and/or choir provides leadership.
- Occasionally, a familiar alternate tune will be used to sing the text if the printed music is very unfamiliar and difficult. The tune we are singing will be printed in the bulletin.
- When the hymn is done, look to your printed bulletin for the next element in the service.

Conclusion

God's people have always sung to and about God. From the Psalms, to "songs and hymns, and spiritual songs," praise to God and exhortations to each other through music have always existed in the church. Some of us sing everywhere, all the time, and under every circumstance. God bless you! On the other hand, an unfortunate condition of our modern world is that many of us no longer make music in any part of our lives, although we are consumers of its various types. This can result in churches singing only familiar hymns or modern songs they know, while many individuals in a congregation regularly avoid singing altogether.

God's people should be a singing people – not performers, but participants in the great act of collectively singing praises to God and encouraging each other. Singing congregational songs is for God and about God, and not about us. We encourage each of you to embrace the voice God has given you and to sing as unto the Lord.

No hymnal will meet all the needs of a congregation forever, but it is Camelback's prayer that this hymnal will serve our congregation well for many years. With its rich selection of music from the past to the present it should provide abundant opportunities to sing his praises in our services.

Dr. Thomas Bookhout, Camelback Bible Church, 9/9/2026