

Having a Hymnal in the Home

Paul Westermeyer

Many churches have as a normal practice given hymnals to persons or families at baptisms and at confirmations. Many people have bought hymnals on their own. Hymnals can often be found therefore in piano benches, on pianos, next to kitchen or dining room tables, on nearby shelves or end tables, or on nightstands next to beds. Though not found in all homes, the presence of hymnals in the homes of many people has not been at all unusual. Our current pandemic and its confinement have made those with hymnals happy to have them and some people without them wishing that they had one—all of which raises the question of the value of a hymnal in the home.

Where hymnals tend to be found in homes suggests their value there. Next to tables and beds points to their devotional use at mealtimes and bedtimes. On shelves points to their use as reference books. On pianos points to their use as musical resources for instructional, devotional, and pleasurable purposes. Behind all of this stands the nature of a hymnal.

Hymnals are remarkable books. Some of them contain only hymns. Others contain hymns plus worship services and resources. Sometimes a hymnal and prayer book are published as two books. In both cases historical checks and balances of many generations serve to keep what has been found to be worth keeping from across the church's history and around the world. This has inestimable value because it provides important things that our current blinders cause us to forget. This value is increased by additions from our period which later generations may or may not find worth keeping.

A hymnal provides a full-orbed snapshot of the church's song. It include hymns and musical settings for them. Hymns are poems which usually highlight one theme, but invariably weave in related ones. Music is organized sound that moves in relation to us in time. Singing hymns takes us on a journey. When successive stanzas are sung to the same tune, the circular spin forward moves together as known and unknown. The journey does not stop to systematize themes. If you lay out the hymns of a hymnal in a sequential fashion, you get the whole story of God's grace and mercy, while the individual hymns move across the fabric and context of that whole tapestry.

Some prayer books include the whole community's Lord's Day worship around word, font, and table, plus daily morning and evening prayer services for communal and individual use, plus readings and prayers for days and seasons of the year in all of these services. Some books have more or less of this material in various forms. In any case, devotional materials are present, even if there is only a hymnal, because hymns themselves can easily be adapted for devotional use.

Hymns as texts alone or sung with their music provide rich sources for devotion, meditation, and study. Hymnals have few if any rivals—anywhere.