

“. . . in the beginning, all hymnbooks were private hymnbooks.”

(Christopher N. Phillips, *The Hymnal: A Reading History*, 2018, p. 185)

This short, direct statement turns our assumptions about hymns and their use on end. Despite millions of hymns, published in millions of hymnals during the last 300 years, participation in congregational singing seems to be on the decline. Could this be because singing in Christian worship, as important as this is to building the body of Christ, fulfills only half of the role that hymns may play in our lives? Many of the texts sung on Sunday are full of scriptural allusions and poetic craft. These, as well as cultural and historical foundations, cannot be absorbed only by one singing. If the study of scripture were left solely to public worship, the depth of images, connections between passages, and the cultural and historical foundations would be lost to us.

Classic Western hymns grew out of devotional poetry. Not until the late nineteenth did hymnals appear as fixtures—part of the furnishings—in places of worship. Before that time, and well into the twentieth century, hymnals were the provenance of the home and school. Hymnals were gifts to children; hymn texts were part of the school curriculum; above all, domestic hymn study, reflection, and singing were manifestations of healthy piety. Even today, large segments of the Christian community bring personal copies of hymnals from home to church each Sunday as an accompaniment to the Bible, especially in Africa. Might it be that one way of invigorating public congregational singing would be to encourage devotional, domestic use of hymns? Some ideas follow.

### **Lectionary and hymns:**

Make a personal covenant to reflect on two or three hymns per week that may be used in worship or correspond to the readings of the week. Many denominational websites publish a list of lectionary readings with appropriate hymns. Enhance your study by finding a YouTube link of a congregation or group singing your hymn. Representative resources follow:

- For Roman Catholics: <http://www.liturgytools.net/p/roman-catholic-lectionary-based-hymn.html>.
- For United Methodists: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning>. Follow the link to “Hymn Suggestions.”
- A general (ecumenical) guide to lectionary and hymns is available with Hymnary.org: <https://hymnary.org/browse/lectionary>.

### **Bible study and hymns:**

If you are reading through a particular book of the Bible, accompany your study with hymns. Suggestions for these may be found in the scriptural index to your hymnal. Also, you may use the “Browse by Scriptural Reference” link on the Hymnary.org site:

<https://hymnary.org/browse/scripture>.

### **Hymns and theology**

Using the topical index of your hymnal, choose a particular topic such as “Creation,” “Incarnation,” “Grace,” “Justice,” and select four hymns under a topic spread over at least three

centuries. Compare and contrast ways in which the hymnwriters articulate the same theme. Alternately, type in the theological theme in Hymnary.org and choose from the list that follows.

**Hymns and Meditation:**

Several sites offer instrumental arrangements of hymns that may be useful for meditation. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1RFSEoBRYI>.

Similarly, the cyclic structure of music from the Taizé Community may be conducive to meditation. For instrumental settings, see

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBjBWjLFr\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBjBWjLFr_Q).

For Taizé settings with texts, see

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BxGY5oI-HOw>.

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