

What Do We Do When We Sing Hymns?

Following is the core of David W. Music's "Editor's Notes" from the April 1994 issue of *The Hymn*.

On occasion, it is a good idea to go back and review some of the basics in any field of human endeavor. The same is true of hymnody. The list of "basics" given below were developed as a result of an invitation to speak to a Sunday school class in a local church. There is nothing profound or unusual about these items, but perhaps they will help remind us of the tremendous power of the sung word.

What do we do when we sing hymns?

1. *We communicate with God.* Through congregational song we express our love and devotion to God and commit ourselves to serve and obey him.
2. *We communicate with one another.* When we sing together a hymn of commitment or admonition we are saying, "I believe this—this is the truth." We place these words in our mouths and they become a public witness of our faith.
3. *We allow God to communicate with us.* Singing allows God's word to penetrate into our consciousness (and subconsciousness). It is easier to absorb spiritual truths when they are sung.
4. *We fulfill biblical commandments to "sing unto the Lord."* Both the Old and New Testaments command us to sing to God (see Pss. 96 and 98, Eph. 5:19, and Col. 3:16).
5. *We follow the example of the central figures of the Bible.* Moses, David, Jesus, Paul—all lifted up their voices in worship and praise through song.
6. *We maintain ties with our historic worship heritage.* One does not sing hymns very long before one encounters the names of Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, and other great leaders of the past. Hymn-singing is the most ecumenical of activities, but it is more than a present ecumenism: our hymnody draws on thousands of years of spiritual thought and experience. By singing hymns we "tread where the saints have trod."
7. *We express our unity as a community of believers in the present.* Hymn-singing is one of the few church activities we all do at the same time. In hymn-singing we rely on other people and they rely on us; the strong help the weak, but the weak constitute their part. We are in this together.
8. *We learn theology and spiritual truths.* I used to say that the hymnal was second only to the Bible as the shape of theology, but due to modern ignorance of the scriptures I now suspect that the hymnal is the most important shaper of theology. The qualities of hymnody that give it power include compression (profound ideas in brief form),

memorable form (rhyme, meter, etc.), repeatability, the emotional power of music and poetry, the use of active involvement, and association with past experiences.

9. *We participate in a physical activity.* We open our mouths and make sounds. We stand up. We pick up a hymnal and hold it in our hands. At least three of the five senses are engaged when we sing our hymns: touch, sight, and hearing.

10. *We participate in an artistic experience.* Let's be honest with ourselves: how many members of our congregations read poetry or engage in music-making during the week? For most of us, hymn-singing is almost our only exposure to poetry and active music-making during a week's time.