

## EDITORIAL

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# "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

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*by Dennis Lee McCardle*

It was the genius of our Creator, the Master of all music and loveliness, to create man with the insatiable desire for music. This God of all music, theme of all song, demands our praise. And throughout sacred history the most potent form of Christian praise has been the hymn. To know and study the hymnody of the church is to know something of its great ascent throughout the ages. Contained and preserved in our hymnals are the struggles and triumphs of God's people. E. E. Ryden, in "The Story of Christian Hymnody" quotes Henry Ward Beecher:

Hymns are the jewels which the church has worn, the pearls, the diamonds, the precious stones, formed into amulets more potent against sorrow and sadness than the most famous charm of the wizard or the magician. And he who knows the way that hymns have flowed, knows where the blood of true piety ran, and can trace its veins and arteries to the very heart.

Perhaps the earliest definition of the hymn is given to the church by St. Augustine. "A hymn is the praise of God by singing. A hymn is a song embodying the praise of God. If there be praise, and praise of God, but not sung, it is not a hymn. For it to be a hymn, it is needful, therefore, for it to have three things — praise, praise of God, and these sung."

Erik Routley presented a twentieth century definition during a recent lecture series: "The hymn is theology for the untheological and music for the unmusical." What the hymn does, then, is to make the

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doctrines of our church come alive, and to the musically untrained the hymn, for centuries, has been the only vehicle of musical expression.

It would be impossible to calculate the impact and influence that the hymn has played in the development and spread of Christianity. Every significant movement from the establishment of the New Testament church to the present has been accompanied by the hymn. The New Testament itself confirms the famous report of Pliny, Governor of Bithynia to the Emperor Trajan (112 A.D.), that the Christians in his area “sang antiphonally hymns to Christ as to a god.” So hymnlike are the phrases of the New Testament that one is tempted to see a veritable ground swell of hymnody underlying the prose of its praise. It was the hymn, a vital weapon of controversy, that Ephraem the Syrian in the East and Ambrose of Milan in the West used to thwart the Arian heresy. It was the prophetic foresight of Luther that envisioned the people singing themselves into Reformed doctrine. Again, it is hardly a coincidence that the Wesleys shook the established church of England to its very foundation on the wings of song.

Millar Patrick states in “The Story of the Church’s Song”:

The discovery was early made in the Christian era that popular religion is moulded largely by the ideas enshrined in its hymns. Sermons often fly over the people’s heads; prayers uttered in their name often fail to carry their hearts and even their intelligence with them: but their songs sink into the memory, color their thought, and fashion their theology much more than any deliberate instruction.