

The people of God sing. The role of music in worship is biblical. After escaping from the Egyptians and crossing the Red Sea, the people of Israel sang a song to the Lord (Exod. 15). Singing was part of Israel's formal worship in both tabernacle and temple (1 Chron. 6:31-32, 16:42). The Psalms bear rich testimony that in joy and sorrow, in praise and lament, the faithful raise their voices in song to God. Hymn singing was practiced by Jesus and his disciples (Matt. 26:30). The Apostle Paul instructed the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3: 16-17).

Through congregational singing Christian faith is not only expressed; to a very real degree it is formed. Since people tend to remember the theology they sing more than the theology that is preached, a congregation's repertoire of hymnody is often of critical importance in shaping the faith of its people. Here again, it is the meaning of the text that is of primary importance. It is through the sense of the words that God's people learn of the nature and character of God and of the Christian life. Noting that if one prays in a tongue, the "spirit prays," but the "mind is unfruitful," the Apostle Paul vows, "I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also" (1 Cor. 14:14-15).

Christian hymnody contains some of the most tightly packed, concise doctrinal and devotional thought of the church. Through congregational song God's people learn their language about God; God's people learn how to speak with God. Songs of worship shape faith. It is, therefore, very important that a congregation have a rich "vocabulary of praise." Simple, repetitive music such as praise choruses can be very effective in moving an individual to worship. But it is also important for the congregation to know some of the great hymns of faith in order to have a sense that the Christian faith is both relevant and enduring, and to be enriched by the faith of the "great cloud of witnesses." Hymns, both ancient and modern, which stretch minds, increase vocabulary, rehearse the biblical story, and teach of the nature and the mighty acts of God are essential for the congregation's growth in faith.