

# Heritage of Hymns



**C**hurch music has changed more in the last fifty years than the preceding five hundred. Martin Luther was a rebellious Augustinian friar with a short temper who nailed his 95 theses—points of doctrine he believed should be discussed—to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral on October 31, 1517. While that may have been his most dramatic act of reform, he also left his mark on the music of the church. Luther loved music and played the lute. He wrote hymns with choral tunes and German texts. His hymns were divided into stanzas which were originally sung in unison, but harmonies crept in, and singing in parts developed. With the availability of the printing press, hymn books, with words and musical notation, could be economically produced. Growing up in the sixties and attending church nearly every Sunday, I learned to sing hymns from books not unlike those of Luther's day. Sometimes, English translations of the songs he wrote.

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Probably the best-known of Martin Luther's compositions is "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," written around 1530.

A mighty fortress is our God, A bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.  
For still our ancient foe Doth seek to work us woe.  
His craft and power are great, And armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing,  
Were not the right man on our side, The man of God's own  
choosing.

Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He.  
Lord Sabaoth His name, From age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

Martin Luther tells us through this song that no power on earth can harm us when we are in God's hands. Martin Luther was a professor and a scholar. When I read his books, I can learn from him, but when I sing his hymns, I stand next to him, and we worship our God together. When I sing this song, my heart is united with the hearts of Christians over the past 500 years, and we worship our God with a voice.

In college, a philosophy professor was explaining the function and importance of religious symbols. He asserted that fundamental churches avoided symbols, fearing they would

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become idols. The trap they have fallen into, he explained, is that they have no medium with which to communicate deep spiritual truth, things that cannot be expressed by words alone. Having grown up in a Christian tradition that tended to eschew symbols, I was fortunate that my church and my family taught those spiritual truths, largely through hymns.

There are hymns that speak to me in times of distress. One of those is “It is Well With My Soul”. Horatio Spafford wrote the words of this hymn in 1873. A successful Chicago lawyer and businessman, Spafford had lost nearly everything in the Chicago fire. He and his family had planned a trip to Europe. When he was detained on business, he sent his wife and four daughters ahead and planned to join them as soon as he could. While crossing the Atlantic, their ship collided with a British sailing vessel, and he received a telegram from his wife saying that she alone was saved.

He left to join his wife, and as he neared the place where his daughters had perished, he stood on the deck. Looking out at the waves that had taken the lives of his four children, lives more precious to him than his own, he wrote the words of “It Is Well With My Soul”.

When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;

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Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
“It is well; it is well with my soul.”

When I sing those words to myself, no matter how sad or frightened I am, I feel better. If Mr. Spafford could write those words in the face of such grief, how could I feel sorry for myself? Being a follower of Christ does not guarantee a life without pain. Jesus told us in John 16, “In the world, you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

Martin Luther changed the world, and Spafford has comforted thousands. As important as these men are, each of us is influenced even more by those we know personally. When I was very young, there was an old man that still comes to mind every time I sing or hear “How Great Thou Art.”

The song was written in 1885 by Carl Boberg, a preacher and member of the Swedish parliament. It was later translated into German, then into Russian, and finally in 1949, about 74 years after it was originally composed, it was translated and arranged into the English version we now know. This song has always been a comfort and inspiration to me, but it is Mr. Barlow that comes to mind when I hear it.

Oliver Barlow was born in 1875, and he turned 80 the month before I was born. I know he was young once, but I remember him older than time itself. In his long life, he had been a

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craftsman, a house painter, a musician, a geologist, a custodian, a horticulturist, and a businessman. He was an artist, and an athlete who participated in wrestling, boxing, swimming, and tightrope walking. He was an avid fisherman until he was 86, when he said, “The stones were becoming slicker, the banks steeper, and the trails longer.”

I knew Mr. Barlow was a great man. But not because of his accomplishments; those are things adults would notice, and I was a little boy. No, Mr. Barlow was a great man because he carried candy. Every Sunday, as the last hymn ended in our little church, a line of children formed to shake hands with Mr. Barlow. As a child approached, he would reach into his pocket and hide a piece of candy in his large hand. When you shook his hand, you came away with a pink wintergreen lozenge and the knowledge that there was at least one grownup who cared about you.

A local gospel quartet sang at the church one evening when I was about 6 or 7 years old. Their music enveloped me, and when they asked for requests, my hand shot up. They asked for my request, which was, “How Great Thou Art”. The leader of the group said, “We don’t know it, but I’ll bet Mr. Barlow does.” I remember being disappointed as Mr. Barlow rose from his seat. I loved the old man, but he didn’t play guitar, and in his mid-80s, his voice wasn’t as strong and clear as it might have been. Now, when I

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think about that night 60 years ago, I see it differently. I don't remember the names or faces of any man in that quartet, but I will never forget watching that old man slowly climb the steps and stand behind a pulpit to sing a song without accompaniment and preparation just because a little boy had asked to hear it.

“How Great Thou Art” is still one of my favorite songs. The beauty of the words and music speaks to my heart in a way that few songs can. But the memories that come to my mind make it even more beautiful. To this day, when I hear it, I think of Mr. Barlow. When I sing it, it is to his memory.

God will reveal his truth to his children, and He can do it in any number of ways. He speaks to us in ways that we can understand to tell us what he wants us to know. The ways he teaches us may not make sense to anyone else, but he knows how to get his message across.

Children, too young to read, learn songs by listening to adults. People don't always pronounce words clearly when they sing, and a child's version of a song may differ from the original. When the congregation sang the chorus of “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” instead of “Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms,” to me, it was, “Leaning, leaning, safe and secure in hollow arms.” The picture in my head was of Jesus standing in a white robe. He was about the size of the Statue of

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Liberty, and his arms were stretched out. His upper arms were hollow, and they opened like the fuselage of an army transport plane. There was plenty of room for me to climb in, and once inside the powerful arm of Jesus, nothing could hurt me. It wasn't exactly what the writer meant, but maybe it should have been.

Songs touch my heart because of their heritage, and others because of their message. Some hymns warm my soul because of the memories they bring to my mind. Others, like "Be Thou My Vision," are simply beautiful. One of my favorite musical styles is Irish folk music. So, it shouldn't have surprised me when I read one day that this song is an Irish hymn from the 8th century, set to a traditional Irish folk melody. It was translated from Gaelic by Mary E. Byrne and published in 1905. The message is as beautiful as the music.

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;  
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art;  
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night,  
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word;  
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord;  
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son;  
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one.

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Be Thou my battle Shield, Sword for the fight;  
Be Thou my Dignity, Thou my Delight;  
Thou my soul's Shelter, Thou my high Tow'r:  
Raise Thou me heav'nward, O Pow'r of my pow'r.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,  
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;  
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart,  
High King of heaven, my Treasure Thou art.

High King of Heaven, my victory won,  
May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright Heaven's Sun!  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

This wasn't a song from my childhood. A small group was playing and singing in a living room. The daughter of a friend played this song on a violin, and I was hooked. Now I play it for my grandchildren as I work to pass on the heritage of hymns to yet another generation.

You may be wondering in what ways the music of corporate Christian worship has changed. When I was a child, there were many wonderful hymns full of beauty and meaning. But there were some on the other end of the spectrum as well. In today's worship services, there are songs that make me cringe, their teaching is sometimes faulty, and their focus is often on us



instead of God. But today's music also includes breathtaking artistry and awe-inspiring truths.

There are two primary ways in which the music of the church changed, and technology drove them both. Technology isn't bad. The printing press made the musical changes of the reformation possible. Now the hymnal has been discarded. The lyrics of songs are now projected on a screen. Hymn books were expensive and subject to damage. However, they were also a steadying influence. They were collections of songs that spanned hundreds of years. Now, our songs rarely last ten. We no longer have traditional songs that speak through generations. For me, this has been a great loss.

Advances in sound technology have made it possible for preachers to speak in a natural voice and be heard by thousands. The same microphones make it possible for vocalists to be heard, and that's wonderful for a concert. However, fifty years ago, congregational singing wasn't a show. A song leader used his or her hands to lead the congregation the way a conductor would direct an orchestra. Now, the song leader has been replaced by a band, and corporate worship has become a concert in which the audience is encouraged to sing along. Congregational singing used to be done by a connected group, offering praise to God as one collective body rather than as individuals. The songs enter into the worship services because they were popular in concerts,

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and they are soon replaced by a new batch of catchy tunes.

Change is one of our few consistencies, a solid rock on which we can depend. This change, like almost any other, brings gains as well as losses. But, the rapidity of this change has left me mourning what has been lost.