

COME HOME TO THE HYMNS

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In 1984, President Thomas S. Monson – then Elder Monson of the Twelve – organized the Leipzig Germany Stake, assisted by Elder Hans B. Ringger, a Regional Representative and later a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy. On Saturday afternoon of stake conference, they interviewed about thirty priesthood holders for stake positions. The brethren were waiting in a nearby room for their turn to be interviewed.

President Monson observed that the brethren in the nearby room sang hymns in beautiful four-part harmony from the hymnbook. He asked Elder Ringger: “Do these brethren represent a priesthood choir for the meeting this evening?” “Oh, no,” replied Elder Ringger, “they are just the brethren who we are going to interview this afternoon. They prefer singing to chatting.”

President Monson recalled that “they sang for four hours. As we would interview some of the tenor section, the tenors became a little weak, and then they would return and the bass would come in for the interview. . . .”

Just imagine: these brethren would rather sing the hymns of Zion than chat with each other! They had been given a rare opportunity of coming together from all over East Germany to visit with each other, and they chose to sing the hymns! Where else in the world would you find a group of priesthood brethren who choose to sing together when they could be talking about the weather, or sports, or simply enjoy each other’s friendship?

President Monson told us later: “We learned a lesson. If you love the Lord, if you love His doctrine, you’ll love the hymns; and when you love them, then you sing them. . . . We must learn once again in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to really sing. We simply must do something with our congregational singing to bring out the spirit of music in the heart and soul of every boy, every girl, every man, every woman.”

President Boyd K. Packer said: We “encourage participation in congregational singing.” (October 1991 General Conference).

President James E. Faust taught that “singing our beautiful, worshipful hymns is food for our souls. Worshipping in song has the effect of spiritually unifying the participants in an attitude of reverence.” (April 1992 General Conference).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks declared: “Hymn singing is a glorious way to worship. . . . Our hymns . . . have been proven effective to invite the Spirit of the Lord. . . . The singing of hymns is one of the best ways to put ourselves in tune with the Spirit of the Lord (and) . . . to learn the doctrine

of the restored gospel. . . . Our sacred music is a powerful preparation for prayer and gospel teaching (and) . . . prepares us to be taught the truths of the gospel.” (October 1994 General Conference).

Elder Adam S. Bennion of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said about fifty-five years ago: “In the Church we need better music and more of it, and better speaking and less of it.”

Under the direction of President Spencer W. Kimball and his counselors in The First Presidency, members of the Church were counseled to experience a renewed enthusiasm for gospel living by singing the hymns of Zion. As we analyze the sealed portion of the current hymnbook – otherwise known as the Preface – we learn that the First Presidency teaches us to worship the Lord more effectively in at least three ways:

1. Singing the hymns of Zion more frequently,
2. Using the words of hymns in support of teaching gospel principles, and
3. Feeling the power of hymns motivating righteous conduct and behavior.

Singing the Hymns of Zion More Frequently

The First Presidency hopes “to see an increase of hymn singing in our congregations. We encourage all members, whether musically inclined or not, to join with us in singing the hymns. . . . Sing them on the Sabbath, in home evening, during scripture study, at prayer time. Sing as you work, as you play, and as you travel together.”

Hymn singing is the easiest, most enjoyable, most effective, and most powerful spiritual activity inviting “all to come unto Christ” (D&C 20:59) “and be perfectly in Him” (Moroni 10:32). Almost everybody can do it! It is universally appealing and ought to be done more frequently in our worship services. Hymn singing lifts one to higher spiritual ground.

Hymn singing is effective because it gives each participant a unique opportunity to express his or her inner feelings. Expressing one’s self through sacred song is good for the soul. It makes one feel very good, especially when singing the hymns of Zion, which have all been created by the Spirit of the Lord directing those who authored the text and composed the music.

The spirited missionary hymn, “Hark, All Ye Nations!” is loved by the Saints the world over. President Thomas S. Monson heard it for the first time in Italy when he visited the missionaries there in the 1960s. He liked it so much that he decided to tell the German Saints about it when he would visit them the next week. He didn’t know that this hymn is probably the most popular and most often sung hymn among the Saints in Germany, Austria, and German-speaking Switzerland. “I told the Saints that the Italians have a good missionary hymn,” he said. “They said, ‘Oh, yes, the Italians stole it from us.’” And indeed they did when they scoured through hymnbooks of surrounding countries when the Church was organized in their land.

If we really love the Lord, we must sing the hymns of the Church much more than we have in the past. Most Church meetings will be enhanced by the singing of hymns. Singing hymns invites the Spirit of the Lord and creates a feeling for reverence and unity. Hymns provide a way for

us to offer praises to the Lord. Hymns move us to repentance and good works. Hymns build testimony and faith. Hymns comfort the weary and console the mourning. Hymns can lift our spirits, give us courage, and help us withstand the temptations of the adversary. Hymns can bring a spirit of beauty, peace, love, and happiness into our lives. Hymns inspire us to endure to the end.

Using the Words of Hymns in Support of Teaching Gospel Principles

The First Presidency hopes that “leaders, teachers, and members who are called upon to speak will turn often to the hymnbook to find sermons presented powerfully and beautifully in verse. . . . Some of the greatest sermons are preached by the singing of hymns. . . . We hope the hymnbook will take a prominent place among the scriptures and other religious books in your homes.”

President Boyd K. Packer has taught: “If we will listen, (the hymns) are teaching the gospel, for the hymns of the Restoration are, in fact, a course in doctrine! . . . (The hymns) are an essential part of our worship.” (October 1991 General Conference).

The purpose of hymn singing is to teach the gospel – to help members learn the hymns, ponder their messages, and partake of the spirit they bring. Many gospel principles are taught through the hymns. Participation in singing the hymns of Zion at home, while traveling, and in Church meetings should be a spiritual highlight in every person’s life, because hymns create a warm spiritual climate and elevate our spirits.

The hymnbook is a standard work filled with sermons to sing. It is a book of scripture because scriptures are messages coming from God to each of us by the power of the Holy Ghost, and these messages may be written, spoken, or sung.

The hymn “Be Thou Humble” declares the doctrine of humility almost verbatim from its scriptural setting in the Doctrine and Covenants. Thomas B. Marsh served as President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles when the Lord counseled him in 1837 regarding several important matters that needed attention in his personal life, including “be thou humble; and the Lord thy God shall lead thee by the hand, and give thee answer to thy prayers” (D&C 112:10).

“Press Forward, Saints” is another good example of paraphrasing scripture. Nephi admonishes us: “Ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (See 2 Nephi 31:20).

Marvin K. Gardner provides three wonderful verses that capture the beauty of Nephi’s statement: “Press forward, Saints, with steadfast faith in Christ. . . . Press forward, feasting on the word of Christ. . . . Press on, enduring in the ways of Christ. . . . Thus saith our God: ‘Ye have eternal life!’” And Vanja Y. Watkins provides a thrilling musical setting for this hymn.

“As I have loved you, love one another” is almost identical to the Savior’s words: “A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:34-35).

Sister Luacine Clark Fox, the author of the text in this hymn, is the youngest daughter of President J. Reuben Clark Jr., counselor in the First Presidency some sixty years ago. When she wrote about the higher law of the gospel taught by the Savior at the Last Supper, she felt impressed to find a good tune for a good new hymn. The melody came into her mind as a direct answer to prayer. “I wrote the melody alongside the words,” she said. “Tears filled my eyes so that I could hardly see the notes. There were no changes made to the original notes.”

Sister Marianne Johnson Fisher bears testimony of the consolation one may receive through the scriptures when she authored the words of the hymn, “As I Search the Holy Scriptures.” I had met her in 1985 in the South Visitors Center on Temple Square following the celebration of the newly published “green scriptures” – the new hymnbook. She had sung with the Tabernacle Choir for many years. However, she was blind since birth, and her comfort, hope, and faith had always come from the scriptures. “My favorite verse is the third verse,” she told me, “please read it.”

*As I search the holy scriptures, May thy mercy be revealed,
Soothe my troubled heart and spirit; May my unseen wounds be healed.*

President Howard W. Hunter provided a classic example of using the words of a hymn in support of teaching gospel principles when he addressed the April 1993 General Conference. He quoted the verses of “Jesus, the Vey Thought of Thee” in support of his testimony of the Savior, and he thus impressed a message on our minds that will be remembered for a long time because of his effective use of a hymn.

President Thomas S. Monson has received inquiries about his favorite hymns. He really likes most hymns, having supported his sermons by quoting 82 times selected verses from 43 hymns in 62 of the last 92 General Conferences (46 years, 1964-2009). President Monson has quoted the most hymns of any General Authority, thus setting the example to the whole Church of using hymn texts frequently in support of teaching the gospel in Church meetings, classes, and home evenings.

Let us likewise learn and teach the gospel through sacred hymns and Primary children’s songs. Our hymns teach gospel principles far more effectively than the mere spoken word or reading the scriptures because memorable melodies are coupled to the messages that are translated into our hearts as deep feelings and impressions that will outlast alternate teaching methods.

Feeling the Power of Hymns Motivating Righteous Conduct and Behavior

The First Presidency declared that “hymns can lift our spirits, give us courage, and move us to righteous actions. They can fill our souls with heavenly thoughts and bring us a spirit of peace. Hymns can also help us withstand the temptations of the adversary.”

Hymn singing builds character by dismissing unworthy and evil thoughts, deepening spiritual insights and sensitivity, quieting and lifting our spirits, aiding us in public and private worship, teaching truths and gospel principles, converting and building testimonies, reminding us of our covenants and heritage, and unifying us as a people.

President Ezra Taft Benson's great-grandfather, Apostle Ezra T. Benson, and his wife and two little boys, George (age 7) and Frank (age 1) had come from Missouri to make their home in Cache Valley. Elder Benson and some other men had to explore Cache Valley to find suitable places for other pioneers who were coming to live there. He left his wife and the two boys in a rather sagebrush covered place. As they were sitting outside the covered wagon, about an hour after the men had gone, Sister Benson heard a noise. Looking in the direction of the noise, she saw a big lion standing on its haunches about a hundred feet from where she and the boys were. It looked like the lion was ready to attack, so Sister Benson prayed in her heart and asked the Lord what to do. She was impressed to sing. This she did, and the lion went away without harming her. Then she knelt down and thanked the Lord for saving her life and the lives of her children. (See Margaret Benson, "A Song for a Lion," *Children's Friend*, July 1941, p. 308).

Music has a powerful influence on the behavior of God's creations. Brigham Young stated that "sweet music will actually tame the most malicious and venomous beasts, even when they have been stirred up to violent wrath, and make them docile and harmless as lambs." (*Journal of Discourses*, page 48).

The story is told of an old bishop in pioneer days who was asked to solve a water problem between two men living in his ward. These men had been bitter enemies for a period of time and had threatened to take their problems to the courts. Finally, they determined to submit it first to their bishop. When they entered his home, he seated them and suggested that they all join in singing: "Angry Words, Oh Let Them Never" (Deseret Sunday School Songs, 1909, no. 67).

*Angry words! Oh let them never / From the tongue unbridled slip;
May the heart's best impulse ever / Check them ere they soil the lip.*

*"Love one another," thus saith the Savior,
Children obey the Father's blest command.*

He started and finished the song, singing alone. "Well," said he, "let's try it again." On the second time, one of the men joined in the chorus. "Now," the bishop continued, "let's sing it again." This time the one man sang all the way through with his bishop, and the other joined in the chorus. The fourth time, all three sang this simple Primary song together.

At the conclusion of the singing, the men said, "Bishop, we haven't any problems we cannot settle between us." The two men left the bishop's home determined to solve their difficulties. Singing a simple children's song had converted two older men to settle their differences amiably. (Leland H. Monson, "Character and Leadership," p. 157).

President Heber J. Grant wrote that “the singing of our sacred hymns, written by the servants of God, has a powerful effect in converting people to the principles of the Gospel, and in promoting peace and spiritual growth.” (“Songs of the Heart,” *Improvement Era*, Sep 1940, p. 522).

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said recently: “We ought to have great music in the Church and more of it; great speaking in the Church and less of it.” (Priesthood Department, 2006 Christmas Devotional).

Elder Dallin H. Oaks has counseled us in the October 1994 General Conference that “we should be careful what music we use in settings where we desire to contribute to worship. Many musical numbers good for other wholesome settings are not appropriate for church meetings. Our hymns have been chosen because they have been proven effective to invite the Spirit of the Lord. . . .

“Soloists should remember that music in our worship services is not for demonstration but for worship. Vocal or instrumental numbers should be chosen to facilitate worship, not to provide performance opportunity for artists, no matter how accomplished. . . .

“Our sacred music is a powerful preparation for prayer and gospel teaching. We need to make more use of our hymns to put us in tune with the Spirit of the Lord, to unify us, and to help us teach and learn our doctrine. . . . Music is an effective way to worship our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. We should use hymns when we need spiritual strength and inspiration. . . . We need to keep singing that we may draw ever closer to Him who has inspired sacred music and commanded that it be used to worship Him.”

Come home to the hymns! Hymn singing is the Lord’s way of invoking righteous feelings. Hymn singing is a reflection of how we feel about the gospel.

Come home to the hymns by singing them frequently! Come home to the hymns by using the words in support of teaching gospel principles! Come home to the hymns by feeling their power in motivating right actions! Come home to the hymns by focusing your thoughts upon the Savior and worshiping Him in praise, devotion, and love.