

AMBASSADOR HYMNAL

One Fold of Paper

What Do the Invitation Hymns in the Ambassador Hymnal Teach?

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Before we open the hymnal to any hymn, open it to page vii.

The preface of the *Ambassador Hymnal for Lutheran Worship* begins with a sentence borrowed from our own Declaration of Faith of 1962: hymn books should be such as will give honor to the Word of God and the Sacraments. Then the committee lists what it was looking for. Every hymn had to uphold the supremacy of the Scriptures as God's Word. Every hymn had to be — this is their wording, not mine — in keeping with our Lutheran understanding of the Sacraments. Every hymn had to be singable in a key that would not strand the altos. And the selection as a whole had to represent the breadth of the Lutheran church, both in its beautiful chorale tradition and in its use of the best of *gospel* hymnody, with the committee's own quotation marks around that last word.

Then, at the end, they say that many people worked on this hymnal and that they have chosen to name none of them, giving honor to God alone.

I put that first because it decides what kind of essay this is. There is no committee here to argue with; they took their names off the book on purpose. And everything I am about to do, they authorized on page vii. They published a standard. All I am going to do is open the book to one page and hold three hymns up against it.

Turn to 426.

Do not sing anything yet. Just look at the two pages in front of you, the way you would look at a photograph.

At the top of the left-hand page is *Almost Persuaded Now to Believe*, words and music both by Philip Bliss, who died in 1876 at thirty-eight. Three short stanzas. The third one is the reason we are here:

"Almost persuaded," Harvest is past!
"Almost persuaded," Doom comes at last.
"Almost" cannot avail;
"Almost" is but to fail!
Sad, sad, that bitter wail—
"Almost but lost!"

Now let me hand you the tool, because you will want it in a moment and you will want it for the rest of your life.

Here are three questions you can ask of any hymn in any book in about thirty seconds. First: **who is the subject of the verbs?** Not who is being sung *about* — who is actually doing things in the sentences. Second: **what does the hymn ask you to supply?** Every hymn asks for something; the question is whether it makes the thing you supply into the hinge on which your salvation turns. Third: **where does the hymn locate assurance?** When you

lie awake wondering whether you belong to God, what does this hymn point you at — a promise attached to something outside you that happened to you and can be named and dated, or an experience inside you that you have to remember correctly and keep having?

Run those on Bliss.

What damns the man in this hymn is not his sin, and what saves the other man is not Christ. The difference between heaven and hell, in these twenty-four lines, is the difference between *almost* and *all the way* — which is to say, a quantity of persuadedness inside the sinner. The second stanza supplies the pressure: come today, angels are lingering, prayers are rising, turn not away. And assurance, in the end, is located in not having been *almost*. That is a thing you can only find by inspecting yourself, and it is a thing you can never finish inspecting.

I want to be careful here, because it would be easy and cheap to be contemptuous, and Bliss deserves better. He was a serious Christian who wrote tunes that have carried more gospel than most of us will speak in a lifetime. He was not trying to poison anybody. He wrote a hymn that puts the weight of a soul's eternity on the completeness of that soul's response, and it is a good tune, and a good tune is how a doctrine gets into a person and stays.

Now look four inches down the same page.

Directly beneath Bliss, hymn 427 begins. It is Anne Steele, an English Baptist who died in 1778, and if you had set out to write a rebuttal to the hymn printed above it you could not have done better:

Can aught beneath a pow'r divine
The stubborn will subdue?
'Tis Thine, Almighty Savior, Thine
To form the heart anew.

Bliss says the hinge is whether you are persuaded all the way. Steele says the stubborn will cannot be subdued by anything beneath a power divine, and that forming the heart anew is Christ's work and nobody else's. She spends three more stanzas on it — the passions recalled, the scales of error made to fall, the shades of death chased away — and every one of them ends in the same place: *'Tis Thine alone to give*.

Run the three questions on Steele and you get the mirror image. The subject of nearly every verb is Christ. What the hymn asks the singer to supply is nothing but the admission that he has nothing. And assurance sits in the character and the power of the one being asked.

Then look across the gutter, to the facing page.

Hymn 428 is Lina Sandell, the Swedish woman who gave us *Children of the Heavenly Father*, and it opens on the narrow gate — the very text a revival preacher would use to tighten the screws:

Straight is the gate to heaven above,
And narrow is the way;
Yet there is room in God's great love
For thee, for thee alway.

Yet there is room. Four stanzas, and that phrase *for thee* lands nine times before she is done. In Paradise there still is room. There is a place at God's right hand for thee. Though ten thousand times a thousand stand there white-robed already, there is room. In Jesus' heart there still is room.

Where Bliss leaves a man standing outside the door counting how nearly he got in, Sandell tells him the room is not full and never was.

That is one page opening. Three hymns, two of them printed on the same side of the same leaf, and they are not saying the same thing. A member of a Free Lutheran congregation who never reads a word about hymnody has that in his hands every time the book falls open there.

I should say plainly what I am not saying. I am not saying the hymnal is compromised, or that the men and women who assembled it were careless. They knew what they were doing. They set out to give Free Lutheran congregations the hymns of their heritage together with the best of American gospel hymnody, and they said so in the front of the book, and the instinct behind that — keep the warm and the confessional in the same room — is a better instinct than most church bodies have managed. Nobody is being asked to tear a page out of anything.

And I am not saying old is good and new is bad. The test does not care about vintage and it does not care about nationality. Anne Steele was an English Baptist, and she passes. Two numbers earlier, the hymn that most clearly shows what an invitation is supposed to sound like was written by an English marine insurance manager and set to a German chorale tune from 1693. Eight pages later, an invitation hymn by a Danish Pietist bishop tells the singer that grace is what beckons him and then compares him to an infant asleep in his mother's arm. The failure in this section of the hymnal is not a failure of era or of accent. It is a failure that happens in the space of a few words, when a hymn stops delivering Christ and starts extracting a response.

What I am saying is this. Your hymnal is generous, and generosity requires discernment. A creed you affirm once and file away. A hymn you sing four hundred times, in the first

person, standing up, with a tune that makes it stick — and forty years later you will still have it when you have lost almost everything else. That is why what we sing matters more than what we say we believe, and why a page opening like 426 is worth ten minutes of a Sunday school hour.

So where is the invitation actually issued, and answered?

It was issued over you at a font, by a man who was not speaking on his own authority, in a name that was put on you before you could spell it. It is issued every Lord's Day from a pulpit, at the moment the preacher stops describing your disease and starts announcing the cure. It is issued at a rail, in bread and in the cup, given and shed *for you* — which is the only two-letter word in the liturgy that matters. Our confession says it about as flatly as it can be said: God gave the preaching office and the sacraments so that we would receive faith, and He gives faith where and when He pleases in those who hear the gospel (Augsburg Confession V). Not where and when we decide. Where and when He pleases, through the means He appointed.

That is why the location matters, and why a hymn that leaves the coming unlocated has left a door open behind it. If your coming happened at an aisle, then when you doubt, you will go back and inspect the aisle. If it happened at a font, you cannot inspect it, because it was never your work in the first place. You can only be told about it again.

Which is what the woman on the facing page has been doing the whole time, if you will let her finish. Bliss ends his hymn with a man's own voice, wailing that he was almost and is lost. Sandell ends hers with the only thing that answers that:

Now God be praised, who even me
A glorious diadem
Will grant when I His glory see
In His Jerusalem.

Who even me. Not who noticed I finally decided. Not who found me persuaded all the way. Who even me.

Sing 426 if it has carried you; God has used worse. But sing 428 after it, and let the last word in the room belong to the one who has the room.

This essay is drawn from work in progress on a book about the Ambassador Hymnal — what a congregation learns by heart without deciding to. More to come.