

A SAMPLE CHAPTER

By Heart

A Layman Reads the Ambassador Hymnal

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Invitation Hymns

This is the chapter the whole book has been walking toward, and I want two things standing beside us before we start.

The first is the sentence the compilers printed at the head of their own preface, which chapter one put on the table: hymn books should be such as will give honor to the Word of God and the Sacraments. They published a standard and they listed their criteria, and one of those criteria was that every hymn had to be in keeping with our Lutheran understanding of the Sacraments. Everything I do in this chapter, they authorized on page vii. All I am going to do is take a few hymns off the shelf and hold them up against the standard the committee set for itself.

The second is that there is nobody here to attack. They took their names off the book on purpose.

Now turn to the table of contents, which tells you something the numbering alone does not. The hymns in this book are grouped by topic, and the group we are entering has a name. It runs from 416 to 444, and the hymnal calls it **Call, Repentance**.

Look at that title for a second, because the whole chapter is inside it. *Call* is something God does. *Repentance* is something that happens in a man. The committee put them under one heading, which is exactly right — you cannot have the second without the first, and Scripture never separates them. But a heading that holds two things together is also a heading under which one of them can quietly swallow the other. That is what happened in a wide stretch of nineteenth-century hymnody, and this section of your hymnal is where it lives.

Here is the test I want to teach you. Three questions, and you can ask them of any hymn in any book in about thirty seconds.

First: **who is the subject of the verbs?** Not who the hymn is about — who is actually doing things in the sentences.

Second: **what does the hymn ask you to supply?** Every hymn asks for something, and most of what they ask for is fine. The question is whether the hymn makes what you supply into the hinge on which the outcome turns.

Third: **where does the hymn locate assurance?** When you cannot feel anything, what does the hymn point you at? Something outside you, that happened to you, that can be named and dated and did not depend on your cooperation? Or something inside you, that you have to remember correctly and keep producing?

That is the test. It is not a machine for sorting hymns into good and bad piles, and if you use it that way you will end up a worse Christian than you started. It is a way of hearing what you are singing.

Try it first on the two hymns that stand at the doors of this section.

The section opens at 416 with Faber: there is a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea; there is welcome for the sinner; there is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed. God is the subject of nearly every clause, the sinner supplies nothing, and assurance sits in a redemption already accomplished. It closes at 444 with Synesius of Cyrene, who died around the year 430, praying *Lord Jesus, think on me* — four stanzas in which the only active verbs belong to Christ and the singer asks to be purged, set free, kept from straying, and brought at last to see. Fifth-century Greek at one end and a Victorian Englishman at the other, and both of them pass the test without effort.

A word of caution about that observation, which applies to every place in this book where I make something of what sits next to what. Chapter three describes how the hymns were sorted and ordered: the committee scored each hymn and the order within a section follows the weight of the vote, and the assignment of hymns to sections was done at one stage by laying them out in piles on a parsonage floor. So the *contents* of this section were chosen with care, and the placement of any particular hymn inside it sometimes was not. What follows is a description of what a congregation meets when the book falls open here. It is not a claim about anybody's intentions.

Between those two doors lie twenty-seven hymns. Some of them do something else.

Start with 417, because it is the best of them and because everybody knows it.

Just as I am, without one plea, But that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou
bid'st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Run the test. The singer's action is *coming*, and there is a great deal of coming here — six stanzas of it, with the phrase doubled at the end of each. So the verbs look like the singer's. But watch what the grammar actually does. *Without one plea, but that* — the entire first stanza is a denial that the singer brings anything, and the two exceptions are

not his: the blood was shed, and the bidding is Christ's. Stanza four is a list of everything he lacks — sight, riches, healing of the mind, all he needs — and locates every item in Christ. Stanza five grounds the whole approach outside him: *because Thy promise I believe*. Stanza six says the barriers came down by a love he did not know about.

This is not decision theology. This is closer to Speratus at 410 than most people singing it realize. Ask the second question — what does this hymn ask you to supply? — and the honest answer is *nothing, and it keeps saying so*.

So why is *Just as I am* the most famous altar-call hymn in the English language?

Because of what it does not say. It never tells you where the coming happens. Charlotte Elliott wrote it in the 1830s for *The Invalid's Hymn Book*, for people too sick and too ashamed to think they could approach God at all — and the earliest printing anyone has been able to lay hands on heads the hymn with a verse: *the one who comes to me I will never send away*. It says *come*, and it leaves the location blank, and a blank is a thing that later hands can fill. Two generations on, Moody's song leader filled it with an aisle, and Graham filled it with a stadium floor, and for a hundred years "I came forward during *Just As I Am*" has been an American sentence meaning *this is when I got saved*.

That is not the hymn's fault. But it is the hymn's situation, and a hymn arrives in a congregation carrying everything that has ever been done with it. Sung at the end of a sermon that has just asked people to decide, 417 is not functioning as Elliott's poem about empty hands. It is functioning as the soundtrack of a transaction. Same words. Different hymn.

I would sing 417 gladly. I would sing it after the absolution and let it mean what it says.

Now 422, and here the ground shifts.

Lewis Hartsough wrote both the words and the tune, and the tune is why it lasted:

I am coming, Lord! Coming now to Thee! Wash me, cleanse me in the blood That
flow'd on Calvary.

Ask the third question — where does this hymn locate assurance? The blood is on Calvary, which is true, and which is a very long way from here. The hymn asks to be washed in it, which is right and biblical. What it does not say — and what a Lutheran would immediately want to say — is how that blood gets from Calvary to *me*: through

what water, what word, what bread and cup. Between Calvary and the singer this text puts nothing at all except the singer's coming. And notice the word *now*. It is a timestamp. It marks a moment, and a moment that gets marked is a moment that can later be doubted.

Then stanza three, which most people sing without hearing:

'Tis Jesus calls me on To perfect faith and love, To perfect hope, and peace, and trust, For earth and heav'n above.

Perfect faith, perfect love, perfect hope, perfect trust — on earth. That is not Elliott's world. That is the Higher Life movement putting its hand up, and if you turn forward to 441 and 460 and 478 you will find it waving. Chapter eight is spent there.

423 is the clearest specimen in the section, and the shape of it is the argument.

Stanza one: shall I not hear? shall I still hold earth's pleasures dear? shall my soul lie in slumber? Two: shall I not rise? can I despise His voice? can I delay? Three: shall He knock and I lock my heart the closer? shall I dare grieve His Spirit? Four: shall I give no heed? Five: yield Him all. Six:

God calling yet!—I cannot stay; My heart I yield without delay: Vain world, farewell!
from thee I part; The voice of God hath reached my heart!

Count the question marks. There are ten, and every one is addressed by the singer to himself. God has one verb in this hymn and He does it in the title: He calls. Everything after that happens inside the singer's deliberation — hearing, rising, yielding, parting, deciding. The drama is not the cross. The drama is a man's will, watched by God, working itself up over six stanzas to a decision. The last line files the report: the voice reached my heart. Now there is something to look back at.

The credit line under this hymn is worth your attention, because it undoes the easy story before we even get going. The text is Gerhard Tersteegen, who died in 1769, translated by Sarah Findlater, who died in 1907. Tersteegen was a Reformed mystic of the pietist stripe, not an American revivalist, and he was writing a century before Finney was born. This stream did not enter Lutheran hymnals only from the American south and west. It came in from Europe as well, in German and in Norwegian, and it was already here when the immigrants landed. Chapter three tried to show you both channels.

Ask the second question of 423 and the answer is not *nothing*. The answer is *your yes*. And once your yes is the hinge, your yes is what you will go looking for at two in the morning when you cannot feel anything at all.

Which brings us to the page that contains this entire chapter.

Open to 426 and look at the whole spread without singing anything.

At the top of the left-hand page is *Almost Persuaded*, text and tune both by Philip Bliss, who died at thirty-eight in the Ashtabula bridge collapse of December 1876 — by the account his friends published the following year, he got clear of the wreck and went back for his wife, and the two of them burned with the train. Three short stanzas, and the third is the most theologically consequential quatrain in this half of the hymnal:

“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!”

Take that seriously as doctrine, because a singer will. 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 is the difference between *almost* and *all the way* — that is, a quantity of persuadedness in the sinner. Stanza two supplies the pressure: come today, angels are lingering, prayers are rising, turn not away. The whole apparatus of the anxious bench is here in twenty-four lines, and it is here in a Lutheran hymnal. I have written a book about what that apparatus does to people and I will not rebuild it here; if you want the history, it is in *The Altar Call, the Anxious Bench, and the Empty Pew*.

Now look four inches down the same page. Directly beneath Bliss, hymn 427 begins, and it is Anne Steele, an English Baptist who died in 1778:

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

That is a direct answer to the hymn printed above it. 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 no one else’s — *’Tis Thine alone to give*.

Then look across the gutter to the facing page, 428, which is Lina Sandell, the Swedish woman who also gave us *Children of the Heavenly Father*:

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 always.

Five stanzas, and the phrase *for thee* lands seven times. There still is room. There is a place at God's right hand for thee. In Jesus' heart there still is room. Where *Almost Persuaded* leaves a man outside the door counting how nearly he got in, Sandell tells him the room is not full and never was.

One spread. Bliss on the left, Steele beneath him, Sandell facing them both. A member of your congregation who never reads a word of this book has that in his hands every time the hymnal falls open there. The two theologies of this hymnal are not separated by two hundred pages. They are separated by a fold of paper.

The rest of the diagnostic work goes quickly, and I want to do it gently, because this is the stretch where a book like this one usually turns cruel.

431 is *Softly and Tenderly*, words and music by Will Thompson, and it is a beautiful hymn. The tune is one of the finest in the gospel repertory. There is no threat in it. There is a Savior on the portals, waiting, watching, pleading, and there is *tho we have sinned He has mercy and pardon*. And there is the refrain, which has been sung over more coffins in this country than most of us can imagine:

Come home, come home, Ye who are weary, come home.

People have died with that in their ears and been comforted. I am not going to pretend otherwise, and neither should you when you teach this. Grandmothers have held onto it, and God is not fastidious about the vessels He uses.

But read stanzas two and three with the test in hand. *Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading? Why should we linger and heed not His mercies? Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing... shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming.* The only obstacle named anywhere in this hymn is our tarrying. Christ is doing everything a person could ask — calling, waiting, watching, pleading, promising — and He is doing it *at the portals*, outside, in the posture of a man who cannot come in on his own authority. The single variable is whether we linger, and the pressure applied is the clock.

Is that false? No. Time is short and Scripture does say today. But notice the assumption underneath. This hymn is sung by a congregation of the baptized — people carried to that font by their parents, over whom the name of the Triune God was spoken, who have been fed at that rail for decades. The hymn addresses them as though they were standing outside the door of their own home wondering whether to knock. Sing that about yourself often enough and you will come to believe the door is one you have to open, and that you may not have opened it hard enough.

433 does the same work in a brighter key — *why from the sunshine of love will you roam farther and farther away?*, and then *quickly arise and away*. Look at its credit line, though, and something strange and rather wonderful appears. The text is Fanny Crosby. The tune is a Swedish folk melody, and the tune name is Norwegian: TIL ØSTERLAND VIL JAG FARA. Somebody on that committee took the most American gospel poet of the nineteenth century and set her to a folk tune the immigrants brought in a trunk.

Hold onto that. It happens again.

If the story ended with the diagnosis, this would be an easy chapter and a dishonest one. It does not end there. Three hymns in this same section refuse to fit, and the credit lines are what give them away.

Turn to 436, *O Seek the Lord Today*. By the title you would file it with 426 without opening it. Open it.

There is salvation still For hearts contritely crying To Him whose gracious will Is now to save the dying. His grace doth beckon thee To seek thy Savior blest.

His grace doth beckon thee. The seeking is commanded, and the power to seek is credited to grace, inside the same sentence. And then stanza four does something no American invitation hymn in this book does:

As in its mother's arm The child sweet comfort gaineth, So, shielding thee from harm, The Lord thy heart sustaineth.

The singer has become an infant in someone else's arms. He is not deciding. He is being held.

Now the credit line: **Hans Adolph Brorson, 1694–1764**. That is the great Danish-Norwegian hymnwriter, and he was a Pietist — a real one, a bishop of the movement, not a

distant cousin of it. The stream that people in our circles are quickest to blame for decision theology produced the hymn in this section that most clearly refuses it. And the tune is a German chorale melody out of a 1693 collection printed at Meiningen.

Which is the same collection, in the same year, that supplied the tune for 424 — and 424 is the hymn that shows what an invitation is supposed to sound like.

“Come unto Me, ye weary, And I will give you rest.” O blessed voice of Jesus, Which comes to hearts oppressed!

Every stanza opens with Christ speaking in the first person, and each of those sentences has the same shape: *Come, and I will give*. Rest, in the first. Light, in the second. Life, in the third. And then:

“And whosoever cometh I will not cast him out.”

Run the three questions. Who is the subject of the verbs? Christ — He gives, He brings, He makes mighty, He will not cast out. The singer’s coming is real and is commanded and is nowhere the hinge, because the promise attached to it is unconditional and is spoken by the one who keeps it. What does the hymn ask you to supply? Weariness, which you already have. Where does the hymn locate assurance? In a sentence out of the mouth of Jesus that does not depend on the condition of the person singing it.

That is not a Lutheran invention. It is what the invitations in Scripture actually look like. *Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest* (Matthew 11:28 NET) — imperative and promise in one breath, and the promise is His work. *The one who comes to me I will never send away* (John 6:37 NET), which our Lord says in the same paragraph where He says no one comes unless the Father draws him. The invitation is not opposed to the gift. The invitation is the gift, arriving in the form of a word spoken to you.

The author of 424, by the way, is William Chatterton Dix, an English marine insurance manager who also wrote *What Child Is This*. Not a Lutheran, not a Scandinavian, not a chorale writer. The test does not care.

And then there is 443, at the far end of the section, which I would have skipped past a month ago. *Just One Step* — three stanzas of pure invitation, with parenthetical asides printed under the music like a preacher leaning in: (*Have you faith,*) (*Can you trust,*) (*O*

this glance). It reads like Sankey. It is Norwegian. The text is Hans Urseth, who grew up in a Norwegian congregation in Minnesota, taught at Augsburg College, wrote a Bible history for home and school, and died at forty-two in 1909; the translation is by Arnold and Olga Hagen, born in 1909 and 1908 — people who were alive and working while this hymnal was being assembled; and the tune is by F. Melius Christiansen of St. Olaf. Somebody wanted a Norwegian invitation hymn in this book badly enough to have it freshly translated for the purpose. An older translation existed and was in the *Concordia*; people who knew the Norwegian thought it beautiful and inaccurate, and an old proofreader from Dalton pressed the committee until a literal one was made.

And the chairman of that committee, writing about this hymn years afterward, said something I could not have said better and would not have dared to say first:

its value may be more theological than musical since it emphasizes the decision to follow Christ. This subjective and personal emphasis of pietistic Norwegian revivalism is a balancing message in the midst of most of the hymns that come from the more objective and sacramental emphasis.¹

Read that again. The man who assembled this book knew he was holding two emphases in one cover, knew which hymn belonged to which, and said so in print. This chapter is not diagnosing something he missed. It is asking the question he left open: what happens to a Christian who is handed both and never told they are two.

So the picture is not two traditions shelved side by side. It is a committee marrying them on the page: Crosby to a Swedish folk tune at 433, Brorson to a German chorale at 436, Montgomery to a Lindeman melody at 419, an English text to a Norwegian folk tune at 480, and a Norwegian text freshly Englished at 443.

Which means the thing this chapter is measuring cannot be measured with a calendar or a map. 436 is old and Danish and passes; 426 is nineteenth-century American and fails; 424 is English and passes; 427 is English and passes; 443 is Norwegian and asks you three times whether you have faith enough. If you leave this chapter with a rule that says *old good, new bad, or Scandinavian good, American bad*, you have learned the wrong thing and you will teach your class the wrong thing. And you will have no way to explain 432, four numbers after *Softly and Tenderly*, a perfectly respectable text from 1833

1. “The Development of the *Ambassador Hymnal*” (M.Div. dissertation, Association Free Lutheran Theological Seminary, 2008), by the chairman of the hymnal committee. Copies are distributed by AFLC Parish Education.

in which every stanza begins *Take up thy cross* and the whole burden of the hymn is what the singer must do.

Substance, not vintage. That is the whole method.

One more turn, and it points forward.

Go to 440. Three stanzas, one from the Father, one from the Son, one from the Spirit, and every one makes the same request:

“Give Me thy heart,” says the Father above— No gift so precious to Him as our love.

Something has reversed. Through this whole section the movement has run from the singer toward God — coming, seeking, deciding, yielding. Now the Trinity is asking the singer for a gift, the gift is his heart, and the third stanza names the terms: *All that thou hast to My keeping resign — Make full surrender and give Me thy heart.*

Full surrender. Hold that phrase and turn one page. At 441, Elisha Hoffman turns it into a question the singer must answer about himself — *Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?* — and into a warning that he cannot have rest or be perfectly blest until it is. That is chapter eight, and it is the one that has done the quiet damage to people I know: not the ones who were never converted, but the ones who were, and who then spent thirty years being told that the reason they still struggled was that they had not yielded hard enough.

For now, notice only the direction of the arrow. At 410 God gives and the sinner receives. At 440 the sinner gives and God receives. Both are in your hymnal, thirty numbers apart, and the second is not a deeper version of the first. It is a different transaction.

I have spent this chapter taking things apart, and I am not going to leave you there, because if I do I will have committed the very error I am describing. I will have handed you a fresh inspection to perform on yourself — this time on your hymn-singing — and sent you off to worry about whether you have sung correctly enough. That would be a fine joke on me and a bad chapter for you.

So let me tell you where the invitation is actually issued, and answered, in your congregation.

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, where the same word that Speratus called a mirror turns into a promise the moment the preacher reaches the second half of his text. It is issued at a rail, in bread and in the cup, where the blood that is on Calvary in hymn 422 is not on Calvary anymore but here, given and shed *for you* — and the whole sacrament turns on that last word. Your own hymnal puts it plainly, at page 80, in the fifth article of the Augsburg Confession:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.

Not when and where we decide. When and where He pleases, through the means He appointed.

And then the article does something I did not expect to find sitting in a pew book, and I want to handle it carefully. It closes by condemning those who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external word of the Gospel.

That sentence is aimed at the radicals of the 1520s and not at anybody who ever wrote a gospel song, and I am not going to pretend otherwise. Philip Bliss was not an Anabaptist and neither is the woman who requested hymn 441 last month. But look at the mechanism the article names — the Spirit arriving by way of what happens inside a person, his preparation, his thinking, his effort, rather than by way of a word spoken to him from outside. That is not a description of a sixteenth-century sect. That is a description of what a hymn teaches when it makes the singer's coming the hinge, and it is printed a hundred pages from the hymns that do it.

That is why location matters so much, and why a hymn that leaves the coming unlocated leaves a door open behind it. If the 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. You can only be told about it again.

Which is exactly what your hymnal does, seven numbers before *Just as I am*, in the seventh stanza of Speratus — a stanza most congregations sing without noticing that it has just answered the entire chapter you have been reading:

Baptized into Thy precious name, My faith cannot be put to shame, And I shall never perish.

And if that is too tidy for the two-in-the-morning version of you, turn back three more numbers to 414.

I am not going to print it. The English of that hymn is somebody's work and is still under copyright, and this book does not reproduce what it has no right to reproduce. But you own a copy. Open it.

Here is what to know before you do. The text is Johann Franck, who studied law at Königsberg while the Thirty Years' War was still running, came home to Guben, and was elected its mayor in 1661 — the same man who gave us *Jesus, Priceless Treasure*, which is at 186 in this book. It was put into English by a Norwegian-American pastor who served in Minot before spending twenty-four years as president of Luther Seminary, and it went into the *Concordia Hymnal* of 1932 set to a tune by Ludvig Lindeman, which is why a German lawyer's hymn sounds Norwegian to everyone who sings it here.

It is Romans 8 with the questions left in. Read the first stanza and count what it puts in the dock: the accusation, the bitter memory, the old scar opening again, the sins of weakness that come back years late and whisper that you are finished. Every one of those is the two-in-the-morning voice, printed in a hymnal, in meter.

Then read what answers them. It is three words long and it is in the past tense, and there is not one syllable in it about how you responded.

Then read the last stanza, which puts you in front of the bench where *Almost Persuaded* left you standing with your bitter wail. This time it is not the sinner who speaks. God the Judge pronounces, and the sentence has two halves: the man is guilty, and the man is free.

That is the verdict, and it is not *almost*. You did not persuade the Judge. The Judge announced. And 409, one number before Speratus, tells you what to do with it when you are dying: *Be this in death my comfort; despite my fears 'tis well with me. I know my sin in all its greatness, but also Him who sets me free.*

Sing 431 at the funeral if it comforts you. Sing 428 too — there is still room, for thee, alway. But make sure somebody sings 414 first.

*This is where the sample ends. The rest of By Heart is the invitation
it opens onto.*

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