



Simple Gifts: Great Hymns: One Man's Search for Grace

Bill Henderson

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If there is one simple phrase that lies at the heart of this moving tribute to the pleasures of singing hymns, it is this: "Only joy." Bill Henderson, a tough man with a gentle vision, found community and religious grace as a middle-aged man while lifting his voice in church. In a book that will inspire readers to share his passion, he writes of his love of traditional hymns and how he sought to learn about their origins. This is a much-needed book about the songs of our lives and will be warmly welcomed by thoughtful people of many faiths, especially those who reject the narrow orthodoxies of religious fundamentalism.

For Bill Henderson, the researching of his favorite hymns became more than fact-finding. As the author went about his research, he learned that he had cancer. Someone slipped a note into his typewriter: "Only Joy," it read. He adopted that phrase as a motto for writing and for life. While *Simple Gifts* is partly a memoir, it is a work not about one man's health but about his pursuit of godliness. That the joy of congregational song aided Henderson in his recovery he has no doubt, but he offers a wider vision, one that is truly life-enhancing.

Bill Henderson grew up attending a Presbyterian church in Philadelphia with his quietly religious family. He left his faith as he became a teenager and didn't rediscover it until many decades later. What brought him back to church was the sheer pleasure he found in singing old familiar hymns with others. Some of these hymns moved him to tears, and so he decided to immerse himself in the history of Christian music.

With three themes under consideration -- Songs of Simplicity, of Wonder, and of Love -- the author begins with a look back at plain chant; the songs of Martin Luther, Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, and others; and the emergence of modern church music. "Simple Gifts," the great Shaker hymn, opens the Songs of Simplicity section, which includes "In the Garden" as well as many Christmas carols like "O Holy Night" and Christina Rossetti's "In the Bleak Midwinter."

The amazing story behind "Amazing Grace" leads into the Songs of Wonder chapter. Also appreciated here are "Be Thou My Vision" and "How Great Thou Art." With the Prayer of St. Francis as a pretext, Henderson discusses Songs of Love: "Make Me a Channel of Your Peace," "There Is a Balm in Gilead," and "Abide With Me."

Henderson believes that many of these old hymns are in danger of being forgotten as "modern" churches have adopted rock-based music or watered-down, politically correct verses. More important, he meditates on the hymns' values as he tries to understand his own relationship with God, even as they inspired him through his bout with a life-threatening illness.

While this book celebrates mainstream Protestant hymns, it is by no means sectarian. It is about songs of the heart, songs that move us, the songs of our lives. It is about joy.

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