

Why Don't Hymns End with "Amen"?

A Leader Reader by David Eicher

The Meaning of Amen!

If you have grown up in a Christian church, you have probably used the word "amen" more times than you can count. You've spoken it at the end of prayers, you might have said it when you agreed with what someone said, and if you sang hymns from a Presbyterian hymnal published before the current 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*, you probably sang "amen" at the end of every hymn. So where did the amens go? Why aren't they printed anymore, and why did we stop singing them?

We can begin to answer that question by thinking about the meaning of the word *amen*. Its most common usage is as a response. It is part of a liturgical conversation. Someone says something to us or on our behalf, and we respond, "Amen." By doing so, we give our assent. It's our way of saying, "I agree with that and I want to say so. I believe it." Since ancient times this has been the way the people have responded to prayers, particularly the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In some congregations, this vocal response becomes an important part of preaching the Word. As the pastor interprets the Word, listeners join the "conversation" by interjecting "Amen" to those points that echo their own beliefs and commitments.

A second historic use is as it appears in some of the moral teachings of Jesus. In the Greek those sayings begin "Amen, amen, I say to you" (English Bible translations more often have "Truly, truly, I say to you"), indicating that these sayings are true and binding on all those who hear them. This usage signals statements of special importance.

Prayer

Give us, O Lord, a reverence for the truth,
the desire both to think and to speak truly.
Save us from all fear of truth.
Grant us all an appreciation of beauty
and things that are lovely.
Increase our reverence for them;
help us to see in them a part of your
revelation of yourself,
that beauty becomes you no less than truth
and righteousness;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy
Spirit,
one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

—Book of Common Worship (Louisville, KY:
Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 830.

History of Using "Amen" in Hymns

What about "Amen" at the end of hymns? How do these ancient uses of the word apply to something that everyone sings? Or do they? Early American Presbyterian hymnals did not have any amens printed. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* of 1874 prints an amen only on chants that end with "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end." The chant version of The Lord's Prayer also has a sung amen, but no hymns include one. When we look at the 1911 revision

of *The Hymnal* (1895), we suddenly find an amen after every hymn. What happened? Why did they suddenly appear?

One of the most famous of all hymnals, the 1861 edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, was printed in England. This hymnal, influenced by the Oxford Movement, which had an ardent interest in Latin hymnody, made available many of these hymns in English translations. The doxologies (“... world without end”), with their amen attached, were a large part of this hymnal. So enamored of Latin hymnody were the compilers that they added doxological stanzas to every hymn, and therefore they added an amen to every hymn. The custom spread through Anglican hymnals and was imitated by the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians, and by some Methodists and Baptists. It seems the only reason it was picked up was that other denominations believed the Church of England knew what it was doing in liturgical matters. The custom that began in England crossed the waters to the United States, and soon we were singing an amen following our hymns. It seems a bit strange that nineteenth-century American Presbyterians would be so influenced by the Church of England, but we followed along with all the other Protestant denominations.

When Should We Stand up When Singing a Hymn?

When the musician plays the introduction for a hymn, just when should you stand? It seems very random in some churches and very ordered in others. Is there a rule?

Actually, there is no rule. Local custom is the rule and worship leaders should agree on this. Some stand on the first note of the introduction to the song, while others stand on the last line. If you are a visitor, it's best to watch the worship leader or choir and everyone else since there is no hard-and-fast rule. The church you visit may be very different than your own church.

The reason those (who are able) do stand to sing is twofold. First, we sing better when standing. Our diaphragm is not squeezed as it is when we are sitting, and we can reach a higher note range. Many also feel it is more respectful to sing praises to God while standing.

Now consider that prior to the 1861 publication of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, hymns did not include a sung amen. The Protestant Reformation hymns did not have an amen. The Calvinist psalms were sung without an amen. The hymns of Isaac Watts, the thousands of hymns by Charles and John Wesley, the hymns of the Great Awakening, and the early American hymnals all were published without a sung amen at the end of the hymns. The only reason they were added was that a very influential English hymnal decided to add a doxological stanza to every hymn printed in that collection.

Around 1920, the Church of England recognized that adding a doxological stanza and its attendant amen had been a rather odd thing to do, so they began to abandon the practice. By about 1950 the amen on hymns had virtually disappeared in England, although the custom held on a little longer in Scotland. Erik Routley, one of the foremost hymnologists of the twentieth century, wrote in his book *Church Music and the Christian Faith* (1978): “Now consider what a patchwork of misunderstanding and anachronism all this is. Singing amen after post-Reformation hymns was unknown before about 1850. There is no older precedent for it, it was in any case an error, and those who initiated it have long repented of it.”¹

The Practice Today

Since 1975 no major American hymnal prints an amen on each hymn, and most hymn writers of the last thirty years don't include them either. There is no liturgical or musical reason for singing them, and we have finally realized they were printed in error. Recent hymnals have corrected the error and left the amen to its more authentic spoken responsive use.

The historic use of the word *amen* indicates that the statement just made is true and personally binding. So let's say it like we mean it.

Endnote

1. Published by Agape, Carol Stream, IL, in 1978. The quote is from page 98.

About the Writer

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