

"The good old hymns" defined

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

March 22, 2011

As a church musician, I've been known to program what I thought were familiar Charles Wesley hymns, only to find my non-Methodist song leaders tongue-tied by the ambitious melodies and all-doctrine-all-the-time words. When I have a week off and visit an Episcopal church, the *Hymnal 1982*'s Arthur Sullivan tunes make my mind wander to operetta. The various denominational hymnals have their peculiarities.

But they also have a great deal in common. *Christianity Today's* [special issue on worship](#) includes an [article](#) detailing just how much. Robert T. Coote looks at 28 hymnals published since the late 1800s by the six largest mainline denominations (and their main predecessor bodies) and tallies up the most commonly occurring songs. These 13 hymns appear in all 28 books:

Abide with Me: Fast Falls the Eventide  
All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name  
Come, Ye Thankful People, Come  
Crown Him with Many Crowns  
Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken  
Guide Me, Oh Thou Great Jehovah  
Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty  
How Firm a Foundation, Ye Saints  
In the Cross of Christ I Glory  
Jesus Shall Reign Wher'er the Sun  
Love Divine, All Loves Excelling  
O Sacred Head, Now Wounded  
When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Eight or nine of these would make my shortlist of staple hymns, but a couple surprised me--and I can't even come up with the tune for "How Firm a Foundation." (I thought I knew the 1978 *Lutheran Book of Worship* backwards and forwards.) Do any of them surprise you?

Coote's complete list--the top 27 hymns--is [here](#). His accompanying [article](#) helpfully details the methodology behind the list. But read at your own risk, all ye who love the mainline, as it also includes little jabs like this:

In view of the stance of most mainline Protestants in the late 1800s, the spiritually warm and orthodox character of these hymns is not surprising. What is somewhat surprising, given the unsettledness in some denominational quarters today, is that these hymns continue to be valued.

I don't find this surprising, but then I don't associate spiritual warmth exclusively with conservatives. But ideological digs aside, Coote's hymnal research is a great idea for an article, and it produced a fascinating list for all of us who love hymns.