

(Re)writing songs for Pentecost

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Somewhere in my queue of non-time-sensitive articles to write—yes, it's been there a while—is one on the history and practice of making theologically significant changes to traditional American songs. Not just line-level edits like neutering/diversifying gendered language or [using “love” in place of “wrath.”](#) I mean re-imagining songs in a thoroughgoing way, while also preserving much of the existing imagery and language patterns. ([I posted some time ago](#) about one historical example.)

I [write songs](#) and play traditional music, but I haven't actually tried this approach myself. Partly because I love this music and am hesitant to change it, spatial dualism (or substitutionary atonement, or us-vs.-them mentality) aside. Also because I take seriously the context and the genuine faith of those who wrote it. Anyway, I may try rewriting most of a traditional song's words at some point, but I haven't done it yet.

What I have done is *add* verses. This comes up in my work as a church musician, and it's usually pretty last-minute: I choose a song ahead of time, and then later I get a closer look while preparing the bulletin and I balk at some of the words. I end up using some of the existing verses but also adding one, to expand the song's theology without erasing it. So when we did Hank Williams's "[When I Get to Glory I'm Gonna Sing, Sing Sing](#)," we pined for heavenly blastoff for a few verses before ending with a new one about how we'll also be sing, sing, singing right here on earth.

Planning Pentecost music this week, I wanted to include "Every Time I Hear the Spirit." In this case, I love the typical hymnal verses—but they're not very *Pentecost-y*. One's about troubles and woes and the Lord's care; another draws from Moses on the mountaintop; a third juxtaposes familiar images of the chilly Jordan and the train bound for glory. Now, you could argue that the Spirit's present in all this, so why not? But I wanted to hit the day's more particular themes, so I came up with this:

The Spirit fills us with holy power
Right here in this place, right at this hour.
The Spirit binds us as holy friends
To go back out where the Spirit sends.

We'll do this one and the "Oh, I have troubles..." verse. It's not a perfect solution, but it does honor the song's history while also addressing the day's liturgical needs.

Also, I just posted the last entry in my song-per-church-season project. (I know, Pentecost isn't really a season.) And lest the above leaves you thinking I don't like old songs unless I can change them a lot, note that the words are from the medieval *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, modernized and moved around but not substantively altered:

Come, Holy Spirit by Steve Thorngate

For more of my liturgical music, visit my [Facebook page](#).