

Onward Christian Soldiers

Hymn of the Month

Just as picturesque scenes can bring peace and calmness to the soul, so does beautiful music

The Hymn



With lyrics full of soldiers, marching, and banners, and a tune with a

military cadence, "Onward, Christian Soldiers" is a stirring, call to action hymn.

A careful reading reveals that the message of the text is symbolic, however, and does not literally call for violent military confrontations in defense of the faith. The battles being fought are the age-old everyday encounters of good against evil.

The symbolism of the army suggests the need for Christians to work together and be unified behind one leader, Jesus Christ, in order to be successful against the adversary. This is given emphasis in the third verse, "We are not divided, all one body we . . ." The author's use of the term "body" reinforces the message of unity, bringing to mind the Biblical Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians where he describes the church of Christ as one body having many members.

The text acknowledges that the battle has been going on for thousands of year by reference to the 'Saints' in whose steps we tread. The Author, who was a clergyman of the Church of England, most likely was referring to canonized Saints such as St. Peter.

Closer to our time, Joseph and Hyrum Smith, sculptures of whom are shown in the photo above, are a great example of revered, but not canonized, latter-day Saints who, as the text admonishes, were brothers not divided in life or in death.

Both were killed for their Christian faith by a mob in 1844, and millions striving to be modern latter-day Saints tread in their footsteps today.

The Author



Sabine Baring-Gould was born in January of 1834, the eldest child of Edward Baring-Gould and Sophia Charlotte Bond. He was christened in March of that year at St. Sidwells Church, Exeter, England. Exeter is

situated on the river Exe in southwestern England about ten miles north of the English Channel and 35 miles east of Lewtrenchard, the parish where the Baring-Gould family estate was located.

According to an 1870 gazetteer, much of the land in the Lewtrenchard parish belonged to the Baring-Gould estate and Lewtrenchard Manor House, also known as Lew House, was the family home. This property near the western border of Dartmoor National Park had been in the Gould family since the 1600's. The area is in what is now known as West Devon. The unusual parish name is said to have originated with the local River Lew and the Trenchard family who were very early owners of the property.

Sabine Baring-Gould's unusual given name was a family name, and he is said to have been named after his great uncle, General Sir Edward Sabine, an arctic explorer and scientist. The family name was hyphenated by his grandfather, William, who was the son of Charles Baring and Margaret Gould. This was done by Royal License. Hyphenation of last names was a fairly common practice at that time. The family name of an heiress would be joined to her husband's to preserve the family name with the property. The Baring family were said to have been in the merchant trade and

The Composer



Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan was born to Thomas and Mary Clementina Sullivan in May of 1842 at Lambeth, England. Lambeth is a borough of London, bordering the River Thames on the south. Thomas Sullivan

was reported to have been a theatre musician and was then an army bandmaster. Young Arthur was a child musical prodigy who, with access to the band instruments through his father, was said to have been able to play them all by the age of eight.

It is said that his father did not encourage him to make a career of music, knowing firsthand the insecurity and difficulties that accompanied the profession. However, Arthur's talent and passion for music prevailed and at the age of eleven he was accepted as one of the choristers, or choir-boys, of the Chapel Royal, although he was older than the usual age. Here he received excellent tutoring. His first published work, a sacred song, was completed at the age of about thirteen.

His opportunities increased after winning a scholarship competition, although the youngest contestant, that allowed him to study at the Royal Academy of Music, and to go abroad to study at Leipzig Conservatoire.

He returned to England about 1862 and a successful performance of his conservatory final examination piece at the Crystal Palace is said to have brought great recognition and began building his reputation.

In these early years, he earned a living as a teacher, church organist, editor and conductor, while increasing his abilities as a

In addition to the Biblical account of the Lord going before Joshua into battle, and mention of armies with banners by Solomon, the imagery provided in the hymn text of the Master leading the battle and the soldiers seeing His banner go before them can also be related to military tradition regarding hand-to-hand combat that took place centuries after the Biblical accounts. It is understood that during the Crusades of the twelfth century the numerous Sovereigns and Lords of Europe whose armies engaged in expeditions to the Holy Land adopted particular marks or ensigns to distinguish themselves in order to marshal their troops under their banner. In battle the banner or ensign was held aloft so it could be seen amid the confusion of the conflict and it gave the soldiers a point of reference.

Battle flags continued to be used after that time. A notable example is the crucial American Revolutionary War battle that led to the writing of the national anthem, 'The Star Spangled Banner.'

The hymn's reference to "the cross of Jesus going on before," identifies the symbol the author believed would be on Christ's banner or battle flag. In a figurative sense, looking to Christ as we fight our daily battles with whatever challenge we face will help us be victorious, and endure, like Timothy in the Bible, "as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

What is "the sign of triumph" mentioned in the second verse that will cause Satan's host to flee? There are layers of meaning possible in this phrase. On a grand scale, the appearance of the Savior at His Second Coming, as prophesied in scriptures, fits the description perfectly. On a smaller personal scale, the presence of the Holy Ghost in response to prayer, and triumph over temptation are other possibilities. Likewise, the "victory" sought for can be seen as both the ultimate victory of Christ over death and Satan, and our personal victory over the adversary through repentance and the atonement of Christ.

The hymn states that "hell's foundations quiver at the shout of praise," and encourages the soldiers to lift their voices in anthems. This thought, that the power

banking businesses and the Gould's were landowners as mentioned above.

Sabine Baring-Gould's father, Edward, had served in the military and gained the rank of Lieutenant in the Madras Light Cavalry. Having traveled abroad as a young man before his marriage, it is said that he tired of country life at Lewtrenchard and in 1849 he leased the manor house and took his family to Europe. They traveled about living in different places until 1851 when Sabine was about seventeen.

These travels were said to have been an influence on his interests and in the direction of his life. Sabine was educated by a private tutor during this time and is said to have become fluent in several languages. He kept a diary in which he appeared to have pondered the meaning of life and become a converted Christian. At the age of seventeen he set out three goals for his life: the moral and spiritual improvement of Lew Parish, the restoration of the parish church and the restoration and reconstruction of the manor-house. In this diary he also recorded numerous poems, self-illustrated stories and accounts. These were the beginning of his prolific authorship.

Sabine entered Clare College, Cambridge University; receiving a B.A. degree about 1857, and an M.A. about 1860. He had a desire to enter the ministry, but his parents did not approve, they wanted him to have a gentleman's situation more suited to his family's position in upper class society.

He had a deep religious conviction, however, and is said to have been influenced by the Oxford or "Tractarian" movement which began about 1833. This movement tried to effect change in the Church of England. Sabine appears to have had a corresponding design to make a difference in the world and the church.

He worked as a teacher until about 1864 when, at the age of thirty, he went to Yorkshire and was ordained at Ripon prior to his appointment as curate, or assistant priest, at Horbury, about ten miles south of Leeds. His mother had passed away the previous year, and his father is reported to have reconciled to his decision and

composer. He became much in demand for commissioned works. His numerous compositions varied widely over the course of his career, from the sacred to the secular, from classical symphony to comic opera.

His father died suddenly about 1866, and it is said that he expressed his grief in writing the overture "In Memoriam." He was reported to be close to his parents and his only sibling, his older brother Frederic, who died young, ten years after their father. His well-known song "The Lost Chord" was said to have been written during his brother's final illness.

In 1871, the same year he composed the hymn tune for "Onward, Christian Soldiers," which was the best known of about seventy hymn tunes written by him, he collaborated for the first time with William Schwenck Gilbert, with whom his name would be paired in later fame.

The Gilbert and Sullivan partnership produced ten operas between 1877 and 1889; 'H.M.S. Pinafore,' 'The Pirates of Penzance,' and 'The Mikado' were among the most enduringly popular.

During this time, Arthur Sullivan also wrote a cantata based on Longfellow's 1851 dramatic poem, 'The Golden Legend,' which was said to be one of the most popular sacred works of the time, rivaling Handel's 'Messiah.'

He received honorary doctoral degrees from both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, received foreign honors, and in 1883 was knighted by Queen Victoria for his service to music.

His success in music unfortunately did not carry over into other areas of his life. He never married, and suffered from ill health. After his brother and sister-in-law died, it is said that he became guardian to their children and took care of them. His oldest nephew is reported to have stayed with him through the end of his life.

This end came unseasonably early as Arthur Sullivan passed away in November of 1900 at the age of 58 after a heart attack. His wish to be buried next to his parents and brother was said to have been overruled by the Queen who insisted that his remains be

of the adversary can be shaken by Christians singing praises to the Lord together, is significant.

Although the military oriented text written in the nineteenth century refers to "Brothers," the messages of courage, unity, tenacity, hope, charity, and blending our voices in praise are equally suited to "Sisters," which makes an enlightening substitution.

The text of "Onward, Christian Soldiers" has been sung by all ages, but it was originally written for children in about 1864.

At that time in England, society had been strictly divided by classes, but a social movement was in progress. Churches had become involved in providing education for children whose families could not afford the preparatory schools such as Eton. Prior to this movement, education was reserved for the upper class, and there was little education available for the working class and the poor. In the Church of England a society was established about 1811 with the goal to have a school in every parish. It is said that many of the local clergymen wholeheartedly engaged in this initiative. The schools taught reading, writing, arithmetic and religion (the four 'R's).

The author of our hymn, Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould, was one of these clergymen, and had been ordained as such in the Church of England shortly before he wrote the hymn text. He is reported to have said in regard to the writing of the hymn that the children of his school in Yorkshire were to participate in a school festival at a neighboring village. He wanted the children to sing while marching to the other village about a mile away but couldn't think of anything suitable, so he sat up at night and wrote something himself. "Onward, Christian Soldiers" was the result of his efforts.

Sources variously identify that the festival was in celebration of Whitsuntide, the time surrounding Pentecost, also known as Whitsunday, fifty days after Easter, and specifically Whit-Monday (the Monday after Pentecost) or Whit-Tuesday, which were traditional festival days.

withdrew his threat of leaving the estate to a younger son.

His first work in the ministry involved building a mission at Horbury. The children of the mission school are believed to be those for whom he wrote his "Hymn for procession of children with cross and banners" which we know as "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

Here he met his future wife, Grace Taylor, who is said to have been a beautiful girl in her teens who taught a class at the mission school. Although Grace was much younger and she was reported to have been a poor mill girl, he is believed to have helped with her education and they married in 1868. Although marriage between a couple of such different social standing was frowned on in society at the time, they were reported to be very happy together until her death 48 years later. They had fifteen children, fourteen of whom lived to adulthood.

Reverend Baring-Gould became vicar at Dalton, Yorkshire and then in 1871 they were sent to East Mersea, in Essex, where he was Rector for ten years.

In 1881, his father having passed away and inheriting the Baring-Gould estate, Sabine took his family to his ancestral home at Lewtrenchard where he became the squire and parson, an unusual position known as squarson. He then commenced the fulfillment of his early goals, restoring the parish church and rebuilding the manor house. In addition to his writing, he also served as Justice of the Peace and was active in archaeological work in the area. He loved the moors and nature, and was skilled in painting. He was said to be rather eclectic and eccentric, however, he took his church duties seriously and was said to give powerful but brief sermons.

He believed that any point could be made in fifteen minutes, and any speech longer than that was unnecessary repetition.

With many responsibilities and demands, life was challenging. Sabine said of himself, "I am very much like a buoy, every wave goes over me, and yet I am never completely submerged." According to memoirs of his descendants, he was devoted to his large family, although

entombed at St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

Onward, Christian Soldiers

Onward, Christian soldiers!
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before;
Christ, the royal Master,
Leads against the foe.
Forward into battle,
See his banner go!

Chorus:
Onward, Christian soldiers!
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before.

At the sign of triumph,
Satan's host doth flee;
On, then, Christian soldiers,
On to victory.
Hell's foundations quiver
At the shout of praise.
Brothers, lift your voices,
Loud your anthems raise.

Chorus:
Onward, Christian soldiers!
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before.

Like a mighty army
Moves the Church of God;
Brothers, we are treading
Where the saints have trod;
We are not divided;
All one body we,
One in hope and doctrine,
One in charity.

Chorus:
Onward, Christian soldiers!
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before.

Onward, then, ye people,
Join our happy throng,
Blend with ours your voices
In the triumph song;
Glory, laud and honor
Unto Christ, the King,

The text is believed to have been written some time in advance of the event, and he is understood to have said that it was written in great haste, and he was concerned about its quality. A few changes were made from his handwritten manuscript before the hymn's widespread publication, but they were minor. Its subsequent popularity was a surprise to him.

It is reported that the tune originally used was a classical theme by Haydn, and various arrangements of this tune were common in the following years. The text was also set to tunes by other composers, however, a tune named ST. GERTRUDE written for the text by Arthur Sullivan began being used in the early 1870's and is the only tune used today. The wonderful fit of the tune with the text is believed to be a significant factor in the hymn's lasting popularity.

The original text is said to have had six verses. Two verses that are not commonly sung today, included below, show what the author believed the church of God should be.

What the saints established,
That I hold for true.
What the saints believed,
That I believe too.
Long as earth endureth,
Men the faith will hold,
Kingdoms, nations, empires,
In destruction rolled.

Crowns and thrones may perish,
Kingdoms rise and wane,
But the church of Jesus
Constant will remain.
Gates of hell can never
'Gainst that church prevail;
We have Christ's own promise,
And that cannot fail.

The hymn was originally titled, 'Hymn for Procession (of children) with Cross and Banners,' and is said to have first been published in 'The Church Times,' October 15, 1864. It has become one of the most enduringly popular hymns, and is reported to have been published in over 1400 hymnals of various denominations.

being very near-sighted he sometimes had difficulties identifying them. Which, in conjunction with a rather stern demeanor led to reports of his being indifferent to them. His wife, Grace, preceded him in death and on her grave he placed a marker with a Latin inscription which meant "Half my soul." Their relationship is believed by a few sources to have provided some inspiration to their acquaintance, George Bernard Shaw, in his writing of "Pygmalion."

Sabine Baring-Gould authored a wide variety of books and other publications over the course of his 89 years and was considered one of the top ten authors in England in the late 1800s. He was known to write while standing and had a special desk made for this purpose. His writings varied from a fifteen volume series on the lives of the Saints, to a collection of local folk-songs, (which was said to be one of his favorite works.) He also wrote numerous hymns, published hymn collections and translations, and wrote books on folklore and many fictional novels. It is believed that he wrote the novels for the income they provided for his rebuilding efforts. He wrote many scholarly works, but is best remembered for those few verses known as "Onward, Christian Soldiers," that were jotted down in a few minutes one evening.

After a remarkably productive life, Sabine Baring-Gould passed away in January of 1924, shortly before his 90th birthday, and was buried beside his wife in his own churchyard at Lewtrenchard.

This thro' countless ages
Men and angels sing.

Chorus:
Onward, Christian soldiers!
Marching as to war,
With the cross of Jesus
Going on before.

"Onward, Christian Soldiers" appeared in the 1889 edition of "The Latter-Day Saints Psalmody" and in subsequent editions of "Hymns, The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-Day Saints" (LDS Hymnal.) The hymn is essentially unchanged over this time period, with only a very few modifications to spelling, punctuation, musical notation, and the wording of the tenor part in the chorus. A slightly lower and simpler key was used in the 1985 edition.

In 2014 we celebrate the 150th anniversary of writing of the hymn text, and the timeless message of encouragement to continue marching in our daily battles, lift our voices in praise to the Lord, and invite others to join with us, is as relevant as ever before.



Information in this article came from:

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