Onward!

The Story of a Yorkshire Children's Song

The Beginning: The Road from Horbury Bridge

In 1865, a young curate named Sabine Baring-Gould was ministering in Horbury Bridge, a small, poverty-stricken, coal-mining village in Yorkshire, just 23 miles north of Sheffield. On the eve of Whit-Monday (the day after Pentecost) Baring-Gould was looking for a suitable hymn that the children of Horbury Bridge could sing together on the rather long walk to the neighbouring village where the Whit-Monday celebrations were to happen. Unable to find something suitably simple, he hastily penned a few verses. Titling his new hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers", he set it to the tune of St Alban, a popular tune of the time.[1]

Baring-Gould was a classic Tractarian/High Church Anglican curate. The very act of a *processional march* with a physical cross and banners going "on before" is a deeply embedded High Church, liturgical tradition, one we still see today in many churches, including local ones, such as St Mary's, Walkley, St Marks, Broomhill, and St John's, Ranmoor. The hymn's structure reflects this love for outward, visible, orderly ritual.

The words of the hymn, according to its author, were influenced by two passages of the New Testament. Firstly, 2 Timothy 2 verses 3-7 where Paul encourages new Christians to *Endure suffering along with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus*, and Ephesians 6, verses 10-17, where Paul instructs the church to *"put on the whole armour of God"* to wrestle against the spiritual forces of evil.

Imagine then, a troop of underfed, distracted children expected to walk a mile or more to a neighbouring village. They'd likely be tired, distracted and unfocused. Baring-Gould wanted something to wake them up, inspire them, and keep them on task. I imagine he achieved it quite well with this song. What Baring-Gould didn't expect was what came next.

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[1] St Alban is a small section from the first movement of Haydn's Symphony No. 104, a tune used for other hymns such as 'Standing at the Portal'. You can hear the tune here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFrvkn6gsts

The Controversy: The Hymnal Wars

Baring-Gould's hymn was published in *The Church Times* the same year it was written, and subsequently a few hymnals picked it up for inclusion. It was perhaps in crossing the Atlantic to the USA, where the civil war had recently ended and the spirit of soldier-hood was still rife in the people, that the hymn gained some popularity. Back in Britain it languished in relative anonymity until Sir Arthur Sullivan (of Gilbert & Sullivan) came across it and wrote a new tune for it in 1871—the tune we know today.[2]

For the next 70-80 years the hymn became a favourite of congregations around the world, and it wasn't until the end of the second world war that church leaders began to feel uncomfortable with its content. Still, it stayed a staple of hymnals until the 1970s when some, at first quietly, and then more vocally began to drop it, with some denominations speaking out passionately against the hymn, its military, imperialistic, and triumphalist overtones being seen as incompatible with a peaceful religion.[3]

Between 1970 and 2000 there followed a wave of exclusions, followed in some cases by fierce congregational backlashes. The hymn was excluded, and then re-included in some hymnals, while in others it disappeared for good. Today, the hymn occupies a strange space: it is officially excluded from a vast number of modern, mainline Protestant hymnals, yet where it does remain, congregations often sing it with a fierce, nostalgic loyalty.

Although the words of the hymn make it clear that the focus is on a spiritual battle, that our King is the omnipotent Christ, and that our foe is Satan—not people different to ourselves—many still choose to see this hymn as a literal battle cry. We know the Christian faith itself has suffered over the generations due to people taking the metaphors of the Bible literally. It seems we want to do this also to some of our great hymns, especially this one, which to many seems an archaic and aggressively militaristic relic of Victorian triumphalism that dangerously conflates the peaceful message of Christ with historical conquest and the glorification of war.

While I can be empathic with the anti-military sentiment, I cannot agree with such a narrow view of the hymn, where it seems all history and nuance has been crushed to

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[2] Sullivan's tune is known as St Gertrude. You can hear a stunning organ recital of the piece, with full choir here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzIAK1Uv-CM

[3] While it is certainly true that for the first three hundred years or so the early church was strictly pacifist, the "Just War" theory, used to justify much combat and bloodshed over the subsequent centuries was put in place as early as the 4th century. Since then the church as a whole, and since its formation the Church of England in particular, being tied to the state, has had an ambiguous relationship with war. From an outsiders perspective the Christian faith does not look like a peaceful religion. Whether a particular war should be supported or not is a frequent dilemma, so it is odd that the words of a single hymn should be given so much focus, when actual major world wars went unconfronted, as do some modern day wars, e.g. the First Gulf War of 1991, which occurred well after the banning of Onward Christian Soldiers.

serve a temporary, modern-day liberal agenda.[4] In other words, it is cool these days to be a pacifist,[5] and therefore any reference to anything war-related, whether literal or metaphorical, is automatically bad.

The Awakening: The View from the Trenches

Taking a more nuanced view of the hymn is the purpose of this piece. In doing so we discover something very different to war glorification. We find love and compassion for those often considered *the least of these*.

To understand this we need to look closer at the scripture that inspired the hymn. Most analyses of the hymn focus, fairly, on the third verse of 2 Timothy 2, "*Endure suffering along with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus"*. What they neglect is to look at the following verses, 4-7.

> *…Soldiers don't get tied up in the affairs of civilian life, for then they cannot please the officer who enlisted them. And athletes cannot win the prize unless they follow the rules. And hardworking farmers should be the first to enjoy the fruit of their labor. Think about what I am saying. The Lord will help you understand all these things.*

Sabine Baring-Gould had taken on Christ's work in one of the poorest parts of the country, serving a community riddled with poverty, danger and death. Likely ordered around and kept in their place by the captains of industry, these people lacked internal discipline and all—perhaps especially the children—are just considered a rag-tag, unruly mob, unworthy of any particular attention. Baring-Gould didn't see them that way. He was a much-loved teacher and mentor to many, a man who cared dearly for his flock, and wished to lift their morale, and their own sense of self. Staying up late into the night to write a hymn for the children because he was unable to find one he felt suited the occasion was a great act of love. Turning to scripture he sought passages that talked of oneness, camaraderie, love of Christ and fellow, and perhaps above all, discipline.

The selected verses from 2 Timothy 2 tell us to be like soldiers, suffering for something greater than self, to lift ourselves above the concerns of everyday life, if only for this one moment, to follow the rules, and become worthy to enjoy the fruits of our labour. Stirring words for a disempowered, oppressed people.

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[4] Rather ironically, this hymn is also frowned upon by the more right-wing, charismatic church, not for anything to do with the lyrics, but because the tune is considered out of keeping with modern-day worship songs. Onward Christian Soldiers gets it from all sides!

[5] Except when it comes to the war in Ukraine, which inspires liberals to proudly display the Ukrainian flag on their social media pages, and write of the evils of Putin and Russia, apparently blind to the hypocrisy.

Further to this, we turn to Ephesians 6, verses 10-17, where Paul instructs the church to *"put on the whole armour of God"* to wrestle against the spiritual forces of evil. This is actually a beautiful, metaphorical passage intended to rouse new Christians to their cause, which of course, at the time of writing, was very much akin to a battle, with Christians being the underdog.

Putting on *the helmet of salvation*, and *the breastplate of righteousness*, and picking up *the shield of faith* and *the sword of the Spirit* would have created a feeling of camaraderie and safety for Paul's new recruits. We should also note that Paul tells the Ephesians that their feet are *shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.* This hymn then can hardly be considered a war metaphor; it is something altogether more angelic, perhaps drawing from the imagery of the Book of Daniel.

The children Baring-Gould was working with were poor, and many had lost their fathers and elder brothers to mining accidents. He wanted to give them a sense of dignity, identity, and shared purpose. By framing these children, not as a ragged, unruly mob of kids, but as "soldiers" marching together, in step, under a unified banner, he attempted to instil a sense of belonging. The lyrics he penned that night emphasise collective action over individual effort:

"We are not divided, all one body we..."

"One in hope and doctrine, one in charity."

The original motivation, therefore, was both functional and compassionate: to use the power of communal rhythm and shared identity to keep a large group of children orderly, enthusiastic, energised, and moving in the same direction.

The Future: Singing the Ideal

Through writing this analysis I am hoping that individuals, and whole congregations will re-evaluate this hymn, and consider it in the light of its original intention. I can certainly see how the line, "*We are not divided, All one Body we*" can be considered naïve in today's divided world—but then again, back in the days of Jesus the world was just as divided, possibly even more so. And when we read the next line, *"One in faith and Spirit, One eternally"* we see that what is being raised here is an ideal—the very same ideal that Jesus asks us to turn our hearts to: One world, one people. Speaking—or singing—in ideals is a way to change the future, to say, in effect, no I don't accept the status quo, I believe deeply in the new tomorrow Isaiah predicted and Jesus promised with his new covenant.

I invite you to read this hymn with new eyes, and a new heart, and perhaps especially to ponder the final verse—maybe sing it aloud with me. Together we might capture the spirit of camaraderie and togetherness, as we consider ourselves, our own church,

and our denomination today and for all its history to be part of the greater body of Christ.

> *Onward, then, ye people! Join our happy throng;*
> *Blend with ours your voices, in the triumph song.*
> *Glory, laud and honour, unto Christ, the King;*
> *This through countless ages men and angels sing.*

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Tobias Mayer, 10 July 2026

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Assignment 2

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