

# The Purpose of a Hymn Book

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### An Agreed Canon of Traditional and Contemporary Hymns

The purpose of a published collection of hymns is to bring together in one place an agreed canon of traditional and recent hymns and worship songs whose words and music have been tried and tested by regular use or reasonable experiment and reveal a wide variety of form in both text and tune and span the ages and continents.

Such a hymn book is a resource of texts and accompanying tunes for those who prepare liturgy, those who accompany services, those who offer worship and those who use the church's hymns and songs as a devotional companion.

The primary purpose of a hymn-book is to be an easy and constant resource for all. The vast majority of the hymn texts and tunes need to be familiar.

In the revision of hymn texts and tunes any updating needs to be in a conservative mode. Words and tunes have often been committed to Christian memory where they have strengthened belief, revealed mystery, carried the weight of glory, anchored faith and stirred the heart. The faithful worshipper of many years does not suddenly want to find when they look up from the page that their neighbour, with eyes still fixed on the page or the screen, is singing different words. Nor do those long familiar with a tune want to find that some pedantic musicians have lengthened the note at the beginning and end of every line in the interests of purity and antiquarianism.

Nevertheless, many hymn texts have now rightly had their masculine pronouns or 'offending images' toned down or removed almost without being noticed. Phrases that have become totally obscure or now sound extremely odd have been given skilled attention. However, it is always easier to make out a case for 'revising' a 20th century text than a 17th or 18th century one.

### The Balancing of Old and New

Fine new words and good new tunes need to be found in every fresh collection of hymns but new hymn books should not be treated primarily as an opportunity for budding poets and eager musicians to offer untried words and unfamiliar tunes on an unsuspecting public. The church's repertoire of hymns and songs and good tunes is best increased when necessity, rather than novelty, is the mother of invention.

The time to add quality to the church's repertoire of hymns and tunes is primarily during the prolonged stages of constant experiment and repetition, in the decades between editions of a particular hymn collection, rather than on the eve of a new publication.

The reviewer of a good new hymn book may be well pleased to see many hymns and worship songs that have found the light of day since that hymn-book's predecessor was published but not so pleased to welcome a host of unfamiliar texts and untried tunes that have been included in the collection in the hope they will catch on. Too many hymn books have a sad list of hymns and tunes that never caught on and delighted few but the compilers.

A good reviewer of a new hymn collection might also look for a few fine hymns of former times that have been 'lost' and 'rediscovered'. Infallibility applies neither to new hymns and tunes incorporated nor to old texts and tunes removed.

## Cultural Myopia

Every worshipping culture needs to be able to find itself in its principal hymn collection but not thereby to render a new collection of hymns virtually unusable by congregations of other traditions. In ecumenical days it behoves denominational compilers to ask hymnologists of other traditions to furnish thirty or forty good hymns which represent the heart of another tradition outside that of the editors of a particular book. Some editors of hymnbooks are regularly exposed to worship outside their own tradition or culture and others are not. A good hymn book needs not only faithfully to express the mind and heart of the Christian sub-culture for which it is primarily produced but at the same time to transcend it.

## An Ecumenical Hymn Book

A good question might emerge in a *Local Ecumenical Partnership* involving say Anglicans, Methodists, URCs and Baptists. 'If we buy a new hymnbook which one shall it be?' Surely the search will concentrate on a book that reflects on the one hand the call of the gospel in conversion, commitment and growth in holiness and on the other both the *temporale* and the *sanctorale* of the wider church's calendar, and hymns of mission and justice.

A hymnbook may prove to be un-ecumenical because the unwritten sub-text might be saying – for instance, 'We – the compilers – don't do Mary, so there are no hymns about Mary in our collection, not even the good standard ones from other books – sorry'.

## Ordering the Contents

There are more or less three basic approaches to the arranging of the contents of a hymnbook. These we might call the classical – the experiential – and the contemporary.

### *Classical Arrangement of Contents*

The classical list of contents usually begins with Advent and moves progressively towards Pentecost, including the work of the Holy Spirit, and concluding with the Holy Trinity. There is then a series of hymns highlighting the gifts and graces of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the Apostles, of the Martyrs, of the Saints in particular, of All Saints, of John the Baptist and of Saint Michael and All Angels. The glory and gifts of God in creation, providence and harvest and the gift of the day and of the night may follow or precede the first section. The hymn sections in the classical contents then move through Initiation and Eucharist to Marriage, Healing, Funerals and the Faithful Departed. Here there is often included Remembrance and Anniversaries of those who have died.

This is the point at which some hymnbooks – with the classical order of contents – collapse and the second half of the book is simply headed 'General Hymns' or 'Hymns through the Year' rather as if the editors then gave up on categorisation!

### *Experiential Arrangement of Contents*

The experiential listing of the contents of a hymn book found its most celebrated form in the 1780 collection of *Wesley's Hymns* where the hymns of the Methodist revival marked and engendered the various stages of the Christian life from formal religion to inward religion. The hymns began with sections contemplating the goodness of God, the reality of death, judgement, heaven and hell, the stages of penitence, of backsliding and the onward pursuit of full redemption and the final goal of perfect love and Christian perfection and ultimately the anticipation of heaven itself.

As the experiential pilgrimage of evangelicals found its inevitable context in the wider church further sections were added to the contents of the hymnbook – on the person and work of Christ – and on

the person and work of the Holy Spirit — and hymns were now provided for times and seasons and for each of the means of grace.

Some of the later classically arranged hymnbooks did not degenerate into a huge *General* section but moved from the Christian Year to the *ordo salutis* — a surviving echo of the experiential tradition — albeit in a less intense form than the Wesleys' — but certainly including conversion and commitment and growth in holiness.

The ecumenical notion of reception clearly applies to hymn collections. Significantly 'catholic' hymn collections need to find a place for new experiential sections on the *ordo salutis* including conversion, commitment and personal holiness and the more 'protestant' hymn collections need to find a place for good hymns on Mary, the saints and a fuller theology of the sacraments. Both these need to take place sooner rather than later and are not least marketing issues.

### *Alphabetical Arrangement of Contents*

The prevailing contemporary approach to the contents of a hymnbook is to arrange the entire corpus alphabetically. This causes previous compilers of hymn books to spin in their graves. The alphabetical contents does make it easy to find a hymn if you know the first line. It also means the editors did not struggle to find enough good hymns for every section or that the compilers were reduced to a certain amount of artificiality as to where a hymn finally went. And — of course — alphabetically arranged hymnbooks do have several indices — Christian Year — Thematic — Lectionary — Biblical.

### **Facing Outwards**

On the Quaker principle that the service only begins when the worship ends a proper modern collection of hymns requires a section not only on the basics of the *ordo salutis* but a section on the church's life and witness, and a section on the gospel in the world. Sections of hymns are required on the church's unity (both given and longed for), on Christian proclamation, on Christ's presence in the world, on love in action, on justice and on peace and on reconciliation.

### **The Psalter**

A good modern hymn collection has to have a thought out policy with regard to the Psalter. If there is not to be a separately produced prose or metrical Psalter how are the psalms to feature in the hymnbook? And are they helpfully to feature as a block or be confusingly scattered across the collection?

The classical Reformed tradition is to provide a metrical paraphrase of all or many of the psalms being as faithful to the original as metre, scansion and rhyme will allow selecting newer texts that avoid the excruciating inversions of former days.

The classical English evangelical Psalter tradition is to include not only a few of the original Geneva or Scottish Paraphrases but also the Christian paraphrases in the mode of Isaac Watts where Christ and his saving work establish the chief theme of the Christian psalmist who then baptizes the original psalm with Christological images. Alongside the Christianizing of the Psalter, both traditional and contemporary, is the turning of classical hymnic passages from the Old and New Testaments into metre of which Dudley-Smith's *Tell out my soul* is an outstanding example.

If the psalms are to feature strongly in a hymn collection perhaps up to fifty or sixty of the psalms should be clearly present — some prose versions set to Anglican chants — some in the mode of Gelineau — some in the mode of Taizé — some metrical (traditional and contemporary) — and some arranged for antiphonal singing or choral speaking.

## The Recapitulation of Christ in us

The Christian Year needs to be adequately catered for. *The Presentation* and *The Transfiguration* might want only two or three hymns each. Advent, on the other hand, lasts for four weeks and in its traditional breadth has other themes besides the coming of the new-born king. Christmas is about incarnation and mystery as well as the Bethlehem story. Epiphany is about the manifestation of Christ's glory at the Jordan and at Cana as well as in the coming of the Magi. Candlemas is not only about glory and light but about the anticipation of the sword of the passion. The season of Lent needs a good section on Penitence as well as the Temptations and an equally good section for Passiontide. The six Sundays of Easter need not only hymns that tell the Easter story but hymns about the risen Christ 'eastering' in us.

The traditional evangelical Easter is about what it means to die and rise with Christ, just as the Ascension is about Christ's and ours, and just as Pentecost is as much about the invocation and blessing and implications of the descending Spirit now as then. Indeed the concept of anamnesis and the recapitulation of the whole Christ event in the community and in the individual and in the poor and needy must be writ large across the best hymn collections.

## Hymns as Catechesis

Doctrinal hymns need to be a dominant factor in a good hymn book because, in the words of Colin Morris 'hymns are theological time-bombs planted in the memory'. Hymns containing sound doctrine in metre are a deep and profound form of catechesis.

So – for instance – the Trinitarian section of the hymnbook needs doxological hymns that not only witness to the work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit but hymns which also carry us into the glory and the unfathomable depths of the Trinity. The being of God needs to be as prominent as the doing of God. An over busy church has a tendency to sing about an over-busy God! There are, of course, some legitimate images that provide reasonably sound alternatives to Father, Son and Holy Spirit but they are very few – and such language as 'God, Christ and the Spirit' and 'Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier' cannot be among them!

The section of the hymnbook on Sacraments and Ordinances again needs to be usable across the Christian spectrum. Who would devise a new hymn collection without looking at the 1982 Lima Text on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*? There Baptism is set forth as – Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection – Conversion – Pardoning and Cleansing – The Gift of the Spirit – Incorporation into the Body of Christ – The Sign of the Kingdom – Personal Commitment – Baptism of Believers – Baptism of Infants – Chrismation – Confirmation.

Are these centralities of initiation clearly present in the baptismal section of a good contemporary hymn book?

Similarly the eucharistic section of the hymnbook should reflect the Lima Text on the Eucharist echoing, for example, the great sections of the Wesleys' *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* – thanksgiving for redemption – the story of the institution – the anamnesis and memorial of the Christ event, including his real presence and his eternal sacrifice – the invocation of the Spirit on the gifts and the people – the consecration of believers to God – fellowship in the communion of saints – anticipation of the final banquet – reconciliation – communion with Christ – sending forth to serve.

Similar tests must be applied to producing hymns that set forth the church's understanding of ordination and ministry, marriage, reconciliation, healing and Christian death.

## Hymns addressed to God

A number of contemporary theologians have sought to remind the church that speech directed to God should be given priority over speech *about* God. As a hymn book is compiled we need to compare our collection with the doxology of the Psalter. Some of the Songs of Zion are addressed to fellow worshippers inviting them to come and worship, or to consider a particular matter but the weight of hymns as with the psalms is primarily one that addresses God – ‘Out of the depths I cry to you’ ‘Jesus, Lover of my soul’ ‘Come down, O Love divine’. Are the majority of hymns in each section of a new hymn collection addressed to God or to the congregation?

## Hymns and Liturgy

It used to be said that in the Catholic and Anglican traditions hymns were included in the liturgy whereas in the Evangelical and Reformed tradition along with prayer, preaching, scripture and sacraments they were the liturgy. There ought, by now, to be a convergence here – as there has always been in the place of hymns in Eastern Orthodoxy. Wherever the hymns come in Catholic liturgy – as an office hymn – as an introit – as a gradual – as the offertory – as sung during communion – as the post communion – as a processional or recessional – or in Reformed worship – as the opening hymn or gathering psalm – as the hymn belonging to the readings – the hymn belonging to the sermon – the hymn belonging to the intercessions – the final hymn of the service – or as the worship songs that make up the opening time of praise – hymns are always, everywhere and above all else vehicles of praise and prayer. They carry earth into heaven and bring heaven to earth. They need therefore to be the approved and worthy canon within or across the Christian traditions and found as such in the covers of a book of words and music.

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