



What are the Arguments For and Against Revising Hymn Texts?

Short Guide No 17: What are the Arguments For and Against Revising Hymn Texts?

'Nothing changes here' or 'All the changing scenes'? Why would we ever 'revise' the words of familiar hymns? We do not change a Shakespeare sonnet or a Beatles song; but we do adopt new Bible versions and modify ancient prayers. In which category do our still-beloved hymns belong?

Unlike poems, hymns are for singing together by churches which may be varied and multicultural, and hymn book editors are answerable not to long-gone hymn writers but to living congregations. Yet is it fair to modify any author's meaning, an inevitable result of modernising? Opponents of change may accept small 'invisible mending': 'It soothes *our* sorrows'; 'Christ is *your* strength'; 'Feed me *now and evermore*'; but rightly observe, 'This isn't quite what the writer *said*'. Translations and paraphrases raise still other questions of authenticity, while from a pastoral perspective is it often the elderly and visually-impaired people who are the chief sufferers from 'tinkering'; they know the old words.

Reasons to revise

- Some phrases are **not understood**. Those with a church background or an academic education rarely grasp how much is gobbledygook to those with neither: consider the puzzle of 'He wants not friends that hath thy love' or 'Naught be all else to me save that thou art'. 'How great thou art' tops 'favourite hymn' polls; I know two people separately who had *no idea* what those four words meant.
- Words are **misunderstood** as meanings change. Even recent hymns use *care, gay, mean* or *want* in senses different from today's usage. Older ones produce comic effects with *bowels, bosom* and *bloody*; lines like 'bridal glory round her shed' are still printed.
- Some lines are **untrue or at least controversial**. Have we never wondered about 'our lives would be all sunshine', 'my own worthlessness', or 'The first Nowell' *passim*?
- Some hymns retain **outdated concepts** of church, world, mission or harvest: 'O'er heathen lands afar / thick darkness broodeth yet'; yes, but what are the various assumptions here?
- What of **non-inclusive** texts? For some, avoiding language heard as 'men-only' is a novel requirement; for others, long overdue. Some just veto *men* and *brothers*; others ban *man* and *mankind* and challenge our use of language for God (*he, him* and many divine titles). Inclusiveness also applies to colour and disability; we speak warily of blackness or blindness, and never of *dumb* or *leper*.
- Services sometimes become **inconsistent**. Worship demands integrity; we cannot keep switching into 'ye olde' mindset after Scriptures and prayers in contemporary English. *Abide, behold, and Holy Ghost* may survive; but reverence should not depend on antiquity.
- Some revisions bring **clear gain**, such as 'God whose almighty word' and 'Glory to Jesus, risen, conquering Son'.

Reasons to refrain from revising

- We need not dumb down to the lowest **understanding**. People learn computer-speak or sports jargon; why not the language of hymns? We may not fully comprehend an isolated phrase; but in the experience of singing together, we often pick up the meaning from the whole context.
- **Untruths or debatable theology** may need unpacking; many 'problem' lines are true for some worshippers in some sense; explanations may help.
- **Outdated** texts may still be part of our cultural heritage. When hymns become offensive—culturally or theologically—drop them rather than mangle them.
- **Inclusivity** may mean yielding to fashions which will be outdated tomorrow, needing yet more adjustments. We should be wary of selling our birthright: **Lord, King, Father** or **Son**.
- **Consistency** as an argument may be much over-stated; in practice, congregations cope easily. Most are liturgically bilingual; few needed 'O come, all *you* faithful'.

- The **gains** do not justify the many losses. Some texts work better unchanged; a final *thee* sings better than *you*; so perhaps ‘Angel voices’ and ‘Holy, holy, holy’ are best left unchanged?
- In any case, a work in copyright cannot be revised without permission. The law is often broken.

Some History

- Revision happens by **omission**: even leaving out a verse or two can skew an author’s intention. But many ‘familiar’ hymns are familiar only as abbreviated; we rarely sing what he or she wrote. Does your hymnal print all of ‘Alleluia, sing to Jesus’ or ‘Immortal, invisible’?
- Revision by **addition** includes the grim ‘ten thousand years’ verse transplanted to ‘Amazing grace’, or the neat reworking of ‘Blest are the pure in heart’. For good or ill, it happens.
- Some are intimidated, some emboldened, by **John Wesley**’s demand (1779) that none dare change a syllable of his or his brother’s hymns as they could not be improved. Well, master-translator John and master-hymnwriter Charles, even Methodists have blushed at that boast. John’s own ‘improvements’ by restructuring George Herbert’s exquisite verse leave us bemused at such double-think. Watts, Doddridge and Montgomery are more realistic about pride, permanence and posterity.
- Three-and-a-half small milestones of note are *The New Catholic Hymnal* (1971), *Hymns for Today’s Church* (1982/1985) and later ‘Jubilate’ collections, and *Praise!* (2000). These books (respectively Roman Catholic, mainly Anglican and mainly Baptist) became known for almost eliminating *thee*, *thou* and related verb forms (*dost*, *wilt*, *wert* etc.). *HTC*, ‘Great hymns of every age in the language of today’, was accompanied by *Hymns in Today’s Language?* by Christopher M. Idle (Grove, 1982). While we have all moved on since then, is this still the only extended discussion of that single issue?

While some revisions are derided or ignored, many are widely adopted and gradually join the mainstream, often without acknowledgement of sources. Some standard denominational books amend where no change of sound or rhyme occurs, or where archaic pronouns are used of humans or objects (little towns, thankful people, servants of God or ‘my soul’); prefaces usually explain such compromise. From Australia, the book known in Britain as *With One Voice* advanced more boldly, while many American books (beyond our present scope) are concerned less with archaism than with sexism, racism and militarism.

Some authors choose to self-regulate; are there gains and losses in these first lines?

- Elizabeth Cosnett: ‘Can man [now *we*] by searching find out God?’;
- Fred Pratt Green: ‘When in man’s [now *our*] music God is glorified’;
- Brian Wren: ‘I come with joy to meet my Lord’ [now ‘I come with joy, *a child of God*’].

Less obviously, among changes in James Seddon’s ‘Go forth and tell’, ‘to men so long denied’ becomes ‘let no-one be denied’. Rosamond Herklots similarly adjusted ‘Forgive our sins as we forgive’. Some writers revise reluctantly and under pressure; others are ever-fertile fine-tuners.

More recently, some singer / songwriters have tried weaving lines from classic authors into their own compositions. Though outside our concern here, results to date are unpromising.

Case studies for further consideration

- ‘**Amazing grace**’: For those with no idea what (who?) grace is, revisers respond by using ‘*God’s* grace’ for ‘Twas grace’, etc.. But do end with authentic John Newton; see above.
- ‘**Eternal Father, strong to save**’: Check out the two main ‘traditional’ versions; does it matter which you prefer?
- ‘**Once in royal David’s city**’: A masterpiece of its time, but too much of its time? Examine its adjectives, childhood aspirations and conclusion before pronouncing it untouchable.
- ‘**Rock of ages**’: Find the original online; but would anyone now sing it?
- ‘**The God of Abraham praise**’: Who will untangle the ‘authentic’ text?
- ‘**Who would true valour see**’: Is this a special case? See what Percy Dearmer makes of John Bunyan, and why, in ‘He who would valiant be’. But—oh dear—we are back to *he* again!

A final caution for would be revisers

Updating is like dating: hard to do solo.

Christopher Idle – September 2014 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
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