



Barratt, His Successors and the Quality of Faith

Treasure No 52: Barratt, His Successors and the Quality of Faith by Alan Gaunt: An article from Bulletin 173

The first 'official' Congregational hymn-book was published in 1836. Its publication had been delayed until agreement was reached on whether or not to include the hymns of Isaac Watts in the same volume. The book was published, in the end, as a supplement to Watts. In 1859 *The New Congregational Hymn Book* was published, this time including the best of Isaac Watts in the same volume. A supplement, in 1874, was criticized by Baldwin Brown for the 'number of hysterically sentimental hymns' it contained.

In 1879, the Congregational Union Assembly decided that a new Sunday School book was needed. This was published two years later, and its editor was G. S. Barrett. Perhaps it was the speed of production that led to his being offered the editorship of the next denominational hymn-book. *Congregational Church Hymnal*, published in 1887, which became known as 'Barrett'. Barrett was trained for the ministry in Lancashire Independent College, Manchester, and was minister of Princes Street, Norwich, for forty-four years.

The book was based on a Trinitarian scheme, as its predecessors had been. That was important, because of what a hymn-book has been within the dissenting tradition. Bernard Manning summed it up when he wrote, 'Hymns are for us Dissenters what the liturgy is for the Anglican. They are the framework, the setting, the conventional, the traditional part of divine service as we use it ... our hymns are our liturgy ... We recite no creed because our hymns are full of the form of sound words ... our hymns revive the sacred scenes and stir the holy emotions with a power and a purity denied to all but the greatest craftsmen,' In full, that curtailed quotation gives expression to a very high doctrine of hymnody, and is a magnificent summary of Puritan delight! However, as a doctrine of hymnody, it has a potential flaw. Erik Routley said, 'A religious company who want to say the right things will have one sort of hymnody, while one that wants to say the wrong things, the irrelevant or romantic or false things, will have another'.

Erik's truism is my text. All Manning's high doctrine falls to the ground if the wrong things are sung, and the context in which the right hymns will be chosen will be a Trinitarian doctrine of Creation and Redemption. It is here that the theological scheme for a hymn-book can have its value. Manning was aware of the potential flaw. He said, '... the greatest hymns

are ... thoroughly and irrevocably Christian, ... That is why all the greatest hymns are orthodox, and why we Dissenters have preserved ... the full catholic and evangelical faith.'

In 1884. another book had been published that was used by a number of Congregational churches: Garrett Horder's *Congregational Hymns*. Later, in 1905, Horder published *Worship Song*. Manning spoke of adventures at holiday times having made him almost too familiar with that book. *Worship Song* is not devoid of good hymns; but this, by W. C. Gannett, is typical of the style and content of a large number of hymns in the book:

*The Lord is in his Holy Place
In all things near and far!
Shekinah of the snowflake, He,
And Glory of the star.
And Secret of the April land
That stirs the field to flowers.
Whose little tabernacles rise
To hold Him through the hours.*

Taken as a whole, the three stanzas of that hymn read rather well, and it even has biblical echoes, but it is by no means 'thoroughly and irrevocably Christian'. That is true of Frederick Lucian Hosmer's hymns. Writing to Hosmer, with a copy of the music edition of *Worship Song*, Horder said of Hosmer's hymns, 'They are great favourites in my church and many others, and at last they are getting the recognition they deserve'. Editorial committees beware! 'Great favourites in many churches' may not necessarily be worthy hymns. Those of Hosmer, and others, are seductive in sound, and there are more lovely pieces in Horder than in Barrett, but they lack the central hard core of orthodox faith; the whole story is not being told; all, in the end, is too dreamily vague.

I detect in all this the influence of Wordsworth, as it was filtered through John Keble. Wordsworth was a very great poet, but Keble's *The Christian Year*, which owed so much to a partial understanding of Wordsworth, was very bad hymnody. Stephen Prickett says, 'Keble's adoption of Wordsworth's ideas was in terms of unquestioned assumptions rather than tenets reached by intellectual and emotional struggle (*Romanticism and Religion*: C.U.P.). Second-hand ideas. Keble told his students 'Do not be original', and followed his own advice.

The chief characteristic of *The Christian Year* is the diffusion of biblical particularity through long poems. Time after time, the central biblical theme is overwhelmed by a thinned-down Wordsworthian nature mysticism, of which Wordsworth himself was too polite to complain. The influence on hymnody is vicious. Nature does not give us God unless we are looking for God, and then nature gives us the God we are looking for. Keble was not a pantheist, or immanentist; but without the basis of Prayer Book worship, it is not surprising that *The Christian Year* pointed many people in that direction.

The Christian Year sold ten thousand copies a year for fifty years, here and in America. It must have had a considerable influence. The evidence of that is to be found in *Worship Song*. In a discussion of that hymn-book. D. Horton Davies quotes Richard Niebuhr from *The Kingdom of God in America*: A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom

without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.’ (*Worship and Theology in England. From Newman to Martineau 1850–1900*: O.U.P.). Most of the hymns peculiar to Horder have not stood the test of time precisely because they lack particularity of doctrine and the sharp clarity of faith. Worship in which such effusions were central must have diminished faith. If Manning’s high doctrine of hymns as liturgy is to stand, hymns must, as he said, be thoroughly and irrevocably Christian. There may be place for a few hymns that are not, but only in the setting of a thoroughly Christian scheme.

A church with its worship centred on the Bible, with scholarly biblical preaching and great hymnody, will not go far wrong. A. M. Allchin, writing about Welsh Protestantism, has said. ‘If there are vital elements of liturgy lacking ... the hymns do much to compensate for the things that are missing’. (*The Dynamic of Tradition*: Darton, Longman and Todd).

This brings us back to Barrett. On the whole Manning’s verdict on the *Congregational Church Hymnal* is sound: It reflects purely and clearly that mind which we should like to think is the Congregational mind: in taste, catholic; in feeling, evangelical; in expression, scholarly; in doctrine, orthodox. It is a book free from fads, fancies, prejudices, party slogans; taking the best from whatever source; most Congregational in lacking the denominationally Congregational note: a simply Christian book.’ As we might put it sixty-three years on, an ecumenical book.

In 1916 Barrett’s book was replaced by *Congregational Hymnary*. I learned my hymn-singing from that book, but also from *School Worship*, published in 1926 and described by Albert Peel, not without justification, as the best hymn-book obtainable for the modern Sunday School. Its musical adviser was George Thalben-Ball and it was, interestingly, published with staff notation and tonic solfa together on the page. As for *Congregational Hymnary*, the fact that it cut out more of the hymns of Isaac Watts, says something about the editorial committee. I am not quite sure what! Perhaps they thought they were being modern. It is telling, though, that *Congregational Praise*, in 1951, brought back about a dozen of Watts’s hymns. I think, too, that *Congregational Hymnary* may have lacked something of that necessary particularity of doctrine and sharp clarity of faith, in spite of the fact that Congregationalism’s greatest theologian, P. T. Forsyth, was on the committee. It is interesting to note that many churches stayed with *Barrett* until the publication of *Congregational Praise*.

I have emphasized the distinction between Horder and Barrett because that distinction bears heavily on my thoughts about hymnody and the quality of faith. A. M. Allchin, writing about the hymns of the 18th-century Welsh Revival, speaks of ‘works at once dogmatic and ecstatic, which make accessible to ordinary people ... some of the deepest mysteries of the faith’ (*The Dynamic of Tradition*). Those hymns are, of course, comparable with the hymns of Charles Wesley: full of theology and joy: deep thought with deep feeling, which sums up the real Wordsworthian principle.

I compare those hymns that tell the whole story with the choruses and songs of the modern charismatic movement, which owes not a little to the Wesleys, and I am puzzled. The deep feeling is there, but not the deep thought, not even the poeticism of Keble and the immanentist hymn writers. There is little imagination and little particularity of doctrine or

sharp clarity of faith. What should hymn-book compilers do with such material, which may be very important to people today but will hardly be viable twenty years from now? Should it be included in a new book? It is not, of course, written for posterity but for spirit-filled worshippers now. But so were Wesley's hymns then. Charles Wesley wrote for field services, not for liturgical worship. Of Wesley's hymns, Evelyn Underhill wrote, 'Like all the greatest creations of Christian devotional genius they are both theological and personal; charged with dogma'. That, I feel is what hymnody should be.

Watts wrote for an ecclesiastical intelligentsia, but Watts and Wesley assumed more than intelligence: they assumed wisdom, understanding and discernment, which are gifts of the Spirit, gifts that enable apparently very simple people', as Allchin says, 'to penetrate deeply into texts and prayers and symbols which our world would think very esoteric'. There is, of course, such a thing as Gospel simplicity, given expression in hymns like 'When I survey' or in some of the great Latin hymns, like those of Fortunatus. for example:

*Already deeply wounded: see
his side now riven by a spear,
and all our sins are swept away
by blood and water flowing here.*
(Trans. A. G.)

Here is the simplicity of some of the greatest art.

So what I hope Barrett's modern successors will produce is a hymn collection that tells the whole story, full of doctrinal particularity and sharp clarity of faith. We are not publishing for posterity, but we will be preserving from the past—not just texts but the whole ethos of the traditions we have inherited in the United Reformed Church. That past with the best we can find today, in so far as we can recognize it we are carrying into the future.

A great hymn-book will always combine depths of thought and depths of feeling, and will always enable people to sing with clarity the great truths of faith, while at the same time feeling deeper into the mystery. For the Free Churches the quality of faith has been sustained for over two hundred years in large part by its hymnody. Anglicans have long thought that the Free Churches have fallen away from the high sacramental doctrine of Wesley's eucharistic hymns. But, ultimately, the choice is not between a central eucharistic liturgy or a liturgy of hymnody. The great and delightful thing must be a fusion of the two. We are nearer to that now than we have ever been, and the process will continue if hymnody retains its artistic and theological integrity

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