



Pastoral Revision of Hymns

Treasure No 48: Pastoral Revision of Hymns by Michael Perry: An article from Bulletin 156

[This is a shortened and revised version of a lecture given at our 1982 Conference. Mr Perry is rector of Eversley, Hants., and a member of the words committee responsible for *Hymns for Today's Church* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), a review of which we hope to include in the next Bulletin.]

My intention is to attempt some justification for the revision process we have undertaken in *Hymns for Today's Church*. Objections to such revision have been voiced but, as this is a pastoral exercise, I shall estimate the likely reaction of congregations to our work. I shall then give some meat to our discussion by looking at examples, and consider briefly the likelihood of what will happen to hymnody—or, rather, what is happening—if we do not revise. Lastly, I shall offer some ground rules for 'pastoral editing'. That is, if such revision is not to be entirely unprincipled, what are the restraints that we must put upon ourselves, and how can we minimize for congregations the discomfort of change and maximize the potential of our hymns for sensitive, joyful and spiritual worship—praise with integrity and comprehension?

Pastoral Arguments for Revision

These are largely those for liturgical revision.

1. The change with the passing of time—in the meaning of language.
2. The need for our understanding of God to be contemporary.
3. The danger of division between faith and reality in people's thinking.
4. The offensiveness of a 'private' religious language. This fully accepts that speaking of the 'beyond' and the 'wholly other' will be in some sense mysterious. But our style of worship should depend on our faith, and not vice versa.
5. The missionary need. The stranger entering our services should have the maximum opportunity to understand what is going on.
6. The teaching need. Hymns teach, if not at the time of singing, then upon subsequent reflection or quotation. Hence they should be readily understood.
7. The spread of 'family worship'. In *Hymns for Today's Church* we have probably increased the number of hymns available for use in this context, not by reducing the language to an 'Enid Blyton' level, but by replacing obscure phrases unnecessary to salvation.
8. The rapid growth of the charismatic movement has brought its own spate of spiritual songs, usually bad. It has, however, embraced new liturgies wholeheartedly. That the songs are repetitive, superficial and otherwise inadequate may well be a reflection of our failure as hymn-writers and editors to keep pace with the need. In other words, there is a contemporary requirement for the

kind of spontaneity in worship that the psalms once provided: hymns must say what we want to say to God.

In the same way, the pastoral arguments *against* the revision of hymnody are largely the same as those against liturgical revision in general. But new questions arise. The main ones are these:

1. *Will abrupt changes in the wording of our hymns destroy the atmosphere of worship?* It depends on how it's done. We were not over-happy with many of the changes made in *The New Catholic Hymnal*, although we admired their spirit. We resolved that we would not be carried away by our own enthusiasm without proper check on the task we were performing. For this reason, we put our work to substantial outside criticism, and to the test of live congregational situations. As a result, we sometimes had to change our views and our procedure—to be less thorough-going in some cases and more sensitive in others
2. *Is there an aesthetic, or even an ethical, obligation to leave hymns intact?* In the main we concluded there was no such general principle. Many of the hymns we sing now are in their present form already substantially revised. There is, and must be, a difference between hymnody and other poetic forms in their right to preservation. If the writer's intention is that his word should be a vehicle of worship, then we should respect his intention and not fossilize his words. Inevitably there are pastoral problems with those who cannot adapt to change or who can no longer re-learn words; but this applies quite as much to the revision of prayers and has to be met in the same way.
3. *Is there a better way namely, leaving awkward hymn-forms simply to die out in favour of hymns which are new altogether?* A mixed answer here: there are some hymns, notably the poems of George Herbert, which raise special problems. It is arguable that much of George Herbert's poetry should not have been requisitioned for hymn books. Other hymns, which have already fallen into disuse through infelicitous wording, can be reinstated, once the principle of revision has been conceded. Moreover, few modern writers are producing substitutes for the hymns of the past which are already being jettisoned.

Our research leads us to believe that there is a real danger that hymns will be lost. Not just verses, but whole hymns are being relegated, because of unhappy phrasing. Formerly this called for an editorial touch here and there. But now there is a new problem—the movement in our liturgy away from the pronouns 'thou' and 'thine' and their many accompanying verb-forms. If no revisions are made, even of our currently-accepted texts, hymns will soon represent a quite different world from the rest of our worship, let alone from that outside. In many churches, everything else has made a major step towards twentieth-century language. Eventually it will prove difficult to have to change gear three or four times in each service, and step back into the past. Hymns irredeemably wedded to 'thee-thy' forms are bound to fall into disfavour, much as the psalms, regrettably, have all but disappeared from the congregational worship of many churches. We delight in the tradition of English hymnody and do not wish this to happen.

Opposition in Principle

Down the years, whenever the prospect of revision has arisen opposition has been voiced by sometimes eminent authorities. Let me remind you of what John Wesley said in the 1779 preface to his hymns, '... Many gentlemen have done my brother and me the honour to reprint many of our hymns. Now they are perfectly welcome to do so, provided they print them just as they are. But I desire they would not attempt to mend them; for they really are not able. None of them is able to mend either the sense or the verse. Therefore, I must beg of them one of these two favours; either to let them stand just as they are, to take them for better or worse: or to add the true reading in the margin, or at the bottom of the page; that we may no longer be accountable either for the nonsense or for the doggerel of other men.'

Yet Wesley himself, despite these objections, changed the work of other writers. For example, whereas Isaac Watts wrote

1. *Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice,
Let every land his name adore:
The British isles shall send the noise
Across the ocean to the shore.*
2. *Nations, attend before his throne
With solemn fear; with sacred joy;
Know that the Lord is God alone;
He can create and he destroy.*

John Wesley virtually abandoned v. 1, and adapted Watts's v. 2 to create a new, and surely splendid, opening stanza:

*Before Jehovah's awful throne,
Ye nations bow with sacred joy;
Know that the Lord is God alone:
He can create, and he destroy.*

We have retained Wesley's structure with a further minimal revision:

*Before Jehovah's awesome throne,
you nations, bow with sacred joy ...*

It can now be seen that John Wesley was right to change Isaac Watts's 'British' verse, just as we believe we are right to change John Wesley's 'aweful' verse.

John Wesley often tried to have his cake and eat it. In his prized 'Catholic spirit', he revised Watts the Independent, Herbert the Anglican, Austin the papist, and Dryden the adaptable poet-laureate; one of his innumerable literary piracies cost him £50 in compensation. We prefer the humility of John Ellerton:

'Anyone who presumes to lay his offering of a song of praise upon the altar, not for his own but for God's glory, cannot be too thankful for the devout, thoughtful and scholarly, criticism of those whose object it is to make his work less unworthy of its sacred purpose.'

At the York Church Congress of 1866, Lord Selborne, called attention to 'the mutilations which the original texts of some of the finest of our English hymns' had undergone. His own *Book of Praise* had set a different example by its restorations of authentic versions. But compare the fortunes of this book and the offending *Hymns A. & M.*

The English Hymnal in 1906 objects in its preface: 'efforts ... to improve the work of competent authors have had the inevitable result. The freshness and strength of the originals have been replaced by stock phrases and commonplace sentiments; an injury has been done to the quality of our public worship as well as to the memory of great hymn writers.' The *EH* editors do indeed print 'Hark! how all the welkin rings' directly before the composite version which has replaced it, 'Hark! the herald angels sing'. But they have not gone back to Wesley in 'O for a thousand tongues' (formerly the seventeen verses began 'Glory to God, and praise, and love'); the stanzas are both selected and rearranged. Similarly, they prefer the new opening 'Let saints on earth in concert sing' to the original

‘Come, let us join our friends above’. And *EH* does not merely juggle with lines. A notable change turns ‘Our God, our help in ages past’ to the now familiar ‘O God, our help—only one word, but that the first; so we avoid having three ‘ours’ in its opening stanza. But the author had a reason for what he did, and more recent hymnals—*Grace Hymns*, *Christian Hymns* and *With One Voice*—have been bold enough to restore his original opening. So *EH*, while announcing itself as ‘a collection of the best hymns in the English language’, has a sprinkling of dagger-signs indicating changes.

In fact, no stand for textural purity could survive long. The preface to *AMR* (1950) concedes: ‘This book does not always adhere to the original texts of the hymns. The editors of the earlier editions made alterations to meet the requirements of a hymn-singing congregation, and the present editors see no reason to go back on the practice of their predecessors. Many of the great Charles Wesley’s hymns have hardly ever been sung as he originally wrote them. Not a few authors, including Dr Neale, have agreed that for the purpose of a hymn-book the versions of their hymns in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* were, on the whole, improvements.’ As Canon Cyril Taylor has concluded, this policy of ‘pastoral editing’ has much to do with the genius and strength of this most successful of all hymnals.

Nevertheless, objections persist, in 1966—the days of the Church of England’s ‘Series 2’ revisions of liturgy—the then Dean of Bristol, the Venerable D. W. Harrison warned: ‘Woe betide any liturgical commission which tries to put hymnbooks into acceptable modern language and into respectable theology!’ (*Liturgical Reform, Some Basic Principles*, p. 23). *The New Catholic Hymnal* (1971) and *The Australian Hymnbook* (1977) (later published as *With one Voice*) introduced revisions although neither volume ventured to tamper with the final rhyming ‘thee’, ‘thine’ or ‘art’, and changed to ‘you’ and ‘your’ only where this could be done fairly painlessly.

All this, and rumours of more to come, was enough to set the alarm bells ringing. *The Church Times* and *The Church of England Newspaper* published letters in 1979 from one angry archdeacon: ‘God preserve our precious heritage of English hymnody from the tinkering of Michael Seward’s team of “specialists”’. Also in 1979, the *PN Review 13: Crisis for Cranmer and King James* supported Wesley’s pretended policy of hymn-conservation and said: ‘Those who promise to do over some 200 of the best-loved hymns might take this admonition to heart’.

Where scholars and hymnologists demur at the modernizing process, what of the majority of the people who sing hymns? This is, after all, the true test for any theory; congregations will have the last word because hymns are for singing, not merely for analysis. Yet church members show remarkable resilience in adapting to change. If congregations are still intact after moving from the Prayer Book to Series 2, then Series 3 and now *The Alternative Service Book*, all in the space of fifteen years, new hymns will not break them. It is here, too, that we have been most encouraged. The readiness of a wide range of congregations to welcome our work in its earlier stages has made a great difference to its progress. Where minimal changes are made, congregations take them in their stride. When ‘Open thou the crystal fountain’ becomes ‘Open now ...’ few even notice. Where larger alterations are needed, and the reasons explained, many people are grateful: ‘So that’s what it means!’ And we have received from such practical testing a volume of useful comment and response—pointing out a weak revision, suggesting a better emendation, or even demanding that we should be still more radical: if you change this, why not that?’

Of course, the real testing is yet to come. However, in the long run, we believe we have taken the course which is not only inevitable, but also desirable.

The Situation in Practice

As we survey the scope of editorial revisions, four things soon become apparent:

1. There is great divergence between what congregations sing and the words originally written.

2. Most worshippers are not aware of this.
3. This divergence is largely played down by hymnal editors.
4. It is often hard to discover the original text.

To introduce our book to various church bodies, we have prepared a selection of changes already made of which the worshipper is not conscious. Our purpose is not merely to ‘sell’ our book but to avoid any unnecessary alarm. We say:

‘Many well-known hymns have undergone changes in the course of time for a variety of reasons. Some changes have been small, some large.

Isaac Watts wrote
Our God, our help in ages past

We sing
O God, our help in ages past

Isaac Watts wrote
When I survey the wondrous cross
Where the young Prince of glory died.

We sing
When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died.

(Watts himself accepted the changes, and was much readier than the Wesleys to accept criticism and amend his text.)

Augustus Toplady (Rock of ages) wrote
While I draw this fleeting breath,
while my eyestrings break in death

We sing
While I draw this fleeting breath
when my eyelids close in death

Could my zeal no languour know

Could my zeal no respite know

In my hand no price I bring

Nothing in my hand I bring

Leprous, to the fountain fly

Foul, I to the fountain fly

All these changes, and more, were made by previous editors in order that we might sing with true purpose and integrity.

The vocabulary of our language changes with the years. We could not now sing ‘Hark! how all the welkin rings’ even though it is the original. For similar reasons of vocabulary, we already sing modernized versions of the following original lines:

Edward Caswall wrote
Hark! an awful voice is sounding

We sing
Hark! a herald voice is calling
(*EH*), or
Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding
(*A&M*)

John Cennick wrote
Lo! He cometh. Countless trumpets
Blow before his bloody sign!

We sing
Lo, He comes with clouds descending,
Once for favoured sinners slain

The words we now sing are the positive and very necessary contribution of previous editors. The editors of *Hymns for Today’s Church* aspire to serve their own generation in the same way.’

Some of these original lines, which have already disappeared, are not only confusing but also quite humorous—not by any intention of the author, and therein exists another problem which we shall look at in a moment.

Those with an academic education find it hard to believe the extent to which phrases they take in their stride may be totally misconstrued. Here are some examples:

*'Can it be that Thou regardest'
'But naught changeth Thee'
'Of the poor wealth Thou wouldst reckon as Thine'
'There is a book who runs may read'
'He wants not friends that hath Thy love'
'Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
'Makes that and the action fine'
'The Son of God his glory hides with parents mean and poor'.*

A majority of members of our modern congregations are as far away from this language as are the uninitiated from Chaucerian English. And there comes the point when we have a duty to interpret, or revise. This is not to deny that there are those, uneducated, who through constant association with these forms over many years, have had time and opportunity to discover their true meaning. Nevertheless, a questionnaire alerts one to the fact that a lot more badly misconstrue the meaning of tortuous phrases. Many of us admit to a childhood confusion over the famous 'green hill' which did not have a city wall, and similar misapprehensions are rife.

Perhaps even worse is the line which has become funny or offensive. In the early seventies I was watching a television *Songs of Praise* programme as the congregation sang with impressive conviction 'and that love may never cease, I will move thee'. Then, within two lines, the camera swung to the row of girls occupying the front choir stall. 'Thou didst note my working breast' loudly sang the congregation, and the girls who had obviously spotted this one in rehearsal, collapsed in giggles before an audience of millions. To allow that sort of thing to happen in public is not a failure of the media, it's a dereliction of duty by the Church. How long can we foist on our congregations the 'chilly dewdrops nightly shed' (in 'Forty days and forty nights'), 'all her bulwarks' and 'bridal glory round her shed' ('Blessed city, heavenly Salem'), even 'who follows in his train?' ('The Son of God goes forth to war') or 'transport of delight' (The King of Love)?

On the other hand, hymns are already being relegated to disuse because of their language. The sentiments of 'There is a fountain filled with blood', no longer pass muster. In spite of its many beauties, 'The God of Love, my Shepherd is' (George Herbert) is not surviving well—largely because of 'or, if I stray, he doth convert and bring my mind in frame'. It would be sad if 'The King of love, my Shepherd is' followed into oblivion because of 'Thy unction grace bestoweth' and (as we have seen) 'transport of delight'. A glance through the section on 'Heaven' in the older hymnals will show a host of once popular hymns which themselves have passed through the 'pearly gates'.

If revisions are not made, older hymns will become the preserve of the specialists. Their texts will not be lost: bookcases will contain them—but no longer at the back of the church. Scholarly research will preserve the best. Some of the others will be collected for their quaintness. But as an expression of what we want to sing to God, they will be quietly lost as each in turn becomes unusable through some fatal phrase or ridiculous word—ridiculous only because no living language stands still, and new meanings will wreck the old verses.

The Rules of the Game

How do we achieve revision with minimum disruption and maximum improvement?

Retaining sound patterns

Where it has been necessary to change a line, we have endeavoured to reflect the original sound pattern of the line.

Old

Fill thou my life

(Come down, O love divine)

Seek thou this soul of mine

(Judge eternal)

And the city's crowded clangour

(Alas! and did my Saviour)

For such a worm as I

(Once in Royal)

Poor and mean and lowly

Mild, obedient...

(O God, unseen)

Our meat the body of the Lord

(Great Shepherd of Thy people)

Unbosom all our cares

New

Fill now my life

Seek out this soul of mine

and the city's crowded clamour

for such a one as I

poor and meek and lowly

kind, obedient...

to eat the body of the Lord

unburden all our cares

Respect for the medium and for the past

Unlike Bible translators or liturgical commissions we are handling metrical rhyming verse. All revisers must have an ear for rhythm; those who bring prose up-to-date are, however, free to create new patterns of stress and sound. We had no such choice, but had to work within a tight framework and a given scheme. Nor were we at liberty to revise hymnody regardless of its origins, but rather to find alternative modes of expression as near as possible to the idiom of the hymnwriter.

Often, we found that a word would fit the gap and the rhythm but not the idiom or vice versa. We can only surmise how an earlier author would have rephrased his hymn to meet the need as we saw it. We are, however, very grateful to modern authors, such as David Mowbray, who have agreed to alter their texts in order to meet criticisms which they saw as valid. And we were impressed, for instance, by George Caird's willingness to rewrite his hymn 'Shepherds came' to meet our criteria.

Nevertheless, the question 'Would John Wesley (for example) have used that word?' was invariably applied to any revision we might be making in one of his hymns (and similarly with other authors).

Wherever possible then, we aimed at 'invisible mending'—a phrase attributed to Archbishop Donald Coggan. We looked for a similar sound or stress; and a word that would not obtrude rhythmically, chronologically or poetically. Inevitably, we have not fulfilled this high purpose because of the constraints that working with verse places upon the would-be editor. Yet, in the course of our work, for practically every change, variants—sometimes scores of them—have been suggested, discussed, criticized and replaced.

Restoring priorities

We did not wield an axe to make theological changes, as has been done before. But, depending on the context, where changes were called for on linguistic grounds, we reconstituted in the following ways:

1. We have tended to move away from the concept of the church as a building to that of the Church as a people. For example,

Old
(Christ is made our sure foundation)
To this temple, where we call Thee,
Come, O Lord of hosts, to-day;
With Thy wonted loving-kindness
Hear Thy people as they pray;
And Thy fullest benediction
Shed within its walls away.

New
We as living stones invoke you:
Come among us, Lord, today!
With your gracious loving kindness
hear your children as we pray;
and the fullness of your blessing
in our fellowship display.

2. Where there are controversial doctrinal issues, our language approximates to Rite A of *The Alternative Service Book* (1980) with irenic intent. For instance, in the hymn ‘We love the place, O God’ we have enhanced the reference to worship at the expense of furniture, offering a dynamic view of the use of the sacrament which retains—or indeed strengthens—a vigorous eucharistic doctrine.

Old
We love Thine altar, Lord;
O what on earth so dear?
For there, in faith adored,
We find Thy presence near.

New
We love the holy feast
where nourished by this food,
in faith we feed on Christ,
his body and his blood.

Replacing inadequate language

Sometimes quite a substantial change was needed to recover a hymn otherwise unnecessarily falling into disuse because sentiments were unworthy or unhelpful.

Old
There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel’s veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

New
There is a fountain opened wide
where life and hope begin;
for Christ the Lord was crucified
to cleanse us from our sin.

We have attended to Authorised Version phrases which are no longer in wide use, nor fully understood; today’s worshippers are far less familiar with A.V. language and some allusions may escape them altogether.

Old
I’m not ashamed to own my Lord

New
I’m not ashamed to name my Lord

In some cases, changes of sentiment were long called-for. Dr Erik Routley comments on Once in Royal David’s city: ‘We have no right, nowadays, to pass over without a blushing sense of incongruity the quite unspeakable couplet “Christian children all must be Mild, obedient, good as he.” ... It is time to ask that some genius alter that couplet, or at least those three adjectives to something more suitable for the praises of Christian parents.’ (*Hymns Today and Tomorrow*, 1966, p. 77). Accordingly, we have dealt with that problem (we have ‘all *should* be’ and ‘*kind*, obedient’) and also

the obvious anti-climax of ‘All in white shall wait around’! By transposing and emending the last two lines we have kept the sense, but ended with the words ‘glory crowned’.

Retaining first lines

We have considered it important to keep the first line where possible. Nevertheless there has been occasional need for change; where this has happened, both old and new first lines are indexed. For example, we have changed ‘Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire’ to ‘Creator Spirit, come, inspire’—a move towards the original Latin meaning and away from English archaism. Yet we consider this hymn sufficiently important to have included also the unrevised version in our selection of traditional texts. According to common usage we have revised ‘Thee’ and ‘Thou’, with their consequent line endings. We have found it impossible to change one occurrence of ‘Where’er’ and two ‘unto’s’. Every other antique pronoun, preposition, adverb, etc. has been modernized. With nouns and verbs (foe, flee, etc.) we have not attempted complete consistency but have made a decision based on context, intelligibility, stress, sound, association and popularity. We have also sought to avoid inversions wherever possible.

Changes of stress

Sometimes we have changed the stress to make a line easier to sing; ‘bruising the serpent’s head’ becomes ‘and crushed the serpent’s head’—a change which strengthens the powerful imagery, and is consistent with Genesis 3.15 (New International Version). There are common ‘hiccups’ of stress in ‘God is working his purpose out’ (*From utmost ...* / *The brotherhood ...*), ‘All creatures of our God and king’ (*Forgiving others ...* / *Waiting to hush our...*), and in ‘For all the saints’, which are now healed.

New versions

Finally, we discovered examples where we thought entirely new versions were needed. In some cases we also supply the old version in an appendix: this is either where the hymn in question is central and established, or where it is popular and we are not satisfied with our own version. There are new versions of ‘The Lord’s my shepherd’, ‘Come Holy Ghost’, ‘He who would valiant be’, the Doxology, Luther’s *Ein feste burg* and even, as a bit of a kite-flier, a more compassionate version of the National Anthem alongside the customary two verses.

(We were not, of course, prepared for the furore that hit the press in early August. The simple fact that we intended to print both versions in the new book was overlooked; the opportunity to ‘have a go’ at the Church of England was too strong a temptation in the wake of the so-called ‘pacifist’ service of thanksgiving in St Paul’s Cathedral following the Falklands crisis.)

In conclusion, let me quote Percy Dearmer (*Songs of Praise Discussed*, 1933): ‘Some of our most successful hymns are ... the result of considerable alteration ... it is the bad emendations that do harm.’

Dr W.S. Lloyd Webber, director of the London College of Music and musical director of the Central Hall, Westminster since 1958, died in London on 29 October. He contributed the tune ‘CHEYNE ROW’ to *The Parish Hymn Book* (1968) and ‘PENITENCE’ to *Hymns and Songs* (1969).

© The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland

For anyone who enjoys, sings, plays, chooses, introduces, studies, teaches or writes hymns ...

The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Visit www.hymnsocietygbi.org.uk for more details.