

BAPTIST PRAISE AND WORSHIP

For those who stand within the broad Free Church tradition, hymnody has to be a matter of high seriousness. For such, hymns have never been mere adjuncts to an offering of worship basically complete without them. On the contrary, they have been essential components in the structure of the Divine Service, building blocks in the rearing of the worship edifice. The progression that marks a hymnal is one of the key features that either expresses or denies that recognition. In an extended review of the *Baptist Hymn Book* (*Baptist Quarterly* XIX, No.6, April 1962), I had to deplore its conventional failure to match content progression with the proper movement of public worship. As I return to the scene of the crime thirty years on, it can thankfully be recorded that the penny has at long last dropped. It is true that, on the basis of their prefatory comment, it might be concluded that the present compilers were more concerned with following the Christian Year than with tracking the innate unfolding of weekly Christian worship. Still, wittingly or unwittingly, the deed has been done, and that with a generally satisfying sensitivity and imagination.

Questions that remain to be asked include those of *quality* and *balance*. The compilers, learning that 'less than half the hymns in the *Baptist Hymn Book* were in regular use', coyly remark that 'this is about the proportion which has been retained'. Are they being somewhat economical with the truth? The *Baptist Hymn Book* (*BH*) contained 777 hymns. Of these 274 appear in *Baptist Praise and Worship* (*BPW*). The discards number 503. The devastation is swingeing. Is it justified? It may seem logical to remove hymns nobody (??) sings, yet it may be salutary to ask whether a current majority verdict is the sufficiently adequate criterion, whether use or disuse reflect a complex array of factors (e.g. tunes provided), and whether balance and quality are significantly being set at risk. Part of the answer will depend upon the nature of the replacements provided.

It is in this context that a restrictive oddity emerges. *BPW* offers 549 hymns. 275 (92% of which are twentieth-century products) were not in *BH*. The remaining 274 represent the *BH* inheritance. Why was the *BH* total of 777 reduced to the *BPW* total of 549, thus cutting inclusion possibilities by a staggering 30%? Was it that 549 hymns was considered quite enough for any church to be afforded? Or was it that a more spacious clarity of layout and presentation, particularly in terms of music, inevitably capped provision at the reduced figure?

Whatever the answer may be, the consequences have to be weighed. In the event, I would be substantially with the compilers in their drastic pruning of *BH*. If there is a problem it is at the margins. Those margins are however critically important. My own subjective judgment is that in 38 cases the exclusion notice is really inexcusable, once criteria of quality and balance are allowed a proper voice. To many of these I shall return. For the moment let me simply deplore the passing of 'Away with gloom', 'God who touchest earth with beauty', 'I am not skilled to understand', 'Light of the world', 'Lo, God is here', 'Lord God, from whom all

life', 'My God, I love thee', 'O happy home', 'Rejoice, O people,', 'See the conqueror mounts in triumph', 'What do I owe?'

What then of the 275 hymns newly making their entrance? 253 of them are twentieth-century products. How far is their inclusion justified? Let us be honest and recognize that a significant minority are pedestrian in quality. There is nothing new in this. Each successive hymnal in fact offers a shop window for consumer testing. Many of the products will just lie there, reach their 'sell by' date, and a generation later be replaced by more modern fashions. Thus, out with 'Jesus and Joseph day after day' and in with 'In a byre near Bethlehem'. Out with 'We thank you, Lord of heaven' with its 'dogs with friendly faces', and in with 'Praise to God in the Highest' with its 'elephants . . . eagles and bees', or with 'Carpenter, carpenter, make me a tree' with its electricians and plumbers. All this is predictable and need not be taken too seriously. What is rather more to the point is that a trawl of the new arrivals in *BPW* suggests to me that there are at least 43 which may be adjudged distinctly surplus to requirement, undistinguished, or downright trite. Given my 38 excluded candidates still knocking at the door, such a (subjective) conclusion is at least worrying. Suppose we try a sampling.

Is not Baughen's 'Come, rejoice before your maker' threadbare in comparison with the excluded 'Before Jehovah's awful throne' of Watts? How well does Stanley's 'O God of awesome majesty' stand up against the excluded 'Lord of all being' of Holmes? If 'witnessing' is in question, does the McCleelan/Pac/Rycroft 'Colours of day' really match up to the excluded 'Come, labour on' of Borthwick - especially if there were the wit to set the latter to Tertius Noble's tune *Ora Labora*? What has Foley's 'How can we sing with joy to God' have to offer in comparison with the excluded 'Not for our sins alone' of Twells? Given the deserved presence of Wren's 'Christ upon the mountain peak', what is gained by retracking the ground with Owen's more pedestrian 'Jesus, transfigured' at the expense of making room for the excluded 'O Son of Man, our hero strong and tender' of Fletcher? Do we want 'Father, we adore you' cheek by jowl with its much more satisfying counterpart 'Father, we love you', at the expense of Ellerton's 'Sing Hallelujah forth' or Alington's 'Praise we God the Father's name', or even Conder's 'All things praise Thee'?

So we might complainly go on. It may, however, be salutary to move to a wider view. When the 275 new arrivals are scrutinized, what sectional coverage will be found to emerge? Each of the 33 hymnal sections gets some reinforcement however slender, though the big increments occur under Praise (32), Lord's Supper (21), Harmony and Healing (18), Response in Faith (16), Holy Spirit (13), Confessing the Faith (13), Gathering for Worship (13). Together, these sections account for one third of the new input. All this is wholly understandable and in large measure well done. It does however prompt reflections, two specific, one more general.

On the generalized front, any contemporary hymn book compilers have to face the issue of inclusion or exclusion of the profusion of latter day choruses, of those repetitive one, two or three liners demanding more than a single performance to

confessed that a good deal of concealed cant too often marks the debate. Traditionalists tend to fulminate against threadbare content and mindless repetition, yet may then be found curiously hospitable to not dissimilar offerings from Taizé or Iona (? respectable and in 'good taste'). After all, the mantra syndrome is as old as the hills, as any admirer of a clutch of Kyrie Eleisons should long since have admitted. What invariably seems lacking is any probe into *where*, in corporate worship, incantation with its mood-inducing properties safely and properly belongs. My liturgical hunch is that its appropriate home is primarily at that entry into and exit from worship which are the points of difficult and demanding transitions from one 'world' to another, and perhaps secondarily at the door of communion silence, but that set anywhere else it quickly becomes either debilitating gluttony or disastrous misdirection. If that were so, *BPW* would have to face some searching questions.

So to the promised specifics and, in particular, The Lord's Supper and The Holy Spirit. Clearly it was felt that the section on The Lord's Supper needed strengthening; but it now has some arguably strange features. Does 'An Upper Room did our Lord prepare' really reveal Pratt Green at his best, or 'Christian People, raise your song' from Thompson immediately impress? Does Pilcher's 'Here, Lord, we take the broken bread' seem other than meagre when we also have Kaan's similar but far richer 'Now let us from this table rise'? We know, of course, why 'Let us break bread together' had to make an appearance, but is there anything more grotesque than a British Baptist congregation singing 'When I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun' - and should it be encouraged to do so? Let it be granted that we can provide only what is on offer. What bothers me then is the passing of Bright's 'And now, O Father, mindful of the love', of Rawson's 'By Christ redeemed, in Christ restored', of Briggs' 'Come, risen Lord, and deign to be our guest'. Is the new preferable just because it is new?

The section on the Holy Spirit raises more basic issues. Of the thirteen additions, one does not obviously relate to the Holy Spirit at all, and at least five seem qualitatively dubious candidates for inclusion. Why this urge to provide a substantial and generous coverage? Presumably it arises from the compilers' conventional preoccupation with the Christian Year at the expense of the progressive movement of corporate worship. So Easter must be succeeded by Whit-Sunday/Pentecost, with the Ascension in between. But this is always a recipe for muddle, as well as for trinitarian segmentation; and it probably reflects the continuing and damaging theological confusion about the Holy Spirit. Those bothered by the exigencies of Whit-Sunday can be painlessly calmed by appropriate cross-referencing, so amply provided by *BPW*. Liturgical integrity would firmly deny any special section to the Holy Spirit, and would distribute its variegated contents and emphases among the sections to which they properly belong. No need then to search vainly around for a centre stage sectional parade of worthy material, in any case doubtfully available.

If, in the matter of hymn selection, quality and balance must engage in sensitive and searching dialogue with *Vox populi*, what of the accompanying hymn tunes and how in this respect does *BPW* fare? Suppose the appropriate criteria to be four.

First of all, a tune must be congregationally singable. This was the hurdle at which a significant part of *Praise for Today* so disastrously fell. Secondly, a tune should not be musically trivial or third rate, given that the worship of God is in question. If standards are at the edges slippery to discern and too easily confused with judgments of personal taste, yet informed consensus in this regard is not generally hard to come by. Thirdly, a variety of musical styles will properly be in evidence. The People of God are of today as well as of yesterday, and of yesterday as well as of today. Finally, a tune must be congruous with the Christian Gospel as well as with the hymn it subserves. Here the difficulties and perils are at their greatest, partly because it is here that the stakes are highest, partly because this will be the criterion that is least understood, and partly because the flavour, tone, and thrust of the Gospel can be so differently understood amid a profusion of devotional and theological imbalances. Nevertheless, the venture has always to be made. Feeding slow spiritual poison to others is not excused by the plea that they like the taste or that it is their own fault if they become addicted.

Comparison of *BPW* with *BH* reveals that a hatchet job has once again been done. *BH* provided 819 tunes of which no less than 483 have now disappeared. *BPW* takes the remaining 336 over from its predecessor, and adds a further 220 to provide a significantly smaller total of 556. I need not again rehearse the possible reasons for this enormous 32% cut in overall provision. It is more important to identify the changes. What might be called the 'Ithell Jones inheritance', that plethora of not always distinguished tunes by Welsh composers given houseroom by *BH* has substantially vanished. Similarly, two-thirds of the 'Germanically' titled tunes have joined the discards in a fairly ruthless pruning of the post-Reformation inheritance. In the end, we emerge in rough terms with 8% of tunes ancient or unclassifiable, 10% from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 9% from the eighteenth century, 35% from the nineteenth century, and 38% from the twentieth. If we turn from tunes to hymns, the musical shift in favour of the modern may even appear modest. The correspondingly approximate figures for the hymns are 3.5% ancient or unclassifiable, 4.5% from sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 13% from the eighteenth, 27% from the nineteenth, and a staggering 52% from the twentieth century. That last is either audacious or foolhardy. Either way, compared with *BH* this is undeniably a *new* hymnal. Yet note that the 52% (of which one-sixth were already in *BH*) are accompanied by only 38% twentieth-century tunes (more than one-fifth of which were already in *BH*). Musically, the wind has been tempered to the shorn lamb. The reason for that will partly have been necessity. I hope it was also and predominantly sensitive wisdom.

Statistics, though potentially informative, too easily become mind-numbing. Suppose we turn to the musical 'small print'. On the twentieth-century scene, it is the occasion for Cox and Warren, Lock and Pulkingham, Barnard, Bilbrough and Baughen to make their entrance; and, of course, Kendrick. Inevitably, 'Lord, the light of your love' is there; but others also, including the superior and more enduring 'Restore, O Lord'. Doubtless, consumer choice will as usual ensure that a

significant proportion of the more experimental offerings will not survive. On the whole, however, they deserve their chance. The real problem lies elsewhere; not so much with the inclusions as with the exclusions.

Of course, it is as usual not difficult to fault some of the inclusions and to identify points at which arguably the compilers' nerve failed them and the popular tail wagged the musical dog. In Lydia, Diadem, Sagina, Lyngham, the debased echoes of eighteenth-century grand opera continue to survive. Third-rate Victoriana still surface in the shape of incredible St Oswald, atrocious St Andrew, boring Rivaulx, sentimental Gottlieb, debilitating St Margaret, dubious Abergele, unspeakable St Bees, threadbare Rimington, and trivial Penlan (without even Nyland as an escape hatch). At 435 might not either Selfless Love or Coe Fen have been helpfully replaced by Aurora, Cuttle Mills (340) by Westridge or Whitstable, Rivaulx (89) by Samson, Tichfield (485) by Salzburg, Cloisters (608) by Coelities Plaudant, Abergele (99) by Emmaus? If we had to live with Newcastle (85), should we not at least have been offered as alternative the superb Teilo Sant? Yet what is even more difficult to defend is the absence of a whole range of basically respectable inherited tunes at the expense of using others *two* or even *three* times.

The point is sufficiently serious to justify making in some detail. Why not Cannock as substitute for Church Triumphant at 251, Capel for St Magnus (403), Deus Tuorum Militum for Tallis' Canon (476), Dunelm for Herongate (613), Es is Kein Tag (or Mayfield) for Almsgiving (259), Ewing for Thornbury (482), Eastview for Crofts 136(72), Harvest Song for Bentley (609), Ivinghoe for Abbot's Leigh (409), Nox Praecessit for St Stephens (482), Rex Glorias for Lux Eoi (406), St Botolph for Waveney (353), Salisbury for Richmond (416), Sawley for Beatitudo (405), Sefton for All for Jesus (289), Tudor for Stracathro (198), Vater Unser for Abingdon (286), Welwyn for Lord of the Years (354), Westminster for St Flavian (217)? Provided that a tune is qualitatively adequate and sufficiently congruous with the words in question, how are we the richer if so many are discarded while others are duplicated and triplicated?

Perhaps it is time to take overall stock. It is comparatively easy for the independent critic to paint pictures of ideal hymnic worlds. Compilers are more likely to find themselves being forced to be pragmatists. What will be used? What will sell? What is popular demand? In the contemporary situation, the uncertainties are legion and the imponderables more weighty than previous generations have known. Take the updating of language and imagery as example. On the whole, an impressively thorough job has been done - though 'Lord, thy Church on earth is seeking' curiously slips through unscathed (? because its author is still living). Does it then follow that a range of hymns are/should be excluded because such modernization was deemed impracticable? Take the substantial scaling down of the number of provided hymns as another example. Does it signal deliberate decision to move away from a hymnal designed for the span of a generation to a more interim provision anticipating a rapidly moving future situation calling for supplements along the way? *BPW* hardly embodies that message, and arguably would have misread the

signs of the times and the deepest needs of the churches had it done so. Nevertheless, these and a multitude of other key issues will have to have been considered; and the judgments made will have subtly moulded perspectives. The onlooker does not necessarily best sense the dynamics of the game. If there is to be searching criticism - and I judge there to be significant grounds for it - it is yet best framed in questioning rather than in declaratory terms.

In the end, for good or ill (and substantially for good) the die is now cast. The dispersed scattering of worship material will by many be found useful. The transposition of tunes into congregationally singable key, already begun in *BH*, has mercifully been carried to proper conclusion. It is in the using of the book that the really crucial battles will be lost or won. The deluging of congregations with unfamiliar material by well-intentioned enthusiasts is one danger. The more serious long-term peril will be the continuation of that conventional mixture of cowardice and myopia that too widely marked the local deployment of *BH*. Treasure demands sensitive, critical, and sometimes adventurous plundering. It is fatally easy to imagine that once a hymnal has been launched, its more popular elements publicly paraded in vast concourses, and its general virtues extolled, the necessary job has been done. A long-term educational task directed towards understanding and discrimination remains.

Beyond this, there lies the necessary recognition that, for a denomination, its hymnal potentially constitutes one of the three adhesive cements of self-consciousness and mutual belonging. The existing portents are menacing, as a common hymnbook bids fair to follow a common bible into oblivion. It is noticeable how a new generation of Baptist ministers routinely and unreflectingly found it impossible to announce a hymn number in *BH* without indicating that it was from *BH*. The assumption that some alternative source will be the exception rather than the rule dies apace. This is a reflection of things as they growingly are. It remains to be seen how far a self-denying ordinance for the sake of the health of the churches will circumscribe the endlessly restless search for some new thing or the alluring appeal of the up-to-date or the uncontainable expression of personal enthusiasms. It remains to be seen to what extent assumptions as to the charm of the overtly contemporary for the uncommitted or the indifferent will finally be adjudged evangelistic wisdom or superficial illusion. It remains to be seen in what measure the call of modernity to the young will prove winningly enduring or horrifyingly fleeting. Meanwhile, we have a flexible aid to the worship of God for which many will be thankful. Warts and all, it both merits and abides scrutiny.

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