

Choosing and Using Hymns

Austin C. Lovelace,
Wellshire Presbyterian Church, Denver, Colorado

Presbyterian law concerning the rights of a pastor is very clear: "There are certain responsibilities which belong to the minister as pastor which are not subject to the authority of the session, but which must be exercised by him subject only to the constitutional authority of the presbytery, namely: the selection of the hymns or psalms to be sung at each service, the selection of a passage or passages of Scripture to be read at each service, the leading of the people in prayer, and the preparation and preaching of the sermon." (*The Book of Order*, 1977-78, 38.04)

It is fascinating that the choice of hymns is listed first and the preparation and delivery of the sermon last. Does this mean the church looks on hymns as of primary importance, or the opposite? In either case the responsibility for the choice is of more importance than most ministers are aware, and this responsibility should be shared with the musical leaders. Methodist circuit riders went on their rounds with a Bible and a hymnal in their saddle bags, for they recognized that the power of the sung gospel was equally as important to the propagation of the gospel as was the preaching of the Word.

I

In *Hymns for Today and Tomorrow*, Erik Routley indicates three tendencies in hymn singing which he declares to be deplorable but curable. "The choosing of hymns by habit instead of by the free and firm use of intelligence is one. The stupid and inattentive singing of hymns is another. The encouragement of congregations to believe in their right never to learn anything new is a third." (p.155)

The primary responsibility in this matter lies in the hands of the minister, but there are several factors of which one should be aware. First, one must become familiar with every hymn in the hymnal (and from there should move on to explore other collections.) One should obtain a handbook for the hymnal, or read historical studies of hymns as background, and then set out on a systematic and careful study of every hymn in the book. If one does not read music, consultation with the organist or director about any tune which does not look familiar is in order. Ask whether the tune is singable and worth learning. Next, make a list of every hymn which has been sung (and how many times) during the past years. Note which have been over-used, and which have been neglected. Discover the areas of the hymnal which have been avoided, and ask why. Make a list of hymns which should be added to the repertoire, and another of those which should be gradually dropped because of inferiority, non-usefulness, or irrelevant or false message.

One of the limitations which affects choices is between the familiar and the unfamiliar. It is not correct to say that only the familiar should be sung: neither

is it correct to sing a steady diet of none but unfamiliar hymns week after week. Another consideration will be to discover what the congregation likes because it is easy, and what it dislikes because it is difficult. This again is not to say that one should avoid what is difficult, if learning the hymn is worth the effort.

When pew-people say, "I know what I like," what they mean is, "I like what I know," and it is human nature to avoid the difficult and the unfamiliar. "I don't like it" is never a valid basis for argument or decision on any hymn. One does not get to the resurrection by-passing the cross, and any great hymn offers its reward only when the singer takes up the cross regularly, and eventually finds it a blessing. Congregations need to be reminded that every favorite hymn at one time was new, unknown, and possibly resisted. You can do a great deal to develop Christian growth by your choice of hymns which stretch the mind and spirit, and push the cozy singers out of the womb which too many gladly would also make their tomb.

In choosing a hymn the primary image which a congregation gets depends on the first line, and this means that the opening phrase must be striking and attention getting. There are, of course, incidental images which may filter through, but a hymn must have a central thought which is captured in the opening line.

The choice of hymns is often affected by the organization of the hymnal, and there are several different methods, none of which is ideal or perfect. In liturgical churches it is customary to arrange hymns according to the Church Year. *The Hymnbook*, published by five Presbyterian bodies in 1955, was organized along topical lines—a standard approach for most hymnals. The new *Methodist Hymnal*, 1964, returned to a format based on the movements of Christian experience, following a design used by John Wesley. And there is *The Worshipbook* (1970) which is arranged alphabetically. While it is easy to find a title if you know it, the book is useful only if the "Guide for the Use of Hymns" at page 660 is used effectively.

The real question is still left unanswered, "On what basis shall hymns be chosen?" Let us look at several patterns in common use. First, choosing hymns according to the Church (or Christian) Year. If a lectionary is used and if the congregation is aware of the meaning and thrust of each season and if the minister preaches from this lectionary and the people come with an expectancy of hearing certain themes at certain times of the year, hymns which undergird this cyclical theme are helpful.

A second pattern for choice is based on the liturgy itself. It is a strange anomaly that churches such as the Episcopal or Lutheran, where there is a highly ordered structure for worship, include few places for hymns per se; whereas the so-called non-liturgical churches who take pride in their charismatic, disorganized, and loosely structured orders of worship tend to include more hymns. The more the service is designed to be homey, friendly, and popular the greater the prominence given to hymns.

In some churches, particularly Lutheran, hymns are seen primarily as illustrations of creedal positions and the scriptures. Here the hymns are chosen and placed to undergird statements of beliefs and to make commentary on the lessons of the day. In some churches hymns are treated more as ceremony—for processions and recessions.

In the Reformed tradition at its best, hymns are chosen to provide a congregational response to what has been done and said in their name by the minister. In this case, well chosen hymns give the congregation a chance to respond to the movements of the liturgy. If the hymns are carelessly thrown in, the service becomes what Routley calls "a disorganized heap of pious actions, gone through in this order merely because the minister directs that this shall be done." And this, he says, is a subtle form of sacerdotalism. Whether hymns are chosen for their response to the liturgy, or as creedal, or illustrative of Scripture or church teachings, the words ought to be studied carefully before they are chosen to make certain their imagery is not misleading and that their singing will make sense to a contemporary congregation.

In addition to these patterns there are others which are completely indefensible: (1) Singing hymns as time fillers. (2) Inviting the congregation to call out favorite numbers. (3) Choosing a hymn as a "seventh inning stretch with sound effects." (4) Hymns as hypnotism—using hymns psychologically to soften up a crowd. (5) Hymns as escape from reality. (6) Hymns interspersed for fun singing. (7) Hymns as a come-on.

Where hymns are chosen with care and attention to their message and placement in the service, they can become part of the preaching of the gospel. At their best they can envelop the worship with the church's teaching, focusing pointed light at a theme which is being emphasized on that particular occasion. The hymnal then can become a precision tool in ministry and a means of grace to the congregation.

In choosing hymns there is a necessity for care in balancing meters, subject, and textures. Just as a meal consisting of all roast beef or all jello is inadequate, so a service in which all hymns are in one meter (whether Common, Long, or long winded 10's) will have a deadening impact. If all of the hymns are of a light, ephemeral nature the service will lack substance; if all are heavy, didactic texts the congregation will suffer from indigestion. One should keep a balance of historical periods and avoid having all hymns in a single key. By all means avoid choosing hymns entirely based on the sermon theme—there are places for praise, confession, thanksgiving, and commitment. Consider the entire congregation in your choices, remembering that older people may want to sing some hymns they know, and children should be permitted to sing some which they like and can understand. Just as a dietician plans a meal which appeals to all appetites but provides all of the necessary vitamins and minerals, so should the minister choose hymnic fare which is palatable to the singers and provides spiritual sustenance and food for growth. Dr. Kendrick Grobel in his fine translation of Clement of Alexandria's hymn, "O Guide to Every Child of Thine," has this intriguing line: "Give milk or bread, or solid food As fits my understanding." Include all three kinds of food in your selections, but don't forget that there are some people who will ask to be breast fed forever if you will let them.

II

Pastors not only have the responsibility for choosing hymns, they also seek to provide meaningful variety in their use. The following catalogue of possibilities begins to unearth some of this rich variety.

Hymns may be used as processions, either for normal Sunday traveling music by the choir, or in an extended procession of congregation and/or choir. They may be accompanied by percussion instruments to keep a steady pace, and by solo instruments such as recorders, flutes, oboes, etc., to keep pitch. Handbells or Orff instruments can give a simple ostinato pattern to maintain pitch and rhythm.

Hymns as Choral Introits. ("Come down, O Love divine"; "O my soul, bless God the Father"; "Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates," st.4; "Good Christian men, rejoice and sing," st. 1, 2, or 5)

Hymns as Calls to Prayer. A carefully chosen hymn sung by choir or congregation can focus the mind and spirit on the prayer which follows. ("Prayer is the soul's sincere desire," last stanza; "Spirit of God, descent upon my heart," st. 1; "Dear Lord and Father of mankind," st. 1, 4, or 5)

Preparation for Scripture. Occasionally a hymn about the Word of God may focus attention to the reading of a lesson. ("Break Thou the bread of life"; "Blessed Jesus, at Thy Word"; "Holy Spirit, Truth Divine"; "How firm a foundation," st. 1; "Break forth, O living light of God," st. 2 or 4.)

Response to Scripture. If a hymn is sung after the Scripture lesson in the Reformed tradition, it should be a response to the passage just read.

Gradual hymns. The word "gradual" comes from "gradus," meaning step. It is customary in many traditions to have the minister or priest move from location to another so that the Old Testament lesson is read from one place and the New Testament from another. In such cases, a hymn which bridges two readings but also ties them together with its message can be very helpful in bringing unity to the service.

Hymns as Prayers. Most hymns are prayers and there is no reason why hymns cannot be used as prayers alone, as part of a pastoral prayer, or as a unison prayer by the congregation. The words move by more rapidly than in singing, and the thought content is clearer when read. ("O God of earth and altar.")

Offertory sentences or responses. ("All things are Thine"; "We give Thee but Thine own"; "What shall I render to my God"; "As men of old their first fruits brought," st. 3.)

Hymns as sermon outlines. Where a hymn is rooted strongly in the Scriptures, the various stanzas may suggest an outline for a sermon.

Hymns as litanies. There are some hymns such as "Jesus, with Thy Church abide" which can either be read or sung as litanies. In another variation the minister may read the first three lines, and the congregation sing the litany refrain. ("Father eternal, Ruler of creation"; "When we are tempted to deny your Son.")

Responsive or antiphonal reading or singing. This is related to the idea of a litany, except that in some hymns the thoughts are so divided that one group can effectively read the first half, while the others read the second half. This can also be done effectively with soloist or choir singing the first half, and the congregation replying with the second half. ("Our Father, which art in heaven"—West Indian folksong; "Praise the Lord, His glories show.")

Paraphrase following Scripture. Where an excellent paraphrase is available, it can effectively be sung immediately following the reading. For example, after reading John 1:1-13 sing "Father eternal, Ruler of creation," st. 4.)

Hymns and Interpretative Dance. Many hymns lend themselves to interpretation if the dancers are well trained and are sensitive to their responsibilities of interpretation through movement. ("In Christ there is no east nor west"; "I danced in the morning.")

Choric Reading. Through the use of solo and chorus voices at different pitch levels, hymns can be given fresh interpretations. Percussion can also be added.

Hymns read and sung. In long hymns with many stanzas, perhaps the first and last can be sung and all of the middle stanzas read.

Hymns as anthems. Anthems can be arranged directly from the hymnal for all kinds of choirs by using some imagination in the treatment. See *Music and Worship in the Church*, Lovelace and Rice, Abingdon Press, 1976, for a listing of twenty-two suggested ways to arrange a hymn as an anthem.

Hymns for meditation. List several hymn numbers at the top of the bulletin to be read as preparation for worship along with the hymns which are to be sung. Or list hymns to be read during the Communion service.

Hymns for home devotions. Suggest a hymn each week to be used at the breakfast table or at devotions. Or build a special Advent service for home use based on hymns.

Dividing a hymn. On a long hymn, divide it into sections so that only a few stanzas are sung at a time.

Choosing stanzas. It is not necessary to sing every stanza of every hymn. Sometimes a single stanza is appropriate, and sometimes you may decide to start with stanza two, or even a later one. In many hymns there are several different ideas, and there is no reason why you should not choose those which are most appropriate for the service. However, there are some in which the argument is so interwoven that no cutting should be done.

Confirmation class. In your session on church history, consider the possibility of using the hymnal as your source book.

Hymns and organ music. Have the organist play a composed hymn prelude before the singing of a hymn. This could be more interesting than listening to a dull, uninspired playing over of a tune.

Hymns with slides. During certain seasons of the year, such as Christmas or Lent, an effective service can be arranged by singing appropriate hymns coupled with interpretations of famous art.

Hymns as benedictions. ("Jesus, still lead on"; "Lord, dismiss us with your blessing"; "By the Babylonian rivers," st.4.)

Hymns dramatized. Interpret the historical setting, or the text itself, through drama.

Hymn Concertatos. Concordia Publishing House has many festive arrangements of familiar hymns which include parts for choir, congregation, organ, and instruments.

Two hymns in alternation. The Quempas Carol ("Shepherds came, their praises bringing" to the tune QUEM PASTORES LAUDAVERE) sung by the choir, and "Good Christian men, rejoice" sung by the congregation to IN DULCI JUBILO (both in the key of F) alternating stanzas as well as tunes.

Hymns in Alternatim. This is related to the concertato, except that the form is simpler and there is not as much musical development. On longer hymns let various forces alternate in the presentation: congregation, choir, soloist,

organ alone, women only, men, two halves of the congregation, reading, etc. ("For all the saints").

Hymns and free accompaniment. The organist can add variety by either improvising, writing out, or using a published new harmonization for various stanzas. The goal should be to provide new musical treatments which highlight certain ideas of the text, and to provide a climax in the last stanza. The voices must sing only the melody, and they should be informed when they are expected to give up singing their parts for a greater good. For an extensive list of materials see *Journal of Church Music*, April 1977, p. 17.

Hymns in canon. A canon is a "round," and such tunes as MENDELSSOHN, TALLIS' CANON, GRAFENBERG, and WEDLOCK can be sung as rounds.

Hymns and descants. A descant is an added ornamental melody above the tune which may be sung by sopranos (adults or children), played by instruments, or by the organist on a pungent stop such as the trumpet.

Words of assurance. *The Worshipbook* at page 661 lists 24 hymns for use after confession and pardon. (See also "Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord," st. 3; "God is love: let heaven adore Him," st. 3.)

Doxologies and Glorias. ("A hymn of glory let us sing," st. 3; "All creatures of our God and King," last st.; "Greater of the stars at night," st. 3; "Now thank we all our God," st. 3).

Hymn Festivals. An entire service can be built out of hymns used in various ways to develop a theme, or hymns can be chosen to take the place of the various movements of a service of worship.

III

In a thought provoking article in *Motive* in February 1953, Dr. S. Paul Schilling of Westminster Theological Seminary in Maryland wrote, "Unfortunately, not all of the discords in church music are struck audibly by singers and accompanists. Many are produced by theological concepts out of harmony with Christian truth, by religious ideas which contradict the actual experiences and beliefs of the worshipers, or by words which lack any clear meaning whatever." He adds, ". . . sometimes people are made to sing the opposite of what they believe."

Because some theological position is implicit if not explicit in every hymn, because sincerity in hymn singing requires understanding and agreement with the beliefs voiced, and because hymns have an incalculable power to spread error as well as truth, every hymn chosen needs to be examined, studied, and considered carefully by the minister and musician. Here are some questions which might be asked:

Does this hymn say something worth saying?

Is its message in accord with New Testament teaching and our highest Christian experience and insight?

Is the hymn selfishly individualistic, or does it reflect a concern for all?

Does it recognize the claims of both time and eternity? Or does it, like so many so-called "gospel" songs, focus solely with the beginning and end of Christian life on earth—conversion and heaven?

Is the language in keeping with the significance of its ideas? Does it avoid empty repetition of hackneyed phrases?

Is it universally true, but personally applicable?

Can a congregation sing it as a valid corporate expression and experience?

Is it lyrical and singable, and does it fit the tune to which it is wedded so that the meter and matter blend?

Is its symbolism meaningful? Are its images understandable and healthy?

Does it have unity of thought balanced with variety of treatment?

Is there a fundamental simplicity which is reflected in a striking and memorable first line?

Does it stretch the mind, the imagination, and the spirit?

Is there a good balance between the objective and subjective?

Are feeling and thought in good balance?

Is it positive rather than negative in tone?

Is this the best available statement of this particular truth?

Does the hymn add to beauty and truth the element of "claritas," which might be defined as splendor? Does it have the indefinable stamp of greatness and magnificence which marks great art in all forms?

There is no perfect hymn, but in choosing hymns these are some of the questions which may guide you in deciding what words and thoughts will be put into the mouths and hearts of a worshiping congregation. What they sing is important. The mind must be turned on with the voice. Concentration is always one measure of consecration. That is why Paul wrote, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the mind also." (1 Cor. 14:15) And who guides the choice of hymns? You do! The minister, then is probably the most important person to church music, for its level cannot rise higher than the minister's estimation of its importance in the life of the church.

F. Pratt Green, whose hymns are enriching the contemporary church, has written a hymn which sums up the matter well:

When, in man's music, God is glorified,
And Adoration leaves no room for pride,
It is as though the whole creation cried: Alleluia!

How oft in making music, we have found
A new dimension in the world of sound,
As worship moved us to a more profound: Alleluia!

And did not Jesus sing a Psalm that night
When utmost evil strove against the light?
Then let us sing, for whom he won the fight: Alleluia!

Let every instrument be tuned for praise!
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
And may God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia!

(Oxford University Press)