

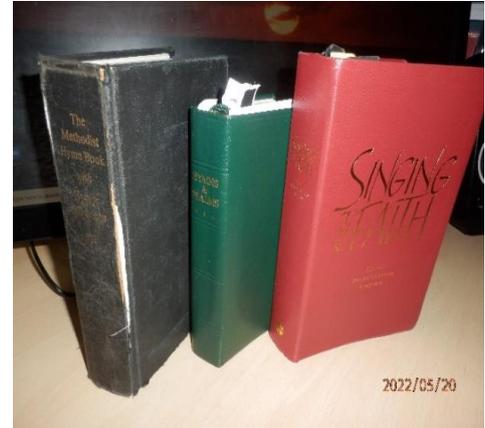


Wey Valley Methodist Circuit – Pastoral Letter 2022 Rev Barrie Tabraham

“Hymns for all seasons” – a personal reflection (Part 1)

Dear friends,

I was brought up on the *Methodist Hymnbook* of 1933, switched smoothly to *Hymns & Psalms* in 1983, and happily embraced *Singing the Faith* in 2013. Of course, a number of supplements have appeared over the years, and dozens of other hymnbooks produced. On our bookshelves, Joan and I have *Mission Praise* (1983), *Sound of Living Waters* (remember that?), *Songs of Fellowship* (4 vols: 1991-2007), *Sing Hallelujah* (1997), *Common Ground* (1998) together with a dozen or more denominational books, hymns of Sankey & Moody, and numerous Iona publications (esp. their *Known Unknowns* in 2018), not to mention earlier Methodist (Wesleyan) works.



This all goes to show that hymnody is a dynamic subject – of course it is. All I want to do here is to make a personal plea for the way in which those hymns judged worthy of being included in successive collections have been ‘modernised’. Please forgive me if I seem to have a few ‘grizzles’, as it were. Whilst there are good grounds for updating archaic language and getting rid of unhelpful imagery (and stereotypes too!) – I think it’s unwise for editors to tinker around with the authors’ words & alter the theology and underlying meaning that was intended.

Can I give you just three examples? You will not all agree with what follows, of course! I’ve given the numbers in *Singing the Faith*, since (apart from the online supplement) it’s the most recent version and the one most of us currently use. The changed words are in **bold** type.

(1) **StF 457 Author of faith, eternal Word (H&P 662)**

Originally, Charles Wesley’s words in vs. 3 were:

*By faith we know thee strong to save –
save us, a present Saviour thou!
Whate’er we hope, by faith we have.
future and past subsisting now.*

You’ll see from those words (which will be very familiar to many of you), that Charles Wesley was speaking about the presence of the Risen Christ in time – hence the contrast with the words ‘future and past’ in the last line – cf. the writer of Hebrews’ words ‘*Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today and forever*’ (Hebrews 13:8). Unfortunately, the editor, keen to remove all ‘thee’s’ and ‘thou’s’, changed the sense of Wesley’s words:-

*By faith we know **you** strong to save –
save us, **O Saviour always near!**
All that we hope, by faith we have,
future and past subsisting **here.***

You see what the editor’s done? It’s not just the language, but the *theology* that has been altered. I’m not sure that the hymn gains anything as a result. The next example is also by Charles Wesley:

(2) StF 378 Father of everlasting grace H&P 300)

Look carefully at the last verse. Charles Wesley's original words were:

*Till, added to that heavenly choir,
we raise our songs of triumph higher,
and praise thee in a bolder strain.
Out-soar the first-born seraph's flight,
and sing, with all our friends in light,
Thy everlasting love to man.*

The editor was concerned, not just with replacing 'thee' with 'you' in the 3rd line, but getting rid of the word 'man' in the last line. Of course, because s/he couldn't substitute 'man' with something more inclusive, this was the result:

*Till, added to that heavenly choir,
we raise our songs of triumph higher,
and praise **you with** a bolder **voice**,
out-soar the first-born seraph's flight,
and sing, with all our friends in light,
with everlasting love **rejoice**.*

Again, the sense has been changed. Wesley's hymn is all about the grace of God – his love to us, shown in the gift of his Spirit. But the editor has switched the emphasis from God to us, making us the subject and not the object of God's love, as Wesley intended. 'CW' would have been very cross!

(3) StF 39 Angel voices, ever singing (H&P 484)

My third example of how unwise it is to tinker with the author's original words is this hymn, beloved of so many. Again, look at the 2nd verse. The original went:

*Thou who art beyond the farthest
mortal eye can scan,
Can it be that thou regardest
songs of sinful man?
Can we know that thou art near us
and wilt hear us?
Yea, we can.*

And the person who revised this decided, with breath-taking lack of consistency, to ignore the archaic language and keep words like 'yea' and 'art' and 'regardest' – but instead made this ridiculous substitution in line 4, viz.

*Thou who art beyond the farthest
mortal eye can scan,
can it be that thou regardest
sinful woman, man?
Can we know that thou art near us,
and wilt hear us?
yea, we can.*

. . . which causes frowns and giggles in equal measure!

I suppose the **criticism** I have in each of those cases is that **the author's words were not allowed to speak for themselves**. If a hymn is clearly antiquated in that its language is so obscure as to be meaningless; if hymns express outdated stereotypes or racially-offensive language [and time doesn't permit me to illustrate, but **I could give you some beauties from the MHB** that could never be sung today] – then, of course, **don't sing** them, but confine them to the history books!

And finally, in case you feel that I've been a little too negative and imply that a return to the 'good old days' would benefit us all, let me add that in my next contribution to the weekly Circuit Pastoral Letter, which is due to appear on 17th August, I hope to give some examples of some of the modern hymns which really do now grace *Singing the Faith*, and which (to quote my son) show 'how changes can improve accessibility of theology and singing to a younger generation'.

We need to heed John Wesley's words: "**SING ALL**" and explore the best of the old and the best of the new, and the richness of the diversity that is Christianity today. Only in this way, to quote the preface of *Hymns & Psalms*, 'will Christians of different traditions be enabled to grow together in understanding and fellowship. *Singing the Faith* is not perfect – no hymnbook could ever be. But it is a wonderful resource and, to quote the Wesleys in the preface to their own collection of hymns in 1784, it can be 'a little body of experimental and practical divinity' for each of us.



A Prayer: Gracious God, help us to combine your gifts of music and poetry to create beauty and meaning, and allow us all, whatever our age or background, to worship you as we should. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Barrie Tabraham