

Hymnals as a Denominational Scrapbooks

A Leader Reader by Beverly Howard

Times Change, So Do Hymnals

As a child, I enjoyed pouring over family photo albums and was always curious to see which of my relatives had similar familial physical features. I was also mesmerized by other details in the photos such as fashion and hairstyles—all details that evoked questions. What was it like to live in their time? What did they think about? What were their daily activities?

Hymnals hold a similar fascination. Within their pages, I find psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs that Presbyterians have sung for generations. These hymns, our shared song in faith, have shaped our Presbyterian heritage. Looking at these “photos,” I muse about our ancestors in faith. What hymns did Presbyterians sing in previous generations? What made a hymnal unique to our denomination? Because hymnals reflect the culture of a given generation, they are like a denominational photo album.

Whenever I look through an old hymnal, I am fascinated by the look and feel of the pages, different font types, the volume’s layout, and language style. Recently, while browsing through a copy of an 1843 Presbyterian hymnal, I noticed the descriptive language used to categorize hymns. Topics such as “Vicissitudes and Conflicts,” “Slothfulness,” and “Submissions under Trials” seemed like quaint words from a bygone era.¹ However, this language brought to my mind images of staunch, sturdy Presbyterians in nineteenth-century America readily rebuking laziness or character weakness!

Contents Vary

Reading a hymnal’s preface offers more clues to what a particular group believes and sings because it serves

Prayer

This hymn, as true of many songs, may be sung or said as prayer. Based on Psalm 90:1–5, it was composed by Isaac Watts in 1719 and has survived countless hymnal selection committees through the centuries. This hymn is found in the current Presbyterian Hymnal, page 210.

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received its frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Soon bears us all away;
We fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our God while life shall last,
And our eternal home.

as an introduction and rationale for the hymnal’s contents. Comparing the prefaces from four Presbyterian

hymnals (1895, 1933, 1955, 1990), I discovered that the editors and committees valued two criteria in the selection process:

- Preserving our heritage of congregational song
- Expanding the selections to represent a current generation

In his preface to *The Hymnal* (1895), Louis Benson wrote that this collection was “a manual of the Church’s praise, a treasury of things new and old, chosen for actual service, expressive in some degree of the culture of god’s people.”² According to Benson, hymns chosen were “those endeared to the Church by proved fitness,” in other words, hymns that had stood the test of time! The editors of *The Hymnal* (1933) intentionally preserved that “rich treasure of the heritage hymns of the Church.”³ Working guidelines for *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) included embracing “the diversity of our historical traditions.”⁴ Because hymnal committees have honored our heritage in song, our hymnals contain psalms from Scottish and Genevan Psalters, hymns informed by Reformed doctrine, and hymns sung by the broader Christian community. Today, we can still sing “All People That on Earth Do Dwell,” “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” and “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” because they have been in various Presbyterian “photo albums” since the mid-nineteenth century.

In addition to black-and-white pictures, my photo

Why Sing Music from Other Countries and Languages?

We honor Christians from other cultures when we sing their music. Being a little uncomfortable with unfamiliar words and tunes can stretch our imaginations and faith to remember that we are only part of God’s larger faith community.

Some argue that we ruin sacred music of other cultures with our feeble and often mistaken attempts. Yet, throughout history groups have always taken music and art from other cultures and made them their own. Music is sung in churches around the world today that was taken from American missionaries and adapted to local cultures and languages. Of course, when we sing other’s songs we do our best to imitate them, but we are not them and can do only the best we can.

albums include color snapshots of the current generation, reminding me of events and experiences I have shared with my family. As these photos pass on to a new generation, they will become the next chapter in my family’s history. Likewise, hymnals contain new material written by and for current Presbyterians, reflecting this generation’s values. New selections sung in worship today may well become the heart songs of future Presbyterians.

Each Hymnal Has an Emphasis

A hymnal’s preface is also instructive because it often includes a rationale for new texts and tunes chosen from a dizzying array of repertoire. Describing the labor in producing the 1895 hymnal as an expression “of the culture of god’s people,” Benson wrote, “the whole field of modern hymnody has been laboriously gleaned.”⁵ No small feat, then or now!

These four prefaces all convey that new hymns chosen reflected theological views current to that particular generation of Presbyterians. When our 1933 hymnal was published, Presbyterians were interested in congregational song that gave “expression to certain new emphases in religious thought today,” which included “social service, brotherhood of man and world friendship” and the devotional life of the Christian.⁶ Accordingly, its table of contents contained categories such as “Brotherhood,” “World Friendship and Peace,” and “The Inner Life.” Some newer hymn texts representing these emphases were “Rise Up, O Men of God,” “Not Alone for Mighty Empire,” and “Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord.”

The Presbyterian Hymnal (1990) reflects latter twentieth-century Presbyterian thought regarding images of God, diversity, and inclusivity. The preface assures the reader that the collection

- Expresses a full range of biblical images for the Persons of the Trinity
- Is inclusive of all God’s people—sensitive to age, race, gender, physical limitations, and language⁷

This hymnal gives our generation opportunity to sing new texts such as “O Praise the Gracious Power,” “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ,” and “For the Fruit of All Creation.”

Today, we live in an era of extended and blended families, with our photo albums including pictures of in-laws, step-parents and siblings, and friends. *The*

Hymnal (1933) expanded Presbyterian song to include hymns from “various nationalities so largely represented in the Presbyterian Church in this Country,” namely Welsh, Irish, and Scandinavian traditions.⁸ *The Hymnbook* (1955), unique as a compilation of hymns from five Presbyterian-Reformed denominations, incorporated more metrical psalms and “secured the admission of a representative body of so-called ‘gospel songs.’”⁹ We now sing songs from the global church because of the 1990 hymnal committee’s “conscious efforts to recognize various racial and ethnic musical traditions.”¹⁰

What will our next “photo album” contain? Although the preface for the 2013 Presbyterian collection of congregational song has yet to be written, we do have a preview via the committee’s Theological Framework:

The overarching theme of the collection will be God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. It will also bespeak the human responses that God’s gracious acts make possible. In other words, the framework for this collection of congregational song will be the history of salvation.¹¹

Endnotes

1. *Psalms and Hymns: Adapted to Social, Private, and Public Worship in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843).

2. Louis Benson, preface to *The Hymnal*, published by the Authority of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, 1895), iv.

3. Clarence Dickinson, preface to *The Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1933), iii.

4. LindaJo McKim, introduction to *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 9.

5. Benson, iv.

6. Dickinson, iii.

7. McKim, 9.

8. Dickinson, iii.

9. David Hugh Jones, preface to *The Hymnbook* (Richmond: Presbyterian Church in the United States, The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Reformed Church in America, 1955), 5.

10. McKim, 9.

11. Presbyterian Hymnal Project, “The New Collection of Presbyterian Hymns and Songs,” Theological Vision Statement, <http://www.presbyterianhymnal.org/CommitteeStatements.html> (accessed November 10, 2010).

About the Writer

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