

ARTICLE X.

THE LESSON OF THE NEW HYMNALS.

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THE publication within the past few years of a rather remarkable number of hymn-books of superior merit—implying, of course, a demand for this species of literature—indicates that there is something going on in our American churches that is favorable to a renewed zeal and improved practice in congregational song. This movement, whatever it may be, is certainly not coming with observation; there is no sudden outburst of hymn-singing enthusiasm, parallel to that of the Lutheran or Wesleyan movements, for such a musical impulse is always the accompaniment of some sudden and powerful religious awakening, of which there is just now no sign. The significance of these recent hymnals lies rather in the evidence they give of the growth of higher standards of taste in religious verse and music, and also of certain changes in progress in our churches in the prevailing modes of religious thought. The evident tendency of hymnology, as indicated by the new books, is to throw less emphasis upon those more mechanical conceptions which gave such a hard precision to a large portion of the older hymnody. A finer poetic afflatus has joined with a more penetrating and intimate vision of the relationship between the divine and the human; and this mental attitude is reflected in the loving trust, the emotional fervor, and the more delicate and inward poetic expression which prevail in the new hymnody. It is inevitable that the theological readjustment, which is so palpable to every intelligent observer, should

color and deflect those forms of poetic and musical expression which are instinctively chosen as the utterance of the worshipping people. Every one at all familiar with the history of religious experience is aware how sensitive popular song has been as an index of popular feeling. Nowhere is the power of psychologic suggestion upon the masses more evident than in the domain of song. Hardly does a revolutionary religious idea, struck from the brains of a few leading thinkers and reformers, effect a lodgment in the hearts of any considerable section of the common people, than it is immediately projected in hymns and melodies. It is not too much to say that no idea has a real vital energizing power which does not so manifest itself. So far as it is no mere scholastic formula, but possesses the power to kindle an active life in the soul, it will quickly clothe itself in figurative speech and musical cadence, and in many cases it will filter itself through this medium until all that is crude, formal, and speculative is drained away, and what is essential and fruitful is retained as a permanent spiritual possession.

If we were able to view the present movement in popular religious verse from a sufficient distance, we should doubtless again find illustration of this general law. Far less obviously, of course, than in the cases of the Hussite, Lutheran, and Wesleyan movements, for the changes of our day are more gradual and placid. I would not imply that the hymns that seem so much the natural voice of the new tendencies are altogether, or even in the majority of cases, recent productions. Many of them certainly come from Watts and Cowper and Newton, and other eighteenth-century men, whose theology contained many gloomy and obsolete tenets, but whose hearts often denied their creeds and spontaneously uttered themselves in strains which every shade of religious conviction may claim as its own. It is not, therefore, that the new hymnals have been helped

by new schools of poetry, but the compilers, being men quick to sense the new devotional demands and also in complete sympathy with them, have made their selections and expurgations from a somewhat modified motive, repressing certain phases of thought and emphasizing others, so that their collections take a wider range, a loftier sweep, and a more joyful, truly evangelical tone than those of a generation ago. It is more the inner life of faith which these books so beautifully present, less that of doctrinal assent and outer conformity. If all this be true, then the publication of these recent hymnals should be hailed with very great satisfaction, for there can be no question that in this instance action and reaction are equal, and that these stores of poetry and music will aid in promoting this very spirit from which I suppose them to proceed.

When we consider the music of the recent books we find that there has been progress also in the matter of selection of the tunes to which the hymns of the church are set. It might be expected that both hymns and tunes would in a general way reflect the same changes of taste from period to period, and would have a considerable degree of influence upon each other. Changes of theological position cannot, of course, be betrayed in music as they are in poetry, and whatever differences may appear in the new hymnals in respect to melodies as compared with the older books, they indicate nothing more definite than altering fashions in congregational music. The harshest doctrines, most prosaically worded, have often been sung to tunes of the most serene and touching quality, while on the other hand there seems to be nothing that would positively forbid the union of a hymn most finely conceived and expressed with very dry, unfeeling music. The whole tendency of the later hymn-book editors, however, has been to consider more carefully than ever before the mutual reinforcement of music and verse, seeking with extreme care that the

most beautiful hymns should be wedded to melodies equally choice and manifestly appropriate in character. There has been a more thorough sifting process in respect to tunes than was ever applied before. This has been made possible by the fact that a rich harvest of melody, chiefly from the English cathedrals and parish churches, has been added in recent years to the Christian storehouse, so that a great quantity of old and commonplace material could be discarded without danger of impoverishment. The later editors have also gone farther afield in their search for jewels, and have levied tribute upon old and remote periods and schools as well as upon those that are new and near at hand. It must be said that some of these books have come under reproach on the ground that the rule of selection is derived from the personal tastes of the editors rather than from the needs of the churches—in other words, that they are too good for the public. This censure would seem to imply that the hymn-book compiler should follow the method of the politician and act “with his ear to the ground,” and form no opinion of his own until he has “heard from the people.” There may be some force in the objection in certain cases. But American hymn-books, on the whole, have been so little open in the past to the charge of “pandering to the better element” in the matter of artistic merit that it may be found that the most severe of the later books have a mission to fulfil; while taken collectively, they may be hailed with gratitude as indicating a reaction against the decline toward sentimentalism and vulgarity into which so many even of the older churches have fallen.

The books in question are, therefore, of value in many ways, not the least as demonstrating to connoisseurs of music and poetry the indubitable fact that no other nation, not even the German, can show any parallel to the treasure embedded in English and American popular re-

ligious song. I have reason to believe that this fact is not known to the great majority of church-members. The average church-goer never looks into a hymn-book except when he stands up to sing in the congregation, and this performance, whatever else it may do for the worshiper, gives him very little information in regard to the artistic or even the spiritual value of the book which he holds in his hand. Let him read his hymn-book in private, as he reads his Tennyson; and although he will not be inclined to compare it in point of literary quality with Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* or Stedman's *Victorian Anthology*, yet he will be somewhat surprised at the number of lyrics whose delicacy, fervor, and pathos will be to him a revelation of the gracious elements that lie in the minor devotional poetry of the English tongue.

These recent contributions to the service of praise are not only interesting in themselves, but even more so, perhaps, as the latest terms in that long series of popular religious song-books which began with the independence of the English church. The *Plymouth Hymnal* and the *In Excelsis* are the ripened issue of that movement whose first official outcome was the quaint *Psalter of Sternhold and Hopkins*; and the contrast between the old and the new is a striking evidence of the changes which three and a half centuries have effected in culture and spiritual emphasis as revealed in popular song. The early songs were prepared as a sort of testimony against formalism and the use of human inventions in the office of worship; they were the outcome of a striving after apostolic simplicity, while in their emotional aspects they served for consolation in trial and persecution, and as a means of stiffening the resolution in times of conflict. The first true hymns, as distinct from versified psalms, were designed still more to quicken joy and hope, and yet at the same time a powerful motive on the part of their authors was to give in-

struction in the doctrines of the faith by a means more direct and persuasive than sermons, and to reinforce the exhortations of evangelists by an instrument that should be effective in awaking the consciences of the unregenerate. It is very evident that the hymnals of our day are pervaded by an idea somewhat different from this, or at least supplementary to it. The church, having become stable, and having a somewhat different mission to perform under the changed conditions of the time, employs its hymns and tunes not so much as revival machinery, or as a means for inculcating dogma, as for spiritual nurture. Hymns have become more subjective, melodies and harmonies are more refined and alluring; the tone has become less stern and militant; the ideas are more universal and tender, less mechanical and precise; appeal is made more to the sensibility than to the intellect, and the chief stress is laid upon the joy and peace that come from believing. It is impossible to avoid vagueness in attempting so broad a generalization. Conservatism usually plays as strong a part in public offices of worship as it does in creeds, and, as Curwen says of the songs of the Puritans, our modern hymns are a liturgy to those who reject liturgies. But one who studies the new hymn-books, reads the prefaces of their editors, and notes the character of the hymns that are most used in our churches, will realize that now, as it has always been in the history of the church, the guiding thought and feeling of the time may be traced in popular song, more faintly but not less inevitably than in the instructions of the pulpit.

From this point of view there is a charm in the study of hymnody to which its sheer poetic and musical properties would hardly entitle it. The significance of the folk-song is fully recognized in our day, and the hymn with music is properly to be classed as a department of the folk-song. It is independent of contemporary art movements,

and but little affected by them. Although largely the work of clergymen, that is to say of educated men, its authors write not out of a purely personal and independent lyric impulse, but as spokesmen of the church, rendering in a simple, naïve manner the feelings that stir in the hearts of the commonalty of believers. Springing thus from popular impulses, the hymn is to be set over against official liturgical forms of song, marking an antithesis which has been productive of a perpetual conflict in all branches of the Christian church from the early Middle Age to the present day. The sacerdotal, sacramental conception of worship—involving a special order or caste, set apart as representatives of the church authority and the dispensers of descending grace—has been the source of the priestly chant and the choral song of the Catholic Church; and in the Anglican, and even to some extent in the Lutheran, it has thrown the preponderance of encouragement upon the elaborate music of the choir. Under such patronage the scientific music of the schools has flourished, the idea of conscious art, wrought by learning and genius, uniting with that of liturgic song as a special official privilege either to repress the free song of the laity altogether, or else to crowd it to one side into a humble, subordinate station. The motive was (1) to encourage musical art as a means of adorning the ritual and reinforcing it on the emotional side, and (2) to maintain a barrier against the intrusion of heretical or unchurchly turns of thought, and also against a dangerous spirit of individualism and lay initiative in worship. That the latter danger was not imaginary was proved in the Reformation struggle, when revolutionary doctrines, as was acknowledged by both sides, were more rapidly disseminated among the people by the new songs than by the Protestant sermons.

Hence the enthusiastic outburst of hymn-singing which ushered in the Protestant movement was one of the most

significant tokens of its character and motive. The emancipated believer demanded a direct access to God through the merits of Christ alone, and how could he better express his joy and hope, and at the same time his consciousness of independence, than by singing? Not the least of his satisfactions lay in the privilege of uttering his faith in his own native tongue, in the public act of worship, and in company with his fellows. The primitive German Choral marks its epoch no less significantly than Luther's ninety-five theses and his *Deutsche Messe*—it was the spiritual battle-cry of a people in successful revolt against an age-long repression of their inborn rights before their Maker.

It is a somewhat singular anomaly that the large liberty given to the Lutheran Christians to express their emotion in hymns of their own spontaneous production or choosing was denied to the far more numerous followers of Calvin. Our magnificent heritage of English hymns was not founded by the early disciples of Calvin, and thus we have no lyrics freighted with the priceless historical associations which consecrate in the mind of a German the songs of a Luther and a Gerhardt. Calvin would tolerate nothing but metrical versions of the psalms in public song. This prohibition was continued in the churches which derived their government and theology from him, and for one hundred and fifty years in France, Switzerland, Holland, England, Scotland, and America there was no outlet given to the impulse—everywhere instinctive in human nature—to give original poetic expression to the controlling emotions. The reason of this barring-out of every form of religious poetry except versified psalms was, as every one knows, the conviction that nothing but “inspired” words should be used in the office of praise. Efficacious as the Calvinistic psalmody has been from many points of view, the repression of a free poetic impulse in the Protestant churches, particularly in those of Great

Britain and America, for so long a period undoubtedly tended to narrow the religious sympathies, and it must be given a certain share of responsibility for the hardness of temper fostered by the Calvinistic system. In the light of subsequent history, however, we may ascribe an appropriateness to the metrical versions of the psalms, of which even Calvin could hardly have been aware. It was given to the Calvinistic sects to meet Catholic vindictiveness in France and the Netherlands and monarchical oppression in England in armed conflict, and maintain its very existence by the sword. In this warfare the Dutch Calvinists and the Puritans drew much of their martial spirit from those psalms which were ascribed to a bard who was also a military chieftain and an avenger of blood upon his enemies. The unemotional unison tunes to which these rhymed psalms were set also satisfied the stern notions of those rigid zealots, who looked upon every appeal to the æsthetic sense in public worship as an enticement to compromise with popery. Before condemning such a position as this, we should take into account the natural effect upon a conscientious and high-spirited people of the fierce persecution to which they were subjected, and the hatred which they would inevitably feel toward everything associated with what was to them corruption and tyranny.

The British and American Puritans loved their dull, prosaic psalmody, and they had good reason to do so. But it was a love which shrunk into fanaticism, and instead of promoting progress it degenerated, when the original religious enthusiasm had declined, into the baldest, dullest, and most discordant routine that the historian of religious song is ever called upon to chronicle. The epoch for which religious poetry and music has so little reason to be grateful came to an end early in the eighteenth century, and the hymns of Watts and the Wesleys opened an era which may justly be called the most glorious in the his-

tory of Christian hymnody. The sad injury which the old bigoted prejudice against "uninspired" hymns had inflicted upon the church had become patent to all but the hopelessly blind, and the fervent zeal, the loving faith, and forceful natural utterance of the lyrics of Watts and the Wesleys contributed an element of incalculable value to the reviving life of the church. What has come of this impulse every student of Christian literature knows. To give any adequate account of the movement which has enriched the multitude of modern hymn-books and religious anthologies would require a volume.¹ No more profitable task could be suggested to one who deems it his highest duty to expand and deepen his spiritual nature, than to possess his mind of the jewels of devotional insight and chastened expression which are scattered through the writings of such poets as Charles Wesley, Cowper, Newton, Newman, Faber, Lyte, Heber, Bonar, Milman, Keble, Ellerton, Montgomery, Ray Palmer, Coxe, Whittier, Holmes, the Cary sisters, and others equal or hardly inferior to these, who have performed immortal service to the divine cause which they revered by revealing to the world the infinite beauty and consolation of the Christian faith. One who studies this great body of poetry in historic sequence will observe the steady growth of the mystical and subjective elements, the fading away of the early fondness for scholastic definition. Lyric poetry is in its very nature mystical and intuitive, and the hymnody of the future, following the present tendency in theology to direct the thought to the personal historic Christ and to appropriate his example and message in accordance with the light which the latest knowledge has given concerning man's nature, needs, and destiny, will aim more

¹This has been done by many writers, but by no other in such admirable fashion as by Horder, whose instructive and delightful book "The Hymn Lover" (London, Curwen, 1889) should be in the library of every minister and church-member.

than ever before to purify and quicken the higher emotional faculties, and will find a still larger field in those fundamental and universal convictions which transcend the bounds of creeds, and which demonstrate that all men are by nature, not by adoption, brothers and children of one Heavenly Father.

In respect to the choice of tunes for the new hymn-books, the editors have exercised as broad an eclecticism as possible under the restraints of a refined taste. The tunes employed are chiefly of old and new English and American origin, with a sprinkling sufficiently liberal of German Chorals and adaptations from miscellaneous European sources. As in the case of the hymns, the omissions are as significant of the later taste as the additions. Adaptations from secular sources, once the favorite resort in the absence of an inventive gift, are coming more and more into disfavor. Associations of the stage or concert hall are not found to increase the edifying effect of a hymn-tune. The tendency also increases to sing hymns to tunes written expressly for them, which has always been the custom in Germany, and was also the custom in England in the Reformation period. A similar sense of fitness preserves time-honored associations of certain tunes with certain poems. Critical reflection discovers that an appropriate relation between a hymn and a melody depends upon other considerations than merely that they have a metre in common. The recent inclination of hymn-writers to shake off the fetters of the conventional metres (L. M., C. M., S. M., P. M., and the rest) and to experiment with a larger variety of rhythms, has been gladly met by later composers, greatly to the advantage of both music and poetry. The musical constituent of the new hymnals has been strengthened at every point. The colorless sweetness of the Lowell Mason period, which flourished in the song-books of a generation ago (where, we must admit, it constituted

an advance at the time) has been eliminated, and a bolder, stronger, and more telling melody and harmony has taken its place. The grand old syllabic and diatonic tunes of the Scotch and English psalters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of which "Dundee" is the best known type, are still held in honor. In fact I notice that in some quarters (as indicated by the Harvard University Hymn Book, for instance) there is a movement to restore other of these ancient rugged but often juicy tunes to popular favor.

The most conspicuous distinction between the hymnals of the present day and those of forty or fifty years ago is to be found in the presence of a large number of tunes of a novel form and coloring, entirely the product of our own period. These tunes are representative of the present school of Church of England composers, such as Dykes, Barnby, Smart, Sullivan, Monk, Hopkins, and many others equally well known, who have contributed a large number of tunes of exceeding beauty and purest devotional quality, quite unlike the congregational tunes of any other nation. It is hardly too much to say that to these musicians, more than to any other influence, is due the revival of interest in popular religious song which has made the new hymnals possible. Composed for the noble ceremony of the Anglican Church, these melodies have made their way into a large number of the non-liturgical sects, and the value of their influence in inspiring a love of that which is purest and most salutary in worship music has been incalculable. Much has been written in praise of these new Anglican tunes, and a good deal also in depreciation. Many of them are, it must be confessed, over-sophisticated for the use of the average congregation, carrying refinements of harmony and rhythm to such a point that they are more suitable for the choir than for the congregation. Their real value, however, taken collectively, can be best

estimated by those who, having once used them, should imagine themselves deprived of them. The tunes that served the needs of former generations will not satisfy ours. Dr. Hanslick says that there is music of which it may correctly be said that it *once was* beautiful. So it is with hymn-tunes. The church is in every phase of its action affected by the secular currents of the time, and those who, in opera house and concert hall, are thrilled by the impassioned strains of the modern romantic composers, will inevitably long for something at least remotely analogous in the songs of the sanctuary. That is to say, the congregational tune must be appealing, stirring, emotional, as the old music doubtless was to the people of the old time, but certainly is no longer. This logical demand the English musicians of the present day and their American followers assume to gratify, and in spite of the cavils of purists and reactionaries, their melodies seem to have taken a permanent place in the affection of the Protestant English-speaking world. The success of these melodies is due not merely to their abstract musical beauty, but perhaps still more to the subtle sympathy which their style exhibits with the contemporary tendencies in theology and devotional experience, which I have already tried to describe as the parent of the new hymnody. So far as music has the power to convey definite ideas, there seems an apt correspondence between this fervent, soaring, touching music and the hymns of faith by which they were in most instances directly inspired. For beautiful illustrations of such fitting union, take for instance Phillips Brooks's "O little town of Bethlehem" with Charles H. Morse's music in the Plymouth Hymnal, Ellerton's "Now the laborer's task is o'er" with Dykes's setting, Faber's "O Paradise" and Barnby's music, or—most eminent example of all—that exquisite setting of "Abide with me," with which William H. Monk has linked his name with that of Henry

Lyte in the lustre of an unfading renown. With such music the modern church supplies a need which, if not universal, is at least obvious and urgent. Much of it does indeed present a certain amount of difficulty, but, as Dr. Lyman Abbott says, familiarity with music, not trivial simplicity, is the secret of good congregational singing; and it is a matter of experience that the choicest of these later English tunes, when once adopted into regular use, are an unfailing source of inspiration and joy.

The appearance and wide adoption of these truly inspiring and elevating hymnals should give renewed hope to those who have been inclined to fall into despair in view of certain degrading tendencies in religious worship in this country during the past twenty or thirty years. It is a melancholy fact that a very large number of congregations, including many that assume to be leaders in piety and good works in their respective communities, have turned their backs upon those stores of devotional expression that are among the chief glories of the English-speaking church. They have adopted instead a kind of song which in respect to words is the shallow expression of a shallow emotionalism, and in respect to music is often below the level of the variety theater. It seems to me beyond question that no church can permanently prosper in the highest spiritual sense which deliberately tries to break down a taste for what is dignified and refined in its offices of worship, and scorns the results of the highest Christian emotional expression of past ages. The business of a church is to educate its members spiritually, and it is not possible that spiritual culture can thrive on the same food that produces intellectual and æsthetic deterioration. Neither is it obvious what a church has to gain by offending the taste of the educated class. Certainly the church has repelled enough of that class already. There is reason to believe, however, that the tide, which once seemed running strong-

ly toward sensationalism and flippancy, has now begun to turn. At any rate the compilers of these noble volumes, of which I have been speaking, have felt no need of even compromising with that taste which the "gospel hymns" illustrate and promote.

It only remains to urge that these splendid collections be adopted to some extent as text-books in the theological seminaries. It is inexcusable that candidates for the ministry should not be thoroughly familiar with the most perfect expression in English song of the faith which they are to preach. Much has been written of late on the need of a highly educated ministry. A refined taste in poetry and music, and a familiarity with the best that has been provided for the office of praise, may fairly be urged as an important ministerial qualification. The mission of song, so potent in the past, is not yet ended, and will not end so long as the Christian church endures. The church must keep pace in its worship, as well as in its teaching, with the growing intelligence of the people. It must be one of the educational factors of the age, or it will inevitably decline. From this point of view its attitude toward that which is strongest, purest, and truest in its offices of worship is no insignificant matter. Its spiritual power can only be increased by the adoption into its educational equipment of that which is intellectually and emotionally the best in the fields of poetry and music.