Hymns and Theology

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I want to start with three brief stories about hymns from the UK where I've spent some extended time in recent years.

- At a PCNet conference in London I heard a very progressive and thoughtful Anglican clergyman saying that the bane of his life was choosing hymns to use in the services at this church. He claimed that he had to spend hours each week trying to find hymns that were singable and I got the impression that he felt that he didn't always succeed.
- At the same conference I heard several other people saying, in informal conversation, that although they got a lot of things right at their churches, and although they were happy with progressive liturgies and sermons, the hymns were just terrible, but there didn't seem to be anything they could do about them.
- I attended a session at my local village Anglican church to hear one of the architects of a new Anglican hymnal talk about the process of producing it. Basically, he was saying that, in relation to the words, the committee changed only what they thought they could get away with — the most obvious cases of language which was offensive, archaic or obscure, and certain phrases or allusions that they thought people wouldn't notice or care about. And he explained that, of course, they hadn't touched things that were much loved parts of the culture — like Christmas carols! The assumption was that people wouldn't stand for that.

I didn't enter into any public discussion about any of this — I was after all a visitor — but I did wonder about the lack of imagination and initiative as well as the timidity that these experiences suggested. I sensed, on these occasions, as I have sensed on many others, the idea that changing the words of hymns is somehow a presumptuous and improper thing to do. The fact is of course, that Christians have been making judgements about the hymns they sing — declaring some acceptable and some not, and making changes to them — for centuries.

I have a hunch there's quite a bit of initiative and not much timidity here today. So what I'd like to do now is to encourage you to brainstorm what you find it hard to put up with — indeed won't put up with — in hymns. This will form an appropriate backdrop to the historical material I want to share with you next, and also to our reflections this afternoon.

Questions for group: What's wrong with traditional hymns? What needs to change?
I noted answers on the white board, separating them into two groups as we proceeded and later identified these groups as matters of style and matters of substance. Responses that were offered, and then added to through further discussion, included:
Style
- exclusive language
- hierarchical language
- outdated language
- other-worldly focus
- emotional manipulation, sentimentality

Substance
- atonement theology
- some expressions of trinitarian theology
- 'blood-soaked' imagery
- militarism and triumphalism
- infantilising theology
- unrealistic optimism
- over-focus on individual piety/sin/salvation
- inappropriate metaphors for God
- outdated world views

I asked: Why does any of this matter? Why not just sing what we enjoy singing, whatever has a good tune, and not worry about the words?
My answer (and here I returned to the more formal presentation mode): because the words really do matter. They matter because they are vehicles for theology, highly-powered vehicles for how we come to understand the Christian gospel. I suspect you will concede the truth of this, on the basis of your own experience. As I have argued in my book about hymns and theology, *Singing the Faith*,

> As any serious singers of evangelical hymns know, hymn-singing in the context of worship is a potent communal activity: lively and joyful, reverent and emotionally evocative, it is capable of encouraging and sustaining personal commitment to Christ, as well as conformity to the Christian subculture with which the singers identify. It is impossible to know precisely what individual singers make of the words that they sing or how the meaning that they take from them tallies with the intent of the writer. Some will apply theological filters and decoders to what they sing, and others will not. But it is unlikely that any one exposed to a particular repertoire of hymns from an early age will avoid consciously or unconsciously imbibing their theological perspective. Indeed, through their frequent repetition and centrality within worship, through their power to evoke mood and memory, and to offer both comfort and challenge

> within familiar formats and categories, it seems likely that it is hymns rather than sermons, bible study or denominational creeds and doctrines that actually 'do theology' for most Christians.[1]

This has been the case for as long as congregational hymn singing has had a central part in regular Christian worship. And that means at least since the Reformation. And although there's inevitably a bit of lag time, hymns have changed throughout history as theological perspectives have changed. We're not doing anything new in wanting to discard some hymns that don't reflect our theology.

We've noted some of the problems we find with hymns today. If we go back in history to the seventeenth century, when the post-reformation dissenting denominations were still fairly new, we would find that hymn-singing was a contentious and divisive affair. But the big argument then was not about the things we've named in our lists, but about 'subjective hymns', that is 'man-made' hymns that arose out of human experience and used 'human language'. Many early Protestant reformers insisted that the only source of language that was acceptable for the praise of God was the scriptures. To sing 'human words' was an affront to the almighty. Hymns should have the Holy Spirit as their author, and in content should limit themselves to the inspired Word. This view helps to account for the place of psalmody within the worship of the early dissenters. Psalms were not 'man-made': they came from scripture and they therefore had the divine imprimatur. A particular theological view about the nature of humanity and its relationship to God clearly undergirds that position.

But of course it wasn't an unchanging view. Through a process described as "stormy and difficult", human words, 'man-made hymns', became acceptable: they came to be recognised as a human achievement that could be acknowledged by God for use in his worship.[2] This transition was well under way by the end of the seventeenth century, and provided the context for the great changes in hymnody that were associated with the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, and especially with the advent of Methodism.

Evangelicalism was associated with a great emphasis on congregational singing, and a prolific output not only of new hymns but also of printed, multi-authored hymn-books. There were apparently many people around who were not timid, not bound by tradition and prepared to have a go at producing hymns that reflected their theology. Two of the best known and most widely published were the great Nonconformist hymn writers, Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. But alongside their work, an extraordinary number of hymn collections were edited by various individuals and denominations. Hymns moved from collection to collection, collections were amalgamated, the language of hymns was modified for theological or literary reasons, verses were added and subtracted. In this way hymn-book editors, as well as hymn writers, could exert considerable influence.[3] I think you will recognise this as being much like what occurs now.

What sort of hymns were these hymns of the eighteenth century evangelical revival? — many of which are still in use in the twenty-first century. They were 'subjective' hymns, 'human hymns', hymns based on the writers' experience of conversion and faith. They were meant for lively congregational singing, often set to "rousing and thrilling" tunes designed to enhance the power and effect of the words. They were understood not as a mere accompaniment to the liturgy, but as an integral part of worship that was designed to evoke personal response and commitment.[4] And unequivocally they were vehicles for evangelical theology. As I've written elsewhere:

> It was their focus on the redemption offered to all through Christ's atoning death, and the individual Christian's experience of salvation which marked them out as new. They were highly personal and often made graphic use of "intimate anatomical imagery" to express the immensity of God's grace and Christ's love and the intensity of [the sinners'] response to it. [5]

They were hymns whose objects were firstly conversion and then a bold and confident claiming of personal salvation.

Some of you were at my lecture during history month when we sang some of these hymns. We sang "lustily and with a good courage" — in a way that would surely have pleased John Wesley. We sang 'O for a thousand tongues' and 'And can it be'. And I think I can safely say that in the context of that occasion, which gave us permission, we loved singing them. I think I can probably also safely say that we haven't sung them since, because of their theology. They are quintessentially evangelical hymns, robust expositions of the notion of substitutionary atonement: Jesus has died in my stead; in fact I have pursued him to death. He has paid the divinely-required ransom for my sin with his life-blood. And on the basis of that I've claimed my place with him in heaven. And there were a lot of such hymns around. They were new in the eighteenth century, lasted for two hundred years and more, were very much part of my growing up, and yours, and still appear in hymn-books.

The Evangelical revival, which occurred within Anglicanism as well as within Non-conformity, played a key role in cementing the place of hymn-singing at the centre of British and later Australian religious life. And of course it didn't remain static: over time Evangelical hymnody underwent change and became diversified just as the various denominations themselves changed and diversified. The dissenting denominations succeeded in accommodating great diversity in their hymnody. We can see the evidence of this in their highly eclectic hymn collections in which the old sits alongside the new, the restrained alongside the florid, the decorous and dignified alongside the emotive and rackety, the theologically conservative alongside the theologically liberal. The early emphasis on conversion and personal salvation was joined by emphases on doctrinal instruction, moral exhortation, biblical knowledge and aspects of contemporary social and political ideology. And people in the past made their choices about which ones they'd keep singing and which ones they'd allow to sink into oblivion, according to their theology, their preferred worship style and their habits, just as we do.

There were several forces that encouraged a renewed surge of hymn-writing during the nineteenth century, and I have discussed these in *Singing the Faith*. I want to say a bit more about one of these today:

- American revivalism. This movement had its most influential expression in the campaigns of Dwight L Moody and Ira D Sankey, who began campaigning in the United States in 1870 and soon took their message to Britain from where it spread quickly to the Australian colonies. Revivalism focused on the unsaved masses in the growing cities, where a decline in church-going, and the " 'sins', of drunkenness, gambling, profanity, domestic irresponsibility, prostitution and other aspects of 'low life' " had become increasingly visible. It produced and popularised hymns and gospel songs that emphasised "conversion through simple child-like faith, pictured in terms of coming home to God, or opening the door to let Jesus in", or making it through storms and ship- wreck by taking Jesus on board as pilot and/or anchor. They were world-denying and placed a big emphasis on the after-life, but also on here-and-now lives "cleaned up, re-ordered, made respectable and no longer in the grip of obvious sin".[6] They were lively and singable, and they quickly appeared in hymnals not only in the United States and Britain but also in Australia. Does that ring any bells?

  Revivalist hymns didn't all please everyone of course. It seems that Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians exercised some discrimination and eschewed the more florid and emotionally manipulative examples. But such hymns had their supporters, including among Churches of Christ, in which I grew up. They were also favoured by the Salvation Army. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army believed gospel songs, set to catchy music, were an important tool of evangelism. He "had no time for the view that certain kinds of music we too vulgar or worldly to be harnessed to the gospel message". He said:

  > Let us have a real tune, a melody with some distinct air in it — which takes *hold* of people and goes on humming in the mind — that is the sort of tune to help you — it will preach to you and bring you believers and converts.[7]

  Others, like RW Dale, the British Congregationalist who visited Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century couldn't quite come at the "childishness" and lack of "literary merit" of the revivalist songs, but recognised their power to stir up the "deepest emotions of the Christian heart". The mainstream churches, in his view needed new, better hymns. Their hymn books were "too stiff and cold" and didn't recognise that "people want to sing not what they *think* but what they *feel*".[8]

Other factors which encouraged the proliferation of hymns in the last third of the nineteenth century included

- the Holiness Movement, the focus of which was the already-saved, who aspired to higher levels of consecration and holiness not by

struggling against sin but by total surrender and yielding to the will of God and the love of Jesus.

- the missionary movement. The great age of missions was also the age of exploration and of European imperial power and pride and many of the missionary hymns reflected this: they were triumphalist, culturally arrogant, unashamedly imperialist and, we would now say, racist. For those reasons, they haven't worn well.

On the whole, the hymns of the nineteenth century reinforced "the fundamental evangelical assumption that society [could be] reclaimed through the reclamation of individuals". They understood sin as an individual rather than a structural and political matter, and consequently did not engage significantly with what we would now call social justice issues.[9] However, by the end of the century some other understandings were emerging, exemplified in the Wesleyan 'Forward Movement', the establishment of city missions and the growth of the view that the church should be in the business of saving bodies as well as souls, and beyond that, should be working for structural and legislative change to create a more just society.[10]

Since then a great many hymns expressing a similar theological perspective, and pushing it further, have appeared: hymns of social protest and community lament, hymns with a greater emphasis on peace, the environment, human relationships and mutual caring, and a greater sensitivity to inclusivity than the older hymns of evangelicalism. They go beyond personal piety and personal salvation to make space for a theology of community and social transformation.[11] Some such hymns appear in the *Australian Hymn Book* and more of them in *Together in Song* though we might still have problems with some of them or feel they are too few in number. And as you know, they sit alongside ancient chorales, metrical psalms from the reformation period, old evangelical and holiness hymns that we grew up with, and new evangelical and Pentecostal songs that have proliferated in recent decades.

So what does all this tell us? I think it tells us that the thing that has brought us here today — that is the desire to sing a progressive message, to sing what truly reflects and also furthers our theological understandings — is something that has a long and complex history. It also has a future, because the task will never be complete. It's an activity that reflects the entirely respectable historical and theological understanding that truth is always contingent, and that "time makes ancient good uncouth".[12] It also resonates with a central value of the Uniting Church, expressed in the Basis of Union — that is that we are called always to be ready to "confess the Lord in fresh words and deeds".[13]

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[1] Judith Raftery, *Singing the Faith: history, theology and hymnody of Churches of Christ in the mid-twentieth century*, Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society, Melbourne, 2011, p.52

[2] Elizabeth Clarke, 'Hymns, psalms and controversy', in Isabel Rivers and David L Wykes (eds), *Dissenting Praise*: *religious dissent and the hymn in England and Wales*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p.31
[3] Isabel Rivers and David L Wykes, 'Introduction' in Rivers and Wykes (eds), *Dissenting Praise*, p.2
[4] Raftery, *Singing the Faith*, pp.37, 40
[5] Raftery, *Singing the Faith*, p.47
[6] Raftery, *Singing the Faith*, pp.40-41
[7] Ian Bradley, *Abide with Me: the world of Victorian hymns*, SCM Press, London, 1997, pp.184-185
[8] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a history from the 1730s to the 1980s*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1989, p.174; Bradley, *Abide With Me*, pp.176, 180-181
[9] Raftery, *Singing the Faith*, p.50
[10] Arnold D Hunt, *This Side of Heaven: a history of Methodism in South Australia*, Lutheran Publishing House, Adelaide, 1985, pp. 248-249
[11] Brian H Fletcher, *Sing a New Song: Australian hymnody and the renewal of the church since the 1960s*, Barton Books, Canberra, 2011, pp.141-144
[12] From the hymn, 'Once to Every Man and Nation', James R Lowell, 1819-1891
[13] *Basis of Union*, paragraph 11