

# **Hymns, Heretics and History**

**A Study In Hymnody**

**BY**

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

Man's most important activity is the worship of the true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is an activity that is commanded in all its scope. That is, the activity itself is commanded. The object of that activity is commanded. Finally, how we worship is a matter of divine command. The Scriptures repeatedly condemn all false worship and warn against man devising his own worship in place of that which has been instituted by God himself. In fact the Scriptures by precept and example even give us the elements of worship, that is, they define what constitutes worship and what activities properly qualify as that worship which God requires of man. The ordinary parts of religious worship are the reading of the Scriptures, the preaching of the word of God, prayer, and the singing of praise, as well as participating in the sacraments.<sup>1</sup> It is the praise element of worship that we are considering in this book. As a key part of man's most important and significant activity, we will see just how important the singing of praise is to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Music itself is important. God considered it important enough that he made specific provision for it in his word and gave explicit instructions how it should be conducted. An entire book of the Bible, the Book of Psalms, or as expressed in the Hebrew, the "Book of Praises," is devoted to the content of our musical praise unto God. The titles of the individual Psalms frequently give specific instructions how the psalm is to be sung, including the instruments and the melodies to be used. God, under divine inspiration, gave David very specific instructions about how to establish the musical worship in the temple, including Levitical choirs, instruments, Psalms, melodies, etc. God certainly thinks that his praises, as musically expressed by his church, are very important.

Even secular and unbelieving men, have historically recognized the great importance of music to any society and culture. A Greek philosopher is noted to have said that he cared not who makes a nation's laws if he could control the people's songs. That is certainly true in America today. Today it is obvious that Hollywood has far more influence on our culture than does the Congress. Examples are legion. In the 1950's capital punishment was generally accepted and there was virtually no effective opposition to it. In the late 1950's a popular singer, Ronnie Hawkins, topped the charts with "*The Ballad of Caryl Chessman.*" Chessman was on death row in California for rape, then a capital crime in the state (as based on Biblical law). He had been on death row for over ten years during extended appeals and had gained a college degree and become a respected expert in his field, while being a model prisoner. The song pleaded for his life with the refrain...

Let him live, Let him live, Let him live...  
I'm not saying forget or forgive.  
If he's guilty of his crime  
Keep him in jail long long time  
But let him live, Let him live, Let him live.

The song was very effective. Neither God's law nor man's law seemed to matter anymore. Everyone was humming the song and rooting for Chessman. By the 1970's capital punishment was on the ropes and the music industry had certainly helped pave the way for that.

The Viet-Nam War is another critical case showing the power of the music industry. The war had strong support in the Democratic Party that controlled both the White House and the Congress. Liberal Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield had long advocated American intervention in South Viet-Nam as an exercise in nation building. The American people were by

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<sup>1</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, Sections III, IV, V

and large supportive because of their innate anti-communism. But what happened? The American left used its control of the music industry to glorify the Viet-Cong, vilify America, promote communist ideals, and to recruit the nation's youth in revolutionary resistance to the war.<sup>2</sup> They were wildly successful and the war was eventually lost and a Democratic President, Lyndon Johnson, forced from office. The music industry had easily triumphed over the nation and its government.

And the music and entertainment industries continue to flex their muscles in the ongoing culture wars in America. In vain has the government sought to maintain some standards of decency in our society in the face of an onslaught of degenerate music. Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley have combined to normalize, and even glorify, fornication, adultery, and lately sodomy as well. Those States that still have laws on the books against such things are far too intimidated to attempt any enforcement of them. Many have quietly repealed them. They are a dead issue. The music/movie industry has again prevailed.

However, music is not intrinsically bad; it is just a two-edged sword that can cut both ways. As we have already noted, God used it very powerfully for good. David used it to calm Saul in his demonic rages, and God used David to write many of the Psalms and to establish a guild of Levitical musicians for the temple that was a great blessing to Israel and expressed praise and honor to Jahweh as the King of Israel. And throughout history those Psalms have been a consistent blessing to the faithful. Not only have they been a blessing, but the power of the Psalms has been recorded on the pages of history. It is part of the record of the power of music, particularly of musical praise.

It was for that reason that the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages forcibly suppressed the singing of the Psalms in the vernacular. It was alright for the monks in the monasteries, and for cathedral choirs to sing the Psalms in Latin, but they feared the power of the Psalms sung by the people in their own language. And well they might! It was a revival of the word of God that precipitated the Great Protestant Reformation. And for the people, many who were not literate, and most of whom could not afford a Bible, they personally possessed the word of God in a special way. They memorized metrical versions of the Psalms and sang them. The theology of the Reformation was very much the theology of the Psalter. As the Reformation advanced, even in the face of horrendous persecution and of the Inquisition, it was characterized by the faithful singing the Psalms. The weaver at his loom and the plowman in the field sang the Psalms as they prepared to live and die for Christ. The Psalm singing armies of the Dutch Calvinists, the English Puritans, and the Scotch Covenanters, defended the Reformation and overthrew civil and religious tyranny. Truly the Psalms were making their mark in history. And they were dramatically illustrating the tremendous power of music and song, its power not just for evil, but also for good.

However, this spiritual weapon so greatly used of God in history has been sheathed of late. And it has not been sheathed by sword or fire, by persecution or by inquisition. It has been sheathed voluntarily by the indolence and ignorance of the professing Church of Jesus Christ. The inspired praises of God's hymnbook no longer stir the faithful to live and die for their Lord. The militant strains of the Psalter no longer prepare the elect of Jesus Christ to do battle in his name. Instead the "faithful" have their ears tickled with the soothing strains of Fanny Crosby as they wend their way down the path of compromise.

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<sup>2</sup> See David A. Noebel, *The Marxist Minstrels*, American Christian College Press, Tulsa, OK 1974. This is a fascinating book that thoroughly documents the Communist use of music to subvert the West and demonstrates their success in radically affecting our culture through this medium.

The church's greatest weapon is the word of God, the sword of the Spirit as Paul styles it. However the church is progressively disarming itself. She has lost control of the Scriptures: the word of God in general, and the Psalter in particular. The church has long lost any control over the Scriptures. The business of providing the word of God in the language of the people, that is the business of Bible translation and publication, is now in the hands of a number of profit-oriented "Christian" publishing concerns. These are rapidly, in a highly competitive market, cranking out designer Bibles, as fast as they can, as they struggle for market share of what is still the world's best selling book.<sup>3</sup> Christian publishing has become big business and one can be sure that the integrity of the text has become secondary to the corporate bottom line. There is a plethora of competing Bibles, designed to appeal to all kinds of niche markets, and all claiming to be the latest and greatest as their translations are based on the most recent philosophies and whims of the textual critics.<sup>4</sup> And while the saints are confused and bedazzled by all these competing versions, reverence for the word of God is systematically undermined as it becomes putty in the hands of its publishers.

Even as that has happened to the Book whose reading and expounding is at the very heart of our worship services, a similar demise has befallen the church's book of praise. In fact its demise is actually worse. The Psalter, at least as a book of praise, as the inspired hymnbook of the church, has not just been adulterated as much as it has simply been supplanted and ignored. It has, for all practical purposes, been replaced by hymnals filled with collections of the favorite uninspired songs that are currently tickling the ears of the professed followers of Jesus Christ. If in this mass of human verbiage there remain a few remnants of God's inspired Psalter, they generally constitute a few corrupted paraphrases. These pseudo-Psalms contain significant human content to replace those words of the Holy Spirit that have been edited out as unsuitable for this more "sanctified gospel age." These songs are far from conducive towards inspiring the saints to shed their blood for the cause and kingdom of Jesus Christ as our forefathers did. These contemporary songs, emphasizing a feel-good theology, are more likely to soothe the church with its theological lullabies than they are to stir her up to new heights of devotion for her Lord and zeal for his cause.

As the church has lost control of the Bible and translations take place without ecclesiastical supervision, giving us a broad range of designer Bibles and subverting respect for the Scriptures and a practical sense of their inerrancy and perfections, so has the church lost control of the content of praise. Anyone can and does write hymns, and the only requirement for success is that they become popular. Pressure from the pew will assure that they are sooner or later included in the church's hymnals, if the church even has a hymnal it professes to control. Just as likely, many churches buy a commercial hymnal that is printed only for profit and totally controlled by market demand rather than theological integrity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> An example of how far this sad process has developed is that Zondervan, the publisher of the NIV, has been bought out by Rupert Murdoch, the owner of the Fox Television network renowned for its sleazy, sexy programming, and who made his fortune in tabloid journalism.

<sup>4</sup> Consider this quote from a recent (1-9-02) communication from Dr. Letis of The Institute for Renaissance and Reformation. "This move (the latest revision of the NASB), while typical of the programmed obsolescence of 'modern translations' was intended to keep their product viable; it only helps to reinforce the most telling critique of this movement: namely, that this independent, corporate, private bible editorial and publishing activity has no external constraints, and as the Greek N.T. remains in constant flux, so do the English bibles. These bibles are in lock-step with this on-going experiment of trying to discover the "real" text of the Bible, an experiment that is now in its 27th try (1993). Hence, even this latest edition of the NASB (1997) still lags behind the most current textual consensus being based as it is on the now-out-of-date 26th ed."

<sup>5</sup> The *Trinity Hymnal* of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the *Psalter Hymnal* of the Christian Reformed Church are two examples of denominationally controlled hymnals.

It is the purpose of this book to study the history and consequences of the church's decision to supplement or abandon the Psalter in favor of hymns of human composition. It is a story played out over many centuries. It is a story of heresy, expediency, compromise, and theological decline. Yet it is a story that the Lord's people need to study if they are ever to reconsider the tragic choices made throughout church history and seek a reformation of the church's worship. The author's prayer is that this book may contribute, in God's good providence, to that worthy end. May the Lord graciously order it so.

One concluding note in this introduction has to deal with the issue of semantics. Words do not always have the same meaning to all parties and the resulting semantic confusion can impede understanding and communication. For the purposes of this book the word "hymn" when used without qualification will always mean an uninspired hymn of human composition. It will not refer to the inspired hymns found in the Scriptures, particularly in the Book of Psalms. In the Scriptures the Psalms are frequently referred to as hymns. This has led some to the erroneous conclusion that the Scriptures authorize, if they do not actually command, men to compose and sing their own hymns. It is not the purpose of this book, as a historical study, to debate that issue.<sup>6</sup> It is however the author's view that every reference to hymns in the Scriptures can be shown to be a reference to the divine hymns that are included in it.

Finally, conspicuous by its absence in this book is any Scriptural argument with respect to the relative merits of Psalms and hymns. That was not an oversight, but rather by design as this was meant to be strictly limited to a historic study. Being "Reformed" and abiding by the Reformation principle of "Sola Scriptura," I fully realize the deficiency of that approach. The reader needs to understand that this book was never meant to be a stand-alone argument on the issue of hymnody. It was only meant to provide a supplemental historical argument to complement the Scriptural one. The Scriptural argument has been thoroughly presented in such works as Michael Bushell's "The Songs of Zion"<sup>7</sup> and more recently Brian Schwertley's "Exclusive Psalmody, A Biblical Defense."<sup>8</sup> While these latter books present the Biblical mandates dealing with Psalmody and hymnody, this book is designed to confront the reader with the practical realities facing those who opt to introduce uninspired hymns into the worship of the Christian Church.

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<sup>6</sup> For a systematic and Scriptural defense of the use of the Psalms in worship to the exclusion of all hymns of human composition see Brian Schwertley, *Exclusive Psalmody, A Biblical Defense*, American Presbyterian Press, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Available from Crown and Covenant Publications, 800 Wood St., Pittsburgh, PA 15221.

<sup>8</sup> Available from The American Presbyterian Press.

## Chapter Two

### The Early Church

The Old Testament Church sang the Psalms. They sang the Psalms exclusively. There is no historical evidence suggesting that the worship of the Jewish Church ever included any hymns other than the inspired hymns of David and the other Old Testament prophets. And to my knowledge no one has ever tried to make the argument that they did. The issue then becomes whether the New Testament Church continued in that tradition or if the change of dispensations includes a new paradigm of worship, including a revision of the church's practice with respect to its praise. All acknowledge that there were significant changes in the church's worship practices. The bloody Old Testament sacraments of circumcision and the Passover, having been fulfilled in Christ, were replaced by baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Old Testament Scriptures were steadily supplemented by the inspired writings of the Apostles as the canon was expanded to include the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The question before us is, "did the church's manual of praise, the Psalter, undergo similar changes involving revision, replacement, or supplementation?" It is a question that we will seek to answer from the pages of church history.

The testimony of church history is clear and extensive on the question at hand. It repeatedly affirms that the early Christian church loved the Psalms, sang the Psalms, and was totally committed to the Psalms. The early Christian church, it testifies, practiced exclusive Psalmody even as the Apostolic Church and the Jewish Church had done before it. The following quotes from church historians make this an undisputed point of church history.

It was only natural that the New Testament Church should follow the example of Jesus and His Disciples in making use of the Psalms...How large a place the Psalms occupied in the early Christian Church may be deduced from the so-called Apostolic Constitutions...in which we find such admonitions as these: "Sing the psalms of David, and peruse diligently the gospel...If thou desirest something to sing, thou hast the psalms...Assemble yourselves together every day, morning and evening, singing psalms and praying in the Lord's house."<sup>9</sup>

From a very early date, perhaps from the beginning, Christians employed in their services the psalms found in the Jewish Scriptures...We hear of at least one form of service in which, after the reading from the Old Testament, the "hymns of David" were sung.<sup>10</sup>

The public portion of Sunday worship began with Scripture reading, interspersed with the singing of psalms...In the Arian struggle the use of hymns other than psalms became common.<sup>11</sup> (Speaking of public worship in the fourth and fifth centuries)

So far as we are able to gather from our sources, nothing, except the Psalms and New Testament hymns (such as the "Gloria in Excelsis," the "Magnificat," the "Nunc Dimittis," etc.) was as a rule sung in public worship before the fourth century.<sup>12</sup>

The dominance of the Psalter, and the importance that the church attached to it is demonstrated by how it was emphasized as an essential part of the training of the church's ministers.

Even in the fourth and fifth century...the Psalms held their place in worship with wonderful tenacity. They were deemed so important that candidates for the ministry were required to commit them to memory.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> E. E. Ryden, *The Story of Christian Hymnody*, Fortress Press, 1959, pp. 3-4

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Scott LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, Harper & Row, 1953, p. 206

<sup>11</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Greek and Latin Hymnology*, cited from Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, Crown and Covenant Publications, 1980, p.122.

The Psalter had attained such prominence by the fifth century that a knowledge of it by heart was required of candidates for ordination. Genadius, Patriarch of Constantinople (A.D. 458-471), refused to ordain as priest anyone who had not been diligent in reciting the Psalter. Gregory the Great refused to allow John the Presbyter to be consecrated as Metropolitan of Ravenna on account of his ignorance of the Psalter.<sup>14</sup>

The second canon of the second Council of Nicaea (A.D. 587), for example, decreed that no one was to be consecrated bishop unless he knew the Psalter thoroughly, and the eighth Council of Toledo (A.D. 653) ordered that “no one henceforth shall be promoted to any ecclesiastical dignity who does not perfectly know the whole Psalter.”<sup>15</sup>

Although, as we shall note, there were departures from the strict Psalmody of the early church, they were initiated by heretical cults, and not imitated to any extent by the orthodox until well into the fourth century. Even then we note that such departures were unofficial and contrary to the established usage and law of the church. The Psalter held such an important place in the church and so dominated its worship that departures from its exclusive use were not officially sanctioned by the church until at least the seventh century. The following quotes from ecclesiastical historians show the continued attempts of the church, through its laws and the decrees of its council, to uphold the distinct and exclusive use of the Psalter in its public praise of God.

The important Council of Laodicea, which met about 360 A.D., forbade “the singing of uninspired hymns in church, and the reading of uncanonical books of Scripture” (Canon 59). This was not a general council, it is true – only what we should call a synod. But the Council of Chalcedon, which met almost a century later (451 A.D.), one of the largest and most important of all the ecumenical councils, confirmed this canon of the Laodicean synod. The decisions of this council the Churches East and West accepted as supreme and final. It was this council that settled once and for all the greatest conflict that ever raged within the Church – the Arian controversy. At the time when it met, and for a millennium thereafter, the ecumenical councils were held to be vested with infallibility. It follows, then, beyond the possibility of reasonable contention, that up to this time – the middle of the fifth century – whatever may have been the emotional and occasional exceptions to the rule, the Psalms of the Bible were the songs of the Church.<sup>16</sup>

...as late as 563 the Council of Braga, in Portugal, decreed that no poetic composition be sung in the church save the Psalms of the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

It is worthy of note that protests against the employment of uninspired hymns in worship continued to be made when the light of truth was fast fading away and the gloom of Romish apostasy was settling down as a pall; and that this antagonism was most strenuous in those regions where resistance to the advancing tide of corruption was most determined. In the North of Italy along the great Alpine range, in the North of Spain, where stretches the rugged range of the Pyrenees, and in the South of France, where at a later day bloody crusades, organized by popes, were hurled against the poor people who held the truth, repugnance to mere human hymns and attachment to the Psalms as matter of praise lingered latest...

Here also we find Agobard, archbishop of Lyons (who died A.D. 841), maintaining a heroic struggle against the growing superstition and expressing his desire that in worship no songs should be used except those found in the Psalter, or, at least, in the Bible.

As further evidence of the spirit which survived in this comparatively orthodox region it may be stated that in a provincial council held in Braga in Portugal, in the year 563, it was decreed that besides the Psalms or canonical Scriptures nothing be sung in the churches.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John McNaughter, *The Psalms in Worship*, Still Waters Revival Books, Edmonton, Canada, 1992, pp. 167,175.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, Crown and Covenant Publications, 1980, p.122.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>16</sup> McNaughter, *The Psalms in Worship*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

A series of Councils dealt with the matter by reasserting the sufficiency of the inspired Psalms and attempting to prevent the introduction of uninspired hymns into the worship of the Church. The Council of Laodicea about A.D. 381 prohibited the ecclesiastical use of uninspired or "private psalms." The Council of Chalcedon in 451 confirmed this decree. Apparently this decree did not prevent hymnographers from expressing their religious ideas in the form of poetry, so it was renewed in a more precise but less rigorous form by the Council of Braga (561) which decreed that poetic compositions were not to be used in the divine service of praise. The fourth Synod of Toledo in the seventh century reiterated the same proscription.

As late as the ninth century we find earnest appeal to the earlier Councils in support of a pure psalmody. Agobard of Lyons, for example, reminds his readers that "the venerable councils of the fathers decree that vulgar psalms (i.e., common or uninspired hymns) should not at all be sung in the church and that 'nothing put together in poetic fashion' should be employed in the divine praises...Let us apply ourselves wholly to divine words in which there is no error, no ambiguity"...We thus see that the Church made a concerted effort to encourage the use of the Psalter and to forestall the introduction of uninspired hymns into the worship of the church.<sup>19</sup>

In fact it was not until the seventh century of the Christian era that a regional church council finally assented to legitimize the use of uninspired hymns in the worship of the churches.

About the date of this council a strong effort was in progress looking toward the admission into the church services of hymns composed by influential bishops, particularly Ambrose and Hilary; and hence in another council, or synod, held in Toledo in Spain in the year 633, the question of permitting in the church services the use of hymns was brought forward. By this time the innovators had gained in strength, and they secured a decision favorable to their cause. It is clear, however, from the action of the Toledo Council that hymns had till then, at least in Spain, been mere beggars for admission; for, in the argument to sustain its action, the Council does not assert that any collection of uninspired hymns had ever been used in the church services.<sup>20</sup>

We have now decisively answered the question of the practice of the early church with respect to its hymnody. The testimony of church history has been found to be thorough and consistent on the matter, and that testimony is that the Post-Apostolic church continued to use the Psalms exclusively long after the death of the Apostles and officially upheld that position for many centuries. The early Christian Church was a Psalm singing church. If that is so, then one should ask, "what is the genesis of a mere human hymnody as currently used in the Church?" We will examine that question in the succeeding chapters.

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, Crown and Covenant Publications, 1980, p.125.

<sup>20</sup> John McNaughter, *The Psalms in Worship*, Still Waters Revival Books, Edmonton, Canada, 1992, pp. 176-177



## Chapter Three

### The Gnostics

Who were the Gnostics? The Gnostics were one of the first cults to plague the early Christian church.<sup>21</sup> Their beliefs were a strange blend of Christianity, Hellenistic philosophy, and Oriental mysticism. Like most mystical cults they didn't have a confession of faith, so it is difficult to define exactly what they believed. Like many mystical cults, what we know of their beliefs doesn't make sense, because it appears weird and nonsensical to ordinary minds. Although the Gnostics varied widely among themselves in their doctrines, the following represents a few of their commonly held beliefs.

- Their philosophy was dualistic, believing that matter was intrinsically evil, and only spirit was good. In this they followed Persian, Hindu, and Buddhist philosophy.
- This rejection of the physical world led them in two opposing directions. It could and did lead to both asceticism and withdrawal from the world on the one hand, and to wild, licentious, profligate lifestyles on the other, since what a man did in the flesh didn't matter anyway, as only the spirit was important. In the latter it resembled the cult of the Nicolaitanes condemned by Christ in the letters to the seven churches of Asia.
- The "god" of the Old Testament was evil because he created matter and tried to rule mankind through law.
- Christ was the representative of a higher, better "god".
- Christ did not have a true physical body, but only the illusion of one, because matter was evil. Some believed that he had a real body resulting from normal generation from Mary and Joseph, but that he was redeemed from this body when, at his baptism, he was filled with wisdom (Sophia) in the form of a dove.
- Salvation is by secret knowledge (*gnosis* in Greek, hence their name is derived) passed on by an oral tradition not contained in the written Scriptures. This knowledge is essential to one's salvation and those who are initiated into it are the only true Christians.
- Christ came to save men by bringing this secret knowledge.

With such views the Gnostics were confronted with a definite problem, the testimony of the Scriptures. Particularly, they had to somehow deal with the New Testament revelation of Jesus Christ, which conflicted severely with their view of Jesus. The Old Testament they could dismiss as a record of the evil Demiurge, although it, too, was filled with accurate information about the Christ, the Messiah. Thus, when his disciples did not understand his work he taught them about himself, saying,

"O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:25-27).

They dealt with the threat that the Scriptures posed to their religious philosophy in a number of ways, the first of which was to do what the Apostle Peter warned the faithful against when he said, speaking of the Scriptures, "...in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are

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<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that Gnosticism is not still around today. The author plugged "Gnosticism" into a major search engine recently and was astounded at the results. There were 36 sites identified as dealing with the subject. The author could not find one site that was critical of Gnosticism or had the courage to call it heretical. Many were sites openly advocating it and rather accurately identifying, defending, and promoting Gnostic teachings. Other sites were involved in damage control presenting "scholarly" arguments why Gnosticism should be accepted as a legitimate interpretation of the Scriptures, as just another "Christian" denomination.

unlearned and unstable wrest, as *they do* also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” (2 Peter 3:16). That is, they radically reinterpreted many of Jesus’ sayings and actions, wresting them out of context and infusing “new meanings” into them.

Second, they corrupted the texts of the New Testament Scriptures to reflect their own beliefs. In textual criticism there are two main classes of manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. The main stream of manuscripts is termed “the Byzantine” and comprises over 90 per cent of extant manuscripts. The other stream is the Alexandrian. Alexandria is the city in Egypt, famous for its devotion to Hellenistic philosophy; after all, it was founded by Greeks in honor of a Greek, Alexander the Great. Egypt of course was the place where the Gnostic sect rose to its greatest prominence, and it was there that the Gnostics carried out their program of radical emendation of the text of the New Testament to undermine its textual witness against some of their heretical teachings.

“Among the most evil opponents of the Gospel of Jesus Christ have been the Gnostics. In the early centuries after the death of Christ the life and death struggle to maintain the purity of the Scriptures was at its fiercest. It was open knowledge that manuscripts were being altered, and that in Egypt the Gnostics had become such a dominant force that the manuscripts executed in Egypt were to be suspected.”<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, in spite of their numerical inferiority, the Alexandrian texts have had a significant influence on the Scriptures. They were rejected by the early Christian Church which was committed to the unadulterated Scriptures represented by the Byzantine text. The Roman Catholic Church accepted a modified Alexandrian text as the basis for the Latin Vulgate and the Douay Version. The Reformers uniformly rejected the Alexandrian text (and there is historical proof that they were familiar with it and understood the issues) and used the Byzantine text (then called the *Textus Receptus*, Latin for the “received text”) for all their translations. However, sadly over the past century, the evil seed sowed by the Gnostics almost two millennia ago has born much fruit. Most of the new versions, starting with Westcott and Hort’s revisions that were the basis for the Revised Version, are based on the corrupt Alexandrian text. Specifically, they are mainly based on two manuscripts, Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. Some regard these two manuscripts as the best and the most accurate because of their alleged antiquity, older being considered more accurate. The former was discovered late in the last century in the Pope’s library in the Vatican and the latter in some trash at St. Catherine’s Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. These manuscripts show evidence of a high degree of tampering, having literally thousands of erasures and write-overs, often multiple emendations superimposed one upon another. A number of scholars<sup>23</sup> have studied the effects of these emendations of the text and have seen a significant and pervasive pattern of changes that weaken and undermine the testimony of the Scriptures with regard to the deity, virgin birth, and divine attributes of Jesus Christ. These manuscripts certainly represent a “Gnostisized” Bible.

In a Chapter entitled, “*Nine Of The New Versions Have Adopted Gnostic Corruptions*” Jay P. Green, Sr. complains...

“Upon studying certain portions of the Scriptures, the author was appalled, thoroughly shocked, when it was found that the NASB and NIV, supposedly ‘conservative’ translations, had eliminated such a noted testimony to the Deity of Christ as *God manifest in the flesh*. Other

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<sup>22</sup> Green, *The Gnostics, The New Versions, and The Deity of Christ*, pp. v-vi.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to the extensive comparisons in the above noted *The Gnostics, The New Versions, and The Deity of Christ*, see also David Otis Fuller, *Which Bible?*, Grand Rapids International Publications, Grand Rapids, MI 49501, 1972, and Edward F. Hills, *The King James Version Defended*, The Christian Research Press, 1973, and John W. Burgon, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark*, Associated Publishers and Authors, Grand Rapids, MI.

new versions were searched to see if they did this also. The following pages reveal the more extensive studies that were made to discover how the new versions treat the deity of Christ.

Such notable Gnostic corruptions as that in Matthew 19:16-19, where the Scriptures were altered to make Christ deny His own goodness, have been resurrected and inserted into nine of the new versions. And this in spite of the fact that the many words the new versions have cast out of Matthew appear intact in Mark 10:17, 18 and Luke 18:18, 19. This, of course, puts a direct contradiction within the new versions. Further study turned up Ebionite, Manichean, and other heretical beliefs being reinserted into new versions. Among other things, the virgin birth, the sinlessness, the omnipresence, and other essential doctrines testifying to Christ as God have been changed or denied in the new versions.<sup>24</sup>

Third, they deleted some books of the New Testament from the canon of Scripture. The Gospel of John was the specific object of their hatred. This was probably because it particularly directs itself against the Gnostic errors that were already surfacing in the church during the first century. Certainly its consistent testimony to both the deity of Jesus Christ, and that he was God manifest in the flesh, was a blow to Gnostic theology.

Fourth, they wrote their own sacred "scriptures" which they added to their version of the New Testament canon. These were quite extensive and included, among others, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Mary, the Acts of John, the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Second Apocalypse of James.

Finally, they attacked the Psalms. The Psalms constituted a special problem for the Gnostics. The Scriptures in general were read and preached to the people. This gave Gnostic teachers a great deal of control over them. They could select the portions to be read and taught and could interpret and apply them according to their own heretical viewpoints. The Psalms however were different. The faithful sang them without the benefit of being theologically filtered by the Gnostic clergy. They memorized them and sang them throughout the week as well. The Psalms are filled with Christ. The Psalms overflow with an accurate and orthodox testimony about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Faithful Psalm singers would not easily accept the Gnostic Jesus and his strange teachings.

The Psalms are a treasure trove of Biblical theology. The New Testament authors quoted the Psalms far more than any other book of the Old Testament. Paul, when he wanted to teach the Hebrew Christians about the person and work of Jesus Christ, quoted predominantly and extensively from the Psalms. So did Peter in his first great public sermon at Pentecost when he proclaimed the risen Christ to Israel. Christ himself quoted frequently from the Psalter, and in his final instructions to his disciples before his ascension he reminded them saying,

"And he said unto them, These *are* the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and *in* the prophets, and *in* the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

The Psalms and Gnosticism simply do not mix!

The response of the Gnostics to this dilemma was to seek to supplant the Psalter. They attempted this by writing their own hymns and using them in their religious services. These hymns were filled with the teachings and doctrines of Gnosticism and were inculcated into the faithful to indoctrinate them in the teachings and tenets of Gnosticism. They could not afford to allow the power of music, especially the power of musical praise, and the power of the word of God in the Psalms to subvert their deluded followers from persevering in the mystical doctrines of the Gnostic faith. Instead they harnessed the power of music and song to instruct and confirm their proselytes in the teachings of their cult. And they were very successful. They spread rapidly

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<sup>24</sup> Jay P. Green, Sr., *The Gnostics*, Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1994, p. vii.

through the Mediterranean world of the early Christian church and constituted a serious threat to orthodox Christianity. In Egypt, where Hellenistic philosophy, espousing a similar dualism, was deeply entrenched, they came to dominate the professed followers of Christ.

A typical sample of a (second century) Gnostic Hymn is given below.

The primal element of all things, the first principle of being and life, is the Spirit.

The second, poured forth from the first son of the Spirit, is chaos.

The third, that received being and form from both, is the soul.

And it is like the timid deer

Which is hunted on earth By Death, who incessantly

Tests his power upon it.

Today it is in the Kingdom of Light,

Tomorrow it is thrown into misery,

Plunged deep into pain and tears.

Straying and lost in the maze

It seeks for the exit in vain.

But Jesus said, "O Father, look

Upon this tormented being,

How it roams the earth in sorrow,

Far away from Thy breath.

It seeks to flee the bitter chaos

Yet does not know the way of escape.

Send me down, O Father, to save it.

With the seals in hand I will descend,

Striding through the aeons,

Opening all the mysteries,

Revealing all the forms of gods.

The secret of the holy way —

I call it knowledge — I will bring."

Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* V.10. <sup>25</sup>

The comments of the editor are insightful.

"This is a genuine Gnostic hymn of the kind which was most decidedly rejected by the Christians of that period, both in the Church at large and in the Montanist communities: in it the Spirit is the primal element; the son of the Spirit pours forth chaos; the soul is the third element, hunted in the labyrinth, between light and chaotic misery; it cannot find the ascent until Jesus descends to it, unveiling the knowledge (gnosis) of the mystery, after speaking with the Father and striding through the aeons."<sup>26</sup>

The above recorded hymn is typical of Gnostic thinking. They postulated a multi-level world in terms of their dualism. The ultimate level was the "pleroma", the "fulness," a place of pure spirit inhabited by the true god and the aeons, spiritual beings he created to dispel his loneliness. The lowest level was the cosmos, the material world. Some Gnostics had levels in between involving progressive stages of deliverance from matter. For them the very essence of salvation was the complete deliverance of the spirit from the world of matter. These levels were populated by varying grades of aeons progressively less spiritual corresponding to their distance from the pleroma. The hymn depicts the plight of poor mortals trapped in world of matter seeking deliverance. Christ, who was often regarded as being a super aeon, and therefore as being merely a creature, is seen asking permission of the father to go and rescue them by bringing them the knowledge needful to thread the maze to the pleroma. He makes his way through all the aeons, the

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<sup>25</sup> Eberhard Arnold, *The Early Christians*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979, p. 241.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394.

maze of all the levels, to the lowest level, the cosmos, bringing the saving *gnosis* to the few spiritual beings trapped there who desired salvation from the world of death, darkness, and matter.

The Gnostics were not only the first in using uninspired hymns in the public and private worship of God, but they were so prolific in this that they also developed the first hymnbooks. Although its origins are somewhat obscure, there was a collection of hymns composed and compiled in the second century entitled, "The Odes of Solomon." From their contents scholars have attributed them to the Gnostics. They were well received not only by the Gnostics, but by other heretical pseudo-Christian cults, and were still being used well into the sixth century.<sup>27</sup> Another Gnostic, the Syrian Bardaisan (Bardesanes) and his son Harmonius, compiled a collection of 150 heretical hymns<sup>28</sup> in Syriac late in the second century, setting them to popular tunes to gain wide acceptance.<sup>29</sup> The number being exactly 150 it represented an obvious attempt to manufacture a pseudo-Psalter that reflected the anti-Christian mysteries of their cult.

It is here, in such hymns, that we see the beginning of uninspired hymnody. Ultimately, it is in the evil geniuses of this grossly heretical cult that the church discovers the genesis of its tradition of singing hymns of human composition. The apparent motive for establishing this practice was to subvert their followers away from the Psalms and from the sound theology they contain. And as we shall see, that has remained the motive for many hymn writers throughout the history of the Christian church.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 395.

<sup>28</sup> LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, 1953, p. 207.

<sup>29</sup> McNaughter, *The Psalms in Worship*, pp. 167,174.

## Chapter Four

### The Arians

The Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the early church were truly theological minefields. The path of orthodoxy was straight and narrow with a treacherous abyss on either side. Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria in the early part of the fourth century of the Christian era fell into one such abyss. He was attempting to oppose Sabellianism, the doctrine that there is only one person in the Godhead and that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are merely different manifestations of the same divine person. It affirms the divinity of all three but denies their separate personalities. To affirm that they were indeed totally separate persons Arius postulated great and significant differences between the Father and the Son. These differences were of a character that effectively denied the deity of the Son. Arians, the followers of Arius, believed the following with respect to the doctrine of God and of Christ.<sup>30</sup>

- Jesus Christ is himself a created being.
- Christ was created out of nothing.
- There was a time in eternity past when Christ did not exist.
- He is of a different essence or substance than the Father.
- As a created being he is subject to alteration and changes in being.
- Having had a beginning he could also have an end.
- Christ is the first of all of God's creatures.
- Christ had a preexistence before the beginning of the world.

The Arians, perhaps having learned the lessons of how the Gnostics failed to prevail in spite of their significant numbers in the church, took a different approach. They did not openly reject the Scriptures, nor did they compose their own "Arian" scriptures. They simply wrested the Scriptures "to their own destruction," professing to develop all their doctrines from them. In this, as most heretical cults over the centuries, they were exceedingly crafty, duplicitous, and evasive, as they waged semantic warfare on the true meanings of Scripture. A good example of this is Eusebius' descriptions of the meetings to confront the heresies of the proto-Arian, Paul of Samosata, and his followers.

...having convened at different times and frequently, various subjects and questions were agitated at every meeting: the adherents of the Samosatians, attempting to conceal and cover over their heterodoxy, but at the same time those on the other side used every effort to unmask and bring to light the heresy, and the blasphemy, of the men against Christ.<sup>31</sup>

It was in the reign of this emperor, when a final council was convened, in which a great number of bishops was present, and this arch heretic at Antioch being detected, and now evidently discarded by all, was now excommunicated from the whole catholic church under heaven. He was refuted, however, and argued out of his lurking place, chiefly by Malchion...This man indeed, was the only one who, after commencing the discussion with him...was able to ferret out the sly and deceitful sentiments of the man.<sup>32</sup>

Such heretics frequently pretend to recant or reconsider when threatened with church discipline, but soon resume promoting their heresies when the furor over their blasphemies subsides. As Eusebius himself notes of the man...

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<sup>30</sup> Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol. I, p. 280.

<sup>31</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 303.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

But Firmilianus who came twice to Antioch, despised his new fangled doctrines...But as he promised to change his mind, he believed him, and hoped that...the matter would be settled in a proper manner. He deferred it therefore; in which, he was deceived by this denier of his God and Lord, and this deserter of his former faith.<sup>33</sup>

Cunningham describes similar traits in his treatment of Arianism. He notes how they (as modern liberals still do) professed to be faithful to Scripture and hid behind their interpretations of it and pretended to be orthodox while asserting doctrines that denied the fundamental doctrines of orthodoxy.

The Arians of the fourth century professed to dislike the Nicene Creed for this, among other reasons, because it deviated from the language of Scripture, and introduced new words and phrases which the word of God has not explicitly sanctioned; and many since have continued to object to this and other similar documents upon the same ground. The objection is a very frivolous one; and when it does not proceed, as it too often does, from a dislike to the doctrines which the creeds and confessions objected to inculcate, is founded upon very obvious misapprehensions. So long as men, all professing to take the Scripture as their rule, deduce from it opposite doctrines, or put inconsistent interpretations upon its statements, it will be indispensably necessary, if they are to attempt to ascertain how far they agree with, and how far they differ from, each other, that they employ, in expressing their convictions, words different from those which are used in Scripture.<sup>34</sup>

Arius professed, as they did, to believe all that was said in Scripture concerning the Son; and hence it became necessary that, if Arianism was to be condemned, and the truth opposed to its errors to be fully and explicitly set forth, other words than those contained in Scripture should be employed – words which, beyond all reasonable doubt, should convince all men competent to judge of them, that those who adopted and concurred in them, denied that the Son was a creature, or had a created and inferior nature; and, on the contrary, maintained that, while undoubtedly a distinct person from the Father, He was possessed of one and the same divine nature, and yet was not a second or distinct God.<sup>35</sup>

During some portion of the fourth century, through the influence of the Emperors Constantius and Valens, a large part of the professing church was overrun with Arian or semi-Arian heresies...During the period, many Arian and semi-Arian councils were held, and a considerable number of creeds were adopted by them. We have still extant several creeds, for example, prepared under Arian and semi-Arian influence, in councils held at Antioch, Sardica, Sirmium, and Ariminum; and the great facts concerning them are these: first, that they all, without exception, omit the word *homoousios* (o`moou,sioj) (Editorial Note: i.e., of the same substance) or any expression of similar import; and, secondly, that there are some of them with respect to which this single omission is the only very intelligible or palpable difference between them and the one at Nice, so that there are even some of them in regard to which it has been ever since a subject of controversy, whether they ought to be regarded as orthodox or not. The more bold and honest Arians said that the Son was *heteroousios* (e`teroou,sioj), of a different substance from the Father; others said that He was *anomoios* (a.no,moioj), unlike the Father; and some, who were usually reckoned semi-Arians, admitted that He was *homoiousios* (o`moiou,sioj), of a like substance with the Father; but they all unanimously refused to admit the Nicene phraseology, because they were opposed to the Nicene doctrine of the true and proper divinity of the Son, and saw and felt that that phraseology accurately and unequivocally expressed it, though they sometimes professed to adduce other objections against the use of it. They made many attempts to appear to come as near as possible to the orthodox doctrine, without really committing themselves to its fundamental distinctive principle; but the word *homoousios* (o`moou,sioj) acted like Ithuriel's spear in detecting all their shifts and manoeuvres,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 304-5

<sup>34</sup> Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol. I, p. 287

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Vol. I, p. 288

and in holding them up to the world as opposers, whatever they might sometimes pretend, of the true and proper divinity of the Son of God.<sup>36</sup>

However, in spite of all their deceptiveness and subtleties in maintaining and advocating their errors the Arians must have found the Psalms a difficult obstacle to the advancement of their faith. The Psalms are filled with Christ and Messianic in their message to a high degree. As we have already noted the New Testament authors constantly taught about the person and work of Christ from the Psalter. The Arians therefore, as the Gnostics before them, decided to, if not totally supplant, at least supplement the Psalter. In this way they too could harness the power of song and of music as an engine to disseminate their heretical view of Christ. Their activities and success in this stratagem are documented by the following quotes from church historians.

Hymns of human composition were, as we have seen, occasionally used during the Post-Apostolic period; but the purpose and the effect of these songs do not augur well for an uninspired psalmody...[after listing a series of heretical hymnists]...Most noted and most noxious of all was Arius of Alexandria (d. A.D. 336) whose name forever stands for organized opposition to the divinity of Christ. Tried and deposed by the authorities of his church, he went far and wide, singing to attractive airs ballads of his own making calculated to catch and corrupt the masses. His success must have surpassed his wildest dreams; for almost the entire church was carried away from the faith for many years...With good reason has it been said, "Let me make a people's songs, and I care not who makes their laws."<sup>37</sup>

There is good reason to believe that the first to introduce uninspired hymns in worship were errorists, who sought by this means to diffuse their peculiar tenets. To this device Valentinian a Gnostic resorted with the purpose of giving currency to his heterodox sentiments...The Syrian church was afflicted at an early date with the hymns produced by Bardesanes...in the interest of the fantastic speculations of Gnosticism. At a later date, when the Arian heresy arose the same method was extensively employed for promoting its spread. In the streets and in worshipping assemblies hymns imbued with Arian sentiments and set to catching music were extensively sung. The Psalms were not adapted to serve the ends of those who were engaged in a war against the dignity of Christ. Recourse was, therefore, had to the preparation and use of hymns for the diffusion of Arian doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

In the Arian struggle the use of hymns other than psalms grew common.<sup>39</sup>

In Constantinople in the days when John Chrysostom was its bishop, the Arians are said to have congregated in the city squares...or to have paraded through the streets at night...chanting antiphonally songs which denounced the Catholic views.<sup>40</sup>

These quotations, which could easily be multiplied, make clear that the next great wave of hymnody in the early Christian Church after the Gnostic onslaught on Psalmody, was the work of the Arians. Up to that date any hymnody alleged to be the work of the orthodox is either insignificant or non-existent.

One particular incident of note regarding those with Arian sentiments writing hymns is the case of Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch in the middle of the third century. Strictly speaking he was more a Socinian than an Arian, not only because he lived before Arius' time, but also in that he denied any pre-existence to Jesus Christ considering him mere man, the fruit of Mary by her husband Joseph. According to Eusebius, "he entertained low and degrading notions of Christ,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., Vol. I, pp. 289-290

<sup>37</sup> McNaughter, *The Psalms in Worship*, pp. 167-168

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 173-174

<sup>39</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, p. 167. He was referring to both the widespread use of hymns by the Arians and the limited response in kind by the orthodox.

<sup>40</sup> LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 207, It seems that these early hymns not only set forth the heretical views of these cults, but also specifically denounced the orthodox doctrine.



contrary to the doctrine of the church, and taught that he was in nature but a common man.”<sup>41</sup> During the reign of the Emperor Aurelian he was excommunicated by a church council. Part of the charges brought against him in a letter to Dionysius,<sup>42</sup> the Bishop of Rome and Maximus, the Bishop of Alexandria include the following statements...

“...this denier of his God and Lord, and this deserter of his former faith...has now arrived at excessive wealth, by his iniquities and sacrileges, and by those various means which he employed to exact and extort from the brethren...he affected lofty things, and assumed with great haughtiness worldly dignities, and...brought envy and odium upon the faith, by his pomp and his haughtiness of heart.”

“Besides this he stopped the psalms that were sung in honour of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the late compositions of modern men, but in honour of himself he had prepared women to sing at the great festival in the midst of the church, which one might shudder to hear...For...he does not wish to confess with us that the Son of God descended from heaven...Whilst they who sing to his praise, and extol him among the people, say that he has descended as an angel from heaven.”<sup>43</sup>

Here we have an early hymnist in the church who suppresses the Psalms given by God for his praise and substitutes hymns that he has had composed in his own honor. This was at a time when hymns were simply not used at all in the Church of Jesus Christ. The charge is therefore not merely that he employed blasphemous hymns in the church that were written to promote his own honor instead of writing “orthodox” hymns; rather the charge includes that he supplants the universal Psalmody practiced by the church in favor of such unauthorized songs.

We have now covered the history of the Christian Church into the first half of the fourth century and discovered that hymnody was practically the exclusive domain of Christ-denying cults. There is not much here to comfort the faithful that they are on solid ground in their tradition of praising God by means of uninspired song.

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<sup>41</sup> Pamphilus, Ecclesiastical History, p. 302.

<sup>42</sup> Dionysius served as Bishop of Rome from A.D. 260-268. See Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Popes*, Harper, 1997, p. 51. This is a more modern and revised chronology and conflicts with the traditional date for Paul of Samosata's excommunication which is A.D. 70.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 304-306.

## Chapter Five

### The Roman Catholics

It is a moot point when the Post-Apostolic Church became the Roman Catholic Church. The accretions of authority by which the Bishop of Rome gained the ascendancy over the Church were gradual. In a similar manner, the corruption of Apostolic worship and doctrine to transmute their faith into what we now call Roman Catholicism was the work of many centuries. Therefore, when one examines Roman Catholic hymnody he should include not only those who had corrupted the primitive and pure worship and doctrine of the Apostolic Church, but also the orthodox who were part of the same ecclesiastical organization during this epoch.

The first beginnings of hymnody among the orthodox was to compose hymns to oppose the heretical songs of the cults. It was not done under Biblical conviction, for the church remained committed to exclusive Psalmody for many more centuries. It was simply an act of expediency. The success of the heretics in employing hymns to inculcate their heresies had to be opposed. Instead of being content to oppose them with the singing of Psalms, the orthodox began to composing hymns to oppose the specific errors of the cults. The orthodox decided to fight fire with fire and combat the heretics with their own weapons. In doing so, they seemingly forgot the admonition of the Apostle Paul,

For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)

It was therefore a deliberate exercise in expediency and not something that was prayerfully done in the light of God's word.

Strictly speaking, the first "hymns" in the early Christian Church were the hymns of the New Testament. The inspired praises recorded especially by Luke were the first hymns. The song of Mary (the Magnificat) and the songs of Zechariah (the Benedictus) and Simeon (the Nunc Dimittis) were sung in the church at an early date. "Until near the end of the fourth century, in the services of the Catholic Church only the Old Testament Psalms and the hymns or canticles from the New Testament were sung."<sup>44</sup>

However, these, being inspired, are not really "hymns" as most modern Christians define the term. The concern of this book is not with what use the church made of inspired songs outside of the Psalter, but with what use the visible church made of uninspired song. The first hymn, the orthodox hymn that is generally credited with the greatest antiquity, is the hymn of Clement of Alexandria, composed some time in the second century. However, in spite of the repeated claims of historians that this is the first orthodox hymn, the claim is somewhat specious. Clement of Alexandria, living in the great center of Gnosticism at the height of that cult's influence, like his famous pupil Origen, has to be considered, at best, as semi-Gnostic. In fact, a century later the Arians claimed both these men and were able to quote with accuracy their statements that implied the creaturehood of Christ. It is therefore not actually until the fourth century that one can attribute any hymns to the orthodox.

One of the first to compose and popularize "orthodox" hymns was Ephraem Syrus (307-373). Reacting to the continuing popularity of Gnostic hymns and their influence on the faithful, he

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<sup>44</sup> LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 207.

decided to oppose them with their own weapon and used hymnody to confirm the saints in orthodoxy. He complained...

In the resorts of Bardesanes  
There are songs and melodies;  
For seeing that young people  
Loved sweet music,  
By the harmony of his songs  
He corrupted their morals.

And,

“to counteract the ‘poisoned sweetness’ of these songs...he arranged different kinds of songs and taught them...until the whole city was gathered unto him and the party of the adversary was put to shame.”<sup>45</sup>

This success led to the continued practice of adopting the means of the heretics to fight their heresy. Ephraem was reacting to Gnostic hymnody, but soon others would be reacting to the Arian variety.

“Arius, used from the outset songs set to popular tunes to propagate his ideas. ‘The workers of the port...the sailors, the idlers, and the common people knew these songs and deafened the faithful of Alexandria with them.’ The earliest and greatest of the opponents of Arius...Athanasius, was apparently content to denounce the frivolity and unseemliness of this practice and did not attempt to organize a counter-crusade of song.”<sup>46</sup>

Others were not so prudent or inhibited. The two men who are most associated with the introduction of hymnody into the Catholic Church are Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers (from 350-368) and Ambrose, Bishop of Milan (340-397). These popular and powerful bishops composed hymns and promoted their use in the churches.

“The Arians and other heretics embodied their doctrines in verses to be sung...Ambrose, in his contest with the Arians, taught his congregation to sing antiphonal hymns. The most famous composers were Ephraem Syrus, Hilary of Poitiers, and Ambrose. There was some opposition to the use of such hymns, on the grounds that they were not taken from the Scriptures; and this could only be overcome by age and usage.”<sup>47</sup>

A contemporary of theirs, Chrysostom (345-407), who became Bishop of Constantinople in 398, for similar reasons, introduced hymnody in that important center of Christendom.

“...the alternative method of ‘not allowing the devil to have all the good tunes’ was resorted to at Constantinople...the Arians were not allowed to worship within the city walls. They made up for this, however, by coming into the city...and assembling in...places of common resort. Here they passed the night in singing hymns in which they set forth the Arian doctrines and hurled taunts at the orthodox. These performances attracted large crowds: and by way of counteracting their influence Chrysostom...initiated solemn nocturnal processions for the chanting of hymns. These competitive demonstrations, not unnaturally, led to riot and bloodshed with the result that the Arian hymn-sings were forbidden by law. Their orthodox rivals, on the other hand, became a permanent institution.”<sup>48</sup>

Even Augustine (d. 430), whose commitment to and love of Psalmody is amply demonstrated by the following quotation, may have been carried away with the zeal to oppose the heretics, for after he wrote,

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<sup>45</sup> C. S. Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, The MacMillan Co., 1937, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> George P. Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887, p. 121.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 29-30.

“The Donatists<sup>49</sup> reproach us with the grave chanting of the divine songs of the prophets in our churches while they inflame their passions in their revels by the singing of psalms of human composition.”<sup>50</sup>

He later adopted the tactic he condemned.

“In like manner in the early part of the fourth century the propagation of Arian views by hymns gave rise to a counter-movement on the part of the orthodox in the form of hymns extolling Christ as God. So also Augustine, an intense lover of the Psalms, was induced to prepare a hymn...in order to cope with the Donatists, who were diligently diffusing their tenets by means of hymns.”<sup>51</sup>

Another way that the orthodox sought to oppose the influence of the heretical cults was to compose hymns that consisted of versifications of orthodox creeds. A versification of the Athanasian Creed was apparently popular in the churches.<sup>52</sup> This practice of explicitly using hymns to teach the exact doctrinal statements of the church, though borrowed from the cults, seems to have survived even the Reformation. The Genevan Psalter contained a versification of a creed, and the Dutch Reformed have used versifications of a short creed, *De Tien Artikelen Des Geloofs* (The Ten Articles of the Faith), and versifications of the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments appended to their Psalters, as authorized by the Synod of Dort.

Ultimately, the successes of the heretics at using hymnody as a propaganda tool proved irresistible to the orthodox. Success, not Scripture, became the touchstone of morality. Dabney noted this of “Northern conservatism.” He prophesied that once Feminist radicals had accomplished their objective of female suffrage that conservatives would try to out-do the radicals in recruiting (conservative) women to vote. He also suggested that once women become candidates for political office, that they would again try to out-do them in proposing (conservative) women for office. Dabney was truly a prophet. The first woman to become Prime Minister of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher, was the candidate of the Conservative Party and the first woman appointed to the United States Supreme Court was by Ronald Reagan, a conservative President. In a similar way, the testimony of church history is that it was not long before the orthodox greatly outdid the heterodox in inundating the church with hymns of human composition.

The consequences of employing this strategy in opposing heresy would be with the church for the remainder of her existence, right up to the present. Neither were these consequences slow in asserting themselves. In the short run they may have been effective in countering the influence of the cults, but in the long run they had at least one deadly consequence. Their effect was to divorce the doctrines of the church from Scripture. Except for the vagaries of translation, the Scriptures were cast in stone. This fact certainly cramped the style of any would-be doctrinal innovators. But the didactic use of hymns to instruct the faithful as the heretics had done was a two-edged sword. It could be used to oppose heresy or to introduce it. Any doctrinal deviations from orthodoxy could now be quickly popularized by means of the hymns. As the church departed from the faith, it would use hymns to inculcate and popularize the new doctrines. Scripture, including the Psalms, could not be easily rewritten, but the church’s hymns were much more plastic. The baleful influence of hymns written by those with a theological axe to grind was now imported directly into the churches of the orthodox.

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<sup>49</sup> The Donatists were a schismatic sect in North Africa rejecting the readmission into the church of those who lapsed from the faith during times of persecution and declaring void baptisms and ordinations performed by those who had compromised the faith.

<sup>50</sup> Editor, *Ad Januarius, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 1, p. 315. Quoted from *Songs of Zion*.

<sup>51</sup> McNaughten, *The Psalms in Worship*, p. 174.

<sup>52</sup> LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 208.

The swiftness with which this Achilles heel of the new tactics was to expose itself was stunning. The Spaniard Prudentius (b. 348), who was contemporary with many of the above cited hymnists, started writing religious poetry in his retirement early in the fifth century. Many of his poems were made into hymns. He went on a pilgrimage to Rome “visiting every famous shrine on the way and in Rome itself.” As a result he wrote a series of 14 poems, which became hymns, honoring the saints and martyrs of these shrines. Later he wrote additional hymns for the martyrs and for the dead.<sup>53</sup> Two of his contemporaries, including St. Paulinus of Nola (353-431), wrote similar hymns extolling the saints.

This trend continued and in the sixth century gained a boost from the prolific hymn writer Fortunatus (born c. 530). A firm believer in relics and their miracle working power (he believed his failing sight had been restored by the power of one such relic) his hymns reflected his theology. One such hymn extols the cross as is typical in Romish idolatry.

“This famous hymn is said to have been composed on the occasion of the solemn reception of a relic of the True Cross which the Emperor Justin II had given to Rhadegunda for her convent of Sainte Croix at Poitiers.”<sup>54</sup>

Part of the hymn is cited below.

O lovely and refulgent tree,  
Adorn'd with purpled majesty;  
Cull'd from a worthy stock, to bear  
Those limbs which sanctified were.  
Blest tree, whose happy branches bore  
The wealth, that did the World restore  
The beam, that did that body weigh,  
Which rais'd up Hell's expected prey.  
Hail Cross, of hopes the most sublime,  
Now in this mourning Passion time;  
Improve religious souls in grace;  
The sins of criminals efface.  
Blest Trinity, Salvation's spring;  
May every soul Thy praises sing  
To those Thou grantest conquest by  
The holy Cross Rewards apply. Amen.<sup>55</sup>

This hymn clearly constitutes an exercise in worshipping the cross. Its praises are directed chiefly to the cross and not to Christ. It places hope in the cross and not in Christ. It pleads for the cross, instead of Christ, to grant grace and efface sin. In the historic context it is clearly an exercise in relic worship and attributes saving power to the physical cross. It is also clearly the prototype for such idolatrous Protestant hymns as *The Old Rugged Cross*.

Fortunatus wrote additional hymns extolling the cross, including one “based on a purely legendary story that the tree from which the Cross was made sprang from a seed of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden” and also containing words suggesting the “mousetrap”<sup>56</sup> theory of the atonement.<sup>57</sup> Some of these hymns were later used in those idolatrous processions, so popular in Roman Catholicism, where the cross was carried through the streets to receive the adoration and

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<sup>53</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61

<sup>56</sup> This theory basically claims that God defeated Satan by deliberately tricking him into having Christ crucified.

<sup>57</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 62.

praises of men during reenactments of the Passion Week. Fortunatus also wrote hymns extolling the “Blessed Virgin Mary,” which constituted a revival of the pagan worship of female deities.<sup>58</sup>

At about the same time, some elements in the church were composing hymns designed to operate as a pagan talisman. One such hymn was the “Breastplate”<sup>59</sup> attributed, by legend at least, to Saint Patrick.

“It is the best and probably the earliest of a number of similar ‘charm hymns’ which were a Christianized form of the old pagan runes intended to ward off evil. An ancient Irish preface to it describes its use.

It is a corslet of faith for the protection of body and soul...Whoever shall sing it every day with pious meditation on GOD, devils shall not stay before him...It will be a safeguard against every poison and envy. It will be a defence to him against sudden death. It will be a corslet to his soul after dying.”<sup>60</sup>

Even as Dabney noted that conservatism was but the shadow that followed radicalism, so we note that orthodox hymnody was but the shadow that followed the hymnody of the cults. As the church’s theology declined during her slide from Apostolic purity to Romish idolatry and superstition, her hymnody reflected every change. However, thus far the church’s hymnody, though progressively more and more corrupt, was still somewhat limited. The exercise of hymnody was sporadic depending on the whims of the church’s poets and bounded by opportunities for its use. For at this time the praise element of the official services of the church was still dominated by Psalmody. Monasticism was the great engine that led to the mass production of hymns and to the progressive eclipse of Psalmody. For the weekly Lord’s Day services, the Psalter had been sufficient as the inspired hymnbook for the church’s praise. As the church’s definition of holiness progressively retreated from leading a sanctified life in terms of God’s law to an external retreat from the world in terms of monasticism, the latter flourished. At the same time the church’s liturgy was becoming more and more complex as she departed from the simplicity of Apostolic worship. The monasteries with their seven daily services all performed according to a predetermined liturgy required extensive amounts of liturgical material. The Psalter was limited to the 150 inspired compositions that God had provided for his church’s praise. There was no such limitation on the church’s hymns as the tide of hymnody rose to fill the church’s liturgical “needs.”

The final impetus to these waves of hymnody was the development of an increasingly complex ecclesiastical calendar. With a host of saint’s days, feasts, and processions there was again a demand for extensive amounts of liturgical material dedicated to the themes of these special days. Not only were large numbers of hymns required, but hymns were now specifically created to support all these extra-Scriptural and unscriptural practices. Like the heretics they had originally opposed, but emulated, the church’s hymnody was now specifically serving the needs of an apostate and heretical system of worship. Hymns were now deliberately written to praise every saint in the church’s pantheon and to promote every pagan holyday imported into the church under a thinly transparent veil of “Christianity.” Hymnody had come full circle and was burying Psalmody in the process.

Dabney sarcastically noted that “conservatism,” having yielded all else, would probably announce that the integrity of the Constitution required at least the denial of suffrage to asses, and that there it would with great dignity take its final position. The final absurdity of Roman Catholic

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>59</sup> Recently, I attended a “Theonomist” conference at a “Reformed” Church where this was heartily sung. Many Theonomists are highly liturgical and seem to delight in such medieval liturgy while being oblivious to the reality of what they are doing.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, pp. 65-66

hymnody also involved the same beasts, for they soon composed hymns in honor of the ass that carried Mary to Bethlehem and odes to the ox and the ass that were stabled in the birthplace of our Lord.

## Chapter Six

### The Lutherans

The Protestant Reformation came in two main successive waves. The first was the Lutheran. Martin Luther arose as the champion of the German nation and voiced its revulsion of Romish idolatry, superstition, and immorality. He sought a reformation of the church based on the supremacy of Scripture over Pope, Church, and tradition. He sought to reform all things so that nothing remained that would be explicitly contrary to the word of God. In that vein, as he saw no specific commandment in Scripture against an uninspired hymnody, he sought to reform hymnody rather than abolish it. The question that the early church failed to ask, "is hymnody authorized by the Scriptures?" was never revisited. The existent hymnody was simply reformed, adapted, and supplemented to serve the new theology.

Under Luther's guidance, the Lutherans adopted what they could of Roman Catholic hymnody, borrowed where they could from other sources, and composed their own.

"The hymns in Weisse's collection were well known to his great contemporary Martin Luther (1483-1546) and were much admired by him. By the time it (Weisse's hymnal) appeared, Luther had followed the example of the Bohemian Brethren<sup>61</sup> in providing a vernacular public worship. A complete German liturgy was issued in 1526. In connection with this, new psalms and hymns were needed to take the place of the old Latin hymns and Sequences. Luther had already set to work to provide them. The German hymns of the later Middle Ages were so steeped in what he believed to be false doctrine, and especially in an almost idolatrous veneration of the Blessed Virgin, as to be useless for his purpose. It was therefore a case of making new ones. Here Luther himself took the lead, at the same time inviting his friends and disciples to associate themselves with him in the task. To his friend Spalatin he wrote, at the close of 1523,

'It is my plan...to make vernacular psalms for the people...We seek therefore everywhere for poets. And as you have such skill and practice in the German tongue, I entreat you to work with us in this matter and to turn one of the psalms into a hymn after the pattern of an effort of my own that I have sent you.'"<sup>62</sup>

Although Luther labored diligently and effectively to reform German hymnody, he did not make any organized effort to rescue Psalmody from the oblivion to which Rome had consigned it. His reformation did not produce a Lutheran Psalter. When he did resort to the Psalter, it was not to translate the Psalms into metrical or singable versions. Rather, he used the Psalter, as he did the rest of Scripture, as material on which to base hymns of human composition. This was his practice, and as noted above, his advice to others. The best example of this is his most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," which is loosely based on Psalm 46. A comparison of the two<sup>63</sup> shows the tragedy of this approach. The success of the hymn, which is today far better known than the Psalm, has much more to do with the tune than the contents. Luther, an accomplished musician in his own right, composed the tune himself. As every hymnist before him, he recognized

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<sup>61</sup> Weisse was a Bohemian Brethren who wrote hymns and compiled an early German hymnbook. The Bohemian Brethren were the pietistic remnants of the Bohemian (modern day Czech Republic) Reformation of the Fifteenth Century under John Huss. That Reformation had also resulted in a worship conducted in the vernacular tongue and in the use of popular hymns. Luther followed this model.

<sup>62</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>63</sup> Originally the two were to be compared, along with some other Psalm paraphrases in an appendix to this book, but space considerations made that unfeasible. Instead they can be reviewed on-line at [www.amrpress.com](http://www.amrpress.com). Look under "Articles" and then under "Psalmody Articles."



the power of music and the effectiveness of an inspiring tune. History clearly documents his success.

A great lover of music and steeped in the folk-song and traditional vernacular hymnody of his race, he (Luther) saw clearly how much could be done to rouse enthusiasm and to assist the dissemination of his views by means of simple popular hymns set to well-known tunes, whether of religious or secular origin. Here, then, once again, as the days of Arianism and Iconoclasm, the singing of hymns was to be made a vehicle for spreading and perpetuating a particular kind of theological teaching; and with such success that a contemporary Romanist complained that "the whole country is singing itself into this Lutheran doctrine." It must be remembered, too, that thus refurbishing anew an ancient weapon of propaganda the Reformers had at their disposal a mighty resource unknown to their predecessors. The invention of printing had made possible the cheap and indefinite multiplication of hymn-books: and, in consequence, we see a continuous stream of these pouring from the presses in all the countries of the Reform.<sup>64</sup>

Lutheran hymnody was the best that history had produced to date. It was the first stream of uninspired hymnody that was consistently or reasonably Scriptural in the sentiments and theology it expressed. But it, too, was plastic and subject to the vagaries of the poets and the spirit of the age. It was the best simply because it reflected the reformation instituted by Luther. It still cannot compare to the perfect and inspired Psalmody it continued to replace. And all this occurred in the middle of the sixteenth century of the Christian era. It was a full 15 centuries after the days of Christ and the Apostles. It was almost that long since men had sought to institute their own praises in place of the divinely established ones. They finally achieved something that at least by human standards might be considered acceptable. There is finally, after a millennium and a half of trying, a stream of hymnody that is not so muddled by heresy and superstition that it is not utterly revolting. Historically speaking, that is not much of an argument for the experiment that the Gnostics embarked on fourteen centuries earlier!

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<sup>64</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p.100.

## Chapter Seven

### The Reformed

The Calvinist Reformation, following swiftly on the heels of Luther's reforms, was more thorough and more consistently Scriptural. Although they shared the same soteriology, and preached the same gospel, nowhere were their differences more evident than in their contrasting modes of worship. The Lutheran worship was based on the principle of not denying, that is, not taking away from the word of God. It sought to affirm the positive statements of Scripture, and if Scripture said "yea," woe to that Pope who said "nay." However, where Scripture was silent Lutherans were willing to tolerate what existed or innovate what didn't.<sup>65</sup> The Calvinists went further in their doctrine of worship. They refused not only to deny Scripture, but also to add to it. Whatever was not commanded by Jesus Christ, the only and sovereign Head of the Church, was stripped away as the mere invention of man. In short, Calvinists sought a return to the doctrine and worship of the Apostolic Church. They therefore rejected hymnody in principle and returned to the exclusive Psalmody that was practiced by the Jewish Church, the Apostolic Church, and the early church. They asked the question with respect to worship that had not been asked for many centuries since the days of the early church, "What saith the Lord?" The answer that they became convicted of was that the Lord had instituted the Psalms, while men had instituted hymns. So hymnody, along with a multitude of other unscriptural and extra-scriptural practices, was swept away by the Calvinist wing of the Reformation.

Strictly speaking, the Calvinists did not practice "exclusive Psalmody;" they did not limit the content of their songs of praise strictly to the Psalter. They included in their Psalters other songs, including such New Testament hymns as the songs of praise of Mary (the Magnificat), Zacharias (Benedictus), Simeon (Nunc Dimittas), and the angels at Bethlehem (Gloria), as well as versifications of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostle's Creed. At the very least it could be called preponderant Psalmody. In fact it was "inspired praises." It was limited to inspired "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." The Calvinist principle of "the Bible and the Bible alone" with respect to the contents of songs of praise was adhered to. In fact, with the single exception of the creed, which was sung instead of recited, it was "exclusive inspired praise" that was practiced. Conspicuous by their absence, and rejected in principle, were any hymns of human composition.

Everywhere that Calvinism took root was marked by the fervent, and for all practical purposes, the exclusive use of the Psalms in both the private and the public worship of God. From the early Huguenots in France to the first Puritans on the shores of America, the Psalms were a notable fixture. The first book published on these shores was the Bay Psalter, published in 1640. It superseded Ainsworth's version, developed in the Netherlands by the Puritans in exile and published there in 1612, eight years before the Pilgrims sailed and brought it to the New World.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The Lutheran reformation was mainly soteriological, and not overtly concerned with Romish idolatry, having few objections to the Mass (they believed in consubstantiation) or the religious use of images. Luther specifically opposed iconoclasm. For the Calvinists the issue of idolatry was paramount; God's glory, his worship, being more important than even man's salvation. For a complete study of the difference in worship between the Lutherans and the Calvinists see Carlos M. N. Eire, "War Against the Idols, The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin."

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, The Abingdon Press, 1932, p. 43. The first sound of Psalmody in America was actually on the California coast in the 1570's. Drake on his way to circumnavigate the globe put into Drake's Bay, North of present day San Francisco, to overhaul his ship. The crew regularly sang Psalms and the local Indians were so enchanted by their singing that they came daily to ask them to sing.

Calvinist Psalmody began with Clement Marot who was the court poet to Francis I.<sup>67</sup> He became a Huguenot (French Calvinist) and turned from generating secular ballads to creating metrical Psalms in French. Because of his great popularity and poetic genius he soon had the king and his court enthusiastically singing them, a notable example of the power of music and verse being used for good. "From the court they spread to the city and the country generally; and were unquestionably a considerable factor in winning support for the Reformed doctrine and worship."<sup>68</sup> However, when he published a small collection of 30 French Psalms for use by the general population, the alarmed Roman Catholic authorities, who had been biding their time because of his standing at court, finally struck. He fled their persecution and arrived in Geneva in 1542, where he continued his work and published a Psalter of 50 Psalms in 1543. This was the beginning of the famed Genevan Psalter. He died in 1544 and the work was continued by Calvin's associate Theodore Beza, who published partially completed Psalters intermittently until the completed Psalter was finally published in 1562. The tunes were predominantly the work of Louis Bourgeois and are generally regarded as being excellent.<sup>69</sup>

From this source Psalmody spread wherever Calvinism and the Reformed faith took hold. The Genevan Psalter was used not only in Switzerland and France, "but in a translated form in Germany, Holland, and Denmark."<sup>70</sup> It was also the inspiration for a succession of English Psalters. England, following the Calvinist rather than the Lutheran Reformation, chose Marot's Psalmody over Luther's hymnody. The first mini-Psalter published was by Miles Coverdale in 1538, but it was suppressed by Henry VIII. However, under Edward VI, who strongly favored the Reformation, a Psalter of at first nineteen Psalms, then thirty-seven, was published by Thomas Sternhold. He died and the work was continued by a John Hopkins. The accession of "Bloody Mary" drove the Calvinists into exile and the work was continued by others in Geneva and finally completed in 1562. And in 1558, at the accession of Elizabeth I, returning exiles from Geneva brought the almost completed Psalter with them. This English-Genevan Psalter was known as the "Old Version" or as "Sternhold and Hopkins," after its first two contributors.<sup>71</sup>

The "Old Version" was a serviceable Psalter, but it lacked the excellent lyrical and musical qualities of the original French Genevan Psalter. In true Puritan style it had stressed the literalness of the translation over poetic quality and had used mostly Common Meter or Double Common Meter tunes in place of the tunes of Louis Bourgeois. It was adopted for use in the Anglican Church and successive editions steadily sought to improve the tunes while leaving the poetry untouched. Finally, in 1696 a "New Version" known as "Tate and Brady," after its two composers, provided an entirely new metrical version of the Psalms. The poetry was significantly improved, however at the expense of faithfulness to the Hebrew text, and it never really caught on or displaced the Old Version.

In the meantime the English Civil War left a victorious Puritan party in the ascendancy and striving for a second and more thorough English Reformation. The focus of this new Reformation

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<sup>67</sup> The very first Calvinist Psalter was published by Calvin himself in 1539 during his exile to Strasbourg. It contained 18 Psalms, 12 by Marot with the remainder being attributed to Calvin himself. See Phillips, Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 127.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>69</sup> One of his most enduring tunes is "Old One Hundredth," traditionally used to accompany Psalm 100. Phillips says of his work, "Dr. Bridges has said: 'Historians who wish to give a true philosophical account of Calvin's influence at Geneva ought probably to refer a great part of it to the enthusiasm attendant on the singing of Bourgeois' melodies.'" Phillips, Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 128.

<sup>70</sup> Phillips, Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 126.

<sup>71</sup> For this section see Phillips, Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, pp. 129-132 and Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, pp. 36-38.

was the work of the Westminster Assembly. The Assembly consistently maintained the Calvinist doctrine of worship,<sup>72</sup> rejecting the Lutheran and even the Anglican one, and was solidly committed to exclusive Psalmody. The only issue for them was which Psalter.<sup>73</sup> In 1646 they chose a new versification of the Psalms by Francis Rous, a Presbyterian lawyer and a delegate to the Assembly. This was a vast improvement over Sternhold and Hopkins, but at the Restoration in 1661, the Puritan-Presbyterian party was again suppressed and Rous' Psalter had no future in England. However, it was, after a thorough revision, adopted by the Church of Scotland, and thus became the basis for the Scottish Psalter that has survived to this day in many of the more conservative Presbyterian communions.

Our concern however, is not merely the history of the Psalter, but particularly the power of the Psalms as an engine of revival and reformation. Our concern is what place did Psalmody play in the great work of God we term the Reformation. To answer that, we cannot do better than quote the following excerpts from Rev. G. W. Robinson. Having documented that the Jews, "found in these Psalms their church songs, their home-songs, their battle-songs, their pilgrim-songs," and having demonstrated how frequently these Psalms were found on the lips of our Lord right to his expiring words on the cross, having noted their place in the Apostolic Church, he goes on to record their power to sustain and inspire men during the cauldrons of conflict and persecution that attended the Reformation.

"In like manner, the important part the Psalms played in the Reformation of the sixteenth century was foreshadowed in the great influence they exerted upon the lives of the forerunners, as well as of the actual leaders, in that epoch-making movement. To John Wyclif belongs the honor of sounding the first clear, unmistakable challenge to a corrupt Church, with his charge of 'Anti-Christ' and plea for separation. As he lay dying at Lutterworth, so the story runs, the Friars crowded around him, urging him to confess the wrongs he had done to their Order. But the indomitable old man caused his servant to raise him from the pillow, and, gathering all his remaining strength, exclaimed with a loud voice, 'I shall not die, but live, and declare the evil deeds of the Friars.'" (Psalms cxviii.)

"Taking up the challenge, John Huss confronted the Council of Constance with it, and then hurried away to the stake, where he died, choked by the flames, but repeating with his last breath the Thirty-First Psalm, 'Into Thy hands I commend my spirit.' His friend, Jerome of Prague, traveled the same fiery way 'a heavenly crown to win'; and won it with his comrade's dying words upon his lips. On the night before his death, Savonarola, in exquisite torture, his left arm broken and his shoulder wrenched from its socket by his cruel inquisitors, found peace for sleep and a fearless strength for 'the trial by fire' on the morrow in David's cheering words, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?'"

"Previous to the fifteenth century there were no books, and he was deemed fortunate above others who chanced to possess a manuscript of any kind...But the coming of the printing press...put the versified Psalter...into the hands of the common people...With the Psalter in the keeping of the people themselves, where they could read and sing it for themselves, a very striking revival in its practice became immediately apparent. A veritable tidal-wave of Psalm-singing began to sweep over the Christian world...With scarcely less enthusiasm the Psalter in verse was received and employed in the Netherlands, in Switzerland and Germany,

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<sup>72</sup> "But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture...The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God" Westminster COF, Ch. 21, Sections I, V.

<sup>73</sup> See Brian Schwertley, *Exclusive Psalmody, A Biblical Defense*, American Presbyterian Press, 2002, p. 69.

in the Slavonic provinces and the Scandinavian kingdoms of the North...Under the patronage of Queen Elizabeth the Psalms were welcomed into the churches and cathedrals of the Established Church, and, spreading rapidly through the parishes, grew so powerfully in popular favor that great multitudes were attracted to the churches, merely to hear, or join in, the singing. Burney in his *History of Music* says, 'In England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, like orgies the Psalms were roared aloud in almost every street, as well as in the churches throughout the kingdom.'"

"The point, however, which I wish to emphasize is this, that by reason of its general employment by the people the Psalter became a powerful ally of the Reformation and an elect agent in the spread of its principles. These Psalms...universally sung as they were by all classes, preached the great essential truths of the Bible, which were also the Reformation truths, more rapidly, more widely, and more effectively than would have been possible by a great army of Reformation apostles. They crept into the highways and byways of the people, stole into kingly courts and royal chambers, and thus touched with their illuminating truths those of high and low degree who would have been wholly inaccessible to preacher or evangelist...So when Calvinism swept from Geneva and began to make its way in France, in the Netherlands, in England and Scotland...[it] traveled over this song-made highway into the hearts and consciences of men. Through familiarity with the Psalms unexpected multitudes were found already infected, or so favorably disposed that the truth gained easy entry to the citadel of their minds. 'To the extent to which the sacred Psalter spread throughout Europe, to that extent the Reformation prospered.'"

The heroic odes of the Psalter have furnished the thrilling battle-songs for the armies of the Lord in all the great struggles for civil and religious liberty throughout history. It must be admitted that the Psalms are not altogether smooth reading for those who press the principle, 'peace at any price.' They came from God, and so reflect God's thought, 'righteousness first, then peace.'

When their national independence trembled in the balance at Emmaus, Judas Maccabeus and his band of six thousand young warriors, 'singing Psalms with a loud voice,' fell upon Gorgias, Governor of Idumea, and his army of forty-seven thousand hardened veterans, and scattered the enemy as the withered leaves of autumn.

During the seventeenth century the followers of the False Prophet swept across the Hellespont, and with lust of blood and fiery sword were laying waste eastern Europe. 'To the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty,' came Sobieski, afterward King John III of Poland, met the fanatic host at Khotin, turned them back into the sea, lifted high the Cross above the Crescent, and thus forever put an end to the dream of Mohammedan conquest in Europe. When the victory was complete these soldiers of the Lord of Hosts gave tongue to their rejoicing in the words of the One Hundred and Fifteenth Psalm

"Not unto us, Lord, not to us, But do Thou glory take  
To Thy own name, ev'n for Thy truth, And for Thy mercy's sake."

With a burst of enthusiasm truly indescribable, the great army took up the final words:

"O wherefore should the heathen say,  
Where is their God now gone?  
But our God in the heaven is,  
What pleased Him He hath done."

In the religious wars of France the Psalms became the Huguenot's 'Marseillaise.' They sounded as the war-cry above all the battlefields of Coligny and Henry of Navarre. Before the battle of Courtras, falling upon their knees, the Huguenots chanted the One Hundred and Eighteenth Psalm

"This day God made; with cheerful voice In it we'll triumph and rejoice.  
Save now, O Lord, we plead with Thee; Lord, send us now prosperity."

Pointing to the kneeling host, a certain young gallant said to the commander of the Catholic forces, 'See, the cowards are afraid; they are confessing themselves.' To which a scarred veteran

made answer, 'Sire, when the Huguenots behave like that, they are getting ready to fight to the death.' And as if to make good the veteran's declaration, leaping from their knees, with Henry at their head, they swept on to decisive victory.

And time would fail me to tell...of Gustavus Adolphus in The Thirty Years' War; of the Waldenses...and the Lollards; of the Covenanters, too, and the Pilgrim Fathers in the New World, who, in the Psalms, with their 'uncommon pith and gnarled vigor of sentiment,' found the tonic strength with which they defied popes, bearded kings, unthroned tyrants, and, waxing valiant in war, 'turned to flight the armies of the aliens,' that the great world might be free.

So, too, the Psalms have ever been the martyr-songs of God's sacrificial host. 'When the iron was in men's souls, and they needed it in their blood, they sang the Psalms.' From the amphitheaters of Rome, from the torture chambers of the Inquisition, from the Smithfields of London, from the fires of St. Andrews, from the dungeons of the Low Countries, from the guillotines of France, these heart-songs of David, burdened with the agonies that tried men's souls to the breaking-point, have risen to Him Who, 'back in the dim unknown, standeth ever within the shadow, keeping watch above His own.'<sup>74</sup>

Such has been the inspiring history of how God has used his divine hymnbook, the Psalter, in the life of his church. From the heroic struggles of the Huguenots that were eventually drowned in the blood of the St. Bartholomew's massacre and crushed by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, to the valiant crusade of the Dutch Calvinists in the Eighty Years War for civil and religious liberty against the legions of the Duke of Alva and the terrors of the Inquisition, resulting in the establishment of one of the great Calvinist republics in history, the Psalms played a crucial part. From the conventicles of the Scotch Presbyterians and the noble cause of the Covenanters to the English Puritans who inflamed by zeal for God, with the Psalms of David on their lips, twice overthrew Stuart tyranny to liberate both their land and their consciences, one sees the power of this means of grace. From the Pilgrims who came to these shores with Ainsworth's Psalter, to the first book published in North America, the Bay Psalter of Massachusetts Bay Colony, the American Republic was a Psalm singing nation, exclusively so until the latter part of the eighteenth century. For over 250 years after Calvin's reformation commenced in Geneva, to be Reformed meant to be a Psalm-singer. This is a heritage and an example that today's churches ignore at their peril.

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<sup>74</sup> McNaughter, Editor, *The Psalms in Worship*, pp. 501-514. The entire article can be viewed online at [www.amprpress.com/psalms\\_in\\_history\\_1.htm](http://www.amprpress.com/psalms_in_history_1.htm)

## Chapter Eight

### Isaac Watts

Isaac Watts is generally considered the “Father of English Hymnody.” Before his day Psalmody reigned virtually unopposed in the public and private praises of English Christians. In spite of some dissatisfaction with the current state of Psalmody, sporadic efforts to introduce hymns had met with such limited acceptance that hymnody seemed doomed to perpetual failure. Religious poetry was popular, and some of it was being turned into hymns despite the authors’ intention to the contrary. Yet most of this incipient hymnody was for private worship and personal use. To date, hymnody had no place in the public worship of God. Watts was the person who changed all that. “For him it was reserved to overthrow the tyranny of Psalmody.”<sup>75</sup> It is therefore important to study not only the man, but also his times. The nature of his era is well articulated by Brawley.

“The early years of the eighteenth century were in England a period of materialism and compromise. A spirit of self-interest pervaded both church and state, and principle was subordinated to expediency. The day of Puritanism was over; complacency succeeded a great war of ideals; faith retreated before the sway of Deism...by the close of the seventeenth century the Psalters were losing ground.”<sup>76</sup>

It was in this cultural setting that Watts made his successful onslaught on Psalmody. Most people are familiar with how Watts (1674-1748) got his start in hymnody as a teenager.

“When Watts complained one day about the untuneful Psalm-versions that were sung in his father’s church, one of the church officers retorted, “give us something better, young man.” Watts was just in the mood to take up the challenge, and although he was quite young, he wrote a new hymn, “Behold the Glories of the Lamb.” Sung the following Sunday, it was so highly praised that the youthful poet decided to write others. In the next two years he composed nearly all the 210 hymns in his volume “Hymns and Spiritual Songs,” Published in 1707. This was the first real hymn-book in the English language.”<sup>77</sup>

It hardly inspires us with confidence that English hymnody got its biggest boost when a church flippantly turned the matter of its praise over to a discontented teenager. However, young as he may have been, Watts was no fool. He had a well thought-out philosophy with respect to both the Scriptures in general and the matter of God’s praises in particular. It is to these views that we can attribute his lifelong campaign to replace the Psalms in the worship of God.

In the preface to his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* Watts definitively and clearly sets forth his views with respect to the Psalms. The title itself is instructive in that regard. He has obviously not only rejected the historic view that the Biblical phrase “Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” refers to the contents of the Psalter, but he eliminated the Psalms while he was at it.

I have been long convinc'd, that one great Occasion of this Evil arises from the Matter and Words to which we confine all our Songs. Some of 'em are almost opposite to the Spirit of the Gospel: Many of them foreign to the State of the New-Testament, and widely different from the present Circumstances of Christians. Hence it comes to pass that when spiritual Affections are excited within us, and our souls are raised a little above this earth in the beginning of a Psalm, we are check'd on a sudden in our Ascent toward Heaven by some Expressions that are more suited to the Days of *Carnal Ordinances*, and fit only to be sung in the *Worldly Sanctuary*. When

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<sup>75</sup> Phillips, Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 166. His sentiment is typical of defenders of hymnody and demonstrates their antipathy to the divine Songs of Zion. Elsewhere he states of Watts’ opposition to the Psalms, “Thus the tyranny of the Genevan principle of ‘The Bible and the Bible only’ was swept away.” (See p. 167).

<sup>76</sup> Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, p. 67.

<sup>77</sup> Cecelia Margaret Rudin, *Stories of Hymns We Love*, John Rudin & Co., 1944, p. 9.

we are just entering into an Evangelic Frame by some of the Glories of the Gospel presented in the brightest Figures of *Judaism*, yet the very next Line perhaps which the Clerk parcels out unto us, hath something in it so extremely Jewish and cloudy, that darkens our Sight of God the Saviour: Thus by keeping too close to *David* in the House of God, the Vail of *Moses* is thrown over our Hearts. While we are kindling into divine Love by the Meditations of the *loving kindness of God, and the Multitude of his tender Mercies*, within a few Verses some dreadful Curse against Men is propos'd to our lips; *That God would add Iniquity unto their Iniquity, not let 'em come into his Righteousness, but blot 'em out of the Book of the Living*, Psal. 69, 16, 27, 28, which is so contrary to the New Commandment, of *Loving our Enemies*. Some Sentences of the *Psalmist* that are expressive of the Temper of our own Hearts and the Circumstances of our Lives may compose our Spirits to Seriousness, and allure us to a sweet Retirement within our selves; but we meet with a following Line which so peculiarly belongs to one Action or Hour of the Life of *David* or *Asaph*, that breaks off our Song in the midst; our Consciences are affrighted lest we should speak a Falshood unto God: Thus the Powers of our Souls are shock'd on a sudden, and our Spirits ruffled before we have time to reflect that this may be sung only as a History of antient Saints and perhaps in some Instances that *Salvo* is hardly Sufficient neither.<sup>78</sup>

There are several theological problems with Watts' views. Three of the more serious ones are his dispensationalism, his view of Scripture, and his views on the Trinity. As Bushell states it,

"It goes almost without saying that Watts' attitude towards the Old Testament permeates his hymns and Psalm imitations. This consideration, coupled with the fact that Watts' views on the Trinity were highly suspect, and the fact that some modern day dispensationalists trace their views back to him, ought to cause even judicious hymn singers to question the propriety of approaching the throne of God with the words of Isaac Watts on their lips."<sup>79</sup>

The issue of Watts' Unitarianism will be dealt with under the chapter on Unitarian hymnody. As for his dispensationalism, that is repeatedly and emphatically manifested in his own statements. As Pollard documents it,

"Like some of his predecessors, Watts published his own version of *The Psalms of David* (1719), but in his case with an important difference indicated by the following words of the title '*Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*.' In the preface he wrote:

For why should I now address God my Saviour in a song, with *Burnt Sacrifices of Fatlings*, and with the *Incense of Rams*? Why should I pray to be *sprinkled with Hysop*, or recur to the *Blood of Bullocks and Goats*?...Where the *Psalmist* has described Religion by fear of God, I have joined Faith and love to it."<sup>80</sup>

And...

"He denied in particular that the Book of Psalms was a canonical hymn book for the New Testament Church, or adapted to its use. It was a Jewish book rather than a Christian book. In Christian praise the gospel teaching must be supreme over that of the Old Testament psalms, some of which are even contrary to the spirit of the gospel."<sup>81</sup>

Watts was so blind that he could see Christ in all the types and shadows of the old covenant. He sees only the works of the law and a religion of fear. Scofield, who stated that at Sinai Israel exchanged grace for law, would heartily concur. Heretical sects and erring Christians are very good at claiming, and frequently with sound basis, members of the pantheon of orthodoxy as their own. Small wonder, then, that modern dispensationalists trace their lineage back not only to Scofield and Darby, but to Watts.

Watts' extreme dispensational views are amply demonstrated by the way he adapted the Davidic Psalms to the "new dispensation."

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<sup>78</sup> Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, pp. 69-70.

<sup>79</sup> Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p.155.

<sup>80</sup> Arthur Pollard, *English Hymns*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1960, p. 13.

<sup>81</sup> H. B. Marks, *The Rise and Growth of English Hymnody*, Fleming H. Revell, 1938, p. 96.



"In his endeavor to bring David up to date, Watts furthermore changed the psalms in order to harmonize them with prevailing economic attitudes of the eighteenth century. Where the psalmist had scored usury, Watts thought it necessary also to leave out the mention of usury, which though politically forbidden by the Jews among themselves, was never unlawful to the Gentles, nor to any Christians since the Jewish polity expired.

"Watts tactfully omitted the mention of those 'temporal' blessings which the royal psalmist repeatedly promised the righteous, because as he expressed it, he believed in discouraging a too confident expectation of these temporal things, . . . the positive blessings of long life, health, recovery, and security in the midst of dangers . . . so much promised in the Old Testament, and so little in the New.

"The happy land of Canaan in Watts's 'Imitations' becomes the British Isles. After omitting the Davidic promises of such personal blessings as long life, health, recovery, and security amidst dangers, because these promises do not appear in the New Testament, he then magnified stray hints of Canaan's blessings into huge prophecies of Britain's future greatness. His version of Psalm LXXVII contained, for instance, the following lines:

Shine, mighty God, on Britain shine...  
God the Redeemer scatters round His choicest favors here...  
Sing loud with solemn voice,  
While British tongues exalt his praise,  
And British hearts rejoice!"

"He changed Psalm LXXV into a series of Anti-Jacobite invectives." The title read: "Power and government from God alone, Applied to the Glorious Revolution by King William, or the happy accession of King George to the throne." In another place he called King George II a "royal saint," and saluted him with the couplet:

'Tis George the Blest remounts the throne,  
With double vigor in his son.

"Watts, in a version of Psalm C, wrote this stanza:

Sing to the Lord with joyful voice  
Let every land his name adore;  
The British Isles shall send the noise  
Across the ocean to the shore . . . .

And Psalm CXLVII elaborated reasons for praising and trusting the Lord

O Britain, praise thy mighty God ....  
He bid the ocean round thee flow;  
No bars of brass could guard thee so.

Not content with justifying the ways of God to the British in England alone, Watts found a new title for the last part of Psalm CVII: "Colonies planted; or Nations blest and punish'd; A Psalm for New England." Two stanzas give an idea of the author's manner in this compliment to the New World:

Where nothing dwelt but beasts of prey,  
Or men as fierce and wild as they,  
He bids th'oprest and poor repair,  
And builds them towns and cities there.  
Thus they are blest; but if they sin,  
He lets the heathen nations in,  
A savage crew invades their lands,

Their princes die by barb'rous hands.<sup>82</sup>

No infidel higher critic and no rationalistic textual critic has presumed to take such extensive liberties with the word of God as Watts presumed to do in the guise of "Christianizing the Psalms."<sup>83</sup>

However, as serious as his handling of Scripture was Watts' view of Scripture. He was at least blatantly guilty of denying the inerrancy of Scripture. Any doctrine of inspiration of Scripture that he may have held would have to be virtually meaningless. Like some contemporary neo-evangelicals, the best construction of his views would be that he believes that the Holy Spirit inspired the authors of the Old Testament to faithfully reproduce the sinful thoughts of men. If he believed that David was inspired when he wrote the Psalms then he was blasphemously attributing "falsehoods" to the Holy Spirit. If he denied that David was inspired then he has subverted the Scriptures, the very foundation of our faith. Either way, the Bible as an infallible rule of faith and practice has been destroyed. His problems run far deeper than his dispensationalism. Watts is not even willing to admit that these "Psalms" were ever fit to be sung in the worship of God. As Bushell states it,

"The contrast between Watts' estimation of the psalter and that of the Reformers ...could hardly be more stark. It reveals an attitude in Watts towards the unity of the Scriptures which is wholly incompatible with a belief in their Divine origin."<sup>84</sup>

Watts' low view of the Old Testament text is amply demonstrated by how he handled it. He presumptuously arrogated to himself the right to review, edit, and censor the text to make it conform to his notions of New Testament Christianity. He is obviously treating it as the words of men and not as the word of God.

"In the case of David's Psalms, Watts cavalierly omitted as 'unworthy of paraphrase' a dozen psalms, and in order to make 'David speak like an eighteenth century British Christian,' so altered a score of others as to render them unrecognizable."<sup>85</sup>

Such liberties with God's word did not go unchallenged and as Stevenson records it,

"...there were, however, at least a few abroad who continued to prefer David to Watts. 'Compared to the Scripture,' wrote one conscientious divine, 'they are like a little taper to the Sun; as for his Psalms, they are so far from the mind of the Spirit, that I am sure if David were to read them, he would not know any one of them to be his.' And the same author continues: 'Why should Dr. Watts...not only take precedence of the Holy Ghost, but thrust him entirely out of the Church? Insomuch that the rhymes of a man are now magnified above the word of God.'"<sup>86</sup>

Finally, it is important to move from Watts' doctrinal views to his practice. That is, one should examine the ethics with which he prosecuted his campaign against Psalmody. Watts' work truly constituted a revolution, and as such it occasioned strong opposition.<sup>87</sup> How did Watts deal with this problem? Did he deal with it openly, honestly, and forthrightly so that the issues could be

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<sup>82</sup> R. M. Stevenson, *Patterns of Protestant Church Music*, Duke University Press, 1953, p. 96-99.

<sup>83</sup> See also Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts, His Life and Works*, The Dryden Press, 1943, p. 199. Davis, noting Watts' attempts to "Christianize" the Psalms states, "He omitted whole Psalms that did not lend themselves to his Christian purpose; he left out parts of others. Evangelical and New Testament themes were introduced in the place of the 'dark sayings' of David. He changed the names of Judah and Israel to England and Scotland and the names of Jewish kings to those of Great Britain."

<sup>84</sup> Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 155.

<sup>85</sup> R. M. Stevenson, *Patterns of Protestant Church Music*, Duke University Press, 1953, p. 96

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99-100.

<sup>87</sup> Even adulatory commentators note, "It is strange that the revolutionary stand of Watts did not arouse far stronger and more lasting opposition. It was asked by one opponent, 'Does Dr. watts indeed presume to correct and instruct the Holy Ghost in writing Psalms?'" See J. B. reeves, *The Hymn as Literature*, The Century Co., 1924, p. 142.

debated and settled on their merits? Finding that hymns were for the most part not being accepted by the churches, he issued a pseudo-Psalter entitled *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. Bushell writes,

“Watts’ Psalter was in reality little more than a hymnal in disguise...and it is very difficult to avoid accusing him of conscious deception at this point.”<sup>88</sup>

As to the propriety of such tactics I quote R. M. Stevenson...

“His excuse was that he was forced to issue these hymns as Psalms. He wrote...‘I must say that I imitated David’s Psalms, not as the fittest book that could be made for Christian worship, but as the best which the churches would yet hearken to.’”<sup>89</sup>

“His Trojan horse technique had opened wide the closely guarded gates of the Christian system of praise; where previously the singing of the divinely appointed Psalms of David had formed the sole vehicle of congregational praise, his first poems masquerading as Psalms of David<sup>90</sup> were wheeled within the Christian walls, and then there had emerged a full flood tide of ‘hymns of human composure.’”<sup>91</sup>

However, if Watts was guilty of deception, the churches were in many cases more than willing to be deceived. If Watts was culpable of disguising his hymns as psalms, the churches were happy to be able to sing hymns and pretend to be maintaining psalmody. As one author put it, “...this procedure enabled the churches to have their cake and eat it too.”<sup>92</sup> One is reminded of Jeremiah’s ancient complaint, “The prophets prophesy falsely...and my people love to have it so.”

Ultimately, one must concur in Bushell’s concerns about using Watts’ compositions, for only gross ignorance or supreme arrogance could induce a worshipper to enter into God’s courts and offer up Watts’ words as the sacrifice of praise.

The bitter legacy of Watts’ treatment of the Psalms is still with us today. One merely has to examine a typical hymnal to confirm that fact. In the Trinity Hymnal, for instance, many of the supposed Psalm selections are not metrical translations, but loose paraphrases in the style of Watts. That is, they are frequently more hymn than Psalm. Would Christians accept a Bible where each chapter has been heavily edited? Would they preach and teach from a Bible where each chapter has many verses deleted and many more replaced with verses made up by the editors? Would there not be an outcry against taking such liberties with the very word of God? Yet if the Psalms are part of Scripture why do they tolerate their corruption by men who imagine that they can improve on the work of the Holy Spirit? It is time that to confront these issues in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Watts’ success spawned a spate of successors seeking to imitate and supplement his work. The dam burst and an unstoppable tide of English hymns was unleashed that has already exceeded 400,000. There is now such an overwhelming stream of precedent and tradition in favor of hymnody that those who would be faithful to Scripture, their Calvinist heritage, and the principles of the Great Protestant Reformation probably feel as powerless as King Canute, in his efforts to stem the tide.

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<sup>88</sup> Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 155.

<sup>89</sup> Stevenson, *Patterns of Protestant Church Music*, p. 96.

<sup>90</sup> A friendly critic notes of his hymn “*Jesus Shall Reign Where’er the Sun*,” purportedly an imitation of Psalm 72, “This is a remarkable performance. Fused in the crucible of Watts’ mind, the various Scripture verses have regrouped themselves, and the material with the Hebrew parallelisms removed has issued in a totally new creation. The Psalm has been ‘imitated in the spirit of Christianity,’ though scarcely a word of the original has survived.” See A. E. Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950, p. 53.

<sup>91</sup> R. M. Stevenson, *Patterns of Protestant Church Music*, p. 99.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95

Watts reacted to the “scandalous doggerel” of the current versifications of the Psalms. He wanted eloquent stirring verse. It is a shame that he didn’t see that the two were not mutually exclusive. Instead of casting out the Psalms he could have sought to improve their versification. Unfortunately, his rejection of the Psalms went deeper than their versification. He hated their contents, their theology, and their very words. So rejecting the current psalmody in its entirety, casting out the substance as well as the form, he launched English Christianity on the path of the ancient heretical cults, cutting its praise loose from Scripture and founding it on the poetic sentiments of men.

## Chapter Nine

### The Methodists

The Methodist movement was primarily the work of the Wesley brothers, John (1703-1791) and Charles (1707-1788). Both men were ministers in the Church of England. Both were committed to that church and determined to remain loyal sons of that communion, particularly Charles. Further, that church was still committed to Psalmody, and its liturgy was still for all practical purposes an exercise in exclusive Psalmody. Yet under the Wesleys Methodism provided a successive wave of hymnody that followed the work of Isaac Watts. How did this come to be? How could two men who were ministers in a church that frowned on hymnody become such prolific writers of hymns and ardent promoters of hymnody?

The first reason is that their father, Samuel Wesley, was prejudiced against the Psalms and passed this prejudice on to his sons. The father had severely criticized the current Psalmody as “insufferable doggerel” and had trained his sons to sing hymns.

“From his (John Wesley’s) early years...he had realized the inadequacy of the old Psalmody and had been trained in the social singing of hymns.”<sup>93</sup>

Second, the Methodist movement developed out of the “Holy Club” at Oxford. In the private meetings of this club the liturgy of the established church had no place and the singing of hymns, as in the Wesley’s home, became a natural part. Since the Methodist movement started off not as an ecclesiastical organization, but as an association for personal devotions, hymns were easily introduced and more readily accepted.

Third, John Wesley was greatly influenced by the Moravians whose Lutheran hymnody made a deep impression on him. In 1735 John embarked on a journey to Georgia as a missionary for the established church. On board were a group of 26 Moravian immigrants under the care of their bishop. Impressed with their piety, their calmness during a severe tempest that threatened to overwhelm the ship, and their fervent hymn singing, he studied German while aboard so that he could participate in their worship.

“One result of this contact was to confirm the brothers in an already pronounced taste for the singing of hymns. On arriving in America they introduced the practice to the congregations to which they ministered, not without exciting opposition.”<sup>94</sup>

While in America Wesley published his first hymnal in 1737, which included a number of Moravian hymns that he had translated from German. On his return to England he continued his association with the Moravians and had what he termed a conversion experience in May of 1738. He subsequently made a “pilgrimage” to Hernhut, the spiritual center of the Moravian movement, to learn more about them and to study their hymnody further. “The effect of this was still further to increase his enthusiasm for hymn-singing of the emotional type affected by the Moravians.”<sup>95</sup>

Fourth, the Methodist movement was born in a time of impassioned revivalism. The Methodist revivals in England were paralleled by the “Great Awakening” in America. These revivals tended to minimize doctrine and stress the experiential and the emotional aspects of religion. The Psalms are both didactic, and express a deep and full range of human emotions. However, the poor state of the Psalmody as reflected in the versions of metrical Psalmody in use in the Church of England

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<sup>93</sup> Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, p. 91.

<sup>94</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 174.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

did not readily stir the emotions. For evangelistic efforts the emotional impact of a sentimental hymnody became an essential ingredient.

Fifth, the preaching in the Methodist revivals and in the Great Awakening was not generally in churches as part of the Lord's Day worship services. This led to a looser form of worship that condoned hymnody. The meetings of the early Methodist societies were not in competition with the stated services of the church, but an addition to them. Much of the evangelistic preaching was open air preaching conducted during the week. All this tended to favor the use of hymns and effectively accomplished an "end-run" around the strict Psalmody of the churches.

Basically, Wesley discovered, as so many before him, the power of music: its power to stir the emotions; and its power to influence and instruct. In a very real sense the success of the Methodist movement depended as much or more on Methodist hymnody as it did on the preaching of the Wesleys. If Roman Catholic clerics had cause to complain that all of Germany was "singing itself into the Lutheran heresy," the Anglicans had shortly an equal basis of complaint against Methodist hymnody.

"...it is a simple historical fact that an enormous part of the attraction of the movement that he created and led consisted in the warmer and more enthusiastic conception of worship for which it stood, and especially in the free, heartfelt participation of the whole congregation in that worship by means of a new, intimately personal type of hymnody."<sup>96</sup>

The tendency of all uninspired hymnody is to usurp the place and prerogatives of the word of God. In Methodism this was no different. Wesley's sentiments on this matter are somewhat shocking.

"In his preface to the Wesleyan Hymn-book of 1780 Wesley asks: 'In what other publication have you so distinct and full an account of Scriptural Christianity: such a declaration of the heights and depths of religion, speculative and practical: so strong cautions against the most plausible errors, particularly those now most prevalent: and so clear directions for making your calling and election sure; for perfecting holiness in the fear of God?'"<sup>97</sup>

Now the obvious answer to this question is in the Bible, the word of God. As far as making known to us the way of salvation and making our calling and election sure Paul says to Timothy, "...from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation." (2 Tim. 3:15). And as for perfecting holiness, Paul adds, "All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (2 Tim. 3:16-17). It is clear that for Wesley, Methodist hymnody was the very essence of the movement and constituted its creed and confession, a veritable compendium of its theology. And all that not in the carefully constructed statements of the theologian supported by scripture proofs, but in the sentimental and effusive words of the poet designed more to swell the emotions than instruct the intellect.

The importance of hymnody to the Methodist movement as well as the problems with it are amply demonstrated by the fact that the Wesleys issued a total of 56 hymn books during their lifetime, 36 of which contained nothing but their own compositions.<sup>98</sup> Hymnody was both the lifeblood of the movement and, at the same time, it was in a very transitory state. It almost reminds us of the current confusing plethora of Bible translations.<sup>99</sup> For something that was a defining part

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp. 171-172.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>98</sup> Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, 1932, p. 93.

<sup>99</sup> Protestant hymnody has always been in a state of flux. The first Protestant hymn-book was published by Luther in 1524. Within 20 years Luther and his associates had cranked out a total of almost 120 hymn-books. See Allan Sutherland, *Famous Hymns of the World*, Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1906, p. 162.

of Methodism it was never very well defined, but remained in a state of flux during the lives of its founders, underscoring its emotional nature.

Not only is the transitory nature of hymnody constantly changing as it conforms to the latest fads and fancies, an issue, but the sheer volume of hymnody raises questions about it. The Scriptures are limited, as the age of inspiration has ceased, and we are commanded not to add or take away from the word of God. The Psalms are equally limited, constituting an inflexible number set by divine authority at 150. In contrast, Charles Wesley is estimated to have written well over 6000 hymns. Only a handful of those hymns have stood the test of time and survived to the present.<sup>100</sup> This is a success rate of less than one third of one percent! And some of these required considerable emendation and editing to endure.<sup>101</sup> By contrast, the Scriptures are perfect and enduring.

The tendency of uninspired hymnody to usurp the prerogatives of God's word as a guide to our feet and a lamp to our path has already been noted. Another way that it supplants Scripture is by its sheer volume. Since hymnody can not compete with Psalmody with respect to either authority or perfection, therefore it competes in quantity. The inexorable tendency of hymnody is to bury Psalmody in a massive landslide of uninspired verbiage. This is clearly illustrated in the ministry of the Wesley's. Their earlier hymnbooks contained a mixture of Psalms, Watts' hymns, and their own compositions. Later hymnbooks, though greatly expanded, had no room for the Psalms and were entirely devoted to hymns.<sup>102</sup> That tendency has continued and a good current example is the Baptist Hymnal of the SBC. Out of 553 selections it has 19 by Charles Wesley, but only 10 paraphrases (i.e., hymns loosely based on Psalms) of Psalm portions. The sad truth is that the testimony of church history consistently affirms that hymns drive out the Psalms.

Hymnists try to downplay their competition with Psalmody, often acting as if they are happily coexisting and merely supplementing the inspired hymnbook that God has given his church. In fact, hymnists have generally been quite critical of the Psalms. John Wesley's attitude of contempt for the current Psalmody of his day comes across clearly in one of his letters dated 1757, in which he compares Methodist hymnody with the Psalmody of the established church.

"Nor are their solemn addresses to God interrupted either by the formal drawl of a parish clerk,<sup>103</sup> the screaming of boys who bawl out what they neither feel nor understand, or the unreasonable and unmeaning impertinence of a voluntary on the organ<sup>104</sup>. When it is reasonable to sing praise to God they do it with the spirit and with the understanding also; not in the miserable, scandalous doggerel of Hopkins and Sternhold, but in psalms and hymns which are both sense and poetry, such as would sooner dispose a critic to turn Christian, than a Christian to turn critic."<sup>105</sup>

By the device of associating Psalmody with the formalism and deadness of a parish church and associating hymnody with the spontaneity and sincerity of the worshippers in a gathered church, Wesley makes his point without having to deal with the crux of the issue, the comparison of the inspired words of God with the musings of Methodist poets. The letter went on to further

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<sup>100</sup> For example there are 8 in the Psalter-Hymnal and 19 in the Trinity Hymnal.

<sup>101</sup> For instance the original words for "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" were "Hark how all the Welkin Sings." Welkin was an old English word for sky. Later editors changed it to the current wording.

<sup>102</sup> The Wesleyan Hymn Book had 770 hymns, 612 by Charles Wesley, none by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>103</sup> In many churches where hymn books were not always available and many of the people were illiterate the clerk would read a line or two and then the congregation would sing them and so clumsily struggle through a Psalm in a process called lining out.

<sup>104</sup> Musical accompaniment was not generally used by the churches of the time and the Calvinists emphatically rejected musical instruments as part of the ceremonial law, singing the Psalms a capella.

<sup>105</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 171.

condemn the worship of the established church and revile Psalmody with guilt by association. This is of course all beside the point and manifestly unfair. No one would deny that the poetry, the music, the sincere, spontaneous singing of the Methodist assemblies far excelled its counterparts in the Anglican churches. What should be compared is the Psalms themselves and as given by God with the hymns themselves as written by men, a point Wesley conveniently omits. What he terms “miserable, scandalous doggerel” is after all a translation, inadequate as it might be, of the very word of God. Where is Wesley’s basic reverence for Scripture? It is nowhere evident. Technical merit is all that was on his mind.

The effect of all this is documented in a statement by William Romaine, an evangelical leader in the Anglican Church, who “was indeed an irreconcilable opponent of the practice of hymn-singing and adhered to Calvin’s principle of ‘The Bible and the Bible only’ in church song. But even in attacking the new hymnody he was compelled to bear an unwilling testimony to its success. ‘The singing of the Psalms,’ he wrote in 1775, ‘is now almost as despicable among the modern religions as it was some time ago among the prophane.’”<sup>106</sup> Among evangelicals in England Psalmody was dead. Hymnody had slain it.

The Wesleys were good and godly men whom God used to call thousands to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Their ministries had a profound impact on the nation for good. None of the above critique should be thought of as diminishing that. Yet, if the Apostle Paul can rebuke Peter, an inspired Apostle for compromising the faith, the reader should not think the less of those who from Biblical convictions point out the shortcomings of those who, after all, were mere men.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 186-187. Romaine also asked, “...why Dr. Watts or any other hymn writer should take precedence of the Holy Ghost?” His position prevailed in the established church until 1819 when Archbishop Vernon, settling an ecclesiastical court case on the issue, finally sanctioned a hymn-book for use in the church. As a result, Fox notes, “all sorts and conditions of men and women now begin to write hymns.” See Adam Fox, *English Hymns and Hymn Writers*, Collins, 1947, p. 32.



## Chapter Ten

### The Tractarians

So far there were definite limits to the progress of hymnody among Protestants. Lutherans adopted hymnody enthusiastically, but the Calvinists rejected it in favor of inspired Psalmody. It was by a definite series of steps that the advance of Protestant hymnody took place. There was a quantum leap in its progress due to the life and labors of Isaac Watts, but Watts was a non-conformist, a dissenter from the established church, representing the Independents. Although the Wesleys did the best to maintain the fiction that they remained loyal members of the Church of England, Methodism was clearly a dissension from the established church, and soon separated from it ecclesiastically, as it had long before separated from it theologically. So Methodist hymnody, the hymnody of John and Charles Wesley, was also part of the stream of non-conformist English Christianity, dissenting from the established church and existing outside it. At this time a new movement in favor of hymnody that successfully operated inside the established church appears.

Until the nineteenth century the established church, the Church of England, clung to what was essentially exclusive Psalmody, at least in her official liturgy and stated services. Hopkins and Sternhold, as well as Tate and Brady, were periodically challenged, but never dethroned. This task remained to be accomplished by the "Oxford Movement" also known as the Tractarians. It was named the former because several of its dominant personalities were associated with Oxford University and the latter because they issued a series of tracts, called "Tracts for the Times," ninety in all, promoting their views. This was essentially a very conservative, traditionalist movement within the established church. Lamenting the challenge to the church by both dissenting Christianity represented by the Independents and Methodists, and the challenge to Christianity by liberalism and the revolutionary fervor of the French Revolution, it sought safety in tradition. This tradition was closely identified with the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church.

"...the Oxford movement was deeply concerned for the historic church, looked back nostalgically to the Catholic Church...and longed for what it called 'reunion'...prized the sacraments, holding them to be valid only when administered by clergy ordained by bishops in the apostolic succession."<sup>107</sup>

One of the leading Tractarians, John Henry Newman (1801-1890), wrote the final and ninetieth tract in 1841 in which he declared,

"...that the Thirty-Nine Articles which officially stated the position of the Church of England were not contrary to Catholic doctrine and practice but simply condemned some of the abuses which had arisen in connection with them. He recognized other sacraments than baptism and the Lord's Supper, came out for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, made room for purgatory and the invocation of saints, qualified the Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith alone, and in other respects attempted to show how those who held to the faith of the Catholic Church could subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles."<sup>108</sup>

"The tract caused such a commotion that the Bishop of Oxford commanded the termination of the series" and in 1846, like many of his fellow Tractarians, Newman left the Church to join the

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<sup>107</sup> LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 1168.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1169-1170

communion of the Church of Rome. It was a good fit for the superstitious Newman who “would cross himself before going into the dark.”<sup>109</sup>

The Tractarians were Anglo-Catholics seeking to Catholicize the Anglican Church, to reunite that Church with Rome. When they failed in those endeavors they would personally act out their faith by becoming Roman Catholic. Newman himself eventually became a Cardinal in the Church of Rome. Even more so than the true Anglicans, they were creatures of tradition. And the tradition that appealed to them the most was the tradition of the Church of Rome. The tradition of the Anglican Church, from its inception had been to sing the Psalms. Hymns were considered a recent innovation and were therefore suspect. The Tractarians digging into the mother lode of Catholic tradition discovered the rich vein of Latin hymnody and appropriated it as part of their ecclesiastical heritage.

“the essence of the Tractarian position was the appeal to Catholic antiquity: and this was to have important results in hymnody...Hitherto the Hymn, with its Methodist and Evangelical associations, had been deeply suspect to those who prided themselves on a loyal and conservative Churchmanship. Such men had constituted themselves the champions of Psalmody, despite the taint of its Genevan origin, because they disliked Hymnody far more...But soon the logic of facts began to operate irresistibly in favour of a practice which a study of ancient liturgical forms had revealed...as an integral part of the venerable Catholic order of worship.”<sup>110</sup>

Tractarians immediately started to translate Latin Hymns from the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church, relying heavily on the various breviaries then available. These were regularly turned into English hymnals for use at first privately and, as soon as they could find acceptance, in the official liturgy of the Anglican Church. They felt that “the use of such hymns would at least serve to impart a Catholic atmosphere...and help towards a more adequate observance of seasons and saints’ days.”<sup>111</sup> Newman himself published two volumes entitled *Hymni Ecclesiae*, in the preface to which he, speaking of the hymns of the Romish Church, said, “...out of which she (the Anglican Church) may complete her rosary and enrich her beads.”<sup>112</sup> The Tractarians were quite successful and due to their skill, influence, and persistent efforts, hymnody became a permanent and accepted part of the worship of the Anglican Church. They may have been heretics, even by Anglican standards, but they contributed greatly to the overthrow of Psalmody in the established church.

In spite of this sordid record, the Tractarians and their hymns were well received, not only within the Anglican community, but by English speaking Protestants in general. Both English renditions of old Latin hymns as well as those of their own composition are used extensively by Protestant churches. A couple of examples should suffice. The first is a hymn written by Newman while he was still a minister in the Church of England. Discouraged, distraught, and distressed by the tenor of the times, Newman, desperate for some spiritual guidance, wrote his most famous hymn, “Lead Kindly Light.” At the time he was a confused young clergyman seeking light to guide him through the troublous times, troublous both personally and with respect to the state of the Church. The hymn is a plaintive cry for divine light to guide him. He has the Scriptures, but he still feels lost and adrift. One almost feels sorry for him, even as he reminds us of those of whom Christ spoke when he said, “Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” That is surely what happened, because he and his deluded followers sought truth in the superstitions of Rome and fell into that deep ditch of Roman

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<sup>109</sup> Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, p. 144.

<sup>110</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, p. 199.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Catholicism. Ultimately, the light that he was speaking of led him into the communion of the Church of Rome. This is hardly the kind of light that the people of God should be singing about and beseeching God for!

Frederick William Faber (1814-1863) was another Tractarian clergyman. He was an “enthusiastic follower of Newman” and in 1845 followed him into the Church of Rome. “He was even more extreme (than Newman) in his devotion to the Virgin and his submission to the Pope.”<sup>113</sup> As a hymnist he is best known for authoring the familiar hymn, “Faith of Our Fathers.” Most people who mindlessly sing this hymn do not realize that the faith that Faber is extolling is the ancient faith of the Fathers, the faith of the Church of Rome. As Brawley puts it, “...he evidently had a meaning somewhat different from that frequently attached to the words.”<sup>114</sup> This is patently evident when one examines the original unedited text of the hymn. Originally the third verse was as follows...

Faith of our Fathers, Mary’s prayers  
Shall win our country back to thee  
And through the truth that comes from God  
England shall then indeed be free  
Faith of our Fathers! Holy Faith!  
We will be true to thee till death.

Now it is obvious that the faith being extolled is the faith of the fathers of Roman Catholicism and the Holy Faith being referred to is the faith of the “Holy Catholic Church.” Should Protestants be pledging to be true to such a faith till death? While the above quoted portion of the hymn is clearly heretical, the remainder is also deceptive. When he spoke of the martyred fathers enduring “dungeon, fire and sword” he was making an overstated reference to the suppression of Catholicism in England after the Reformation. When he said “Faith of our Fathers, We will love, Both friend and foe in all our strife,” he was lying. The record of Roman Catholic persecution of their foes and the bloody suppression of the Reformation in entire countries with countless thousands of victims is abundant evidence to the contrary. The “Faith of the Fathers” that he was referring to was the faith of the Inquisition that required the extirpation of heretics, and not as he pretends, winning them by “kindly words and virtuous life.” He cannot have it both ways. If he wants to profess the latter he has to deny the former. This hymn is not only heretical, but manifestly deceptive.

And the question one should ask himself is, “Is this what Christians ought to offer up to God in praise?” Are they to offer up the words of men that broke their ordination vows and sought to subvert their own church back into Roman Catholicism, and when they failed, apostatized and returned, as dogs to their vomit, to the communion of the Church of Rome? Are the religious sentiments of idolaters and apostates from the faith fit to be presented to God as part of his praise?

Some will say that it doesn’t matter what they meant, that one can put one’s own meaning on the words. One doubts that God is so easily persuaded to accept such glosses on the corruptions that are offered up to him in worship. He commands his people to earnestly contend for the faith. The professing church offers back the words of heretics and apostates.

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<sup>113</sup> Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, p. 145.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

## Chapter Eleven

### The Unitarians

Unitarianism, in the form of Arianism, after a long and heroic struggle by the orthodox, had been rejected by the early Church. However, such a key doctrine as the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ is always under attack by the forces of unbelief and infidelity. In the sixteenth century the Italian theologian Socinus became an effective proponent of this heresy, and he had an apt if unbalanced co-religionist in the ill-fated Servetus. Socinus outdid the Arians by denying any preexistence to Christ and limiting him to being mere man. His followers, chiefly in Poland in that day, were known as Socinians. With the increasing rationalism and skepticism of the eighteenth century, infidelity in general and Unitarianism in particular made significant gains throughout Europe and the New World. Such famous poets as John Milton and William Wordsworth Longfellow, and such famous scientists as Sir Isaac Newton and Joseph Priestley, were Unitarians. Wherever there were no explicit creeds enforced by church discipline churches frequently fell away into this heresy.

“In 1698 the General Synod of Ulster required strict subscription to the Westminster COF for all candidates for the ministry. In 1705 The Belfast Society was formed of young, liberal ministers who opposed subscription. *‘In reference to ecclesiastical discipline, the members of the society taught, among other things, that the church had no right to require candidates for the ministry to subscribe a confession of faith prepared by any man or body of men; and that such a required subscription was a violation of the right of private judgment, and inconsistent with Christian liberty and true Protestantism.’*<sup>115</sup> Due to continued agitation from the society in 1720 the ‘*Pacific Act*’ was passed mandating that ministers be allowed to dissent from the Confession and state their doctrine in their own words as long as they were deemed, ‘*sound in the faith*’.<sup>116</sup> This led to a six-year battle between subscriptionists and non-subscriptionists in the Ulster General Synod. The drift to heresy became such a threat that in 1726 the Synod voted to exclude all non-subscribing members. Those excluded soon drifted into Independency and Socinianism. The latter was the general fate of all non-subscriptionist Reformed churches. The Reformed Churches of both Switzerland and England succumbed to such a fate.”<sup>117</sup>

Presbyterianism never flourished in England as it did in Scotland, the Netherlands, and North America. Under the Tudors it was suppressed in favor of the established church, and because of its opposition to religious liberty came under the disfavor of Cromwell and the Independents. After the Restoration it continued to be persecuted. As a result Presbyterians were never able to establish their churches and their system of church government, and they soon fell away into Socinianism.

“In England Anti-Trinitarian views attracted a following among some of the intellectuals. The Presbyterian churches in that country, small in numbers, largely became Unitarian. Some of the General Baptists also moved in that direction.”<sup>118</sup>

The Unitarians, like the Arians whose theology they emulated, wrote their own hymns. As has frequently occurred in the history of hymnody, they have come into the standard hymnals of conservative evangelical Protestantism despite their origins. This was chiefly on account of their great influence, which was generally far beyond the weight of their numbers, and depended more on their social standing and intellectual attainments.

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<sup>115</sup> Samuel J. Baird, *History of the New School*, Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, Philadelphia, PA, 1868, p. 57.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>117</sup> Louis F. DeBoer, Article, “*Biblical Principles of Church Government*,” 1999. Can be viewed online at [www.amprpress.com](http://www.amprpress.com) under “Articles.”

<sup>118</sup> LaTourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 1005.

"The Unitarians were chiefly the descendents...of the Presbyterians, for the latter, thrown out of the Church of England by the Stuart Restoration...had objected to creedal or confessional tests and under the influence of the rationalism of the eighteenth century had moved increasingly towards a non-Trinitarian faith. In general the Unitarians were from the upper income classes and highly educated"<sup>119</sup>

The same was true of the Unitarians in America except that they were almost exclusively the progeny of New England Congregationalism.

"It was in 1818 that the main division began in the Congregational churches...In 1825 the American Unitarian Association was organized. Unitarians never constituted more than a minority of the population, but because of their ability, wealth, and education they exercised an influence far out of proportion to their numbers."<sup>120</sup>

The Unitarians were "respectable" people and did their best to appear orthodox. Their hymns reflected their theology, but in an understated way. Unlike the Arians, whose confrontational hymns mocked the orthodox faith, the Unitarians preferred to sin by omission. Their hymns frequently ignored Christ, or spoke of him in a way that referred only to his humanity without explicitly denying his deity. They were the intellectuals of society, affected by rationalism and the "Enlightenment," with its belief in the perfectibility of man. Their humanist faith and their social gospel was frequently stressed in their hymns, as was their mystical devotion to their deity. They were very "religious," but defined religion not in terms of orthodox doctrine, but in religious feelings and devotions and mystical communion with their god. They denied the atonement, but saw Christ as the great moral teacher whose moral example we are to follow.

The most famous Unitarian hymn is probably Sarah Flower Adams' (1805-1848) "Nearer My God To Thee." An examination of its words reveals its Unitarian essence.

Nearer, my God to thee, Nearer to thee!  
E'en though it be a cross That raiseth me;  
Still all my song shall be,  
Nearer, my God, to thee, Nearer to thee  
Though like the wanderer, The sun gone down  
Darkness be over me, My rest a stone  
Yet in my dreams I'd be  
Nearer , my God to thee, Nearer to thee.  
There let the way appear, Steps unto heaven:  
All that thou sendest me, In mercy given  
Angels to beckon me  
Nearer , my God to thee, Nearer to thee.  
Then with my waking thoughts, Bright with thy praise  
Out of my stony griefs, Bethel I'll raise  
So by my woes to be  
Nearer , my God to thee, Nearer to thee.  
Or if on joyful wing, Cleaving the Sky  
Sun, moon, and stars forgot, Upwards I fly,  
Still all my song shall be,  
Nearer , my God to thee, Nearer to thee.

First, the hymn is devoid of any reference to Christ or hope in his atonement. Rather, it is by following Christ's example and suffering for truth and right that one gains salvation. Hence the references to "E'en though it be a cross, That raiseth me" and "So by my woes to be" as bringing her nearer to her god. Salvation is not through Christ or his atonement, but by a mystical

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 1180.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 1043.

experience loosely paralleling Jacob's experience at Bethel. A spiritual wanderer, in darkness, by a mystical experience in a dream, is brought nearer to God. The "way" to God, the "Steps unto heaven" are not through Jesus Christ, but through a mystical experience. The "way" to God is not through Christ or the Scriptures, "which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15), but will "appear" through this mystical experience. These words are precisely what Unitarian sentiments would dictate. This is, in all respects, a perfect Unitarian hymn.

Jesus taught, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Sarah Flower Adams, however, taught that men can approach God without Christ and by virtue of their own willingness to suffer for what is right. The Scriptures teach that the objective fact of the atonement is the basis for our being able to come to God. This hymn teaches that it is our subjective religious experiences that bring us into closer communion with God. Sadly, this does not seem to matter to most Christians. Lowell Mason's alluring tune<sup>121</sup> and Mrs. Adams' mystical poetry are far too irresistible, and so such heretical ditties are regularly offered as praise to God in evangelical churches.

The following is a partial list of popular hymns that were authored by Unitarians.

Sir John Bowring (1792-1872) authored "In the Cross of Christ I glory." This hymn is a mystical veneration of the physical cross reminiscent of the worst of idolatrous Romish hymns on that subject.

Robert Robinson (1735-1790) started off as a Baptist, became an Independent, and then a Unitarian. He wrote "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" in 1858, probably before he imbibed Unitarian sentiments.

Edmund H. Sears (1810-1876) wrote "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." This composition will be examined in the chapter dealing with Christmas carols.

Finally, no review of Unitarian hymns is complete without dealing with that most infamous one of all, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." This infidel poem was authored by Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910), a Unitarian minister. As a Unitarian she was committed to a social gospel and therefore was a radical abolitionist. Written during the War Between the States as a battle-hymn for Union soldiers, it reflects her theology as well as her hatred of the South.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on  
I have seen him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps;  
They have builded him an altar in the evening dews and damps;  
I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;  
His day is marching on  
I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel:  
"As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;  
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,  
Since God is marching on."  
He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;

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<sup>121</sup> This hymn was first published in 1841 and achieved but little success until it was set to Lowell Mason's tune in 1860. As usual, it was the power of the music that fueled its success as a hymn, the words being secondary. See Sutherland, *Famous Hymns of the World*, p. 185.

He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat:  
Oh, be swift my soul to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet!  
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,  
With a glory in his bosom that transfigured you and me:  
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,  
While God is marching on.

The Unitarians, having rejected the deity and the atonement of Jesus Christ, had nothing left except a social gospel. Since Christ, a mere man, was dead, there could be no second coming and no future eternal kingdom of God. Like the Sadducees, whose theology they paralleled, their kingdom was of this world and their real religion was power politics. This social gospel comes through clearly in the above hymn.

The first thing one has to examine is the “coming of the Lord” referenced in verse one. What was she referring to? It cannot be any real or even any spiritual return of Jesus Christ in judgment, for in her mind he is dead. This is clearly manifest from her poem on the subject entitled, “The Dead Christ,” the final verse of which reads...

I ask of thee no wonders,  
No changing white or red;  
I dream not thou art living;  
I love and prize thee dead.  
That salutary deadness  
I seek through want and pain,  
From which God's own high power can bid  
Our virtue rise again.<sup>122</sup>

It could, of course, be a reference to God coming in judgment, but most likely it is an oblique reference to Christ. Christ for her lives on in his followers. He lives on in the continuing power of his teachings and his moral example. He is coming as, by his words and example, he inspires his followers to act in his name. And what are they to do in his name? Are they to preach the gospel and build his church? No! They are to take vengeance in his name on the ungodly, specifically on the slaveholding society of the South. They are to unsheathe the sword, not of the word of God, but of steel, as they seek to implement his teachings. Mohammed would be proud of her. This is a battle cry to impose religion by the sword. The Scriptures say, “Vengeance is mine saith the Lord, I will repay.” When The Sons of Thunder sought to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village that rejected the presence of Christ, he rebuked them and said, “Ye know not what spirit ye are of.” By contrast this hymn calls us to slay the infidels.

Verse two continues in this vein. The invading Yankee army coming to destroy the powers of evil in the South was seen as enjoying the mystical presence of Christ in their camps. Their watch fires are altars to his cause, the cause of social justice. Their invasion was transmuted into a religious crusade. They were coming to implement the sentence decreed by his moral teachings. Christ is dead, but his day is coming as his followers implement his ideals.

The social gospel shines forth with a vengeance in the third verse. This infidel woman now announces a new gospel. This gospel is not found in “Holy Writ” It is not a gospel of salvation from sin and death and hell through the blood of Christ. This is a gospel “writ in burnished rows of steel.” This is a gospel of social salvation imposed by the bayonets of the Yankee army. This gospel will liberate the South from its “slavocracy” and impose a new order of social justice. The kingdom of God is being built and it is being built by the sword. And to this perverted gospel one

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<sup>122</sup> From her book, “Passion Flowers,” published in 1854.

is asked to sing, "Hallelujah"! This gospel knows nothing of faith and repentance and justification by the blood of Christ. In this gospel the grace of God is earned by works, and the specific work called for is the destruction of the "enemies," the "contemners," of God. Salvation, in this earthly paradise, can be earned by the sword. Taking a page from the pagans, like the heroes of Odin who enter Valhalla if they die sword in hand, and like the martyrs of Islam who go straight to paradise if they die for the faith, so these Yankee soldiers will gain the grace of God if they take up the sword in this crusade.

But enough is enough. Lack of space forbids me from reviewing the remainder of this hymn, except perhaps to note that she carefully distinguished between Christ, as the "Hero born of woman" and God as referenced in the following line. This hymn is heretical to a high degree. Christians should think soberly and seriously before offering such infidel sentiments to God in praise. After all, why should we approach God with the Battle Hymns of his enemies on our lips? Is that not the height of impertinence or even blasphemy? One would do better to sing Psalm 20, which Calvin and many others considered the Battle Hymn of the church. A good antidote to such sentiments would be to read J. S. Reid's article, "The Battle Hymns of the Lord: Calvinist Psalmody of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century." He writes,

"...the psalms, so much a part of the Calvinist springs of action, automatically became one of the major factors in forming and inspiring Calvinistic resistance to persecution, oppression, and attack."<sup>123</sup>

It is interesting to note that the Lord Jesus Christ defended himself from the charge of blasphemy leveled at him by the Pharisees by arguing the reality of his deity from the Book of Psalms. Gnostics, Arians, and Unitarians cannot sing the Psalms, but they all can and do compose and sing hymns, hymns that conveniently ignore or deny the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Deluded Protestants who profess to believe in his divinity do not seem to notice or mind the omission. Again, one should ask the question, "Should we be offering up to God in praise the words of those who deny his Son?" This is especially true, when it is only through the Son that we can come to the Father. Christ taught "He that rejects me rejects him that sent me."

Finally, no chapter on Unitarian hymnody would be complete without at least a brief review of the question, "Was Isaac Watts a Unitarian?" There is considerable evidence that Watts held Arian or Unitarian opinions. At the very least, as we have already noted, "Watts' views on the Trinity were highly suspect." This is confirmed by a number of independent sources. The root of many of these allegations against Watts' orthodoxy with respect to the deity of Jesus Christ stem from his own writings. As one authority states it,

"His theological as well as philosophical fame was considerable. His '*Speculations on the Human Nature of the Logos,*' as a contribution to the great controversy on the Holy Trinity, brought on him a charge of Arian opinions."<sup>124</sup>

In other works as well Watts took essentially Arian positions.

"It is true that Mather's enthusiasm for Watts<sup>125</sup> was greatly diminished at a later date, when the latter published his *Disquisitions*. Mather's conservative soul was alarmed by Watts'

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<sup>123</sup> C. S. Meyer, Editor, *16<sup>th</sup> Century Essays and Studies*, Foundation for Reformation Research, p. 38. Quoted from Bushell, Op. cit., p. 200.

<sup>124</sup> *Dictionary of Hymnology*, Editor, John Julian, Vol. 2, p. 1236, Kregel Publications, 1985 (Reprint of 1907 Edition). I have not been able to access this work personally. However, I spoke with Dr. William Young of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, who was familiar with this work. He states that although Watts did not explicitly deny the deity of Christ in this work, he systematically reviewed all the standard proof-texts for the deity of Christ and explicated them so as to apply them all to the human nature of Jesus Christ. As Dr. Young put it, "If you deny all those texts what have you got left on which to base any doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ?"



theological liberalism, and on January 28th, 1726/7, he wrote to Thomas Prince, the then youthful minister of the Old South, denouncing Watts as 'a very Disqualified person,' and 'too shallow' to deal with theology, and warning Prince to beware of him. And, from his point of view, he was right, for in that work Watts took an Arian position and was headed straight down the road which led, a generation or two later, to early English Unitarianism."<sup>126</sup>

"His attitude towards Christ may in large measure have reflected his own belief in the everlasting humanity of Christ. Nowadays in studying his hymns we may perhaps not realize that he entertained peculiar views on the Glorified Humanity of Christ. For the most part, his original ideas on Christ and the Trinity never reached a wide public, and because he became known as a writer of hymns and psalms, his dangerous tracts were conveniently forgotten."

"In *The Glory of Christ as God-Man*, Dr. Watts hazarded the opinion that 'Michael is Jesus Christ, because he is called...the first of the princes, that is, the prime archangel.'<sup>127</sup> Watts 'confirms this sentiment' that Christ and Michael are the same beings from Revelation 12:7. He continues, 'Perhaps this Michael, that is Christ the King of the Jews, is the only archangel, or prince and head of all angels.'<sup>128</sup> A little later he ventures the opinion that 'Jesus Christ was that angel who generally appeared in ancient times to the patriarchs and to the Jews.'<sup>129</sup>

"According to Watts, God constantly resided in this angel (Christ-Michael) and influenced this angel.<sup>130</sup> God has now given this archangel, or prince and head of all angels, dominion and power over all things. 'This government of Christ is frequently represented as a gift and a reward, and therefore must belong eminently to the inferior nature [of Christ], which alone is capable of rewards and gifts from God.'<sup>131</sup> It is because God has exalted Christ to be intercessor that Christ can particularly assist man, and not because Christ can himself 'bestow effectual succour and relief.'<sup>132</sup> In keeping with the spirit of his century Watts proposes to give 'A rational account how the man Jesus Christ may be vested with such extensive powers.'<sup>133</sup> Christ, he declares, does not now know 'every single thought, word, or action of every particular creature,' but does know 'all the greater, more general, and more considerable affairs and transactions of nations, churches, and particular persons.'<sup>134</sup> Christ's human soul is 'the brightest image or copy of the divine nature that is found among mere creatures.'<sup>135</sup> Watts supposes that 'it belongs only to the omniscience of God himself to take in with one infinite, simultaneous and extensive view all the shapes, sizes, situations and motions' of every atom of the Universe, and Christ who is 'mere creature' does not share this prerogative. Christ, in the analogy of the author, is like a general watching a battle from an elevated position; he knows the way the battle is going, but 'cannot know every sword that is drawn, nor hear every groan.'<sup>136</sup> Not even the 'glorious created mind of Christ' can share the infinite knowledge of God."

"Watts, because he thought of Christ as a glorified angel now exalted to the highest dominion in heaven, was once asked why he did not alter some passages in his early hymns in order more exactly to suit them to his matured theological views; his reply is worth quoting:

"I freely answer I wish some things were corrected. But...I might tell you, that of all the books I have written, that particular copy is not mine. I sold it to Mr. Lawrence near thirty years

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<sup>125</sup> Before the above quotation the author states that initially Cotton Mather approved of Watts' hymns, but only for personal and private use, and absolutely not for use in the sanctuary in the public worship of God.

<sup>126</sup> Henry Wilder Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody*, Archon Books, 1968, p. 68.

<sup>127</sup> I. Watts, *Discourses, Essays, and Tracts, on Various Subjects*, London, 1753, VI, 749.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 749.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 752.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 763.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 778.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 782.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 778.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 785.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 786.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 787.

ago, and his posterity make money of it to this day, and I can scarce claim a right to make any alteration in the book which would alter the sale of it.”

“John Wesley, whose opinion of Watts's Divine Love poems has been given, threw out a penetrating view on Watts's theology: ‘Some years since,’ comments Wesley, ‘I read about fifty pages of Dr. Watts's ingenious treatise upon the “Glorified Humanity of Christ.” But it so confounded my intellects, and plunged me into such unprofitable reasons, yea, dangerous ones, that I would not have read it through for five hundred pounds.’ ‘It led him [Watts] into Arianism. Take care that similar tracts (all of which I abhor) have not the same effect upon you.’<sup>137</sup>

“At the last, Watts, in one of his more passionate outbursts, found himself still absolutely baffled ‘and unsatisfied with respect to the God he was to worship.’ In a paroxysm of despair he cried out, ‘Surely I ought to know the God whom I worship, whether he be one pure simple being or whether thou art a three-fold deity...’<sup>138</sup>

“Bewildered and beset with the scourge of temptation ‘to give up thy word and thy gospel as an unintelligible book, and betake myself to the light of nature and reason,’ he then prayed: ‘I entreat, O most merciful Father, that thou wilt not suffer the remnant of my short life to be wasted in such endless wanderings, in quest of thee and thy Son Jesus, as a great part of my past days have been...’<sup>139</sup> This was the end of the journey for Watts; at the end it was ‘De Profundis.’<sup>140</sup>”<sup>141</sup>

It is worth examining how Watts became a “Unitarian.” Watts was as much a product of the Enlightenment as he was of the Reformation. He was highly influenced by both reason and Scripture and most of his controversial writings were attempts to reconcile the two. For instance, although he professed to be a Calvinist, he used reason to so modify and explain the alleged “harshness” of Calvinism that he certainly can not be regarded as orthodox in that respect. In his book *Ruin and Recovery* Watts redefines Calvinism as follows...

“But *Ruin and Recovery* is an interesting treatise in other respects. When Watts discusses the ‘recovery’ of mankind, he falls into some peculiar beliefs. In explaining some of the Calvinistic dogmas through the light of reason, he succeeds in explaining them away. Take, for example, his explication of the doctrine of election. It is logical, he feels, that God should guarantee through election that a certain number be saved to partake of His grace; but on the other hand, there is no reason ‘why the strictest Calvinist should be angry, that the all sufficient merit of Christ should overflow so far in its influence, as to provide a conditional salvation for all mankind, since the elect of God have that certain and absolute salvation which they contend for, secured to them by the same merit;...’”<sup>142</sup>

Watts thus redefined the Calvinist doctrine of election to include the Arminian doctrine of an unlimited atonement providing a conditional salvation for all. He then goes on to further redefine Calvinism to make it more acceptable to Arminians and rationalists.

“We see Watts in this work clinging to the forms of Calvinistic dogmas but explaining away their harshness. There *are* elect, he says, but there is also a conditional salvation for all; the infants of the unregenerate cannot expect to be saved, but they will not suffer eternally, for God will mercifully annihilate them; the virtuous heathen will be treated gently...Watts could not conceive of God as being cruel, unfair, or unreasonable. When first considered, some of the tenets of Calvinism seemed to make Him so. But, Watts asserts, if one examines these tenets in the light of reason, one will find that the true meaning need not necessarily be the commonly accepted meaning of such dogmas. Watts was a product of the rationalistic spirit of the

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<sup>137</sup> John Wesley, *The Works* (New York, 1856), VII, 82.

<sup>138</sup> I. Watts, *The Works*, London, 1753, IV, 641.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 641.

<sup>140</sup> De Profundis is Latin for “out of the depths,” that is, out of the depths of sorrow and despair.

<sup>141</sup> Stevenson, *Patterns of Protestant Church Music*, pp. 107-110.

<sup>142</sup> Arthur Paul Davis, *Isaac Watts, His Life and Works*, The Dryden Press, 1943, pp. 108.

eighteenth century as well as of the believing spirit of the seventeenth. In *Ruin and Recovery* he tries to reconcile the two."<sup>143</sup>

Watts was clearly attempting to resolve the controversy over Calvinist soteriology by redefining it so that its detractors would find it acceptable. Just as clearly his redefinition transmuted it into something that no orthodox Calvinist would accept. This is a model for how Watts handled the Trinitarian-Unitarian controversy of his day. Just as he styled himself a Calvinist, he styled himself a Trinitarian; yet he was as prepared to redefine the Trinity as he was Calvinism in the interest of resolving the conflict. That he would attempt to reconcile the two is itself amazing enough. His initial problem, as one biographer put it, was that Watts was "broad even to the point of admitting Arianism and Socinianism to the family of accepted sects."<sup>144</sup>

The eighteenth century was an age of reason during which rationalistic Unitarianism made great inroads into the English churches. This resulted in increasing controversy and led to the Salter's Hall controversy of 1719 in which a group of alarmed orthodox nonconformist ministers sought to impose the Athanasian Creed on all dissenting clergy. This was Watts' point of departure for entering the public debate and seeking to reconcile the two parties by proposing mediating positions. This was not only because, as noted above, he saw both sides as included within the pale of Biblical Christianity, but because he personally had, from an early age, sympathies with Unitarianism. As Davis noted, as early as 1696 Watts "wrote to his friend, Pocyon, 'sometimes I seem to have carried reason with me even to the camp of Socinus.'"<sup>145</sup> Watts was confessing that reason was already leading him to consider the opinions of the Italian Unitarian, Socinus, who taught that Christ was a mere man.

Davis then extensively traced the development of Watts' thought, or at least his public expressions of it, for the next few decades.<sup>146</sup> Repeatedly Watts would defend Trinitarianism by redefining the doctrine of the Trinity to make it more acceptable to Unitarians. As he came under fire from both sides he would make further adjustments to his arguments, these generally consisting of more concessions to the Unitarians, to seek to bridge the gap and bring them back into the Trinitarian fold. Basically, Watts seemed to have believed that all orthodoxy demanded was a belief in some "Trinity," no matter how it was defined. Watts specifically stated "he could accept practically any explanation [of the Trinity] which did not insist on 'three distinct conscious minds.' This was contrary to reason and therefore could not be the explanation."<sup>147</sup>

Watts' first attempt to reconcile Unitarianism by redefining the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity occurred when he published *The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity* in 1722. In it...

"Watts merely suggests that the Bible need not be taken in a literal sense when it refers to the persons of the Trinity. In one sense of the word, the Spirit may be an attribute of the Godhead personified in order to convey its functioning to the Christian reader. It need not be an individual apart from the Godhead. Concerning the Son, Watts is even more cautious. He hints an interest in the 'indwelling scheme,' and warns us that the scheme is not one to be 'rashly rejected.' The whole essay seems to be a straw-in-the-wind venture as well as an attempt to reconcile by means of redefinition the views of orthodox Trinitarians and those of Arians, Socinians, and Sabellians."<sup>148</sup>

Like most untenable compromises, Watts' position was attacked from both the Unitarian and the Trinitarian side. Thomas Bradbury, a defender of orthodoxy,

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., pp. 109-126, passim.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pp. 111-112.

“accused Watts of making ‘the divinity of Christ to evaporate into meer attribute’ and acidly reproached him... ‘it is a pity, after you have been more than thirty years a teacher of others, you are yet to learn the first principles of the oracles of God...Was Dr. Owen's church to be taught another Jesus, that the Son and Holy Spirit are only two powers in the divine nature?’ Watts' reply to this charge was that though the doctrine of the Trinity was a first principle, the particular mode of explaining it was not.”<sup>149</sup>

The Unitarian attack came from Martin Tomkins, “a dissenting minister who had been dismissed by his congregation at Stoke Newington for his ‘Arian or Unitarian principles.’”<sup>150</sup> His critique had a telling effect on Watts and pushed him in the direction of making further compromises with Unitarianism. As Davis puts it, “Watts was generous enough to admit the superiority of his opponent's treatise and to profit by the latter's arguments.”<sup>151</sup>

Watts' response came in 1724 when he published *Three Dissertations relating to the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*. “The first of the three dissertations, *The Arian Invited to the Orthodox Faith*, was an attempt to show that the Arian belief concerning the ‘proper deity of Christ’ was not actually irreconcilable with that of the orthodox. The two were not so far apart as the average Christian supposed. In his proof of this contention, Watts made certain concessions to the Arian point of view which outraged some of his orthodox friends. In a letter to Thomas Prince, Cotton Mather expressed in no uncertain terms the attitude of this group:

“Sir,—Having first Expressed my Satisfaction on what you have written to Mr. Watts, I will freely, and in the most open-hearted Manner, offer you a Little of my Opinion, about the *Disquisitions*, which that Man has Lately published.

“I take him, to be a very Disqualified person, for the Managing of the vast Subject he has undertaken;...He is not only too shallow for it: but also led away with a Spurious and Criminal Charity, for those Abominable Idolaters, the Arians,...whom to treat as a great part of the Dissenters are Wickedly come to do, is an High-Treason of a greater and blacker consequence than ever an Atterbury was charged withal.

“His complements to that execrable crew of Traitors (I mean, the Arians) are unchristian, and scandalous, and have a Tendency to destroy the Religion of God...Could his predecessor [Isaac Chauncy] once again take his pen into his hand, he would charge him with nothing Less than grievous Haeresies.”

In spite of the controversy he was generating and the attacks on his orthodoxy, Watts persisted. He continued to rework his doctrine of the Trinity to accommodate Unitarian criticism. In 1725 he published a second series of essays on the Trinity entitled, *Four Dissertations relating to the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity*.

“In the preface Watts admits that his sentiments have changed concerning certain beliefs which he once held and which some of his earlier works expressed...In these essays, Watts goes deeply into Biblical scholarship to prove the preexistence of the soul of Christ. He makes the Spirit a literal divinity but a figurative personality. In short, by 1725 Watts had practically arrived at the position concerning the Trinity which he was to hold the rest of his life, but he was unwilling to assert it too definitely. He was not quite convinced himself.”<sup>152</sup>

In short, Watts was developing the prototype of his eventual definition of the Trinity. In it the Spirit was reduced to a divine attribute and with respect to the Son his formulation was a redefinition of his original indwelling scheme. Christ was reduced to a pre-existent glorified humanity, semi-deified by a mutual indwelling with the Father.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

Watts continued to publish his opinions on the issue of the Trinity through 1746 when he published *Useful and Important Questions concerning Jesus the Son of God Freely Proposed and The Glory of Christ as God Man*. Davis summarizes the teaching of the latter as follows...

"As *The Glory of Christ* was Watts's last Trinitarian treatise, it is time to summarize his belief. There is but one God, and the 'Deity itself personally distinguished as the Father, was united to the man Christ Jesus, in consequence of which union, or indwelling of the Godhead, he became properly God.' The human soul of Christ existed with the Father from before the foundation of the world; it was united of course with that of the Father before the Saviour's appearance in the flesh. As for the Spirit, it is God in being the active energy or power of the Deity, but it has no actual personal existence."<sup>153</sup>

To sum up the matter, Watts' problem in this area was that he failed to see Unitarianism as a serious error, much less as a gross heresy. Watts simply viewed both Unitarians and Trinitarians as Christians unnecessarily divided over their differences. Watts' speculations on the question of the Trinity should be seen as attempts to reconcile their differences and unify Christians on the issue by seeking to synthesize the two positions. This would explain for instance the position he took in "*Speculations on the Human Nature of the Logos*," where he refuted every proof-text for the deity of Christ without ever explicitly denying it. As his mediating position came under attack from both sides he was progressively influenced by the arguments of more consistent Unitarians, until eventually he virtually became one. His problem was that, in seeking a middle ground, he compromised the doctrine of the Trinity so severely that he ceased to be a Trinitarian in any meaningful way. He ceased to be orthodox.

Finally, was Watts an Arian or a Unitarian? Strictly speaking, the answer is no. He always considered himself a Trinitarian, and his views never fully coincided with the standard definitions of either of those errors. However, his redefinition of the Trinity, although unique, basically constituted a new variant of Arianism/Unitarianism. By denying that the Spirit and the Son were not fully and eternally God in the same sense as the Father, he was essentially Unitarian. By proposing that the Son was some kind of deified created being, and more than mere man, he was essentially an Arian. And by reducing the Spirit to nothing more than a divine force he was agreeing with both. No matter how one considers it, Watts was a heretic with respect to the Trinity.

From the Gnostics and the Arians, to Isaac Watts and more modern Unitarians, a succession of hymnists have frequently been tainted with serious heresies including the denial of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus taught, "I and the Father are one," and they denied it. Jesus taught, "If you have seen me you have seen the Father," and they denied it. Paul taught, "God was manifest in the flesh," and they denied it. John taught, "For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist." Yet evangelical Christians take the words of these deceivers, of these deniers of our Lord, of these very antichrists, and offer them to God in praise! As James taught, "My brethren, these things ought not to be so."

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

## Chapter Twelve

### The Fundamentalists and Gospel Music

The history of hymnody has been traced through the beginnings of the nineteenth century, and a consistent pattern has emerged. The power of music has consistently been harnessed to serve theological purposes. Catchy tunes are employed to inculcate the faithful with the message of the words. The message does need to be logically presented and convincingly argued. The faithful will be influenced by the power of the music, bypassing their rational faculties if necessary. In short, what we have seen is that the message is what is important, and the music is but the messenger; the melodies are but the means to an end. From the Gnostics to the Tractarians, from the Arians to the Unitarians, this has been the pattern. However, that is all about to change.

With the advent of what is termed “gospel music” there was paradigm shift in the nature of hymnody. The music now began to take the precedence over the words. The music was becoming the dominant aspect of hymnody. The medium was about to become the message.

“The ordinary procedure in the production of a hymn is for an author to write the words and for a composer to fit to these a tune that may be appropriate. In connection with the gospel hymns, however, this order was frequently reversed, a tune being written first. We may even say that in a large way the music takes precedence over the words, and we find in an unusual degree the success of the new hymns was due to two or three gifted singers who placed them before the public and won for them acceptance.”<sup>154</sup>

This is illustrated in the life of Fanny Crosby (1820-1915), herself a prolific creator of the genre.

One day while she (Fanny Crosby) was talking to Mr. Bradbury in New York, Doctor Doane came into the room and said to her, “I have written a tune and I want you to write words for it.” “Let me hear how the tune goes,” she said; and Doctor Doane played the music on a small organ. Having heard it, she exclaimed, “Why, that says ‘Safe in the arms of Jesus,’ and I will see what I can do about it.” She retired to an adjoining room and in a half hour her poem was finished.<sup>155</sup>

That this process is entirely subjective and totally dependant on an emotional reaction to the music is obvious. Brawley goes on to document the other issue he brought up. He mentions how these hymns were popularized by being sung at mass meetings by famous gospel singers such as Philip Phillips (1834-1875) and Ira Sankey (1840-1908). In a harbinger of the twentieth century “celebrity culture” he describes the beginning of a gospel hymn “hit parade” led by famous vocalists driving their latest offerings to the top of the gospel music charts. He gives an illustration of the effect of such musical “ministry by Phillips.”

“In February, 1865, at a meeting of the United States Christian Commission in the Senate Chamber in Washington, he sang before the many notables present “Your Mission,” by Mrs. Ellen M. H. Gates...The impression was so powerful that President Lincoln asked the chairman, Secretary Seward, to have the song repeated near the close of the meeting.”<sup>156</sup>

Now what had such an effect on the President? Could it have been the message? Could it have been the truths of Christianity? Not likely, for Lincoln was never a believer. He described himself as a “hopeful agnostic.” He was not sure there was a god, but hoped that there might be. If there was a god he was uncertain whether it would be the God of Scripture or the god of the Hindu. He never professed faith in the Christian religion and never became a member of a Christian Church.

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<sup>154</sup> Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, p. 205.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

He generally never attended church until after he became President and then probably only for appearance's sake.<sup>157</sup> From all this it is clear that the effect was strictly induced by the musical performance and had no relation whatsoever to being affected by the truths of Scripture. Gospel hymnody represents a huge step in the evolution of the church's praise from worship to entertainment. Only Christians can really render the former. The world can appreciate the latter.

Ultimately, one must understand that Gospel music is the logical consequence of Arminian evangelism. How are people converted? How ought the Christian Church to evangelize the lost? The Biblical answer is "by the word of God." Paul says, "So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17) The word of God is the instrument by which the Spirit effectually calls persons to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Peter teaches the same truth saying, "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh *is* as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you." (1 Peter 1:23-25) According to Peter we are born again by the word of God, by the gospel that is preached to us. Therefore if one is pursuing Scriptural evangelism one would logically preach the pure word of God. It is the word, as used by the Holy Spirit, that convicts and converts. Calvinism has always taught that God will save his elect, and that our function is to be faithful witnesses of the word. We are not accountable for the results, but merely for our faithful testimony to God's truth. Whether, like Jonah, we have a marvelous conversion of an entire city to the true God or, like Jeremiah, we are cast into a dungeon for our testimony is up to God. As Isaiah stated, "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent it." (Isaiah 55:11)

Arminianism, however, teaches that the conversion of men is not up to the sovereign workings of a Holy God implementing his eternal decrees in time. Arminians believe that salvation depends on the free will of man. Arminian evangelism therefore inevitably degenerates into an exercise of trying to influence that will, rather than the unvarnished presentation of the word of God. Since, as Scripture abundantly testifies, "...the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14), the Arminian reasons, "why turn people off by asserting the unpalatable truths of Scripture?" So they ignore the offensive and humbling truths of Christianity. All is love and peace. "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life" is more to a sinner's liking. "God loves you and is just straining to bless you and help you if you will just please let him," sounds more palatable to the unconverted. Arminian evangelism seeks to seduce the will of man through the emotions. Emotional oratory, and emotional testimonies, accompanied by emotional musical experiences, are capped off by an emotional altar call. Unfortunately, as church history so abundantly testifies, these "conversions" are as ephemeral as the emotions that induced them.

But this is the whole purpose of gospel music, of gospel hymnody. Its authors have no intention of attempting to pierce the heart of man with shafts of divine truth. Its appeal is strictly to the emotions. It therefore majors in sentiment and minors in theology. As Brawley, himself an ardent hymnist, stated it in his analysis...

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<sup>157</sup> This is to say nothing of the fact that Lincoln shredded the Constitution with his usurpations of power, arbitrarily arresting all his political opponents, unilaterally suspending the writ of habeus corpus, and interning his enemies in military prisons where the civil courts had no power to try them or to release them, and trying them, if at all, before military tribunals. Many a Christian minister speaking out for a just peace found himself in Mr. Lincoln's stockades. Having put his hand on the Christian Scriptures, to swear by the God he didn't believe in, to uphold a Constitution that he refused to be bound by, it would have been better if Mr. Phillips had sung Psalm 15 in his presence.

“In dealing with these compositions we understand at the outset that we have to do with an order of work that can hardly win the meed of critical approval. Words are often so trite or commonplace, music is so simple or trivial that a capable poet or musician might well be aghast. No one realized this more than some of the composers themselves. Said Lowry<sup>158</sup> of ‘Shall we gather at the river?’: ‘It is brass band music, has a march movement, and for that reason has become popular, though for myself, I do not think much of it.’”<sup>159</sup>

However, Brawley justified it by the statement, “The basis of all hymnody is feeling.”<sup>160</sup> As he was speaking of uninspired hymnody in general, and gospel hymns in particular, his analysis was quite accurate. Unfortunately, feelings can neither instruct the faithful, nor convert the faithless. Only the word of God can do that. During the Reformation, entire nations were converted to the Protestant faith by the preaching of Scripture and the singing of the Psalms. After a century and a half of Arminian “Gospel” evangelism, America is a spiritual wasteland. It is not hard to see why.

As has been previously noted, many a Calvinistic sermon is concluded with an Arminian hymn. And nobody seems to notice or mind this logical contradiction. Logic, unfortunately, has nothing to do with it. It is the emotional experience of singing the hymn that counts. The words are at best secondary. They don’t matter at all as far as theological content. Their only purpose is to support the music in evoking the emotions. Gospel hymnody is the ultimate in the dumbing down of praise!

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<sup>158</sup> Lowry was both the author of the hymn and composer of the tune.

<sup>159</sup> Brawley, *History of the English Hymn*, p. 204.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.



## Chapter Thirteen

### The Praise of Heresy & The Rejection of Truth

Having considered Arminianism and how it affected the course of hymnody, it is now time to consider additional theological errors that influence the nature and the course of hymnody. Error comes in various forms. It can be positive or negative. It can add to Scripture or it can take away from Scripture. The Scriptures equally condemn both.

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish *ought* from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. (Deuteronomy 4:2)

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:18-19)

The Pharisees added to the word of God and the Sadducees took away from it, and Christ explicitly condemned both.

Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread. But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?...But in vain they do worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men. (Matthew 15:1-3,9)

The same day came to him the Sadducees, which say that there is no resurrection, and asked him...Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. (Matthew 22:23,29)

Uninspired hymnody does both, as it is limited only by the imaginations of men and their poetic license. Maintaining heresy is a positive error that seeks to add to the Scriptures. The church has consistently seen this as the fruit of hymnody through the ages. Starting with the Gnostics and the Arians, through the Donatists and the followers of Apollinaris, all sought to promote and inculcate heretical doctrines by means of their hymnody. Similarly, she has seen the stream of Catholic hymnody progressively corrupt itself to serve the expression of superstition and idolatry. Consistently hymnody has served the purpose of the positive promotion of error.

However, subsequent to the Great Protestant Reformation, which swept away so much of this error, Protestant hymnody has also taken another tack. Although both forms of error have consistently been present throughout the history of hymnody, the other error has now gained preeminence. Protestant hymnody has chiefly served not to inculcate positive error as much as to censor out the more unpalatable truths of Scripture. That is, it serves the negative error of rejecting truths that it finds inconvenient.

One can preach and teach nothing but truths, yet still be in grievous error simply by willfully ignoring specific Scriptural truths. One can reject positive errors and simply write hymns that ignore many important truths of the Bible. In other words, one can simply destroy the balance of scripture. One can emphasize popular truths that are palatable to many professing Christians and simply ignore truths that are unpopular or that conflict with the spirit of the age. This is what one finds to a large degree in Protestant hymnody. There is a consistent and blatant rejection of the less popular truths that are clearly set forth in holy writ.

A comparison of the themes of typical hymns with those of the Psalms will bring this fact into sharp relief. Hymns tend to wax effusive with emotional statements about the love of God. The Psalms, while they consistently profess the loving kindness of the Lord, lay much more stress upon his holy justice. While hymns stress themes of heavenly bliss and the hereafter, the Psalms consistently deal with the realities of the Lord's people walking before him as pilgrims and strangers in a wicked and perverse world. While hymns rarely speak about the wicked, the Psalms consistently talk about them and what God will do with them in this life and in the next. Hymn writers rarely deal with themes of the wicked persecuting the righteous and of their response to God in their afflictions. The Psalms are filled with cries of the Lord's people to him for deliverance from the wicked. And these petitions include not only a call for deliverance, but for complete vindication and justice. They ask God in his righteousness to judge the wicked according to his law. The Psalms abound with God's people beseeching the Lord for his mercies and blessings in this life as well as that which is to come. The Lord responds with many promises of temporal as well as eternal blessings for the righteous. In all these and many other issues the hymnists have destroyed the balance of Scripture and censored unpalatable truths out of the church's praise.

The Apostle Paul stated to the elders of the Ephesian Church at Miletus, "Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I *am* pure from the blood of all *men*. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." (Acts 20:26-27) Modern hymn writers can not say the same. Paul told Timothy, "...godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." (1 Tim. 4:8) Modern hymn writers cannot consistently profess to believe this truth. The Apostle John speaks of the departed martyrs of the Christian faith saying, "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:9-10) Yet all such prayers and thoughts are blotted out from modern hymnody. No one was more emphatic, and more explicit, in his teaching about the reality of hell and eternal punishment than the Lord Jesus Christ in his public ministry. Modern hymn writers have ignored his example. The sad truth is that a steady diet of singing hymns will give one a very distorted and unbalanced view of the Biblical message.

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Feminization of the Church

Men and women are not just differentiated in their physical bodies; they think differently as well. Although individuals vary greatly, in general it can be said that men are more logical and theologically speaking more doctrinal, while women are more in tune to relationships and sensitive to devotional issues. And just as for the physical well being of the race both men and women are necessary, so both of the aspects they tend to emphasize are important for the spiritual well being of the Lord's people. Churches need mutual edification, encouragement, and fellowship as well as sound doctrine. However, the Lord has definitely put the teaching ministry of the church in the hands of men. From the Old Testament prophets and its inspired authors, to the New Testament Apostles and authors, the leadership of the Church and its instruction in the faith has consistently been by divine appointment in the hands of men. God clearly does not want fuzzy devotional thinking and concerns about peace, unity, and good relationships to ever cloud the specific truths that are revealed in his word, or to compromise them on the altar of a pretended unity.

When Karl Marx proclaimed in the Communist manifesto the "abolition of the family" and the "equality of the sexes" he sparked a feminist revolution that has been plaguing the church for over a century.<sup>161</sup> Long before the church had to deal with the Equal Rights Amendment and other aspects of a feminist revolution to reverse God's creation order and institute a unisex society, feminism had been making quiet inroads into the church. Women slowly took over a part of the teaching ministry of the church. This began with the use of women teachers in the Sunday Schools and spread to the use of female missionaries for overseas mission fields. There was a definite double standard. Home missions and church plantings were invariably entrusted to male teaching elders. On the mission field another standard applied and the Pauline prohibition of women teaching in the church was set aside.

However, one of the most fruitful areas where women have exercised a teaching ministry in the church at large has been in the church's hymnody. The songs of praise that the church lifts up to God have multiple purposes. Primarily they offer up praise unto God. However, they also achieve other objectives. They edify the believers and build them up in the knowledge of the truth. They also have a teaching ministry; they are didactic, and in fact the Psalm titles differentiate the nature of the various Psalms and some are entitled a didactic or teaching Psalm. And as we have already noted, the teaching power of songs set to music is considerable. And for over a century this teaching power has progressively been more and more exercised by women. The result of this end run around a clear divine negative has been predictable. The results have been the progressive feminization of the church, the subversion of sound doctrine, and its replacement with a mushy sentimentalism.

While the church has been "zealously" guarding the front door into the teaching ministry, the back door has been left wide open. Candidates for the ministry generally have attended a Christian liberal arts college where they completed a four year curriculum majoring in Bible. After that they attended a seminary for three years with intensive studies in theology and the original languages of Scripture. Then they intern for a while in some practical ministry. Then, and only then, are they

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<sup>161</sup> The first Women's Rights conference held in America took place in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, the same year as the promulgation of the Communist Manifesto. The two were not unrelated.

carefully examined in their gifts, theology, and calling, and allowed to exercise a teaching ministry in the church. And even then the church has still frequently been plagued with weak and unworthy men in her ministry. However, by contrast, any woman with a poetical bent of mind, and more zeal than wisdom, can write hymns for the church. And as noted from the experience of church history, that sort of teaching ministry can be very effective and influential. Many a time this author has gone to a church professing the Reformed faith and heard a good Calvinistic sermon only to have the service concluded with some fundamentalist Arminian ditty. The effectiveness of these hymns is demonstrated by the fact that few seem to notice the contradiction, as the people conclude the service by confessing the Arminian sentiments that are echoing in their ears.

The following partial list of well known feminine hymnists and the titles of some of their hymns are suggestive of both the extent and the nature of the problem. These titles clearly suggest not the robust theology of the Psalms, but rather a sweet, sickly, mushy, sentimentalism.

Mary Bernstecher:	-He Will Answer Every Prayer
Mrs. Frank A. Breck:	-When Love Shines In
Harriet Buell:	-A Child of the King
Fanny J. Crosby:	-Safe in the Arms of Jesus
	-Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior
	-Jesus Is Calling
	-'Tis the Blessed Hour of Prayer
	-Tell Me the Story of Jesus
	-Blessed Assurance
Maine P. Ferguson:	-Blessed Quietness
Frances Havergal:	-I Gave My Life for Thee
Eliza E. Hewitt:	-Sunshine in the Soul
	-Beautiful Words of Jesus
	-When We All Get To Heaven
Mary D. James:	-All For Jesus
Leila Long:	-Jesus Is the Sweetest Name I Know
Leila N. Morris:	-Sweet Will of God
	-Sweeter as the Years Go By
Anna B. Russell:	-Wonderful, Wonderful Jesus
Eleanor A. Schroll:	-The Beautiful Garden of Prayer
Louisa M. R. Stead:	-'Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus
Harriet Beecher Stowe:	-Still, Still With Thee
Anna B. Warner:	-Jesus Loves Me
Susan Warner:	-Jesus Bids Us Shine

## Chapter Fifteen

### Children's Hymns

The feminization of the church's worship is particularly seen in hymns for children. These are especially silly, sentimental, and devoid of solid instruction in Scripture truth. The modern practice of writing special hymns for little children seems to have started with Martin Luther. He composed "*Away in a Manger*," included in the first Protestant hymnal in 1524, which, with its sentimental trivialities, set the tone for the genre. Watts continued this deplorable practice when he published his "*Divine and Moral Songs for Children*" in 1715. The following is a sample the trivial material that he composed for children...

Let dogs delight to bark and bite  
For God has made them so  
Let bears and lions growl and fight  
For 'tis their nature too.

But, children you should never let  
Such angry passions rise;  
Your little hands were never made  
To tear each other's eyes.<sup>162</sup>

Another one went as follows...

How proud we are! How fond to shew  
Our clothes, and call them rich and new!  
When the poor sheep and silk-worm wore  
That very clothing long before.<sup>163</sup>

Now, while it is all very nice to inculcate gentleness and humility into children, these are neither hymns nor "*Divine Songs*" as Watts claimed in his title. They are simply little moralisms and are divorced from the only source of moral authority that we have in this world, the will of God as revealed in Scripture. These samples represent his best work in children's hymnody. One could find even worse examples. Even such an ardent hymnist and Watts supporter as Phillips remarks, "It is easy to poke fun at Watts...by quoting his more absurd and repellent lines, which are specially abundant, unfortunately, in his *Hymns for Little Children*."<sup>164</sup>

Charles Wesley also contributed to this aspect of hymnody. One of his more popular children's hymns was entitled, "*Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild*."<sup>165</sup> The title is sufficient to apprise us of the fact that it is long on sentiment and short on faithfulness to Scripture truth. The archetypal children's hymn is the familiar,

Jesus loves me, this I know  
For the Bible tells me so;  
Little ones to him belong;  
They are weak, but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me,  
Yes, Jesus loves me,  
Yes, Jesus loves me,  
The Bible tells me so.

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<sup>162</sup> Fox, *English Hymns and Hymn Writers*, p. 21.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>164</sup> Phillips, *Hymnody Past and Present*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>165</sup> Cecelia Margaret Rudin, *Stories of Hymns We Love*, John Rudin & Co., 1944, p. 13.

While gushing with an unscriptural, indiscriminate divine love, this hymn shows its Baptist roots and Universalist tendencies. Now there may be a sense in which God does love all men in that the Scriptures teach that "love is the fulfilling of the law" and in that all men do receive perfect justice according to God's holy law. But, in no other sense does God love all men or all children indiscriminately. The following Scriptures clearly teach otherwise.

"Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." (Romans 9:13)

"The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou hatest all workers of iniquity." (Psalm 5:5)

"God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry *with the wicked* every day." (Psalm 7:11)

The Scriptural position is that God hates sinners and intends to put them in hell where the smoke of their torment will ascend for all eternity. The only sinners that a Holy God can love are his elect in Jesus Christ who are clothed with his righteousness and cleansed by his blood. This mushy unscriptural indiscriminate universal love destroys the concept of covenant children and the distinction between the church and the world. It may be based on a neo-Calvinist error of the late nineteenth century. Moderates in the PCUSA, seeking to soften its strict Calvinist stance, seen as a hindrance to ecumenism and church union, revised the church's doctrine to teach the salvation of all who die in infancy.

"Dare to be a Daniel" is another children's favorite. This militant little ditty praises Daniel and his friends instead of God; ascribes victory over giants to Daniel and his friends rather than to God, and urges the hearers and its singers to defy Satan and his hosts. All of this is contrary to Scripture. Even the Archangel Michael did not dare defy Satan but left him to God's rebuke. The Apostle Paul when recounting the heroes of the faith did not invoke hero worship and incite us to hail them, but rather emphasized the power of faith in their lives, a faith that elsewhere he reminds us, is not of ourselves, but is the gift of God.

Other well-known children's hymns include "I'll be a Sunbeam" and "Jewels For His Crown". Both are filled with unscriptural nonsense and serious errors such as the former, which teaches the Arminian doctrine that men have the ability of their own free wills to please God and live acceptably in his sight apart from dependence on divine grace.

Children used to be catechized and taught sound theology from their early youth. The New England Primer taught little children the rudiments of Christian doctrine as they learned their ABC's. It went something like this...

A is for Adam who sinned for us all

B for the blood that redeems from the fall

Now children are taught sentimental mush about Jesus that is frequently in error theologically. It would be far better to teach children to memorize Scripture and learn some of the simpler Psalms than to fill their heads with the typical sentimental nonsense of children's songs.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Idolatrous Hymns

#### **“The Old Rugged Cross”**

The extreme popularity of this hymn has a lot to do with the tune. The tune is extremely catchy, and much as one may detest this hymn it is hard to refrain from humming the tune once one has become familiar with it. The homosexuals have realized this and appreciating the power of music to advance their propaganda have appropriated the tune and set new words to it. As I recollect the refrain now goes...

“I’ll come out of the old closet door,  
And exchange it right now for gay pride.”

The point is that almost any message set to this tune will get a hearing. And the message that it carries is blatantly idolatrous and is reminiscent of the worst of Romish relic worship. A careful examination of its words reveals an idolatrous veneration of the physical cross. Statements such as, “And I love that old cross...” “That old rugged cross...has a wondrous attraction for me,” “In that old rugged cross...A wondrous beauty I see,” constitute sacrilegious veneration of a physical object. When Hezekiah discovered that the children of Israel were venerating the brazen serpent Moses used in the wilderness he wisely ground it into powder. Since the Reformers cleansed the sanctuaries of God’s church from all Romish relics, Protestants have relapsed and have again cluttered them with crosses. The next logical step in harmony with the sentiments of this hymn will be to start bowing to them, kissing them, and physically expressing their veneration. But the sentiments expressed in this hymn only get worse. It goes on to exhort, “To the old rugged cross I will ever be true, its shame and reproach gladly bear.” Here the cross blatantly usurps the place of Christ as all idolatrous relics tend to do.<sup>166</sup> It is to Christ that we are to be true, not to some piece of wood. It is Christ’s shame and reproach that we are called to bear, not that of some relic. The crowning piece of this idolatrous hymn is in the chorus where the worshipper exclaims, “I will cling to the old rugged cross and exchange it some day for a crown.” Salvation is now ascribed to the physical cross. By clinging to it men can achieve a crown of life. This is gross! It is a testimony to the power of music and the emotional impact of these hymns that rational Christians can be induced to express such sentiments in the public worship of God.

There are other idolatrous hymns in the pantheon of Protestant hymnody, but space forbids a detailed examination of them. A couple that come to mind are “O Day of Rest and Gladness” where a day is worshipped and “O Little Town of Bethlehem” which is an ode to a town!

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<sup>166</sup> A similar hymn, “Lead On, O King Eternal” has “Thy cross is lifted o’er us; We journey in its light.” Rather than acknowledging that Christ is the “light of the world” the cross has now become our light!

## Chapter Seventeen

### Christmas Carols

Hymns particularly composed to serve the needs of an ecclesiastical calendar were once exclusively the domain of Roman Catholicism. They wrote hymns to serve the liturgical needs of special holydays such as saints' days and feast days. They were emulated in this practice to some extent by the Anglican Church and by the Lutherans. And modern evangelicals, forsaking their Reformed heritage, have also adopted the practice. And woe betide the faithful pastor who seeks to separate them from their Christmas carols and their Easter hymns. These "Protestant" feasts require a liturgy and the church has amply supplied the need. And like their Roman Catholic prototypes they are sadly deficient in being worthy to offer up to God in praise. We will examine a few typical specimens.

#### It Came Upon the Midnight Clear

It is a Roman Catholic superstition that Christ was born at midnight and they celebrate it with a midnight mass. This practice is probably the origin of the term Christmas, that is Christ's Mass. This is derived from the following verse in the Apocrypha...

"For when peaceful stillness compassed everything and the night in its swift course was half spent, your all-powerful word from heaven's royal throne bounded, a fierce warrior, into the doomed land." (Wisdom 18:14-15)

The context for the above verses is actually the destruction of the firstborn of Egypt as the tenth plague inflicted on the land for Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to submit to God's decree, "Let my people go". This is so obvious that Rome must have had a pressing reason for corrupting this text to pretend to teach something that it clearly does not and cannot. This is not the only time that Rome has prostituted a verse from the Apocrypha to justify its idolatrous doctrines and practices. And the reason is generally not hard to find. It was usually to justify an accommodation with paganism and to justify the "Christianization" of some pagan belief or practice that was dear to the nominally converted multitudes that were being brought into the church by political means.

To understand what midnight on December 24<sup>th</sup> would have meant to a pagan in the ancient world we need to understand that their calendar was different. On our calendar the winter solstice (December 21), Christmas (December 25), and New Year's Day (January 1) are all distinct. On the pagan calendar they were all the same day. The year to them was not regulated by the calendar, but by the sun. A year, then as now, constituted a cycle of the sun in the heavens as viewed from earth. The year ended with the symbolic death of the sun when it was at its weakest the day before the winter solstice. The new year began with the resurrection of the sun on the day of the winter solstice when it began to grow stronger again and the days started growing longer. Midnight on December 24<sup>th</sup> was to them like midnight on New Year's Eve to us and their festivities probably outdid anything we do in Times Square, etc. It marked the rebirth of the sun god, the beginning of a new year, and the renewal of the earth as it is fertilized by the rays of the sun god and begins to cast off its winter barrenness and prepares to again bring forth life and prosperity.

Besides imbibing in the neo-pagan superstitions of Rome the hymn adds to the Scriptures all kinds of details such as having the angels of Bethlehem "playing harps of gold." And of course as previously noted, it was authored by a Unitarian. Is this what Christians want to use to celebrate the incarnation of the Savior?

#### We Three Kings of Orient Are



Along with the usual adding to the Scriptural accounts the imaginings of men, this carol has additional problems, the foremost of which is that the title itself contains two significant errors of fact. First of all, the Scriptures nowhere state that there were three wise men. That is an unwarranted assumption based on the fact that three separate gift items are recorded.

“Isn't it interesting that the gifts brought by the Magi (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) were the major gifts mentioned in the Greek translation of Isaiah 60:6 that foreign kings would bring to Israel's messianic ruler? The tradition that there were only three Magi stems from the assumption that each gave one gift to Christ. No one knows how many Magi there were who went to Bethlehem, but some traditions mention there were as many as twelve.”<sup>167</sup>

Secondly, they were wise men, not kings. The actual term is “Magi.”

“Who were these Magi? The Magi were originally one of the six tribes of the Medes...a priestly caste similar to the Levites among the Israelites. In their early history their occupation was to provide the kings of the Medes and Persians (also Babylonians) with divine information about daily affairs...Their role in interpreting divine matters is also mentioned in the Bible. The prophet Daniel in the time of king Nebuchadnezzar became the master of the magicians (master of the ‘Magi’)...and perhaps the fraternization of Daniel with the early Magi helps to explain why they expected a Jewish king to arrive near the end of the first century [B.C.].”<sup>168</sup>

Finally, the refrain of this hymn is an ode to a star and a prayer to that star for guidance. Again, is this what Christians want to employ as a hymn of thanksgiving for the coming of the Savior?

### Joy to the World

This carol, while seeking to celebrate the first advent, gets confused with the second and speaks of a present end to thorns and thistles and Christ replacing the curse with blessing. At the first advent Christ came to make an atonement for sin. At the second advent he will come to lift the curse, renew the earth, and bring in everlasting peace and righteousness. A more serious problem with this offering is that it is one of Watts' Psalm imitations and purports to be Psalm 98. A cursory comparison of the two will swiftly disabuse one of the notion that this is a viable conclusion, the two having virtually nothing in common.

One wonders why we should we take the words of an unbeliever,<sup>169</sup> who ultimately denied the deity of Christ to celebrate the very incarnation of that Deity? It would be far better to sing of that incarnation from the Psalms themselves. There are sufficient inspired Psalms that speak of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of our Lord. In fact Psalm 98 itself both contains a command to sing Psalms and a reference to the incarnation and coming of Christ.

He mindful of his grace and truth  
To Isr'els house has been  
The great salvation of our God  
All ends of earth have seen<sup>170</sup>  
O all the earth, sing to the LORD  
And make a joyful sound  
Lift up your voice aloud to Him;  
Sing Psalms! Let joy resound!<sup>171</sup>

### The First Noel

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<sup>167</sup> E. L. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Recalculated*, Foundation For Biblical Research, 1980, p. 165.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.

<sup>169</sup> “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.” (1 John 2:19).

<sup>170</sup> Compare with Luke 2:25-32

<sup>171</sup> Psalm 98:3-4 from the RPCNA Psalter, *The Book of Psalms for Singing*, Crown and Covenant Publications, 800 Wood St., Pittsburgh, PA 15221.

This carol speaks of “a cold winter’s night.” This is at best a supposition without Scriptural warrant. In all likelihood it is an error, as all the Scriptural and historical clues to the time of Christ’s birth point to a September or October date.<sup>172</sup> Another conjecture asserted as fact in this hymn is that the wise men came to Bethlehem. Actually it seems more likely that they came to Nazareth. Matthew’s account says that they left Jerusalem after consulting with Herod and the Sanhedrin and that the star led them to where the “young child” was, and states that they had “come into the house,” not a stable. Matthew makes no statement as to where this all took place. Luke states that after her days of purification, Mary with Joseph returned to Nazareth. This would have been 40 days after Christ’s birth per Leviticus 12:2-4. If the star appeared in the heavens as an astronomical sign of Christ’s birth as the Magi clearly state, they would have taken longer than 40 days to make the journey from Persia, a journey that would have been nigh impossible in the winter. Herod’s slaughter of the children of Bethlehem up to two years of age indicates that all this took place a significant time after Christ’s birth. By jumping to such questionable and possibly unscriptural conclusions these carols promote a mythological view of Christ’s birth that is not based on the inspired facts of the sacred record.

### **Silent Night! Holy Night!**

This, probably the most famous of all carols, was composed by a pair of Roman Catholics in 1818 in Oberndorf, Germany. The words were composed by a village priest and the tune by the church organist. It was composed to be sung that night in a Christmas Eve Midnight Mass.<sup>173</sup> We have already noted the neo-pagan nature of that practice. As usual, with typical poetic license, it cavalierly adds to the Scriptural account of Christ’s birth. Statements such as “*All is calm, all is bright*” have no basis in fact. Actually the city was thronged with travelers because of the census, so much so that there was no room for them at any of the city’s inns. And as for the city being bright, that too is a mere figment of the imagination for even the brightest star would not light up the city. And if the city had been all lit up supernaturally, although the Scriptures give not the slightest indication of this, then the mass of the people would have been in a state of excited amazement rather than simply calm. And of course the idea of the city being all lit up presupposes darkness and a night birth which, in spite of the title, is again mere speculation.<sup>174</sup>

The carol continues with typical Romish idolatry to say with respect to the Christ child, “Radiant beams from thy holy face.” This is reminiscent of idolatrous Romish icons that depict Christ and his parents with haloes. Actually, the Scriptures record that Christ’s visage was nothing of the sort. Isaiah tells us, “his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men:” and “he hath no form or comeliness; and when we shall see him there is no beauty that we should desire him.” (Isaiah 52:14; 53:2) Unlike Saul whose was tall and handsome and whose appeal was to the flesh, the true King of Israel was far from physically handsome or attractive. As part of his suffering and humiliation he came “in the likeness of sinful flesh.”

The hymn goes on to speak of Christ’s birth as “...the dawn of redeeming grace.” How can the fulfillment of millennia of covenants and promises be called a “dawn”? Redeeming grace dawned in the Garden of Eden when God promised a Redeemer who would crush the serpent’s head and deliver the race from the fall. Redeeming grace dawned in the Garden of Eden when Adam and

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<sup>172</sup> See the author’s article, “*The Birth of Christ*” available on line at [www.amprpress.com/articles.htm](http://www.amprpress.com/articles.htm)

<sup>173</sup> Paul Gallico, *The Story of Silent Night*, Crown Publishers, Inc., New York, 1967, pp. 11-12.

<sup>174</sup> We know neither the year, the day of the year, nor the time of day of Christ’s birth. While many scholars have attempted to determine the former two, I know of only one who has attempted to calculate the time of day of Christ’s birth. That is Ernest L. Martin. He calculates it as between 6:15 P.M. and 7:45 P.M. on September 11, 3 BC, based on an astrological interpretation of the astronomical data relating to the star of Bethlehem. Martin, *The Birth of Christ Revaluated*, pp. 143-147.

Eve did not die but were spared, and their nakedness was covered with the skins of animals whose blood was spilt to provide them a covering. In fact, the reason Christ is called the Lamb slain from the foundations of the world is because redeeming grace was planned in the councils of eternity past in the Trinitarian Covenant. Thousands of Old Testament saints saw and experienced that redeeming grace and rejoiced in it. Unfortunately, such theological confusion is not only typical, but seemingly acceptable in hymnody.

We could go on and on, such as to ask what does it mean when Christ is called “love’s pure light”? Are hymnists allowed to invent new titles and attributes of Jesus Christ? And what of a prayer to a star—“Wondrous star lend thy light”? And we are reviewing the edited, cleaned-up version. The original has such sentimental and irreverent mush as Mary calling the Christ child, “my darling, curly-headed boy.”<sup>175</sup>

In spite of its shortcomings and the negative reaction of early critics, the hymn became wildly popular. People loved it and it became one of the most ecumenical hymns ever written.

The only ones who loved what they had wrought, whole-heartedly and unreservedly were the people. And they numbered millions...this love was experienced by unbeliever as well as believer, Muslim, Buddhist and nature worshippers, red, white, yellow, brown and black. It crossed the religious lines of the Christian whites as well as the infidel and became a symbol of the one day of the year dedicated to peace on earth and good will to men.<sup>176</sup>

While it may be acceptable to all sorts of men the question that we have to consider is, is it acceptable to God when we come into his courts and offer it up to him in worship?

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 12

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 46

## Chapter Eighteen

### Inaccurate Hymns

Many hymns that seem sound are often more erroneous than heretical. They have allowed poetic license to carry their sentiments beyond the bounds of Scripture. This unlawful adding to God's word and a tolerance of sloppy and mistaken theology in the cause of stirring poetic flights of fancy are typical. A few examples will suffice to identify the breed.

#### **When the Roll is Called Up Yonder**

This is a popular fundamentalist hymn that has even been adopted by many Reformed churches (e.g., it is in the Trinity Hymnal). Yet it abounds in incidental errors. It states "On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise." There are at least two errors in this statement. One is that the Scriptures nowhere teach that Christ's return will be on a morning. The Scriptures say that no man knows the day or the hour. Some have inferred from the parable of the wise and foolish virgins that it might be at midnight, but even that is an unwarranted inference. We simply don't know, but the words sound good and millions have enthusiastically sung them. Secondly, we have it on absolute Biblical authority that it will not be cloudless. Repeatedly the Scriptures associate clouds with the second advent of Jesus Christ. If a minister were to preach and teach such things, he would probably be confronted by members of his congregation and possibly be corrected by his presbytery, but in a hymn it seems one can get away with all kinds of things. The hymn abounds in other inconsistencies. It purports to take place at the return of Christ and the contemporaneous resurrection of the dead saints and translation of the living ones. It then says "When his chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies." But at that time Christ is returning to lift the curse, renew the creation, bring in everlasting righteousness, and establish that glorious kingdom that will have no end. That is not the time for the saints to enter the intermediate state in heaven where the disembodied spirits of the saints await the resurrection and the consummation of all things. And speaking of things eschatological, although these are controversial issues on which the Lord's people remain divided, where in Scripture do we hear of a general roll call of the saints in heaven at the time of Christ's return. The whole hymn is based on a fictitious event. And all of this is to say nothing of the fact that it is not a hymn, that is it does not consist of praise to God, but chiefly consists of men expressing their determination "to be there" at some mythical roll call in the sky. As usual, the truth is sacrificed to the emotional experience of an Arminian determination to be there in that glorious hour.

#### **And Can It Be That I Should Gain**

The refrain of this well-liked hymn by Charles Wesley goes, "Amazing love! How can it be That Thou my God shouldst die for me." This statement contains a most serious error. Did Christ die for sinners? Absolutely! Is Jesus God? Assuredly! Did God die for sinners? Absolutely not! God is immutable, eternal and cannot die. Christ was both God and man, and it is his human nature that suffered death.<sup>177</sup> Is this some inconsequential abstract truth? Absolutely not. The orthodox fought these battles in the great Christological controversies of the early church. They fought and bled for

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<sup>177</sup> The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin, being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man. WCOF, Ch. 8, Sect. II.

these truths and were willing to go to the stake for them. Great issues were at stake. If there could be conversion and confusion between the two natures of Christ, then the way was open for the emperors to claim divinity. If God could become man and man become God, then orthodoxy was imperiled and the pagan doctrine of ancient Rome and the divinization of men was possible. Under great pressure and threats of persecution the orthodox maintained their stand on the ancient creeds. Yet these foundational truths of orthodox Christianity are cavalierly cast aside in the cause of enhancing the emotional impact of a hymn.<sup>178</sup> Wesley goes on to say that Christ “Emptied himself of all but love.”<sup>179</sup> This too is a serious error. As God, Christ was immutable and retained all the attributes of divinity including sovereignty, omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, etc., and not just love. These are serious Christological errors and the latter error has been argued by Unitarians to deny the deity of Christ (i.e., If Christ did not possess all the attributes of deity then he wasn’t God). This however means nothing in the face of the poetic license of hymnists. There are additional errors in this hymn, but enough is enough.

In the preface to one of their hymnals John Wesley defends the poetic effusions of his brother saying,

“In these hymns there is no doggerel; no botches; nothing put in to patch up the rhyme; no feeble expletives. Here is nothing turgid or bombast on the one hand or low and creeping on the other. Here are no cant expressions; no words without meaning...Here are, allow me to say, both the purity, the strength and the elegance of the English language.”<sup>180</sup>

While all that may be true, Wesley as usual is totally riveted on technical merit. For what there is, while linguistically excellent, contains large doses of significant theological error. This is typical of many uninspired hymns, which, if they are not outright heretical, are so sloppy in their theology that they are filled with gross inaccuracies and indiscriminately add to God’s word.

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<sup>178</sup> In another verse from one of Wesley’s hymns we have, “Our God contracted to a span, Incomprehensively made man.” This too is a heretical view of the incarnation. God did not contract into a man and God did not become man.

<sup>179</sup> This is probably based on a misinterpretation of Philippians 2:5-7, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.”

<sup>180</sup> Pollard, *English Hymns*, p. 27.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Conclusion

The Apostle Paul warned almost 2000 years ago that “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine.” One of the means that Satan has used to fulfil that prophecy is to corrupt the theology of the church with the use of uninspired hymns. Even conservative Christians, even those who profess allegiance to the Reformed faith and give assent to the Westminster standards, are so subverted by the theology of the hymns that they have been singing for generations that they will no longer endure the sound theology of the Psalms. This is only one of the reasons why hymns and Psalms cannot, and historically never have, coexisted.

Hymnody always conforms to the spirit of the age. Every wave of hymnody was launched because its architects were discontent with the existent hymnody (which frequently was Psalmody). They all therefore had a theological axe to grind and molded hymnody to suit their purposes. From the Arians and the Gnostics who used their hymnody to propagandize the views of their sects, to Watts’ dispensational rejection of the Psalms, to Roman Catholics and Tractarians who wrote hymns to support the liturgical needs of their feasts and fasts, etc., to the Methodists and the Fundamentalists who tailored their hymnody to suit the needs of Arminian evangelism, hymnody has always been prostituted to serve the theological climate of the hour. The one constant thing about hymnody is its adaptability to the spirit of, to the whims and follies of, any and every age.

Hymnody, by its very nature, is plastic and ever changing. It will always represent the spirit of the age. The vast number of over 400,000 English hymns composed since the Reformation and the countless number of hymnals<sup>181</sup> issued bear testimony to that fact. As it perpetually conforms to present realities, it is inherently useless to protect the church from error and theological decline. The trends we have noted for the past two millennia are hardly going to be reversed in our day. Take the following example, now already over thirty years old.

In an excerpt entitled "Now Sounds" Pastor William E. Ashbrook complains of a contemporary hymnal issued in the late 1960's.

“This writer, nevertheless, could scarcely believe when he read an ad for a new psychedelic song book, entitled ‘*Now Sounds*,’ authored by John E. Walvoord, son of the president of Dallas; Don Wyrzten, son of Jack Wyrzten of Word of Life; and David MacCorkle, son of the president of Philadelphia College of the Bible. Each of these young men is a graduate of Dallas, two of them are now teaching in the Seminary. Foreword of commendation for this ‘far out’ production is written by Ralph Carmichael. Lovers of gospel music will find it hard to believe that such a weird collection of discordant and cacophonous sound would be offered to the public in the name of a gospel witness. Here is just one sample, among others of like kind, entitled BREAD, words by Walvoord, music by Wyrzten.

#### BREAD

Ever feel hungry, ever feel empty  
Take a look inside - Get off the joy ride  
You only need some bread, You only need some bread.  
Bread, bread, that's what the man said.  
Where you gonna get the bread  
When you're always in the red?

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<sup>181</sup> The Church of England alone used 220 different hymn-books between 1800 and 1880. See Pollard, *English Hymns*, p. 41.

What did it mean when He said, we only needed bread?

To make matters worse, in our judgment, this horrendous Beatle-like number is concluded with these words of the last verse;

People still today - Look the other way  
But the broken bread - Came when His blood was shed  
It was the way He said - It was the way He said.  
Bread, bread, that's what the man said  
Bread, bread, that's what the man said  
He's the one that is the bread  
Even when we're in the red  
That's what He meant when He said  
'I am the bread.'

John E. Walvoord, author of the above words now teaches at Dallas Seminary and Prof. Don Wyrzten, composer of the music, has recently been added to the musical faculty there. Perhaps the young men have not realized it, but the very title they used, *Now Sounds*, smacks of Existential philosophy, for in such a context *Now* is the word of the Existentialists.<sup>182</sup>

Pastor Brian Schwertley shows the futility of Ashbrook's protest. Having accepted uninspired hymnody reflecting the spirit of the age, it is useless to complain as the spirit of the age inexorably reworks present hymnody.

"Many older more conservative believers are attempting to stem the tide against this new form of worship. They recognize that it is worship light; that it is theological pabulum. They want to return to Hart, Toplady, or Newton. They want to get rid of the guitars and drums and return to the piano and organ. But as long as they are unwilling to obey the regulative principle of worship and return to exclusive Psalmody they will be steam-rollered by new worship gimmicks that appeal to the flesh."<sup>183</sup>

Ultimately, one has to ask where all this is taking the church. Since the days of the Gnostics, hymnody has never been a static affair. And as one reviews the current state of hymnody and its progressive departures from a Biblical theology, one has to look at the larger picture. Hymnody is part of the church's worship. If it is being corrupted, what of the remainder of the church's worship? If the Psalms, representing the divinely appointed and inspired hymnbook of the church, can be cast out to be replaced by mere human innovations, is any part of the church's worship safe? The answer is clearly not. As noted in the introduction, the ordinary elements of religious worship are the reading of the Scriptures, the preaching of the word of God, prayer, and the singing of praise, as well as participating in the sacraments. Are these also being affected as we note the degeneration of God's public praise? The answer this time is clearly yes!

As not just the church's praise, but its worship in general, departs from traditional and Biblical norms there is a euphemism for what is replacing it. It is called contemporary worship.<sup>184</sup> Such services, once the exclusive domain of liberal or charismatic churches, are now commonplace in evangelical and even Reformed churches. In such services all the elements of worship, as Scripturally prescribed, are affected. Frequently they are totally eliminated. In such services not only the Psalms, but the reading and the preaching of God's word are conspicuous by their absence. And not only the content, but the practice of God's praise is radically changed. The new system of praise is frequently performed by musicians and choirs before a passive audience. The people no longer gather to publicly participate in God's worship. They now gather to be

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<sup>182</sup> William E. Ashbrook, *Evangelicalism, The New Neutralism*, 1970, pp. 62-63.

<sup>183</sup> Schwertley, *Exclusive Psalmody, A Biblical Defense*, p. 46

<sup>184</sup> For an extensive analysis of contemporary Christian music, its philosophy, ecumenism, and doctrinal themes, as well as its worldliness and origins, etc. see *Contemporary Christian Music Under the Spotlight* by David W. Cloud, Way of Life Literature, 1998.

entertained by what purports to be worship, but is actually entertainment, a concert of “sacred” music. And having cast off all Biblical restraints, there are no clearly defined boundaries for “contemporary worship.” The only criterion is that it tickle enough ears and is popular enough to fill the pews. As its power to motivate attendance wanes, the envelope can be expanded to include rock bands and liturgical dance. Since the true motive of coming to worship God in Spirit and in truth has long been lost sight of, it is not hard to predict where this appeal to the flesh will ultimately lead. The day is coming and even now is when this “worship” will degenerate from hand clapping and swaying all the way to the orgiastic dancing to a rock beat that lures the ungodly to the bars, discos and rock concerts of the land. Then truly we can emblazon, “ichabod,” the glory is departed, over that holy and pure worship of himself that God prescribes in his word.

Apologists for hymnody rarely acknowledge, or even realize, that they are out to destroy Psalmody and drive it from the sanctuary. Historical reality however dictates that this is inevitably the result of their labors. Hymns are like weeds. If you tolerate a few of them in your garden they will inexorably take it over. Hymns, like weeds, multiply without constraint until they have choked out all the competition. The testimony of church history is that the two cannot coexist. Hymnody will always choke out Psalmody and drive it into virtual extinction. Those who mock the interpretation that Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 represent “Psalms, Psalms, and Psalms”<sup>185</sup> inevitably wind up singing “hymns, hymns, and hymns.”

The church needs to decide if she wants quality or quantity, if she wants perfection or will tolerate error, if she wants divine inspiration or human flights of fancy. It is estimated that since the Reformation over 400,000 English hymns have been written.<sup>186</sup> Charles Wesley alone is estimated to have written about 6,500. Fanny Crosby wrote over 8,000.<sup>187</sup> Most of these hymns were dashed off in a matter of minutes.<sup>188</sup> Watts’ contribution of some six hundred hymns almost pales into insignificance compared to his successors. The comparison that is needful to make is that there are only 150 Psalms, composed in a span of several centuries. David, the “Lord’s anointed” and the “sweet Psalmist of Israel,” only wrote about half of that number. If God had placed the emphasis on numbers that our hymnists do, the Scriptures would have contained many hundreds more of inspired Psalms and hymns. In God’s mind, 150 are obviously sufficient. And this is verified by any reality check of our hymnals. Most churches, although they may have as many as five or six hundred selections in their hymnbooks, generally restrict themselves in their services to about a hundred or so favorites.

Hymns are ecumenical. Rarely are they written anymore to explicitly teach the doctrines of the church. Rather they are composed so as to appeal to a broad audience. Doctrine is thus watered down and the lowest common denominator prevails. Sentiment prevails over explicitly stated truth and emotions are evoked that are common not only to all professing Christians, but frequently to unbelievers as well.<sup>189</sup>

“The hymn-books of the various English denominations show representatives of the different communions side by side, Anglican and Methodist, Baptist and Congregationalist,

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<sup>185</sup> In the book of Psalms the titles to the various compositions style them sometimes as a psalm, or as a hymn, or as a song. Calvinists have thus historically interpreted the Biblical phrase “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” as referring exclusively to the contents of the Psalter.

<sup>186</sup> Pollard, *English Hymns*, p. 7.

<sup>187</sup> Rudin, *Stories of Hymns We Love*, p. 61. The author states of Fanny Crosby, “Often the lines came to her as fast as they could be dictated.”

<sup>188</sup> She composed as many as seven in one day! See Sutherland, *Famous Hymns of the World*, p. 231.

<sup>189</sup> For instance it has been said of the mystic Unitarian hymn, “Nearer My God to Thee” that “This is one of the few hymns acceptable to all faiths, Protestant, Catholic, and Jew a like. It has been translated into nearly every tongue.” See Rudin, *Stories of Hymns We Love*, p. 61..



even Roman Catholic and Unitarian. Because the good hymn is so wide in its appeal, it can speak also to those who are not Christians, for the scope of the good hymn is broadly human, speaking to those emotions, humilities and aspirations which are found in all men everywhere."<sup>190</sup>

What is forgotten, as hymns are deliberately tailored to appeal to as broad a range of humanity as possible, is that the purpose of hymns is not to please men, but to please God. After all, they are being offered up in praise to God as part of his worship. When the tickling of human ears takes precedence over rendering God that worship that he delights in, then indeed we have reached a low point in the state of the church.

Ultimately, the end does not justify the means. No one can deny that God has been pleased to use the influence of hymns for good in the lives of many of his children. If God only blessed the work of perfect ministers, and only prospered the ministries of perfect churches, where would we be? In his mercy God is pleased to use the even the sinful efforts of weak men to accomplish his holy will. But God's mercy and forbearance should never be used to justify our sins and shortcomings. The path of obedience is the one that the Lord most delights to bless. And when he hears the strains of a corrupt hymnody rising up to him, should he not react as he did to the offering of Cain, and the "strange fire" of Adab and Abihu? Should he not say to us today as he said to Israel ages ago through the mouth of his servant Isaiah, "When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand?" (Isaiah 1:12) It is not for nothing that the Scriptures command us, "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil."

Some issues in theology can be evaded, others cannot. Issues of worship are in the latter category. Since all men are commanded to worship God, the practical realities of how to conduct that worship are ever before us. The Scriptures command us to worship the true God and they teach that that worship which is commanded is ordained by God and is not to be based on the whims and fancies of mere men. And God has ordained the very elements of worship, and one of those elements is the singing of his praise. And this particular element of worship is referred to in scripture as "the sacrifice of praise." The sacrifices of the Old Covenant were to be perfect, a lamb without spot or blemish. The true sacrifice of the New Covenant was the spotless, sinless Lamb of God, "holy, harmless and undefiled, and separate from sinners." Therefore what should our "sacrifice of praise" consist of? Should it be the corrupt, fallible, erroneous words of men, the spotted and blemished poetic imaginings of human minds, or should it consist of the perfect Spirit breathed songs of the divinely instituted Psalter? To even ask this question should be to answer it. The Bible goes on to say that our praises are the "fruit of our lips." What is that acceptable fruit that we should offer him in his sanctuary? Should it be the words of infidels and heretics or the acceptable words of the Spirit of truth that with inspired precision set forth his praises? It is a sad day in Zion when the church gives an uncertain sound on that question!

I am under no illusions that any critique of hymnody is likely to get a favorable hearing, much less find significant acceptance, in our day. Hymns, like heroin and cocaine, are extremely addictive. Evangelical Christians are addicted to the emotional experience of singing their favorite hymns and behave like bears "robbed of their whelps" when they are separated from them. A faithful pastor is more likely to be mauled than praised in his efforts to restore the "Songs of Zion" to their rightful place. Nonetheless, it remains a duty, and duty, not success, is the watchword in our service for Christ. Any reformation of the church has to start with a reformation of its worship, for the worship of the true God is the very essence of her existence. And any reformation of her worship has to include a reformation of her praise. And that necessarily involves the rejection and the casting out of a corrupt and offensive hymnody, tainted with error and plagued with heresy,

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<sup>190</sup> Pollard, *English Hymns*, p. 8.

and an embracing of those praises that God, in his sovereign wisdom and gracious mercy, has ordained his church to offer him. That is what is acceptable to him and any reformation that falls short of that mark is a failure and an exercise in humanism. May God graciously grant us the zeal for his worship to labor to that end.