

11.13.94

Dear Friends -

Michael tells me that you'd like to hear my feelings about the New Century Hymnal.

I am delighted with the wide selection of hymns, the inclusion of many international and multicultural hymns, and the desire to include old favorites. The selections I had seen before last weekend were excellent - new hymns, international in tone, and very singable.

Last weekend I went to a workshop promoting the hymnal, and it really changed my mind. I take issue with the extent to which words were altered.

Personally, I feel very strongly that certain hymn texts should be changed - or, at least, given in original and altered forms in a modern hymnal. I feel that sexism + racism should be addressed; I also feel that language should be inclusive.

HOWEVER! I feel that it's undesirable + unreasonable to change any text which doesn't really need it. I also think it's okay to refer to Jesus, whom we all understand to have been male, as

"he" and "him". I also don't think it's necessary to reduce every hymn to a sixth grade ~~and~~ vocabulary. I understand that there have been many requests from youth ministries and from churches for which English may be a second language for easier ~~and~~ + more modern texts. Fine, but does every hymn in a 650-hymn hymnal have to fit those criteria? ~~at least~~ How about two-thirds? And why not include altered texts (or the originals, as the case might be) as alternate verses on a facing page, for some of those particularly beloved hymns? Also, perhaps it's my own Congregational heritage, but I feel strongly that beloved hymns are tools for teaching. I remember what a thrill of understanding I had when it was explained to me that "thou" is an intimate form, one we have mostly dropped from English, but can still use with the most intimate thing we know - God, our heavenly father, God within us, Jesus, lover of our souls. Must we drop it from every single hymn? Must we drop every word that's not in absolutely everyday usage?

One hymn which particularly distresses me is "Come thou fount of every

blessing" ("Come, O Saviour" in the New Century).

I notice that the first verse is largely unchanged. The second verse, as I recall it, is traditionally:

Here I plant my ~~ebenezer~~
Hither by thy help I'm come,
And I hope, by thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.
Jesus ^{sought} ~~found~~ me when a stranger
Wandering from the fold of God.
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed his precious blood.

The new version:

Here I pause in my sojourning
Giving thanks for having come,
Come to trust, at every turning,
God will guide me safely home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God,
Came to rescue me from danger,
Precious presence, precious blood.

Even if they felt they had to change the
"thee" and "thou", WHY change anything else?

"Ebenezer" has never been a household word, but
it's in any unabridged dictionary - essentially,
"a memorial to thank God for help or deliverance".

I thought that was pretty neat when I learned it, as a child. Look at some of the other alterations - they change the meaning. "Hope" has become "trust" - a good sentiment, but a different one. And that's the point of the last line in the new version? It's been made into a nonsequiter.

3rd verse:

Old:

O, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the ~~love~~^{God} I love.
Here's my heart - oh, take + seal it,
Seal it for thy courts above.

New:

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I am drawn anew!
Let that grace now, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to you.
Prone to wander, I can feel it,
Wander from the love I've known;
Here's my heart, oh, take and seal it,
Seal it for your very own.

Okay, change the "thee" + "thou" if you must. Change "Lord" to "God" - ~~because~~ though, as I mentioned above, it should be okay to call Jesus "Lord". I won't quibble about that. Hard to say which of the trinity that third verse is addressed to, anyway. But why the changes in lines 6 + 8? The meaning is changed from leaving the "God I love" to leaving God's love - very different. And "seal it for your very own"? Are Walter + I the only ones who think that last line is almost too icky to sing?

Well, there are other similar objections with other hymns. I really feel that there is room in any modern hymnal for traditional texts, with only the absolutely necessary changes required ~~by~~ to ~~get rid~~ get rid of racism + sexism. This hymnal apparently alters all "old-fashioned" texts as well. Why did they ask for favorite hymns, only to say, "Oops, nobody will like these the way they are"? I thought the point was that people do like them the way they are.

Yes, it also upsets me that these old texts, because of their extensive alterations, will be

back under copyright in the New Century. I doubt that a new copyright would be issued for changing "thee" to "you" and "son" to "child" and "Him" to "God". Am I being way too cynical, or might copyright have been an incentive to change a critical mass of words in certain hymns?

Another problem, which I will be addressing to the appropriate person, is misattribution. One hymn in the sampler is ~~to~~ attributed to the Scottish psalter, 1650. You'll find that psalter version (of ps. 23) in the Red UCC hymnal as "The Lord's my Shepherd". Frankly, the ¹⁶⁵⁰ Scottish psalter version of ps. 23 is lousy. It's awkward. The ^{new} adaptation of ps. 23 given in the sampler is fine; but to attribute it to the Scottish psalter with adaptations is just plain wrong. It's an entirely new adaptation; it has one phrase in common with the Scottish psalter; it doesn't even use the same pattern. To add a historical note that this Scottish psalter ps. 23 is one of the most popular texts in English Hymnody is almost insulting. It should be attributed entirely to the new poet, perhaps "loosely based on the Scottish psalter".

All this said, there is a lot to like about the New Century. The new hymns are fine. The variety is admirable. The attention to church year and biblical texts is good. Would it be a good and useful supplement to the Pilgrim Hymnal? Yes - but it could be so much better! Will it be a viable replacement? In my opinion, no. Might there be better companions to the Pilgrim Hymnal? There might. Most of the arguments I've heard for ignoring the New Century's problems and buying it have to do with denominational solidarity. Ought a church to forgo examining the hymnal closely for appropriateness to the specific congregation's needs, just for the sake of denominational solidarity? Not in my opinion. Look at the red UCC hymnal. What a total waste!

As head of my church's worship committee, I expect to recommend buying the New Century for the choir. The special hymns will be very useful there. Once we have it in hand, we may decide to purchase it as a supplement to the old E+R hymnal and a replacement to the red UCC hymnal, our current supplement. I do not feel that the early order discounts are a sufficient prod to buy them ^{unseen} (except for the sampler).

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I realize I've done some ranting, but
I feel very, very strongly about hymnody.
If you'd like to contact me to question me
further, feel free.

Good luck with your decision. It ought
not to be an easy one; purchasing a new
hymnal is a step not to be taken lightly or
in haste,

With lots of love,

Marian

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Dear Friends -

11-13-94

I hesitated to write this letter, as I realize that it was Marian's opinion you were specifically interested in. Marian is a fairly serious scholar of hymnody, and so in some ways is in a better position to comment than I am. However, she encouraged me to convey my less scholarly opinions.

I essentially share Marian's viewpoint, though I more vehemently dislike the new hymnal. For me, singing is a central part of worship, and the most emotional part of the service. Many traditional hymns have come to be very significant to me. Some of them do need to be changed, to reduce sexist language, especially when it refers to us. (e.g. "How happy every child of grace who feels his sins forgiven.") However, this hymnal goes far beyond these needed changes.

Many of the problems are brought on by the editors' insistence on eliminating "thee" and "thou". This policy forces them to alter the poetry greatly, usually resulting in a much more namby-pamby version. As an example, I'll take one of the hymns Marian discusses, the 3rd verse of ~~"How great a debt"~~ "Come thou fount of every blessing"

The original has the first two lines:

O, to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!

The new version:

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I am drawn anew!

This makes no sense! It seems grammatically incorrect! Presumably, I'm drawn to grace, but then what's the deal with "how great a debtor"?!!? The original version is much clearer.

The reason the editors made this change was to avoid "thee" in line 4. By changing "thee" to "you", they were forced to mangle lines 1 and 2 so that the end of line 2 would rhyme with "you". Is it rational to destroy the meaning of a verse merely to avoid an old-fashioned word whose meaning is known by all?

I agree that new hymns should probably use the more common "you", but cannot agree that "thee" and "thou" should be eliminated from old hymns.

Marian may be satisfied with the new version of "The Lord's my shepherd" (except for the attribution to the Scottish Psalter), but I'm not.

Psalms 23 (RSV)

Scottish Psalter

New Version

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

The Lord's my shepherd,
I'll not want.

God is my shepherd,
I'll not want.

He makes me lie down
in green pastures

He makes me down to lie
in pastures green

I feed in pastures green

He leads me beside
still waters.

He leadeth me the
quiet waters by.

[I prefer the image of the sheep being cured for,
not as eating grass.]
God grants me rest and bread
me drink from waters calm and clean.

Through daily tasks I'm blessed and
led by One I have not seen.

My soul ~~he~~ doth restore again;

Restored to life each morning new,
I rise up from the dust

He restores my soul.

He leads me in the paths
of righteousness for his
name's sake.

And me to walk doth make
within the paths of righteousness,
even for his own name's sake.

to follow God whose presence gives me
confidence and trust

I praise the name of God today;
in God I put my trust.

Psalm 23 (RSV)

Scottish Psalter

New Version

(both versions, scottish psalter and new version, are fine here)

Yee then I walk ...

Thou preparast a table before
me in the presence of my
enemies

Thou anointest my head with oil,
my cup overflows.

My table thou hast furnished
in presence of my foes

thou dost ~~anoint~~ with oil anoint,
My head ~~anointed~~
And my cup overflows

No enemy can overcome,
no power on earth defeat

the ones anointed by God's grace,
and fed with manna sweet.
My cup is filled and overflows
as I my savior ~~meet~~. greet.

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I agree that the poetry in the Scottish psalter isn't great, but at least it conveys the same meaning as the Psalm. I suppose the main problem here is the desire to avoid referring to God as "he". Well, the psalmist does, and this hymn is based on the psalm. Perhaps in other hymns we might try to avoid using ~~the~~ "he" for god, but not in those closely based on scripture. [Personally, I can see no problem in referring to God as "He". Jesus ~~the Father~~ did. Are we to rewrite the Lord's Prayer?!? Again, perhaps new hymns should avoid "he", but we should not rewrite old ones to eliminate it.]

Some hymns have been changed for no apparent reason. Take, for example, "For all the saints", which I can seldom sing all the way through without getting choked up with emotion.

Verse 4:

Old:

O blest communion, fellowship divine!

New:

Ringed by this cloud of witnesses divine

Why make this change? It seems like they're making changes just for the sake of change.

To conclude, the ^{frivolous} changes made to the words of old hymns have robbed them of much of their emotional impact. Surely, most members of the congregation will be disgusted by the changes. Again, some changes were needed, but the editors were much too heavy-handed.

~~Walter~~

I am quite disappointed in the new hymnal. I had hoped that it would allow many congregations to use just one hymnal. (Every ~~one~~ UCC congregation I've been to uses two.) Perhaps the New Century Hymnal can replace the Red UCC hymnal, but we'll still need an older hymnal for the traditional hymns. This is unfortunate since, aside from the inconvenience, we'll be stuck with the old sexist words.

How frustrating!

Good Luck with your decision.

— Walter

The New Century Hymnal, Pros and Cons

Addendum, D. W. Ross, 12/17/94

Further Examples

“When morning Gilds the Skies”, German anon. 1828, transl. E. Caswell, 1854, alt., P35, N21

1. When morning gilds the skies,
My heart awaking cries,
May Jesus Christ be praised!
Alike at work and prayer,
To Jesus I repair;
May Jesus Christ be praised!

When morning gilds the skies,
my heart awaking cries,
may Jesus Christ be praised!
Alike at work and prayer,
one purpose I declare:
may Jesus Christ be praised!

2. The night becomes as day,
When from the heart we say,
May Jesus Christ be praised!
The powers of darkness fear,
When this sweet chant they hear,
May Jesus Christ be praised!

New strength comes night or day,
when from the heart we say,
may Jesus Christ be praised!
Let sin and evil fear,
when this sweet chant they hear,
may Jesus Christ be praised!

“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”, attr. to D. Thrupp, 1779-1847, P327, N24

- 1 Savior like a shepherd lead us
Much we need thy tender care;
In thy pleasant pastures feed us,
For our use thy folds prepare.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus,
Thou hast bought us, thine we are.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus,
Thou hast bought us, thine we are.

Savior like a shepherd lead us
much we need your tender care;
in your pleasant pastures feed us,
for our use your folds prepare.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus,
you have bought us, yours we are.
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus,
you have bought us, yours we are.

3. Early let us seek thy favor;
Early let us do thy will;
Blessed Lord and only Savior,
With thy love our bosoms fill
Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus
Thou hast loved us, love us still.
Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus
Thou hast loved us, love us still.

Let us always seek your favor;
Let us always do your will;
Jesus Christ our only Savior,
With your love our spirits fill
Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus
You have loved us, love us still.
Blessed Jesus, Blessed Jesus
You have loved us, love us still.

OK, remove the archaisms, but what's wrong with “bosoms”? (DWR)

“Now in the Days of Youth”, W. J. Mathans, 1913, P490, N34

1. Now in the days of youth,
When life flows fresh and free,
Thou Lord of all our hearts and lives
We give ourselves to thee;
Our fervent gift receive,
And fit us to fulfill,
Through all our days, in all our ways,
Our heavenly fathers will.

2. Teach us wher-'ere we live,
To act as in thy sight
And do what thou wouldst have us do
With radiant delight,
Not choosing what is great,
Nor spurning what is small,
But take as from thy hands our tasks
And glorify them all.

3. Teach us to love the true,
The beautiful and pure,
And let us not for one short hour
An evil thought endure;
But give us grace to stand
Decided brave and strong
The lovers of all holy things,
The foes of all things wrong.

4. Spirit of Christ, do thou
Our first bright days inspire,
That we may live the life of love
And loftiest desire;
And be by thee prepared,
For larger years to come,
And for the life ineffable,
Within the Father's home.

Now in the days of youth,
when life is filled with choice,
when hope and doubt touch every hour,
when all thoughts find a voice,
We turn O God to you,
For guidance and for grace,
In all our days, in all our ways,
help us to seek your face.

Teach us to use our lives
with purpose and with power
for visions of a better world
and for decisions hour;
To choose the way of life
reject the way of death
until the radiant force of God
fills mind and strength and breath.

Teach us to love in truth,
to give and to receive,
with joyful and with open hearts
with all that we believe;
To seek another's good
to honor what is right
to let our will and our desire
be held in holy light.

Teacher, creator, God,
enfold us in your arms,
be with us as we try our wings,
and keep us safe from harm;
All good and perfect gifts
come to us from your hand.
O help us use them carefully
and live by loves command.

There is not much left of this one! The attribution of this new poem might even be questionable.
(DWR)

"We Would Be Building," P. E. Dietz, 1935, P494, N50

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| 1. ... | ... |
| We would be building, Master let thy plan | We would be building, <u>Architect Divine</u> , |
| Reveal the life that God would give to man. | reveal the <u>shape of life in your design</u> . |
| 2. ... | ... |
| Ribbed with the steel | ribbed with <u>fine</u> steel |
| that time and change doth mock | <u>both</u> time and change <u>to</u> mock |
| The unfailing purpose of our noblest creed. | the unfailing purpose of our noblest creed. |
| Teach us to build; O Master lend us sight | Teach us to build; O <u>Maker</u> lend us sight |
| To see the towers gleaming in the light. | to see the towers gleaming in the light. |

Remarks:

This completes the survey of the sampler hymns that we have either, in our current hymnal or in our "Pink pamphlet." *Not a single one remains unscathed!*

I hate to think what they have done to other favorites like "Joyful, Joyful, we adore thee," Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," "We gather together," "All Creatures of our God and King," "What Child is This?" "The first Noel," "Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult," and "We are climbing Jacob's Ladder, Soldiers of the Cross," to pick a few at random.

All in all, I consider this work to be an assault on my cultural heritage, and I will have a very hard time accepting it. DWR.