

The Study and Selection of Hymns

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I have said a few words to you on a number of occasions, about the importance of studying hymns and the proper selection of hymns to suit occasions. Sometimes an improper selection of a hymn leads to very deplorable results. I was informed of one instance in which, on a funeral occasion, the selection of the hymns being left to the young man who led the singing. He selected one that started right, but just as the pallbearers started off with the corpse they sang, "Believing we rejoice to see the curse remove." That service ended with more tittering than tears.

In order that you may make appropriate selections you must know your hymn- book, not only the first stanza of every hymn that is worth singing, but the whole of it. You must know all those worth singing if you would make your selections wisely. The elements of a good hymn may be stated thus:

First, and most important of all, its sentiments must be scriptural. There is a hymn in one of our church hymnals which has been sung a great deal, the second stanza of which confidently looks forward to the time when that old boatman familiar in Greek mythology who used to row people across the river Styx, will safely row the Christians across the river of death. Now that is heathenish, but it is in a Christian hymn book. First, then, let me say again, and emphasize it, See to it that the sentiments of every hymn you select to sing in the church are scriptural.

Second, a good hymn is good poetry. Those of you who have gone pretty well along in the course of English, ought to know what good poetry is. You have been taught what it is. But it will require on your part a good deal of thought and study in addition to what you get from your professor, in order to give you that fine taste which will enable you to see the fine elements of poetry in a hymn. I do not think that there is one of the hymns that have become permanently popular that is not good poetry. Not only is good poetry essential, but there is a sentiment among uncultivated people that demands it. Some hymns acquire popularity and usefulness for a short time by means of the fine music set to them, even though they are only a jingle of rhymes; but they soon pass away.

Then, when a hymn is found to contain scriptur[al] sentiment and good poetry, in order to be effective as a hymn it must be sung to appropriate music – music that expresses finely the sentiments of the

hymn. Now no man can be successful in the selection of hymns to suit occasions from day to day and from week to week, who does not devote a great deal of attention and careful study to hymns. There are hymns which, instead of being good poetry, are nothing but lines of prose with rhymes at the end of them, and not always good rhyme at that. I will read you a couple of instances of this kind. Number 526 in our hymnal: the second stanza: "Thrice blest is he to whom is given The instinct that can tell That God is on the field, when He Is most invis-^{ible} – ble, it ought to be. If it be true as was said a long time ago by some wise man and repeated again by others, that, if you will allow a man of good judgment to select the songs of a people, he may care very little who makes their laws, then it can not be a matter of minor importance to select wisely the songs of the church. There are a great many people, and especially children, who obtain their religious sentiments more from the hymns they are taught to sing than from the Scripture which they read or hear from the pulpit. And when sentiments are thus formed, whether just right or just wrong, it is almost impossible in later years to eradicate them. This is another indication of the importance of the careful study of hymns.

I have said that those hymns which have been long popular and have had strong hold upon the minds and hearts of the people, have, all of them, been characterized by those qualities of a good hymn which I have mentioned. For example, that one which Matthew Arnold pronounces the finest hymn in the English language:

"When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my Lord;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

I do not know that Matthew Arnold was correct in thinking that [it is] the finest hymn in the English language, but certainly it had in it all the elements of a good hymn.

Take as another example that old hymn that should have made the name of its author immortal. Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, who died a few days ago, made her name famous by the composition of one song that has attained the name of The Battle Hymn of the Republic. We have a battle hymn.

Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb,
And shall I fear to own His cause,
Or blush to speak His name?

You all know the rest of it. Then there is another hymn, not sung so often, but equally fine, which might be called the Christian's call to arms.

Soldiers of Christ arise,
And put your armor on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies,
Thro[ugh] His eternal Son.

Strong in the Lord of Hosts,
And in His mighty power,
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts,
Is more than conqueror.

Stand, then, in His great might,
With all His strength endued,
And take to arms you for the fight,
The panoply of God.

Leave no unguarded place,
No weakness of the soul,
Take every virtue, every grace,
And fortify the whole.

That, having all things done,
And all your conflicts past,
You may o'er come through Christ,

And stand entire at last.

Such hymns as these two arouse all the energy and courage that is in the soul of a man who loves the Lord.

Then, we have our marching hymn; not one, but many; especially that one which we sing so often in this chapel:

Come we that love the Lord,
And let our joys be known,
Join in the song with sweet accord,
And thus surround the throne.

Let those refuse to sing,
Who never knew our God;
But children of the heavenly King,
May speak their joys abroad.

The hill of Zion yields,
A thousand sacred sweets,
Before we reach the heavenly fields,
Or walk the golden streets.

Then let our songs abound,
And every tear be dry:
We're marching thro Immanuel's ground,
To fairer worlds on high.

That hymn is a fine piece of poetry, and it is sung to the music of a very fine march. I wonder that some composer has not taken it in hand [and] made of [it] a grand march for a brass band. I think it would be a good thing right now for us to rise and sing it.

But there are times that come over the disciples of Christ quite different from those indicated in these exulting stanzas. They are times of gloom and tears, when we need the tenderest words of divine sympathy. Our hymn writers have not left us without comfort in times like these. What is more consoling than the lines in which we sing our Lord's own invitation to the weary and heavy laden; beginning with the stanza,

“C[ome] unto me when shadows darkly gather,
When the sad heart is weary and distressed.
Seeking for comfort from your heavenly Father,
Come unto me and I will give you rest.”

We love to sing of our final triumph over death and the grave, and some of our best hymns are devoted to this inspiring theme. I wish we could bring back into general use that inimitable composition in which the resurrection of our Lord and our own resurrection are so beautifully and triumphantly so forth that it should hold a place, as it once did, in every hymn book:

“The angels that watched round the tomb
Where low the Redeemer was laid,
When deep in mortalit[y’s] gloom
He hid for a season his head,

That veiled their fair face while he slept,
And ceased their [sweet] harps to employ.”

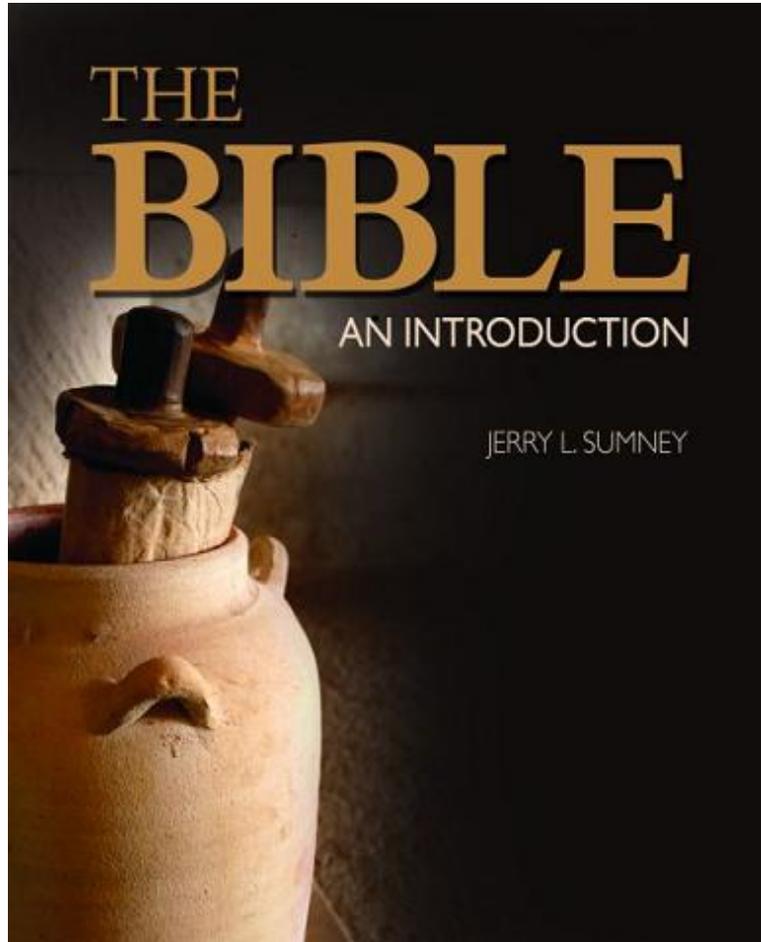
[Is there anything more beautiful than this?]

Have witnessed his rising, and wept.
Their chords with the triumphs of joy.

Though dreary the empire of night,
I soon shall emerge from its gloom,
And see immortality’s light
Arise on the shades of the tomb.

Then welcome the last rending sighs,
When these aching heart-strings shall break,
When death shall extinguish these eyes,
And moisten with dew the pale cheek.

No terror the prospect begets,
I am not mortality’s slave;
The sunbeam of life, as it sets,
Leaves a halo of peace in the grave.”



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