

## CHAPTER 11

### Seven Standards for Worthy Hymns

**W**HAT IS so special about our existing traditional-format hymns? Should they be defended and kept in use, or should they be replaced by modern-format alternatives? If traditional-format hymns are to be retained, strong and compelling reasons must be given.

This chapter will mention some of the high standards generally honoured by traditional hymns. New compositions are always welcome, but they must surely measure up to the standards of the past. (The choruses and songs of new-style worship never do.) How shall we define or determine what is a good hymn? Here are seven qualities which the writer believes are the necessary minimum standards, all of which have been achieved by the majority of well-loved traditional hymns.

**1** The first standard for a worthy hymn is that it should reflect the example and method of the *Psalms* – the Old Testament hymnbook inspired by God. The *Psalms* should shape hymns of human composition in a number of ways.

Hymns, for example, should imitate the topics represented in the *Psalms*, and the balance of worship components. (See the charts at the end of this chapter.)

Perhaps the greatest point of departure from traditional hymns in new-style worship is the abandonment of the principles of the *Psalms*. New worship certainly employs selected psalms, but in its new hymns it ignores their 'intellectual' level, their dignity, their reverence, their weighty character, their style of worship, and their balance of doctrines.

**2** The second standard for a worthy hymn is that it will edify the worshipper. It will add something to him. It will, perhaps, expound and apply the Word to his heart. It will give the opportunity for a heartfelt response to God for what has been understood. Like a psalm, it will be profound, yet available to everyone's understanding. It will have broad scope and stretch the soul, yet it will never be too complex for the average mind. This is the standard of the *Psalms* – neither too high, nor too low (unlike the modern chorus which is always far too low).

A worthy hymn will have the capacity to throw light on scriptural truth, and will often cater for some definite aspect of spiritual experience. This is what we look for in a hymn – something good, solid, worthy, soul-elevating, and yet reasonably simple. The hymns of Watts and Wesley educated countless people, from farm-hands to royals, in great Christian doctrines. Unlike modern choruses, they touched on solid truths and helped develop mature and profound believers. The question proposed by Paul, 'Does it edify?' applies to the hymn. What exactly has it accomplished? Has it added to my

understanding, or my godliness? Has it built me up, not just at an emotional level, but at a truly spiritual level?

**3** The third standard for a worthy hymn is that it will be reverent. It will address the *mighty* God. It will not be merely sentimental. It will not treat God as a chum living next door. It will have reverence, calling upon the One Who is high and lifted up. Once again we must insist that it is intelligent, because this is part of being reverent. How can I show reverence to God if I sing a banal chorus containing perhaps only four operative words? I surely insult Him, and bring Him down to the level of the kindergarten. If a hymn is not credibly intelligent, it can do nothing for us, and is not worthy to be sung to Almighty God.

**4** The fourth standard for a worthy hymn is that it must be doctrinally clear. It must not be ambiguous or vague. It must be clear enough to offend people if they do not believe the sentiment or the doctrine. If a hymn is so innocuous that universal acceptance is assured, then it clearly misses the mark. If writers manage to speak so vaguely and so generally that people of every religious hue like their words, they cannot be producing worthy hymns. If they satisfy all theological positions at once, how can they expand the understanding of the worshipper? It is significant that the best-known new-worship songs are immensely popular with theological liberals, and also with Catholic congregations throughout the world.

The effect of vague, vapid choruses and hymns is extremely damaging to a sound congregation, because they train people to worship with only half their minds, and with only half their

sincerity and earnestness. If we want to teach a congregation to sing without sustained understanding and earnestness, then vague hymns, or hymns with flowery, meaningless ideas will achieve this. The people will learn to accept 'small-percentage-worship', and will soon be obliged to draw their enjoyment more from the tunes than the words.

**5** The fifth standard for a worthy hymn is that it should avoid over-ornamental lines, and be clear in its expression. A worthy hymn is not an exercise in poetic embellishment. It does not suffocate its sentiments with over-eloquence and ornamentation, because the people of God are to sing with the understanding (*1 Corinthians 14.15*). Good hymnwriters have usually commanded a great vocabulary, but have clearly restricted this in order to be understood. The secular poet is free to indulge himself and exhibit his powers, but a hymn is quite different from secular verse. The hallmark of great hymns is this combination of depth and simplicity.

**6** A sixth standard for a worthy hymn is that it will have a good structure and sensible rhyming – the technical part of hymnwriting. A quality hymn does not have forced lines, or 'near miss' rhymes. Some hymns betray the struggles of their author. The first or second lines evidently worked well, but then the author ran into difficulty, and had to bludgeon words around to create a rhyme. Sense and logic were compelled to yield to the need for a rhyming word. The gifted hymnwriter seldom reflects this difficulty. His structure is so good and his line of thought so seamless, he seems to have found it easy. The highest pinnacle of hymnwriting is seen when a hymn

holds and builds its theme through the verses. The author does not hop around changing the subject because he could not maintain the metre or rhyming with the topic he began with. Poorer hymns often jump around so much there is an unconnected fresh theme in every line – sometimes every half line. The mind of the singer is torn from one unexpected idea to another, and so he gives up tracking the sense, and sings with little earnestness. The hymn is a bag of fragments.

The work of identifying sentiments, keeping them in the right order, and then presenting a quality verse is difficult, but this is commonly accomplished in traditional hymnody. New worship songs, by comparison, fail constantly at this point. If we define a hymn by the standards achieved in the past, there are very few hymns being written today. This, sadly, is the unmistakable reality.

**7** The seventh standard for a worthy hymn is that it should be free from mystical statements. Hymns are bound to have a morsel of mysticism, because it is not possible to express some of the wonderful things of the faith without using terms and figures which, if subjected to scrutiny, do not entirely fit reality. We speak, for example, of 'knowing the Lord', but there may not be space in a hymn to define carefully what is meant, or to introduce the 'by faith' concept. Some traditional hymns are rather mystical, and this writer believes we should avoid using them. New worship, however, teems with outrageously mystical sentiments. A good hymn will use biblical imagery and biblical language where possible, but it will not become wilfully detached from reality.

These points are offered chiefly to show that the traditional

---

hymn was never an accident or quirk of culture. Able writers thought about what they were doing. They possessed the ability to handle hymn composition, and they honoured the essential principles of worship. We do not find these riches in today's offerings, except for a few writers working within the traditional format.

### Weaknesses in traditional hymns

All that glitters is not gold, and it must be acknowledged that there are hymns in the corpus of traditional-style hymns that cry out for correction. Just as it is not necessary that we should sing in the language of the Old Testament, so also it is not necessary that we should be tied to the language of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hymns need not have a dusty, ancient image. Worshippers should not have to 'translate' into modern speech as they sing. Some traditional hymns are marred by gruesomely old-fashioned expressions, and these need editorial help. This is not about 'Thee's and Thou's', which in the view of this writer continue to be a valid form of respectful address to Almighty God. This is about quaint and awkward words and lines.

It is well known that Charles Wesley's great hymn – 'Hark! the herald angels sing' – began life in 1739 as 'Hark, how all the welkin rings'. We are glad that this received very early attention. By 1753 George Whitefield's *Collection* had altered it to the present famous first line (the change coming after only 14 years). The same hymn benefitted from other early alterations. Martin Madan's hymnbook of 1760 introduced the line 'With th'angelic host proclaim', in place of 'Universal nature sang'. In 1807 the *New Version* Anglican psalter and hymn

book added the refrain. Many other hymns have been similarly improved by editing, and the process needs to go on. We are now separated from Watts and Wesley by well over two centuries.

Some people look at the pre-1960s hymnbooks of the mainline denominations and assume that these represent traditional hymnody, and in large measure they do – but it must be appreciated that these books have to some extent marred that tradition. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century there were numerous fine hymns expressing the doctrines of grace very clearly, but then something happened which destroyed many of these. It was the advent of denominational hymnbooks. Before this time most hymnbooks were compiled by individuals, often well-known ministers. These secured their place in church use by merit. But then the mainline denominations decided to take over.

As it happened, these denominations were usually a ‘mixt multitude’ of Calvinists and Arminians, and hymnbooks were needed which would offend neither one side nor the other. Hymns that were too explicit in expressing a doctrinal position were either omitted, or their distinctive theology was edited out. As theological liberals grew in number within the denominations, later hymnbooks took account of their tastes also, and a proportion of liberal and Catholic hymns crept in. These have done much to tarnish the traditional hymn, especially as they often express mushy, vague sentiments in florid language. There are even animistic hymns in some hymnbooks, retained presumably because they became well known as school hymns. New-Agers and ecologists could happily sing them, but they do not sit well in Bible-based collections. We

---

acknowledge that traditional hymnbooks have suffered from flaws, but the central stance of Protestant hymns remains an unbeatable, magnificent storehouse of biblical praise.

We freely admit that there is work to be done to extend the excellence of traditional hymnbooks, and there is room also for new hymns in that mould. Some have been written, but with our outstandingly rich heritage of hymns, whether measured in terms of sound theology or literary excellence, it is unlikely there will be many more before the Lord comes. The philosophers of Athens in Paul's day spent their time listening for some new thing to arrive in the theatre of thought. In our day we are almost obsessed with the idea that new is good and old is bad. Many Bible believers are curiously embarrassed at older hymns, but why are they? Our next chapter will talk about some phenomenal hymnwriters of traditional worship.

## THE PSALMS

*as a guide to worship, analysed to show proportions of different aspects of worship*

### ALL CATEGORIES OF PSALM – OBJECTIVE OR PERSONAL?

	Objective*	Personal
Psalms of praise, thanksgiving, affirmation or reflection	70 47%	18 12%
Petitions	21 14%	41 27%
Total:	91 61%	59 39%

\*ie: focusing either on God, or on themes outside oneself

### PSALMS OF PRAISE

#### CHIEF SUBJECT:

God; His acts in general; creation and the natural world	28	19%
Reflecting on the human race (generally negatively)	13	9%
Reflection and thanksgiving for own experience	18	12%
Reflecting on redemption in general	29	19%

### PETITIONAL PSALMS – some psalms divide over two categories

For deliverance and upholding	19	13%
Repentance	11	7%
Longing for assurance	9	6%
Commitment/dedication	7	5%
Sanctification	7	5%
For Israel	11	7%
(ie: for the deliverance and advancement of the church)		
For judgement upon enemies	9	6%
(Some in which the good of the church is the objective, and some in which the psalmist is a type of Christ acting in divine judgement.)		

## THE PSALMS

*Categories of worship in the Psalms compared with a  
sample traditional hymnbook*

	The Book of Psalms	A Traditional Hymnbook
Psalms of praise, thanksgiving, affirmation or reflection	88 59%	328 56% hymns
Psalms of petition (asking psalms)	62 41%	257 44% hymns

*A comparison of petitional psalms with a traditional  
hymnbook (taking hymns other than psalm-based hymns)*

	The Book of Psalms	A Traditional Hymnbook
Repentance	11 7%	48 8%
Israel/church	11 7%	46 8%
Commitment	7 5%	31 5%
Deliverance and upholding	19 13%	81 13%

It will be noticed that the selection of hymns in an analysed typical traditional hymnbook relates remarkably closely to the *Book of Psalms*, showing the influence of the Psalter on generations of hymnwriters. Several hymnbooks of a conservative and reformed kind appear to be very similar in composition.