

Decisions about Language in *Glory to God*

This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.

Introduction

“Did you go changing the words?” Few questions posed to hymnal committees are as frequent or pointed as this one. And rightly so. From childhood forward, we learn about God through stories and songs, and we form deep-rooted attachments to texts that have nurtured our lives of faith. So if we are singing by heart a long-cherished hymn only to discover that people around us are singing different words from *Glory to God*, we may find ourselves perplexed.

Tampering with Originals

Thus word changes in hymns understandably provoke criticism. One line of critique goes something like this: “Hymnal committees should not tamper with texts; we should sing the words the way the authors wrote them.” This protest implies that a hymn’s original author is most probably a superior poet to members of an editorial board, and as such, his or her word choices should be left intact.

While such a critique has merit, it fails to take a few things into account. Most importantly, the words we think of as an author’s

“original” may simply be the text we grew up singing and therefore assume (incorrectly) to have precedence over any other version. In some such instances, to return from what we are *accustomed* to singing to what the author *actually* wrote would elicit stronger objections. Who among us would not balk at singing, “Draw nigh, draw nigh, Emmanuel” as an Advent hymn? Yet those are the words written by John Mason Neale to translate a medieval Latin text we now sing as “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (#88). Who at Christmas would be able to sing, “Hark how all the welkin rings!” without stumbling? Yet these are Charles Wesley’s original words, only later adapted to speak of “herald angels” (#119).

Such examples are not simply exceptions. In fact, the long-standing *norm* for hymnal editors has been to adapt texts to make them more singable and comprehensible for their intended audiences. Sometimes, for example, altering the word order of

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a text makes its accents fit more smoothly with its appointed melody: John Mason Neale’s Palm Sunday hymn “All Glory, Laud, and Honor” (#196) is a case in point, since singing Neale’s original version, “Glory and Laud and Honor,” to the tune VALET WILL ICH DIR GEBEN, would put undue stress on the weaker syllable of the first word, “glo-RY.”¹ Sometimes an author’s original hymn contains terms not in the accustomed vocabulary of a group of singers, so revisions are made not to *cause*, but to *prevent* verbal stumbling. Another text from Neale is illustrative: his translation of an early Latin poem into the hymn “Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation” (#394) initially included a doxology praising the God who is “consubstantial, co-eternal, while unending ages run.” The editors of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861 changed these adjectives to “one in might and one in glory,”² which is the text we still sing today.

Proceed with Caution

Changing words must be done with caution, since shifts in vocabulary can also mean shifts in theology. However, sometimes theological shifts are the very reasons for revision. Two texts by Charles Wesley give pertinent examples. The second stanza of his “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (#366) has undergone numerous alterations by editors (including his own brother John) who were uncomfortable with the text’s extreme view of Christian perfectibility in this life. “Take away our *power* of sinning” has thus become, “Take away the *love* of sinning.”³ In like manner, an eighteenth-century editor disagreed with the universalism implied in a line of Wesley’s Easter hymn, “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!” (#245): “Dying once, he all doth save.” The line was amended to, “Once he died, our souls to save.”⁴ Subsequent editors have eliminated the word “once,” making the line simply, “Jesus died, our souls to save,” which is the version both in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* 1990 and in *Glory to God*.

Since textual revision is a far more normal prac-

tice than most people in the pews realize, those who insist we should sing hymns “the way the authors wrote them” might fruitfully explore how familiar they really are with authors’ original phrasing. Below are a few fill-in-the-blank exercises to assist such exploration. (Answers appear at the end.)

- “Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed,”⁵ Isaac Watts (#212)
 - Stanza 1: “Would he [Christ] devote that sacred head / for _____ as I!”
 - Stanza 3: “Well might the sun in darkness hide / and shut its glories in, / when _____ died . . .”
- “For the Beauty of the Earth,”⁶ Folliott Sandford Pierpoint (#14)
 - Refrain: “_____ to thee we raise / this our _____.”
- “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me,”⁷ Augustus M. Toplady (#438)
 - Stanza 1: “Be of sin the double cure, / _____.”
 - Stanza 4: “While I draw this fleeting breath, / when my _____ in death . . .”

The Distinctiveness of Hymn Poetry

Even faced with such examples of how revision has been used throughout the centuries, a critic might still object that “is” does not equal “ought”: just because something *has* been done need not imply that it *should* be done. A purist might continue to argue that we should leave poets’ original words untouched—unless we can make a clear case that hymn poems differ in fundamental ways from other kinds of poetry.

No less an authority than Louis Fitzgerald Benson makes this case. Editor of the *Presbyterian Hymnal* of 1895 (and its subsequent revisions in 1911 and 1917), Benson’s meticulous scholarship set the professional standard for generations of

hymnal editors to come. In a book on *The Hymnody of the Christian Church*, he aptly observed, “In a collection of poems for poetry’s sake the rule of fidelity of text is absolute. In a collection of hymns for congregational use, fidelity must be tempered by considerations of practical utility.”⁸

This point is crucial. Hymns are not “poems for

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poetry’s sake.” The hymn poem does not exist to call attention to its own artistry, but rather to point beyond itself to the artistry of God. As *functional* rather than *pure* art, hymns are less like oil paintings in a museum (where the “rule of fidelity” to the original might well be absolute) and more like sweaters hand-knitted to offer warmth when the weather grows cold. While sweaters, like hymns, can be beautifully crafted, they ultimately have a job to do. If over the years of doing that job they show signs of fraying, it is far from blasphemous to darn a careful repair over the worn spot. In like manner, if a hymn text contains words that have grown puzzling or problematic through shifts in vocabulary (like “consubstantial” in an example above), if it causes singers to stumble over syllables that do not fit the meter of a tune, or, more significantly, if it contains concepts that do not fit the theology of their context, then it is no longer able to do its job of facilitating worship as effectively as it might.

These are the “considerations of practical utility” that Benson had in mind. A few years before his death, looking back over his long career, he actually faulted himself for making “too little use of the privilege of amendment” in the collections

he compiled, operating instead out of an “over-scrupulosity” with regard to original texts. “With more than thirty years of added experience,” he remarked, “I should now not hesitate to go much further.”⁹ He could say this not simply as an editor, but as a poet as well. Presbyterian hymnals are still enriched by his “O Sing a Song of Bethlehem” (#159) and “For the Bread Which You Have Broken” (#516). We might imagine that far from objecting that his original language had been tampered with in shifting from “thou hast” to “you have” in the latter of these examples,

Benson would appreciate the fact that his words from a prior century are being kept current for new generations of singers.

The Committee’s Principles

Still, permission to exercise Benson’s “privilege of amendment” is not license to alter words heedlessly or haphazardly. Thus, when approaching the task of creating a twenty-first century collection of hymns for both old and new generations of singers, the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (PCOCS) began by drafting “A Statement on Language” to guide their efforts. This statement is included as appendix 2 in *Glory to God*. In seeking principles of operation, however, we quickly realized that no “one-size-fits-all” editorial model would work. Decisions about language would ultimately have to be made on a case-by-case basis, attentive to “issues of tradition, theological integrity, poetic quality, and copyright.”¹⁰

Our language concerns were not simply about gender pronouns, as some might imagine, but about larger issues regarding the fit of texts to tunes and to our contemporary theological and social context. In the latter regard, for exam-

ple, we worked hard to find common texts that we might sing in unity with sisters and brothers in churches within our ecumenical partnership. Given our shared beliefs as Christians, it is remarkable that words sung across denominations have come to be so different, even when we are presumably voicing the “same” hymn! In an era when people who join Presbyterian congregations are more likely than ever to have grown up in some different tradition, it is increasingly desirable to find ways that we can come together to sing, metaphorically if not literally, off the same page.

Beyond such concerns for commonality, our verbal concerns focused on three key areas: archaic, prejudicial, and gendered language.

Archaic Language

Just as the Reformers insisted on translating the Bible from Latin into the languages people actually spoke, so hymnal editors have frequently attempted to rephrase hymns in something closer to the spoken idioms of their own day. The *Worship Book* of 1975 was a pioneer in such efforts in the Presbyterian Church, even rendering “I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art” as “We Greet You, Sure Redeemer from All Strife.” The Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song took more of a middle ground on this issue, electing to return the text attributed to Calvin to its more familiar form and generally opting not to alter pronouns in familiar first lines or in stanzas where words like “thee” or “thine” occupied rhyming positions.

We did, however, shift occasional archaic words into more contemporary vocabulary in places where the shift seemed unlikely to cause an awkward tension between what some might be singing by heart and what others were singing off the page. With hymnal editors before us, we made such occasional revisions out of a desire to keep hymns in an idiom whereby they speak to and from our own condition. After all, one

test of a good hymn is that it voices a prayer we might utter ourselves if we had the verbal skill of the author. Again, hymns are not intended as museum pieces or relics of a bygone era, but as the living voice of contemporary believers.

Prejudicial Language

Because many beloved hymns do hail from earlier historic eras, they do not always manifest sensitivity to language that has come to be seen as biased or stereotyping in our day. Thus, for example, working with the Office of Disability Concerns, the PCOCS attempted to avoid verbal constructions implying that physical disabilities such as sight, hearing, or mobility impairments are evidence of moral failing. The 1990 hymnal committee had already begun this editorial work. It is a delicate task, however, since powerful biblical metaphors speak of the messianic age as a time when the blind will see, the deaf will hear, and the lame will walk. *Glory to God* preserves some such images as expressive of our deep hope for personal and cosmic healing. In other instances, however, authors of recent texts proved willing to work with us in revising their works to be less unintentionally prejudicial.

In making changes for reasons of potential prejudice, we were aware that some critics would charge us with “political correctness.” Upon further reflection, however, such a charge is puzzling. After all, it is not from the *political* arena that we learn the importance of putting our neighbors’ needs above our own. From a Christian perspective, surely the sacrifice of a particular familiar word seems a small price to pay for the purpose of helping all our sisters and brothers feel welcomed and valued: hospitality toward the other and the stranger expresses *biblical*, not *political*, correctness. Indeed, it constitutes an arena in which we might take pleasure in our efforts to “outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom. 12:10).

Gendered Language

Critics, however, are also apt to voice the charge of political correctness in cases where hymnal committees alter gender-specific references. Again, though, if as Christians we take to heart teachings about hospitality, then even if masculine pronouns do not bother us personally, might we not be willing to show biblical correctness in putting the feelings of others above our own? For some members of our church family, exclusively male language sounds like a painful reinforcement of discriminatory social systems—social systems that Jesus himself upended in treating men and women as persons of equal worth.

As with archaic language, so with gendered language the PCOCS attempted a mediating position. Our Statement on Language expresses a clear preference for inclusive language regarding human beings. So, for instance, “Men of faith, rise up and sing” (#319) is balanced by a second stanza that calls for “women of the truth” to rise up as well. A version of Psalm 133, “O Look and Wonder” (#397) sings in one stanza of how good it is when brothers dwell in peace with one another, and in subsequent stanzas it tells of the joy of unity among sisters and “all earth’s people.” While we made an editorial decision not to insert any *new* asterisks into *Glory to God* to provide alternate, inclusive-language versions of texts, where asterisks appeared in the 1990 hymnal, we left them in place. So, for example, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” (#169) continues to offer another option for singers in place of the mankind reference (“Dear Lord, Creator good and kind”).

In approaching God-language, we exercised even more caution than when assessing language for humans. The PCOCS Statement on Language acknowledges:

While many are deeply nurtured and comforted by traditional imagery for God, many others are

concerned about associations of patriarchy and other forms of domination and are looking for other and more diverse language.¹¹

Recognizing, therefore, that our hymnal is intended for a vast body of believers whose positions on such questions differ, we adopted a policy of expansive language for God. In other words, the full array of biblical metaphors for God is retained, including references to God as Father, Lord, and King. But also in this array appear images in which God is the “womb of life and source of being” (#3) and the “mothering” one who gave us birth (#7). There are also images that have no gendered connotations at all: “Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud” (#11), “fiery pillar” (#315), “Rock of Ages” (#438), and many, many more.

The Last Word

In any hymn about God, our Statement on Language reminds us, we are attempting to sing of “the one whose ways and thoughts are as beyond human speech as the heaven is higher than the earth (Isa. 55:8).”¹² Hence *none* of our words—whether an author’s originals or a committee’s alterations—can ever be fully adequate. Yet drawing on God’s revelation in Scripture to test the spirits of any human creation or re-creation, we do our best to sing boldly and faithfully. Glory to God!

Answers to Fill-in-the-Blank Exercises

- Watts, Stanza 1: “for such a worm as I”; when God the mighty maker died.”
- Watts, Stanza 3: “Christ our God to thee we raise / this, our sacrifice of praise.”
- Pierpoint, Refrain: “Lord of all . . .” and “. . . hymn of grateful praise.”
- Toplady, Stanza 1: Toplady himself wrote two versions: initially, “save from wrath and make me pure,” which he later revised to “save me from its guilt and power” (the latter being preferred in Presbyterian, and the former in Methodist and Baptist hymnals).

- Toplady, Stanza 4: “when my eye-strings break in death.”

Endnotes

1. *Companion to the Hymnal*, ed. Fred Gealy, Austin Lovelace, and Carlton Young (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970). 74.
2. *Ibid.*, 131.
3. *Ibid.*, 281.
4. *Ibid.*, 133.
5. *Ibid.*, 71.
6. *Ibid.*, 180.
7. *Ibid.* 364.
8. Louis F. Benson, *The Hymnody of the Christian Church* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1956), 211.

9. *Ibid.*, 218.

10. “A Statement on Language,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 929.

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