



## Hymnal as a Denominational Scrapbook

### Times Change, So Do Hymnals

As a child, I enjoyed pouring over family photo albums and was always curious to see which of my relatives had similar familial physical features. I was also mesmerized by other details in the photos such as fashion and hairstyles—all details that evoked questions. What was it like to live in their time? What did they think about? What were their daily activities?

Hymnals hold a similar fascination. Within their pages, I find psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs that Presbyterians have sung for generations. These hymns, our shared song in faith, have shaped our Presbyterian heritage. Looking at these “photos,” I muse about our ancestors in faith. What hymns did Presbyterians sing in previous generations? What made a hymnal unique to our denomination? Because hymnals reflect the culture of a given generation, they are like a denominational photo album.

Whenever I look through an old hymnal, I am fascinated by the look and feel of the pages, different font types, the volume’s layout, and language style. Recently, while browsing through a copy of an 1843 Presbyterian hymnal, I noticed the descriptive language used to categorize hymns. Topics such as “Vicissitudes and Conflicts,” “Slothfulness,” and “Submissions under Trials” seemed like quaint words from a bygone era.<sup>1</sup> However, this language brought

to my mind images of staunch, sturdy Presbyterians in nineteenth-century America readily rebuking laziness or character weakness!

### Contents Vary

Reading a hymnal’s preface offers more clues to what a particular group believes and sings because it serves as an introduction and rationale for the hymnal’s contents. Comparing the prefaces from four Presbyterian hymnals (1895, 1933, 1955, 1990), I discovered that the editors and committees valued two criteria in the selection process:

- Preserving our heritage of congregational song
- Expanding the selections to represent a current generation

In his preface to *The Hymnal* (1895), Louis Benson wrote that this collection was “a manual of the Church’s praise, a treasury of things new and old, chosen for actual service, expressive in some degree of the culture of god’s people.”<sup>2</sup> According to Benson, hymns chosen were “those endeared to the Church by proved fitness,” in other words, hymns that had stood the test of time! The editors of *The Hymnal* (1933) intentionally preserved that “rich treasure of the heritage hymns of the Church.”<sup>3</sup> Working guidelines for *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) included embracing “the diversity of our historical traditions.”<sup>4</sup> Because hymnal committees have honored our heritage in song, our hymnals contain psalms from Scottish and

Genevan *Psalms*, hymns informed by Reformed doctrine, and hymns sung by the broader Christian community. Today, we can still sing “All People That on Earth Do Dwell,” “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” and “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” because they have been in various Presbyterian “photo albums” since the mid-nineteenth century.

In addition to black-and-white pictures, my photo albums include color snapshots of the current generation, reminding me of events and experiences I have shared with my family. As these photos pass on to a new generation, they will become the next chapter in my family’s history. Likewise, hymnals contain new material written by and for current Presbyterians, reflecting this generation’s values. New selections sung in worship today may well become the heart songs of future Presbyterians.

## Each Hymnal Has an Emphasis

A hymnal’s preface is also instructive because it often includes a rationale for new texts and tunes chosen from a dizzying array of repertoire. Describing the labor in producing the 1895 hymnal as an expression “of the culture of god’s people,” Benson wrote, “the whole field of modern hymnody has been laboriously gleaned.”<sup>5</sup> No small feat, then or now!

These four prefaces all convey that new hymns chosen reflected theological views current to that particular generation of Presbyterians. When our 1933 hymnal was published, Presbyterians were interested in congregational song that gave “expression to certain new emphases in religious thought today,” which included “social service, brotherhood of man and world friendship” and the devotional life of the Christian.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, its table of

contents contained categories such as “Brotherhood,” “World Friendship and Peace,” and “The Inner Life.” Some newer hymn texts representing these emphases were “Rise Up, O Men of God,” “Not Alone for Mighty Empire,” and “Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord.”

*The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) reflects latter twentieth-century Presbyterian thought regarding images of God, diversity, and inclusivity. The preface assures the reader that the collection

- Expresses a full range of biblical images for the Persons of the Trinity
- Is inclusive of all God’s people—sensitive to age, race, gender, physical limitations, and language<sup>7</sup>

This hymnal gives our generation opportunity to sing new texts such as “O Praise the Gracious Power,” “Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ,” and “For the Fruit of All Creation.”

Today, we live in an era of extended and blended families, with our photo albums including pictures of in-laws, step-parents and siblings, and friends. *The Hymnal* (1933) expanded Presbyterian song to include hymns from “various nationalities so largely represented in the Presbyterian Church in this Country,” namely Welsh, Irish, and Scandinavian traditions.<sup>8</sup> *The Hymnbook* (1955), unique as a compilation of hymns from five Presbyterian-Reformed denominations, incorporated more metrical psalms and “secured the admission of a representative body of so-called ‘gospel songs.’”<sup>9</sup> We now sing songs from the global church because of the 1990 hymnal committee’s “conscious efforts to recognize various racial and ethnic musical traditions.”<sup>10</sup>

What will our next “photo album” contain? Although the preface for the 2013 Presbyterian collection of congregational song has yet to be written, we do have a preview via the committee’s Theological Framework:

The overarching theme of the collection will be God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. It will also bespeak the human responses that God’s gracious acts make possible. In other words, the framework for this collection of congregational song will be the history of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

## About the Writer

*Beverly Howard is a professor of music at California Baptist University and organist at Calvary Presbyterian Church in Riverside, California. She is a former editor of The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song and a member of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song.*

## Endnotes

---

1. *Psalms and Hymns: Adapted to Social, Private, and Public Worship in the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843).
2. Louis Benson, preface to *The Hymnal /published by the Authority of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, 1895), iv.
3. Clarence Dickinson, preface to *The Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1933), iii.
4. LindaJo McKim, introduction to *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 9.
5. Benson, iv.
6. Dickinson, iii.
7. McKim, 9.
8. Dickinson, iii.
9. David Hugh Jones, preface to *The Hymnbook* (Richmond: Presbyterian Church in the United States, The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Reformed Church in America, 1955), 5.
10. McKim, 9.
11. Presbyterian Hymnal Project, “The New Collection of Presbyterian Hymns and Songs,” Theological Vision Statement, <http://www.presbyterianhymnal.org/TheologicalVision.asp> (accessed November 10, 2010).