



No More New Hymns?

Arguments against New Hymns

“Please,” the plea begins, “no more new hymns. What’s wrong with the inspiring hymns that we grew up with? When I go to church, it’s to worship God, not to be distracted with learning a new hymn.”

How many of us have heard similar reactions to a given Sunday’s musical selections? The author of this protest continues: “Last week’s new hymn was particularly unnerving. While the text was good, the tune was quite unsingable and the harmonies were quite discordant.”

This specific letter of lament appeared in *The Lutheran Witness*, but it could equally well have graced the pages of a Presbyterian publication. In fact, when people in my home church find out that I am serving on the new hymnal committee for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), their most frequent response is, “Please make sure there are hymns we can sing!” (In the interest of full disclosure, I should perhaps also confess that I once participated in a church choir whose members threatened mutiny should a certain “new” hymn—which shall remain nameless—ever be programmed for worship again!)

But here’s the punch line. The letter quoted above was written in 1890, and the hymn to which it referred is “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” In other words, every hymn we sing today was a “new hymn” once upon a time. So where would we draw the line? Where would we presume to say to the Holy Spirit, “Thanks, but no thanks. You can close the door of inspiration now. We can do

without any more texts or tunes to ‘distract’ us in worship. The ‘inspiring hymns that we grew up with’ are more than sufficient for our needs”?

If the Holy Spirit had attended to the “no more new hymns” plea in *The Lutheran Witness* in 1890, how many gems of the faith would now be missing from our repertoire! Of what further gifts might we deprive future generations were we to insist that “no more new hymns” be permitted after, say, a denominational hymnal published in 1990?

Sing to the Lord a New Song

Admittedly, laypeople who responded to a Presbyterian panel survey in 2005 did not seem overly troubled by this prospect. Over half of them thought it “not too likely” or “not at all likely” that the PCUSA would need a new hymnal by 2013. Among the most frequently cited reasons for their opposition was a claim that the 1990 hymnal would still be “contemporary.” Well, yes and no. Surely, much of the 1990 hymnal will still be relevant in 2013; indeed, the substance of any hymnal should have a timeless quality, carrying forward the deep traditions of the faith, celebrating the God in Christ who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Yet, on the other hand, if God is also perennially “doing a new thing” (Isa. 43:19), can we hope to respond appropriately without obeying the Psalmist and singing “a new song” (Ps. 96:1)? One of the surprising discoveries to emerge from asking people to identify their favorite hymns from the 1990

Presbyterian Hymnal is the number of songs they name that would have been relatively “new” when that collection was being compiled: “God of the Sparrow,” Jaroslav Vajda’s text with Carl Schalk’s tune, both from 1983; “Here I Am, Lord,” Dan Schutte’s lyrics and music from 1979; or slightly earlier, Sydney Carter’s “Lord of the Dance,” from 1963. To be sure, a number of least favorite hymns in the 1990 hymnal also date from the mid-60s to the mid-80s. But this coincidence raises two questions. First, is the relative “newness” of a given hymn really the problem? And second, could any hymnal committee reasonably be expected to distinguish future “favorites” from future “least favorites” in advance?

I once heard a professor of church history point out that the canon of the Bible was not formed by a council of experts who got together to vote particular passages “in” or “out.” Rather, it was formed by believers themselves who, over a period of years, found certain texts more resonant and meaningful than others. Those texts that were used most widely, by the consent of the faithful, became the authoritative body of Scripture. Granted, hymns do not carry the same status, but their incorporation into the life of the church follows a similar process. A hymnal committee may sign the official “adoption” papers, but it takes years of get-togethers with aunts and uncles and great-nieces and cousins before a text or tune becomes a widely loved member of the family.

Arguments for New Hymns

Frankly, I sometimes wonder if the plea no more new hymns really means no more hymns—of whatever vintage—that, to borrow a word from the 1890 Lutheran Witness letter, “unnerves” us because their harmonies are unaccustomed, their time-signature changes are troubling, their images are jarring, or for some unidentifiable reason,

they simply fail to touch our hearts. Of course, a further complication to this hypothesis arises because material that touches my heart or stirs my theological imagination may utterly elude the person beside me in the pew—and vice versa. As a result, a hymnal must contain a wide variety of materials, both old and new; otherwise, it cannot begin to represent the rich diversity of the body of Christ.

On the contrary, the author of the Lutheran Witness letter claims that the church needs a whole array of new hymns alongside the “inspiring hymns that we grew up with.” We need new hymns to speak a prophetic word to the distinctive social problems of our day—economic injustice, environmental degradation. We need new hymns to speak a pastoral word to fresh, personal challenges facing our congregations—whether AIDS or Alzheimer’s or aging. We need new hymns to speak a priestly word, “gathering into one” (in the text of an old Eucharistic prayer) the disparate gifts of an increasingly global community.

Not only, in fact, does the church need new hymns, but if the wild wind of the Holy Spirit is blowing, we may even sing them with gusto!

About the Writer

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