Hymn Singing in Victorian England

A brief history

Some of you may have attended worship services in various evangelical or charismatic churches when you have been on holiday in a town where there has been no Reformed church. In many of these churches, especially in the larger ones, the singing will be led by a band and a group of singers. Often they are the ones singing while the rest of the congregation is largely silent; the band and singers are the performers and the worshippers are the audience. This practice is similar to the worship services of the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. At that time the priests chanted their way through the liturgy, in Latin (a language most of the people could not understand), while the gathered worshippers were silent spectators.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century changed this situation dramatically. The Reformers believed that the people of God ought to sing God’s praise. Martin Luther, a skilled musician and a talented hymn writer, led the way. He wrote hymns the German people could sing in their own language, including his most famous hymn, A Mighty Fortress is our God. Calvin also promoted congregational singing, but wanted the church to sing primarily (though not exclusively) the Psalms. For the next 250 years reformational churches that followed Calvin maintained this practice of singing metrical versions of the Psalms and some of the New Testament songs.¹

In the Protestant churches in England and Scotland the Psalms were sung unaccompanied and were often led by a precentor, who gave out each line before the congregation joined in. This made singing a psalm a very slow process, slowed even more by the repetition of lines and very long notes. Often the precentor sang solo because of the lack of enthusiasm of the congregation.

In the late 1700s many English parish churches began to abandon this method of singing metrical psalms and instead introduced a choir and instrumentalists who were located in a gallery and who led the psalm singing. (In the large towns and cities most churches preferred an organ, but in the rural areas the singing was led by this gallery band.) These bands were usually vigorous, spontaneous and enthusiastic, which most worshippers saw as an improvement on the precentor. However, these instrumentalists were usually amateurish, disorganised and irreverent. Thomas Hardy’s novels portray them “first and foremost as performers out to have a good time and only secondarily, if at all, as committed to leading God’s people in worship and praise.”² On Saturday nights they were out playing for dancing parties and on Sunday they were leading the congregation in worship. Many of the clergy, understandably, were most unhappy with the gallery bands and sought to remove them from the church. The bands were ousted between 1830 and 1850 with the introduction of barrel organs, which brought more regularity and order to congregational singing.

Around the 1750s a growing number of Dissenting churches began to sing hymns, both in their chapels and even more so in their open air services.³ The 18th century English revival gave them plenty of material to use. Isaac Watts, minister of an Independent congregation at Mark Lane Chapel in London, wrote 600 hymns and Christianised versions of the Psalms for use in his church. Charles Wesley wrote many hymns for the large open-air rallies held during the 1740’s and 50s, at which he and his brother John preached. Charles was a prolific writer of hymns producing as many as 6,500!

The Church of England was slower to accept hymns. Many in that denomination were concerned about the poor state of their congregational singing. In 1790 the Bishop of London told the clergy of his diocese that “of all the aspects of worship in the Church of England none was ‘at so low an ebb’
as the psalmody”. The gallery bands had discouraged members of the congregation from joining in the singing of the psalms but the evangelicals in the Church of England encouraged worshippers to sing chanted psalms and hymns. By the beginning of the 1800s a small number of hymns were included in the Prayer Book and in 1820 the Archbishop of York approved a collection of 146 hymns. “The Archbishop’s collection”, as it came to be known, was taken up by a good number of churches in the North of England and went through 29 editions. By the 1840s hymns had become fully accepted in the Church of England.

Queen Victoria came to the throne of England in 1837. Her reign coincided with a proliferation of hymn writing and singing. Great poetry was combined with rousing and thrilling tunes and congregations were eager to sing devotional words to these strong tunes. Hymns became a means of expressing personal devotion and expounding sound doctrine. These hymns and tunes were written by Dissenters, evangelical Anglicans and by those in the High Church and Oxford movements of the Anglican Church, especially John Keble. Hymns became a major feature in the worship services of all the main Christian denominations in England. Worshippers were now able to sing the praise of God in their own language to tunes they found appealing and singable. Horton Davis is quite certain that “the greatest factor in popularising Victorian services was the hymnody.”

The Victorians wrote hymns, not just for worship, but for all times and places. In a preface to one of their later hymnals the Primitive Methodists wrote they required hymns “for the sick chamber, for the marriage feast, for funerals, for journeys by sea and land, for various social gatherings, for the home sanctuary, for personal and private use, for praising God ‘secretly among the faithful’ as well as in the ‘great congregation’.” Hymns were written for every conceivable (and even inconceivable!) purpose and occasion; one was written for use during a cattle plague and another to be sung before a parliamentary election!

Various factors were at work in promoting this great increase in singing. In the 1840s and 50s there was a great interest in learning music; these decades “saw a burst of musical education and an explosion of popular interest and involvement in choral singing unparalleled before or since.” Choral societies sprang up all over the country. Sunday Schools also encouraged the singing of hymns. By 1888 three quarters of English children attended Sunday School and singing was an important and popular part of their programme. Hymns were also widely sung by families in their homes and were learnt at school. The combined effect of singing them at home, school and church made hymns the folk song of Victorian Britain.

“...it was hymns rather than parlour ballads, folk songs or music hall numbers that most exercised the nation’s vocal chords – not just in churches and chapels, but in school rooms, at public meetings and social gatherings, in the streets and, most of all, at home in the nursery or parlour ... It is almost impossible for us to grasp the ubiquity and pervasiveness of hymns in Victorian culture ... Their texts appeared on postcards and tombstones, on framed posters to be hung up at home and in school reading books.”

Hymn writing attracted some of the finest poets and composers of the Victorian period. This was due to a strong culture of reading and writing poetry combined with the healthy condition of the English church. A faithful church meant there were many biblical and capable ministers. Some of them devoted their considerable talents to writing hymns. This is not surprising given that ministers of the Word ought to have a thorough knowledge of the Bible, and the original languages, and facility in the use of words. Significant hymn writers of the 18th and 19th centuries included Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, William Cowper, John Newton, Augustus Toplady, Horatius Bonar and Phillip Doddridge. Examples of their compositions can be found in most hymnbooks.

Ian Bradley cites the hymn-book as one of the great Victorian inventions, alongside the penny post and the railway system. “From modest origins as a tool of reforming clergy wishing to improve congregational worship, the hymn-book became one of the central institutions of Victorian religion, defining the identity of different denominations and church parties and providing a handbook for doctrine and devotion which, if sales provide any indication, had more influence and impact than any other category of publication.” Twelve hundred hymn books were published in Britain between 1837 and 1901. Between 1830 and 1880 the Church of England alone produced an average of
one hymnal a year. These appeared at a time of increasing literacy among the English population; bringing with it an insatiable appetite for reading, especially of devotional books, and including hymn-books. The most popular of these was *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. This book sold steadily at a rate of 3000 copies per week for 35 years clocking up sales of 35 million by the end of the century. The hymns were arranged according to the church year. An innovation in this book was to give each hymn its own tune and to print the verses and melody on the same page. This was a significant change from the system of leaving it to the clergy and the musicians to mix and match a tune to a psalm or hymn. This new practice provided a strong, singable tune for each hymn and established an association between a tune and a hymn that aided the memory and caused a hymn to become well-loved. Think of the associations of tune and hymn with John Newton’s “Amazing Grace”, Charles Wesley’s “And Can it Be”, and John Keble’s “Sun of My Soul”.

The Church of Scotland was much slower to allow hymns into its worship services, even though the greatest Scottish hymn writer, Horatius Bonar, came from this denomination. A number of his hymns, including “I heard the voice of Jesus say”, were part of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, but he was not allowed to have them sung in the church where he was a minister for over 20 years. At last, in 1893, the three main Presbyterian churches in the United Kingdom set up a joint hymnal committee. In 1898 they produced *The Church Hymnary*, the last great denominational hymn-book of the Victorian era.

**A few observations**

We can always learn some lessons from the past. Here are a few observations on our hymn singing today. One lesson worth noting from this brief history is the need to sing the Psalms and to sing them in an edifying manner. In writing about hymns in this issue of *Faith in Focus* we do not intend to minimise the value of the Psalms. Christian congregations today ought to sing the 150 Psalms and their neglect in worship is a sad and telling indicator of the ill-health of the wider church. But we need to sing the Psalms well. Our new Psalter, *Sing to the Lord*, is a significant step forward in this area. The metrical psalms selected follow the biblical text very closely, which cannot always be said of the psalm selections in the blue Psalter Hymnal. The committee has selected a variety of tunes and careful attention has been given to finding a tune to match the words. Another plus is that the numbering of the psalms follows the biblical psalter. Let’s pray this new book helps us sing the Psalms consistently and well.

This brief history of hymn singing also highlights the importance of skillful and appropriate musical accompaniment in worship. The gallery bands of the English parish churches, with their rag-tag and undisciplined musical style, discouraged the congregation from singing. Others far more qualified than I could write on this subject but I want to note that musical accompaniment, whether from one instrument or a collection, must be skillful, well-timed, of the correct tempo and of appropriate volume (not too soft nor too loud).

Hymns are also a means of instructing Christians about the faith. The Victorian hymn writers were well aware of the power and influence of this medium of communication and worship. In 1780 John Wesley put together the first major denominational hymnbook for the Methodist Church, claiming that it contained “all the truth of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical.” John and Charles Wesley saw hymns as a means of teaching Christian doctrine. They wanted to counter what they saw as bad teaching and to promote their own peculiar doctrines, such as their view on sanctification. The High Church and Oxford movements had their own agenda, as did Calvinists such as Isaac Watts and Horatius Bonar. Hymns teach doctrine, whether that be true or false, orthodox or heretical. Singing sound, orthodox hymns and songs will encourage believers in a sound, biblical theology. Singing hymns and songs that are theologically weak and/or heretical will lead people into error. We are what we sing. With this in mind we must sing not only what is bright and cheerful, expressing our spiritual "highs", but also sing about the struggles believers go through in severe suffering and in the face of horrendous evil; and their difficulty in holding on to their faith in such times. The psalms and many hymns of the church give us a treasure chest of sound doctrine written out of profound human experience. Therefore, it is a great loss if we do not have a Psalter-Hymnal in the form of a book. It seems to me the move to data-projectors is a
significant step backwards for a number of reasons. Singing from a screen means that people do not have the music in front of them, nor can they look at the words before or after singing the psalm or hymn, nor do they have a book at home to sing from or refer to.

There is great value in singing hymns. Thousands of hymns have been written and only a comparatively small number of these have been passed on and are used today. It is estimated that around 400,000 hymns were written during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). Less than 1000 have survived and are still being sung today. The chaff has been blown away and the best have been preserved. Singing hymns that come from the history of the Christian church makes us aware that we are part of the holy catholic church that has existed for 20 centuries. These hymns connect us with our historical, theological and musical tradition. The Victorian period has provided us with hymns that have rich imagery and depth of meaning. Sometimes that meaning is not easily grasped. At times we need to think carefully about the words and the images. Bradley warns against being “seduced by the vandals who would strip out the beauty and ambiguity from ‘difficult’ language and replace it with the blandly banal.” He observes that these hymns were not written to entertain or boost audience ratings. Rather, they were intended “to praise or petition God, convert sinners, sustain the righteous, guide the perplexed, comfort the downhearted, challenge the complacent, wrestle honestly with doubt, celebrate the wonder of creation, teach the basic doctrines of the faith or penetrate the mystery of holiness.”

I want to conclude with a quotation from the preface to one of the many huge-selling collections of hymns in the Victorian Age.

“Next to the Bible itself, hymns have done more to influence our views, and mould our theology, than any other instrumentality whatever. There is a power in hymns which never dies. Easily learned in the days of childhood and of youth; often repeated; seldom, if ever, forgotten, they abide with us, a most precious heritage amid all the changes of our earthly life. They form a fitting and most welcome expression for every kind of deep religious feeling: they are with us to speak of Faith and Hope in hours of trial and sorrow; with us to animate to all earnest Christian effort; with us as the rich consolation of individual hearts, and as one common bond of fellowship between the living members of Christ’s mystical body.”

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Notes

1 Metrical versions of the psalms are paraphrases of the biblical text in verse form, with regular poetic meter and rhyming lines.
2 Abide With Me – The World of Victorian Hymns, Ian Bradley, (1997, CIA Publications, London), p. 4. This is a fine book on Victorian hymnody and has been my main source for this article.
3 The Dissenting churches were all those outside of the established Church of England.
4 Abide With Me, p. 15
5 Abide With Me, p. 46
6 Abide With Me, p. 8
7 Abide With Me, p. 33
8 Abide With Me, p. xiii
9 Abide With Me, p. 53
10 Abide With Me, p. 7
11 ie., Universal
12 Abide With Me, p. xv
13 Abide With Me, p. 52