

Christian Hymnology.

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JAMES ORMSBEE MURRAY, D.D., LL.D.





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A SERMON

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BY

REV. JAMES O. MURRAY, D. D.,

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THE occasion of this discourse was the introduction of "The Sacrifice of Praise," a Hymn-book "designed for Public Worship and Private Devotion," compiled by a Committee of the Session, of which the author was chairman.

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CHRISTIAN HYMNOLOGY.

“And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives.” *Matthew* xxvi. 30.

“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” *Ephesians* v. 18, 19.

THE first of these texts shows us one of the many ways in which Jesus used his voice to the glory of God. He taught of God, He prayed to God, He sang the praise of God. We know what He and his disciples sang together in that upper room. It was the Hallel, or hallelujah psalms (113-118), used at the Jewish Passover. But it is the *fact* that He sang even more than what He sang, which interests the Christian mind and heart. For the singing in which He took part, was thus directly associated with a newly established ordinance of the Christian Church. It belonged to the new dispensation. Jesus by it gave to his church an example of worship in song.

The second of these texts shows us that the example of Christ had been followed; that the early Christians craved and used devotional singing in their social and public assemblies; that this had become of prominence enough

to be made a matter of apostolic teaching. The fundamental principles of sacred song are therein set forth, namely, that sacred music is of any worth in the sight of God and for the soul of man, just in so far as it comes from hearts filled with the Spirit: "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Again, that this singing should be something in common and not done by proxy. "Speaking to one another" conveys more exactly the meaning of the apostle than "speaking to yourselves." It denotes a congregational singing as the apostolic model for church music. Again, that vocal melody, artistic excellence, the science of music, should be valued only as they tend to beget a melody of heart to the Lord. This psalmody of the inward heart is the first aim of the service of song in the house of the Lord.

We are moreover taught by this passage that there were already found in the church and used by the disciples, Christian hymns. It is hardly possible to discriminate very sharply and say wherein the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs differed each from the others. But it is certainly to be inferred from this teaching of St. Paul, that there was a class of uninspired Christian hymns or spiritual songs, sanctioned by apostolic authority, which were entirely different from the ancient psalms. Whatever

they were, they mark and constitute the beginning of a distinctively Christian hymnology. This is a subject, which of late years has so extensively and intensively engaged the Christian mind, as to demand for it some consideration by professed religious teachers. Never before in the history of the church, have hymns been so widely studied, so generally read, so deeply loved. A new mission, or at least a new enlargement of power, seems to have been given them by the Spirit of God. They are fulfilling their sweet and gentle, but powerful offices of quickening and comfort in thousands of hearts, that a few years since knew little of what rich stores of helpfulness and solace were laid up in them. It would be difficult to specify any theme more directly within the province of the pulpit, or one in which timely words needed more to be spoken.

Christian hymnology is not an independent and isolated product of the Christian Church. Like most of the institutions of that church, it is a growth out of a similar growth in the old dispensation. It has its roots in the inspired psalmody of the Jewish Church. Both are a development. Both grew from small beginnings. The parallel between these growths is close and instructive.

The traces of sacred music in primitive worship are very scanty. When we have noticed

the invention of musical instruments by Jubal,¹ the father of all such as handle the harp and the organ, and the defeated purpose of Laban,² to send Jacob away "with mirth and with songs, with tabret and with harp," we have exhausted all the information the Bible gives us as to the original introduction and use of music. It is probable, though by no means certain, that the music of the period was in some way associated with religion. But the first distinct assurance we have of this, is when on the banks of the Red Sea, Moses and the children of Israel sang their triumphal song. This had a decidedly religious character, and Hebrew psalmody may be traced to this as almost to its very source. The song of Deborah and Barak is metrical in its structure, and was without doubt intended to be sung. But we search in vain the books of Moses to find any clear trace of the incorporation of sacred music into his ritual of worship. In the first institution and observance of public worship, everything was subordinate to the sacrificial idea. It was needful to have the people thoroughly rooted and grounded in this, and that nothing should be introduced which should in any way divert their attention from it.

But when established in Canaan, and brought forward in their religious education so as to

¹ Genesis iv. 21.

² *Ibid.* xxxi. 27.

need and to demand a temple-worship, they needed and demanded a service of song: The popular heart was prepared for the strains of the psalmist, when God had prepared the Psalmist to compose them. The hour had come and the man, — both by appointment of God.¹ The individual felt the need of holy song in which to express his religious emotions; these found voice in the Psalms of David. The congregation felt the need of some service of song in the house of the Lord; that service was provided for in the psalms which the sons of Korah and the sons of Asaph chanted to the accompaniment of psalteries and harps.

Yet what demands our notice especially, is that all this worship of God in song, in psalms composed expressly for it, in a temple-worship which elaborately provided for it, was the slow growth of centuries. The earliest worship of God on earth was by sacrifice without song. Then came song on special eminent occasions, such as the deliverance of Israel from Pharaoh and his hosts. It may be true, — though no trace of this appears in the ritual of Moses, — that the "Levites all along practiced music, and that some musical service was part of the worship of the Tabernacle."² The growth of the institution of sacrifices, from the first offered by

¹ See 2 Chron. xxix. 25.

² See article on "Music" in Smith's *Bible Dictionary*.

Adam to that finished system established by Moses, marks a development in time and in gradation, — exactly like the development of holy song. What a mighty difference every way, between the songs of Miriam and Deborah, and the psalms used in the temple-worship! Christian hymnology, however, has had a similar development. It did not spring into being at once and completely. Christianity was indeed born amid the songs of Mary, of Elizabeth, of Simeon, and of the heavenly host. That early spirit of Christian song had a further expansion in the apostolic age. In the Epistles, — if we may trust the careful and learned judgment of church historians like Dr. Schaff, — appear fragments of primitive Christian songs, which by their insertion bear the sanction and seal of inspiration itself. Examples are found in 1 Tim. iii. 16, — that terse delineation of the great mystery of godliness which even in the English version seems to have a rhythmical movement in it; and in 2 Timothy ii. 11, where the Greek particle indicates a quotation, and the parallelisms a poetical quotation. Grotius finds, in Acts iv. 24–30, the substance of a hymn to Christ, the first Christian song. The Apocalypse is full of doxologies and antiphonal songs. The psalmody of the Old Testament was beyond all doubt the first used by the apostolic church. But not exclusively, for

there grew up with it a distinctively Christian hymnology. Tertullian, Eusebius, Origen, all mention the existence and use of these hymns to Christ. Eusebius (A. D. 314) quotes from an earlier historian when he says, "How many songs and odes of the brethren there are, written from the beginning by believers, which offer praise to Christ as the Word of God, ascribing divinity to Him."¹ The quotation shows that Christian hymns had then been committed to writing in great numbers. Dr. Coleman's remark on this passage is striking and true, "We here have evidence of the existence of a Christian hymn-book from the beginning."²

The earliest hymnology is of course that of the Oriental Church. So mightily did the spirit of Christian song brood over the souls of the Oriental Christians, that we are told that if all the Greek Church poetry were put together it would make four thousand quarto pages closely printed in double columns.³ Most of it has no permanent value. But we owe to the Greek Church of the third, or perhaps the second century, the "Gloria in Excelsis," known originally as the Morning Song in the Apostolical Constitutions; and also the "Te Deum" in an earlier form, which Ambrose

¹ Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, lib. v. xxviii.

² Coleman's *Ancient Christianity*, p. 328.

³ J. M. Neale quoted in Schaff's *History of the Church*, vol. iii. p. 583.

afterwards expanded and enriched. And such hymns as that of Anatolius, Patriarch of Constantinople (†458), on Christ stilling the tempest, Neale's fine translation of which, beginning, —

“ Fierce was the wild billow,” —

is found in the “ Sacrifice of Praise,” No. 149, show us how in those primitive ages the highest lyrical excellence was sometimes joined to the profoundest doctrinal statements. The extent of the Greek hymnology is all the more remarkable when it is remembered that in the outset the Greek Church adhered rigorously, almost exclusively, to the Psalms of David; and did not, until the fifth century, lose its prejudices against uninspired poetry in worship.

Latin hymnology flourished from the fourth to the sixteenth century. It is said, by those who have made it their study, to be smaller in compass than the Greek, but richer in simplicity, vigor, and truth. As containing “ a more subjective appropriation and experience of salvation,” and as being an accented and rhymed poetry, it “ forms the transition to the Evangelical Hymn.” Ambrose and Bernard are the links which bind in the unity of sacred song, Gregory Nazianzen and Anatolius, to Paul Eber and Martin Luther. Much of it, especially the later, is vitiated with idolatrous homage to Mary. But much of it, in translations which catch with wonderful aptness the meaning and

flavor of the original, can express for us the very truest and deepest worship of all believing hearts. The "Gloria in Excelsis" is known to us by its Latin reproduction. The "Te Deum," the "bright consummate flower" of all the hymns which we owe to Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, is the most magnificent of uninspired hymns. It stands nearest the inspired psalms for sublimity and devotion. "Jerusalem, my Happy Home," is only a transfusion of an ancient Latin hymn. "Jesus the very thought of Thee,"¹ "Jesus thou joy of loving hearts,"² hymns of Bernard of Clairvaux, styled by Luther "the best monk that ever lived," are somewhat recent translations which the Christian heart has taken already to its warmest affections. "O Bread to pilgrims given,"³ a sacramental hymn by Aquinas, is a translation of a Latin hymn by one of our own choicest hymn-writers, Dr. Ray Palmer, and is full of sacramental joy and richness. In regard to these, and such as these, it has been most truthfully and beautifully said,⁴ "the old hymns of the Church have come back to us in their true dignity and power as representations of a religious life which the Spirit of God never suffered wholly to die out. They are the hymns of the early sanctuary sung by Christians whose fathers had

¹ *Sacrifice of Praise*, No. 155.

² *Ibid.* No. 156.

³ *Ibid.* No. 513.

⁴ *Bib. Sacra*, vol. xvi. p. 214.

joined with the Apostles in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. They are the hymns of the early morning prayer-meeting, in which the heathen overheard Christians singing before daylight in praise of Christ as God. They are the hymns of the early Christian homes, which were sung at marriage-feasts, and over the cradles of children, and at the morning and evening fireside. They are the hymns of the Eucharist and of Baptism in which the spirit of primitive consecration breathed the fragrance of its piety. They are the early pastoral hymns of the Church, which 'you could not go into the country without hearing,' says Jerome, 'from the ploughman, the mower, and the vine-dresser.' . . . They are some of them older than any living language, yet to-day they speak the life of Christian hearts as freshly as when they were first written." It is high time that such hymns were incorporated with our English hymnology. The Church has no right to leave them out of her manuals of song, or to leave them unsung when inserted. Hymns like the "Gloria in Excelsis" and the "Te Deum," are the heritage of the Church Universal, and should be its song.

Scarcely less is the Reformation to be noted for its revival of the spirit of sacred song than for its revival of pure doctrine. Yet as there were "Reformers before the Reformation," so

there were hymn-writers among the Albigenses and the Bohemian brethren. "The current of Continental Protestantism was early and strongly set in the channel of an original hymnology, . . . long before English hymnology as distinct from psalmody was in existence."¹ The heart of the awakened Church called for hymns, as well as the Bible in the vernacular, and Luther gave them both. The confessions and catechisms conveyed true doctrine into the understandings, but the hymns of Luther and his compeers and successors sung it into the hearts of the people. At first this took the form of a versified psalmody, at least with Calvin, but soon the distinctively Christian hymn appeared, claimed and took its place in the service of song. Calvin himself wrote a hymn, which has just appeared in English dress.² From the historian of English poetry we learn, that "France and Germany were instantly infatuated with a love of psalm-singing. . . . The energetic hymns of Geneva exhilarated the convivial assemblies of the Calvinists, were commonly heard in the streets, and accompanied the labors of the artificer." The hymnological studies of the last few years have revealed the extent and the evangelical richness of the German hymnology. "Hymns from the Land of Luther," is a household book with many.

¹ *Bib. Sacra*, vol. xvi. p. 212.

² Schaff's *Christian Song*.

Gerhardt, Schmocke, Angelus, Laurenti, are names which begin to fall on our ears like those of Watts, and Wesley, and Doddridge.

The period of English hymnology ushered in by Watts, continued by Doddridge and the Wesleys, is in some respects more marked than any in the history of Christian song. The Christian hymn had to fight its way to recognition, and it was a "good fight of faith." It was opposed by the force of tradition, prejudice and very honest, very strong, very strange convictions. Dr. Watts was by the very nature of his position compelled to be a "bold and determined innovator." Up to his time nothing but versions of the Psalms — the standard of perfection in which was *first*, literal and prosaic adherence to the original; and *secondly*, rhyme or its caricature, — had any acknowledged right to a place in worship. We can scarcely conceive now, how these words from his preface to his first book of psalms and hymns, must have startled many good people in his time: "I am bold to maintain the great principle on which my present work is founded, and that is, that if the brightest genius on earth, or an angel from heaven, should translate David, and keep close to the sense and style of the inspired author, we should obtain thereby a bright or heavenly copy of the devotion of the Jewish king, but it could never make the fittest psalm-book for a

Christian people." He went beyond this even, and asserted the right of a *Christian hymn*, founded on *any* portion of inspired truth, to take its place in the service of song. The ancient Church had acknowledged it; the churches of the Reformation had acknowledged it. Watts gained the right for *his* psalms and hymns, and so for all, by writing such as were so superior that they compelled the recognition. The excellence of our modern hymn-books may be quickly tested by ascertaining what proportion of their selections are from Watts. He unloosed the spirit of Christian song which soared aloft and has been brooding over choice souls ever since. To Dr. Watts we are indebted for Doddridge, Toplady, the Wesleys, Cowper, Newton, Anne Steele, Bishop Heber, Lyte, Montgomery. He created the hymnology to which they have made such rich additions. That hymnology has already reached a large and symmetrical growth, but the more recent additions to it of such hymns as that of Charlotte Elliott, —

"Just as I am;"¹

that of Mrs. Sarah F. Adams, —

"Nearer my God to thee;"²

that of Ray Palmer, —

"My faith looks up to Thee;"³

¹ *Sacrifice of Praise*, No. 350.

² *Ibid.* No. 419.

³ *Ibid.* No. 139.

show us that an "untold affluence of lyric thought yet lies in the Word of God, unuttered in lyric verse." The development of our Christian hymnology is perhaps complete so far as its main body is concerned. But it will have additions, and the church needs these as they come.

Here, then, we have two remarkable historical developments, the one resulting and terminating in an inspired psalmody, the other resulting, but not yet terminated, in an uninspired Christian hymnology. Both together make up the praise of God in its completeness. The grand and ineffaceable distinction between them is, that one is inspired and the other is uninspired. But though uninspired, the Christian hymn has had the seal of divine approval put upon it, in its manifest agency in producing a riper and more happy Christian life. Both are needed, in the complete service of song, in the house of the Lord. "Psalms and hymns" the Church of Christ needs and should have, the psalm just as it was composed, sung to a chant, the hymn or psalm-version sung to goodly church tunes. No church of Christ can wisely give up the chanting of psalms. Only so can the Christian soul sing the praises of God as the Holy Spirit has framed them, and as such they should be sung as well as read. Jesus must

have used a chanted psalmody, when with his disciples he sang the Hallel around the first communion table. Good men, — men to whom the whole church looks up with confidence and love; men like the late Dr. James W. Alexander of this city — have taken high and strong ground in favor of their use.¹ The General Assembly in its Hymnal has acceded to this view. It has sent forth to the churches for their use an inspired psalmody and an uninspired hymnology; the one to be used in chants, the other in tunes, both together making up the completeness of the service of song in the house of the Lord. There is no more reason why a congregation should not learn simple chants, — and the excellence of all church music lies in a pure and strong simplicity, — than tunes like “Duke Street” and “Mear.” The union of the two in the worship of God in song would seem likely to insure the highest spiritual power. The chant is stately and majestic. The hymn is free and flowing. The chanted psalm or other Holy Scripture moves the soul to adoration. The hymn, sung in a more familiar way, moves the soul to heavenly communion. The one is more objective; calls out the devout affections, by presenting in in-

¹ “There can be conceived no mode of singing God’s praise more simple, grave, impressive, and truly Protestant than the chanting of the very words of Scripture by all the voices of a congregation.” — *Sacramental Discourses*, p. 94.

spired poetry Divine glories to the view of the soul. The other is more subjective, and has to do with the soul's inner wants, desires, aspirations. If my soul has been lifted up toward God on the sublime strains of a *Venite* or *Jubilate*, and with David I have rapturously sung, "O come, let us sing unto the Lord," "O be joyful in God all ye lands," and my soul through the touch of God's Spirit has caught and breathed out in turn something of David's profound exulting adoration, I shall be more deeply moved when in simpler strains and more inward experiences and more directly expressed human wants and aspirations, I sing the hymn of Wesley, "Jesus lover of my soul," or Mrs. Adams's "Nearer my God to Thee."

Without Christian hymnology all distinctively Christian elements disappear from the worship of holy song. "Though there are many gone before me," said Dr. Watts in his preface to his version of the Psalms; "who have taught the Hebrew Psalmist to speak English, yet I think I may assume the pleasure of being the first who hath brought down the royal author into the common affairs of the Christian life, and led the Psalmist of Israel into the Church of Christ without anything of the Jew about him." It needs this union of inspired psalmody and Christian hymnology to have the New Testament appear at all in the service of song in the house of the Lord.

After this survey of the historical growth of Christian hymnology, we are prepared to see what are the characteristics of a true hymn.

First of all it must have its source in inspired truth.

It is a very curious historical fact that it was a favorite project with some of the early English psalmists, that all Scripture should be versified and sung. The first fourteen chapters of the Acts of the Apostles were thus versified and actually sung in the royal chapel of Edward VI. The books of Genesis and Kings were "done" into metre. Yet the principle was a right one, that the hymn should have its source in inspired truth. Not to Nature, not to human ethics, but to the Word of God, Christian hymn-writers must turn. The idea of the hymn must square with divine truth as its rule of faith. The spirit of the hymn — its aroma, its indescribable tone — must come from the Word of God. The power of our best hymns is all grounded in their inspired theology. Watts, the great leader in the grand swelling chorus of sacred song, has set the purest and strongest example in this. He has but one source of inspiration for his hymns as well as for his psalms. Many of them are so immediately founded on the Scriptures, that the very verse or passage which suggested and shaped them, is at a glance detected. His hymns have

quite as much of inspired truth in them as his psalms. The pulse of inspiration beats strongly in them all. And this is the hiding of their power. He has been closely followed in this by every hymn-writer of any note. "The most hearty hymnology of any age,—that to which the most genuine religious life will always respond feelingly, and which in return will be most tonic to any living experience in the church,—must be that which is most intensely pervaded with Biblical thought." The reason is simply this, that *only so* will there be most unction from the Holy One in the hymn. In so far as any hymn-book contains in its hymns the living Word of God, it contains the spirit of God. It is not inspired, but it has the Spirit of inspiration in it and which exhales from it. "Replete with Scriptural thought, radiant with Scriptural imagery, and fragrant with Scriptural devotion," it, by manifestation of the truth, must commend itself to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Gathering substance from the Word of God, hymns should, in the next place, take form and shape from God's laws as these are expressed in the structure of the mind. These are, plainly, that they should have lyrical excellence, should be poetic. He has so constituted the soul of man that hymns having high merit as lyrical poetry affect it most

powerfully. He has conformed the structure of inspired psalms to this law of mind. They are inspired poetry. A hymn-writer must have the lyrical mind and gift in order to be a true hymnologist. The same truths that are expressed in the twenty-third Psalm are contained in a thousand tracts and sermons; but what soul is so untutored that it would not feel the difference between Watts's beautiful version of that psalm, and the prose of the sermon or the tract? Thousands of so-called hymns have died, and hundreds more ought to die, because they are simply rhymed prose. God's pattern is shown us in the holy mount of inspired psalmody, where Siloa's brook flowed fast by the oracle of God. He has by laws of mind illustrated in inspired poetry, and by the earnest verdict of Christian experience, taught us that the hymn to be a true hymn must be lyrical, — must have in it a charm and flavor of poetic excellence. It is not God's design that we should sing prose in rhyme. Dr. Watts has recorded of himself, "It was not my design to exalt myself to the rank and place of poets; but I was ambitious to be a servant to the churches, and a helper to the joy of the meanest Christian." But the excellence of his service to the churches, and his timely help to many a poor soul struggling for light and life, are found in this — that he brought

to the structure of his hymns lyrical fire, lyrical skill, lyrical taste. He caught his inspiration from the psalmody of David. The lyrical form is in its sphere, as imperative as the Biblical substance of the hymn is in its sphere.

It is another characteristic of true hymnology, that it gives expression to a various and deep Christian experience. It has been admirably said, "that the ideal of a perfect hymn-book is that of a perfect expression of the real life of the church in forms perfectly adjusted to the service of song. Every true hymn is a psalm of life; some soul has lived it." For on this depends its power to stir kindred emotions. Hundreds of hymns have been written and have found their way into collections, which cannot answer to this test. They touch only the surface of Christian feeling, and can by no possibility penetrate into the depths of true religious emotion. They are as much lacking in this element, as in the lyrical. They can be read or sung in no other than a mechanical way. If they express no deep life, how can they awaken any. "Like begets like," is as true for hymns as for nature. They put into the lips of a Christian manhood or womanhood what are the expressions of the merest Christian infancy, and so violate the Scriptural injunction that we put away childish things. It is the test to which we may safely put any hymn that

we crave it or that we reject it in our hours of deepest Christian experience. It is as impossible for a superficial hymn to touch the soul to its best devotion, as for a thin and poor harmony in music to stir the soul of one who loves the concord of sweet sounds. It is as impossible for a true hymn to help finding responses in the Christian soul, through its expression of deep Christian feeling, as for one Æolian harp to help responding to another by its side when its strings are swept by airs from heaven. No soul that has known any of the deeper experiences of the throne of grace, any of the hidden blessedness of communion with God, but will pass instantly by all superficial hymns on this subject, to find in Charlotte Elliott's hymn on the hour of prayer an instant and joyful echo. And this Christian experience, expressed in hymns should be as *varied* as it is deep. It sweeps through a vast scale of degrees. From dejection to rapture, from the agony of struggle to the triumph of victory, from penitence to adoration, from submission to aspiration, in activity and in meditation, in sickness and health, in view of death, in the very last hours of life, in view of heaven, at the Lord's table, in social worship, in rooms of sickness, at the fireside, in the solitude of personal approaches to God, in all these seasons, under all these circumstances, some new chord of Christian experience must

be struck, and the hymns express it in full clear voice. Hence, every hymn-book must be largely historic, and have in it the hymns of the ages. The hymns of the ancient Church are marked by an intensity of devotion to the person of Christ, and by the deepest expression of the individuality of the relation between the Redeemer and his disciples. Each age has its own peculiar expression for its hymns. And the true hymnology gathers it all up and conducts its worshippers in song over all the varied richness of its sweet and strong emotions.

And still another characteristic of a true hymnology is that it be Catholic in its type. It is said of Dr. Watts that this spirit of Christian unity was so strong that he had hung on the walls of his study, side by side, portraits of the eminent saints in widely different communions. Luther and Bellarmine, Calvin and Arminius, Leighton and Bunyan. Protestant and Romanist, Predestinarian and Anti-Predestinarian, Dissenter and Churchman, looked down on him while he wrote hymns for them all to unite in singing. It was the same spirit which led him to wish that the pall-bearers at his funeral should represent men of differing faiths. Christian song refuses to be polemic. Polemic hymns, hymns which set in rhyme the differences of Christians, die by a sure and speedy

death. Hymns cannot be arguments. It crushes the life out of hymns to put them into the logical processes necessary to teach the distinctive sectarian peculiarities. On whatever else Christians differ, they must agree in the hymns they sing. If we may not enter each other's pulpits, or sit down at each other's communion tables; if we may not say our prayers in the same forms, or baptize in the same modes, when we come to the service of song in the house of the Lord there is unavoidable unity. The whole Church sings the same hymns, in great part. Translated from one tongue to another tongue, all sing the "Gloria in Excelsis," and "There is a Fountain filled with blood," and "O for a closer walk with God." God has ordained this bond of Christian unity in the hymns of the Church, and it cannot be broken.

It was needful to examine the development and true structure of our hymnology before we could fully appreciate *the uses of our Christian hymnology*. Its chief purpose is to evoke, or to aid in evoking the most spiritual and deepest worship of God. It has any fitness to do this just in so far as it embodies Biblical truth, — and Biblical truth in forms which have come right up out of the heart of a deep Christian experience. When, however, the hymns of the Church have transmuted into lyrical forms

these mighty truths of Christianity, and have been the voices in which saints of the Lord in their most elevated spiritual states have seen them, and felt them, and sung them, then the Spirit of God has a fit instrument for calling out the most exalted worship of God. For God has made the soul of man so as to be moved by poetic forms. The rudest tribe of men has yet its bards. God has made the soul of man so as to be moved by the concord of sweet sounds. He who made the ear and the laws of sound, He surely contemplated the highest sphere and use for which in their mutual relations these were ordained. Did He make the human eye for anything less than that it should see his power and his wisdom, and worship Him in its seeing? Did He make the human ear for anything less than that through it should be poured into the spiritual heart some soul-moving strains to his praise? The Spirit of God uses the laws of mind, as well as the truth of God in converting a sinner to Christ. The self-same spirit uses the laws of the soul and the truth in hymns, to evoke, or aid in evoking his purest, deepest worship. "How did I weep in thy hymns and canticles, touched to the quick by the voices of thy sweet attuned Church! The voices flowed into my ears, and the truth distilled into my heart, whence the affections of my devotion overflowed, and tears ran down,

and happy was I therein, the brethren zealously joining with harmony of voice and hearts." St. Augustine has in these words embodied the whole philosophy of Christian praise.

A choice hymn is an adoring presentation of truth. It is a direct appeal to the deepest and tenderest Christian sensibilities. Many hymns are prayers, breathing the very closest communion with God. They have in them the very life-blood of Christian worship. It is impossible, utterly impossible, for any soul to use them in any spirituality of mind and not have its affections drawn up and drawn out and offered devoutly to God. We talk of wingéd words. No words are so wingéd as those of a hymn which takes the affection of a renewed soul, and soars away on strong pinions up to the very throne of God, around which those redeemed from the earth are singing the "new" song.

But the use of hymns as worship is seen again in their reflex influence on all the other parts of worship. Suppose on any Sabbath morning the version of Watts, —

"Great God indulge my humble claim,"¹ —

has been the opening service of song, and that as it has moved from stanza to stanza, the affections of the heart have flowed along and with its words. The soul has claimed in hu-

¹ *Sacrifice of Praise*, No. 229.

mility, but with fervor, God as its hope, its joy, its rest. In faith it has appropriated the glories that compose the name of God, as covenanted to the believer to make him blest. It has joyfully recognized its relation to God, as a son and a servant bought with blood. It has breathed out longings for God intense as the thirst of panting harts. It has avowed its delight in the sanctuary with its communion of saints. It has ended its psalm with the most solemn of personal consecrations to God, —

“ I'll lift my hands, I'll raise my voice,
While I have breath to pray or praise ;
This work shall make my heart rejoice,
And spend the remnant of my days.”

If the affections of the soul have been moved in the sacred channels of this psalm, how can it be otherwise than that the reading of God's Word shall fall upon an open heart, an active conscience, and an obedient will ? What could so well prepare the soul for prayer to God as this calming, composing, yet quickening power of sacred song. The best possible preparation for supplication is a choice hymn, or psalm, or chant devoutly sung by God's people. More than anything else it will banish intruding worldly thoughts, and lift the soul out of its dull round of earthly care. As the harp of David charmed away the evil spirit of Saul, so it will again charm away the thought of world-

ly pride, or passion, or business, or anxiety. And what is true for one part of God's public worship, is true for all. Preaching depends much for its power on the singing of hymns. The effect of many a sermon has been lost because the heart lost its preparation for the truth in the worship of song. And as one hymn devoutly sung but inflames the heart to higher strains of praise, the whole service from beginning to end is the richer or the poorer, as the hymns of worship have been sung listlessly or earnestly, formally or spiritually, with gladness or with dullness.

But the hymnology of the church has other uses than those involved in public worship. It has a use in the homes of the people as well as in the sanctuary of the Lord. Our favorite hymns are our companions in the hours of private devotion. They, in the solitary reading of them, compose our minds to communion with God and elicit our tenderest emotions. That Christian has something yet to learn of what his private devotions may be made to him for comfort and strength, who has not learned how to use his hymn-book in such seasons. He can never fail to find some hymn which will exactly match his mood of spirit. Has some great mercy filled his cup to overflowing? Let him read that psalm of Watts, —

“What shall I render to the Lord.”

Has some great solicitude burdened his soul till life has become a weary load? Let him read that choicest of hymns on submission to God, found in our collection beginning, —

“Hast thou within a care so deep.”¹

In hours of sickness, detention from the sanctuary through long years of a weary invalidism, it may be, in old age, when death draws nigh, — nay in the wakeful hours of night which so often befall many of us, the Christian heart can do no better than to recall the hymns of the church. It would be a most instructive service just to hear, if we could gather up the knowledge, what this private reading of hymns has done for human souls. Dr. James Hamilton, in his “Lectures on Hymns,” states that the conversion of Dr. Leifchild was effected through the reading of one of Wesley’s hymns. After days of darkness and struggle, — if I may be pardoned the personal allusion, — the light broke in for me in reading the version of Watts, “Show pity, Lord; O Lord, forgive.” And I never hear the psalm read without living over again the joy and freedom of that first deliverance from the power of sin and death. This fact of personal history makes me earnest in the conviction that Christians should use the hymn-book in the home, at the family altar, in the hour of secret prayer. No hymn-book

¹ *Sacrifice of Praise*, No. 388.

is properly constructed which omits this as one of its aims, to be a companion for the mercy-seat. It is most gratifying to know from a wide and growing testimony, that this feature of our own book has been warmly commended. The aim is subsidiary, but subsidiary aims are important and essential aims. One star differeth from another star in glory, but the difference is only of degree. The end in all uses of hymns is worship; but the heart of every Christian is a temple of God's Spirit, and on its altar, in the closet of private devotion, he has need to lay his choicest sacrifices of praise.

The use here advocated will indeed largely depend on the memorizing of hymns. How was it that our Lord and his disciples were able to sing the psalms they sang at the first communion? There were no hymn-books in those days, and no Bibles in circulation. The psalms must have been learned by heart. It is a welcome picture for us to draw, — that of Christ's mother teaching him these psalms sung at the Passover festival by every household. What an attractive picture it gives us of this paschal feast; so many households all celebrating it in the voices of holy song. Yes, learn the hymns by heart. Some day there shall come — it may not be far off — a time of sickness, when an enfeebled mind in an enfeebled body will long for some ex-

pression of its faith and love, which it cannot frame for itself. Teach children the hymns of the church, at home, in Sunday-schools. Teach them by singing them. In these days when a flood of the weakest and flattest evangelical jingle is let in upon our Sunday-schools, teach them the best and choicest of the whole.¹ A classic hymn is marked first of all by simplicity of structure and diction. Its simplicity fits it for childhood to learn, and for childhood to sing. I have somewhere heard it said of Mr. Webster, that nothing would stir his interest more quickly than the hymns of Watts, taught him in childhood by his mother; and that he never failed to pay a grateful tribute to the hymns he learned, and her whose wise care of piety taught them. This becomes the more important when it is remembered how much of the service of the sanctuary shoots over the heads of children. Prayer and sermon alike, — too often it may be, and yet by a necessity which the pulpit does not create nor entail. The more reason then that the children find their portion in the Word of the Lord and in the hymns of the church.

It is another and most commanding use of Christian hymnology that it is a conservator of true and fundamental Christian doctrine.

¹ One child's hymn-book teaches the little ones to sing, "I want to be an angel." Soon another is published, which teaches them to sing, "I would not be an angel." This is confusing, to say the least.

There can be no good hymnology except such as is founded on the essential truths of Christianity. There must be a sound theology in hymns, because they must breathe the mind of Christ. They do not teach theology as a system, but they do teach it as a life. They hold it in solution, as clear waters hold the crystalline and precious salts. They indoctrinate the mind through the affections, —and that truth is longest held and best appreciated, which is clung to as a conviction, by the tendrils of the heart. The early heresiarchs well understood this. Gnostics, Arians, and Apollinarians, all employed religious poetry and music as a popular means of commending and propagating their errors. Many of the Fathers advocated the use of a Christian hymnology to subvert the false doctrine and inculcate the true. So thought Chrysostom and Gregory. So thought Ambrose and Augustine. It is easy to discern in the deep-toned, unhesitating ascription of divine honors to Christ, which the “Gloria in Excelsis” and the “Te Deum” embody so majestically, what a safeguard against Arianism they were and are and ever shall be. In the year 1524 Luther wrote to his friend Spalatin the following words: “I propose, after the example of the prophets and the early Fathers of the Church, to write for the people some German psalms or spiritual songs, so that by the

help of song the Word of God may abide among them." A Roman Catholic hymn-writer in England,¹ has published a small collection of hymns inculcating the praises of the Virgin and the intercession of the saints, with a preface in which he says, the hymns of Watts and Wesley, by their indoctrinating power, have suggested this as a necessity of the times for Romanists if they are to hold their faith. The catechism and the hymn-book go together in religious education. The one gives truth in its clear-cut, terse, definite, systematic forms, and makes its appeal to the illumined understanding; the other gives its truths in melodious, experimental, artless statements, and makes its appeal to the illumined heart. Cowper's hymn, "There is a fountain filled with blood," is an answer to the question in the catechism, "How are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ?" Toplady's hymn, "Rock of ages cleft for me," is an answer to the question, "Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?" Charlotte Elliott's hymn, "Just as I am," is an answer to the question, "What is faith in Jesus Christ?" Cowper's hymn on the Scriptures, "The Spirit breathes upon the word," is an answer to the question, "How is the word made effectual to salvation?" Long as the church shall sing such hymns the gates of hell shall not prevail

¹ Faber.

against the truth. If the songs of a people shall be the guardian of popular liberties,—and beyond all doubt they are,—the songs of the church shall be its guardian of a sound faith. These sweet-voiced teachers of a true theology will insinuate the truth into the hearts of men. The fact is, that seeing this, modern skepticism has already begun to send its shafts at hymns and hymn-writers. “Watts,” so it utters its dictum, “wrote love songs, and Cowper was insane, and Wesley was a mere enthusiast.” They may well dread these more even than defenses of the faith in forms of Evidences of Christianity.

One topic more remains for our discussion. It is the principles which should guide the church in its use of hymns.

First, and most evidently and most earnestly, let her insist on using in her worship only the best. “Pure oil olive beaten for the light,” was the only oil for the lighting of the ancient sanctuary. The epithet “beaten,” here indicates that it was oil obtained from olives pounded in a mortar, not pressed in an oil-mill, and so free from the sediment and dregs which the oil of the mill generally contained. The victims offered in ancient sacrifice were to be without blemish and without spot. The principles underlying these directions of an ancient ritual are of perpetual force. They apply to

the prayers as well as to the oil; to the hymns as well as to the sacrifices. Nothing but the best for the Lord's worship in everything. There are many cases in which spirit is not independent of form, and the hymn is one of them. It is self-evident that a more perfect hymn is better fitted to evoke worship than a less perfect hymn. It is matter of experience, that mediocre and weak hymns beget listlessness in the service of song. If of two hymns expressing the same emotions, that one be chosen by the leader which is less rich in its expression, less vigorous, less lyrical in its structure, just in so far has he thrown a check on the outflow of Christian feeling. The people asked of him bread, and he gave them a stone. And if some hymns were given out which are to be found in some collections, when the people asked for a fish, there would be given a scorpion, stinging a pure taste to its bitter wounding. The classical hymns, the best hymns, the hymns which have the most Bible in them, and are fragrant with richest Christian experience, are few, compared with the multitudes that have been written. Some hymns of eminent hymn-writers are far from meeting the high demands in a true hymn, worthy to be associated with an inspired psalmody. Watts wrote hundreds which must needs be forgotten. But the hymns of the best class cover a

very wide field. They answer all legitimate demands. They give the soul all the variety it needs. They supply a worship of song which compasses the whole circle of religious feeling. There is, then, no reason for having any but the best. It is to be feared that too many hymn-books have been made with the market as well as the church in view. They are wares to sell, catering to the popular taste, rather than standards of worship, educating that taste up to higher and nobler expression. It is the opinion of those who have most carefully studied the whole field of hymnology, that thirteen hundred or even one thousand first-class English hymns cannot be found. They are not in being. Any congregation which uses a book or wants a book with as many hymns in it, will use or want to use five or six hundred mediocre hymns, feeble hymns, prosing hymns, debilitating, with a cheap rhyme, the high themes they teach. It is the duty of those who have anything to do with sacred song, to educate the Christian popular heart in the very best and highest forms of devotional experience. Educate any people in such a standard of hymns, and it will turn away from what is irreverent in praying, sensational and meretricious in preaching. It will demand richness, a complete and profound evangelical fullness in the whole worship of the

sanctuary. It will be led to see the reverence and the humility and the high emotional tone in which all worship should be rendered. The key-note of worship is not seldom found in the hymns a people are accustomed to use.

Another principle which should guide the church in its use of hymns, is that it should be with some knowledge of their history. The Spirit of inspiration has seen fit to associate with many of David's psalms the peculiar emergencies of his history. We read over one, as its heading, "A psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son;" over another, "The Shiggaion of David which he sung unto the Lord concerning the words of Cush, the Benjamite;" over another, "A psalm of David when Nathan the prophet came unto him." If we have failed to read the psalms in the light of these headings we have failed to appreciate either their beauty or their force. So hymns have a history. They are many of them the product of most peculiar circumstances. They took their rise in very marked hours of personal history. The melancholy of Cowper, the invalidism of Miss Anne Steele; the strong polemical character of Toplady; the blindness of Blacklock, whose hymn in our collection (No. 55) seems to come from one who had eyes to gaze far into the hidden depths of the blue empyrean above us;

the personal histories of all hymn-writers, should be most deeply studied if we would have their hymns affect us most profoundly. With many hymns, a peculiar history all their own is blended. Lyte's hymn, "Abide with me," written after administering the Lord's Supper to his congregation at Lower Brixham, Devon, and presented to a relative just before retiring to rest for the night, and just, too, before departing for Nice, where he died and was buried, has such a history. Baxter's hymn, "Lord it belongs not to my care," is evidently the outpouring of a soul buffeted for its faith; it suggests to us his persecution under the infamous Jeffries; and when one is told that his "wife in her former sickness subscribed her name to the hymn with a cheerful will, as to a personal covenant," it seems to be hallowed by saintly memories whose sacred power we must feel. The fact that such an awakening to the history of hymns has taken place, is proof enough of its value. It is a subject on which knowledge will kindle devotion.

Finally, they should be used *congregationally*. The reasons for insisting on congregational singing are few and simple, but they are incontrovertible.

1st. Only by such a service of song can we imitate the example of our Lord and his Apostles.

2d. The best and largest part of our churches calls for it. If this part desires to sing the praise of God with its own lips, it is arbitrary and unjust to deprive it of the privilege, that the tastes of the few may be gratified by choir-performances. Not only so, but if it is debarred the privilege, what becomes of the spirituality in the worship of song?

3d. The evidence is abundant that spiritual life is evoked from our hymnology only so far as it is *personally* appropriated to the spiritual wants of the individual Christian.

4th. In the times of highest and purest spiritual activity, the Church of Christ has always demanded congregational singing. Revivals of religion tolerate nothing else. But we have great need to remember that congregational singing is not something which comes of itself and without effort. "If,"¹ said John Calvin, "the singing is such as befits the reverence which we ought to feel when we sing before God and the angels, it is an ornament which bestows grace and dignity upon our worship; and it is an excellent method of kindling the heart, and making it burn with great ardor in prayer. But we must at all times take heed lest the ear should be more attentive to the harmony of the sound than the soul to the hidden meaning of the words."

¹ *Institutes*, ch. xx.

So profoundly was he convinced that special pains must be taken in order to secure an effective congregational singing, that a music teacher was secured, paid by the State, who gave lessons three times a week to several choirs of children. They seem to have led the congregation in its service of song, after a careful training for the purpose. Calvin's idea of Church music was exactly that of Israel's psalmist: *Both young men and maidens, old men and children, let them praise the name of the Lord.* We have need to follow closely the example of our great leader, in the cultivation of sacred song, as well as in his theology. First, the service of praise must be exalted as a part of worship. Then the *fittest* mediums of song-worship in the choicest chants and hymns, should be furnished the people of God, and the tame, mediocre, insipid, prosaic rhymes on spiritual themes, falsely called psalms or hymns or spiritual songs, discarded. And then by a direct education of the people in singing these hymns to suitable tunes, the latent capacities for congregational singing in our churches should be called out. This will take time and pains, but it is well worth all it will cost. In no dim or doubtful sense will it prove true, that a revival of the spirit of Christian song is a revival of religion.

