

Establishing A Canon Of Common Hymn Texts: The Contributions of Louis F. Benson

PAUL R. POWELL

When it was proposed to the Executive Committee in 1998 that The Hymn Society publish a collection of commonly used hymns revised to incorporate inclusive language, the intent was to aid future compilers and editors by providing a canon of common texts. One has only to survey several of the most recently published hymnals to understand the desirability of having a single revised, inclusive language version of a well-loved and often-used older hymn. However, after careful consideration of the proposal, the Society's Executive Committee decided that establishing such a canon would be impractical, if not impossible. How could any person or group come up with an inclusive language version acceptable to all? It was suggested, however, that perhaps a series of articles in *THE HYMN* encouraging dialogue on the issue might be of interest and benefit. It is hoped that this initial article will elicit additional ones.

At the Society's 1999 annual conference in Vancouver the term *expansive language* was beginning to be used, indicating that perhaps we are moving in that direction as a new generation of hymnals subsequent to an earlier generation of *inclusive language* ones begins to appear. Unfortunately, it is the nature of our fast-paced information age that trends or movements in almost everything, including religious and hymnic language, may be so short-lived as to render anything on the order of a common hymn text impossible.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Louis F. Benson faced a similar predicament in the compiling and editing of the highly regarded 1895 Presbyterian hymnal.¹ Benson's challenge, however, was just the opposite: *returning hymn texts to their original versions*. By the late nineteenth century, something of a canon of commonly used hymns was coming into being, but that did not at all indicate that hymns common to a broad range of American denominations and hymnals operated under anything like a canon of common texts. Indeed, just the opposite was true. Benson was keenly aware of the need for establishing

the original versions of as many of the hymns selected for the 1895 hymnal as possible. This was no small task, for no such canon of common texts existed; to obtain the original, unaltered texts involved extraordinary diligence on the part of Benson, as well as considerable expense. In fact, it was this effort that sparked Benson's hymnal collecting, eventually resulting in a collection of more than 9,000 volumes by the time of his death in 1930.

The high esteem accorded the 1895 Presbyterian hymnal is generally related to its interlining of only the first stanza between the staves of music, its page design and layout, and its splendid topical arrangement, all of which influenced American and even British hymnals for at least the first half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, Benson exerted his greatest influence on the hymnal (and thereby upon virtually all American hymnals to follow) by establishing a canon of common hymn texts in the English language. Such influence was not by accident. Benson's philosophy is covered rather succinctly and thoroughly in one of his Stone lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1926 and published the next year in *The Hymnody of the Christian Church*.²

Benson begins this lecture on "The Text of the Hymns" by posing the importance of texts to the Puritan mind from the early colonists and their 1640 *Bay Psalm Book* through the Old School and New School Presbyterians and their hymnals of the mid-nineteenth century. He points out that to seventeenth-century Puritans, the text of their church-songs had come to mean everything, and it was only under the influence of the eighteenth-century revival, and in particular the evangelical enthusiasm aroused by George Whitefield's preaching, that the whole structure of Puritan psalmody gave way and the singing of hymns started almost spontaneously. Quite a controversy raged among American Presbyterians over which versifications of the Psalms should be used, the more literal versus Watts' Christianized free renderings with their evangelical implications.³

According to Benson, this Puritan-Presbyterian concern for text in the versified Psalms carried over into hymns. Both clergy and amateur theologians submitted hymns to close scrutiny, watching and guarding against error, and thus, the texts of hymns had become much more of a concern in the preparation of new hymn books. Likewise, to average Christians who cherished the hymn book for private devotion and learned many hymns by heart, texts meant a great deal more than poetry or any other literature, because hymns came closer to their lives.⁴

Regardless of the high regard that both theologian and lay person had for hymn texts, those texts had been altered from their originals by omission and amendment for reasons ranging from sound doctrine to elementary grammar. In some cases these omissions and amendments were little more than window dressing, but in other cases had substantially altered the original author's intent. More alarming was the fact that so many such omissions and alterations were being made according to the whims of various editors and committees that no canon of common texts existed. The problem was compounded when ordinary Christians memorized certain familiar hymns, only to find that the texts they loved so dearly might be quite different in other hymnals.⁵ This is precisely the complaint of many late twentieth-century Christians regarding familiar hymn texts that have been recast in contemporary and inclusive language. Even some who welcome inclusive or expansive language may oppose any sort of tampering with the hymns they know and love and have sung for years. This is a dilemma not easily resolved by contemporary editors.

Benson provided a striking example of the confusion of texts in the great variance with which Toplady's "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me" was altered in several collections prior to the 1895 Presbyterian hymnal:

Old School Presbyterians were singing "From Thy wounded side which flowed"

New School Presbyterians were singing "From Thy riven side which flowed"

Some Congregationalists were singing "From Thy side a healing flood"

Old School—"Cleanse me from its guilt and power"

New School—"Save me, Lord, and make me pure"

Some Congregationalists—"Save from wrath, and make me pure"

Old School—"Could my zeal no respite know"

New School—"Should my zeal no languor know"

Old School—"Nothing in my hand I bring"

New School—"In my hand no price I bring"

Old School—"See Thee on Thy judgment throne"

New School—"And behold Thee on Thy throne."⁶

In some cases, even the changing of a single word or letter could alter altogether the author's original intent. For example, the original versification of Psalm 100, "All people that on earth do dwell," had a line "We are his *folck*, he doth us feed." The word *folk* was spelled *folck* when the version was first printed in 1560-61, and taken into the English Psalter in 1564. However, within a year some typesetter had mistakenly transposed *folck* to read *flock* and the text retained this error for another 317 years until Godfrey Thring discovered it. Similarly, Charles Wesley's well-known "Love Divine, all loves excelling," had begun to be printed as "Love Divine, all love [no final s] excelling" soon after first appearing, and this erroneous version was so common that many letters of protest were aroused by its restoration to "all *loves*" in the 1895 hymnal.⁷

No hymnal committee or editor prior to the 1895 Presbyterian hymnal had made so conscientious an effort to restore all its texts to such textual integrity. Benson pointed out that although Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology* was both a survey of and a guide to what had been a very roughly charted territory of hymn texts, Julian had been obliged to go to press without having seen a copy of the originals of either Watts' *Hymns* or his *Horae Lyricae*. At the time, there was not even a thesaurus of English hymns, nor were there many collectors to whom editors could turn to obtain the originals.⁸

Benson was not averse to making any changes in hymn texts. He felt that the privilege of making omissions from a text was allowable and even indispensable. Some hymns were simply too long to be printed in their entirety. The key was to present each hymn "with sufficient fullness to preserve its message and to complete its development."⁹

Benson also acknowledged the necessity of amendment. One such amendment made in the 1895 Presbyterian hymnal involved Draper's "Ye Christian heralds, go proclaim" with its assurance of the immunity of missionaries from attack by the forces of nature, which was slightly modified to turn the verses into a prayer for their protection. Another was the slight alteration of the line "Let us find the second rest" from Wesley's "Love Divine, all loves excelling" to a more acceptable "Let us find the promised rest."¹⁰ Benson would admit toward the end of his life that he made too little use of amendment in the 1895 hymnal, but he seemed pleased to have been credited with its use as a source book for later hymnals, and thus its "contributing somewhat to the formation of a common text."¹¹

To Benson, the teaching power of hymns was very great, and in that regard, their words were the vehicle of the teaching. Thus, textual integrity was of utmost importance, especially if the theory that "congregational feeling is better expressed through hymnody than anything else" has the validity so often afforded it.¹²

Benson's first book on hymnody, *The Best Church Hymns*,¹³ was a collection of 32 hymns with his own introduction and notes to each hymn. These hymns were judged best not by his own estimation, but by surveying common occurrence in virtually all the major denominationally and privately published English-language hymnals of the time. They were best because they were used. In analyzing this list of best hymns, Benson came up with five characteristics which help to define what makes a good hymn:

- lyrical quality
- literary excellence
- liturgical propriety
- a tone of reverence
- spiritual reality.¹⁴

Perhaps closer attention to these qualities outlined by Benson a century ago would help contemporary hymnal editors in dealing with the tricky issue of inclusive or expansive language revisions of well-known and well-loved hymns from the past still being used in the churches today. It is no less true today than in Benson's day that hymn editors ought to give careful attention to maintaining the integrity of an author's original text, revising only so slightly as to insure that the intent, if not the language, is the same.

Perhaps one of the most revealing examples of contemporary altering of a well-known and well-loved hymn text, "Be Thou My Vision," is to be found in *The New Century Hymnal*.¹⁵ The very first line has been changed to "Be *now* my vision" which maintains something of a lyrical equivalent but completely changes the character of the original author's intent. The hymn is a prayer or petition for God to be one's vision quite apart from any time reference which *now* implies. Admittedly, "Be *You* my vision" wouldn't work very well, but is anything gained spiritually by dropping the use of *Thou* and replacing it with *now* which completely destroys the hymn's textual integrity? Likewise, although the replacing of *Lord* with *God* in the same line would generally not be offensive, there is the theological uncertainty of whether the original author's designation *Lord* meant God the Creator or Jesus the Saviour.

Placed side by side, the first stanza of the hymn reveals exactly how the altering of this text obliterates the characteristics of a good hymn which Benson outlined: (See below)

Even the archaic language of the original second line has a poetic, lyrical quality to it that the revised wording does not, and although the replacing of *Thou* with *You* in the third line and *Thy* with *your* in the fourth maintains textual integrity, do any of these changes provide a better or clearer voicing of one's prayer? And does not the replacing of *Thou* and *Thy* take away something of the *tone of reverence* which Benson felt to be an important characteristic of the best hymns?

Benson would undoubtedly have wished to change the text back to the original. At the same time, he would not likely have objected to the use of inclusive and expansive language in new hymns, which given sufficient time to be judged best by their use might well live up to those same five characteristics common to those hymns he surveyed in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, the two of Benson's own hymns which have been widely published in contemporary hymnals, "O Sing a Song of Bethlehem" and "For the Bread Which Thou Hast Broken," needed very little amendment or revision to make them completely acceptable to editors desiring inclusive or contemporary renderings. In fact, little more than the changing of "Thou hast" to "You have" in the latter was necessary to do so, and even Benson might have agreed that this is an acceptable amending because it in no way destroys his original intent, nor does it lessen the hymn's lyrical quality, literary excellence, liturgical propriety, tone of reverence, or spiritual reality.

Louis F. Benson would likely be in full sympathy with the predicament of today's hymnal editors in choosing appropriate ways to amend well-known hymns, but he would undoubtedly maintain the attitude that hymn texts should be kept as close to their original versions as possible. He might also admonish contemporary editors to let time be the judge for well-known and well-loved hymns which may or may not be replaced by new hymns yet to be judged best because they are widely used. To Benson, as well as other great hymnologists such as Erik Routley, a hymn is designed to be a congregational act of praise and does not become a good one until its work has been done and it has been sung, or, more precisely, until it has been well written, well chosen, and well sung.¹⁶ Then, and only then, can a hymn be confidently added to a canon of common hymn texts, and it is unlikely that any text already considered part of such a canon can hope to gain ongoing acceptance in a dramatically revised version, however noble the reviser's intent. ☪

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Nought be all else to me, save that Thou art—
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

Be now my vision, O God of my heart;
nothing surpasses the love you impart—
You my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, your presence my light.

From *The New Century Hymnal*, Copyright © 1995 The Pilgrim Press. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Paul R. Powell is Head of Cataloguing at Princeton Theological Seminary and Director of Research for The Hymn Society.

Notes

¹The Hymnal Published by Authority of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1895), hereafter referred to as the 1895 Presbyterian hymnal.

²Louis F. Benson, *The Hymnody of the Christian Church* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927).

³Ibid., 190-191.

⁴Ibid., 192.

⁵Ibid., 192-194.

⁶Ibid., 196-197.

⁷Ibid., 209-210.

⁸Ibid., 204-206.

⁹Ibid., 213.

¹⁰Ibid., 214-216.

¹¹Ibid., 218-219.

¹²Ibid., 219.

¹³Louis F. Benson, *The Best Church Hymns* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1898).

¹⁴Ibid., xxiv-xxix.


¹⁵*The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1995)

¹⁶Erik Routley, *Hymns and Human Life* (London: John Murray, 1952), 297, 299.

Fannie Crosby ■ Isaac Watts ■ Johann Sebastian Bach ■ Charles Wesley ■ Philip Bliss ■ John Newton ■ Judson VanDeVenter ■ Frances Havergal ■ Joseph Hart ■ Martin Luther ■ Wil Thompson ■ Lewis Jones ■ John Wesley ■ St. Anne ■ Henry Francis Lyte ■ Thomas Shepard ■ William Cowper ■ Oswald Smith ■ Francis Asse ■ Carl Rodkey ■ Robert Robinson ■ William Williams ■ Samuel Stennett ■ Augustus Montague Toplady ■ John Fawcett ■ John Cennick ■ Kurt Kaiser ■ Catherine Hankey ■ Bernard of Clairvaux ■ Franz Joseph Haydn


Hymnody in American Protestantism Conference

May 17-20, 2000



Hymns help shape the adoration, faith, longings and hope of American Christians. The ISAE's conference on Hymnody in American Protestantism will explore what hymns reveal about the larger story of American Protestant history, life, and culture. Over forty scholars will present the results of their research on the theology, themes, and imagery of popular hymns; the development and "careers" of particular hymns; and, the role of hymns in various ethnic, regional, and denominational settings. The conference will feature a variety of plenary, concurrent, and panel sessions, as well as three evening *Hymnfests*.

For more information, contact:

 **Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals**
Wheaton College • Wheaton, IL 60187
(630) 752-5437 • isae@wheaton.edu

See the conference website at: www.wheaton.edu/isae.

Funded by the generous support of the Lilly Foundation, Inc.

Frederick Faber ■ Robert Lowry ■ Samuel Medley ■ Edward Perronet ■ Ira Sankey ■ Thomas Ken ■ Reginald Heber ■ G. F. Handel ■ Horatio Spafford