

CH3 as a Manual of Devotion

A paper given by James M. Annand, Lockerbie, at the Autumn Meeting in Dundee Parish Church on Monday 21 October, 1985.

It is twenty two years since the revision of the RCH was first mooted and twelve years since CH 3, as it is rather depressingly popularly known - it sounds rather like a chemical formula - was published so that the book is no longer new and indeed judging by the life spans of its predecessors a quarter or even a third of its existence has already passed and in another fifteen or twenty years it will be necessary for the appropriate authorities to start taking order for yet another Hymnary more in keeping with the spirit of the age. CH 3 therefore ought to be, and indeed I think it is, well established in the Church.

It has taken its place in a notable succession and it is perhaps worthwhile considering briefly the very beginning of that tradition of which it is the current example. It is always possible to go back to Calvin in the Church of Scotland and on this subject of the place of hymns and music in our devotions he had something to say which is still quite useful. His remarks in the Institutes have been paraphrased thus: "If the singing come not from the heart it is worth nothing and can only awaken God's wrath. Singing in itself is good and useful; our tongues must praise God and, as we honour him by a common faith, we must also be united in glorifying Him before men, that they may hear our confession of His name and be inspired with the desire of following our example. Singing in the Church has been practiced from the earliest times; the apostle Paul recommended the use of spiritual songs. But neither the ear nor the spirit must be distracted. Augustine remarks that he preferred the style recommended by Athanasius, which was rather speaking than singing; but the latter awakened feelings in the highest degree edifying to his soul. With proper moderation, therefore, the use of singing is holy and useful. Those melodies which are introduced merely to give pleasure are not agreeable to the majesty of the Church, and must be infinitely displeasing to God."

In his usual thoroughgoing fashion Calvin ended up by having nothing but the Psalms set to very dignified but plain tunes and for three hundred years we laboured under this dispensation until it occurred to somebody that after all the Psalter started out in life as a hymn book and perhaps the heavens would not fall if a more varied devotional diet were provided. Well I think that CH 3 is still recognisably within the tradition that Calvin started. He would have approved the reverence and the dignity and the quality that are its hall marks and of course it

goes without saying that a hymnary's value as a devotional aid stands or falls by the attitude which its users adopt. So CH 3 is still in the tradition that was begun by our Genevan forebears in the faith and such criticisms as have been most vociferously advanced against it have complained that it is too staid, too much emphasis has been laid upon the timeless and the classical and not enough attention has been paid to contemporary thoughts and ideas and it should have been rooted more firmly in these latter years of the 20th century. It is urged that there are a great many modern hymnographers and composers whose work ought to have been included making it more representative of the times and giving it a far wider appeal especially to the young. In short CH 3 is far too much like its predecessors to be altogether a good thing. But on the other hand there are certainly not lacking those who hold with equally agitating insistence that the book has departed too far from what is alleged to be anciently received orthodoxy; it has not enough of their particular brand of evangelical fervour. There are no doubt many other varieties of critic whose voices have been raised against it but now that we have had time to get over our own particular disappointments about the exclusion of our own particular favourites I am sure that the vast majority of people who have gradually got used to the book are glad that it does not go to either extreme nor pander unduly to vociferous minorities.

As far as traditionalism goes one has only to consider how long it apparently takes to bring a hymnary to birth to understand that the compilers have to weigh very carefully the likely value of hymns and, that they should lean to well tried examples is not only natural but sensible for how quickly things change. If the editors seem rather conservative in some eyes so are the vast majority of the people for whom they were catering. When one thinks how dated some of the ideas that moved us in the sixties now appear we should be thankful that not too many samples of the hymns of the sixties crept in for what was topical then might not appear to be very helpful or contemporary nowadays, when so many of the aspirations of the sixties have come to little or nothing.

Hymns are unquestionably the most popular items of public worship but they do labour under the disadvantage of employing two different arts and while I imagine that everyone can appreciate in some degree the words and the verses, by no means everyone is endowed with sufficient musical ability to participate fully in anything other than the simplest of tunes, though this does not mean that they cannot find hymns helpful and rewarding. It is always quite encouraging to recall that the great Prof. Cooper who did so much to encourage the introduction of the ancient hymns and greater musical adventurousness was tone deaf so that for him organs thundered and choirs bawled in vain but nevertheless he was able to imagine the value of music and accomplished much for the Church's praise despite a great handicap. So the mere fact that some people are not very musical does not

necessarily mean that they do not like hymns or find them helpful but there is no doubt that having to serve two arts does cause great difficulties and it is not often that the two can be so combined that the words and the music mutually enhance each other so that the one without the other seems quite incomplete. Of course it does happen and often it almost happens but on the whole the majority of hymns have tunes that are perhaps very good and greatly assist the flow and understanding of the words but lack this final perfection that carries a hymn out of the Church and into the repertory of the world as a whole.

I often wonder if the highly gifted musicians who edit hymn books in their search for the perfectly appropriate tune always realise the abysmal darkness that shrouds so many of us in this direction. In their undoubtedly very difficult task of matching words with music so that meaning and dignity are added to the words it seems to me that they sometimes go to rather pedantic lengths to ensure the musical best which alas only too commonly means upsetting the life-long prejudices of simple and devoted church people and in CH 3 one feels that there has been quite a lot of that sort of thing of making improvements that please the musician. Of course if every congregation was possessed of a really able Choir Master the difficulty could be swiftly and simply resolved for such a person can do marvels in teaching a congregation a new tune or hymn in a matter of minutes. I always recall some years ago attending a service at St. Margaret, Westminster which, too late, I discovered was also being attended by the members of the British Horse Society for their annual kirkling. In the five minutes before the Service began the then Choir Master, Mr. Richard Hickcox taught those present a brand new hymn with a brand new tune written specially for the occasion and half an hour later during the service we all sang it at least with a certain measure of familiarity. Whether the effort was worthwhile is another matter; all I recall is the bit that implored "Teach us all to love our horses/Keep us from all evil courses/ Help us to do right." Well a capable musician can do that sort of thing but how few congregations are privileged in that way. Many people feel that CH 3 perhaps expected a rather greater musical literacy than really prevails. Some of its hymns are in consequence saddled with tunes which to an able musician are simplicity itself but to the rest of us are as mysterious as the Higher Mathematics and like so many of the hymns in The Old Book will just never be sung in the average congregation who are really the people for whom the book is written.

One can get round such difficulties, as we all know, in some cases quite easily just by using the old tune or substituting another well known one but such improvisations can be very tiresome and even a slight change in words can be disastrous while a moment's carelessness can be quite catastrophic. Again let me recall not long since attending an Induction service in a small country Church for once filled to the doors. The congregation still adhered to the RCH while the

Presbytery which provided the copies of the words was reconciled to CH 3. The Organist, a man of much character and strong principles, looked up in his book the hymn Come Holy Ghost and in the heat of the moment made a terrible mistake so that we sang in due course The Veni Creator to the tune of S. Columba - it can be done; we did it and while it sounded awful we probably paid far more attention to the words than we might otherwise have done but it was scarcely devotionally rewarding and would have earned Calvin's hearty condemnation.

Now what I have been saying applies to all hymns and hymnaries but such things are I think important when one comes to think of our own hymnary as a Manual of devotion. An aid to prayer or praise ought to bring one to a frame of mind where one finds spiritual serenity and if the words or the music make one feel even slightly uncomfortable or uneasy then there has been a failure for it becomes just that much harder to achieve the desired state of mind wherein one can contemplate God and commune with Him. In the natural course of things there are always so many distractions in the worship of the Church all trying to wean our minds away from our purpose that it is surely extremely important that even slight improprieties should be smoothed away and not allowed to add their quota to the general petty disturbances that surround us. One could wish that the editors had perhaps sometimes left alone what was reasonably well at what seems unnecessary change; there might have been fewer people labouring under a sense of grievance which does nothing for their souls.

Having lamented that the musicians had sought too high a standard of excellence it is perhaps only fair to remark on the gradual improvement of the literary standard of the words which is so much higher than those of the book's two predecessors. There was much that was colourful in the old book's more spectacular offerings but there was much equally that one could scarcely use in any normal service with any feeling of propriety. There were many hymns in the old books whose disappearance can hardly be lamented. For example Gillman in his "Evolution of English Hymns" remarks "Of the Sankey type of American hymn there is little need to write. It cannot be questioned that it helped the inner life of many people, though it is equally certain that it hindered others. Historically it is of little count." Well they have gone but even allowing for the great improvement in literary quality (and the Sankey type of hymns were not the only offenders in the old books) I do not know that there would be many people who would read CH 3 as an anthology of religious verse. It is an odd thing that while the list of composers and arrangers of the music contains many of the greatest names in music the list of authors with one or two exceptions contains none of

the great names of secular poetry even though many of them have written religious verse. I suppose it shows what a highly specialised field the hymn writers craft is and presents a challenge that even the greatest musicians have been glad to accept for God's glory. But CH 3 is blessed in having so many hymns that do in fact read extremely well.

One of the most important features of any Hymnary is its construction and CH 3 has been ingeniously contrived so that it may easily and simply take its proper place in adoring and amplifying the normal worship of the Church. In some communions the reading of the hymnary as a book of prayers and devotions is encouraged but with us the hymnary is primarily a thing to be used in public worship and indeed is first and foremost a liturgical work of particular importance to us because it is the only means we supply for permitting the ordinary person to take an active part in the liturgy of a Sunday. In their Introduction the Editors make it quite plain that they see the book's use as being a part of the eucharistic pattern of the Church's normal service and to this end they have arranged the contents under three main headings, the first being the Approach to God where the hymns consider the greatness of God and our proper attitude to him; the second consists of hymns that set forth the Word of God following generally the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as the Creeds declare it, while the third division is concerned with the response that we ought to make to the Word. The Introduction which I am sure few people read regularly has indeed a short section on how to use the book wherein it is suggested that by recognising this general shape those who have to select the hymns for public worship i.e. make the book come alive and work as a means of devotion, will find their task made much easier and I am sure this is quite right, but by implication it does underline the chief difficulty of using any hymn book as an adjunct to worship and that is the truly formidable range of choice that confronts the selector and in the end the success or failure of the Book as a Devotional Aid hinges on what is chosen out and used. Certainly the choice ought to be wide enough so that the adherents of the varying schools of thought within the Church can find something to satisfy their own peculiar requirements. But just think of even the principal classification of the hymns. For example there are the admirable translations of the ancient hymns of the Catholic Church; there are some Medieval hymns; there are the Lutheran contributions with their curiously possessive and personal attitude to God; there are the classical hymns of the 18th and 19th centuries carefully weeded out as compared with the RCH so that they form unexceptional examples of their type reflecting in so many instances the contrasting churchmanship of the Victorians;

there is the notable American contribution and there are the hymns of the first half of the 20th century with their noble aspirations and their rather self-conscious endeavours to avoid vulgarity and lapses of taste. These I suppose are the hymns that are particularly associated with us and more modern times being concerned with the humanitarian and social implications of the Gospel. Whereas previous generations laid great stress upon the reality of heaven and the other-worldliness that belonged to their times when human beings were so completely helpless in the face of death, now the emphasis is upon this world and the things of everyday life, "the gay vans and bright busses that roar up and down". So one can go on: there is surely nobody who cannot find somewhere in the book something to satisfy their tastes and edify in their own particular fashion. I think the selection of Psalms in CH 3 has proved a useful thing. But it is just this enormous range that makes it very hard for those who must choose out Sunday by Sunday hymns suitable to the occasion.

Obviously there is no substitute for just sitting down and reading the hymns through so that one becomes reasonably familiar with them and what they have to say and perhaps with luck one will be able to recall at the right moment a hymn which fits exactly with the theme under consideration on any Sunday. I daresay that for those who are so minded, computers might be useful for this, but for the rest of us reliance must be placed on our own too fallible memories and it is only too likely that we shall neglect much that is worthy.

Any Manual of devotion that is worthy of the name does not regard the spiritual state as something static; on the contrary it sees the inner life as something that is always changing and developing and is seldom still so it is never enough just to stick to the old and the well tried ways. A manual of devotion must try to lead us on to an ever growing awareness and a deepening of the inner and spiritual life so that when we set it down we are richer than when we took it up. We see our God more clearly; we see our souls more distinctly. One thinks of such works as Thomas A. Kempis's Imitation of Christ in which the reader is invited to grow into a closer fellowship with Christ and all the classical works on the subject seek a progressive development of the soul. The hymn book therefore should never be just a quarry from which to extract musical interludes as required. It ought to be used in an orderly and logical fashion to amplify and explain what is happening in the rest of the service. Just as the cultivation of the spiritual life suggests the necessity for order and careful progression so hymns should be seen as fitting carefully into the framework of the individual service in which they are used so that they may make their own particular and clear statement about the theme and confirm and expand the meditations of the worshippers.

Now many people have systems of their own for covering the great doctrines of the Church and I daresay they find them perfectly adequate and from their own knowledge and experience are able to select hymns that fit happily into the subject that they have chosen. But I would like to think that nowadays most people do not spend too much time devising their own schemes of devotion but follow fairly closely the Grand Procession of Doctrines which the Church's year brings annually to our notice and this means following fairly carefully the Lectionaries which the Church commends so that a congregation is not left wholly to the imagination however skilled of the incumbent, but is treated to a diet of the great doctrines of the faith which are contained in the lessons appointed to be read Sunday by Sunday and which draw upon the wisdom and experience of the Church as a whole. To my mind it is only in conjunction with a carefully devised lectionary that hymns are able to play the really profound part in a congregation's devotions and point happily the import of what the lessons have been saying and what the sermon has been trying to say.

To do this efficiently requires a wide knowledge of the Hymnary such as quite frankly most of us would have to admit we do not possess. I have often thought that the little Booklet "The Year's Praise" does not receive the place that it's worth merits. I for one have been profoundly grateful for its suggestions. Its authors modestly claim very little for it suggesting that in places it is arbitrary and its selections are by no means definitive. However this may be their wide knowledge of the contents of the hymnary is such that they have been able to provide suitable items of praise which harmonise for the most part quite admirably with the Epistle and Gospel for the day. I owe to having been much instructed by their erudition. This little handbook to the hymnary or something like it is, it seems to me, essential if the hymns selected are to be on as wide a base as possible. It is quite true, of course, that there are many of the booklet's suggestions which have to be rejected because the tune is unknown and nothing else will do but over the years a certain familiarity with the hymnary does enable one to discover what perhaps may prove to be a not unworthy substitute. One does gradually break new ground but it is such a slow process introducing a congregation to new hymns. I have to confess that I always tend to favour new hymns whose tunes cover several other hymns as well. Apart from leading one gently into fresh fields and pastures new the booklet by its easy familiarity with the contents of so many hymns drawn from so many divergent sources is occasionally able to provide light upon the lessons for the day when resource to Commentaries has failed to elicit any inspiration for the sermon. It is I think a testament to the quality of CH 3 that so many of its hymns seem to derive their own inspiration directly from the Scriptures and they are thereby the better fitted to take their place in the Liturgy of a Sunday.

When one examines the hymns one is obviously struck by the range of traditions which have contributed to the compositions of the book. The Church may be sadly divided into competing factions and fragments but it is notable that the authors of the hymns come from every conceivable communion. In our own Church it is not the least of the book's functions that it serves to make us aware of our common heritage with other Christians and bids us by the same token to look beyond our own immediate traditions to the vaster range of the Church Catholic. Surely that is one of the things which any devotional work ought to be able to do and the CH by its sheer comprehensiveness, which can be something of an embarrassment at times, is certainly able to show us something of the greatness of the Church at large. I do not know whether anyone has ever counted how many hymns in it were written by Presbyterians but I have a suspicion that the majority of contributors were, or are, of other persuasions. I have sometimes thought it might be interesting to note for a few Sundays at least just which denominations provided the day's praise. It might help to remind us of just what a very small part of Christendom we are, and I think that that might not be a bad thing.

But at the same time while it speaks to us of the contribution that others make to our spiritual nourishment CH 3 is also one of the things that bind us together as a Church. It is rather sad that nowadays one can never be sure which particular version of Holy Writ will confront one in any given Church and the difference between the various versions is such that at times it is hard to recognise a passage with which one ought to be familiar. It is, I daresay, a good thing that we should have constant opportunity for seeing things in a new and different way but it is also pleasant to find oneself on familiar territory. Allowing for the vagaries of every congregation it is perhaps only the hymns in a service which we find familiar and recognise. Despite the bizarre ongoing as we may happen to consider them, the fact that we sing from the same hymn is at least reassuring. The Bible, the prayers, the Order may all very well be different from what we usually know but at least the words of the hymns remind us that here we are amongst friends and co-religionists! We do well to consider the extent to which any denomination owes its particular character and special devotional ethos to its hymnal. The C of E is perhaps even more divided into High and Low than we are and although they are bound together whether they like it or not by their Prayer Book they show their differences by the hymn books they use; Ancient and Modern, the English Hymnal, Songs of Praise and the rest; each contrives to try to persuade one that this is a different world from any other. We may have our diversities of thought and practice in the C of S but I would think that we have all a common background and a common piety provided by the universal hymn book which despite

having so many diverse ideas between its covers is able nevertheless to reconcile them. Every congregation has its own favourites but there are so many which we all sing whether we are high or dry or low or middle of the road or muscular or whatever the label may be. We may interpret our Bibles literally or liberally; we may read our prayers, compose them or extemporise them or all three but I would hope that we are all united in using the same hymnary and have that much in common. But it is fatally easy nowadays to reproduce words and music in quantity and I wonder if we do well to depart too easily from the somewhat staid orthodoxy of the Church Hymnary as so many people seem to do. It may be well enough upon an odd occasion and experiment may be necessary but as a general thing it has certain dangers. I said earlier that the hymnary's name was rather depressing but upon consideration surely it is most apt for it is just what it says, a hymnary for all the Church and for the third time running the Church has managed to find something that is universally acceptable on the whole to its constituents.

It is a pity when people forget this; it is very easy to teach children jolly little hymns with catchy little tunes and no particular content that certainly could never achieve the pages of the Church Hymnary but how wise is it? I would think that it is most important to familiarise children with the hymnary of the Church and its treasury of praise consisting of things that are solid and likely to be of lasting value. I do not think that anyone would claim that our hymnary is perfect; it is of necessity a compromise but nonetheless it enshrines in fairly memorable form the great doctrines that really matter, on which the Church must insist and with which we all ought to be familiar. It is a function of a hymnary that it should teach and it seems to me that the earlier the age at which such instruction begins the better for the future of the Church. In devout and careful hands the hymnary following a course of spiritual teaching is able in its fashion to show us these great matters of the Faith and it does give us very gradually a deeper insight into the life of the spirit. There is, we are constantly being told, a great hunger and interest for the things of the Spirit nowadays even if this feast apparently is expected to be available without the benefit of formal religion but there is also I suspect a great deal of inability to talk about these things because modern language is very inadequate when it comes to dealing with anything other than very material things. The Bible in modern guise is still trying to find a definitive form; we have nothing comparable to the old Shorter Catechism which provided a whole vocabulary of religious expression and the popular hymns are almost the only vehicle of expression left to the ordinary person, which remains unchanged and apparently unchanging. Someone once said that an engineer was a person who could do for half a crown what any fool could do for five shillings and perhaps one might say the same of the hymn writer; he can express neatly

and clearly and in memorable form what the rest of us can only think in a vague way. This facility is often used by the ordinary rather inarticulate person when faced with the necessity of conveying something which they feel deeply but have no words of their own to use. How often does one hear a parishioner using a phrase from one of the popular hymns to express some emotion which has defeated him or her and in the great crises of life it is remarkable that it is often the words of a hymn rather than the words of Scripture that comes from the lips of even more than nominal church men and women.

In the end the value of CH 3 as a Manual of devotion will be assessed when the time comes to compile its successor and it will be seen how many of its contents are carried on to the new book. At the moment I think that CH 3 reflects very fairly the spiritual thoughts and aspirations of those of us who have been brought up on the Old Book and have found its successor a not unhappily balanced composition. The people who decide CH 3's merits will be those who have grown up with it knowing no other hymnary but subjected to all the influences that obtain in these last years of the 20th century and the first years of the next. They will know what they want to carry forward from it for they will know what they have found helpful, what has shown them God, what has developed their spiritual lives. He would be very bold who offered any conjecture on that subject but I have a feeling that a great many of the old traditional hymns - things like "Abide with me" which ends CH 3 - will get through because they are the spiritual expressions of the Christians of all the ages. They speak to needs that never change and make their appeal because they say what we cannot readily find words to express. But I am sure that there will also be a little group of hymns with their tunes to which CH 3 has introduced us which will accompany the old war-horses into the future. But it is only emerging very gradually which these potential classics might be.

A DIP IN THE ARCHIVES

George W Sprott speaking at the Annual Meeting, 25th May, 1876:-

"Some time ago, at an Irish Synod, there was a great outcry against sacramentalism, when the presiding Bishop said he would like to hear the views of those present on two extracts which he would read. The first was received with expressions of horror and cries of repudiation, the second met with the heartiest approbation. 'Gentlemen,' said the Bishop, 'the first extract which you repudiate with so much abhorrence is from the writings of one of our most illustrious reformers, the latter, which you so loudly applauded, is from the works of that Christ-denying heretic Socinus.' I think it quite possible that a similar experiment in Scotland might in various quarters have similar result."