

Should “old” hymns be modernised?

Have you ever found yourself singing the words of a hymn from memory and realising they are not the same as the congregation is singing from their hymn books or from the projected words on the screen?

I distinctly remember one morning break in the school staff room in Croydon. Our new Head of Music was complaining bitterly about the hymn book we used in chapel – many of the hymns had altered words.

Quite a few of the staff tried to “silence” him – not because they disagreed with what he was saying but because they knew the husband of another member of staff, a local Anglican vicar, had been one of the nine members of the words editorial committee for the said hymn book!!

The hymn book in question was *Hymns of Today’s Church* and the editors aimed at three kinds of revision:

1. Changing thee to you
2. Replacing archaic endings such as “-est” and “-eth”, which sometimes required the re-shaping of whole lines
3. The most difficult change – the re-writing of 19th Century emotive or sentimental language

One example of a hymn, changed in their hymn book:

© in this version *Jubilate Hymns*

All creation join to say:
Christ the Lord is risen today!
raise your joys and triumphs high;
sing, ye heavens, and earth reply:
Alleluia!

Love’s redeeming work is done;
fought the fight, the battle won:
see, our Sun’s eclipse has passed;
see, the dawn has come at last!
Alleluia!

Vain the stone, the watch, the seal:
Christ has burst the gates of hell;
death in vain forbids his rise -
Christ has opened paradise:
Alleluia!

Now he lives, our glorious king;
now, O death, where is your sting?
Once he died our souls to save -
where’s your victory, boasting grave?
Alleluia!

So we rise where Christ has led,
following our exalted head;
made like him, like him we rise -
ours the cross, the grave, the skies:
Alleluia!

Hail the Lord of earth and heaven!
praise to you by both be given:
every knee to you shall bow,
risen Christ, triumphant now:
Alleluia!

Charles Wesley (Wesley’s Hymns No. 716)

“Christ the Lord is risen today”
Sons of men and angels say!
Raise your joys and triumphs high:
Sing, ye heavens; thou earth, reply.

Love’s redeeming work is done;
Fought the fight, the battle won:
Lo! the sun’s eclipse is o’er,
Lo! He sets in blood no more!

Vain the stone, the watch, the seal:
Christ hath burst the gates of hell:
Death in vain forbids his rise,
Christ hath opened Paradise.

Lives again our glorious King!
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
Once he died our souls to save;
Where’s thy victory, boasting grave?

Soar we now where Christ hath led,
Following our exalted Head:
Made like him, like him we rise,
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.

King of glory! Soul of bliss!
Everlasting life is this,
Thee to know, thy power to prove,
Thus to sing, and thus to love.

You will have seen how the words committee of *Jubilate Hymns* applied their three rules to the Charles Wesley text. But - **Rule 3** – have they really retained the meaning of the original?

In the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book and in Hymns and Psalms, lines 3&4 from verse 2 and from verse 3 are omitted - the first two lines of verse 3 becoming the final two lines of verse 2.

In Singing the Faith we, essentially have the previous “Methodist” hymn but the editors have applied *Jubilate Hymns’* Rule 1 and Rule 2 to the text.

When Hymns and Psalms was produced and published in 1983, there were few examples of radical change (Rule 3). There is one change (that I have seen – there may be others!) which radically changes (waters down?) the text of a Charles Wesley hymn.

Version in Hymns and Psalms (also in Singing the Faith)

A charge to keep I have:
A God to glorify;
A never- dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky;

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfil; -
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

Arm me with jealous care,
As in thy sight to live;
And O thy servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,
And on thyself rely,
***So shall I not my trust betray,
Nor love within me die.***

Charles Wesley text (Wesley's Hymns - 1831)

A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never- dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky;
To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfil:
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!

Arm me with jealous care
As in thy sight to live;
And O thy servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give!
Help me to watch and pray,
And on thyself rely,
**Assured, if I my trust betray,
I shall for ever die.**

In the Companion to Hymns and Psalms published in 1988 by the Methodist Publishing House we read the comment, "*The last two lines have been radically altered*". !!!!!!!! – The exclamation marks are mine.

If I ever choose this hymn in a service I am conducting I invite the congregation to join with me in singing the original last two lines.

I am, regrettably, finding more and more changes in Singing the Faith, some of which appear to affect the meaning conveyed.

In conclusion I leave you with words of John Wesley (taken from his "Preface to a Collection of Hymns for use of the People Called Methodists (1779)" and included in the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book).

"Many Gentlemen have done my Brother and me (though without naming us) the honour to reprint many of our hymns. Now they are perfectly welcome so to do, provided they print them just as they are. But I desire they would not attempt to mend them – for they really are not able. None of them is able to mend either the sense or the verse."

Should "old" hymns be modernised?

I have expressed my views, especially when it comes to the Wesley hymns.

I leave you to your own decision!

Eric Brown