

“WORDS OF TRUTH” OR WORDS OF ERROR?

J.P. Thackway

This is the title of a 32-page booklet recently published by the Evangelical Movement of Wales. It is subtitled, “An assessment of the Bible League’s critique of the new Christian Hymns,” and is written by Rev. Stephen Clark, minister of Freeschool Court Evangelical Church, Bridgend, and a consulting editor of the Evangelical Magazine.

We have carefully read Mr. Clark’s arguments, which, lawyer-like, seize upon details to try to render evidence inadmissible. He seems to overlook the Critique’s main contention, which is that in new Christian Hymns (NCH) the editors have made concessions to the modern climate of charismatic-style worship. If, as Mr. Clark maintains, this is not so, then why include songs of this genre?

Another reformed minister wrote to me sometime ago, complaining that the Critique unjustly criticised NCH. According to him, “The words (and music) of people such as Kendrick, Townend, Redman are for the most part very biblical, inspiring, and challenging and the church would be a lot poorer without them ... (new) Christian Hymns is a reformed hymn book – and let us hope that in the next edition more of the fine, modern songs are included ...”

The reply I sent seems equally applicable to the discussion here,

“It is good to hear that you exercise a Reformed ministry. If our Reformed convictions extend to the character of our worship also (which it should, since that was what was recovered at the Reformation) then to approve the worship songs and style of charismatic composers can hardly be consistent with that claim. Charismatic authors are usually Arminian, ecumenically compromised, and making quite a lot of money from their lyrics, music, CDs, DVDs, concert appearances, etc.

Reformed convictions, on the other hand, lead us to reject anything worldly in worship and instead ensure that Scripture regulates what we offer to God in worship, and *how* we offer it.”

I would like now to address just one of Mr. Clark’s contentions in his “assessment” to set the record straight.

Mr. Clark states that when the original Christian Hymns (OCH) was published in 1977, Mr. S.M. Houghton, then editor of the *Quarterly*, helped in the early stages, and afterwards in 1978 wrote a warm and approving review of the book. He then observes that, “nearly thirty years after the review by Mr. S.M. Houghton, the present editor of *The Bible League Quarterly*, the Rev. J.P. Thackway, has written a review of the new Christian Hymns” (page 5).

Having made the parallel, Mr. Clark then says that he will “compare and contrast this critique by the present editor of *The Bible League Quarterly* with that of the early edition of Christian Hymns by a former editor of the *Quarterly*” (page 5). This he does, in a way that is decidedly unfavourable to the present Bible League editor and his fellow trustees.

The booklet maintains that in this critique we have departed from the high standard set by Mr. S.M. Houghton, who, Mr. Clark implies, would not have written as we have done about new Christian Hymns (NCH). His actual words are,

“Mr. Thackway and the present Bible League Trust have declined and departed grievously from the high standard set by the late and much lamented Mr. Houghton” (page 5).

The reasons Mr. Clark gives for this belief regarding Mr. Houghton are that he knew him in his student days when Mr. Houghton was elder at a church he attended (page 4), and our former editor’s involvement with OCH and the favourable review already mentioned.

It is clear, however, that Mr. Clark has seriously underestimated Mr. Houghton's views where they would apply to NCH. In comparing Mr. Houghton and OCH with our critique of NCH, he is not comparing like with like. The reasons for this are as follows,

1. Some members of the Bible League Trust are older than Mr. Clark is, and have known Mr. Houghton over many years.

On Mr. Clark's own admission, he was only a student in the church where Mr. Houghton was an elder. The trustees, however, are in a much better position to say what Mr. Houghton's views and actions regarding this controversy would have been.

2. Mr. Houghton also reviewed *Grace Hymns* in the November 1975 issue of the *Gospel Magazine*.

In this, he was not quite as complimentary as with OCH. While commending the book, he expressed surprise at the inclusion of two "Singspiration" songs, one of which he maintained, "...says little more than 'Burdens are lifted at Calvary.'" One wonders what would have been his comments had he seen the worse items in NCH!

3. Our present Chairman, Malcolm Watts, also knew Mr. Houghton well.

He visited Mr. Houghton in the 1980s, when a revised edition of *Grace Hymns* was being mooted. This eventually became the *Praise!* hymn book of 2001. However, in discussing the proposed changing and modernising of "Thee" and "Thou," etc., in hymns he replied, "The Lord confound their tricks!"

4. Mr. Houghton's views on modern Bible translations are also clear from the *Quarterly*.

For instance, in an issue for 1986 he published Oswald T. Allis' "Is a pronominal Revision of the AV desirable?" In it, Dr. Allis opposes changing the special pronouns "Thee, thou, etc." for their modern equivalents. In a letter to Malcolm Watts in the same year, Mr. Houghton wrote, "I have been hoping for some time to write against the use of 'You' as addressed to Deity...." This shows something of what his attitude would be to the modernising of hymn books.

5. Mr. Watts comments on Stephen Clark's response as follows,

"I am convinced that Mr. Houghton would have taken the same position as the present Bible League Trust over radically-altered hymn books, the removing of the biblical pronouns from hymns, and the inclusion of charismatic-type songs."

Contrary then, to what Mr. Clark attempts to show, the Bible League Council is united in its belief that had Mr. Houghton lived beyond his home-call in 1987, he would take the same position as we have done concerning new Christian Hymns.

Footnote

In Wrexham there was a "North Wales Men's Convention" on Saturday, October 20th, 2007. The main speaker was Jonathan Stephen, Director of Affinity and Principal of the Wales Evangelical School of Theology (WEST), formerly Evangelical Theological College of Wales. This is the training college of the Evangelical Movement of Wales, the body that produced OCH and NCH. **Music at this convention is to be led by Stuart Townend (who has seven songs in NCH and says that influences upon his music include David Bowie, The Beatles, Bob Dylan and Stevie Wonder). There were separate concerts by Townend and the Phatfish "Christian" pop/rock music band.** Need we say more?