

REVIEW OF 'CHRISTIAN WORSHIP'

The publication of a major hymnbook is an event of great significance and the first decade of the 21st Century has seen three such publications – the *Praise!* hymnbook in 2000, *New Christian Hymns* in 2004 and now *Christian Worship*. The publication of three hymnbooks in a comparatively short period is a significant indication of the **sad** divisions within evangelicalism today and the call by different sections of the Christian church for quite different types of hymnbooks.

Following the publishing of *New Christian Hymns*, which many reformed congregations found disappointing, particularly on account of the inclusion of many charismatic songs and choruses and the modernising of the language in many of the hymns, some two dozen ministers met in Dudley in March 2005 to discuss the possibility of producing a new hymnbook to fill the gap which would be left by the eventual demise of the original *Christian Hymns*. The press release following that meeting indicated that a new hymnbook, to be called *Christian Worship*, was planned with the intention of offering a traditional alternative to contemporary books such as *Praise!* and *New Christian Hymns*.

The new hymnbook is the work of a small editorial committee chaired by Neil Pfeiffer and including Vernon Higham, author of contemporary classics such as "Great is the gospel of our glorious God" and "I saw a new vision of Jesus."

The editors say that *Christian Worship* is seeking to take traditional evangelical worship, as represented by twentieth century hymnbooks such as *Christian Hymns*, *Gospel Hymns* and *Grace Hymns*, forward into the twenty first century and they believe that it will make a unique contribution to traditional evangelical worship in the coming years.

While many will criticize the book as nothing more than a collection of largely 18th & 19th Century hymns, this reviewer believes that the editors have succeeded admirably in their endeavour and that there are a number of commendable improvements in *Christian Worship* in comparison with other modern hymnbooks.

METRICAL PSALTER

Firstly, a notable and welcome feature of *Christian Worship* is that unlike the majority of hymnbooks published in the last few generations, it includes a complete Metrical Psalter. (*Psalms and Hymns of Reformed Worship* published by the Metropolitan Tabernacle in 1991 includes, with few exceptions, only paraphrases of the Psalms). This addition of the Metrical Psalter should bring forth gratitude to God in a day when, apart from reformed congregations in Scotland and Northern Ireland, very few psalms – and often only paraphrases – are sung in the U.K. and the Psalter has almost fallen into disuse in most churches.

The many reformed churches which do not practice exclusive psalmody will nevertheless be glad to have the complete Psalter to choose from. There is also a useful subject index of the Psalter with suggested verse divisions which will make it easier for ministers to include suitable psalms in the worship services.

RETENTION OF TRADITIONAL LANGUAGE

Another welcome feature of this book, as distinct from other modern hymnbooks is the consistent retention of the personal pronouns "Thee", "Thou", "Thy" and "Thine" in accordance with the accurate biblical translation of these words. This will make the book more acceptable to the many congregations who are not happy in using the revised language so often adopted by other modern books. Without such a book as *Christian Worship* many non-charismatic churches would find it difficult to know what hymn book to use, as once a book is introduced which includes modern songs and choruses, the door would be opened for some members to press for the singing of such material and reformed churches which seek to hold to the old paths may find themselves in difficulties.

Experience has shown that many churches which have introduced a Supplement, including modern songs and choruses (originally intended for occasional use), have had the character of their worship totally changed as the Supplement has replaced the traditional hymnbook and paved the way for a totally new hymnbook to be introduced into the church to reflect the new trends.

THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

Apart from the complete Psalter, *Christian Worship* contains 1,041 traditional hymns including numerous psalm and other scripture paraphrases. These are a very comprehensive collection of well chosen, doctrinally sound hymns and while the majority of them are drawn from the old *Christian Hymns* there are nearly two hundred other hymns which, together with the Psalter, provide a fuller and richer variety of words with which to offer worthy praise to God. It is helpful to have a pertinent verse of scripture at the head of every hymn as a reminder of the biblical truth which is the main theme of the hymn.

The hymns are drawn from a wide variety of writers, although a third of them are by just seven writers - C. Wesley (125) Watts (80) V. Higham (37) Newton (28) Montgomery (27) Doddridge (23) and Bonar (23). It is good that so many of Wesley's and Watts' hymns have been included as their writing has never been surpassed and it is good to see some of their less familiar hymns recovered. It is also good to see more hymns by Benjamin Beddome, Joseph Hart, William Gadsby and John Kent.

Somewhat unexpectedly the book also includes some 'old fashioned' gospel hymns, among which are 'Would you be free from your burden of sin?'; 'Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?' and 'Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it' and while a few of the choruses of these hymns are repetitive, the words of the verses proclaim solid gospel truths.

Some will be surprised by the inclusion of a number of hymns by writers who are far from the reformed tradition but it is evident that this has only been done when the hymns themselves are well known, worthy to be sung and have a long tradition of being included in the majority of former hymnbooks.

It is refreshing to see so many excellent hymns on the doctrine of the Covenant - a theme often neglected in modern hymn books - and many doctrinally solid hymns on the theme of sovereign grace and altogether over one hundred and fifty hymns on various aspects of the gospel.

Some will no doubt criticise the fact that apart from the hymns by Vernon Higham there are very few hymns by contemporary writers but as the writers of the preface of the original *Christian Hymns* said, "There is surely no virtue in singing hymns merely because they are old, but it must be admitted that the general quality of hymn writing in the present century (20th) has not been of a high order. It is therefore still necessary for the church to turn back to these hymns which at their best have something of a timeless quality about them"

With the continuing acceleration into ever more irreverent forms of worship it is not surprising that, with a few exceptions, the hymns written since those days have not been of that 'high order' and the association of the authors of the many modern hymns and songs with the charismatic movement means that many believers will not have any desire to sing them.

So with the life of the original *Christian Hymns* drawing to a close in view of normal wear and tear, the need for a new hymnbook in the reformed evangelical tradition has been increasingly urgent and in the good providence of God it would appear that *Christian Worship* is such a book.

As Neil Pfeiffer (Chairman of the 'Christian Worship' hymnbook Trust) has written, "What we offer to the Most High in worship affects whether He is glorified or not. In addition, as Christians, we eventually become what we offer in our praise. Therefore, what can be more important than the very worship of the Living God? Is what we sing, and how we sing in our praise, a secondary issue?"

FORMAT

The words edition is well produced with clear print on good quality paper and costs £9:50 but some will find the size and weight something of a disadvantage - it is almost exactly the same size and weight of the green covered music copy of the original *Christian Hymns*.

The music copy (costing £19) is also well produced and clear but has the disadvantage of containing music only so it will be difficult, if not impossible, for members of the congregation to sing from the music unless they can manage to hold two books at the same time! Moreover the tune numbers **do not match** the numbers of the hymns in the words copy so there will not be a tune immediately available for organists who will have to consult the index of hymns where 'preferred' and 'alternate' tunes are suggested for each hymn **and psalm**. **A further difficulty is that some of the music is very close to the bottom of the page and may be obscured by the hymnbook rest on the organ.**

But these disadvantages are small matters compared with the overall excellence of this collection. *Christian Worship* is a welcome move back to reverent and godly worship and is highly recommended for those churches who wish their worship to be of that character without having to use a hymnbook containing charismatic songs and choruses and with familiar hymns being changed to fit modern trends.

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