



*Reforming hymns*  
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## REFORMING HYMNS

One of the distinguishing features of Christianity is the amount of attention given to the sung praise of God. Not, I may add, by a select few in worship (the clergy and choirs alone), but by all in the Christian community.

The church has forever sung the Old Testament psalms. In our Reformed tradition this practice continues to various degrees. Though there are few psalms in the *Trinity Hymnal*, we can be thankful that the *Psalter Trinity Hymnal* has remedied this. Many older people, though, have grown up loving hymns of the nineteenth-century Victorian era. Certainly, they are gospel-centered, even if focused on Christ on times to the exclusion of the Father and the Spirit. A younger generation of hymn singers are content, however, to sing anything which has proven biblical substance, regardless of whether the hymn in view originated with Martin Luther, Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley or Stuart Townend and the Gettys. We may pray that those enveloped in the contemporary worship movement would return to the God-centered, Christ-exalting, biblically rich, and Spirit-dependent treasury of sung praise in the possession of the church.

But lest we get smug or snobbish about our store of glorious hymns of the faith, it is ever necessary to attest uninspired elements of praise by the Word of God. There follows then a review of certain well-known lines of praise about which we need to think again. The aim of this piece, though, is not to abandon otherwise beloved and faithful hymns because of the odd word or line which grates, for there is a certain degree of poetic license for which we must allow. Yet, we have the liberty to look for better wording which fits the regular tune and takes away the theological jarring. Whereas instances of poetic license are bearable for they allow for flexibility of interpretation, statements that gainsay, in perception or actuality, the specific teaching of Scripture need reconsidering.

This interest in holding our hymns biblically accountable began in 2007 when I first arrived at Seventh Reformed Church. I had chosen Hattie Buell's hymn "The Child of a King" for the evening worship service, but was told prior to the service by the Elder escorting me that night that the congregation sung the chorus of the hymn differently than was found in the hymnal (see below). After that, we revised, periodically, the wording of a number of hymns we sung. Not wanting, however, to overdo the editorial amendment of our hymns in the process of worship, I have opted instead to begin a list below of suggested alternative renderings to questionable words or hymn-lines encountered. I am not anticipating the adoption of the suggestions, nor am I wishing to engage in issues of copyright. All the same, the following examples of biblical adjustment may be of interest.

*COME, THOU FOUNT OF EV-'RY BLESSING*  
(Robert Robinson, 1758)

*Verse 3:*

*O to grace how great a debt-or Dai-ly I'm constrained to be;  
Let that grace now, like a fet-ter, Bind my wan-d'ring heart to thee.  
Prone to wan-der, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for thy courts a-bove.*

*Suggested change:*

*O to grace how great a debt-or Dai-ly I'm constrained to be;  
Let that grace now, like a fet-ter, Bind my wan-d'ring heart to thee.  
Prone to wan-der, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love;  
**Here's my heart, You've taken and sealed it, Sealed it for thy courts a-bove.***

*Reason for the change:* The apostle Paul consistently understands the Lord's people as already sealed (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:22).



*I LAY MY SINS ON JESUS, THE SPOTLESS LAMB OF GOD*  
 (Horatius Bonar)

Verse 1:

*I lay my sins on Jesus, The spotless Lamb of God;  
 He bears them all, and frees us From the accursed load:  
 I bring my guilt to Jesus, To wash my crimson stains  
 White in his blood and most precious, Till not a spot  
 remains”*

Suggested change:

*I see my sins on Jesus, The spotless Lamb of God;  
 He bears them all, and frees us From the accursed load:  
 I bring my guilt to Jesus, To wash my crimson stains  
 White in his blood and most precious, Till not a spot  
 remains.*

*Reason for the change:* If we are the ones responsible for laying our sins on Jesus, the, undoubtedly, we are still condemned; for no one knows the half of the sins he has committed in mind, speech, or action. The glory of the gospel is that it is God the Father who has laid every sin of the believer on his Son Jesus. None remain unatoned! Since, in the *Trinity Hymnal* (1961), Bonar’s hymn is included in the section “Faith in Christ” the words “I see my sins on Jesus” are an appropriate replacement.

*LORD, FOR THE YEARS YOUR LOVE HAS KEPT AND GUIDED*  
 (Timothy Dudley-Smith)

Verse 3:

*Lord, for our land in this our gen-er-a-tion, spirits op-pres-  
 sed by plea-sure, wealth and care; for young and old, for*

*com-mon-wealth and na-tion, Lord for our land, be pleased  
 to hear our prayer.*

Suggested change:

*Lord, for our land in this our gen-er-a-tion, spirits op-pres-  
 sed by plea-sure, wealth and care; for young and old,  
 for **con-tin-ent** and na-tion, Lord for our land, be pleased to  
 hear our prayer.*

*Reason for the change:* To enable Christians in non-Commonwealth lands to sing the hymn without geo-political distraction.

*MIGHTY CHRIST FROM TIME ETERNAL*  
 (Titus Lewis, translated from Welsh by Graham Harrison)

Verse 3:

*Great my Jesus in His Person, great as God and man is He,  
 great His comeliness and beauty, white and ruddy, fair to  
 see.  
 Great that sight, sovereign Might, throned secure on  
 heaven’s height!*

Suggested change:

*Great my Jesus in His Person, great as God and man is He,  
 great His comeliness and beauty, **power and glory, glad to  
 see.**  
 Great that sight, sovereign Might, throned secure on  
 heaven’s height!*

*Reason for the change:* If we leave “comeliness and beauty” as descriptive of Christ’s humanity (note the earlier clause “great as God and man is he”),



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we may insert “power and glory” instead of “white and ruddy” to reference his divinity. On the one hand, “power and glory” circumvents the possibility of a literal reading at odds with the Middle Eastern humanity Christ has taken with him back to heaven. On the other hand, the words “power and glory” reflect Christ’s divinity and balance out what is said of his “comeliness and beauty.” “Glad to see” offers us, then, what may be perceived as a less effeminate picture of Christ than “fair to see,” and speaks of the believer’s response to the fullness of Christ’s person as both human and divine.

*REVIVE THY WORK, O LORD*  
(Albert Midlane, 1858)

Verse 5:

*Revive thy work, O Lord, Give pen-te-costal show’rs:  
The glo-ry shall be all thine own, The blessing, Lord, be ours.*

*Suggested change:*

*Revive thy work, O Lord, Give **o-ver-whelming** show’rs:  
The glo-ry shall be all thine own, The blessing, Lord, be ours.*

*Reason for the change:* To protect the once-for-allness of Pentecost as a unique event in redemptive history.

*THE CHILD OF A KING*  
(Hattie Buell)

*The refrain:* “I’m the child of a King, The child of a King! With Jesus, my Saviour, I’m the child of a King.”

*Changed to:* “I’m a child of the King, A child of the King! With Jesus, my Saviour, I’m a child of the King.”

*Reason for change:* To emphasize the uniqueness of the King and to reduce the unwitting me-centeredness of the refrain..

Doubtless, there are other examples worth discussing. It is interesting how, with sensitivity to Scripture and to the hymns in question, we can find alternatives to words or lines which sit awkwardly and potentially mislead. The aim is not to encourage worshipers to be picky, nevertheless we ought to be thinking about what we sing as worship to God.