

WHERE MODERNISM BEGINS

by

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WRITING more than fifty years ago, H. Hensly Henson, then Canon of Westminster, declared, "Moreover, it is hard to see why the traditional practice of limiting the lessons read in Church to the Bible should forever continue. We want to supplement the canonical Scriptures by the Christian compositions which have secured the approval of general acceptance, and taken the rank of spiritual classics among religious people, just as in the worship of the Church the Psalter has been supplemented by hymns and anthems." (Quoted, **The Psalms in Worship**, pp. 416 f).

Twenty-five years later, an American Professor, Dr. A. W. Palmer, President of the Congregational Seminary in Chicago, had the same point of view to propound. "The race," he said, "goes on building a larger Bible. The real Bible of the intelligent Christian to-day includes devotional books like **Pilgrim's Progress** and the **Imitation of Christ**, great hymns like the **Te Deum** and "Jesus Lover of My Soul," creeds and confessions like the Apostle's Creed, biographies like those of St. Francis or David Livingstone. These books have far greater religious influence in our lives and are more continuously and appropriately used in our churches than Esther, Chronicles, or Ecclesiastes. The true and larger Bible is never complete." (Quoted by Wilbur M. Smith in "**Therefore Stand**," p. 126).

Still more recently, Dr. Leslie Weatherhead of the City Temple, London, has written, "If the process by which the Bible was begun had continued, then the words of Milton and Browning and many another would be in the Bible, and whatever theory you hold of the inspiration of the Bible, do realise that there is more spiritual inspiration in some of Browning's poems than in some chapters of the Bible. The Word of God is the truth about God and about life, and wherever you find the truth about God and life, that is the Word of God." ("**In Quest of a Kingdom**," p. 204).

These are the statements of outspoken modernists who do not accept the unique inspiration of the Bible, and we perhaps should not be surprised that they set merely human compositions above the Word of God. But are they not carrying to its logical conclusion what is done in countless churches when hymns are substituted for the Divinely-inspired Psalms of the Bible? If one book of the Bible can be set aside for something more modern and suited to popular taste, is it not reasonable to give the same liberty in the case of other parts of the Bible as well? The Book of Psalms is a part of the inspired Word of God; and the purpose of this study is to suggest to those who think that hymns should be used in the worship of God that they are, perhaps all unintentionally, casting doubt on the inspiration and sufficiency of the Bible itself. It is a strange and illogical fact that some of the most strongly evangelical and fundamentalist groups, which stand firmly on the doctrine of the Divine inspiration of the Word of God, are apparently the most reluctant to use the praise section of that Divinely-inspired Word in their worship. But it seems to me that a consistent application of the doctrine of Divine inspiration demands that nothing should be substituted in worship for the perfection which God Himself has given. There is a verse in the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy which states quite clearly, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you," on which "**The New Bible Commentary**" makes the comment—"This peremptory command creates a sharp distinction between the Word of God and the word of man." And lest it should be thought that that "peremptory command" is concerned only with the law of Moses or the Old Testament, we find the same prohibition expressed still more solemnly at the end of the New Testament—"I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book." There is "a sharp distinction between the Word of God and the word of man," and anything that would tend to blur that distinction must be most carefully watched.

It comes down to this—If the Bible is Divinely-inspired, the only infallible rule of faith and practice, as we believe it is, then it is absolutely unique; it stands on a plane of its own; and, therefore, to substitute anything else for any

part of it is to prefer the inferior work of man to the perfect Word of God. Those who do not accept the Divine inspiration of the Bible are, of course, faced with no such dilemma ; the modernists consider themselves at liberty to discard parts of the Bible as inadequate and imperfect. And that, it seems to me, is what is done when God's book of praises is set aside as insufficient. If that is true, it gives the modernists some very strange bed-fellows !

It is a stubborn fact of history that the making of hymn-books had its beginning in the second century when Bardesanes used hymns to popularise the false doctrines of Gnosticism, which had been rejected by the church. There he showed himself a shrewd student of human nature, for people will sing unthinkingly what in their saner moments they know to be quite erroneous. For example, the fact that " The Londonderry Air " is a very fine tune is sufficient to make a great many thoughtless people get pleasure from a song called " Danny Boy," with this blatantly Romish line in it—"and kneel and say an 'Ave' there for me." Similarly the rousing, martial tune of " Onward, Christian Soldiers " tends to camouflage the fact that there is rather more than a suggestion of the material cross of Romanism in its tune-fully attractive chorus, " With the Cross of Jesus going on before." The Church of the Reformation wisely got rid of the material symbol of the cross, so that the spiritual truth of the atonement might be the more clearly revealed, but the hymnary in some instances at least seems to wish to reintroduce it. At all events, the fact is that singing has often been the medium of a popular propagation of error.

The heretical sect of the Donatists in Augustine's day had the same method as Bardesanes of circulating error in popular fashion ; but most noted of all the heretics of the early centuries was Arius, whose name stands still for opposition to the doctrine of the deity of Christ. He was tried and deposed by the authorities of the church, but he went far and wide, singing to attractive tunes, songs of his own composition designed to seduce the masses to unbelief, and to a very large extent accomplished by rhyme what he could not do by reason. All these early efforts were, of course, intentionally framed for the purpose of deception, though their authors would perhaps have disclaimed any such intention. But the most obvious moral to be derived

from this period in the history of hymn-writing seems to be that to depart from the Word of God always holds the possibility of error, and that musical error is more contagious than any other kind. Safer, surely, was the attitude of Richard Baxter when he set his hand to the paraphrasing of the Psalms—"I feared adding to God's Word, and making my own to pass for God's."

Having suggested, however reluctantly, that there is a kinship between modernism and the substitution of hymns for Psalms, I want to go a stage further and explore the possibility that the setting aside of the Psalms in favour of hymns can itself be the beginning of modernism. History seems to show that the substitution of hymns for Psalms marked the beginning in many cases of a laxer view of the Bible, which had its ultimate harvest in modernism full-blown. When we go back, for example, to the Churches of the Reformation, we find that hymns belonged more to the Lutheran churches, and Psalms to those churches which were more strongly Calvinistic. Luther himself preferred the Psalms, and contended that they had much more sap and strength than any hymns; some of his finest hymns were based on Psalms, for example the 46th. But his followers came to use the Psalms less and less, and hymns of human composition more and more. Versions of the Psalms were made in the German language shortly after Luther's time, but they did not take deep or wide-spread root, and have survived only in a few localities. Is it not significant, then, that it was from Germany that there came in the 18th and 19th centuries the rationalism which radically criticised the Bible and dismissed much of it as myth and legend?

Calvin, on the other hand, was hostile to anything which might seem to detract from the supreme authority of the Bible, and from the outset of his ministry in Geneva set his face against the introduction of "human hymns." The Calvinistic churches of the Reformation followed his example, and, it seems, remained proof against destructive Biblical criticism so long as they remained exclusively Psalm-singing. But in the 18th century Isaac Watts opened the door to the use of praise other than that inspired and enjoined by God, when he proposed to make David speak like a Christian, and followed up his paraphrases of the Psalms with a large number of hymns for worship. Watts himself

was no modernist, though it is perhaps not without significance that he was accused of heresy with regard to the doctrine of Christ's deity ; the man who casts doubts on the sufficiency of any part of Scripture cannot expect to be considered above suspicion of unorthodoxy. He was no modernist, but his implied criticism of a part of the Old Testament must have had some influence in preparing a theological climate in which criticisms of the whole Bible could grow and flourish.

One hesitates to question the value of the work done by Moody and Sankey, who were greatly used of God in the work of evangelical revival, but Rev. Kenneth A. Macrae, of the Free Church of Scotland, in his booklet "**The Resurgence of Arminianism,**" maintains with some cogency that while there was no taint of modernism in the Moody-Sankey revival, the evangelists' undermining of the Calvinism of the Free Church of Scotland encouraged those who favoured the new German Higher Criticism to come out into the open with their criticism of the Bible.

There appear to be grounds, therefore, for the contention that to substitute hymns for Psalms, is, perhaps all inadvertently, to open the door to the destructive criticism that rejects much more of the Bible than the Psalms.

It remains to ask what those who advocate the singing of hymns have in common with the modernists. For the most part, very little, we are glad to say, and as very many of those who sing hymns would most emphatically say. Certainly a very large majority of those who advocate the singing of hymns in worship have never realised the full implications of what they are doing. There are varying degrees of man's insistence that he knows better than God, and the denial of the inspiration and the authority of the Bible is a far cry from the substitution of human hymns for the Psalms that God has given. And yet is there not something of the same rebellion against God's way in them both ? Modernism really began in the Garden of Eden when the tempter first questioned the sufficiency and the validity of the Divine Word. " Yea, hath God said . . . ? " was the Serpent's question to Eve. Over against the Word of God was set a suggestion of truth and experience beyond what God had said. The seeds of self-sufficiency were sown

there. And modernism, if the grace of God does not check the universal tendency, is the ultimate assertion of the wisdom of man's reason over against the revealed truth of God.

It is significant that for the objectivity of the Psalms there is often substituted the subjectivity of human hymns, which are frequently man-centred, in contrast to the God-centred character of the Psalms. It is very easy to fall into the error of assuming that since there is a subjective side of worship, in which our experiences and our feelings and our needs have a very real place, worship must be largely subjective, and that the medium of praise should therefore reflect the feelings of the worshipper. Many excellent hymns are content to do that. But worship is much more than a subjective experience in which our spirits draw near to God, the Father of spirits. It is a realisation of Him as He is in truth and an approach to Him as He has revealed Himself in His Word.

A writer setting forth the standard for hymns has written—"The true hymn must have a motion Godward. It is not exactly necessary that God should be directly addressed, but God must be uppermost in the thought if not particularly conspicuous in the expression. The true hymn must tend towards God ; bring Him to mind ; exalt His name and seek His glory. Those which are simply introspective, didactic, dogmatic, sentimental, egotistical and the like, are not hymns." It is my contention that the vast majority of hymns fail to reach that norm, and that the only "hymns" which do reach it invariably are the "hymns" of the Divinely-given Book of Psalms.

It might be thought, however, that this man-directed emphasis of many hymns, while a little unhealthy from the point of view of robust worship, is more or less harmless. But the fact is that a concern limited to personal experience, however important that may be, carries within it the seeds of its own deterioration. Writing of the subjective Pietism of seventeenth-century Germany—a Pietism which manifested itself incidentally in an exceptionally rich outburst of Church song—James Orr in "**The Progress of Dogma**" declares, "For the healthy objectivity of the piety of the Reformers, it substituted a morbid brooding on subjective

states ; while, in a scientific respect, it could offer no satisfaction to minds aroused to ask the meaning of the Christian doctrines, and their relations to the wide fields of knowledge opening up around them. It cannot be thought surprising, therefore, that Pietism should, about the middle of the eighteenth century, fall a prey to the rationalism which at that time was overspreading Europe" (p. 290). If man be the measure of things, there comes inevitably a place where he sets his own reason above the revelation which God has given. And that is Modernism.

But lest it should be thought that there is no danger of such an insidious slipping towards Modernism in a church which uses Psalms exclusively in praise, it should be pointed out that there is a possibility of a personal Higher Criticism even among those who are satisfied to use only the Psalms in worship. To pick and choose among the Psalms and select only certain of them for worship has in it an implied criticism of the portions which are omitted. For example, there is a reluctance to use those Psalms which have been called the Imprecatory Psalms, containing prayers for the destruction of wicked men. Such reluctance seems to regard these Psalms merely as human compositions, expressing David's personal vindictiveness against his personal enemies. The truth is that they are Divinely-inspired and are directed against the implacable enemies of God and of God's kingdom in every age, showing His righteous wrath against evil.

A similar tendency is observable in the use of only those portions of the Psalms which deal with subjective experience, omitting the portions which deal with the historical, objective basis of that personal experience in the sovereign acts of God's grace. Dr. J. G. Vos writes regarding such tendencies—"Those who love one aspect of the Psalms only, while finding other aspects alien to their religious life, or even unpleasant and objectionable, are already involved in a process which, if not reversed, will in the course of time lead to the complete rejection of the Psalter as the manual of praise. This same process, if not checked, will in the course of time lead to a complete departure from the Biblical religion of divine redemption from an objective realm of evil, to an alien type of religion, a type of religion which is merely subjective and idealistic." (*Blue Banner Faith and Life*, vol. 7, no. 3, p. 126).

It seems to me, therefore, that what is required is that we should give ourselves to a more systematic and intensive study of the Psalms ; above all, that we should find Christ in the Psalms, which, as He Himself said, spoke of Him ; and that we should hear in them the living word of the living God.

I should be most reluctant to leave the impression of condemning those who advocate the singing of hymns in the worship of God without realising the implications of what they are doing, especially in view of the fact that God in His sovereign grace has used hymns to bring truth and blessing to the hearts of many. But I cannot forget that God has used even the preaching of modernists to do the same, for He can use very imperfect vessels to bear the good news of His grace. But shall we knowingly be satisfied to use an imperfect instrument of praise when a perfect one, Divinely-provided, lies to our hand ? Shall we rashly suggest that any part of God's Word is imperfect and inadequate for the purpose for which He has given it ? We have a promise regarding every part of the Word of God, unqualified and uncanceled, which no human composition can confidently claim—"It shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." Since that promise is God's own word regarding His Divinely-inspired Word, I am satisfied to use in praise only the Book of praises that He has given, and to sing unto the Lord with "the voice of a Psalm."