

CFBC Hymns Class 46

We Come O Christ To You Margaret Clarkson (1915-2008)

Margaret Clarkson wrote "We Come O Christ to You" at the request of Stacey Woods, who was the general director of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Canada and the United States. He asked her to write a hymn that might help to unify the scattered student groups of the young organization. The hymn was sung at IVCF's first missionary convention, held in Toronto in 1946. Published in many modern hymnals and translated into several languages, "We Come O Christ to You" is the best known of Margaret Clarkson's hymns. She revised the hymn in 1955, substituting the informal "you" for the formal "thee" throughout the hymn.

<https://www.songsandhymns.org/hymns/detail/we-come-o-christ-to-you>

We come, O Christ to you, true Son of God and man,
By whom all things consist, in whom all life began:
In you alone we live and move, and have our being in your love.

You are the Way to God, your blood our ransom paid;
In you we face our Judge and Maker unafraid.
Before the throne absolved we stand, your love has met your law's demand.

You are the living Truth! All wisdom dwells in you,
the Source of every skill, the one eternal TRUE!
O great I AM! In you we rest, sure answer to our every quest.

You only are true Life, to know you is to live
The more abundant life that earth can never give:
O risen Lord! We live in you: in us each day your life renew!

We worship you, Lord Christ, our Savior and our King,
To you our youth and strength adoringly we bring:
So fill our hearts, that all may view your life in us, and turn to you.

“Throughout her life Margaret Clarkson seemingly experienced every form of suffering one could experience; a broken home, financial strains, loneliness and isolation, and constant physical pain, however through it all she continued to place her faith and trust in her savior. During a life of trials she sensed God’s grace and mercy and communicated that to others by providing the Church with dozens of hymns testifying to his sovereignty, love, and power. Margaret Clarkson heard and increasingly understood God’s call upon her life. As she matured she recognized that she was sent out to minister to others, not in isolation, but in triumph.”

The Life of E. Margaret Clarkson (Excerpts)

8 June 1915—17 March 2008

EDITH MARGARET CLARKSON, almost always known as Margaret or E. Margaret, was born 8 June 1915 in Melville, Saskatchewan, Canada, daughter of Frederick Henry and Ethel May (Brown) Clarkson, third of five children (siblings Jessie, Arthur, Molly, and Bruce). As a small child, her family moved to Toronto, where she grew up attending St. John's Presbyterian Church, learned to love hymns, and studied the Westminster Shorter Catechism. She started to play the piano and write poetry at age 12, around the same time her parents divorced. Her love for hymns came early in life, as she later recalled:

Before I was ten I knew hundreds of hymns by heart. At church I would lose myself in the hymnbook during long sermons; at home, I would sing hymns perched high in a cherry tree.[1]

Clarkson chose a profession of teaching, receiving her degree from the Toronto Teachers' College. She initially taught elementary school in northern Ontario before moving back to Toronto, where she spent the next 31 years as a teacher, except for an intensive stint as a writer for Scripture Press in Wheaton, Illinois, in 1948 and 1949. As a writer, her first book was *Let's Listen to Music* (1944, rev. 1957), which was a series of music appreciation lessons intended to be used with Victor recordings. An early reviewer wrote:

The author of *Let's Listen to Music* reveals excellent taste in the choice of recordings she has made, while her brief biographical notes on the composers and her well-thought-out teaching points on the various selections make her book one which should prove extremely valuable and helpful to young people. Adults, moreover, will find Miss Clarkson's book thoroughly stimulating.[2]

Clarkson would go on to be credited with writing 17 books in her long career. Much later in life, she wrote *Destined for Glory: The Meaning of Suffering* (1983) in which she recounted a long struggle with physical ailments:

I can't remember a time in which I was not tormented by excruciating headaches coupled with compulsive vomiting, lasting for days at a time. ... Though I have besought God earnestly for healing, He has not seen fit to touch my body with a miracle. His working in me has been more intimate—He has touched my spirit and is working His miracle there.[3]

In 1946, Clarkson's gifts as a teacher and poet came to the attention of C. Stacey Woods, General Secretary of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, who asked her to write a hymn for the campus ministry. The result, "We come, O Christ, to Thee," was premiered at IVCF's first Missionary Convention at Toronto in December 1946, and it was included in IVCF's *Hymns* (1947). In spite of writing poetry in the past, she regarded this to be her first true hymn.

Clarkson often wrote about the practice of writing hymns. In 1984, she summarized her approach this way:

Good hymns do not spring from ambition, but from personal Christian faith and devotion. They are God-centered, not man-centered, solidly rooted in Scripture. Their doctrine is neither myopic nor over blown, but true to the Word of God and the experience of the average believer. They are practical, designed to help worshipers to live better lives. Good hymns have an arresting first line, a single theme, and a clear progression of thought moving to a decisive climax. They must have organic unity—no extraneous thought may intrude because of strictures of rhyme or rhythm. They must be adult in tone, and innocent of offense. Emotionally warm and fervent, they are never sentimental. They must be capable of sustaining a good tune, and short enough to be sung in their entirety.[4]

Clarkson retired from teaching in 1973, although she later taught courses in hymnody at Regent College in Vancouver in 1979 and 1981. For many years she was a member of Knox Presbyterian Church, Toronto. She was named a Fellow of the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada in 1993. She died 17 March 2008 at Shepherd Lodge, Toronto. At her death, fellow hymn writer Christopher Idle said of her:

She was a robust defender of the Reformed faith, a lively and witty correspondent, and a respected editor and consultant...Although her final years were clouded by dementia, countless believers share her heartfelt prayer: “Lead on in sovereign mercy through all life’s troubled ways, till resurrection bodies bring resurrection praise!”[5]

by CHRIS FENNER
for Hymnology Archive
28 May 2020

1. E. Margaret Clarkson, “Approaches to hymn writing,” *The Hymn*, vol. 35, No. 2 (April 1984), p. 79.
2. “Useful Book,” *Vancouver Daily Province* (13 January 1945), p. 15.
3. *Destined for Glory: The Meaning of Suffering* (1983), quoted in Leslie K. Tarr, “Suffering issue baffles, embitters,” *Calgary Herald* (10 Dec. 1983), p. G10.
4. E. Margaret Clarkson, “Approaches to hymn writing,” *The Hymn*, vol. 35, No. 2 (April 1984), p. 79.
5. Christopher Idle, “Edith Margaret Clarkson,” *Evangelicals Now* (June 2008).

<https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/edith-margaret-clarkson>

More About Margaret Clarkson...

Margaret Clarkson, whose rarely-used first name is Edith, was born in 1915 into, as Margaret herself described, “a loveless and unhappy marriage” which broke up when she was twelve. The memories of her childhood were of tension, fear, insecurity, and isolation.

Margaret was born in Melville, Saskatchewan where she lived until her parents, Frederick and Ethel, and the family moved to Toronto when she was around age four. Throughout her life, she was plagued by pain; initially from migraines, accompanied by convulsive vomiting, and then arthritis—two ailments that accompanied her continually. In *Destined for Glory*, she related sadly that her mother told her that her first words were “my head hurts.” At age three Margaret, or Margie as her friends knew her, contracted juvenile arthritis and became bed bound. She recalled the pain as well as the bald spot worn on the back of her head from lying in bed so long.

As mentioned, when Margaret was nearing five she moved to downtown Toronto. The street that they lived on “was a long one, with a high-steepled church at either end.” Margaret’s family attended the closest one, St. John’s Presbyterian Church. She described her time at this church, which had a significant impact upon her, as growing up in “the heart of a large evangelical church.” Margaret was active in church, though she felt no kindred connection, remembering that she was different from everyone she knew. Through memorization, Margaret won a hymnbook from her Sunday School, which she would love to climb in a tree with to the highest point possible and sing.

Margaret found great comfort and strength in hymns. Early they were her solace as, before any sort of children’s church or programs existed, she sat through entire services with their 45-minute sermons. She would leaf through pages reading and noting authors and composers. She gained a “sense of the community of saints” as she did this, which “led naturally to a search for their other writings.” She came in contact with “such people as John Bunyan, John and Charles Wesley, Martin Luther, William Cowper, John Newton, James Montgomery, Paul Gerhardt, Philipp Nicolai, Gerhard Tersteegen, Isaac Watts, Frances Ridley Havergal, and Fanny Crosby.” As she did this she began to see the church “as one continuous, living stream of the grace of God” in which she too had a place. During this time Margaret attended Bolton Ave. Elementary School until she was thirteen. While a student at Bolton she exhibited a strong intellect as she won 2nd prize in a nationwide essay contest offered by the League of Nations.

These childhood years were ones of great personal growth; a growth of the mind, soul, and heart. Margaret remembered that before her tenth birthday, she enjoyed gardening in her backyard, as well as roaming the large park near her home, “spending countless hours wandering the grassy slopes, pursuing the Don River to its source, and exploring the ancient hills through which it had carved its broad, deep valley.” This “child of concrete” knew “where watercress grew in the crystal trickle of a spring hidden near an almost invisible path, and where shy, wild forget-me-nots bloomed in the shade of its moist borders.”

Along with her love of the outdoors, Margaret experienced recognition for her writing efforts. She enjoyed “playing with words and phrases, savoring as sweet morsels those that most delighted her”. At age ten she had her first published work—a poem on the New Year took second place in a contest for children under sixteen. It was also at this age that she gained an assurance of faith in Christ during a series of children’s meetings based on Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Within the next year Margaret confessed her faith to the church and joined St. John's. She was able to recite "all 107 questions and answers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism." Shortly thereafter Margaret began "writing verse more or less regularly... publishing in parish magazines and Sunday School papers." In addition to these new forms of expression, Margaret began to learn to play piano with the hymnbook being her chief teacher.

After her parents divorce, when Margaret was thirteen, she began to attend Riverdale Collegiate Institute. Also, she and her family moved to a new, non-denominational, church. With the move, she felt a sense of loss of the "great hymns of the Church," as this new church used many more gospel songs in its worship. Margaret would recount that the years at this church were one of narrowness and legalism. When she left home at 20 she searched for a church "where good hymns as well as good preaching" could be found. However, it was at this new church that Margaret wrote her first Christian song, which was to be used in an evening service, at the request of her pastor. During her teens, she continued to write "songs intermittently, a few of which were published."

Though Margaret was able to devote her energies to writing and other pursuits she was not free from pain. When she was seventeen her arthritis went into remission, however, she was left to contend with migraines and a congenitally malformed lower spine. Her ailments caused her to miss school for nearly a year. Her health, family situation, and the Great Depression, all made it very difficult to pursue a university education. Instead, she attended Toronto Normal School in order to become a teacher. In the great grace of God, Margaret was not left alone. During this time, she had been able to find a friend and mentor in a "vibrant, creative woman about 12 years [her] senior," a relationship that Margaret maintained for 20 years.

Upon her completion of the teacher program Margaret found that she could not find any teaching positions in the Toronto area. Desperate, she took a position teaching elementary school in a lumber camp in Barwick, Ontario. It was here in 1936 that she wrote the early version of So Send I You. Margaret stayed there for two very difficult years. From Barwick she moved to a position in the public schools of Kirkland Lake, Ontario, a gold-mining community. It was here that she became Music Supervisor of six large schools after one year. Margaret found these years to be "devastating," and full of spiritual isolation. It was during this time that she also found herself faced with the possibility of a lifetime of singleness.

Though a very difficult period of immense loneliness, this period enabled Margaret to begin her journey of resting on God's sovereignty. A bright spot to her time in this wilderness was her enjoyment of the outdoors. Despite being far from her home and family, at age 26, Margaret began to establish roots by buying "an isolated, rundown summer cottage" on the Severn River for \$600--this was nearly a year's salary for her. Though unmarried, the words of Solomon ring as true for Margaret Clarkson as they have for other women of noble character. "She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard."

The cottage, which she named, Innisfree--an allusion to Yeats' poem The Lake Isle of Innisfree--was only accessible by water. Margaret worked hard for many years to make this cottage a home. It was here that she did most of her writing. She recognized that it was at Innisfree that her "love of the outdoors came to full flower."

In the midst of World War II Margaret was able to secure a new position and moved to Southern Ontario and taught in the Township of York. The following year she was able to transfer back to Toronto and teach at Dawson St. Public School. During the next dozen or so years, home, for Margaret, "consisted of a drably-furnished room in a series of downtown rooming houses." Fulfilling her dream of find a church that supported good singing and good preaching, Margaret joined Knox Presbyterian Church and sat under the ministry of Dr. William Fitch.

Margaret's move back to "civilization" and her involvement in a strong, solid church afforded her the stability to focus on her hymn writing. In 1946 she wrote what she called her "first real hymn" at the request of Stacey Woods, General Secretary of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. We Come O Christ, To Thee was written to "link together the widely-scattered groups that made up the young student movement." The next year she published a book; Let's Listen to Music.

Despite the stability that Margaret most certainly felt as she settled into a teaching position and as she increased her writing activities, she was drawn in other directions. In the fall of 1948, perhaps in an effort to expand her horizons, she left Toronto and assumed an editorial position with Scripture Press in Wheaton, Illinois. However, by April she returned to Toronto, possibly missing the classroom environment and contact with students. Margaret resumed her association with the Toronto Board of Education and in 1950 began teaching at Huron School.

In 1955 Margaret further established her roots in Toronto as she purchased a home on a busy street, thus leaving the life of the drab rooming house for a "hefty" mortgage. In 1957 she moved to Blythwood School and the next year she published *The Creative Classroom*...It was during these years that Margaret, admittedly, began to have a fuller sense of God's sovereignty, especially as it related to her own personal suffering. The success of *Susie's Babies* allowed Margaret to take a leave of absence during the 1960-61 school year during which she took courses in Language and Literature at University of Toronto. These courses enabled her to increase her certification and most certainly her salary.

The 1960s saw a stream of published books written by Margaret Clarkson. In 1961 *Our Father: The Lord's Prayer for Children* was published, following by *Clear Shining After Rain* and *Chats With Young Adults on Growing Up* in 1962. Over the next few years *The Wondrous Cross* (1966), *Rivers Among the Rocks* (1967) and *God's Hedge*(1967) were also published. Margaret must have sensed the Lord's care for her during this period.

During the early years of her publishing frenzy Margaret realized that *So Send I You* was rather one-sided hymn. She decided to “rewrite” the hymn during the summer at Innisfree. After creating the second version she believed that she created a more biblical hymn that reflected the trials, and the joys, of God’s call on the lives of his children. The new version began to replace the earlier one to Margaret’s pleasure.

The gap in publishing mid-decade was brought about by her continual spinal problems, which had been masked by the migraine pain that was her constant companion. The spinal problems finally required surgery that fused much of her lower spine. A few years after this surgery Margaret’s arthritis reemerged, particularly in her back. The arthritis that returned soon began to be debilitating and brought an increased level of suffering for Margaret. With this she began to write *Grace Grows Best in Winter*, published in 1972. She did not write this book as C.S. Lewis had in *The Problem of Pain*, with philosophical arguments, but as he had in *A Grief Observed*; as a “cry of human anguish which only faith could assuage.” Margaret’s pain became so severe that she retired from teaching in 1973 at the age of 58.

At this time Margaret sold her Toronto home and moved to the suburbs, where she lived quietly and happily in Willowdale, Ontario. Though still plagued by pain, Margaret had learned early in life that during “long hours of solitude and weakness, repeating hymns and Scriptures...could help...withstand the ravages of pain.” Throughout her life she learned to seek solace in Christ, the scriptures, hymnody, and the “gentle ministry of the Holy Spirit.” During her retirement, Margaret was able to take occasional courses at Regent College in Vancouver and attended lectures in theology at Ontario Theological College in Toronto. She was also able to devote energies to continued writing. A few years after her retirement *Conversations with a Barred Owl* (1975) and *So You're Single* (1978) were published. In all Margaret published seventeen books in seven languages. In 1979 and 1981 Margaret taught Christian Hymnody at Regent College.

It was in these latter years of productivity that Margaret produced the greatest amount of material about herself. The earlier work *So You're Single*, followed in the 1980s by *Destined for Glory* (1983), *All Nature Sings* (1986), and *A Singing Heart* (1987), create a nexus of biographical information that Margaret had hoped would be improved upon later with a fuller autobiography, but this never happened. In 1985 Margaret again underwent “severe orthopedic surgery.”

Struggling for a few more years on her own, in 1992 Margaret retired to a monitored-care home in Toronto. Unfortunately, she was unable to interact with those who had appreciated and had been ministered to by her works. A bright spot of that year was the recognition of her contributions to hymnody by being named a Fellow of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada.

At the end of her introduction to *Destined for Glory*, Margaret Clarkson relates the story of a friend who came to visit, who for five years had struggled with the death of her mother after a nine year battle with cancer.

At that time Margaret had been halfway through the manuscript for the book and allowed her to read it and engage her on the subject of suffering. According to Margaret, her friend “was able to find rest on a number of points that had been troubling her and commit herself in a new way to God’s sovereignty.” Soon after, this same woman found that she was diagnosed with cancer. During this trial Margaret’s friend wrote to her that her book had enabled her to hold up under the burden of her illness and learn about God’s purpose in pain. Margaret recognized that “what higher ministry could one hope for in writing a book—or living a life?”

Throughout her life Margaret Clarkson seemingly experienced every form of suffering one could experience; a broken home, financial strains, loneliness and isolation, and constant physical pain, however through it all she continued to place her faith and trust in her savior. During a life of trials she sensed God’s grace and mercy and communicated that to others by providing the church with dozens of hymns testifying to his sovereignty, love, and power. Margaret Clarkson heard and increasingly understood God’s call upon her life. As she matured she recognized that she was sent out to minister to others, not in isolation, but in triumph. She died on March 17, 2008 in Toronto, Ontario.

<https://archives.wheaton.edu/agents/people/2679>

So Send I You (First Version)

So send I you—to labor unrewarded,
To serve unpaid, unloved, unsought, unknown,
To bear rebuke, to suffer scorn and scoffing—
So send I you to toil for Me alone.

So send I you—to bind the bruised and broken,
O’er wand’ring souls to work, to weep, to wake,
To bear the burdens of a world weary—
So send I you, to suffer for My sake.

So send I you—to loneliness and longing,
With heart a hung’ring for the loved and known,
Forsaking home and kindred, friend and dear one—
So send I you, to know My love alone.

So send I—to leave your life’s ambition,
To die to dear desire, self-will resign,
To labor long, and love where men revile you—
So send I you, to lose your life in Mine.

So send I you—to hearts made hard by hatred,
To eyes made blind because they will not see,
To spend, tho it be blood, to spend and spare not—
So send I you to taste of Calvary.
"As the Father hath sent Me, So send I you."

The First Version...

In 1954, Clarkson's text was brought to the attention of musician John W. Peterson (1921–2006) in Chicago. Peterson gave his own account to William Reynolds in 1976:

In the summer of 1954, I was on the staff of Moody Bible Institute radio station WMBI in Chicago. One of the girls in the office handed me a poem one day that had impressed her. She thought I could possibly read it on one of the programs I conducted called "The Shut-In Hour." The poem was "So send I you." I did use it and was deeply moved by the verses, so much so that I tucked them away in my briefcase that I would be carrying to Kansas a few weeks later for a summer vacation.

One morning during my vacation in Wichita, Kansas, while improvising at the piano at the home of my mother, with the lines of the poem before me, the melody came. As I sang it through, I was again deeply moved by the power of the lyrics. I called some of my family who were present to come to the piano and hear the new song. Their reaction was the same as mine. Somehow I sensed in my heart that God was going to use this song.

Peterson's musical setting was first published in *Low Voice No. 1* (1954), part of the Melody-Aire series produced by the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, later acquired and reprinted by Zondervan's Singspiration brand. Peterson's arrangement was for unison voices and accompaniment, using all five of Clarkson's stanzas unchanged, but Peterson replaced the original coda with a short chorus saying "As the Father hath sent me, so send I you." This first issue of the song was headed "As sung by Bill Pearce of WMBI." In this 1954 printing, Clarkson was not credited.

The Second Version...

In spite of the success of the hymn and repeated appearances in Singspiration songbooks and some other collections, Clarkson was not satisfied with her original text. She explained in *A Singing Heart*:

As I grew in knowledge of the Scriptures, I came to realize that this text, written when I was only 22, was really very one-sided: it told only of the difficulties and privations of the missionary call, and none of its triumph and glory. It is true that the badge of Christian discipleship is a cross; it is equally true that the cross is crowned with eternal glory. In 1962, while on vacation at the Severn River, I wrote a second text. This set forth the true teaching of the Word of God on our Lord's missionary call, showing its sorrows but also showing its triumph and joy.

While the original song is still widely sung, I am happy to see that many of the newer hymnals are dropping that text in favor of the newer one, which undoubtedly is the more biblical hymn. I wish above all to be a biblical writer.

Clarkson's new words also suggested the need for a new tune. Peterson wrote his second tune at this time, a manuscript copy of which is held in Clarkson's papers at Wheaton College.

Peterson's second tune has largely been ignored by hymnal compilers in favor his first. In *A Singing Heart*, Clarkson remarked, "These new words need a more triumphant tune than either of the two earlier ones," and she listed eight possibilities, her most preferred being WELWYN, by Alfred Scott-Gatty (1847–1918), from *Arundel Hymns* (1902).

Clarkson's new text was adopted into other hymnals and songbooks, and for thirty years both versions continued to circulate, the older version appearing, for example, in the *Ambassador Hymnal* (1994). In one notable example of a hymnal editor choosing the older over the newer, Donald Hustad explained his retention of the old version in *Hymns for the Living Church* (1974):

She said that in later years she came to know that there is *joy* in obedience, and regretted the somber tone of the hymn. In fact, she wrote another "optimistic" version. However, God has used and blessed the original setting, and it seems to be preferred.

Clarkson later acknowledged the appeal of the older text and described the relationship between the two versions:

... the emotional appeal of the older one is stronger than that of the newer one, and I knew it isn't the emotion that is needed in a hymn, it was really a solid theology. Let's say that the first version of "So send I you" was unconsciously a hymn, but I grew past it. . . . The second version of "So send I you" is not the best thing I have ever written, but at the time it was greatly loved and used.

Baptist pastor Bob Cummings described the difference between the two texts via a spiritual metaphor:

Sometimes one's point of view makes all the difference in the world. Two little girls were sent by their mother to gather wild blackberries for a pie. Both soon discovered that the tangled, thorny bushes grabbed at their clothes and tore at their skin. One was so upset because of the difficulties that she returned home immediately—with an empty bucket. The second daughter returned later, a bit disheveled and covered with little scratches, but her bucket was filled with sweet, juicy berries. "It'll be worth it all when I taste the pie," she said.

The author of this hymn, Margaret Clarkson, knew well that Christian service as a missionary can be like picking blueberries—a long and uncomfortable task. With that perspective she wrote the hymn "So send I you—to labor unrewarded."

It spoke in somber, even dismal tones of serving “unpaid, unloved, unsought, unknown.” Its selfless frame of mind captured the imagination of many hearty souls and stirred many Christians to sacrificial service.

Later she wrote, . . . “It is true that the badge of Christian discipleship is a cross; it is equally true that the cross is crowned with eternal glory.” Consequently, she wrote a second version—the one included here—and urged hymnal editors to use it instead of the earlier text.

Clarkson’s second version, at the end, quotes Matthew 25:23, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” which aptly reflects the real spiritual reward of selfless Christian service: acknowledgement and reward from the One who calls his people to a life of humble commitment.

by Chris Fenner for Hymnology Archive 12 June 2020

The Second Version...

Some years later, though still battling pain, she found other teaching positions and began having her writing published. She came to believe the first version of “So Send I You” was one-sided, and wrote new lyrics that she felt were more biblically balanced between the trials and joys of the Christian life under-girded by God’s grace:

So send I you-by grace made strong to triumph
O’er hosts of hell, o’er darkness, death, and sin,
My name to bear, and in that name to conquer-
So send I you, my victory to win.

So send I you-to take to souls in bondage
The word of truth that sets the captive free,
To break the bonds of sin, to loose death’s fetters-
So send I you, to bring the lost to me.

So send I you-my strength to know in weakness,
My joy in grief, my perfect peace in pain,
To prove My power, My grace, My promised presence-
So send I you, eternal fruit to gain.

So send I you-to bear My cross with patience,
And then one day with joy to lay it down,
To hear My voice, “well done, My faithful servant-
Come, share My throne, My kingdom, and My crown!”

“As the Father hath sent Me, so send I you.”

It does make a difference where our focus is.

<https://barbaraleeharper.com/2013/11/03/new-lyrics-to-so-send-i-you/>

What is a Hymn?

Edith Margaret Clarkson

A hymn is an expression of worship—our glad and grateful acknowledgement of the "worth-ship" of Almighty God, our confession of our own creatureliness before our Creator, our bowing before his transcendence. Hymns are a celebration of who and what God is and of what he has done— songs of praise, thanksgiving, and joy in God. Christians sing hymns because our God is worthy to be praised.

It follows, then, that the words of a hymn are of the utmost importance. Good music must accompany them, but its highest office is to strengthen and enhance the message of the words. The best tunes are those that best help worshipers experience the text of the hymn; for it is the words, not the music, that decide the worth of a hymn.

What, then, constitutes a good hymn text? Watts and Wesley set the norm long ago, and their standards have never been surpassed. Today's hymns must be in our own language, idiom, and metaphor, but our main thrust will not be substantially different from theirs. I suggest that good hymns have six general characteristics.

1. ***Good hymns are God-centered, not man-centered—looking upwards, not inwards.*** They have loftiness of concept, and dignity and reverence of language. They adore the eternal Godhead for who and what he is, worshiping him for his holiness, wisdom, power, justice, goodness, mercy, and truth. They praise him for his mighty acts—for creation, preservation, redemption; for guidance, protection, provision; for the means of grace and the hope of glory. They offer petition suitable to their theme; they praise, worship, nourish, encourage, teach, exhort, inspire, and rejoice in Christian community. Good hymns are not subjective; they are free from introspection. When man enters the picture, it is to acknowledge the darkness of his own sinful nature in the presence of such a God, to seek his mercy, and to grasp more closely his redeeming grace.
2. ***Good hymns are doctrinal in content and theologically sound, rooted solidly in the Word of God.*** Christian leaders should be more aware of the doctrinal content of the hymns they choose than many of them are, for many hymns in common use today contain theological errors or untruths. All too often attractive or well-known tunes are allowed to take precedence over truly biblical texts, and our congregations absorb false doctrines unwittingly. For as Erik Routley has written, "A congregation's disposition towards right belief or away from it is subtly influenced by the habitual use of hymns... The singing congregation is uncritical; but it matters very much what it sings, *for it comes to believe its hymns*. Wrong doctrine in preaching would be noticed; *in hymns, it may come to be believed*" (Erik Routley, *Hymns Today and Tomorrow*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964). The worshiping congregation with a good and wisely used hymnbook, however, is constantly instructed and blessed as the great doctrines of the faith are brought before it in review: so truth is kept vernal. The doctrine of good hymns is neither myopic nor overblown, but true to the Word of

God and to the experience of the average believer. It is practical in nature, designed to help worshipers respond to God's truth and so to live better Christian lives.

3. ***Good hymns have words of beauty, dignity, reverence, and simplicity.*** Whether their theme is one of lofty exultation or a simple expression of trust, good hymns are chaste, precise, and lovely in their utterance. Their language is clear and concise. They are never glib, never pat, never extravagant, never trite; they are always true. Emotionally warm and fervent, they are never sentimental. They speak beautifully, feelingly, compellingly, and with restraint of the things of God. They do not transgress the limits of good taste in concept, word, or setting. They cannot give offense.
4. ***Good hymns are adult in word and tone.*** They do not insult intelligence by requiring us to sing immortal truths in childish or unsuitable modes of expression, or to sloppy, sentimental tunes. While remaining true to the Gospel, they contain nothing to embarrass or bewilder outsiders, but rather will speak to them of a deep, sincere, vital experience of God. Their figures of speech will be in keeping with the worth-ship of God and will have meaning for the contemporary Christian.
5. ***Good hymns display precision and finesse of poetic technique and expression.*** They will have a single theme and organic unity. They move from a bold and arresting attack in the opening line, through a definite progression of thought, to a clear and decisive climax. No extraneous thought may intrude for the sake of a rhyme or rhythmic pattern. Rhymes and rhythms are interesting, original, and correct. The declamation (union of words with music) is accurate. Meters may be varied but will be conservative enough that good tunes, capable of being well sung by average congregations, may be written for them. Good hymns should be short enough to be sung in their entirety, in order that the full impact of their sequence may be experienced. They should be free of irrelevant refrains which detract from the main thought.
6. ***Good hymns turn the heart heavenward.*** They rejoice in the unity of believers and the communion of saints. The best hymnists have recognized more clearly than most of us that the people of God are one. They take their place with the warring, suffering, and triumphing church universal, identifying with the saints of long ago as readily as with those of today. The hymns of such writers sing often, and with deep delight and longing, of the soul's true home.

What constitutes a good hymn? Good hymns are not the result of desire or ambition, but are an outgrowth of spiritual life. They are not based on feeling but on eternal verities, not centered on man but on God. Writing a hymn is more than using certain techniques correctly. It is a matter of looking on the face of God, of worshiping in his presence, of embracing his will, of accepting his cross and living under its daily obedience; then, having learned the disciplines of good writing, of singing his grace. True hymnwriters have not sought primarily to write hymns, but to know God: knowing him, they could not help but sing. Theirs are the hymns that have lived through the ages and will live far into the future. It is this kind of hymnwriting we need today if our generation is to contribute anything of real worth to the church's treasury of worship and praise.