

# UNIT TEN

## SINGING TOGETHER

- When Paul wrote about the use of psalms, hymns and songs in meeting, he envisaged two things happening together – believers could edify and build up the church as they offered their praises to God.
- Praise need not be specifically directed to God in the second person, because we praise him as we talk or sing about him to one another.
- However, addressing God ‘face to face’ is important – we diminish the value of singing together if we think of it purely in terms of encouraging one another.

## WORDS AND MUSIC: WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

- Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs
  - Paul’s writings make no distinction between these categories – both Old Testament psalms and new songs of praise would have been included.
  - Christians have continued to sing psalms in various forms; ‘hymns’, ‘choruses’ and ‘songs’ have come to describe different forms of music.
  - Like many Biblical psalms, good Christian hymns or songs tell us what God is like and what he has done, and encourage a response.
  - Those planning services must consider the functions of songs at different stages.
- The Affective Value of Music
  - Music can touch our emotions, but can be manipulative if it is simply used to create a mood – if it is used to *highlight the meaning of the words* it can plant the word of God memorably in our hearts.
- Maintaining the Unity of the Spirit
  - Music makes it possible for many people to exercise their gifts for the edification of the congregation – as people join together it can be a particular expression of the unity we have in Christ.
  - Unfortunately, it can also be a cause of division in a congregation – many people think of music in selfish terms.
  - People should be encouraged to welcome the contributions of others.

- The Priority of Words over Music
  - In church, music must serve the proclamation and application of Scriptural truth — not simply be used to entertain or create a mood.
  - What we sing must be consistent with God’s word and reflect its teaching — but music is important too.
  - If hymns are not well chosen, or if the musical accompaniment is inappropriate, the process of edification may be hindered — the congregation must be able to participate meaningfully in the singing.

## **BALANCING THE OLD AND THE NEW**

- The aim in any congregation should be to develop a musical tradition appropriate to the group concerned.
- However, this brings the danger of developing only a very narrow musical tradition, following fads, becoming too attached to familiar favourites or trying to relive past experiences.
- If we become the victims of a particular musical trend we will soon be out of date, and if we just respond to the latest fads we will provide nothing of permanent value.
- Christians need to be put in touch with the insights of past generations, but also with modern music — otherwise there is a danger of widening the generation gap.
- All church music should have the ability to speak to the entire congregation — it should have meaning to most, and should not be divisive.
- We should not underestimate the ability of congregations to learn new or more complicated music.

## **REDISCOVERING HYMNS**

- Various Types of Hymns
  - By virtue of their structure, traditional hymns differ from choruses in being able to:
    - Provide a more extensive treatment of a biblical passage.
    - Develop a biblical theme, looking at it from various points of view.
    - Tell the story of someone else’s spiritual pilgrimage.
    - Paint a picture of some biblical scene to encourage us to respond.
    - Explore the different dimensions of the response we should make to God.
- Hymns Through the Ages
  - The Earliest Centuries and the Medieval Period
    - Most church music in this era was written for sections of the Greek or Latin mass — congregational involvement would have been limited.

- In monasteries, hymn singing was introduced but this was only enjoyed by a small number of people – many of these hymns were associated with times or day or seasons of the year.
- The Reformation Legacy
  - The hymn to be sung by the congregation in the regular Sunday gathering really emerged with the German Reformation.
  - Hymns became a vehicle for corporately affirming confidence in God and the gospel.
  - German hymns often have many syllables in a line and many lines in a verse – strong tunes in a measured, slow beat show the sense of confidence and adoration conveyed by the words.
  - Many were not necessarily tied to Scriptural texts but related some aspect of biblical truth or Christian experience.
  - In Geneva, the Book of Psalms became the sole vehicle of the people’s musical expression – this was to rediscover the richness of the Psalms and also in the belief that only strict paraphrases of Scripture were appropriate for use in church.
- Eighteenth Century Developments
  - One of the greatest hymn writers of all time was Isaac Watts (1674-1748) – he was concerned that the Old Testament should be used and interpreted in the light of the New, and the Psalms should become Christian praises.
  - Watts wrote thousands of hymns on divine subjects, some based on specific passages and some, though biblical, not based on any single passage – he was concerned that hymns should express the thoughts and feelings of those singing as well as the truths of Scripture.
  - Charles Wesley (1707-88) was the most prolific of all English hymn writers – he and his brother John encouraged people to sing about Christ, using attractive tunes to match compelling poetry.
  - Even more so than Watts, Wesley wrote about Christian experience and focused on the love of God, particularly as seen in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.
  - Wesley also experimented more freely with the hymn form than Watts.
  - Another milestone in this period was the publication of an evangelical hymnal by John Newton and William Cowper in 1779.

- The Nineteenth Century
  - The poetic ideals and literary styles of the Romantic Movement, with its focus on nature, beauty and sentiments, were reflected in the development of hymns in the nineteenth century.
  - Heber (1783-1826) wrote to persuade the Church of England to use hymns which were inspiring, yet related to the Bible readings for Sundays and holy days in the Prayer Book Calendar.
  - As the Oxford movement re-introduced Catholic theology to the Church of England, many early Greek and Latin hymns were translated.
  - There was a massive outpouring of hymns in the Victorian period, but many are too dated in language, music and style to be used today.
- The Twentieth Century
  - Developments in the twentieth century were more complex — traditional hymns were still written but in more modern language and musical forms, and modern tunes have been written for old words.
  - The Charismatic movement, with its emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, has generated an international movement of song writing — this tradition tends to focus on congregational life and ministry.
  - Contemporary Christian music often follows folk, rock or jazz styles, and sometimes lyrics are confused and lack theological depth and substance, using repetition to create a mood.
  - There is a bright and vigorous note of celebration in much of this material, but little to compare with the doctrinal strength of older hymns — insufficient attention is given to the great gospel events.
  - Important themes like suffering and judgement are often neglected, possibly because words are often written by musicians rather than by pastors or teachers.
  - Modern music can be difficult to sing — great care may be needed to teach some items to a congregation.
  - There have been exciting contributions to Christian music in recent decades, but it would be foolish to sing only modern songs.