

# Spiritual Songs Hymnbook, Preface of 1881

by John Nelson Darby

---

*A good hymn book should have a basis of truth, the spirit of poetry, and experimental acquaintance with truth in the affections, and should be consistent with the Christian's conscious place in Christ before the Father.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 95:1, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16

**Topics:** "Hymnody", "Worship"

---

## Description

John Nelson Darby discusses the challenges and responsibilities involved in creating a new edition of the Spiritual Songs Hymnbook, emphasizing the need for sound doctrine, poetic spirit, and a deep experiential understanding of truth that connects the assembly with Christ. He highlights the importance of hymns that reflect the Father's love and Christ's presence, ensuring they are suitable for corporate worship rather than individual experiences. Darby warns against hymns that, while pious, may contain unscriptural elements that could mislead the congregation. He advocates for simplicity and collective expression in hymns, aiming to elevate the assembly's affections towards God. The preface concludes with a prayer for divine guidance in the hymnbook's use and effectiveness.

---

## Transcript

A new edition of this Hymn Book being required, the present editor was asked by the publisher to take charge of it. Of course the responsibility of its new contents and form must rest with him; but as it was meant for all, he took counsel with brethren in various places who came in his way, who he thought would be likely to aid in the work - a work far more difficult than those imagine who have never undertaken it.

Three things are needed for a hymn book. A basis of truth and sound doctrine. Something at least of the spirit of poetry, though not poetry itself, which is objectionable, as merely the spirit and imagination of man; and thirdly, the most difficult to find of all, that experimental acquaintance with truth in the affections which enables a person to make his hymn (if led of God to compose one) the vehicle in sustained thought and language of practical grace and truth, which sets the soul in communion with Christ and rises even to the Father, and yet this in such sort that it is not mere individual experience which, for assembly-worship, is out of place. In a word, the Father's love, and Christ developed in the soul's affections, rising in praise back again to its source. God alone can give this so as to meet the wants of an assembly. Like assembly-prayer, it must not rise too completely beyond the state of the assembly, yet must reach up to God, and raise the assembly's affections up to Him, so that what He is in grace developed in the affections of the soul should be jointly proclaimed. It is not mere wants - that would be a hymn for a prayer-meeting.

A basis of truth has been spoken of, or, to speak more justly, the truth; this is evidently fundamentally necessary, but much more is. There is based on this truth a large sphere of scriptural thoughts, feelings, experiences and hopes, in which the soul moves, which ought to be scriptural.

Now in a vast number of hymns there is real piety in the affections, but connected with statements which may not touch any great foundational truth, but are unscriptural, and thus the best affections are connected with unscriptural thoughts, and this is a very real injury to the soul. Thus, suppose uncertainty as to salvation the absence of the spirit of adoption, a bright hope of being in glory when we die; these are merely taken as instances, for it applies to very many points, and souls are quite angry at losing a hymn which their piety has enjoyed, but which has connected their hopes and affections with what is not scriptural. Many such have been eliminated heretofore from the collection, but there remained still something to do. Hymns should be simple, full of Christ and the Father's love, unaffected, and in some measure elevated so as not to be mere prose. The singer must be there, but the singer associated in his thoughts with God filled from on high; yet so as not to individualise himself and leave the assembly behind him. Many most sweet hymns are too individual, too experimental, for an assembly. In this collection an Appendix is therefore added where there may be as beautiful hymns, but the assembly has been less thought of. Where possible, the hymns for the assembly are in the plural. There are hymns which suit prayer-meetings, home-devotion, even the gospel; though there the difficulty is very great. Abstractedly you are making people sing as having certain feelings, and then preaching to them because they have not.

But in actual Christendom things are not so sharply defined, and there are hidden souls and hidden wants which the hymn may give expression to, and set a soul free or make it apprehend God's love sometimes more effectually than the sermon; still there is very great danger of widespread delusion and loose apprehension of sin and grace, and the difficulty is very real. You may often find the loudest singers where the conscience is the least reached.

---

Finally is added what perhaps should have come first: the great principle in selecting and correcting has been that there should be nothing in the hymns for the assembly but what was the expression of, or at least consistent with, the Christian's conscious place in Christ before the Father.

The reader will kindly remark that there are changes necessitated by putting "we" for "I." which, but for that, there would have been no occasion for.

The book is commended to Him who alone can give songs in the night, trusting that a hymn book, already the best known to the editor, may be still more useful to brethren sure that the Spirit, who alone can indite a genuine hymn, can alone enable it to be sung aright. J. N. D.

---

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/spiritual-songs-hymnbook-preface-of-1881/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**