

Singers of the Eighteenth Century

by Paxton Hood

The sermon explores the profound impact of sacred hymns during the Eighteenth century revival, highlighting key figures and their contributions to English hymnology.

Scripture: Psalm 40:3, Psalm 71:23, Psalm 96:1, Psalm 149:1, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16

Topics: "Christian Hymns", "Church Revival"

Description

Paxton Hood delves into the significance of sacred songs in the Christian faith, particularly during the Eighteenth century revival, where Isaac Watts and Phillip Doddridge introduced popular sacred melodies, with Watts being hailed as the creator of the English hymn. John and Charles Wesley played a crucial role in translating and improving hymns from the Moravian community, providing new songs of praise that resonated with the passionate spiritual experiences of the revival. Other notable lyricists like Thomas Olivers, Augustus Toplady, and John Cennick made important contributions to the hymns of the revival, creating a spirit of sacred song that was boldly evangelical and deeply devotional.

Transcript

The greatest religious movements through all the Christian ages have acknowledged the power of sacred song. The Eighteenth century revival was no exception. One of the great aids to the revival was the music generated through the course of the revival.

Until Isaac Watts and Phillip Doddridge appeared, England had no popular sacred melodies. It ought never to be forgotten that Watts was the creator of the English hymn. The average majesty of thought and expression in Watts's hymns probably still exceeds that of any other English hymn writer. However, the hymns of Watts as a whole were well suited for expression of the kind of passionate spiritual experience produced in a great revival.

When the revival came, the general public were accustomed to songs that were thoughtless, foolish, and often licentious. New songs of praise were needed. In order to begin meeting this need, John and Charles Wesley took Count Zinzendorf's hymns from the Moravian community, translated them into English, and immensely improved them. Some of the finest hymns in the Wesleyan collection are these translations.

The Wesleys' first collection of hymns was published in 1739. Probably without knowing it, the Wesleys and their coadjutors did exactly what the Reformer had done. They gave emotional expression to the revival through the ordinance of song, and they preached the Gospel in sweet refrains.

The songs written during the revival were remarkably free from rigidity and ritual. As in all great religious movements that have shaken men's souls, they were spiritual, authentic expressions of God's work in the soul. Loud "amens" resounded as the preacher spoke or prayed, and then hearty gushes of song united all hearts.

Among infuriated mobs, Wesley often found retreat in song. On one occasion in 1740, he was attacked by a crowd. It was proposed by one that they should take him away and drown him. He broke out singing, and the mob retreated, leaving him on a bridge. He took his stand on the bridge and preached a useful sermon to hundreds who remained to listen to from the text, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

But the contributions of John and Charles Wesley are so well known that it is more important to notice that, as the revival moved on, other lyricists made important contributions to the songs written during the revival. A remarkable example was Thomas Olivers, a "sturdy Welshman." Before his conversion, he was a thoroughly bad fellow, a kind of wandering reprobate. He ridiculed the revival and made comic songs about George Whitefield and sung them with in the barrooms.

When Whitefield came to town, he went with the purpose of obtaining fresh material for his mockery. But his heart was completely broken, and he felt so much grief for what he had done that he began to follow Whitefield through the streets, scarcely refraining from kissing the prints of his footsteps. By his own testimony, he now "saw God in everything: the heavens, the earth, and the rain showed me something of Him."

Olivers was about to enter into a business when John Wesley heard of him. Although he was converted under Whitefield, Wesley persuaded him to yield himself to the work of preaching as a member of his itinerant band.

For the next forty-six years, Olivers wrote poetry and hymns. He is the author of one of the most majestic of all hymns: "The God of Abraham Praise!"

Another fine hymn writer of the revival was Augustus Toplady. He wrote many fine songs, full of melody, pathos, and affecting imagery. There is scarcely a hymnbook that does not contain his most popular work, "Rock of Ages." The characteristic of "Rock of Ages" is its depth of penitential devotion. A volume might be written on the history of this expressive hymn. Innumerable are the multitudes whom these words have sustained when dying. Toplady himself died in 1778 in the thirty-eighth year of his age. No public announcement was made for his funeral, but thousands followed him to his burial in Tottenham Court Road Chapel.

In a far humbler sphere, but representing the same faith and fervor as Toplady, was John Cennick. His hymns "Children of the Heavenly King" and "Thou Dear Redeemer, Dying Lamb" are two of his best-loved." Also deserving of mention are the fine body of hymns written by William Cowper and John Newton as well as lesser known songwriters James Grant, Joseph Griggs, and Miss Steele.

Thus there was set free throughout the country a spirit of sacred song that was new to the experience of the nation. These songs were boldly evangelical, devoted not to church forms but rather praises to Christ, earnest meditation upon the state of man without His work, and the blessedness of the soul that had been saved by Him.

It has seemed to some that the most perfect hymn in the English language is "Jesus! Lover of My Soul." Sentiments may differ, but this hymn undoubtedly captures the essence of all the hymns that were sung in the days of the revival. For the first time there was given to Christian experience that which met it at every turn. The hymns united all companies and all societies, and thousands continue to be drawn from earth to heaven in their wake.

The revival hymns become so well known that a sad cluster of convicts, horse stealers, highway robbers, burglars, smugglers, and thieves were led forth to execution singing these hymns. The turnkey of the prison said he had never seen such people before. The Methodists had been among them, and they had all yielded themselves to the power of the truth as it is in Jesus.

The hymns also found their way to sickbeds. When the old Earl of Derby was dying at Knowsley, he had his housekeeper read to him the well-known hymn "All Ye That Pass By to Jesus Draw Nigh." When she came to the lines,

The Lord in the day of His anger did lay

Our sins on the Lamb, and He bore them away,

the Earl looked up and said, "Stop! Don't you think that ought to be, 'The Lord in the day of His mercy did lay?'"

The old lady did not admit the validity of his lordship's theology, but it abundantly shows that his experience had passed through the verse and reached to the true meaning of the hymn.

The hymns written during the revival inaugurated the rise of English hymnology, and it is not too much to say that as compared with them, many more recent hymns are as tinsel compared with gold. As one writer so aptly described them:

They sob, they swell, they meet the spirit in its most hushed and plaintive mood. They roll and bear it aloft in its most inspired and prophetic moods. Among the mines and factories of Lancashire and Yorkshire, in chambers of death, in the most joyous assemblages of the household, they have relieved the hard lot, and sweetened the pleasant one. Even in other lands, soldiers and sailors, slaves and prisoners, have recited with what joy these words have entered into their life.

Thus the great hymns of this period grew and became a religious power in the land. It may be said with no exaggeration that the hymnology of England in the eighteenth century is the finest and most complete that the history of the Church has known.

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