

The Journey into Congregational Hymnody  
Congregational History and Polity  
December 18, 1999  
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Introduction

The journey into Congregational Hymnody has been an interesting and difficult one. The evolution from psalter to hymnal has taken many turns and even stepped backwards at times. The final result, the Pilgrim Hymnal, of the twentieth century has served Congregational churches well, but it was a long time in coming.

Hymnody burst on the scene with the reformation of Martin Luther. Although hymn singing was fairly common among reformed congregations, when the Puritans came to this continent, they brought with them the practice of psalm-singing during worship, and not that of hymn-singing. The Book of Psalmes by Henry Ainsworth from 1612 was brought on the Mayflower, and was used in the worship services of Plimoth Plantation. As the Massachusetts Bay Colony settled, other Puritans also used the Old Version of Sternhold and Hopkins from 1562. Thus psalms were the music of worship for the Puritans in the colonies.

Since the Puritans believed in the elevation of scripture in the worship service, the singing of psalms fit perfectly into their practice as Christians and their theology. But the singing was not what it could be. Many, by then Congregationalists, felt that the poor quality of singing was not fit to glorify God. Also, the psalms were from the Old Testament only, and did not glorify Christ through God's gift of music. This lack of Biblical totality left worship through music an incomplete reflection of the whole of Christian experience.

In response to these two deficiencies, Isaac Watts emerged as the premier hymn and psalm writer of the eighteenth century. His numerous volumes revolutionized the Congregational scene, both in England and the American Colonies. Though Watts was respected, and there was widespread consensus that Watts was meeting an urgent need, it was an uphill struggle. The exclusive singing of psalms was held on to tightly by many churches. "This struggle continued through the better part of the century before all of the churches were persuaded to break away from the Bay Psalm Book and to sing 'hymns of human composure.'" (Atkins, 6).

Though the struggle was uphill, the end result was a plethora of hymnals in the nineteenth century from various sources. While some were from Congregational sources, they were independent and not a reflection of the entire Congregational community. Yet, there are common threads that emerged, a Congregational criteria, if you will. These criteria eventually evolved into the Pilgrim Hymnal of the twentieth century. "There was a demand also for a hymnal of our own, not a borrowed one." (Atkins, 15)

In taking a close look at the hymnals of the nineteenth century used by various Congregational churches and the three most popular editions of this century's Pilgrim Hymnal (1912, 1935, 1958), the criteria for publishing a Congregational hymnal becomes evident. In the following section, these criteria will be discussed.

### Congregational Criteria

Criteria include both musical and non-musical considerations. The needs of the individual churches plus scriptural witness and expression of Christian experience all are important pieces in the mix. These components are not to be prioritized in any way, but are all necessary and important for a useful and truthful Christian expression to all that is Congregational hymn-singing. The early Congregationalists desired to have Christ be the head and center of their church. They desired their congregations to function as the body of Christ. "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another." (Romans 12:4-5, NRSV) The hymnal was seen in the same way, all functions are important. If one is left out, the body is incomplete. To be a true extension of Congregationalism, all the criteria must be met with equal fervor.

### Literary and Musical Integrity

The most consistent and widely spoken of criteria is that of high literary and musical integrity. Virtually every hymnal of the last two centuries at use in Congregational churches highlights the attempt to meet this need. The high musical standards set were merely a carry-over from Ainsworth's psalter, a book of "great (musical) scholarship" (Atkins, 4). Spiritual Songs of 1832 attempted to "provide a better class of hymn" (Atkins, 10), while Spiritual Songs for Social Worship of 1833 was greatly concerned with "musical quality" (preface, 1).

By the 1850s, the high standard of musical quality understood, more emphasis was placed on the poetic. The Sabbath Hymn Book of 1958 stressed hymns with "lyrical character" and the Congregational Hymn Book of the same year attempted "elevation of style and harmony in

language". (preface, 1). Also, the Plymouth Hymnal of 1855 "represents a very high standard, both in words and music" (Atkins, 16). The joint publication between the Presbyterians and Congregationalists in 1897, the immediate predecessor to the Pilgrim Hymnal, stressed "the highest standard in musical or literary merit" (preface, 1).

By the time the Pilgrim Hymnal came into being, both the literary and musical standards were set. It should be no surprise that Congregationalists universally embraced literary and musical scholarship and the high standards that scholarship represented. After all, the Congregationalists were champions of education, establishing colleges and universities on this continent and displaying extremely high regard for the highly educated in their pulpits.

The Pilgrim Hymnal of 1912 states that it has "admitted nothing which has not poetical or musical merit" (preface, 1), including no verse in any hymn that is not "lyrical and worshipful" and "no tune which is not singable, devout, and congenial" (preface, 2). The 1935 version speaks of "raising the standard" (preface, iv) of the hymn, while the 1958 "draws more heavily on the best hymnody of the Church Universal" (preface, v), and seeks to "guarantee the integrity of texts and tunes" (preface, vi). The 1958 hymnal even quotes composer Ralph Vaughan Williams on the importance of melody and harmony, "The only correct music is that which is beautiful and noble" (preface, vii). The importance of a high standard of music and poetry is now considered representative of Congregational hymnody.

Secondly, the Congregationalists have taken very seriously the inclusion of new or "modern" hymns in their publications. Demonstrating the Congregational desire for inclusion of newer hymns, the Sabbath Hymn Book of 1858 contains both "tried hymns" and the "fruits of modern

hymnody” (Introduction, 1). Earlier, Village Hymns of 1824 included “a number of originals that became very popular” (Atkins, 9). The 1912 Pilgrim Hymnal is “hospitable to the new from every source” (preface, 1). And the 1958 version is sensitive to the “recent developments in hymnody” (preface, v).

The reflection of modern hymnody that has characterized Congregational hymnals and the singing practice of Congregational churches in the United States throughout the last two centuries has not come to a close. Since the publication of the 1958 hymnal, individual churches have taken it upon themselves to publish both supplements (Oshkosh and Fox Point, Wisconsin) and complete hymnals (Winnetka, Illinois). This attempt to stay current with the addition of new hymns is totally in keeping with the Congregational practice of including modern hymns. As the 1958 hymnal states, “There is need for periodic revision of our hymnals” (preface, v). It would seem that a revision of the 1958 hymnal would be the logical next step, and would unify the hymn singing of the NACCC churches, avoiding the individual attempts to fill a single need, as occurred in the last century.

### Social Awareness

In addition to musical considerations as priorities for the published Congregational hymnals, there was also the importance of social issues. Attention to the changing world around them resulted in an emphasis on ecumenism and the social gospel. By the time of the 1855 Plymouth Collection fo Hymns and Tunes, the “Great Humanities” (preface, iv) were a consideration. This is no surprise, since many Congregational Colleges, such as Oberlin and Beloit College, had a liberal arts focus. Attention was given in this hymnal to “temperance, human rights and

freedom, peace and benevolence” (preface, 2). This is also reflective of the Congregational church’s involvement in the abolitionist movement which was exploding on the scene.

The trend to reflect the social issues of our times continued into this century with the Pilgrim Hymnal. Atkins calls the hymnal a “pioneer in hymns for the social gospel” (15). The 1935 edition contained “more hymns of the social gospel than any former book has contained” (preface, 1). Other twentieth century hymnals address this issue as well, with the Century Hymnal of 1921 and Hymns for the Living Age of 1923 placing “an emphasis on the Social Gospel that is exactly in tune with the times” (Atkins, 17).

In addition, the hymnal of 1958 attempted to show how Christian worship and praise are “tied to common life” and address the “problems of the here and now” (Guide to the Pilgrim Hymnal, xxi). Not only did the hymnal desire to make worship relevant, but the inclusion of the hymns of the social gospel were to reflect the “social implications of the gospel” (ibid, xxi). The 1958 hymnal was striving to obtain “universal and cosmic significance (ivid, xxi). It was ahead of its time.

The idea of ecumenism was important as well, and as ahead of its time as the idea of the social gospel. Henry Ward Beecher in 1855 with the Plymouth Collection of Hymns and Tunes, “looked in books of every denomination of Christians” (preface, iv) for material to include. Hymns from the Moravian, Roman Catholic and Methodist traditions were used. Just a glance at the indexes of Authors, Composers and Sources of any of the Congregational hymnals of the last century show that Beecher’s practice has continued. The Pilgrim Hymnal of 1958, states plainly that hymns are taken from the ‘hymnody of the Church Universal” and that the hymnal

itself has “benefited from the broadening and enriching impetus of the ecumenical movement” (preface, v). The ecumenical nature of this hymnal includes an ideal of timelessness and ethnicity as well, taking tunes from “every age of the church” and “many traditions, countries, and cultures” (preface, vii).

### Scriptural Witness and Christian Experience

Another important element of the body of priorities that make up the necessity of Congregational hymnody is that of scriptural witness and Christian experience. In the United States, especially, the use of “all of canonical Scripture was not only proper but necessary” (Atkins, 7) during the time of Watt’s composing. In 1815, the publication Christian Psalmody, a compilation of 236 Watts hymns and some 240 from other sources, attempted to reflect the “institutions and ordinances of the gospel” and that all material included was “for high praises of God...(to) favor Him, (and to) glory His adorable name” (preface, 1). The Plymouth Collection of Hymns and Tunes (1855) goal was to represent the “full expression of whole religious feeling” (preface, iv).

The Congregational Hymn Book of 1858 continued this devotion to the scriptures in saying that the hymnal and its contents was to “express knowledge of God”, though “not to teach doctrines of theology”, rather to accomplish “praise and adoration of God” (preface, 4, 5). The Pilgrim Hymnal also is a strong example of scriptural witnessing through hymns. It speaks of “convey(ing) to members of each congregation the meanings of the gospel” (preface, v).

The desire to keep Christ at the center of the church, kept scriptural witness alive in the hymns of the last two centuries which have been frequented by Congregational churches. According to the Guide to the Pilgrim Hymnal, the Christocentric character of the hymnal is to insure that Christ is “enthroned and adored above all else in the worship of the church” (xix), and to “remove the veil and allow the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ to be revealed in its fullness and majesty (xx). The desire to stay focused on Christ and to deepen understanding of the scriptures has remained consistent in Congregational hymnody.

Scriptural witness bridges nicely to the expression of Christian experience. Beginning again in 1815 with Christian Psalmody, the hymnal attempts to convey the “diversities of Christian experience” (preface, 1). Also considered important was the “religious effect of a hymn” (Christian Lyre, preface, 1). Beecher’s work also added hymns about “Christ and Christian experience” (preface, 2), and those hymns were to “excite or express feelings” (preface, 1). The Congregational Hymn Book of 1858 strove to affect the singer of hymns so much as to “awaken (them) to a higher spirituality” and “lead them to a holier style of living” (preface, 5).

The intentional use of hymns to affect the listener to a deeper and more full Christian experience has continued with this century’s Pilgrim Hymnal in its varying editions. The 1912 volume speaks of the myriad of Christian experience it hopes to inspire, “communion with God in his nearness and living presence, fellowship with Christ, enthusiasm for humanity, the passion of service, and consecration to the Kingdom of God on earth” (preface, 1). These goals



encompass a vast area of Christian experience, not only deeper personal understanding, but also love for God and creation that leads one to action.

The Guide to the Pilgrim Hymnal brings to light the blending of these two ideals, scriptural witness and Christian experience. In the criteria that this volume sets, a hymn should be “inspired, shaped and formed by Biblical revelation and imagery” (xx). It goes on to say that we should be able to “speak our own hearts and our own words to God” (xx) without necessarily resorting to literalism. As Congregationalists, we should strive for a “greater thrust of meaning, power and beauty” (xx) in our representations and reflections of scripture in hymns. Though a great deal of emphasis is placed on the expression of Christian experience in Congregational hymnody, the source is still scripture itself. The focus remains scriptural.

### Worship Considerations

Other considerations in Congregational criteria have to do with worship in varying ways. The first and foremost consideration in this category initially was to elevate the place of Congregational hymn singing. Early in the nineteenth century this was still a reaction to the dispute between the diverse camps of psalm singing and hymn singing. “Congregational clergymen...were most active in the movement for the reform of singing” (Atkins, 3), and “the 18<sup>th</sup> century soon saw a determined effort on the part of certain of its pastors to effect an improvement in the mode of singing” (Atkins, 5). In 1831, it was the desire of Rev. Joshua Leavitt “that people should sing the hymns” (Atkins, 10). Even in the middle of that century the

problem of limited congregational singing still existed. Henry Ward Beecher in the introduction of his Plymouth Collection of Hymns and Tunes said that the “choir sings not for the congregations, but to incite them to sing and lead the way” (iii). Rev. Elias Nason in 1859 wrote that “singing in the sanctuary (needed to come) down from the choir to the congregation” (Atkins, 13), and that hymns should be “sung by choir and congregation with fervor” (preface, v).

It is still of primary importance that the congregation be involved in hymn singing. Now that hymn singing is the common practice, the goals have taken a step ahead. In the Pilgrim Hymnal of 1935, it is stated that “we come nearer to full Christian unity in our hymns than in any other feature of the life of our churches” (preface, iv). The 1958 edition talks about the fellowship we find in congregational singing this way, “worship should be first and foremost an act of prayer and praise to God, understood and entered into by the whole company of the faithful” (preface, v).

In The Guide to the Pilgrim Hymnal, the purpose of the 1958 book is clearly that of use on congregational singing. Hymns are not for personal use, but are for the singing of hymns together in worship. This is a departure from the previous century, where the purpose of a hymnal ranged anywhere from use with “families and social religious meetings” (Spiritual Songs for Social Worship, preface, 1) to “in the closet (private, family and social worship)” (Sabbath Hymn Book, preface, 1). Prayer meetings and revivals are mentioned in the preface of The Christian Lyre (1) and also in The Hartford Selection of Hymns (Atkins, 9). Religious lectures

are even mentioned in the Plymouth Collection of Hymns and Tunes (preface, vi). Though the focus appears to have narrowed, this focus has enabled the hymnals of this century to choose hymns that specifically address the fellowship emphasis of Congregationalism. This has only strengthened the body of work in the last several hymnals, who are not trying to meet the need of every possible religious gathering of situation, as emphasized in the Plymouth Collection of Hymns and Tunes which attempts to be so inclusive that it becomes “so large and various as to account for all taste” (preface, iv).

The church year, with its varying times and seasons has also been a constant which has been addressed with Congregational hymnody, beginning in 1815 with Christian Psalms, which includes hymns for “varying times and seasons” (preface, I). This criteria continues through the Congregational Hymn Book which seeks to provide music for “varied circumstances and special occasions” (preface, I) and the Sabbath Hymn Book does the same, providing a “variety of hymns for special occasions” (introduction, I).

### Congregational Heritage

One cannot look at the variety of Congregational hymnals created in the past two hundred years without noticing the attention given to Congregational history, heritage and needs. This is most clearly stated in the preface to the Congregational Hymn Book of 1858, which emphasizes that the selection of hymns attempts to “satisfy present exigencies of the Congregational Church in America” (I). It continues in stating that part of its purpose is to express the “genius and

spirit of the Congregational Church in this country” (preface, 5). A century later, the 1958 *Pilgrim Hymnal* aspires to express our tradition as well, “making fuller use of our particular heritage: the *Genevan Psalters*, the *Bay Psalm Book*, Isaac Watts—all the richness of the Reformed and Free Church traditions” (preface, v). Keeping the heritage of the Congregational Way alive through its hymnody is as important to us in this century as it was in the last. Our hymns are an expression of not only our particular Congregational theology and practice, but also the way our Christian faith is lived out in our personal lives and in our world.

## Core Congregational Hymns

In looking for a core group of hymns to label as Congregational, the difficulty is obvious. The hymn movement in Congregationalism has been varied and ecumenical, trying to stay current and to embrace Christian hymnody from many directions. Looking at several of the hymnals from the century just past, and the Pilgrim Hymnal in its varied versions from this century, there are commonalities in literature to be found.

The four basic hymn books from the nineteenth century that I was able to study at the Congregational Library were the Plymouth Collection of Hymns and Tunes (Beecher, 1855), the Congregational Hymn Book (Nason, 1858), the Sabbath Hymn Book (Mason Brothers, 1858) and The Hymnal for Use in Congregational Churches (Congregational and Presbyterian sources, 1897). In comparing them to three of the Pilgrim Hymnal editions (1912, 1935, 1958), I have found that there are a substantial amount of hymns that are included in all seven hymnals! Several of these hymns are also found in the 1844 edition of Zion's Harp.

In looking at this group of hymns, we see the dominance of English and American hymns. The group is also very consistent in its Christocentric character and unified in religious expression. When looking for a core group of Congregational hymns, this list is an excellent place to begin. These hymns have been included in the major Congregational hymnals of the last 150 years. They are tried and true. They are of high poetic and musical integrity, and express a broad range of Christian experience and theological thought. Because of their broad use and

durability, plus the meeting of Congregational hymn criteria, I consider them to be the core group of hymns for use in Congregational churches.

I have listed the hymns by composer, in order that the reader can easily make associations and comparisons of the fifty hymns and their character.

Isaac Watts-

Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove  
From All That Dwell Below the Skies  
High in the Heavens, Eternal God  
Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun  
Joy to the World! The Lord is Come  
Our God, Our Help in Ages Past  
When I Survey the Wondrous Cross  
With Songs and Honors Sounding Loud

Charles Wesley-

Christ the Lord is Risen Today  
Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies  
Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus  
Hark! The Herald Angels Sing  
Jesus, Lover of My Soul  
Love Divine, All Love's Excelling  
Soldiers of Christ, Arise  
Ye Servants of God, Your Master  
Proclaim

William Cowper-

God Moves in a Mysterious Way  
O For a Closer Walk With God

Philip Doddridge-

Awake My Soul, Stretch Every Nerve  
Great God, We Sing That Mighty Hand  
How Gentle God's Commands

Joseph Addison-

The Spacious Firmament on High  
When All Thy Mercies, O My God

John Newton-

Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken  
How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds

John Bowring-

In the Cross of Christ I Glory  
Watchman, Tell Us of the Night

James Montgomery-

According to Thy Gracious Word  
Go to Dark Gethsemane  
Hail to the Lord's Anointed

Edward Perronet-

All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name

Thomas Ken-

Awake My Soul, and With the Sun

John Fawcett-

Blest Be the Tie That Binds  
Lord, Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing

Reginald Heber-

Brightest and Best of the Sons of the  
Morning

Paul Gerhardt-  
Give to the Winds Thy Fears

K. Rippon-  
How Firm a Foundation, Ye Saints of  
the Lord

Timothy Dwight-  
I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord

Ray Palmer-  
My Faith Looks Up to Thee

Leonard Bacon-  
O God, beneath Thy Guiding Hand

Charlotte Elliott-  
Just As I Am, Without One Plea

Sarah Adams-  
Nearer My God to Thee

Robert Grant-  
O Worship the King, All Glorious Above

Henry H. Milman-  
Ride On, Ride On In Majesty

Augustus M. Toplady-  
Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

Samuel F. Smith-  
The Morning Light Is Breaking

William B. Tappan-  
'Tis Midnight and On Olives' Brow

Nahum Tate-  
While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks  
By Night

Tate and Brady, New Version-  
Through All the Changing Scenes of  
Life

Anonymous-  
Come, Thou Almighty King

There is another small group of hymns, which is included in two or three of the hymnals of the last century, and in the three same of this century. This list includes:

John Keble-  
Blest Are the Pure in Heart  
New Every Morning is the Love

James Montgomery-  
Angels, From the Realms of Glory  
God is My Strong Salvation  
O Spirit of the Living God

Warren Kethe-  
All People That On Earth Do Dwell

Charles Wesley-  
Forth in Thy Name, O Lord, I Go

Anna L. Waring-  
In Heavenly Love Abiding

Edward Caswall (translator)-  
Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee

Ray Palmer (translator)-  
Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts

William Cowper-  
Jesus, Where'er Thy People Meet

John Milton-  
Let Us With a Gladsome Mind

Paul Gerhardt-  
O Sacred Head Now Wounded

Anna L. Barbauld-  
Praise to God, Immortal Praise

Andrew Reed-  
Spirit Divine, Attend Our Prayers

George Herbert-  
Teach Me, My God and King

Henry F. Lyte-  
Abide With Me, Fast Falls the  
Eventide

Anonymous German-  
Fairest Lord Jesus

Samuel F. Smith-  
My Country, 'Tis of Thee

Arthur C. Coxe-  
O Where Are Kings and Empires Now

Dorothy A. Thrupp-  
Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us

George Duffield-  
Stand Up, Stand Up For Jesus

Newton Mann and Max Landsberg-  
The God of Abraham Praise

The Founding Hospital Collection-  
Praise the Lord! Ye Heavens Adore Him

The inclusion of this final group of twenty four hymns as core to Congregational hymnody would be altogether acceptable in my opinion. First of all, they are tried and proven, being included in five or six of the major hymnals from the last 150 years. Secondly, they also follow Congregational criteria. Musical and poetic integrity is very high, plus they express a variety of theological thought and express Christian experience. Even more that that, this group of hymns is more diverse and includes hymns from a broader base of sources and countries. The addition of German hymnody especially is to be noted here, as well as Scandinavian.



## Concluding Remarks

It is exciting and challenging to try and make some sense out of the diversity that is Congregational hymnody. Yet, in spite of the diversity of sources and styles, a common thread emerged in the Pilgrim Hymnal of the twentieth century. This fine volume, in its many editions, has found its way in expressing the Congregational Way. The high standards and ideals set by those who have gone before us in the field of Congregational hymnody have stood their ground. Many of our churches continue to enjoy the Pilgrim Hymnal of 1958, even into its fifth decade or use. The long-lasting quality of this volume is proof of its durability both musically and theologically.

In keeping with the goals of the past two hundred years, I look forward to the continuation of the idealistic nature of Congregational hymnody. The importance of including new hymns and staying current with social issues of the next century should be of primary concern. With the rise of ecumenism and global awareness, a new edition of the beloved Pilgrim Hymnal is necessary if Congregationalism is to be vital throughout the world and representative of it. Also, the last fifty years have provided the world with many new hymns which meet the Congregational criteria. Inclusion of some new hymns would enable us to bridge the gap to the next century and begin to create a new group of core Congregational hymns.

A new edition would also meet the needs of the Congregational movement, which includes churches from a broad range of theological viewpoints, worship practices and sizes. A hymnal is a unifying force in any group of churches, and a new hymnal would serve in this manner for the churches of the NACCC.

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