

CLERGYMAN'S CRITICISM OF GOSPEL HYMNS.

MANY OF THEM, WRITTEN, HE ASSERTS, WITH COMMERCIAL PURPOSE.

In the September number of the Junior Munsy Rev. Charles Graves in an article entitled "Hymns That Haven't Helped," criticizes sharply many of the favorite Gospel hymns, declaring in effect that "their music is cheap and trashy, while the words are often meaningless, doggerel or worse."

"Much has been said and written from time to time about the low grade of music in common use in our churches. With the rise of the class of hymns commonly known as 'Gospel hymns,' but which for the sake of revenue of self glorification, are sometimes published under such titles as 'Songs of Joy and Gladness,' 'The Finest of the Wheat,' 'Christian Endeavor Songs' and others too numerous to mention—with the advent of this class of church music there has come an appetite for cheap, trashy melodies. Old hymn books, which contained the fine hymns and tunes of the great masters, have been laid aside for the jingling and non-sacred music of MacGranaham, Stebbins, Sankley, Billhorn, Kirkpatrick and others.

"People like to sing these songs," is the strongest reason given for the change. We do not follow out this principle and give the people a circus instead of a sermon, because they like it better! If we are going to have sacred worship we must have sacred music—music that suggests pure and holy thoughts, that awakens divine aspirations, that lifts the soul above the distractions of earth into the restfulness of heaven. Many of the Gospel hymn tunes seem to land you in the midst of an Indian war dance. All is not music that jingles, and all is not sacred that is published with a religious title.

"Enough, perhaps, has been said and written upon the question of hymn tunes without my adding anything; but it is seldom, if ever, that attention is called to the character of the words that make up these Gospel hymns. Bad as the music is—if music it may be called—the words are, in many cases, still worse. Barring out a few such hymns as this:

With holy fear and humble song,
The dreadful God our souls adore,
Reverence and awe become the tongue,
That speaks the terror of his power

which belong to the early years of Protestant hymnody, the Gospel hymns are by far the worst that have ever been published. But say some, 'We don't care about the words.' If the tune pleases us, that is all we ask.' Then why use words at all? Why not use the meaningless 'Tra-ra-boom-de-aye,' instead of such wretched words as 'The blood, the blood is all my plea Hallelujah! how it cleanses me!'

"To a great many people the church service is nothing more than a form. They recite creed and ritual as though the words meant nothing. Many say, with solemn unctious, 'I believe in the resurrection of the dead,' when they don't believe any such thing. They confess to God that they are the 'chief of sinners,' when they would smite you in the face if you called them such. And how many people sing, with a great deal of enthusiasm about wearing 'white robes' and 'golden crowns' and walking 'through streets of pure gold,' knowing at the same time that that is sheer fancy a series of images borrowed from dark and far away ages!

"The history of hymnody shows that hymns have always been fired with a serious purpose. Charles Wesley's hymns were as effective as John Wesley's sermons. The hymn has been a mighty force in spreading different forms of the Christian faith. 'Let me make the hymns,' said one old writer, 'and I care not who makes the creeds.' John Wesley describes his hymn book as a body of experimental and practical divinity. And recently Bishop Mallahan, speaking of Moody, said, 'He circulated unnumbered millions of gospel hymns. If it be true that he who makes the hymns of a people rules the nation, then Mr. Moody must have been one of the mightiest of men.' So clearly have religious leaders seen the need of hymns to voice their faith and emphasize its cardinal points, that, lacking good hymns of their own creation, they have taken the hymns of other writers and adapted them to their notions.

MEANINGLESS AND MORIBID HYMNS.

"It is fair to assume that the Gospel hymns have been written, or, at least, are published for the purpose of teaching the sentiments therein expressed. They are given to the world with all seriousness. The words, as well as the music, have been approved and selected for the purpose of imparting religious instruction and awakening religious faith. Were these hymns used only for a few benighted souls in the back woods they might be fittingly ignored; but inasmuch as these or others of exactly the same character are sung at every religious revival in Epworth League, and Christian Endeavor meetings in the majority of Protestant orthodox churches in the country, and all too frequently in our public schools their character is not an unimportant matter.

"There are societies established for the suppression of bad pictures and books, because it is believed upon very good evidence that these things are demoralizing. A great many stories of good little

King's Evil

That is Scrofula. No disease is older. No disease is really responsible for a larger mortality.

Consumption is commonly its outgrowth. There is no excuse for neglecting it, it makes its presence known by so many signs, such as glandular tumors, cutaneous eruptions, inflamed eyelids, sore ears, rickets, catarrh, wasting and general debility. Children of J. W. McGinn, Woodstock, Ont., had scrofula sores so bad they could not attend school for three months. When different kinds of medicines had been used to no purpose whatever, these sufferers were cured, according to Mr. McGinn's voluntary testimony, by

Hood's Sarsaparilla

which has effected the most wonderful, radical and permanent cures of scrofula in old and young.

boys and girls who die young, written expressly for Sunday school libraries, exert as pernicious an influence as the worst 'detective' or Indian dime novel. Much that passes under the name of religion is as unhealthful as anything else can well be. A century ago if an epidemic smote a community, it was considered a proper and effective thing to pray to God to stop the scourge. Nowadays we see that the sewers are open and the streets clean. To neglect sanitary measures, even for the purpose of devoting time to prayer, would be deemed suicidal. A larger knowledge compelled the suppression of the religion; treatment of witchcraft, insanity and epidemics; and a large knowledge compels us to reject many hymns because they exercise a thoroughly evil influence. Take as an illustration the one beginning:

"I am a stranger here,
Heaven is my home,
Earth is a desert drear,
Heaven is my home,
Dangers and sorrow stand
Round me on every hand;
Heaven is my fatherland,
Heaven is my home.

"There may be a measure of truth in this; but, in the main, it is false and pernicious. A broad and sober-minded philosophy regards this world as a good world and life in it as a joyous privilege. It is God's world. We are His children; and it is an ugly pessimism coupled with a profound ignorance of men and things that leads singers and preachers to heap curses upon its fast creation and darken the world with silly lamentations over our existence.

SAMPLES OF HYMNAL DOGGEREL.

"Let us look at them still more closely. Montgomery shrewdly remarks—and his remarks condemn many of his own productions, though doubtless that was not his intention—"Hymns, looking at the multitude and mass of them, appear to have been written by all kinds of persons except poets." And this is especially true of the Gospel hymns. The mass of them are the basest doggerel you can imagine, and mean as little as a lot of words thrown together can well mean. They lack almost every quality that makes good verse, secular or religious, and they are as empty of feeling as of sense. No. 38 is a typical specimen, though by no means the worse. Here is the second stanza:

"Come home, come home,
For we watch and we wait,
And we stand at the gate,
While the shadows are piled,

"Nor is this from No. 263 any better: "Would you have your cares grow light?
Fix your eyes upon Jesus
Would you songs have in the night?
Fix your eyes upon Jesus

"Nor do more recent editions and hymns show any improvement, as this, it is taken from 'Gospel Hymns No. 5,' will show:

"Rejoice in the Lord, oh, let His mercy cheer,
He sunder the bands that enthral,
Redeemed by His blood why should we ever fear,
Since Jesus is our all in all.

"We are told that the 'mysteries of religion' are hidden from the wise and revealed to the simple; perhaps that is the case with the merits of these hymns. But in this hard-headed, every-day world we are in the habit of taking things at their face value and, on the whole, it is a safe way.

"It doesn't mend matters to plead that the writers of this doggerel meant well and were inspired by a noble purpose. Judging by their work, they succeeded in keeping all meaning and inspiration out of their hymns. Nor can it be urged that there was any need for a greater number of hymns to express the special religious dogmas of evangelical Christianity, for there is an adequate store of very fine and strong hymns orthodox enough to suit the most rigidly righteous. How can people deliberately forsake such vigorous and inspiring hymns as:

"Thou hidden love of God, whose height,
Whose depth unfathomed, no man knows,
I see from far thy beautiful light,
I long to see thy face.

My heart is pained, nor can it be
At rest, till I find rest in Thee—
for the cheap, meaningless trash of the average Gospel hymn? I think all agree that when we worship God we should worship Him with the best of our command. We should be moved by the purest intent, and our words should be the sweetest and noblest mortal tongues can slip. There are, as we all know, many

hymns that express the orthodox ideas in a noble and worthy way. To neglect these for the wishy washy verses characteristic of this collection is to vulgarize religious worship and rob it of its sweet spiritual uplift.

EXAMPLES OF MUTILATION.

"Not only are the finest hymns of the orthodox faith put aside for much inferior ones, but it is not unusual to find them mutilated and murdered—for to rob a hymn of its life is to murder it. A good example of this is found in No. 236 The original is one of Dr. Watts' most celebrated hymns. In its true form it is a noble utterance; its rhythm is sweet, its movement majestic and its thoughts inspiring:

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come,
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And Heaven and Nature sing

"A greater writer than Dr. Watts might perhaps improve upon this; but there is not a Gospel hymn writer who could hold a candle to that great hymnist. And yet, full of confidence and conceit, as all little minds are, one of these ingenious people has thought to improve the hymn and purify its orthodoxy by twisting it thus:

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come,
The mighty God, the Everlasting Father,
The Prince of Peace.
Let every heart prepare him room,
The mighty God, the Everlasting Father,
The Prince of Peace.

"Evidently Watts did not emphasize the Deity of Christ sufficiently to satisfy the demands of the Gospel hymn writers. Then there is that hymn beginning:

"Watchman, tell me, does the morning
Of fair Zion's glory dawn?
Have the signs that mark his coming
Yet upon my pathway shone!

"This is plainly written to replace that noble and soul-stirring hymn, 'Watchman, Tell Us of the Night.'

HYMNS SATURATED WITH BLOOD.

"I have not yet touched what to me is the worst feature of these hymns. Not only are many of them the basest doggerel, but the diction of some is simply horrible and degrading. Such language as this is enough to make one shudder and feel that he is surrounded by a lot of cannibals:

"For Jesus shed his precious blood
Rich blessings to bestow;
Plunge now into the crimson flood
That washes white as snow.

"Is any worthy or noble thou, lit awakened by such language as this? Will it be sincerely said by anyone that it is reverent and spiritual thus to speak of the death of Jesus? Will anyone in all honesty declare that it is true religion and sweet worship to declare:

"The blood has always precious been;
'Tis precious now to me. * * *

"Or that it strengthens mankind in love of all that is true and holy to sing in religious gathering:

"Helpless I come to Jesus' blood,
And all myself resign;
I lose my weakness in that flood,
And gather strength divine.

"And that time honored, but, to me, brutal hymn, like a thousand others, savors more of cannibalism than of the sweetness and purity of the Christ life and faith—Cowper's verses beginning:

"There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.

"Although this hymn boldly voices a popular theology and may be dear to many, yet it seems to me to be fit for anything but worship. That Christian people should exult in the shedding of blood; that they should speak of bathing in it—to teach that the most sacred and effective washing a man can have is in the blood of Jesus—is, when you come to think of it, simply shocking.

"A great many hymns of the book under consideration are simply saturated with blood.

"Now I feel the blood applied;
I'm washed in Jesus' blood,
In the blood of yonder Lamb,
Washed from every stain I am.

"In singing Hymn 332 you repeat the phrase 'the blood of Jesus' 18 times. In No. 349 it occurs 10 times. It is prominent in every stanza of No. 254, and in many others. It is common to find it put in this fashion:

"That blood is a font
Where the vilest may go,
And wash till their souls
Shall be whiter than snow.

"It surely cannot make life more sacred in the thought of the people to teach them to sing hymns that are bold exultations over the shedding of blood. Such a sentiment befits the savage rather than the civilized state.

"More pernicious still is the hymn that commands a life of absolute inaction, to strive for nothing, to be nothing. I refer to the hymn beginning, 'Oh, to be nothing, nothing!' It would be more becoming to sing, 'Oh, to be a tadpole!'

"Of course there are some good things that could be said for this collection of hymns, but the features I have dealt upon are so prominent and form so large a part of the collection that the good is lost. I cannot see wherein these hymns can be of help. Would it not be more inspiring, more ennobling, more helpful, more worshipping to sing such hymns as this one by Samuel Longfellow:

"Go forth to life, O child of earth,
Still mindful of thy Heavenly birth!
Thou art not here for ease or sin,

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Though tempters strong beset thy way,
Thy spirit is more strong than they.

"Go from the innocence of youth
To manly purity, manly truth;
God's angels still are near to save,
And God Himself doth help the brave.

"Then forth to life, O child of earth!
Be worthy of thy Heavenly birth;
For noble service thou art here;
Thy brothers help, thy God reverse."

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