

DOGMA IN PROTESTANT HYMNS

A recent article in *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* voiced concern over the spread of liberalism among American Protestants.¹ Evidence was adduced that fundamental Christian dogmas are being washed away not merely in the divinity schools and among the educated but also in the ordinary churches and among the mass of average Protestants. The conclusion, drawn mainly from an examination of three books, one of theology, one of sermons, one of spiritual reading, was that "little by little the whole substance of Christianity is being leached out of the churches and nihilism is taking its place."²

This gloomy picture of the state of Christian dogma in the Protestant churches is undoubtedly a valid conclusion from the evidence examined. But there is another area which should be investigated before a final judgment is made. In view of the connection between the *lex credendi* and the *lex supplicandi* the Protestant liturgy is a relevant source of data on the beliefs current in contemporary Protestantism. It is true that Protestantism has traditionally put preponderant, even exclusive, emphasis on the ministry of the word. But this theoretical emphasis has not in practice meant the elimination of other elements of a religious service. Hymn singing, for instance, plays a prominent part in most Protestant services. It is reasonable to assume that the ideas contained in these hymns have some influence on the beliefs of the congregations that sing them.

A handy source of information on Protestant hymns is a recent booklet entitled *101 Favorite Hymns*,³ which contains the words and music of the most popular Protestant hymns. They were chosen "on the advice of clergymen and laymen of all denominations, in all sections of the United States and Canada. We consulted the opinions expressed by thousands of readers of *Christian Herald* magazine, in a poll taken by the editors of that magazine. Some pastors have polled their congregations on our behalf."⁴ The value of this hymnal as an index of dogmas to which Protestants are being exposed is limited by the fact that it is an anthology of all denominations. We have no way of telling, for instance, whether a certain hymn is sung only by Baptists or also by other groups. Nevertheless the recurrence of certain dogmatic themes throughout a number of hymns makes it quite

¹ Gustave Weigel, S.J., "Protestantism as a Catholic Concern," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 16 (1955) 214-32.

² *Ibid.*, p. 231.

³ Edited by James and Albert Morehead (New York: Sigma Music, Inc., 1953; distributed by Pocket Books, Inc., N.Y.).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

probable that these dogmas are being heralded (if not preached) in many Protestant groups today.

God is described in *101 Favorite Hymns* as uniquely holy (3)⁵, unchangeable (30), perfect in power, love, and purity (3). In relation to His creatures He is love (42), fount of every blessing (68), the bread of heaven (67), faithful (48, 139), truthful (48), merciful (3, 60). His providence is a favorite theme. He is our help in ages past and our hope for the future (23, 138). He takes care of us (172); His love will not let us go (152); He leads us by the hand (142). At least six of the hymns teach explicitly that God is three divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (3, 6, 8, 9, 23, 28). God the Father is merciful (198). He is to be prayed to through Jesus Christ our Lord (51). God the Holy Ghost is Lord and lifegiver (6), comforter, witness-bearer, almighty (28).

The picture drawn of our Blessed Lord is a full one. He is God and man (5, 19, 23), changeless (5), Alpha and Omega (43), lord of angels and saints (10, 17), lord of nations (10) and of all nature (18), king (17, 114, 136). In relation to men He is the way, the truth, and the life (51), the foundation of faith (43), its beginning and end (175). He is our Savior (36, 45, 51, 52, 54, 60, 72, etc.). He is all compassion and unbounded love (43), merciful (125, 178, 203), friend (52), faithful friend (53), more than friend or life (44). He is the Lamb (54, 70), shepherd (62), master of the sea (79), sun of the soul (72, 150), lover of the soul (32), the heart's dear refuge (19). His name is the hope of earth and joy of heaven (137). Trust in our Lord is inculcated in phrases quite similar to those of Catholic hymns to the Sacred Heart (e.g., 190, 135, 165, 168, 171). "Look to Jesus, He'll carry you through" (201); "Bring Jesus thy burden" (132). He will give grace and glory (110), gives grace for every trial and feeds us with living bread (178), will help us conquer the world and sin (87).

Redemption is another very frequent topic. That Christ died to save sinful men is variously paraphrased (17, 70, 129, 156, 160, 175, 180, 190, 203). He bought us (63); His blood washed away our sins (41, 69, 76); He rescued the lost sheep (21, 160). That the fruit of Christ's redemption is offered to all is implicit in several hymns. He is able and willing to pardon sinners (126); He came to call not the righteous but the sinner (26); He softly and tenderly calls the sinner home (124). He has broken every fetter (84) and offers pardon and peace to all (106). Salvation is free (117).

Justification comes through the merits of Christ: "On Christ the living rock I stand, all other hope is shifting sand" (176). "My hope is built on

⁵ Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in *101 Favorite Hymns*.

His blood and righteousness" (176).⁶ "Stand in Jesus' strength, trust not your own" (122). Cooperation on our part is required. We must follow the path where the Master trod (116), labor till He comes (117, 186, 192, 194), stand up for Him as soldiers of the cross (122), make sacrifices (103), bear the cross patiently (138), yield not to temptation but fight manfully (200). The cross is the only way to heaven (182). "God's love is so amazing it demands my all" (103). One motive for doing good works is the help our example will give to others (199). We are warned not to put off repentance (131).

Among other dogmas referred to are the Mystical Body (9, 114), the communion of saints (2, 148), the angels (94, etc.), Satan (5). Heaven is the exclusive topic of several hymns and it is mentioned in many others (90, 92, 118, 121, 114, 191). The Kingdom of God is described as existing here and now (141), as growing toward perfection (25). Two hymns deal with the Church.⁷ Its foundation is Christ (12). It is His holy bride (12), bought with His blood (12), troubled now by heresy and schism but destined for a glorious consummation (12). It is a mighty army united in faith, hope, and love (115).

Numerous petitions, of course, are contained in these hymns: for love in our hearts (14), forgiveness, strengthened faith (55). Petition is made that Christ may live in us (47), that we may be loyal to Him (51), hear His call (71), be like Jesus (84), be consecrated to Him (104), and that we may win others to His love (27). There are prayers that we may be touched and healed (47), that the love of sinning may be taken from our hearts (43), that God's will may be done (46, 62). Resignation to God's will is extolled. Do not be discouraged, God is over all (204); count your blessings (205); whate'er befall, Jesus doeth all things well (178). Trust and obey (207). The Lord is on thy side (139).

If the dictum of Simonides, "Let me write the nation's songs and I care not who writes her laws," has validity in the religious sphere, we can take heart from this brief glance at the dogmatic content of Protestant hymns. In them the divinely revealed truths about the Blessed Trinity, Christ and His redemptive work, and man's struggle with sin stand embodied in all their uncompromising literalness. The waves of modernism and liberalism have left this avenue of the traditional *kerygma* untouched. A complete

⁶ Another phrase in this same hymn sounds unorthodox in seeming to deny the intrinsic nature of justification: ". . . dressed in His righteousness alone."

⁷ Protestants often mean something different than Catholics when speaking of the Church; cf. Avery Dulles, S.J., "The Protestant Concept of the Church," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 132 (1955) 330-35.

evaluation of the state of Christian beliefs among our separated brethren should take into account this factor, secondary though it be.

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NOTE.—At the suggestion of the Editor and with the consent of Fr. Carmody I add this little comment.

I am grateful to Fr. Carmody for bringing out a fact of Protestant reality which my article, to which he refers, could not discuss. Protestantism is a vast phenomenon. Whoever writes about it must do so from a freely chosen point of view, which necessarily limits the vision of the observer. Hence, though all he says may be quite true, it is equally true that much more can and should be said. As Fr. Carmody realizes, it was not my intention to present Protestantism as a complete denial of all the values which are essential to Christianity as a definite historical thing. Yet I do believe that Protestantism is in an hour of grave crisis. This is hardly an original light. Bultmann, Tillich, Niebuhr, and many others have noticed this fact. The hymns the Protestants sing, the clichés the preachers use, the message the liturgies convey, the manifestos issued by the World Council, all carry a confession of the faith of our fathers. Yet the theologians feel uncomfortable because of the formulas that are sincerely and lovingly used. They believe that the symbols cannot be understood as our fathers understood them. All would agree that to some extent they must be "demythologized." In an individual theologian the demythologizing may be very drastic, even though the Protestant fellowship as a whole may not go along with him.

Although this is so, it still remains true that, by and large, demythologization and reconstructionism are affecting ever greater numbers of Protestant Christians. This is lamented but recognized by spokesmen of communions like the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church. One gets the feeling that more and more Protestants are asking, not what the Christian tradition declares, but rather how much of it we can accept today. They have no quarrel with their hymns, which are very dear to them even when their literary and musical forms are not exemplary. The fundamentalists cling closely to the original meaning of such songs, and they are forthright and highly vocal in saying so. Yet the question we must ask is whether the movement of Protestantism as a whole is toward fundamentalism or away from it. In spite of the vigor, zeal, and relative increase of fundamentalist groups, I think the general movement is away from fundamentalism.

Orthodox conservatism is not without its scholars, but the scholarly voices revered by Protestants in general are antifundamentalist, and the Protestant community is more embarrassed by its fundamentalists than attracted by them.

Salvation, redemption, the saving blood, resurrection, Church, the Spirit, are words as current today in Protestant speech as they were in the past. But what is the meaning of these terms for those who use them? Would it be too trenchant to say that for many who sing these words no precise meaning is expressed? Undoubtedly the meaning granted these words by the famous urban theological centers is totally different from that conveyed by the many little Bible colleges scattered through the South and West. Will the average Protestant minister answer simply and without hedging when asked by his congregation whether Jesus became flesh by a virgin birth? No matter what he himself may believe, does he dare to give a clear and unequivocal explanation of the resurrection of the flesh? Does he feel secure enough to be precise in his exposition of the Easter event?

This ambiguity, conscious or unconscious, does not mean that the Protestant clergyman or lay person is discarding the Christian tradition. Perhaps today more than ever we find a strong adherence to Christianity as a truth and as a way of salvation. The fervor and piety of Protestants without number are impressive, easy to behold. Protestants of this kind resent quite rightly any insinuation that they are destroying Christianity, which they love deeply. The dedication of so many engaged in the ecumenical movement is palpable and godly. This fundamental truth must never be ignored by Catholics, nor should we speak as if we did not realize it. The ecumenical dialogue into which we must gladly enter will not be fruitful if we suppose antecedently that our Protestant friends use Bible rhetoric without Bible meaning.

Fr. Carmody's note is a recognition of the point stressed in the preceding paragraph. For that reason I am glad that he has presented his brief study.

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