

## How Do You Select the Hymns?

By Harry Eskew

(This is Harry Eskew's first article concerning hymns, published in the June 1962 issue of *The Church Musician*.)

A vital part of the task of the minister of music is selecting hymns for congregational singing. Its importance requires more than a hurried moment's selection just before the order of service music be turned in for the following Sunday's bulletin. What are some factors to be considered in the choice of hymns for the congregation to sing?

In the pastor's selection of sermon topics, which do you consider more important—a message that will be popular, or one that will meet the needs of the people? Naturally, your answer would be the latter. The same test must be given to hymns chosen for the service. The primary criterion is not that of popularity, but of ministering to the spiritual needs of those who come to the service. This will, of course, involve consideration of the cultural level and musical background of the congregation, as well as the whole gamut of Christian doctrine and experience.

Hymns should be related to the theme of the message and type of service. Just as "Onward Christian Soldiers" bears little relation to a sermon on "The Peace of God," so is "Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart" inappropriate to the mood of a typical Lord's Supper Service.

The rule of proper balance should be applied to the use of standard and gospel hymns. Usually in the worship service more standard hymns are used, while in the evangelistic service the gospel hymns predominate. Since most of our regular services combine worship with evangelism, both types of hymns are used.

The repertoire of a congregation should consist of a good variety of hymns representative of Christian hymnody. How limited would be our range of hymn singing if we sang only hymns written by Baptists! No longer could we join other Christians in singing "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "To

God Be the Glory,” or “Holy, Holy, Holy.” Let us also utilize our rich heritage of Greek, Latin, and German hymns, as well as the best products of more recent eras of Christian hymnody.

The scriptural admonition to sing unto the Lord a new song should not be neglected in the selection of hymns. Even “Amazing Grace” was once a new hymn. What if all the worship leaders of the past had neglected to use it simply because the congregation did not know it? When introduced properly, new hymns can be a vital stimulus to good congregational singing.

The place of the hymn in the order of service is another guiding factor in its selection. Appropriate opening hymns are usually majestic or joyful. As the service progresses, the more subjective hymns may be used. Hymns may be effectively related to various elements of the worship service. Before the reading of the Scriptures, a hymn about God’s Word may be sung. A prayer hymn may be used to prepare the congregation for uniting in prayer. Preceding the offering, hymns concerning stewardship and dedication are appropriate.

Sometimes the posture of the congregation can be a determining factor in hymn selection. The more vigorous hymns are best sung when the people are standing, whereas a sitting posture is suitable with quiet meditative hymns.

Sometimes seasonal hymns can add meaning to the congregational singing. In addition to Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving, there are many other occasions for which appropriate hymns may be chosen, such as Christian Home Week, Independence Day, and weeks of prayer for foreign and home missions.

Perhaps the most important question the minister of music could ask as he or she prayerfully selects congregational hymns is: What does this hymn say? This question naturally leads to a closer examination of the hymn under consideration. Does its message ring true to the teaching of the Scriptures? Is its emphasis selfish or outgoing? Do its words express the heartfelt beliefs of a Christian congregation? Does the music enhance the meaning of the words?

In summarization, the following are among the factors, which may well be considered in the selection of hymns for congregational singing:

- Relating to the theme and type of service
- Achieving a balance between standard and gospel hymns
- Meeting the needs of the people
- Utilizing a good variety from Christian hymnody
- Introducing new hymns
- Associating a hymn with its place in the service
- Considering the posture of the congregation
- Considering hymns related to the seasons of the year
- Asking the very important question> “What does this hymn say”?