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Conducted by  
Frank Worgan

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*"Visits to various congregations reveals that they do not always use the same hymn book - (which some of them call 'the song-book,' after the American fashion)*

*Does it matter which book we use? And does it matter which hymns - or songs - we sing in our worship?"*

I am happy to have the opportunity of saying something on this subject, because it relates to an aspect of our worship that has given me personal concern as I have shared the worship of a number of our congregations. Let me deal very briefly with the first part of the question.

*Does it matter which book we use?*

There is no scriptural rule requiring congregations to use the same hymnbook.

As a matter of fact, there is nothing in the scriptures to say that it is essential to use any book whatsoever! I have been present in services overseas where brothers and sisters did not possess hymnbooks, but sang with enthusiasm the hymns and songs they had learned off by heart.

Older readers will remember that even in the British churches, because our earliest hymnbooks did not contain music, congregations had to be taught the appropriate tunes by some capable 'precentor' - (now often called the 'song-leader').

A hymnbook - (and I must point out that I feel comfortable using the term with which I was brought up in churches of Christ) - is merely an expedient. It is a tool that enables us to worship God more conveniently. If congregations used the same book, the most important advantage this would offer, would probably be that we could all learn to sing the same tunes in the same way! As we have visited sister congregations, many of us have discovered this sometimes does not happen! (Of course, the reason for this may be that there are often differences in the way a particular tune is written in different hymnbooks).

But the size, shape, colour, or cost of a hymnbook, does not matter, nor is a congregation identified by the hymnbook it uses. What *does* matter is that the hymns

the book contains should express scriptural ideas and be of a lyrical and musical quality, which marks them out as suitable for use in our worship. This leads me to the next point.

*Does it matter what we sing?*

It certainly does! I am strongly tempted, at this point, to express my personal opinion about the trivial and inconsequential 'songs' which, in these days, are being used in some places. I will, however, restrict myself to the observation, that many modern songs possess very little to commend them in the way of musical or literary quality. A glance at the dates of their composition, usually found at the bottom of the page, will reveal that many have been written within the last forty or fifty years, for use in some 'clap-happy' gathering, where the congregational 'feel-good factor' appears to be more important than that God should be praised.

If the best that a song has to offer is that has a 'beat' that is just not good enough.

As Christians we should make a point in our worship, of offering to our God our very best. I do not believe that our congregational praise should amount to little more than a rollicking singsong, where tunes are chosen because they 'go with a swing.'

And, before anyone labels me an 'old-fashioned fuddy-duddy,' let me say that I am well aware of the fact that there are some excellent modern hymns. But I would argue that they are greatly outnumbered by this nation's rich heritage of earlier hymns and tunes.

Sadly, however, these tend either to be overlooked or forgotten; or, perhaps the truth is that congregations are not sufficiently interested to take the trouble to learn them.

I suggest it is here, in the matter of appropriate choice of hymns, that those who lead our praise bear a special responsibility. Hymns or songs can either make or mar a service, and it should be the concern of those who lead to ensure that what they invite the congregation to sing is appropriate to the occasion. The atmosphere and the spiritual quality of a service may be spoiled by an inappropriate selection of hymns, whilst, conversely, a good choice may be an inspiring and elevating aid to worship.

I can recall an occasion when the brother leading a Lord's Day morning service invited us to sing, as the first hymn, *'The day Thou gavest Lord is ended.'* It was obviously one of his favourites. A good hymn - but utterly inappropriate at the time.

*Our Lord's Example*

On the night in which He instituted the Supper, Jesus Himself sang the praise of God, with His disciples. Matt. 26:30, KJV, reads. *"And when they had sung an hymn . . ."*

Allow me to point out that they did not sing a 'hymn.' The Greek text says, *"after hymning,"* and, without question, this refers to the fact that, in the Upper Room, the Lord and His disciples sang that group of ancient psalms which is known as 'the Hallel,' still traditionally used by Jews in connection with the Passover celebration.

These are psalms 113 to 118, and they are called the 'Hallel' because each one begins with the word *'Hallelujah.'*

These special psalms, sung by the Lord, celebrated the deliverance of God's ancient people from the Bondage of Egypt. It is surely appropriate, therefore, as we meet around the Table to share the Feast, which He personally instituted, that we should also sing songs that fit the occasion, and which express our own thankfulness, gratitude, praise, joy and commitment, as we consider the immense cost of our salvation.

*To be continued. . . .*

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