

Notes on Some of the Hymns in our Present Hymnal.

BY REV. T. FENWICK.

No. 36, by Dix, is founded on the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus. It begins with the following words:—

"As with gladness men of old
Did the guiding star behold."

Their being led by the star, their worshipping the infant Saviour, and their presenting to Him costly gifts, are in it made corresponding subjects of prayer. The hymn is a most beautiful piece of devotional poetry, and therefore, with the correction of one defect in it, ought, certainly, to be retained in the new Hymnal. The defect of which I speak, is the following. It represents the wise men as seeing Christ when He was lying in the manger.

"As with joyful steps they sped
To that lowly manger-bed." v. 2.

"As they offered gifts most rare
At that cradle rude and bare." v. 3.

The shepherds saw the infant Jesus in the manger where His mother laid Him because there was no room for them in the inn (Gr. *Kataluma*). But the wise men saw Him in a "house" (Gr. *oikia*).

Very likely before this visit, Christ had been presented in the Temple, which was done when He was eight days old. After that, Joseph and Mary returned with Him to Bethlehem. The throng which the decree of the Roman Emperor had brought to that town, had left. It was now in its usual state, which was one of quietness. Joseph was thus able to obtain a house.

Many a Sabbath School scholar only five years of age, knows better than to make the mistake which I have pointed out. Those who are familiar with the story of the visit of the wise men, cannot conscientiously use in worship this hymn in its present state. It seems to them mockery to sing what they know to be nonsense.

Very often, in paintings, we see the shepherds led by a star, and the wise men worshipping Christ who is lying in a manger. This shows that the artists were more familiar with the Bible than with the Hymnal.

I would now propose alterations in the hymn, like the following:—

"As with joyous steps they sped
To the royal infant's bed."

"As they, glad, went on their way
To where He whom they sought lay."
(or) "To the house where the Babe lay."

"As they went in joyously
To where they that Babe should see." v. 2.

"As to Him they homage paid
By their gifts before Him laid."

"As they Him their reverence showed
By rare gifts on Him bestowed." v. 3.

More elegant alterations than these may be made, but the latter show my meaning with sufficient plainness. They remove the nonsensical passages in the hymn those in which the wise men are represented as seeing the infant Jesus in the manger. If we should, for one reason, or another, reject, wholly, or in part, certain psalms, why should we use hymns in which there is nonsense?

As I have already said, this hymn, is, with but a single exception, a most beautiful one. If then, that defect can be removed by two slight alterations in it, without its beauty being, in the least degree, marred, whereby its suitability for use in the worship of God will be greatly increased, these alterations should be made.

Some Modern Church Music.

BY MARY A. BASSETT.

The writer, as organist for churches of several different denominations, has been in a position to examine various collections of hymns prepared by committees appointed by the governing bodies of many church organizations, these committees consisting of prominent cultured musicians and clergymen. These hymns have been collected from various sources, the majority having borne the test of time. The music contained in these collections is, as a rule, dignified and reverential without being unattractive. Many of the tunes have emanated from the minds of the great masters,—

Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Handel, Hadyn and others, and a competent director may each Sabbath prepare something of permanent value. There are also Sabbath school hymnals of similar character, but they are not found in common use.

In addition to these, however, there seems to be, in the opinion of many whose office it is to direct in this matter, a demand for collections containing those lighter compositions, with words to correspond, which are now commonly used in the devotional and especially the revival services of the church. Admitting that some of the compositions of Bliss, Sankey and others are gems which shall endure, yet there are others often included in the same collections concerning which too much can not be said in condemnation. Why this demand for music of a different character for different services has arisen seems difficult to explain. Possibly the explanation would be that of a man who was accustomed to employ what he considered the milder remedies of the homeopathic school during the ailments of his wife and children, but when taken with a severe illness himself, sent at once for the allopathic physician, remarking that homeopathy was all right for women and children. In music, as in medicine, what is good for the father should be good for the children.

In examining these compositions let us first look at the music. A pastor has expressed himself thus:—"We must have something of this kind for our young people's meetings—something bright and catching, with a swing to it,"—and this seems to describe fairly well the popular music of this character. There comes upon our musical horizon occasionally the popular song. Often it is difficult to account for its popularity or to trace its origin, but some little strain has caught the common fancy. So the new waltz to be played most frequently by the orchestras through the season is the one with a pronounced accent or "catching" strain.

The question arises: "Are we to take these methods to attract our young people in our devotional meetings?" A familiar example of one of these compositions is but a slight variation of the song, "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane." Three numbers in a collection recently examined briefly had the peculiar characteristics in time and accent of the Jubilee Songs of the South, and if accompanied by the motions of these colored brethren might be quite weird and effective. It might be objected that a renowned musician has recently pronounced the Southern melodies to embody the foundations of a new American school of music; so it should be explained that while the rhythm and accent are similar, the peculiar succession and combination of tones which produce the originality and excellence of the Negro melodies is here wanting.

It is said that, upon the opening of the series of popular concerts in New York, Theodore Thomas stubbornly refused to yield to the general demand for a lighter class of music, declaring that he would bring the popular taste to his standard and present only that which was truly valuable, and he succeeded. The church has a similar work to do for its young people.

But if the music seems trifling and worthless, what of the hymns accompanying it? The first and most important objection is this: As representatives of evangelical denominations we believe the Redeemer of mankind, the Second Person of the Trinity, to be the equal and one with the Father, and yet we allow that Name to be repeated in a meaningless, frivolous way, and associated with expressions unsuitable and to a thoughtful person often irreverent. The step from carelessness to irreverence is not so great as we may imagine, while that from irreverence to profanity is even less. In the Psalms and Prophets are to be found expressions, couched in the poetic imagery of ancient Hebrew times, that have a grandeur about them; but when such an expression as "the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" is in a meaningless way made to sound "a wea-ry land, a wea-ry land, a wea-ry land," and end with a rollicking movement down to the closing tonic, the sublimity is entirely lost. That the Negroes and the Salvation Army express true worship in their melodies we need not deny, while we refuse to make their methods our own.

It may be objected that many of these rousing melodies have expressed the genuine enthusiasm of large bodies of people at the annual conventions of various societies. But there seems to be in both words and music of many of these songs an appeal simply to the emotions. Music in church service should express the devotional spirit more than merely arouse and excite. The effect upon one's feelings produced by a hymn must of necessity be transient. Righteous living must be founded upon more enduring influences. The result of this emotional music may be expected to be an emotional Christianity.