

Culling Sacred Cows from the LDS Hymnal

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The Church recently requested its members provide feedback on the Hymnal, in the form of suggestions for alterations and new original music either fully composed or in the form of poetry or musical arrangements. I would like to stimulate that effort by offering some suggested changes to the Hymnal, in the hope that others perhaps enlarge or focus the discussion with their own observations and suggestions.

Hymns such as *Lead, Kindly Light*, and *How Great Thou Art*, among many others have blessed my life. I hope that other favorites such as *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing* make it into the next edition.

I also hope that some lesser known hymns with powerful, magnificent verse are not purged due to disuse. Karen Lynn Davidson's hymn 197, *O Savior, Thou Who Wearest a Crown* is an example. What an important message she conveys amid our culture that often wrongly supposes Jesus came to save us through His suffering from our mistakes, weaknesses and shortcomings. Though His Atonement is capable of blessing us even in our recognition of those things and in our continual efforts to improve them, (see Ether 12:27) yet those little things are not sins, nor do they contribute to imperfection in His eyes. They are not why He came to the earth. They are not why he bore scorn, ridicule and—importantly—horrific and malicious ransoming torture. They are not the reason why His exquisite suffering provoked the discharge of blood through his pores, even as it tempted him to the brink of desiring death as an escape.

Sister Davidson astutely recognized that Jesus came to save us from our own sin of betrayal,¹ something worthy of praises sung often. Perhaps if we better understood this primal nature of sin, we would quit beating ourselves up in a culture tending toward perfectionism and pretense.

As whimsically iconoclastic as my essay's title appears, my proposed alterations to the Hymnal are quite serious, though, and scripturally focused on foundational points of core theology such as the nature of moral agency (choosing good vs. evil and the respective consequences of life and death), the nature of God, and the purpose of the Church in pointing us down the path of discipleship in Christ:

1) There is one word that is exactly upside-down and backward to the truth in *Upon the Cross of Calvary* (#184). Our hymns should be consistent extensions of scripture, given that the beautiful music and the contemplative service of the sacrament powerfully helps us commit key ideas to our thoughts even more so than scripture itself.

“That death unlocks the passageway into eternity” should be (by scriptural authority) precisely the opposite, “that death *had blocked* the passageway into eternity.”

When primary source scripture² informs us that sin and death have blocked the passageway into eternity and that these fundamental notions are corroborated by many prophets,³ then no platitude will make it otherwise. Let's correct fundamental false doctrine when it exists in our attempted praise so that we may truly recognize the God in whom we trust.

2) Adding important context to *We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet* (#19):

William Fowler, who wrote this hymn, died young, shortly after immigrating to the Salt Lake Valley, never having known the prophet Joseph. We see in his words a sense of lingering animus toward those who raised arms against the Saints even as he voices his own hope in a brighter future. As beloved as is this hymn and as often as we sing it, though, I suggest we give it a perspective that will more strongly resonate with modern Saints worldwide. Let's convey more universal, positive messages.

There are several problems with the hymn as it currently stands: The song begins as a prayer spoken to God, about a prophet. But in the second and third verses it lapses into a conversation among ourselves with some rather self-justifying elements so that those listening might be left unclear to whom the later verses refer, God or that prophet we began singing about in the first place.

This song is ultimately not about a prophet but about what was wrought by God through a prophet. There is just no context for a prophet without first understanding that God loves and saves us through His Son and then brings us back into His presence through keys given to His agent.⁴

Let's make a new first verse to clarify that simple but important point. No one should attend and leave our services with the impression that Mormons sing praises by day and night to a prophet for *his* goodness and mercy...

*We thank thee, O God, for our Savior,
who ransomed us from Hell's savage hold!
He released the dead and gave us back our freedom,
and called us back into thy fold!*

*We thank thee for agency and scripture.
Thou founded thy church and gave us keys.
Thy words bless thy children in our day
through Prophets, Apostles and Seers.*

The existing verse 1 then becomes verse 2 as-is.

Another problem with this hymn is that its identified enemy is others who fight against Zion. Wasn't Saul also the enemy of the Lord's church before his conversion? (Acts 7:58,59) Let's not presume to make enemies of others, but rather focus on the one named enemy, (John 12:31; 14:30) and then pray for all else who might persecute, revile or spitefully use us. (Matt 5:43,44) So as we finish the old verse 2, let's rather give others a reason to come join us:

*We doubt thee not, Lord, nor thy goodness.
Thou hast proved us in days that are past:
Thy blessings wait naught but our asking,
heal the wounded and lift the downcast.*

In the existing last verse, I suggest substituting one word to clarify as we begin altering the direction of the conversation back amongst ourselves:

We'll sing of *God's* goodness and mercy...

The bottom line for this hymn as it stands is that those who are worthy⁵ get perfected and everybody else gets denied such happiness, even while seemingly belittling others with a subtle message of "I am better (or have earned or am entitled to more) than you." May I suggest a more inclusive and positive message in the final stanza:

*Thus fam'lies can be bound together—
with our Father and Mother on high—
rejoicing in every blessing
given graciously as we abide.*

3) How do we teach the most fundamental aspects of the scripture-defined Plan of Salvation? How important is it that we teach these things freely unto our children?

Moses 6:58–62 *Therefore I give unto you a commandment, to teach these things freely unto your children, saying:*

That by reason of transgression cometh the fall, which fall bringeth death, and inasmuch as ye were born into the world by water, and blood, and the spirit, which I have made, and so became of dust a living soul, even so ye must be born again into the kingdom of heaven, of water, and of the Spirit, and be cleansed by blood, even the blood of mine Only Begotten; that ye might be sanctified from all sin, and enjoy the words of eternal life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come, even immortal glory;

For by the water ye keep the commandment; by the Spirit ye are justified, and by the blood ye are sanctified;

And now, behold, I say unto you: This is the plan of salvation unto all men, through the blood of mine Only Begotten, who shall come in the meridian of time.

I suggest a means of teaching children, sung to the tune *Follow the Prophet* (Children's Songbook #110) using the following words that came to me in a very random way as I was working at the family ranch helping to fix fences. I have no idea why the Primary tune happened to be in my head and was most surprised to then discern the alternative words, but had to frantically interrupt my chore to write them down.

*Adam is our father,
wed to Mother Eve.
They brought sin to Eden
and for death we grieve.*

*Then they both repented
and showed us the way
to follow the Savior.
He's the only Way!*

1st Verse Chorus:

*Follow our father.
Follow our mother.
Follow the Savior,
don't go astray. / He is "The Way"!

*Jesus is my Savior,
ransom for my sins.
He died at Golgotha
then he lived again.*

*He restored His gospel
truth upon the earth.
He gave me the chance to
Joy in my rebirth.*

2nd Verse Chorus:

*Follow the Savior.
Follow the Savior.
Follow the Savior,
don't go astray. / He is "The Way"!

Alternate chorus for the remaining verses in the song for other prophets:

*Follow the Savior.
Follow the Savior.
Follow the prophets,
don't go astray. / they know "The Way"!*

Beyond potential use of these verses in the Children's Songbook, they may also be used in re-purposing anachronistic 6 5 6 5 metered tunes in the main hymnal. One candidate is Hymn 159 (*Now the Day is Over*), which might find a better home in a new book of favorite LDS lullabies. Another option is to adapt the words to the tune *Onward Christian Soldiers* to less adversarially proclaim the gospel.

4) Hymn #250 *We Are All Enlisted*, proclaims, "*We are all enlisted...haste to the battle, quick to the field....stand by the colors, proudly they wave, we're joyfully, joyfully marching to our....*"

Really? Marching to our *home*? Only if we falsely believe that death unlocks the passageway into eternity. Rightfully, "grave" rhymes with wave, and it follows the train of thought better too, but lacks, apparently, the essential quality of a platitude.

I disparaged *Onward Christian Soldiers* in my suggestion #3, above, but perhaps, in proposing culling yet another sacred cow,⁶ I might more adequately explain why:

I suggest that polarizing songs⁷ are more akin to what Satan promotes than what Jesus champions. Is there any true, lasting victor in war other than Satan? *We Are All Enlisted*, culturally beloved as it is, sets us in ranks against unknown and faceless foes.⁸ It pits "us" against any who are not *like* us. It sows doubt and fear against "them". Lucifer loves this ploy because such efforts distract us from the real, named foe: himself.⁹ Rulers throughout history have created external enemies when none otherwise existed in order to mobilize their countrymen against a commonly perceived foe to prevent them looking to cleanse the filth and corruption that existed within their own house. Lucifer is the father of pointing the finger elsewhere to draw people's gaze away from himself.

5) What is the nature of the God portrayed in Hymn #30, *Come, Come Ye Saints*?

Who has not shed a tear, recalling heroic pioneer suffering set in stark juxtaposition against "all is well!" I suggest this beloved hymn has served its purpose in comforting the Saints amid their affliction. Isn't it time to move away from a false representation God's true character?

The fundamental underlying assumption behind "all is well" is that God intended this. *Why should we mourn or think our lot is hard? 'Tis not so; all is right.* Everything that happens is according to God's will. Even affliction. Even deprivation. *And should we die before our journey's through, Happy day! All is well!* God's in control. It will all work out. It's all part of "the Plan". We are either being tested by suffering, or punished by it. Either way we will learn, or suffer needlessly.¹⁰

Who is the God that would do this? In what way, precisely, can this sorrowful and bloody plan be called "happy"? Will I worship such an arbitrary and capricious being? How many people have given up on God, when the trials and tribulations they faced became greater than their ability to assign *purpose* from a presumed loving God?¹¹

No! That is not the nature of the God whom I worship. Because the scriptures tell me¹² that God gave me agency, and that having done so, He is compelled against any manipulation of that gift.

Random tribulation¹³ is neither God's test nor punishment upon us. But He allows the effects of a fallen world to happen, waiting to see what we will do with them. Will we rise up and face the challenge? Will we learn? Will we grow? And when we run up against the wall and simply have not the strength to face the test alone, will we recognize His loving outstretched and pierced hand? Will we have the courage to ask Him for assistance and strength, for comfort and even healing?¹⁴ That's what the pioneers did.

So with this beloved and venerable hymn can we not faithfully assign truth to the nature of God as well as proper attribution of His divine Hand to stories of the pioneers' deliverance by respectfully changing the words as:

*Why should we mourn or think our lot is hard?
'Tis not so; all is right.
Why should we think to earn a great reward
If we now shun the fight?*

Can become:¹⁵
*And as we mourn, our God with us grieves too,
comforts us; blessings bring.
Love conquers all, comes as the morning dew,
carry on! Together cling!*

Then,
*And should we die before our journey's through,
Happy day! All is well!
We then are free from toil and sorrow, too;
With the just we shall dwell!*

Can become:¹⁶
*And should we die before our journey's through,
hope in Christ makes passing sweet!
We then may rest from toil and sorrow, too;
forward look, to joy complete!*

Finally,
All is well! All is well!
Can become: *God is good; hears our prayer!*

2 Nephi 28:

*20 For behold, at that day shall [the devil] rage in the hearts of the children of men,
and stir them up to anger against that which is good.*

21 And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.

24 Therefore, wo be unto him that is at ease in Zion!

25 Wo be unto him that crieth: All is well!

In summary, we who are so sure that agency governs as the prime directive in our interactions with God—because He said so¹⁷—don't seem to understand the ramifications of what that agency really means: *It's on us!* We therefore offend and blaspheme the true nature of God when we unwittingly describe an arbitrary, controlling, manipulative God—even as we attempt singing praises to Him.

About the Author

Dr. Ian R. Harvey recently relocated with his wife, Kristine, as empty nesters to Princeton, NJ where he teaches nanotechnology and directs the research Cleanroom at the Princeton University Institute for the Science and Technology of Materials. He serves as the executive secretary in his ward and enjoys participating in the Sunday school class on hymn writing.

Notes

¹ More on this in my article, “Well, Dr. Nibley, I do have a suggestion...” (Sunstone, 183, Winter 2016, 11 – 15.)

² Primary source scripture *i.e.*, God or Jesus speaking as to the perspective we should have on death: John 5:24; 6:47-51; 8:51; D&C 29:40-41, 3 Ne 28:6-8

³ Prophets corroborating that death is not a designed step on the way to eternal joy, but is in fact what Jesus came to save us *from*: 1 Corinthians 15:21,26,54-56; 2 Nephi 9:6-39; Alma 11:40-45; Hebrews 2:9-15

⁴ It is useful here to distinguish between the Gospel and the Church. “The Gospel is true” in the sense that it is defined, principled and unchanging (though our understanding of it may change, see 3 Ne 27:13-20). In the very next verse (21) we see, set in contrast the “church” as the vehicle for *us* to perform the Lord’s work benefitting His sheep. In Eph 4:11-15, we see that there are essential defined elements for the church, but we can’t say that “the *Church* is true” in the same sense the Gospel is. The Church is not static and unchanging. The Church is still being restored and is thus evolving, changing and adapting in its programs, policies, handbooks, manuals, practices and even its culture(s). For me, the essence of “Church” is that it is the protectorate of the saving ordinances because its leaders are the holders of the keys to the same. (Matt 16:18-19; 28:16-20; D&C 13)

⁵ We should be far less focused in our discussions and interviews regarding the *worthiness* of people, looking back on where they have been. (Mosiah 18:10-11) The Lord judges people on devotion in their hearts (Alma 33:23; 41:3) and helps them plot a path forward (John 8:10,11) to His kingdom. (D&C 137:7-10) So should we.

⁶ I do claim some level of competence in culling old and favorite cows who have served well and happily on the range and in the meadows, but whose time has come to move to the *other* pasture, given my recent background serving as a weekend hand on my father's Wyoming beef cattle ranch.

⁷ Our habit of using military-style hymns to build and extend our pioneer culture helps reinforce the fantasy that the early Saints were perfect and never did anything to justify the anxiety or bitterness of their neighbors, other than possess truth. How disillusioning it is to someday come to realize that was not the case. Nor does right justify might, even as might does not make one right. Since we are not talking about the good-ol'-days of the war in heaven within our songs of gathering, let's stop assuming the worst in our neighbors by pitting ourselves against them.

⁸ Keep in mind that the great War in Heaven did have a named foe. (Moses 4:1-4) And the battle never brought swords to bear as it was purely ideological in nature fought by spirit beings incapable of inflicting or receiving pain or wound as we humans know such things. Indeed it was fought over the right to experience such things. No one in that great contest died of wounds inflicted by anyone other than him or herself, and those wounds were etched in fear, doubt, betrayal and hate. Death, the outcome of self destruction in that case, meant eternal, self-induced exile from all joy and happiness, as Lucifer's pitiful followers chose rather to serve—and be served—sorrow.

⁹ Another of Lucifer's lies to the effect of distracting us from the real enemy is, "What is being taught? The philosophies of men, mingled with scripture." This beauty—effective only as we believe him—once again has us searching all among the faces in the crowd, doubting the best intentions of faithful brothers and sisters and lovers of God. Contrast this with when Lucifer's very own words (mingled with scripture) are culturally taken as truth, being drawn from uniquely Mormon scripture, and even within the hallowed walls of our own sacred temples. See *The Lineage of The Lie: Revealing Paul's "Man of Sin"*, I.R. Harvey, Outskirts Press, 2018, ISBN 978-1-4787-8642-9

¹⁰ See *Satan Gets To Reign BAD THINGS HAPPEN God Gets the Blame*, I.R. Harvey, Outskirts Press, 2017, ISBN 978-1-4787-9022-8

¹¹ As an example, I think of Jim, my college roommate: I ran into Jim for the first time in 18 years on a cross country flight. He had become inactive in response to his former mission companion's child who was born so disabled such that as we spoke the child was seven years old with no further mental development beyond the day it was born. This was seen as extreme tribulation with Jim commenting, "If God either did that to the child or

was complicit in allowing it to happen when He could have prevented it, then I do not want to know such a God".

¹² God, having given us agency (Moses 3:17; 4:28-29,56,59; 7:33) cannot intervene unless asked.

¹³ Thy will or not Thy will? Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge (Heb 11:1, Alma 32:21), so we can't wait around for stuff to happen then claim that it must have been God's will. God's will is for us to exercise agency in love; (Moses 7:32-33) He wants us to be joyful. (Romans 14:7; D&C 93:33-34; 128:19,23) There are non-random tribulations that come as a result of intensive requests, like Nephi praying for famine to bring humility to the people, like Alma and Mosiah praying for their sons, like the people of Christ praying fervently for those who do persecute and revile, and whose prayers wrought upon Saul who became Paul.

¹⁴ Agency governs according to what is asked: 3 Nephi 18:20 Ask in my name, that which is right, believing.... Mormon 9: has the day of miracles ceased? v. 21: *ask doubting nothing*.... Moroni 7:26-27 ask in my name, for that which is good, in faith, believing that you shall receive.... D&C 24:13-14 require not miracles unless it be required by them who desire it, except casting out devils... faith determines outcome: D&C 42:43-52; D&C 59:2 (sweetness for those who die in Christ); 63:49-51; Death is not God's: Moses 6:48-59

¹⁵ See, *e.g.*, Moses 7:35-37; Moroni 8:26; Moses 6:61; John 14:27; 1 John 4:7-12,16-21; John 15:9-10,12-13,17,19.

¹⁶ See, *e.g.*, D&C 42:43-46; D&C 138:49-50; D&C 93:33-34.

¹⁷ Agency was freely given to us, free of the asking (Moses 3:17), but though God gave us the ability to choose success or failure, life or death, exaltation or destruction (Deut 30:19; 2 Nephi 2:26-29; Helaman 14:31); yet our choices do not altogether represent his expectations (Abraham 3:27; 4:31) because He cannot arbitrarily intervene and manipulate our agency. (Moses 7:28-33)