

Why are hymns retranslated?

On Christmas Eve, I was asked to attend a German service in my congregation and to give a Children's address at that service. Surprisingly, they asked me to do it in English. Why? Because there were many children at that service, and the vast majority of these children didn't speak much German. Some of these children were there for family reasons; others were there to gain some deeper appreciation for their German heritage. At the same time, however, the people organising this service were concerned that the children should be able to hear the story of their Saviour's birth in a language they could understand.

Our church has a strong heritage of translation. Since the time of the Reformation, Lutherans have been concerned about offering God's word to people in a language they can understand. Right at the beginning, Luther set about translating the scriptures into German. He didn't stop there. Luther wrote hymns in German, and many of these German hymns were actually translations or paraphrases from Latin texts. Luther himself wasn't opposed to using Latin in worship; he didn't see it necessary to have everything in German. But motivated by the desire to pass on the heritage of the Christian church to all the people of God, he worked hard to translate the liturgy and hymns of the church into words that the common people could understand. He did this so that they could hear of God's wonderful works for them in their own language.

We've seen the same process repeated right here in Australia. During the first half of the 20th century, the Lutheran church moved from being a largely German speaking church to one that spoke mainly English. There was nothing wrong with the German language. Many of the German hymns our ancestors sang were beautiful, meaningful compositions which brought tremendous joy to their singers. Why were they translated, then? The simple truth is that many of the people didn't have German as their first language anymore; they were English speakers. Recognising this, the church began the long process of translating the liturgy and much loved hymns into English, so that they could then pass on the heritage of this hymnody in a language people could understand.

What we're seeing now is part of this ongoing process. Many of the translations in our hymnbooks are not written in the language people readily understand. In an attempt to keep alive these old hymns which we treasure, gifted translators have set to work retranslating them. Sometimes this involves nothing but a simple 'tweaking' of the language by replacing words and expressions which aren't clear anymore. In some cases, hymns need to be retranslated completely. This is sometimes done because the older translation was inaccurate to begin with. It's important to realise that this work is not done with a view to wreck or ruin these hymns. By and large, translators themselves are people who love and treasure our church's hymnody deeply. They hope that their efforts will help people understand more of what they're singing, so that they will come to treasure their heritage being passed down to them.

Pastorally, this is a very sensitive area. In the hymns and songs of the church we have words and music combined in a dynamic and powerful way. We mightn't always recognise this, but as we sing them, the words of a hymn worm their way into our subconscious. Many people were encouraged to commit hymn verses to memory as children to make this link stronger. When this is the case, change doesn't come easily. When I was a child, I committed to memory Luther's Small Catechism. To this day, it's a struggle for me to use any translation other than the one I learned. It's almost like those words have become part of me, and these other translations run against the grain.

It's important that we bear this in mind when we choose whether to use newer translations or retain the older ones. It's not always wise or beneficial to use newer translations, especially when the particular hymn is so well loved. Ancient hymns can sometimes speak a message that is crystal clear despite any old or outdated language they use. Just because something is new doesn't necessarily make it better. At the same time, however, we do need to ask whether stepping into the unfamiliar and embracing a new translation can be a worthwhile investment if it means the hymns we love can be treasured for generations to come.

Prepared by Matthias Prenzler
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