ForeWord Reviews

How Sweet the Sound: The Message of Our Best-Loved Hymns
Richard Allen Farmer
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The contemporary Christian church faces a challenge: it must present its tenets effectively, making clear the relevance of the Gospel to life in the twenty-first century. Answering this challenge, Christians are creating contemporary worship music that conveys biblical principles.

While the author-a classically trained pianist, itinerant preacher, and former pastor-does not disparage the work of contemporary songwriters, he encourages worshippers to continue to value the more traditional songs of the hymnal. As he states in his introduction, “I give thanks that we have some writers, who in the last five years, have given the church some extraordinary pieces of music. I want us to enjoy this music; I also want the church to enjoy those pieces that were written before 1900.”

By including the texts of twenty-five hymns, Farmer convincingly shows that hymns are valuable sources of doctrinal exposition and rich mines of biblical truth. He divides hymns into four subjects: God, Christ, the church, and worship. For each piece, Farmer picks out important themes or potential questions that listeners might ask, and exposits them, sometimes using anecdotes to illustrate a point.

For example, “Blest Be the Tie that Binds,” included in Farmer’s group of hymns about the church, states, “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.” In his commentary, Farmer tells how, as a child in the Bronx, he had to walk to church. “In the winter that was not fun. But I made the trek gladly, for I loved going to worship.” He explains the joy that he finds in the gathering: “The church is that body of people who have heard God calling them from something and to something. The Greek word for church, ekklesia, is a word made up of ek (‘out of’) and kaleo (‘to call’). Literally, the church is an assembly of ‘called out’ people.” Farmer asserts that Christians have a need for bonding, for fellowship with one another.

Farmer’s approach is not exhaustive; nor is it meant to be, for he states in his introduction, “This book is merely a discussion starter.” It is an extremely effective one. In addition, the topical manner in which this book is written makes it an excellent devotional.

Although the reader may wish that Farmer dwelt on a particular topic longer, or made the connections between his thoughts more explicit in places, How Sweet the Sound is a delightful voyage of discovery through the Protestant hymnody. Pastors and music ministers

will be inspired to incorporate these exquisitely crafted, thought-provoking hymns into their churches' repertoires, while lay Christians will simply be inspired.

Melanie Seibert