God and man in
baptist hymnals
1784-1844
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Few issues are as significant or as intriguing for the student of intellectual history as the manner in which ideas are transmitted from the intellectual elite to the broad masses of society. In point of fact, however, historians have given little systematic attention to this problem. This can be readily seen, for example, in the large number of scholarly writings which have dealt with the transformations in Calvinist theology in the period between the Great Awakening and the revivals of Charles Finney.¹ Often written from a history of ideas perspective, and focused on the writings of a number of leading theologians, these volumes have clearly delineated the various stages in the shift from a strict Calvinism to Arminianism. What one seeks in vain in most of these studies, however, is any discussion of the ways in which the subtleties of theological speculation were made available to the average churchgoer. We know a great deal about men like Edwards, Backus, Beecher and Taylor, but very little about the manner in which their ideas entered the mainstream of American intellectual life.

In order to achieve a more precise understanding of the ways in which changing theological ideas were disseminated and popularized during the early Republic, I have undertaken an analysis of Baptist hymnals published in the years 1784-1844.² While an extensive examination of the sermonic literature of the period would also have proved fruitful in this connection, the hymnals, being specifically intended for wide congregational use, offer, I believe, the best insight into the popularization of sophisticated religious concepts. Since the hymnals themselves, however, can only be profitably evaluated within the broad context of Baptist historical development, we must begin our analysis with an examination of the formative period of that denomination.

Perhaps the most ironic feature of the Great Awakening was that its
largest and most lasting fruits were borne off by the Baptists, who had remained largely aloof from the movement. The phenomenal growth of Baptist sentiment which resulted from the Great Awakening, and which propelled the Baptists into the mainstream of American religious life, was directly related to the role of Separate Baptists in the great religious upheaval.

The rise of Baptist belief among Strict Congregationalists was merely the final step in the logical development of those ideas and beliefs which had inspired the Great Awakening. The New Lights, those who favored the revival techniques of the Awakening, had revolted against the gradual shift to Arminian principles which had taken place in the colonies by 1740. The New Lights attacked the Halfway Covenant and the innovations of Solomon Stoddard as evil compromises, and demanded a return to the pure church ideal. They believed in justification by faith alone, and insisted upon the necessity of dramatic conscious conversion as evidence of the Spirit’s presence. It was only natural for the more extreme elements among the New Lights, in striving for a pure church ideal, to reject the idea of “graceless communion,” which was the “admission into church membership of those who could not testify to a personal experience of grace.” To those who were opposed to communion with the unregenerate, it seemed imperative to withdraw from their respective congregations, and to form churches composed only of those who had undergone conversion. This extreme wing of the New Light party became known as Separates, or more accurately Strict Congregationalists.

It was among the Strict Congregationalists that Baptist sentiment came to fruition. In professing to return to the ideal of a pure church, the Separates “almost inevitably came to the conclusion that if churches were to be composed only of the regenerate, the rite of admission should be restricted to confessed believers.” The logic of the pure church ideal seemed to necessitate the rejection of infant baptism. Thus, the religious zeal of the Separates drove them into the Baptist fold.

The conversion of the Strict Congregationalists to antipedobaptist beliefs completely transformed the Baptist denomination. The rapid development of Separate Baptist churches, with their evangelical zeal, brought a steady stream of converts into the fold, in both the older settled areas and on the frontier. The Separate Baptists brought about a doctrinal revolution in New England when they overwhelmed the Arminian General Baptists. Of greater significance, however, was the rapprochement which took place between the Separates and the Particular Baptists of the Middle Colonies. The Particular Baptists were well organized in the Philadelphia Association, and their willingness to cooperate with the Separate Baptists helped to stabilize the latter group and to bring about their absorption into the ongoing life of American Baptists. Thus, by the end of the eighteenth century, the two groups were completely amalgamated.
While the decline of the Arminian General Baptists and the rapprochement between the Separate and Particular Baptists converted the denomination as a whole to an evangelical Calvinistic theology, this strict Calvinism soon began to undergo significant changes. These changes, which were attributable in part to the influence of Enlightenment ideas, but even more so to the initial impact of the powerful Arminianizing dynamic inherent in Calvinism itself, particularly in its revivalist phases, were faithfully reflected in the hymnals published between 1784 and 1807. To any careful reader of these hymnals it would have been evident that Calvinist theology had entered a transitional phase.

The precarious state of Calvinism during 1784-1807 is most notably apparent in the hymnals in the steady disintegration of the doctrine of limited atonement, a central pillar of Calvinist orthodoxy, and its replacement by the concept of universal atonement. The central feature of these hymnals is their theocentrism. Unlike the later hymnals which are anthropocentric, the hymnals of this period give God the leading role in the drama of salvation. This theocentrism follows quite naturally from the Calvinist view of man as tainted, sinful and frail. If man is depraved, then he can do little to effect his salvation. Salvation thus becomes the prerogative of God, who takes his place in the center of the drama.

The depravity of man is thus one of the central themes of these hymnals. Again and again the hymns proclaim:

Dear Lord, how wond'rous is thy love
To such unworthy worms as we . . . 4

Sinners are reminded that “till saving faith possesses the mind/ In vain of sense we boast/ We are but senseless, tasteless, blind,/ And deaf and dead and lost . . .” (9)

Man is a

Helpless creature
Full of the deepest need
throughout defiled by nature . . . 5

Emphasis is placed on the Fall as the cause of human depravity. In the Selection of Psalms and Hymns, there appears a hymn entitled “Depravity of Nature”:

Lord, I am vile, conceived in sin
And born unholy and unclean
Sprung from the man whose guilty fall
Corrupts the race and taints us all . . . 6

Greater emphasis is placed, however, on God’s love for man. The leading theme of these hymnals is the infinite love of God for depraved mankind. The following are suggestive of the many hymns which express God’s love for man:
Hail sovereign love! That first began
The scheme to rescue fallen man. . .7

and

The Lord is good, the Lord is kind
Great in his grace, his mercy sure. . .8

God in these hymnals is the “glorious lover” of mankind.

God’s infinite love for man has made possible universal salvation. A hymnal of 1808 invited sinners to the fountain “So clear in which all may find pardon.”9 Another hymn “Fallen Race Invited to Return,” begins:

Come to the living waters, come
Sinners, obey your Maker’s call
Return, ye weary wand’rers, home
And find my grace reach’d to all. (195)

A converted sinner assured his listeners:

Nor hath the King of Grace decreed
This prize for me alone
But all that love and long to see
Th’ appearance of his Son.10

Salvation is thus possible for all men. It is theirs upon the condition that they give themselves up to Jesus. “Invitation to Christ” is one of the numerous “Invitation” hymns found in these hymnals. It begins:

Come hither, all ye weary souls
Ye heavy laden sinners come
I’ll give you rest from all your toils
And raise you to my heavenly home. (15)

In spite of their calls to sinners, however, these hymnals are not Arminian. To be sure the distinction between appeals to man in Calvinist and Arminian hymns is quite subtle, the difference often being one of tone and emphasis rather than wording. This is so, as we have noted above, because there is an Arminianizing tendency embedded in preaching and revivalism. The revivalist, desiring to produce the conviction of sin and preaching for decisions, has to address himself to the will of the sinner. Arminian hymns, however, explicitly demand of man that he choose his own destiny, while in Calvinist hymns man can only passively cast himself in complete trust upon Christ.11 It is the latter role that man plays in the hymns of 1784-1807. Thus salvation is “forever nigh/ The souls that fear and trust the Lord.”12 That the drama of grace and salvation is largely the monopoly of God is clearly suggested to the churchgoer in the following hymn:

No art of man can weave this robe
Tis of such mixture fine
Nor could the worth of all the globe
By purchase make it mine.13
Grace in these hymnals

sits a sovereign on the throne
And reigns in majesty alone.  

One final aspect of these hymnals which should be noted is the role of Jesus in the process of salvation. In these hymnals the Calvinistic understanding of the crucifixion as a ransoming of sinners is still upheld. Jesus

Took the dying traitors place
And suffered in his stead.  (195)

The crucifixion is thus a payment of a debt to the law. In one hymn Jesus is made to say:

This blood is for the ransome
I'll die that thou may'st live.  (104)

Jesus died to atone

for sins not his own
Our debt he hath paid.  (97)

Of the hymnals I have examined for the years 1784-1807 only two contain the doctrine of limited atonement. They are the isolated voices of a faltering orthodox Calvinism. The first is the Hymns of Richard Burnham which were printed in 1796 for John Asplund, who had deserted from the British Navy and had settled in Southampton, Virginia, where he was ordained. They are recommended to the reader because they "are very sound or orthodox, both in Doctrines, Ordinances and Discipline." Limited atonement is expressed in such hymns as

Love moved the everlasting Three
On man's salvation to agree
Wisdom did devise the scheme
How the Lord's chosen to redeem . . .  (59)

and

All the elected train
Were chosen in their Head.  (57)

Of even greater interest is the Selection of Free Grace Hymns compiled by John Inglesby in 1807. Inglesby was the minister of the Ebenzer Baptist Church in New York City. The orthodoxy of these hymns is suggested by Inglesby's description of their general character: "Where God the father's eternal love and free choice of his people is preached, the Divine Meditation exalted in his person, work and characters, the depravity of human nature kept constantly in view and all delusive self-righteous hopes utterly exploded." The following is typical of the hymns praising God for his election of his saints:
Sons we are, through God’s election
Who in Jesus Christ believe
By eternal destination
Sovereign grace we here receive. (139)

The hymnal also contains the church covenant. Its stringent orthodoxy is the most uncompromising statement of Calvinism to appear in any of the hymnals. Each member of the church was required to affirm that “God did from eternity love, with an everlasting and unchangeable love, a certain number of the human race, which he did freely of his own sovereign will and pleasure, elect in Jesus Christ.” (319) Adam “transgressed the law of his Creator, and so fell from his original righteousness, from whom a corrupt nature is conveyed to all his offspring . . . .” (319)

The Selection of Free Grace Hymns is the last of the Baptist hymnals I have examined to uphold the doctrine of limited atonement. This doctrine which, as every sensitive hymnal reader must have been aware, had been steadily declining since 1794, completely gave way after 1807 to the concept of universal atonement. That universal atonement itself, however, proved to be merely a halfway point on the way to Arminianism is clearly indicated by a reading of the hymnals published after 1817. By 1843 the shift to Arminianism had been completed.

Arminians believe that depravity is a basis which leaves “the will free and man responsible for his own destiny through the choice of faith or unbelief.”17 The Adamic unity of the race is preserved, but man’s tendencies toward evil are “met and neutralized by the free and universal grace communicated to the race in Christ the second Adam.” Both Calvinist and Arminian regard the conversion experience as the work of the Holy Spirit. But Calvinism maintains “the grace of God to be irresistible . . . . The Arminian assert[s] that the Divine action [is] mediate, through the truth, and thus moral and persuasive, as distinguished from physical and necessitating. Moreover—the grace may be finally resisted.” (810) There is a tendency to define faith “in terms of intellectual assent, rather than a trust.” (811)

Arminianism, with its doctrine of freedom of the will, places the burden of salvation on the sinner, by requiring him to accept or reject the grace offered by God. In terms of the relationship of man and God this doctrine leads in the hymnals to an ever increasing anthropocentrism. This anthropocentrism has its beginnings in 1817 in the Selection of Hymns, a collection “designed for the use of the Baptist and Methodist denomination of Christians.”18 By uniting in the publication of a joint hymnal with the Arminian Methodists, the Baptists were clearly indicating to their membership the direction in which their theology was moving. Typical of its man-centered hymns is

O sinner be awaken’d
To see your wretched state
Repent and be converted
Before it is too late . . . (73)

In 1817, there also appeared the second edition of David Benedict's *Pawtucket Collection of Conference Hymns*. Benedict, for many years an influential leader of the Baptist denomination, was graduated from Brown University in 1806. He was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Pawtucket for twenty-five years.\(^1\) The Arminianism of his collection is quite pronounced as is indicated in the hymn "Today":

Today, if you will hear his voice
This is the time to make your choice
Say, will you to Mount Zion go?
Say, will you have the Christ or no.\(^2\)

Many of the hymns are entitled "Address to Youth" and contain such warnings as

Oh, fellow youth, this is the state
Of all who do free grace refuse
And soon with you twill be too late
The way of life in Christ to choose. \(^14\)

In 1826 the seventh edition appeared under a new title, containing several hymns from the *Methodist Collection*.\(^21\)

The anthropocentrism present in the hymnals of 1817 continues to grow more pronounced with each passing year. This movement from theocentrism to anthropocentrism presupposes a shift in the relationship of God and man. The theocentrism of Calvinism is necessitated by its belief in the depravity of man. If man, as Calvinists conceive him, is immersed in sin, he can do little to effect his salvation. The conversion experience will thus be largely dependent upon God. Arminianism, on the other hand, assigns the sinner a greater role in the conversion experience. In granting man freedom of the will it places the burden of salvation on the sinner. It is understandable, therefore, that the Arminian emphasis on man's participation in the conversion experience led to a revaluation of the doctrine of human depravity. Thus, parallel to the growing anthropocentrism of the hymnals published after 1817, we find a continuous withering of the doctrine of human depravity. By 1844, in the *Psalmist*, it is completely absent.\(^22\)

The withering away of the doctrine of human depravity is intimately linked with the new role of Jesus in the drama of salvation. Associated with the decline of the concept of depravity in these hymnals is the disappearance of the myth of the Fall. It was the Fall, however, which had determined the role of Jesus in the drama. It necessitated a conception of Jesus as the functionary of God who ransomed man from the law. With the denial of the absolute depravity of man, however, it was no longer necessary to conceive of Jesus as man's ransomer. Thus, in the
Arminian hymnals, the crucifixion becomes an act of love. It is no longer linked to any concept of human depravity. Sinners are reminded to think what your Saviour bore
   In the gloomy garden
   Sweating blood from every pore
   Crying, O my father . . .

Many hymns demand of the sinner that he reciprocate the love of Jesus:

   Will you let him die in vain
   Crucify your lord again?

The denial of human depravity is also responsible for a shift in the relationship of God and Jesus. In the hymnals of 1784-1807, God occupies the center of the stage in the drama of salvation. In the Arminian hymnals, however, the God-man relationship is transformed into one between Jesus and man. This shift was possible only when human depravity was denied. For as long as depravity was affirmed, Jesus could only be seen as God's servant, sent to earth to ransom man from the law. With the denial of depravity, however, Jesus could replace God as man's partner in the dialogue between heaven and earth. This shift is reflected in the numerous hymns which present salvation as an offer from Jesus to man. In one hymn Jesus is made to say

   Come and make my paths your choice
   I will guide you to your home . . . (359)

In another hymn sinners are invited with the words

   Come ye guilty souls opprest
   Answer to the Saviour's call;
   Come and I will give you rest
   Come and I will save you all . . .

God is not ignored in these hymns, but his position is clearly secondary to Jesus.

The substitution of a Jesus-man relationship for the God-man relationship of Calvinism is, from a psychological point of view, a narrowing of the distance between the human and the Divine. Original sin had necessitated for Calvinism an unbridgeable gulf between depraved man and the Divine. By denying human depravity, Arminianism was able to narrow this gulf. Thus, the Arminian emphasis on the relationship between the God-man Jesus and human beings reflects its acceptance of man's dignity which makes possible human effort in the conversion process.

The strength of the conception of human dignity, which is at the basis of these Arminian hymnals, is suggested by the extreme anthropocentrism of the hymns. In many of the hymns men are begged to accept salvation:
Will you not his grace receive?
Will ye still refuse to live?
Oh! ye dying sinners why—
Why will ye forever die?

The choice between heaven and hell is completely in the hands of the sinner:

Where can ye hope to dwell,
When from this world you go.
Ye choose the road that leads to hell . . .

Like a lawyer the minister is to convince by argumentation:

Absurd and vain attempts to bind
With iron chains the free born mind;
To force conviction and reclaim
The wandering by destructive flame.

By proof divine and reason strong
He draws the willing soul along
And conquests to the church acquires
By eloquence which heaven inspires.

This hymn reminds one of Charles Finney's definition of regeneration as "nothing else than the will being duly influenced by the truth." Human dignity has come a long way when the gospel must convince man by argumentation!

Another significant feature of these hymnals is their evangelical tone. The Select Hymns compiled by James Linsley and Gustavus Davis contains chapters entitled "Sinners warned," "Sinners awakened," "Sinners invited," "Sinners converted," "Revivals" and "Missionary concert."

Some of the hymnals are directly linked to revivals. Enoch Freeman, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Lowell, Massachusetts, writing in 1831, thus explains the origins of his compilation: "The work of revival which has been carried forward in this town for more than three years past, and which is still progressing, seems to call for a greater number and a more extensive variety of hymns than are usually found in collections of this kind." Freeman hoped that his book might be useful "as an instrument in exciting and perpetuating those glorious revivals of pure religion which so characterize this age." (Preface) Rufus Babcock, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Salem, attempted to render his selection "particularly copious in those classes of hymns which are especially adapted to this period of revivals . . . ." There is also, in these hymnals, a continuous growth in the number of "missionary hymns." David Benedict wrote a "Prayer for the Conversion of the American Indians" which begins

Travel up the broad Missouri
O'er the Rocky Mountains fly
On the wide Pacific's border
Raise the gospel's ensign high.
Especially numerous are those hymns which envision the spread of the gospel throughout the world:

- Speak and the world shall hear thy voice
- Speak and the desert shall rejoice
- Scatter the gloom of heathen night
- And bid all nations hail the light.

Finally, those hymns which are devoted to the ministers of the gospel conceive of them as soul savers. The hymn “Prayer for Ministers” suggests the proper role of the minister:

- We plead for those who plead for thee
- Successful pleaders may they be!
- Teach them immortal souls to gain
- Souls that will reward their pain.

Amidst the radiant optimism of these Arminian hymnals, I have found only two dissenting voices. The two hymnals, James Winchell’s Selection and Jason Lothrop’s Pilgrim’s Companion continue to uphold human depravity. They are throwbacks to the hymnals of 1784-1807 which combine human depravity and universal atonement. Winchell was a graduate of Brown University and pastor of the First Baptist Church in Boston. The theology of his Selection is revealed in the following hymn which combines human depravity, universal atonement and Jesus as man’s ransomer:

- Pascal Lamb, by God appointed,
- All our sins on thee were laid;
- By almighty love anointed
- Thou hast full atonement made:
- All thy people are forgiven
- Through the virtue of thy blood.

Jason Lothrop, in his Preface, informs the reader that he undertook the compilation in order to correct certain abuses which had crept into many hymns. “Many of our popular hymns,” he laments, “have greatly deteriorated by passing through the hands of those opposed to the scriptural doctrine of Grace.” His view of grace includes human depravity, a mediatory role for Jesus and universal atonement. That God’s role in the conversion process is paramount is brought home to the reader in such lines as

- Oh, turn and look upon me, Lord
- And break my heart of stone. (129)

These two hymnals, however, stand alone in a period of Arminianism. In 1843, with the publication of the Psalmist, the victory of Arminianism was complete. The Psalmist was examined by a committee of eminent Baptist ministers residing in different parts of the country. They “recommended it to the churches in hope of uniting the Baptists of the United States in its use.” The compilers hoped that the collection would “tend
to the elevation of evangelical taste, the interest of worship, the diffusion of a more fervent piety and the glory of God." The extreme Arminianism of the hymnal is suggested by the following two hymns:

Yes, whoever will  
O let him freely come,  
And freely drink the stream of life;  
Tis Jesus bids him come. (227)

and

Say will you hear my gracious voice,  
And have your sins forgiven?  
Or will you make that wretched choice,  
And bar yourself from heaven? (229)

In giving its recommendation to the Psalmist, the Board of the American Baptist Publication and Sunday School Society was clearly indicating to all Baptists that Arminianism was the accepted doctrine of the denomination.

It should be clear from the foregoing analysis that hymnals can provide the historian of American religion with significant insights about the ways in which theological ideas are popularized. In the case of the Baptist hymnals published between 1784-1844, one can readily see how the average churchgoer was made aware of the various stages in the shift from orthodox Calvinism to Arminianism. An examination of the hymns reveals a continuous movement from theocentrism to anthropocentrism, or, more specifically, from limited to universal atonement, and from universal atonement to Arminianism. The hymnals thus provide a major link between the theologians and the masses.

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footnotes


2. This paper is based on an examination of Baptist hymnals in the Harris Collection of American Poetry, Brown University. I have examined a total of forty-five hymnals (including various additions of the same hymnal), covering the period 1784-1844. Of the thirty-seven hymnals covering this period which are catalogued by Burrage in his Baptist Hymn Writers and Their Hymns, I was able to examine seventeen, in addition to a number of others which he failed to mention. Thus, in spite of its limitations, the selection of hymnals available in the Harris Collection would appear to be representative.

The first hymnal published in America for the Baptist denomination was Hymns and Spiritual Songs, printed in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1766. The hymnal contains the theology of the Six Principle Baptists and is thus irrelevant for my study. My examination begins with the second hymnal published for the Baptists in 1784.


5. Joshua Smith, Divine Hymns and Spiritual Songs (Norwich, 1794), 12.

7. Smith, Divine Hymns and Spiritual Songs, 9.
9. Boston Collection of Hymns (Boston, 1808), 129.
10. Jones and Allison, Selection of Psalms and Hymns, 83.
15. Richard Burnham, Hymns (Boston, 1796), Preface.
18. Paul Himes and Jonathan Wilson, Selection From the Best Authors Designed for the Use of the Baptist and Methodist Denomination of Christians (Greenfield, 1817), Title Page.
19. Henry Burrage, Baptist Hymn Writers and Their Hymns (Portland, 1885), 254.
20. David Benedict, Pawtucket Collection of Conference Hymns (Boston, 1826), 43.
23. Enoch Freeman, Selection of Hymns (Exeter, 1831), 237.
24. Rufus Babcock, Manuel of Christian Psalmody (Boston, 1832), 386.
25. Freeman, Selection of Hymns, 188.
27. James Linsley and Gustavus Davis, Select Hymns, Adopted to the Devotional Exercises of the Baptist Denomination (Hartford, 1836), 119.
28. Barly, Maxon and Clark, New Selection of Psalms and Hymns (Schenectady, 1826), 242.
This collection also contains hymns from Methodist Collection.
30. Linsley and Davis, Select Hymns, Table of Contents.
31. Freeman, Selection of Hymns, Preface.
34. Thomas Ripley, Selection of Hymns for Conference and Prayer Meetings (Bangor, 1831), 75.
35. Baily, Maxon and Clark, New Selection of Psalms and Hymns, 344.
36. James Winchell, A Selection of More than Three Hundred Hymns (Boston, 1819).
37. Jason Lothrop, Pilgrims Companion (Newport, 1827).
38. Winchell, A Selection of More than Three Hundred Hymns, 74.
40. Burrage, Baptist Hymn Writers and Their Hymns, 655.
41. Stowe and Smith, The Psalmist, Preface.
appendix: a list of hymnals

The following is a list of the hymnals used in the preparation of this paper. I have classified them as being either Calvinist, transitional (combining human depravity with universal atonement) or Arminian in theology.

16. Linsley, James, and Gustavus Davis. *Select Hymns Adapted to the Devotional Exercises of the Baptist Denomination*. Hartford, 1836 (Arminian).
   ———. *Selection of More Than Three Hundred Hymns From the Most Approved Authors*. . . Boston, 1819, 1820, 1821, 1823 (Transitional).