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'Sinners Jesus will receive' —
the British Reception of
Neumeister's hymn
by John S. Andrews

Dr. Andrews is already known to readers of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY for his studies in hymnology. The essay which follows is a by-product from his thesis 'A Study of German Hymns in Current English Hymnals' which has recently been published (see note 9).

The leader of the Pietist revival in Germany was Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705). In 1670 this Lutheran pastor began to hold the *collegia pietatis* (or cottage prayer-meetings) out of which the nickname 'Pietismus' arose. The movement, which reacted against the cold formalism that had by then infected the Lutheran Church, aimed at a deepening of personal religion. Spener set forth his desiderata for his co-religionists in his *Pia desideria*, which appeared in 1675.¹

One of the many lasting achievements of Pietism was the hymnody that it inspired. Erik Routley, the author of many perceptive publications on hymnology, was 'something of a hostile witness' as far as Pietism was concerned, since he had not fully understood the movement in its Lutheran setting.² In Lutheranism there had always been a strong strand of mystical devotion;³ but Routley did not distinguish between this orthodox Lutheran piety and the devotional aspects of Pietism as a specific historical movement.⁴ At all events, by the late seventeenth century the main body of the Lutheran Church stood in need of revival.

Not all Lutherans welcomed the new movement. One of its eloquent and vehement opponents in the pulpit and in the press was the High Lutheran court preacher Erdmann Neumeister (1671-1756). The underlying motive for his opposition was 'doubtless to preserve the simplicity of the faith from the subjective novelties of the period'. The author of one of the earliest historico-critical works on German poetry, he was also a pioneer composer of church cantatas. Many of his over 650 hymns were

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¹ A convenient brief assessment of Pietism appears in the *New Internat. Dict. Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Exeter, 1978). For fuller details consult the works cited there and also those in the extensive bibliography to August Langen's *Der Wortschatz des deutschen Pietismus* (Tübingen, 1954).

² So Robin A. Leaver, *Catherine Winkworth: The Influence of Her Translations on English Hymnody* (St. Louis, Mo., 1978), 33.

³ See Leaver, *The Liturgy and Music: A Study of the Use of the Hymn in Two Liturgical Traditions* (Bramcote, Notts., 1976) (Grove Liturgical Study, 6). The two traditions are Lutheranism and Anglicanism.

⁴ Leaver, *Winkworth*, 143, note 48, citing two references by Routley, who had also discussed Pietist hymnody in his *Music of Christian Hymnody* (London, 1957), chap. x.

noted for 'their simple, musical style, scripturalness, poetic fervour, depth of faith and Christian experience'.⁵

Such were the characteristics of his popular hymn, first published in his *Evangelischer Nachklang* (Hamburg, 1718), *Jesus nimmt die Sünder an*; in piety it was equal to the best products of the movement that the author repudiated. The evangelistic pericope providing the theme made the hymn especially suitable for mission services.⁶ Of the eleven hymns by Neumeister cited by Julian as available in English only this one has any currency in Britain today, and it is now known only in one of Julian's six translations.

This translation was the work of Mrs. Emma Frances Bevan, who rendered all the eight six-line stanzas in her *Songs of Eternal Life* (London, 1858).⁷ In *Sinners Jesus will receive* she could not resist colouring Neumeister's rather prosaic stanza *iii* by introducing 'mountains bleak and cold' (line 2) and 'moor and fen' (5). So also in stanza *v* the 'Betäubter' (1) had to be 'Sick, and sorrowful, and blind'. The sinner in stanza *vi* not only stood 'in white array' (4), but was 'Purged from every spot and stain' (5), for which expression the German gave little warrant. Such 'improvements' were Mrs. Bevan's chief weakness: she was so prolific a translator, especially of the hymns of the mystic Gerhard Tersteegen where exact fidelity to the original was not always essential, that she lacked the discipline of a Catherine Winkworth.

Nevertheless, *Sinners Jesus will receive* was a fine spirited rendering, which retained most of the force as well as the literal sense of the German. In 1897 when Mrs. Bevan reprinted the poem in her *Hymns of Ter Steegen and Others* she omitted stanza *ii*. It was no doubt in this collection (reprinted as late as 1920) or in *Sankey's* recast of 1888⁸ that the compilers of modern hymnals discovered the hymn; for all those examined omitted this stanza.

For a recent study on the reception of German hymns I examined thirty-six contemporary English collections representing a wide range of denominations and special interests.⁹ Mrs. Bevan's hymn appeared in

⁵ John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, rev. ed. (London, 1907), 797, i, q. v. for fuller biographical details. See also Wilhelm Nelle, *Geschichte des deutschen evangelischen Kirchenliedes*, 3. Aufl. (Leipzig, 1928), 174, 241f.

⁶ Luke 15.2b, followed by the parable of the lost sheep. Other relevant Scriptures are Mt. 11:28 and Isa. 1:18; in both texts the Lord bade the sinner come unto Him (cf. stanzas *iv* and *vi* of Neumeister's hymn, reproduced as an appendix to this present article).

⁷ For her text see my appendix. On her achievement as a translator of German hymns see my articles, *EQ*, 34 (1962), 206-13 and 35 (1963), 30-38.

⁸ See the next paragraph but one below.

⁹ *A Study of German Hymns in Current English Hymnals* (Bern, Peter Lang, 1982). This is a radical revision of my Leeds Ph.D. thesis (1966).

some form in nine of them. It appeared also in five older English collections, the Pentecostal *Redemption Hymnal* and in a recent Welsh collection, *Christian Hymns*.¹⁰

The earliest hymnal among those examined to use the hymn was Sankey's *Sacred Songs & Solos (SSS)*.¹¹ This collection, which consisted of only 23 pieces in its original 1873 edition, grew to 750 in its 1888 edition, and to 1200 in its final 1903 one.¹² To the best of my knowledge the first appearance of the hymn in SSS was in the 1888 edition, where it was no. 447. Unfortunately, as often in this collection, a chorus was added to a hymn complete without one. Neumeister had contented himself with the repetition of his opening line at the end of each stanza and at the beginning of his last stanza. Except in her opening line, 'Sinners Jesus will receive', Mrs. Bevan kept the repetition with the rendering 'Christ receiveth sinful men'. SSS gave only four stanzas each of only four lines and invented the chorus:

Sing it o'er ... and ... o'er again: ...
Christ receiv ... eth sinful men; ...
Make the mes ... sage clear and plain: ...
Christ receiveth sinful men.

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The four stanzas were considerably recast and corresponded to Mrs. Bevan's *i*, 1-4; *iv*, 1,5,3,6; *vii*, 1-4; and *viii*, 1-2, *vi*, 5, *viii*, 4.

The tune by James McGranahan was composed originally for male voices and had been included in *The Gospel Male Choir No. 2* (1883) and the same year in a mixed-voice setting in *The Gospel Choir*, the latter compiled by Ira D. Sankey and McGranahan.¹³

In 1881 the leader of the Exclusive Brethren, J. N. Darby, had wise words to say on gospel hymns. 'Abstractedly, you [were] making people sing as having certain feelings, and then preaching to them because they [had] not'. Although he admitted that in practice things were not so sharply defined, there was a real danger of 'wide-spread delusion and loose apprehension of sin and grace ... You [might] often find the loudest singers where conscience [was] the least reached'.¹⁴ Most of Mrs. Bevan's

¹⁰ Details of variants except minor ones such as punctuation and spelling are given in the appendix.

¹¹ For abbreviations of hymnals see appendix.

¹² Julian, *Dict. of Hymnology*, 1698, ii.

¹³ So Donald P. Hustad, *Dictionary-Handbook to Hymns for the Living Church* (Carol Stream, Ill., 1978), 101. Hustad adds that the tune was called 'Neumeister' in the *Mennonite Hymnary* (1940). On McGranahan and Sankey see Hustad, 285 and 312 (where SSS is said to have sold over eighty million copies).

¹⁴ *A Few Hymns and Some Spiritual Songs. Selected 1956, for the Little Flock*. Revised (N.Y., 1881), Preface. The Preface was anonymous.

translations and original compositions were intended for the household of faith. What her views about gospel hymns were as a member of the Open Brethren was not known; but the difficulty inseparable from all such hymns of singing (to use a Quaker phrase) 'unfelt truth' was particularly acute with the *Sankey* recast of her hymn complete with its chorus and rousing tune.

All the same, the version found its way into at least eight Free Church and interdenominational collections, including the definitive 1903 edition of *SSS*. *SA* omitted the third stanza. *MHB* amended line 2 of the first from 'Sound *this* word of grace ...' to 'Sound *His* word ...' More surprisingly, in the second stanza the Reformed Baptist *GH* replaced 'the sinfulest' (which at least rhymes well with 'give you rest') to 'the very worst'; the change was probably not due to any desire to soft-pedal the concept of sin — a concept that was anyway hammered home throughout the rest of the hymn. Apart from these minor variants all the compilers were content with the recast.

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Perhaps for similar reasons to those expressed by Darby the compilers of the 1907 edition of the English Presbyterian *Church P* admitted 'revival' hymns only 'with reserve'.¹⁵ Mrs. Bevan's hymn was used but in its original form. The 1927 *RCH*, which was authorised for use by Presbyterian Churches throughout Britain and by some overseas, followed suit. So did four more English Free Church and interdenominational collections besides the evangelical *AHB* and *CH(W)*, which was published by the Evangelical Movement of Wales. The hymn was set to various tunes, e.g. J. B. Dykes's *Glastonbury* and Johann Crüger's *Jesu, meine Zuversicht*.

The hymn was thought to need abridgement. All the eight hymnals omitted stanza *ii* (which Mrs. Bevan herself had omitted in the 1897 reprint of the hymn in her *Hymns of Ter Steegen*), and all except *CW* omitted stanzas *iv* and *vii*. *CW*, no doubt influenced by the *Sankey* recast in an earlier Brethren collection *HCWS*, amended *i*, 2 from 'Say this word of grace ...' to 'Sound...' (four other collections had 'Tell ...') and also amended the final stanza to bring it into line with that in *Sankey*. Otherwise the only departure of interest was in the opening line, which *BCH* rewrote as 'Jesus sinners will receive' instead of 'Sinners Jesus ...'; in this the compilers were following a precedent in earlier Baptist collections.¹⁶

Three trends may be discerned in the reception of the translation. First, all the collections including it are Free Church and/or evangelical

¹⁵ L. H. Bunn, *Seventy Years of English Presbyterian Praise, 1857-1927* (Presbyterian Hist. Soc. of England, 1959), 16. This lecture was reprinted, with new pagination, from the *J. Presbyterian Hist. Soc. of England*, 11 (1959), 173-91.

¹⁶ Julian, *Dict. of Hymnology*, ad loc.

ones. No Anglican collection except the evangelical *AHB* has it. Secondly, most of the recent compilers have wisely reverted to the original six-line version without the chorus. In the 1926 *GB* the CSSM (Scripture Union) was still under *Sankey's* influence; but by 1964 the SU reverted, in *HF*, to the six-line version.¹⁷ Finally, there has been an overall decline in popularity. The 1927 *RCH* included the hymn; its 1973 successor does not. It is true that the 1973 edition, being more 'high church' in ethos than its predecessor, has not entirely superseded the earlier book. More significantly, the hymn is not included in *The Baptist Hymn Book* of 1962, whereas it had appeared not only in *BCH* but also in a Baptist collection as early as 1879.¹⁸ The overall decline in popularity appears to be the product of modernity rather than of churchmanship and of an increased awareness of the likely counter-productive effect of the language of Canaan upon the unchurched.¹⁹

¹⁷ *HF* followed the Baptists in i, 1: 'Jesus sinners ...'

¹⁸ *The Baptist Hymnal* (Julian, ad loc.).

¹⁹ Cf. Bill Hopkinson's survey of recent hymnals based on word-counts, 'Changes in the Emphases of Evangelical Belief 1970-1980', *Churchman*, 95 (1981), 123-38; the hymnal of Australian origin, *With One Voice* (London, 1979), which modernised the text of many hymns; and *Hymns for Today's Church* (London, 1982), which carried modernisation much further. See also Christopher Idle's apologia for the latter hymnal, *Hymns in Today's Language?* (Bramcote, Notts., 1982) (Grove Worship Series, 81).

NEUMEISTER — BEVAN
Songs of Eternal Life (London, 1858),
p.23

i Sinners Jesus will receive, —
Say this word of grace to all,
Who the heavenly pathway leave,
All who linger, all who fall! —
This can bring them back again, —
Christ receiveth sinful men.

Var: 1 Jesus sinners w.

BCH, HF

2 Tell t.

AHB, RCH, Christian P, CH(W)/
Sound t. CW

228 ii We deserve no help, no love,
Yet His changeless word is given,
That His grace shall not remove:
No man at the gate of Heaven
In His name shall knock in vain —
Christ receiveth sinful men.
om st all¹

iii Shepherds seek their wandering sheep
O'er the mountains bleak and cold, —
Jesus such a watch doth keep
O'er the lost ones of His fold; —
Seeking them o'er moor and fen:
Christ receiveth sinful men.

om st BCH, CW, HF

iv Come, and He will give you rest,
Sorrow-stricken, sin-defiled —
He can make the sinfulest
God the Father's blessed child:
Trust Him, for His word is plain,
Christ receiveth sinful men.

om st all except CW

Var: 5 T. H., trust H. w. again CW

v Sick, and sorrowful, and blind,
I with all my sins draw nigh, —
O my Saviour, Thou canst find
Help for sinners such as I.
Speak that word of love again:
Christ receiveth sinful men.

NEUMEISTER

C. K. J. Bunsen, *Versuch eines
allgemeinen evangelischen Gesang-
und Gebetbuchs zum Kirchen- und
Hausgebrauch* (Hamburg, 1833),
no.303.

i Jesus nimmt die Sünder an:
Saget doch diess Trostwort allen,
Welche von der rechten Bahn
Auf verkehrten Weg verfallen:
Hier ist, was sie retten kann;
Jesus nimmt die Sünder an.

ii Keiner Gnade sind wir werth,
Doch er hat in seinem Worte
Eidlich sich dazu erklärt:
Sehet nur, die Gnadenpforte
Ist hier völlig aufgethan;
Jesus nimmt die Sünder an.

iii Wenn ein Schaf verloren ist,
Suchet es ein treuer Hirte:
Jesus, der uns nie vergisst,
Suchet treulich das Verirrte,
Dass es nicht verderben kann:
Jesus nimmt die Sünder an.

iv Kommet alle, kommet her,
Kommet, ihr betrübten Sünder:
Jesus ruft euch, und er
Macht aus Sündern Gotteskinder;
Glaubets doch und denket dran:
Jesus nimmt die Sünder an.

v Ich Betrübter komme hier,
Und bekenne meine Sünden:
Lass, mein Heiland, mich bei dir
Gnade und Vergebung finden,
Dass diess Wort mich trösten kann:
Jesus nimmt die Sünder an.

¹ This stanza was also omitted in Mrs. Bevan's *Hymns of Ter Steegen*, vol. 2 (London, 1897), p.87.

vi Yea, my soul is comforted,
For Thy Blood hath washed away
All my sins, though crimson-red,
And I stand in white array,
Purged from every spot and stain:
Christ receiveth sinful men.

om *st AHB, CW, RCH, Christian P,*
CH(W)

vii Now my heart condemns me not,
Pure before the Law I stand;
He who cleansed me from all spot,
Satisfied its last demand.
Who shall dare accuse me then?
Christ receiveth sinful men.

om *st except CW*

Var: 5 Hear the word of peace again
CW

viii Christ receiveth sinful men —
Even me with all my sin;
Openeth to me Heaven again,
With Him I may enter in.
Death hath no more sting nor pain,
Christ receiveth sinful men.

Var: 3 Purged from every spot and
stain *CW*

4 Heaven with Him I e. *CW*

vi Ich bin ganz getrosten Muths;
Ob die Sünden blutroth wären,
Müssen sie kraft deines Bluts
Sich dennoch in schneeweiss kehren,
Da ich gläubig sprechen kann:
Jesus nimmt die Sünder an.

vii Mein Gewissen darf mich nicht,
Das Gesetz mich nicht verklagen:
Der mich frei und led'ig spricht,
Hat die Schulden abgetragen,
Dass mich nichts verdammen kann:
Jesus nimmt die Sünder an.

viii Jesus nimmt die Sünder an:
Mich hat er auch angenommen
Und den Himmel aufgethan,
Dass ich selig zu ihm kommen
Und auf den Trost sterben kann:
Jesus nimmt die Sünder an.

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The version above is found in *AHB, BCH, CW, Church P, RCH, HF, Christian P, CH(W)*.

NEUMEISTER — BEVAN, adapted

Sacred Songs and Solos, compiled by Ira D. Sankey (London, [1888]), no. 477

[*i*] Sinners Jesus will receive;
Sound this word of grace to all
Who the heav'nly pathway leave,
All who linger, all who fall!

S. His w. *MHB*

Refrain:

Sing it o'er ... and o'er again: ...
Christ receiv ... eth sinful men; ...
Make the mes ... sage clear and plain: ...
Christ receiveth sinful men.

[*iv*] Come: and He will give you rest;
Trust Him: for His word is plain;
He will take the sinfulest:
Christ receiveth sinful men.

t. t. very worst *GH*

- [vii] Now my heart condemns me not, om st SA
Pure before the law I stand;
He who cleansed me from all spot,
Satisfied its last demand.
- [viii] Christ receiveth sinful men,
Even me with all my sin;
Purged from every spot and stain,
Heaven with Him I enter in.

The version above is found in *MHB, SA, GH, HCWS, ChCh, RH; SSS, GB.*

These four stanzas are based respectively on Mrs. Bevan's *i*, 1-4; *iv*, 1, 5, 3, 6; *vii*, 1-4; and *viii*, 1-2, *vi*, 5, *viii*, 4.

HYMNALS CITED (with abbreviations)

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| AHB | <i>Anglican Hymn Book</i> (London, 1965), Evangelical Anglican |
| BCH | <i>The Baptist Church Hymnal</i> . Rev. ed. (London, 1933) |
| ChCh | <i>The Christian Hymnary for Use of Churches of Christ</i> . Rev. (Birmingham, 1938) |
| 230 CH(W) | <i>Christian Hymns</i> (Worthing, 1977) Evangelical Movement of Wales |
| Christian P | <i>Christian Praise</i> (London, 1957) IVF, now UCCF |
| CW | <i>Christian Worship</i> (Exeter, 1976) Open Brethren |
| Church P | <i>Church Praise</i> . Rev. ed. (London, 1907) English Presbyterian |
| GB | <i>Golden Bells: Hymns for Young People</i> (London, [1926]) Scripture Union |
| GH | <i>Grace Hymns</i> . 2nd words ed. (London, 1978) Reformed Baptist |
| HCWS | <i>Hymns for Christian Worship and Service</i> (London, 1920) Open Brethren |
| HF | <i>Hymns of Faith</i> (London, 1964) Scripture Union |
| NHB | <i>The Methodist Hymn-Book</i> (London, 1933) |
| RCH | <i>The [Revised] Church Hymnary</i> (London, 1927) Presbyterian |
| RH | <i>Redemption Hymnal</i> (Eastbourne, 1951) Pentecostal |
| SSS | <i>Sacred Songs & Solos</i> . Rev. and enlarged (London, [1903]) Sankey |
| SA | <i>The Song Book of the Salvation Army</i> (London, 1955) |