

### 3. Figures of speech, sound and thought and rhetorical figures

Like poets and prose writers, hymn writers use these devices to give vividness and emphasis in their work. Some of the most common types are alliteration, metaphor, personification, paradox, rhetorical question and simile. There are examples of all of them in well known hymns.

a. Alliteration. (a figure of sound) This is the use of words beginning with the same letter often to create a specific effect in sound: for instance “Summer suns” which opens no. 99. A good example of the creative way alliteration can be used is in verse 4 of 105. In the last two lines of this verse the hymn writer Isaac Watts contrasts the “sharpest smart” that Christ suffered with the “purchased pleasures” enjoyed by the believer.

b. Simile. (a figure of thought) A simile is a comparison. The writer sheds light on his subject by comparing it to something else, usually using the words “like” or “as” Here are some examples from hymns which are all to do with water:

“Time like an ever rolling stream” (92)

Time is compared to a stream because both are always moving onwards.

“He [the man who loves God’s precepts] is like a tree well planted by the flowing river’s side” (624). This simile comes from the Book of Psalms itself. The man is like the tree because in times of difficulty he has his needs provided just as the tree has water provided in a drought because of its position on the riverside.

“Like a river glorious is God’s perfect peace” (652). This time it is God’s peace which is compared to a river because it rolls on and is unstoppable like a broad tranquil river.

c. Metaphor. (a figure of thought) This is a kind of compressed simile where the comparison is made without the use of “like” or “as” but by simply saying that one thing *is* another even though in reality it is not. Here are some examples: “We are his flock” (1) “A safe stronghold our God is still” (360) “Jesus vouchsafes to be my tower” 591.

d. Personification. (a figure of thought) This figure of speech is a kind of metaphor in which something which is *not* a person is described as if it *was* a person, for example “Death cannot keep his prey” (235).

e. Antithesis. (a rhetorical figure) This is the balancing or contrasting of two ideas,

In all my pain and misery  
Be thou my health and life. (704)

is a good example.

f. Paradox. (a rhetorical figure) A paradox is a statement which seems at first to contradict itself such as: “When I am weak then I am strong” (790).

g. Rhetorical question. (a rhetorical figure) Rhetorical questions are common in hymns. They are questions asked for effect: an answer is not required. “What have we to fear?” (864) “What but thy grace can foil the tempter’s power?” Who like thyself my guide and stay can be?” (808) “The master praises: what are men?” (774) are typical examples.