

Psalm Singing in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland and Australia

History

The Reformation in Europe instigated by Luther, included not only a reformation of doctrine but also of worship. The Church of Rome conducted worship in a language unintelligible to most people so that congregational participation was minimal. Luther, being very musical himself, set about producing material for the people to sing. He used the Psalms as well as New Testament (NT) material for words. Some of this German material found its way to Scotland in the form of the book commonly known as *The Gude and Godlie Ballatis* – also known as the Dundee Psalms or Wedderburn Psalms (1542-1546). Millar (p5) says that next to the Bible this book did more than any other to further the Reformation in Scotland. The songs, which included 22 Psalms, were very popular in homes but were not sung in public worship.

John Knox fled to the Continent along with many Puritans during the rule of 'bloody' Mary in England (1553-58). Many of these exiles were familiar with the Psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins published from 1549-1554 in England. This collection included 44 metrical Psalms and was very popular during the rule of Edward (Leaver, p326). Knox was forced to leave Frankfurt and went to Geneva in 1554. In 1556 the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter, with revision and additions by Whittingham to total 51 metrical Psalms, was published in Geneva. This Anglo-Genevan Psalter was checked against the Hebrew original because Calvin's ideal was a metrical Psalmody in which the Biblical text was given priority over poetic performance. Knox, like Calvin, held the view that nothing but what was Biblical could be used in public worship. Singing was primarily from the Psalter since Calvin believed that 'we shall not find better or more appropriate songs to this end than the Psalms of David, inspired by the Holy Spirit' (Ward, p29). Calvin did not permit instrumental music in public worship.

The first Scottish Psalter (1564)

When Knox returned to Scotland in 1560 he took with him the prayer book called *The Order of Geneva*. This included a section of 'one and fiftie Psalms of David, in English metre, whereof 37 were made by Thomas Sternhold, and the rest by others, conferred with the Hebrew, and in certain places corrected as the text and sense of the prophets required' (Millar, p27). The first General Assembly (GA) in Scotland in 1560 recognised this Order of Geneva. This became the Book of Common Order in Scotland. The GA arranged for a revision and completion of the Psalter. The Psalms in this Book of Common Order included 87 from the last revision of the Anglo-Genevan Psalter of 1560 and the remainder from the English Psalter of 1562 (Leaver, p331). The completed Psalter was published in 1564 with the approval of the GA and other Psalters were banned. The principle aim in this Psalter was to maintain a correct translation of the Hebrew text. There were no appended 'Spiritual songs' as found in the English Psalter of 1562. There were 105 tunes and the people were encouraged to sing.

Many editions were subsequently printed; with pressure from Episcopalians, doxologies and other songs (Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments) were introduced without authorization of the GA, until 1650 when a new translation was produced.

Scottish Psalter of 1635

This Psalter represents the high water mark of the Psalmody in the Reformation in Scotland according to Millar (p63), probably because of the music attached. Yet it did not have the approval of the Church and did not have great acceptance. It had 14 songs in addition to the Psalms, including it seems an uninspired Spiritual Song.

The second Scottish Psalter of 1650

The *Old version* of 1564 had fallen into disuse by 1650 (Millar, p80). Psalm singing was in a very bad way in Scotland and in the cities had virtually ceased. These were troubled times as King James was trying to force his version of the Psalms upon Scotland. Then Charles I published his translation in 1631 and tried to force this on the people. The Assembly and presbyteries did not act upon the Royal orders. In 1638 The National Covenant was signed and the free GA revoked all Episcopalian systems and material including the Royal Psalter, in Scotland.

Meanwhile the *Bay Psalm Book* was published by the Puritans in New England in 1640, 'the whole book of Psalms faithfully translated into English metre'. Again concern for literal accuracy was paramount in this translation. This Psalter found its way to Scotland and significant portions were incorporated into the new 1650 Psalter.

In 1643 the Long Parliament in England convened the 'Westminster Assembly of Divines'. The Church in Scotland sent commissioners as part of the Solemn League and Covenant (1643). This agreement included, among other things, the preservation of reformed worship in Scotland. The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) drawn up by this Assembly included under Chapter 21 on *Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day* an instruction for the 'singing of psalms with grace in the heart' as part of public worship. . The Assembly went further and produced a new metrical Psalter. In this they 'kept punctually to the original text', omitting the doxology in the process, as something 'whereupon the popish and prelatial party did so much dote' (cited in Cameron, p104). Francis Rous, an English Puritan, had prepared a version of the Psalms in 1638, which was presented to the Assembly for consideration. The Scottish Commissioners were very cautious and wanted it checked against the Hebrew and sent to Scotland for examination. After much revision both in Scotland and at Westminster a final version was produced in 1645- what should be called the Westminster Version (Millar, p94).

In Scotland the GA submitted the Westminster Version for further revisions. Two years and four months later a complete Psalter was approved for public use with the words 'Hereby authorizing the same to be the only Paraphrase of the Psalmes of David to be sung in the Kirk of Scotland: and discharging the old Paraphrase and any other than this new Paraphrase to be made use of in any congregation of family after the first day of May in the year 1650' (Millar, p99). It was 'diligently compared with the original text' and included only the Psalms of David. This is the version which adheres more closely with Scripture than any other, and which has been the authorized metrical Psalter of the Church of Scotland for over three hundred years.

The Directory for Public Worship, also produced by the Westminster Assembly, recommends that 'the prayer following the Sermon having ended, let a psalm be sung, if with conveniency it may be done'. The Assembly operated on the principle that what was not expressly sanctioned in Scripture was forbidden in public worship- the Regulative Principle. 'Thus the use in public worship of the Doxology, the Creed and the ten Commandments was laid aside' (Donaldson, p54). The WCF does not refer to instrumental music since organs were removed from all churches in England in 1644 and Scotland prior to this (Ward, p38). The practice of 'lining out' was recommended by the Westminster Assembly, although it was not needed among the more literate population of Scotland. Indeed it may have contributed to the subsequent demise of Psalm singing in Scotland as it made 'agreeable musical standards impossible' (Donaldson, p53).

The 1650 Psalter was published without any tunes and it was not until 1666 that twelve tunes in common metre were made available, and these came to constitute a fixed canon. This was more the result of troubled political times than an oversight or deliberate policy. Charles II was proclaimed king in the same year as the Psalter was published. However Cromwell's army marched into Scotland and occupied it for nine years. Church worship was greatly disrupted. Singing of Psalms ceased in many places. Millar (p110) decries the decline in music which followed this 'invasion from south of the border by a pestilent type of Puritanism, inconceivably arrogant and intolerant, which in the name of a supposedly superior piety, sought to cast discredit on every form of art used in association with worship'.

When the Monarchy was restored in 1660 the Episcopalians again brought pressure to have the Doxology and other devices introduced into worship services. Episcopal clergy 'concluded their prayers with the Lords prayer, and their singing with the doxology, both which zealots of the other side decried as superstitious and formal' (Skinner cited in Cameron, p104). An account from 1691 relates that Episcopalian and Presbyterian worship were much the same in their singing of Psalms except, that the Presbyterian refused to conclude with the doxology (Donaldson, p62).

In 1688 when James II surrendered the throne, the pressure from Episcopalians was relieved. The GA of 1707 brought about union, and restoration of Presbyterianism. This GA passed an *Act Against Innovations in the Worship of God*. Nevertheless, it took a long time for Psalm singing to recover. Millar cites the obstacles to reform as firstly the Precentors who were largely untrained and incompetent (he preferred choirs) and the people themselves who in true Scottish fashion resisted any change and tenaciously hung onto their twelve tunes for a century! Meanwhile, south of the border Isaac Watts published in 1707 his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* including a number of metrical Psalms which he tried to Christianise. He was not concerned for 'conferring with the Hebrew' but with making them Christian.

There was an attempt to introduce Scriptural songs other than the Psalms at the GA in 1647. Zachary Boyd was asked to 'translate the other scriptural songs' but for unknown reasons his work was never approved. In 1745 metrical versions of Scripture other than Psalms were published but not accepted by the GA. In 1751 a book of 45 paraphrases was approved for private use- it was revised and expanded using uninspired hymns in 1781 as *The Paraphrases*. These had limited use, as they were not really authorized for public worship (Ward, p48). In 1807 another attempt to extend the materials of praise was made by the GA. It appears there was some confusion in the committee appointed by the GA so that it was not until 1820 that portions of Scripture and two doxologies were presented- and rejected by the GA (Millar, p214). Millar (p215) states that in 1824 yet another attempt was made by Dr Baird, enlisting the help of 'every living poet' to submit paraphrases of Scripture- most were sensible enough to decline the request. Millar repeatedly refers to the pressure to extend materials for praise but clearly the GA did not feel such pressure; rather there appears to have been a reluctance to add to the 1650 Psalter for public worship.

Until the middle of the 19th century, therefore, nothing beyond the Psalms of David were authorised for public worship in the Church of Scotland. Indeed there was no attempt to use extra-Scriptural material for musical compositions. How and when did uninspired hymns enter the Church of Scotland? The Relief Church, a small branch sympathetic to the Calvinistic Methodists (McLeod, p230), published a hymnbook in 1794. The Secession church united with the Relief church to form the United Presbyterian Church in 1847 and another hymnbook was published in 1851. The compilers had to draw most of their material from English hymn writers such as Watts and Wesley. Within the established Church of Scotland the *Scottish Hymnal* was published in 1870. The Free Church initially opposed the introduction of hymns as a departure from the WCF. Indeed a decline in Calvinistic orthodoxy was reflected in the increasing use of hymns. However the Free Church also produced a hymnbook in 1872. In 1898 a hymnbook common to the Church of Scotland, United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church was adopted, including the 1650 Psalter in the front. This was revised in 1928 but retained the same format until 1973 when revision removed the Psalter as a distinct unit (Ward, p48).

The Free Church of Scotland, which was formed at the Disruption in 1843 and inherited the constitution of the Church of Scotland, continued with metrical Psalms in the main. The 1781 Paraphrases, previously allowed restricted 'discretionary' use, were revised, but the issue was never settled by the GA of the Free Church (Ward, p50). At another split in 1900 the minority that remained in the Free Church later united with the Free Presbyterian Church. In 1905 this GA passed an Act allowing only inspired Psalms and songs to the exclusion of uninspired hymns.

In Australia the PCA formed in 1900 followed the practice of the Church of Scotland in adopting the hymnbook of 1898 and currently use a hymnbook having no separate Psalter. The PCEA followed the Free Church of Scotland in allowing only Psalms and inspired Scripture songs. Since 1953 only metrical Psalms are authorised for public worship in the PCEA.

Value of Psalm singing and its future

The historic position of the Reformed church in Scotland with regard to praise in public worship is undoubtedly exclusive Psalmody. The Regulative Principle enunciated by the Genevan reformers and maintained at the Westminster Assembly is certainly disregarded in adopting songs composed by uninspired man. A quick glance at any modern hymnbook will reveal a predominance of compositions from the 18th and 19th centuries. It is interesting that John Newton composed a hymn for each time he preached. Hymn singing is therefore a relatively recent practice in the Reformed church and this brief survey shows that it was accepted with great reluctance by the Church of Scotland. Theologically it reveals a lack of appreciation of the OT, and also of the primary Reformation doctrine declaring the Word of God as the only rule of faith and life.

There is a resurgence of interest in singing the Psalms according to recent American authors. Leaver (p345) writes that 'for over 100 years ... psalmody was replaced by the younger and stronger tradition ... of hymnody. However in the latter part of the 20th century there has been something of a revival in writing new metrical versions of the psalms'. Similarly Old (p55) can see a 'great benefit in an attempt to recover psalm prayer for our day'. The depth of theology encountered in the Psalms will rarely be found in uninspired writings. Particularly in the present day, the restricted focus of choruses sung in many churches is beginning to be questioned by believers desiring to grow in their faith. It seems that no matter what subject one wishes to pursue there is a Psalm which has some relevant teaching. It must not be overlooked that the book of Psalms is the most quoted OT book by NT writers. If the first Christians found this book full of references to Christ and were content to continue singing the Psalms in praise to God, then the church today would do well to look again at the Psalms. It is well to remember of course, that it is only the words of Hebrew Scripture that are inspired and that modern translations and new tunes could be used to make the Psalms more meaningful in the 21st century.

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