

Young People's Forum (III.10)

I mentioned in the last forum article that there was a vast amount of classical religious music available, which the Christian who wants to live an antithetical life can and may enjoy. But in this article I want to make my case for singing the Psalms in the divine worship services. I have long defended this proposition, and I still believe it is true today.

First of all, I have objections to singing hymns in the worship services. Many years ago I was put on a study committee appointed by Synod to study the matter of singing other songs than our Psalter in the worship services. The Synod was interested in examining the question whether singing other **versifications of other parts of Scripture** was to be approved. The question was not, whether to introduce into the worship hymns that were not versifications of Scripture, but what are sometimes called "free hymns: that is, hymns that are not versifications of specific texts, but rather write about various doctrines or themes in Scripture.

We spent a great deal of time in our study and accumulated reams of papers that were studies of the "hymn question" as it arose over and over again in the history of the Reformed Churches. The most important thing we discovered in all this study was that every time a church, in whatever land it was found, introduced free hymns into the worship, it soon departed from the truth. We asked ourselves the question why this was. The answer we came up with was that, although the church was very particular about what hymns were sung, soon, because of the clamor of the people, more and more hymns were introduced, many of which were not Reformed at all. As one church historian put it: "Arminianism sang its way into the church." So we advised Synod not to open the door to any kind of hymns, for fear that introducing any hymn into the church would lead the church away from the Psalms altogether. The Synod agreed.

I freely admit that there are good hymns. To name only a few, I could mention "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "My God, How wonderful Thou Art," "The Church's One Foundation," and others. However, I do have objections against many hymns that ought not to be sung in the church. These objections are the following.

First, the origin of some hymns, which may seem doctrinally sound, are written by wicked people. The hymn, for example, "Faith of Our Fathers" was written by a French Roman Catholic who was trying to persuade the people of France to stay Roman Catholic while the stench of the burning bodies of Protestant martyrs filled the air. I think the words fit Protestant martyrs and people of God very well, but I keep smelling this awful smell every time I sing it.

Second, many hymns are outright heresy. My wife and I were talking about a hymn we often sang in our Christian school days – although we went to different schools. The first verse goes like this: "Almost persuaded, now to believe; almost persuaded, Christ to receive. Hear now some soul to say, 'Go, Spirit, go thy way.' Some more convenient day, on thee I'll call." What a wretched song that was! I still am ashamed to think that we used to sing it with gusto. The same thing is true of many, many hymns. "Jesus Is Tenderly Calling Thee Home," "Throw Out the Lifeline Line," "Brighten the Corner Where you are," "Life is Like a Mountain Railway," "I Come to the

Garden Alone,” and many others. You probably do not have many of these songs here, but you may very well have similar ones.

Third, many hymns, especially more modern ones, are simple ditties which have no content of significance and no meaning worth our effort. Paul tells both in Colossians and in Ephesians, to sing with understanding and being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18-20, Col 3:16, 17). They are popular because they have appealing music, catchy tunes and rhythms, and simple lyrics that require no effort on our part to know what they mean.

Fourth, the music is frequently not in keeping with the solemnity of worship. Worship is entering the presence of the infinitely holy God before whom the cherubims cover their faces with their wings and cry all the day, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.” Imagine that while the angels are covering their faces in holy adoration, we come bouncing, dancing and swaying into his presence with silly little ditties on our lips.

Fifth, so many of the hymns are not necessarily heretical, but they are not God-centered.

They may even be, in a certain sense, Christ-centered, but they lead us to Christ only. They are wrongly Christ-centered, for we go to Christ as the way to God. We must go to Christ, but we may not stay there; we must go through Christ to God. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” Christ tells us. An example might be the well-known hymn, “Rock of Ages.” I like that hymn. It was written by a sound Calvinist, though Baptist. I was in his church in Southern England and stood in his pulpit. His name was Augustus Toplady. John Wesley hated him and slandered him because he was a staunch Calvinist and Wesley was thoroughly Arminian who denied all that Calvinism stood for. John Wesley’s brother, Charles, as Arminian as John, wrote many hymns that are still sung today.

I like to sing “Rock of Ages,” and can enjoy singing it. But if you ask me whether it is helpful in worship on the Lord’s Day, then I know that I need more, for I may not stop at the “Rock of Ages,” but must go on to the Rock that is higher than I (Psalm 61:2, where the Hebrew has, “Lead me to the rock that is too high for me.”)

Some of you might want to say, “Oh, these are little things. Don’t be so picky. You get all bent out of shape over little things that make no difference. And now you want us to do the same.” Well, I’m not so sure about that. It seems to be that little things are very important when we are talking about our presence in God’s dwelling place. If it is true that we are, as Isaiah says, less than a speck of dust in the scales, or a drop of water on the bottom lip of a bucket, and God is so great that heaven and earth cannot contain him --; if it is true that we are dreadfully wicked sinners in the presence of a holy God whose holiness is such a bright light that even angels cannot look at it --; if to talk with God is more of a miracle than if a small spider in the corner of the room where I am sitting would talk with me --; if I would never dare to enter the presence of the queen of England with holes in my trousers, sandals on my feet, hair uncombed, a rag for a shirt, unshaven and unwashed, frolicking and prancing around whistling, “Roll Out the Barrel, and We’ll Have a Barrel of fun” a song sung in beer halls --; if all these things are true, then it seems to me we are obligated to give some thought to how we come into God’s presence on the Lord’s Day and not call our

appearance, our conduct and how we act and talk, little things as of no account and of o importance.

God has given us a book filled with songs he inspired by his Holy Spirit. It would seem to me that we are safest and most pleasing to God when we use this book.

But there are positive reason also why God's book of songs seems to me to be the best.

I'll wait with that until next time.
With love, the Lord,

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