

## **A DIFFERENT SCHOOL OF THOUGHT**

It is approximately a year ago that the matter of the music sung and heard in our Christian schools, particularly our local high-school, became the subject of protracted discussion and debate. Many parents expressed their concern about the general direction of our schools, and specifically their uneasiness with regard to the choice of music for the morning devotions and the school assemblies. There was considerable trepidation about the use of so called "Christian" rock or Contemporary Christian Music, and "Praise and Worship" music. The propriety and appropriateness of employing musical instruments such as electric guitars and drums was questioned. There was apprehension about the ease with which the psalms and hymns in our Book of Praise were put aside to accommodate the personal preferences and tastes of the students and the staff.

If we are willing to overlook the fact that these disturbing developments were in reality the consequence of a lack of thought, we could say that we encountered here a distinctively different school of thought. We are confronted with a sentiment that suggests that "change must be welcomed and what is old must be discarded." Out with the old, and in with the new. "The Reformed practices and traditions of the past are put aside to make way for what is acceptable and popular in the present. The heritage of hundreds of years is replaced with that which is current and common: that which finds its justification only in its newness." (Reformed Polemics, April 15/95) Although this school of thought extends far beyond what we encounter in our Reformed schools, yet, as history has taught us, it seems to find its most fertile soil in our institutions of learning. What comes to mind is the devastating and destructive effects of the AACS philosophy in both the churches and schools of the Christian Reformed Churches in the 1950's and 60's.

On the basis of discussions with board members, teachers, and other members of our school community, and also from the opinions expressed in the public press, it became obvious that there was no longer a clear consensus regarding the music we should sing or perform during the school assemblies and morning devotions held at our high school. It became evident that there was widespread disagreement not only on matters of music in general, but also a pronounced difference of opinion as to what the specific issues were. The issue was not first and foremost about music in general, but music sung and performed at "school assemblies and morning devotions." It is of course difficult, or perhaps impossible, to talk about music that is suitable for our school assemblies and morning devotions without in some way or another referring to or discussing music in general. Yet, we were dealing specifically with music suitable for school assemblies and morning devotions.

The issue was therefore not that the only suitable music for any occurrence or all occasions is the music of the Psalms and Hymns as found in the Book of Praise. The real issue or point was that, as a rule, the music most eminently suited for school assemblies and morning devotions are the Psalms and Hymns in the Book of Praise. We sing these Psalms and Hymns in our worship services in the church, and hopefully also in our family devotions in our homes. Therefore we should, as a rule, also sing these same Psalms and Hymns in the assemblies and morning devotions held at our schools.

In speaking about the role of the school as it relates to the family, the triangle (or triad) of church, home, and school is frequently mentioned. It is often noted that the school must be an extension of our community, and therefore should reflect and promote the ideals and expectations of its membership. We must, of course, be careful that we do not propagate the notion that the school board and staff must of necessity and under all circumstances do whatever the parents (or students) want and expect. Nevertheless, as parents, church members, and school society members, we belong to a community for whom the word "Reformed" has a special meaning; a community where there should be high regard for our Reformed traditions, and true appreciation of our Reformed heritage. We therefore have ample reason to expect that our school, also in its choice of music for the school assemblies and morning devotions, will be "an extension of our (Reformed) community,...and reflect and promote the ideals and expectations of its membership."

Those "ideals and expectations" with regard to the music to be used in our assemblies and morning devotions are clearly articulated in article 55 of our Church Order. We have agreed that "in the worship services the Psalms will be sung in the rhyming adopted by general synod and the Hymns approved by general synod." As a Reformed community the existing and accepted standard or norm for the singing of our songs of praise and adoration to our God is the Psalms and Hymns as found in our Book of Praise. That is, and should continue to be our standard or norm. The interim statement of our high school board that "all songs sung shall be from the Book of Praise" confirms and reiterates that standard or norm.

The Book of Praise represents and preserves a Psalmbook that is more than four hundred years old. Its tunes are still sung by Reformed believers all over the world. It took us, as Canadian Reformed churches, a quarter of a century to get it across the ocean. The Genevan Psalter is not a Canadian Reformed "specialty" or peculiarity, it is the song book of the Reformed Reformation. It is part of our rich and remarkable heritage. It is ironical that while there is a renewed interest in our English language Genevan Psalter among many non-Reformed churches or denominations, we are again called upon to defend the Reformed Psalter to Reformed believers.

The Psalms and Hymns in our Book of Praise, (our "Genevan Psalter") can be preserved only by the full cooperation of home, school and church. In many cases we have already lost the home. There are indications that we may also be losing the school. Many people in our Reformed community continue to question the need of upholding the Reformed tradition of singing the Psalms and Hymns from our Genevan Psalter. Some people would just as soon drop them! If that is also our sentiment, then a few questions are in order. What other Reformed traditions are we willing to drop? The second worship service? Or the Catechism preaching? Or maybe, the Church Order? Or perhaps, our doctrinal standards or Reformed confessions and creeds?

We are in our present predicament because we so easily give up our rich heritage of psalmody. In *The Songs of the Church*, H. David Schuringa writes: "In the preface to the Genevan Psalter Calvin hints as to where one can find the steps of spiritual renewal and reformation when it comes to singing...we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose of praising God, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him."

When we abandon our rich heritage of psalmody we have, perhaps, already taken the first step in giving up the Word of God. "It is the loss of the Word of God, our greatest treasure, which will bring about impoverishment...and death. We live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. The Psalms are God's Word... It is sad to note that churches which give up singing the Psalms exclusively, generally give up singing the Psalms entirely." (Dr. Richard L. Ganz, Letter to the Editor, Chr. Renewal, March 20, 1995)

Dr. C. vander Waal, in *The Covenant Gospel*, notes that the singing of the Psalms has decreased in the course of the centuries. In the Reformed Churches throughout the world, a similar development can be perceived. He then writes: "No one should think that these things have nothing to do with the gospel and that we are only speaking of traditions. For the gospel is most certainly at stake here.

Aversion to the Psalms is rooted in an aversion to petitions for the administration of covenant vengeance that is evident in them. Hymns have been deliberately introduced to compete with the Psalms and not to reinforce their message. In this there lies a definite difference with the early Christian church. Because one has been caught up with the idea that the New Testament preaches a God of love in contrast to the harshness of the Old Testament, one is shocked at the psalms of vengeance as a remnant of Judaism. In this way it has been suggested in the liturgy that the new covenant knows no covenant vengeance. The false prophecy, which preaches 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace (Jer. 6:14; 8:11), here had a golden opportunity. False prophecy brings a false gospel with it.

We have to realize that the social gospel with its humanistic approach has been greatly promoted by the radical purge in the selection of Psalms or the total evacuation of Psalms in the liturgy. However, it must be stated emphatically that the New Testament adopts the whole of the Psalter, including the psalms of vengeance... Anyone who discriminates against the Psalms, in actual fact attacks God's kingship. He also attacks the gospel, because the gospel is the gospel of the kingship of God, who will not be mocked."

The real issue as to what music is truly suitable for our school assemblies and morning devotions can be summed up in the pertinent question, "Is our high school truly an extension of our Reformed community, or is it already an institution which has its own persona, its own agenda?" As we noted earlier, a year has already gone by since the matter of the music sung and heard and heard in our Christian schools first became the subject of discussion and debate. We may thankfully note that in response to the concerns expressed by many of the parents, the school board has taken steps to prevent a reoccurrence of the events of a year ago.

Nevertheless it must be stated that the impetus for return to our rich heritage of psalmody or our Book of Praise was not the consequence of a clear consensus on this matter. There remains, not only in our schools, but throughout our Reformed community, a different school of thought. Rev. P. DeJong writes that "this rejection of whatever is old results from the basic assumption that change is good and must be welcomed and that what is old must be discarded - the evolutionary assumption that is characteristic of the older liberalism." (Some Questions and Answers About the AACCS) Evidently this different school of thought is not new, definitely not scriptural, and certainly not a viable option for those who want to regain, maintain, and preserve their rich Reformed

heritage. Let us therefore remain vigilant and alert, for there is far more at stake than merely a matter of music.

May God give, to us and our children that the powerful melodies of our Reformed psalter may continue to fill our churches, our schools, our homes and our hearts.

Ron Dykstra

## **FAITH EXPERIENCE**

### **Stimulation Necessary?**

In our churches there is much to do about the subject of Faith Experience. A journalist, a minister, and a 'regular' church member, a sister in the congregation, have been to America and have come home with enthusiastic stories. It had been fantastic. The journalist had to write about it - in the paper - in a special article. They did not visit our brothers and sisters in Denver. But outside of the circle of those brothers and sisters, they found something marvelous.

They came across something special: faith experience. They met it in the preaching, in ministers and their hearers. Back in the Netherlands this has consequences. Congresses and special evenings have been organized so that the visitors to America can tell about their experiences. And many listen to them. There are enthusiastic reactions!

Haven't we been extremely lacking in 'faith experience'? For many years hasn't there been far too much 'knowledge' and not enough 'heart'? We often speak of doctrine but not about life style...We did things: we liberated, we established our own organizations, we began our own schools, we started our own newspaper (yes, even that), etc., etc.; But we rarely or ever spoke about our faith. What the Lord really means for you, could hardly be explained to our children. This is the image that is painted of the older generation. An awakening must take place. And it is coming about now, by means of these visitors to America - and their reports - and their publications - and their meetings.

### **Is That It?**

This brings us to a question that can not remain unasked: Is this what we need? Must it come from America? Wasn't it available here? Is it true that there was little or no discussion about faith experience? Is the image that is painted of the older generation and that which is forced on the younger generation accurate? For that is how it appears. The younger generation is told that this is how it has been and changes are necessary. The lack of faith experience must be corrected.

Isn't it obvious that by presenting such a picture one does a great injustice to parents and grandparents? In this manner one dirties his own nest. The parents and grandparents who experienced the Liberation are not with us anymore. They have fallen away recently or a longer time ago. They can not defend themselves anymore. But surely those that are still with us suffer from such depictions of an assumed lack of faith experience.

### **What really is Faith Experience?**

Indeed, what really is faith experience? Is it that you can express what the Lord has meant and means for you? Is it that you are able to speak about what God is for you? Is it that you experience Him in your life, that you feel Him in your being?

What exactly does the Lord ask of us? Well: 'but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8). The Lord does not ask for every possible and impossible sacrifice, but on the contrary (that and only that: "but to do justice...") only that. Do justice to the Lord and your neighbour. Pursue the honour of the Lord and that of your neighbour. Remain faithful to the Lord and your neighbour. Deal with Him and them in a way that responds to God's Word and law; to the covenant of the Lord, and to its stipulations. Your nearest neighbours after your wife or husband, are your parents, your children, and your brothers and sisters in the church. Deal righteously with them.

To all those who place trust in you, and further, all those who you meet in life - deal righteously with them. For all these are your neighbours. That's what the Lord asks of you. When you do that you live faithfully. Then you experience your faith. Not when you make wrong caricatures of such people, and when your error is explained you silence those who point it out, but rather when you quickly act to restore your neighbour's honor. That is what it means to do right and to love trustworthiness. That is faith experience. That's what it is to walk humbly with God.

### **Walking Humbly With God**

That walking with God is really nothing else but walking in obedience to His Word, bowing before it, bowing deeply. It is the acceptance of the Gospel and living out of it. It is living in complete trust that God will confirm His Word and fulfill His promises. As long as we only depend on that Word and those promises and set our hearts toward them.

According to Gen. 17:1 the Lord once told Abram: "...walk before Me and be blameless." Or, as Prof. B. Holwerda translated: "your walk before me ought to be complete, unbroken." That is to say: "you must be resolute and consequent to live before Me." You must depend on My Word and on the positive expectation of the fulfillment of My promises. And when he does that, even sacrificing his son Isaac to the Lord (Gen.22; Heb.11), then the Lord tells him: "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice" (Gen.22:16-18). He trusted the Word of God so strongly, he expected the fulfillment of his promises so sincerely that "he considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Heb.11:19). Like Abraham, Enoch (Gen.5:24) and Noah (Gen.6:9) also walked with God. Their life was based on a trust in and an expectation of the Lord. They depended upon His word and His promises. That is how they experienced their faith. They sought to be in agreement with His will. They sought to will what He appeared to want by the way in which He led their lives. Abraham experienced his faith when, called by the Lord, he left his country, his homeland and his father's house to go up to the land that the Lord showed him (Gen.12:1) and when he offered his son Isaac at the Lord's command, all without objection. With Noah this was the case when he built the ark amidst all the taunts of his

neighbours (Gen.6; 2 Peter 2:5). That was faith experience. That's also what it was when David confessed his great sin of adultery and murder by putting his trust in the Lord, by depending on His Word and promises (Psalms 32 and 51). And that's what it was when Peter, having denied the Lord, wept bitterly (Matt.26:75; Mark 14:72; Luke 22:62).

### Agreement

One experiences his faith when he is in agreement with the will of the Lord. When he admits and confesses that he cannot live without Him. Not being able to live without the Lord Jesus Christ one seeks to enjoy community with Him. One experiences his faith when he believes in the Lord as the Redeemer or his life; and when he lives out of that faith: following the Saviour as his Lord. That is also how the older generation experienced their faith when they liberated and followed the consequences to which that led. They did not do that because they 'enjoyed' it so much or because of the need to do something, but they did it because the Lord called them to do it. They did it in faithful trust upon His faithful expectation. That Liberation was no 'picnic' and what followed was even less so. But that too was **faith experience**.

In submission to the Lord follow that road that you yourself may not want to follow at all. For sometimes it will cost you the friendship of your friends or the love of your family. It has cost some their fiancée, to others it even brought a breakup of their family, to still others it brought an extensive drop in the good will of their business. But they did it in the faith conviction that that was the path the Lord was showing them.

Faith experience is not the ability to speak much about all your experiences, but a **humble walking with the Lord**. It is a belief in what He, in and through His Son, has done and still does for you, and in utter thankfulness for it to do His will. Follow the path that He directs, even when it goes against flesh and blood.

### Character

And then there is still the (differences in) character. We have had the privilege to work in different provinces as a minister of the Word. Then you certainly notice differences in characters of the people. There are those who have a very deep faith, their faith experiences are deeply rooted, but have great difficulty in speaking about them. That has to be overlooked. One must look at there **lifestyle**. That is the crucial question. When a believing loved one passes away we don't sit by expectantly waiting for a last word, do we? But then we rather (rightly) say: "It is a matter of his, or her, faith expression; of his, or her life as a child of God. From that it is clear that he or she is a child of the Lord".

### From Above

Faith experience: do we have to learn about it from the West or from the East; from the North or from the South; from America or from China, from Russia or Chile, etc? Of course not! Faith experience must only be learned from above, from the Spirit and the Word. We must learn it from the Sunday church services, from the preaching of the holy gospel, from the living preaching of the Word.

The Scriptures teach us to believe and to experience our faith. The Lord teaches it to us by means of the Scriptures when He sees to it that it is exegeted for us, explained to us, preached to us, and

applied for us. And are there complaints about the preaching? Let us daily compare Scripture to see if the things we are told in the preaching are truly so. Just as the Jews at Beroea did with the preaching of people no less than Paul and Silas (Acts 17:11). In the mean time they accepted the preaching “with all eagerness”. Are there proper complaints about the preaching? See the minister, and ‘his’ consistory. For that’s what it’s all about - the pure preaching of the living Word. The preacher is a messenger. He only has to pass on the Word. That Word - unabridged and unaltered. For it is the Word that must do it, and it does!

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