

Free Church of Scotland Position on Worship

Written by Dr Rowland S. Ward

Saturday, 26 March 2011 17:48 - Last Updated Wednesday, 14 August 2013 08:40

FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND POSITION ON WORSHIP

Rowland S Ward

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I confess very happily that I am an inclusive Presbyterian: I've very ready, despite my own prejudices, to live in the same church with office-bearers who have different viewpoints on many issues that are not decided by our Confession of Faith. I'm also very happy to have close fellowship with churches like the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the USA that do not have the same form of worship as ourselves, but do cling loyally to the Reformed Faith. Still, I'm very sorry to see that the Free Church of Scotland on 19 November voted 98-84 to change its position on unaccompanied singing of inspired material in public worship.

The matter of the propriety of limiting sung praise in public worship to inspired material without musical accompaniment has been under discussion in the Free Church for several years. Of course our sister is entitled to make its own decisions in accordance with its constitution. Still, it's the way the matter has been raised and dealt with that is of particular concern.

As well as rescinding certain past decisions (1905,1910,1932) – not a bad idea if simply replaced with a simple Declaratory Act as to the meaning of the vows - the Assembly resolved:

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“5. The General Assembly declare that purity of worship requires that every aspect of worship services, including sung praise, be consistent with the Word of God and with the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith approved by previous Assemblies of this Church.

“6. The General Assembly ordain that every service of congregational worship shall include the singing of Psalms.

“7. The General Assembly ordain that, with regard to the sung praise of congregations in worship, each Kirk Session shall have freedom, either to restrict the sung praise to the Psalms, or to include paraphrases of Scripture, and hymns and spiritual songs consistent with the doctrine of the Confession of Faith; that each Kirk Session shall have freedom whether to permit musical accompaniment to the sung praise in worship, or not.

“8. The General Assembly advise that, notwithstanding the foregoing, no Kirk Session should agree to a change in sung praise or musical accompaniment against the wishes of the minister of the congregation, and that a visiting minister, presiding at a service in a congregation where the aforementioned freedom to use uninspired materials of praise and musical instruments has been exercised, may exercise that freedom or not as he sees fit.

“9. The General Assembly ordain that in meetings of Church Courts the use of uninspired materials of praise and of instrumental music will be avoided.

“10. The General Assembly appoint a Special Committee (using consultants as required) to investigate the feasibility and desirability of producing a recommended list of paraphrases of Scripture and hymns and spiritual songs consistent with the Word of God and the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith, and whether the Free Church ought to produce a praise resource supplementary to the Psalter, and to report to the 2011 General Assembly.”

These decisions arise from a plenary Assembly of all ministers and an equal number of elders. Against the advice of the Assembly Clerk, James Maciver, it was claimed that the plenary nature of the Assembly rendered Barrier Act procedure unnecessary. Barrier Act procedure dates from 1697 as a method for regulating the exercise of the lawful power of the church. The relevant part reads:

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“...considering...that it will mightily conduce to the exact obedience of the Acts of Assemblies, that General Assemblies be very deliberate in making of the same, and that the whole Church have a previous knowledge thereof, and their opinion be had therein, and for preventing any sudden alteration or innovation, or other prejudice to the Church, in either doctrine or worship or discipline, or government thereof, now happily established; do, therefore, appoint, enact, and declare, that before any General Assembly of this Church shall pass any Acts, which are to be binding Rules and Constitutions to the Church, the same Acts be first proposed as overtures to the Assembly, and, being by them passed as such, be remitted to the consideration of the several Presbyteries of this Church, and their opinions and consent reported by their commissioners to the next General Assembly following, who may then pass the same in Acts, if the more general opinion of the Church thus had agreed thereunto.”

The proposal passed was not what was recommended by the relevant Assembly Committee (which essentially recommended the *status quo*), but was an amendment not considered by presbyteries beforehand. In the setting of the plenary Assembly a decision might well be taken that was not sufficiently weighed and considered, although a majority of Sessions were known to be opposed to change. I have the very distinct impression that a significant number of commissioners were anxious to avoid another split after the division in 2000, and so accepted the proposal as the best obtainable, but in the setting of Presbytery meetings it might well have been rejected. The decision also might have had something to do with the long-standing lack of a positive and succinct statement on the vows about worship, as well as the rather complicated legislation of the Free Church hitherto which might convey to sensitive consciences the thought that other forms of worship were of necessity to be regarded as sinful.

So the Free Church, by the barest of margins, has enacted new binding laws without Barrier Act procedure, and rescinded a contrary position adopted in 1910, again without the Barrier Act procedure required by the Act of 1736. I don't think this was wise procedure and I'm afraid it may cause trouble. I confess some sympathy with the supporters of the substance of the decision, but their pushing the matter through as they have is disappointing. (I guess as a Church we can't be too critical since we did something similar re our relations with the Free Church in 2005, but I was opposed then to not following Barrier Act procedure.) William Mackay, a former elder in Melbourne, rightly pointed out in debate how inappropriate it was to make this decision so soon after the new Psalter had been produced.

I know that there was frustration that the Free Church worship style seemed a barrier to evangelicals disillusioned with the now so liberal Church of Scotland, but I hardly imagine introducing hymns and musical instruments is really the solution, assuming that it is within the church's constitutional power to do so. If we have a proper balance in our practice, singing the

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psalms is liberating, honours the word, protects the conscience and is truly ecumenical.

The decision will not of itself lead to theological liberalism in the Free Church but when a few high flyers thumb their noses at the vows and garner support from others, with good men caving in for the sake of peace, you have pragmatism operating and ultimately you will get liberalism,

Of course most Free Church congregations will not change from exclusive use of the psalms, but some will. I remain very happy to have close relations with the Free Church, our sister if not our mother, but have no desire to follow in her direction on the worship issue. One very happily supports the superiority of the Psalms of the word of God, and it was pleasing to note at our second Leaders' Training day in Melbourne on 20 November that our two newest ministers in Southern Presbytery (Messrs Bajema and Miranda) spoke so positively of their use in public worship.

Appendix

I add the following comments 26/3/2011

1. For some considerable period certain ministers advocated change. Now these same ministers object that some of those opposed to the decision are publicly indicating their disapproval. This sounds like the pot calling the kettle black! -especially when the ground of opposition is the claim that the decision was not constitutionally valid.

2. It is claimed that singing of psalms and use of instrumental music is not a change requiring Barrier Act procedure.

a. The Barrier Act is not a means of changing the constitution but of regulating lawful changes within the constitution to ensure they are well considered.

b. The recommendation of the Trustees to the Plenary Assembly was that there should be no

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change in worship but some tidying up of legislation. The Presbyteries had been informed by the Chairman of Trustees in a letter dated 30/11/2009

'...If the Plenary Assembly resolve to change the Church's practice on worship then the matter would have to go to Presbyteries under the Barrier Act and come back to another Plenary Assembly for final resolution. The Board will recommend to the May Assembly that it empowers the Plenary Assembly to call another Plenary Assembly to receive the results of the Barrier Act round of Presbyteries and finally give its ruling on the matter. If the initial Plenary affirms the status quo it will of course be unnecessary to call another.'

c. As it turned out a proposal from Rev Alex J. MacDonald was submitted a day or two before the Plenary Assembly and it was accepted by a narrow margin, and was then declared to be a decision equivalent to one passed under the Barrier Act.

3. The decision was not an esoteric one on a point not of general interest to the church, nor was it one about which there was general agreement, - in which case one could argue that the intent of the Barrier Act was either not applicable or met by a decision of a plenary assembly, but it was one on which there was much division of opinion and concerning which it was known that about 70% of Sessions were opposed and thus 'the exact obedience' aimed at by the Barrier Act was not likely to be achieved.

4. It would appear that pressing ahead with change in these circumstances, even supposing it within the constitutional power of the Church, was not prudent but only likely to further division.

5. While one is not forced to use hymns and instrumental music, how one can keep the vow to 'assert, maintain and defend' the worship of the church if one is not satisfied that scripture warrants hymns and instrumental music in public worship is not at all obvious.

6. In March 2011 a Memorial and Protestation appeared in several newspapers circulating in areas where the Free Church of Scotland is represented seeking signatures to a Memorial and Protestation to the Assembly to meet in May 2011 seeking that the decision of the plenary Assembly be recalled. Several former Moderators expressed their agreement with the Memorial although doubtless wishing the situation was not so serious as to require this practice.

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7. Much as one respects many who have supported the change as Christian ministers, the proceedings have not been edifying. The Free Church of Scotland suffered from the tyranny of the right in 2000; does she now suffer through the tyranny of the left?

Supplement

On of the finest statements of the Free Church of Scotland principle and practice is found in

The Free Church of Scotland: The Crisis of 1900 by Alexander Stewart DD and J. Kennedy Cameron DD: (Edinb
urgh: Knox Press 1985) - The Maintenance of the Heritage: Chapter XVI, pp 393 – 396.

This Gospel, alike in its fulness and in its freeness, the Free Church is able to preach in accordance with the terms of her Confession of Faith. She is in a position to give every aspect of revealed truth its appropriate place, and to unfold with the clear and harmonious exposition of a definite system the whole counsel of God.

The teaching of the Confession was enough for the great preachers of Scotland during the two and a half centuries which embrace the most fruitful period of its history; and the Free Church of today does not profess to have reached unto higher attainments in the secret of the Lord than they.

She will be satisfied if, with some measure of the same authority and tenderness, and with the same effectiveness of converting and sanctifying power, the doctrines of grace are proclaimed from her pulpits in the twentieth century.

In the services of the sanctuary the Free Church adheres to the simplicity which is a supreme characteristic of New Testament worship, and which prevailed in Scotland during the best days

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of its religious history. She dispenses with instrumental aids in her service of public praise. For this restriction she believes that she has ample Scripture warrant.

She regards the use of instrumental music in the House of God as out of harmony with the spirituality of the New Dispensation.

Adapted as it undoubtedly was to the period of the Church's growth in which her services were to a large extent of a sensuous and symbolical character, it is among the "childish things" which she "put away" when she came of age in the day of Christ.

An outstanding feature of New Testament worship is its independence of the external and its repression of the sensuous.

The Father is worshipped in spirit and in truth.

He listens to the language of the soul, and takes delight in those spiritual offerings of the grateful heart which find their most appropriate expression in "the fruit of the lips."

There was no need for instrumental music in those days of the Church when the power of the truth as it is in Jesus was most deeply felt in men's hearts.

"Indeed it is only within the last half-century," says Dr. D. Hay Fleming, than whom there is no higher living authority on the subject, "that, in Scotland, instrumental music in God's worship has come to be regarded as compatible with Presbyterianism and evangelical preaching." (The Reformation in Scotland, p.310)

There is no need for it still when the message of the Gospel makes music in the soul.

These external trappings of worship are an invariable sign of spiritual impoverishment and retrogression.

They are the attempt to make sensuous gratification take the place of spiritual enjoyment.

When the tide of spirituality rises, it is always found that such professed aids to devotion are largely swept away.

The need for them is no longer felt.

They are found to be a hindrance rather than a help to the praises of the full heart.

That these features of modern worship make a powerful appeal to the natural mind is a fact which cannot be gainsaid.

Whether they are at the same time pleasing to God is another question.

Certain it is, at any rate, that once there is a departure from the simplicity of worship which is sanctioned in the New Testament Scriptures, it is difficult to draw the line in actual practice.

Experience has proved that the element of praise in the services of the sanctuary tends more and more to degenerate into an exhibition of musical proficiency; the needs of the congregation for the vocal expression of thanksgiving are largely set aside; and the Father's House is turned to a great extent into a place of entertainment.

In the matter of public praise the Free Church confines herself to the words of Inspiration. It is not a little remarkable that the precedence which she thus accords to the hymns of the Holy Ghost should be the occasion of bringing upon her a large amount of reproach, and that even at the hands of those who profess to believe in the unique authority of Holy Scripture.

The objections to the Psalter as a manual of New Testament praise are indeed in many cases of the most superficial character.

Although advanced in the name of progress and enlightenment they are not always intelligent.

The Psalms, for example, are often said to be deficient as a vehicle of evangelical truth and

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Christian feeling.

Scarcely any charge could be more unfounded.

The Psalms are full of Christ.

When He himself first tasted of the joy of His Incarnation, and set His face upon the steep but pleasant path of obedience which ended in Joseph's tomb, he found the words which best described the willingness of His heart in the Book of Psalms.

When He gave expression again to those awful sufferings which culminated in the agony of His dereliction, it was in the same portion of the sacred volume that He sought the fitting medium of utterance.

And, on the other hand, when an inspired apostle seeks, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, to declare the glory and honour which the risen saviour received from the hand of His Father as the reward of His redemptive service, it is to the Book of Psalms that he turns for the terms that most appropriately unfold the splendour of the Mediatorial Throne.

Again, when after the Resurrection Christ expounded to His wondering disciples "the things concerning Himself" as the suffering and triumphant Messiah, the Psalms were one of the special portions of the Divine oracles to whose testimony He appealed.

And when the apostles went forth on their great mission of preaching the Gospel of Christ to their fellow-men, the effect of the illumination which then flooded their minds was at once apparent.

Their recorded sermons are in some cases little more than an exposition of those portions of the Book of Psalms which speak of the Death and Resurrection of their Lord.

Once indeed we realise that the key to the Psalter is held in the Saviour's pierced hand, we shall find it "vital with His presence and vocal with His voice." The Book of Psalms is a perfect instrument of praise, a complete and permanent manual of congregational song.

There is no aspect of spiritual experience which it does not delineate.

There is no phase of spiritual emotion to which it does not give utterance.

From the

de profundis

of penitential sorrow to the exultant strains that are appropriate to the Delectable Mountains – it covers the whole range of expression.

There is no form of Christian effort to whose activities it will not form a fitting accompaniment of song.

For long generations in Scotland it has been inseparably associated with those peaceful and hallowed Sabbath scenes in which

"the kneeling hamlet drains

The chalice of the grapes of God";

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And for the more stirring and arduous field of missionary enterprise it furnishes material not less sufficient or suitable. The Psalms are adapted to every age of the Church's history. "Unshackled from time altogether," to use Dr. Hugh Martin's striking words, "they are the Holy Spirit's expression for mental action and spiritual emotion transpiring in a realm above all outward dispensation – the realm of immediate fellowship with God."

Such are some of the truths which the Free Church is called upon to "assert, maintain, and defend."