

Come Let Us Sing

JAN DEGELDER

So far, our search for evidence that the Church Order is the villain who shuts down our desires to make changes in the manner in which we worship has not yielded much. We have read about the number of services, catechism preaching (Art. 52), times of commemoration (Art. 53), and days of prayer (Art. 54). But in the Church Order we don't find an adopted order of worship for all the churches. There is much opportunity for local diversity here.

This does not, of course, mean that there are no good reasons why corporate worship in Reformed churches has the format we are familiar with. On the contrary—how we worship is not irrelevant. Liturgics is an important field of study, and decisions to

change liturgical practices that have a long history should only be made after thorough study of God's Word and the history of worship.¹ However, none of this is in our Church Order. Our unity of faith as federated churches does not require uniformity in all our liturgical practices.

But then we get to Article 55: "The metrical psalms adopted by general synod as well as the hymns approved by general synod shall be sung in the worship services." We can also add Article 56 here: "The sacraments shall be administered . . . with the use of the adopted forms."

¹ Between the older books by Dr. K. Deddens (*Where Everything Points to Him*) and Rev. G. VanRongen (*Our Reformed Church Service Book*) and the more recent publications of Dr. W. Bredenhof (*Aiming to Please*) and Dr. C. VanDam (*Worship Matters*), there is much to learn. I'd also recommend D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe*.

Why have we agreed that throughout the federation the churches restrict themselves to singing only the songs, and using only the liturgical forms, we have approved and adopted together at general synod?

As such the articles are simple and straightforward. But in light of the flexibility we just noticed, it triggers the question: Why have we agreed that throughout the federation the churches restrict themselves to singing only the songs, and using only the liturgical forms, we have approved and adopted together at general synod?²

A LITTLE BIT OF HISTORY

There is no doubt among scholars that in the early church Christians were singing psalms in worship, but opinions differ about the question of whether other songs were also included. During the Middle Ages congregational singing disappeared altogether, but the Reformation gave singing back to the congregation. John Calvin in particular was instrumental in teaching the Reformed churches to sing the psalms again. From the beginning these churches also allowed for other songs in worship, but only as they were found in Scripture. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, they were very reluctant in making room for other, free NT hymns. Over the last century or so most Reformed churches have approved a growing (but still limited) number of hymns. “Limited” because, as the URCNA Church Order puts it: “The 150 psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches” (Art. 39). In an older version of the Christian Reformed Church Order it says this: “While the singing of the Psalms in divine worship is a requirement, the use of the approved hymns is left to the freedom of the Churches” (Art. 69). Behind all of this is the conviction that Reformed churches should continue to be psalm-singing churches. And it is a simple observation that this becomes more and more a challenge when the number of NT hymns continues to increase.

BUT WHY?

Back to the question above: Why have we agreed as churches to sing in worship only the songs and use only the forms adopted by general synod?

It has to do with the fact that of all the various aspects of our liturgy—all the different things we do when we gather for corporate worship—what we sing and how we explain the sacraments reflects most directly what we believe, our doctrine as we have it in our confessions. These stipulations are here because they serve one of the main goals of adopting the Church Order: our mutual responsibility to help one another safeguard the true doctrine of Scripture and the faithful teaching thereof.³ This should be obvious when we think of using liturgical forms. They explain and teach what we believe. But it is equally true for what we sing.

In his foreword to Sinclair Ferguson’s book *In Christ Alone*, Alistair Begg comments on the loss of focus on the gospel in many contemporary songs. He says: “In many cases congregations unwittingly have begun to sing about themselves and how they are feeling, rather than about God and about his glory.” He also quotes Alec Motyer: “When truth gets into a hymnbook it becomes the confident possession of the whole church.” I would say that’s also true when untruth gets into a hymnbook. And then it becomes dangerous.

A. W. Tozer once said: “The things you read will fashion you by slowly transforming your mind.” Again, that’s also true for the things you sing, especially when they come with attractive melodies that you sing over and over again. The point is, we should sing what we believe. But the challenge is, how to prevent us from believing whatever we sing.

The apostle Paul understood the significance of this when he describes singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs as

² Much of what follows I wrote about more extensively in “Article 55—Straightjacket or Wise Agreement,” *Clarion*, Vol. 68, No. 8, 231–233, April 19, 2019.

³ See Jan DeGelder, “Governing the Church: Checks & Balances,” *Clarion*, Vol. 71, No. 24, 714–716, November 25, 2022.

“addressing one another” (Eph 5:15) and “teaching and admonishing one another” (Col 3:16). Indeed—singing is teaching and hymn-writers are teachers, which reminds us of what Scripture says about the need to distinguish between faithful teaching and false teaching. Congregational singing is powerful. Psalms and hymns you are familiar with give you a musical reservoir in your heart and mind that provides you with comfort and encouragement when you need it in your life. Recognize all of this as background for Article 55 CO, about what we sing in worship, and Article 56 CO, about the forms to be used in worship.

SYNOD OR CONSISTORY?

However, in recent years some questions about Articles 55 and 56 have been raised that resulted in overtures to our recent general synods.

With regard to Article 55, to begin with, it may be good to make clear that “metrical psalms” are not the same as Genevan tunes. Regardless of historical value or personal preference, by provisionally approving a number of metrical psalms with alternate tunes, GS 2022 was not in conflict with the Church Order. In fact, the earliest CanRC synods already mentioned the option of adding non-Genevan tunes to the psalter.

As for the hymns, two things were questioned. Why must new hymns be approved by a general synod for the whole federation? Why can this responsibility for the local church not be left to the local consistory? Is a synod more capable of doing this than a council or consistory? No, not necessarily. But this is not a matter of who is more qualified to choose and approve. It’s about churches that are united in faith and therefore desire to sing theologically and spiritually from the same page, so to speak. The freedom to sing locally selected hymns can easily split the churches into groups that end up having entirely different song repertoires.

Another stumbling block (at least for some) is the infamous cap of 100, set by GS Chatham in 2004. Does that not sound like a totally arbitrary number? In a way this is true, of course. Why not 89 or 134? As mentioned earlier, the idea is that hymns should not crowd out the psalms.

But there is a bit more to it. Research has shown that the average church member who is not a musician will not be familiar with more than somewhere between 100 and 150 hymns, probably less, even if a church has a hymnbook with 500 or more songs. In other words, if we want the congregation to sing robustly, we had better make sure that they know well the very best 100 hymns we can come up with.

As for the forms, mentioned in Article 56, “using” or “with the use of” simply means what it says. As churches we have agreed to use the forms we all adopted “as they are.” It’s true, the forms do not have confessional authority. But they do have ecclesiastical authority in the sense that we agree that they reflect the teaching of Scripture as summarized in the confessions. Using these forms is therefore a good way to prevent errors and misconceptions in the doctrine of the two sacraments.

But what if what we have adopted in the past has outdated language, is not clear, is not enough, or is too much in different circumstances? Then let’s make the needed changes. But let’s do it together, so that these forms continue to reflect our unity of faith. **C**



Jan DeGelder, Minister Emeritus
Flamborough Canadian Reformed Church
Flamborough, Ontario
jdegelder@cogeco.ca