

Special Committee on Praise – Speech for GA 2011

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Moderator, fathers and brethren, this Committee was set up by the Plenary Assembly of November 2010 with the remit of looking at the provision of suitable materials of praise other than the 150 Psalms. The exact terms of the remit, which are set out in the report, specify that the materials must be consistent with Scripture and the whole doctrine of the Confession of Faith.

The Committee early on decided that it was neither desirable nor feasible to produce a new praise resource in book form, at least meantime. We reckoned that only a minority of congregations would require new materials of praise and that they would very likely use electronic means of overhead projection rather than books. The production of a book would be extremely time-consuming and expensive. There are already available a large number of hymn books and also web-based resources, and so the Committee decided that it was both feasible and desirable to draw up a list of suitable praise items which conform to the criteria laid down by the Assembly and where they can be accessed. This process is now underway.

It would be helpful if the ministers and Sessions who have already introduced materials of praise other than the Psalms would communicate with the Committee as to what materials they already use and how they access them.

Copyright

In this connection I would like to remind the Assembly of the importance of observing copyright law. All compositions (words and music) published during the past 75 years, or for 75 years after the death of the author or composer, almost certainly will carry copyright restrictions which prevent unauthorised copying and distribution. Compositions published before the 75-year cut-off are said to be in the “Public Domain” and if so, will not carry any copyright restrictions, unless indicated by the publisher.

If we reproduce and store copyright material electronically or in hard copy for use, such as in worship services, we have to have the permission of the copyright holder or possess the appropriate copyright licence. This includes all recently composed hymns and songs, such as the popular Townend-Getty compositions. If you use hymn books, the copyright charge is included in the price of the book.

The most convenient way to get the appropriate licence is to join Christian Copyright Licensing International [CCLI] at www.ccli.co.uk who handle the copyright arrangements of the vast majority of composers and publishers of Christian praise. In return for payment of an annual fee (the size of which will depend on the size of the congregation) congregations will be free to use copyright praise material. This annual fee will range from about £50 for a very small congregation to about £500 for a very large one. The Committee has prepared guidelines on copyright and will distribute them to congregations. Copyright items cannot be changed in any way without permission, whereas items in the Public Domain have often been changed in the past. That’s why it is important to be aware of which version you are downloading from the Internet, because an altered version of an old hymn or a new arrangement of a tune

may be under new copyright restrictions. Also the words may have been altered for theological reasons and these changes have to be assessed.

Copyright is important because it protects the right of the author or composer to be recognised as the originator of the item and to receive any royalties due. It also protects the composition from unauthorised use or alteration.

Scripture songs and paraphrases

The second part of the remit is to look into the availability of, or to produce from within the resources of the Church, Scripture songs and paraphrases of Scripture for singing. An obvious starting point here is the Scottish Paraphrases produced in 1781. Some of these have found favour in many hymn collections and have stood the test of time, but many are dated in language and style and are not of great quality. At least they can be used as a pointer to portions of Scripture suitable for this purpose. Our primary guide in this continues to be the 150 canonical Psalms. As well as containing praise, adoration, thanksgiving, confession, lament, complaint, imprecation, prayer and supplication, the Psalms also have narrative and historical passages with a didactic and hortatory function, reciting God's mighty deeds and expressing human responses to them. These can guide us to parts of the NT suitable for praise material. The best hymns are full of Scriptural material, references and allusions, and the closer we hold to Scripture the better.

As Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 make clear, the speaking and the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs have the function of mutual teaching and edification as well as expressing our heart-felt thanks to and praise of God. Thus narrative, didactic and hortatory passages may provide suitable material for congregational singing. It should also be remembered that worship consists of much more than sung praise. The whole service consists of worship, not just the sung praise: the reading, the preaching and the hearing of the Word, the prayers, the collection and the benediction.

The Committee has begun the process of looking for suitable Scripture songs and paraphrases and so far has collected well over a dozen new metrical versions of Scripture produced within the Free Church. After initial assessment and editing, the Committee plans to send these to congregations who request them. After trying them out, we would like to get feedback before a final editing process, similar to that used during the production of *Sing Psalms*. We are also looking at other sources.

The Committee spent some time discussing what is meant by Scripture Songs and Paraphrases and if there is a distinction between them. In ordinary usage 'paraphrase' means restating a text or passage in different words or form, while accurately rendering the meaning of the original. This may be for clarification or to show you have understood the meaning of the text or passage. It has often been pointed out that the line between a Scripture Song (especially in metrical form) and a paraphrase is difficult to define. The Scottish Metrical Psalms were called paraphrases long ago, and they are still regarded as such by many today, especially by those who are used to chanting of the prose versions. In the narrow sense that I have just mentioned that is quite understandable and justifiable. (Prose here does not mean non-poetic; rather it means not written in strict metrical and versified form.)

The Scottish Paraphrases often seem to stray from this narrow definition. For example: Paraphrase 2, O God of Bethel, based on Gen.18:20-22, expands considerably on the text, and Paraphrase 33, based on the Lord's Prayer, adds considerably to the very spare wording of the original text. They do fairly accurately reflect and fill out the meaning of the original, often with other Scriptural material, but this gives rise to a much wider definition of paraphrase. This, of course, does not invalidate them as praise material.

In producing *Sing Psalms* the Psalmody Committee aimed at a 'metrical translation', with the minimum of contraction and expansion, while trying to reflect any nuances of the original when adding words to fit the metre and rhyme. Some would confine the use of 'Scripture song' to portions of Scripture sung straight from a prose version, be it KJV, NIV or whatever other version there may be. The differences between these different translations alone should warn us against being too quick to downgrade a metrical version to the status of 'paraphrase' in the wider sense or to use the term in a pejorative way. One problem with singing one or two verses of Scripture as popular choruses is that they may be understood apart from their context. The Committee is aiming to produce versions which accurately reflect the meaning of the original and are readily singable in well-known metres.

We have approached a number of people to act as consultants throughout the Church and most of them have agreed to help. Their role will be to advise on the suitability or otherwise of the items of praise which we recommend and also to make recommendations.

Two of our members have resigned from the Committee due to pressure of work, Rev John MacPherson and Rev Finlay MacKenzie. We thank them both for their contributions to the work of the Committee. This leaves only four members on the Committee, so we are requesting that the Assembly appoint replacements.