

Sing Psalms: A Minister's Perspective

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At a Saturday afternoon conference, held in Knockbain in 2004, I was asked to share some thoughts on the use of Sing Psalms. As I was in no position to speak representatively on behalf of other ministers, my words were a personal perspective, based on our experience of introducing Sing Psalms at Greyfriars, Inverness. What follows is an edited version of the first part of my talk.

It is of the essence of being a Reformed church that every now and again Church leaders are entrusted to oversee change in Church life. Under the slogan 'a Reformed church is always Reforming' the Reformers sought to safeguard the Reformation from the forces of stagnation and traditionalism by insisting on a rolling programme of Biblical reformation. Which is just another way of saying, that when necessary a Church must be willing to accept changes that help it to be a more faithful and articulate servant of Christ. In the Free Church of Scotland these changes do not come rapidly. For over a hundred years, from the Revised Version of 1885 to the English Standard Version of 2001, the quest has been on to find the best alternative to the 1611 Authorised Version, as the most suitable Bible version for public reading. Over the past few decades most of our ministers, and others who pray in public, have changed from using seventeenth century language in prayer to modern English. We have also had to consider the question of Psalmody. Whereas as many as eighteen different Psalters were produced in the ninety year period between 1561 and 1650, from 1650 the *Scottish Metrical Version* has monopolised praise for 350 years. Today, we have a complete version of the Psalms in contemporary English enjoying the commendation of the General Assembly and the approval of the vast majority of Free Church people. Most congregations in the denomination now use the *Sing Psalms* versions.

What then was the rationale that lay behind the Kirk Session's decision to bring in *Sing Psalms* at Greyfriars? We recognised, that in congregations like ours, the introduction of a new version of the Psalms, like the earlier decision to approve the use of the English Standard Version of the Bible, was a sensitive matter; something which if to be done at had to be done for sound spiritual, theological and ecclesiastical reasons and not for the sake of novelty. After careful consideration, the Kirk Session unanimously agreed to use *Sing Psalms* alongside the *Scottish Metrical Version*. At a prayer meeting one Thursday night I intimated to the congregation the forthcoming change and presented the four reasons for the Session's decision.

The first reason for adopting *Sing Psalms* was the clarity of its language. Singing psalms in worship involves two movements. One is an outgoing movement, the expression of our faith in worship to God and in witness to the world. The other is an inward movement, whereby we, the singers, receive instruction from God's Word. Which is why the Psalms require us not only to sing with enthusiasm (Ps 33.3, Ps 95.1-2) but also with intelligence (Ps 47.7), understanding the words we use. For many people the message of the Psalms is obscured by language no longer in common use. We have to take this problem very seriously indeed and avoid all unnecessary barriers in communicating the gospel.

Because the timeless gospel is relevant to the contemporary needs of men and women in all age, Christian communicators from the Apostle Paul onward have sought to express it in language which is clearly understood. How can non-Christians worshipping in our churches learn if they cannot understand the meaning of words? Nor ought our children and young people be required to use archaic language for worship, or else they may feel that the message of the Bible has little to say to their modern world. Many long-time churchgoers and mature Christians are also confused, even if they don't realise they are. For example, who, without an open dictionary before them can make sense of that classic passage of outdated language, Psalm 18.25-26? Indeed the meaninglessness of such words has, for generations, rendered those particular verses redundant in Christian praise. But there are many other less obvious obstacles to clear understanding; a couple of examples may suffice to make the point. Probably, most people understand the word 'tell' in Ps. 22.17 or 48.12 to mean 'mention or make known?' Few today would understand that it means 'to number' or 'count.' Then we have the word 'prevent' in Ps.18.5. Normally when we talk of 'preventing' something we mean we 'forestall', 'avert', 'hinder' or 'put off' but in the 17th century it meant 'to go before', 'anticipate' or 'confront.'

The second reason for using *Sing Psalms* is theological. Because the Psalms were originally written in Hebrew they must be translated before most of us can read them. Our forefathers believed the translation of the Bible into ordinary, everyday, language to be a sacred trust, for which they were prepared to give their lives. William Tyndale aimed to render Scripture in such straightforward and simple language that barely educated ploughboys could read and understand it. Likewise, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, to which all Free Church ministers and office-bearers subscribe, holds to the same principle. In chapter one the Confession requires that the Bible be translated into the 'vulgar language' and in our case that means contemporary English. It is precisely because 'faith comes by hearing' that accurate communication and translation is not

merely desirable but absolutely essential. As we are entrusted with the responsibility of making Scripture intelligible both to ourselves and to our contemporaries, we need to learn from our Saviour who carefully adapted his language to enable his hearers to understand his words. As the metrical Psalms we sing are Holy Scripture it necessarily follows that they too must be translated into ordinary, everyday, language.

A third reason is the question of loyalty. The Greyfriars Kirk Session thought it was important to remind our church family that the version we were introducing did not come from some doubtful source but had been carefully prepared by the Psalmody Committee of our own Church, representing all traditions within the denomination. It is quite astounding to hear, usually from non-Hebrew speakers, and totally erroneously, that *Sing Psalms* is not a good translation. We can have full confidence in the expertise of the Committee and the supervision of our Professor of Old Testament, John L. MacKay. The finished product has been approved and sanctioned for congregational praise by the General Assembly. We believed that it would, therefore, be very disloyal if we were to ignore the decision of the General Assembly, set ourselves apart from this project and reject the finished product.

A final reason for using of *Sing Psalms* is its huge potential for providing much needed spiritual refreshment. Many congregations who have started to use *Sing Psalms* have found that in this new version the familiar truths, sung in differing meters, wedded to a wider variety of tunes, has brought wonderful spiritual refreshment to their worship. I have been very enthusiastic about *Sing Psalms* since the first trial editions became available. At that least typical Free Church congregation, Cole Abbey, London, the worth of the new version became immediately obvious when numbers of overseas tourists began worshipping with us after accepting invitations to the evening service handed out in the St. Paul's area. But after moving north to Inverness it has amazed me to hear so many of the older Christians in the Highlands, folk who may be thought of as conservative and slow to change, expressing their warm and enthusiastic appreciation of *Sing Psalms*. All across Scotland, many congregations are confirming that the new versions are making the Psalms come alive for them too. *Sing Psalms* is proving to be a true blessing by keeping alive for future generations the glorious heritage of Scottish Presbyterian Psalmody.