

Hymnal Revision.

In connection with a resolution before the last meeting of the Presbytery of Owen Sound, Rev John McAlpine, of Chatsworth, prepared the following address which represents the views held by many on the subject of Hymnal revision. Mr. McAlpine after preliminary remarks says:—This motion, so far as I understand myself, is the expression of a very profound conviction, which, with the leave of the Presbytery, I shall attempt sincerely to justify.

1. In doing so, my first position is that the psalter is a medium of praise furnished by Divine inspiration to the Old Testament church. In that proposition there are two parts: (a) that the psalter is a medium of praise for the Old Testament church, and (b) that it is Divinely inspired. I do not think either of these positions is questioned amongst us. Let me just notice with regard to the inspiration, that the testimony upon that point of the New Testament is very decisive, and all the more that it is given very expressly to what are called the recurring psalms, so that it is quite unallowable for any Christian to speak of any psalm as breaking the spirit of private revenge. It is a very different spirit they breathe, a spirit of which if the church was more largely possessed, it would value the psalms more highly.

2. My second position is that this Divinely inspired medium of praise was given to form a medium of praise not only for the Old Testament church, but also for the church of the New Testament. This is a position which I think does not admit of question. That the Divine Being intended the psalter as a medium of New Testament praise, will, I think, be at once admitted by all. Perhaps I may be permitted to refer to two considerations in support of it. One is the very late date at which the psalter was completed. Material continued to be added to it up to the time of Malachi. Thus it was only in her closing period that the Old Testament church possessed the completed psalter which would seem to be at least a confirmation of the position that it was designed for the New as well as the Old, nay, more, for the New than the Old. The other consideration is this very surprising one, that penned amid the remarkable ritual of the Old Testament economy and expression of the religious sentiments of those to whom every rite in that economy was specially dear, the psalms would be so largely free from the colouring that could not but be expected to impart, and laying hold simply of the informing spirit should so express it as to provide a medium of praise suitable. Still when that ritual had sunk into oblivion, a phenomenon so remarkable as to be explainable in no other way but the now largely discredited one that holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

3. I shall suppose my second proposition to be admitted, and shall now proceed to state the third, which is that the psalter, being a Divinely inspired medium of praise designed for the New Testament church, contains within it, nor is there to be found anywhere in Scripture with regard to it any satisfactory indication that it is only partially fitted to be a medium of praise for the New Testament church. I employ the word satisfactory because there are some who supposed they have found indications; but it is manifest that these indications being the determination of private judgment cannot be deemed satisfactory to say whose judgment may not make the same pronouncement, nor can I imagine any indication would or could be satisfactory, but an indication from the same high source as that which furnished the medium of praise. Only He whose infinite wisdom has furnished it is entitled to employ the pruning knife and to say what should and what should not be embraced in the psalmody of the New Testament church.

4. My fourth proposition, which is simply a corollary from the preceding, is that therefore the proposal to make selections from the inspired psalter is a strangely unbecoming one. One might with entire propriety use much stronger language with regard to it, and all the more so when the genesis of the

proposal is considered. I venture to say that it is not long since when such a proposal could not have been made in the Presbyterian Church in Canada. I venture to say that not long ago there was not a man in the Presbyterian Church in Canada who would have dared, in any court of the Church, to make such a proposal. The possibility of such a proposal is but of yesterday, and the wherefore of the possibility is not hard to indicate. There is not a question but it has risen out of the marvellous manner in which men bearing the Christian name have permitted themselves to handle the Word of God, and is indicative, painfully indicative, of how the Church has permitted herself to be influenced by them. Such is the genesis of this proposal, and such being the genesis we have the less hesitation in characterizing the proposal before us as being, to the last degree, unbecoming. Its unbecomingness is further emphasized by two considerations which I ask leave to present and with which I shall conclude. One is the want of qualification upon the part of any and every human being to say what are the elements of praise proper to an inspired psalter. To have to write such a sentence is matter of pure amazement. Just think of a company of men sitting down to determine what part of an inspired psalter is fitted for praise! Of the incongruity of such a spectacle we shall be more convinced if we recall to ourselves what is the Scriptures' estimate of man. We have one statement of that estimate in the words, "Cursed is man that trusteth in man and maketh flesh his arm," a statement that finds ample confirmation in the spectacle that at this day is presented by society. Another statement of that estimate is the statement that "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool." And, friends, the more I become acquainted with myself, the more extended is my observation and experience of my fellow-creatures, the more do I feel compelled to bow to the humiliation of these representations. And such being a true representation of man, and man at his best estate, what are we to think of a company of such beings sitting down to eliminate from the divine book of praise what is displeasing to them? Words cannot express the utter and horrible incongruity of the spectacle. The second consideration in confirmation of the unbecomingness of the proposal before us are the selections themselves that have been presented to us. To one who has taken the trouble to go over the psalms carefully, noting the selections and exclusions, the result, I have no doubt, has been that of pure amazement and profound pain. There have been portions left out that have, no doubt, proved the rod and staff of God to smite His own in their need, or the green pastures in which He has made them delightedly lie down. Take, for instance, that beautiful verse in the 42nd psalm, "His loving kindness yet the Lord command will in the day, His songs with me by night. To God by whom I live I'll pray." In the 40th psalm we are not to sing, "Thy tender mercies, Lord, from me O do Thou not restrain, Thy loving kindness and Thy truth let them me still maintain." Words whose preciousness are immensely enhanced by their connection with the striking confession of one which follows, a confession that must have spoken hope to many a sin-burdened soul, and all the more that the words of confession are put into his lips by God himself. In the 48th the words of pure praise are no longer to be sung, "O Lord, according to Thy name this all the earth's Thy praise, and Thy right hand, O Lord, is full of righteousness always. Because Thy judgments are made known Let Zion mount rejoice, of Judah let the daughters all send forth a cheerful voice." And the 50th psalm is left out, with its magnificent start, reminding one of the blow of the trumpet at the great day, "The mighty God the Lord hath spoken and did call, the earth from rising of the sun to where hath his fall. Our God shall surely come, keep silence shall not He before Him. Fire shall waste, great storms shall round about Him be. Unto the heavens clear He from above shall call, and to the earth likewise that He may judge His people all."

Who that has been discoursing on the solemn theme of the final judgment could fail to turn to that passage as appropriate praise, and the more that there is in it so sweet a declaration of the very marrow of the Gospel in the lines that describe God's saints, "Those that by sacrifice have made a covenant with me." Nor are we to say in the 51st psalm, "My closed lips, O Lord, by Thee let them be opened, then shall thy praises by my mouth abroad be published." Nor, "A broken spirit is to God a pleasing sacrifice; a broken or contrite, Lord, Thou wilt not despise." In the wisdom of our hymnal committee these choice precious words are no longer to be sung. And just listen to the strains they have left out in the 85th psalm, "That in Thee may Thy people joy, wilt Thou not us revive. Show us Thy mercy, Lord, to us do Thy salvation give. I'll hear what God the Lord will speak: to His folk He'll speak peace, and to His saints, but let them not return to foolishness. To them that fear Him surely near is His salvation, that glory in our land may have her habitation. Truth met with mercy, righteousness and peace kissed mutually. Truth springs from earth, righteousness looks down from heaven high." Just think of that last stanza containing so striking an expression of the central mystery of the Gospel, the reconciliation of righteousness with peace. Think of that being left out of the praises of the Church; ay! and left out when divine wisdom and grace had put it in. But not to expand let me just notice two other instances. One is in the 27th psalm, "Though my parents both should leave, the Lord will me uptake." Words which the great Father has put in the psalter to comfort those who in His providence have been deprived of their natural guardians, or, what is worse, have natural guardians that are unfaithful to their trust; and that is but an instance of a whole class, a class in which reference is made to some form or other of human painful experience, such as orphanage as here, widowhood and old age, a class so minutely divided that I believe there is scarcely a phase of human sorrow, ay, or guilt, which has not its own special words of comfort and hope in the Psalms; but to which our hymnal committee has been apparently quite oblivious. My other reference is to the 84th psalm, in which occurs the irrefragable arguments in the words "The Lord did plant the ear of man, and hear then shall not he; He only formed the eye, and then shall he not clearly see. He that the nations doth correct, shall he not chastise you. He knowledge into man doth teach, and shall himself not know." Our argument before which to every upright mind all the systems of atheism, pantheism, agnosticism and scepticism of every kind tumble into ruin like so many structures of cardboard as they all are, but an argument which the Church in the wisdom of our hymnal committee is no longer to sing, although it is worthy of the loudest notes of praise.

Closing these general allusions I would call your attention to this, that the committee in its selections seems to have acted upon the principle of excluding as much as possible everything of a denunciatory character. The instances that might be adduced on very many. As to the wisdom of the principle there is great room for question. It is questionable on the ground that it is a certain sign of church decadence when she sings peace, peace, and that in a high state of spiritual life the church will ever joyfully sound the note of warning. It is objectionable also in the face of the fact already referred to that the New Testament gives its imprimatur to the most denunciatory of all the psalms. And its objectionableness will appear if we take a single instance. Let it be the opening line of the 36th psalm, "The wicked man's transgression." Just see the concentrated wisdom of that collection of words. See how any transgressor is transfixed with the thought that he is a wicked man. That is a conclusion which many a transgressor socks eagerly to avoid, and how it is thrust upon him and by an authority which he cannot dispute, and with an emphasis of a very special kind when it is the utterance of the praise of the whole congregation. And