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Schilder's Views Regarding the Reformed Hymnary

This article is a revised version of a speech delivered together with Rev. George van Popta at Office Bearers' Conferences in Ancaster, ON and Yarrow, BC (November 2009 and March 2010 respectively).

In a previous article we discussed the views of Dr. Klaas Schilder regarding the Reformed psalter. In this article we look at his views regarding the Reformed hymnary. As the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) are in the process of updating and modestly expanding their hymnary, it will be instructive to listen to the voice of Dr. Schilder. After all, his views had considerable influence on the thinking of the first generation of CanRC immigrants as they put together the *Book of Praise*.

Let us start by putting Schilder's contribution in historical perspective. It is well known that the matter of hymn singing has often caused discussion and even dissension in the Reformed tradition. Calvin favoured the singing of psalms and initiated the production of the Genevan psalter. Yet, he did not defend an "exclusive psalmody" position. From early on canticles such as the Song of Zechariah were included in Reformed church books. Already Calvin himself included a "free stanza" at the end of the versification of the Ten Commandments (see Hymn 7:9 in the *Book of Praise*).

The fathers of the Secession of 1834 were divided on the issue. Rev. Hendrik de Cock was vehemently opposed to the singing of hymns. Other leaders, such as Rev. Anthony Brummelkamp and Dr. Lucas Lindeboom, wanted the Reformed churches to have a collection of good, biblically grounded hymns. Among the leaders of the Doleantie of 1886 the situation was similar. Dr. Abraham Kuyper changed his position a few times during his lifetime: As a young man he had no qualms about singing hymns. After his conversion to the Reformed faith he was opposed. Later on he

adopted a moderate position, on the one hand warning that hymns often lack the spiritual depth of the psalms, on the other hand stating there was an "urgent need" for the church to adopt more hymns.¹

Expansion

By the time Schilder as a young minister started to write about liturgical issues (1920s), the Dutch churches were going through a process that is quite similar to the one the CanRC is going through at the moment. The churches had a small collection of twelve hymns and there was a strong feeling that the hymnary should be expanded. For two decades virtually every synod dealt with the issue until the Synod of 1933 adopted a new hymnary that contained twenty-nine hymns. The collection included popular hymns such as "*Een Vaste Burcht*" ("A Mighty Fortress") and "*Ere Zij God*" ("Glory to God," the songs of the angels, Luke 2:14). Before and after 1933 there were debates in the church magazines with some arguing pro and others arguing contra expansion of the hymnary.

In his magazine *De Reformatie* Schilder came out strongly in favour of adding more hymns to the collection. In response to those who had "principal" problems with the singing of hymns, he wrote: "There is nothing wrong with the singing of hymns as long as they fit in the Reformed worship service."² In another article he observed that the churches had been singing free hymns for decades and that there is no real difference between singing many hymns or just a few: "If someone has 'principal' objections against hymns, he must reject every number of hymns, whether large or small."³

It is instructive to note why Schilder was such a strong supporter of the singing of hymns. He approached the matter from a covenantal perspective: The worship service is a meeting between the Lord and his people. During this meeting the Lord speaks

through Scripture reading and proclamation of the Word, and God's people respond in prayer and singing, etc. In order for the congregation's response to be a real response it should not be a repetition of God's Word. We expect our ministers to pray "free" prayers (not taken literally from the Bible). Similarly, we should expect the congregation to sing "free hymns." Guided by God's Word and God's Spirit the congregation should formulate its own answer to God's Word. Only then may we speak of covenantal fellowship.

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Schilder was not impressed by the popular argument that it is wrong to sing hymns because they are "uninspired." During the 1880s Dr. Abraham Kuyper had coined a phrase for this sentiment: 'In God's house only God's Word.' Schilder considered this to be a thoughtless slogan ("een ondoordachte leus").⁴ Of course, in the preaching only God's Word should be proclaimed. But in prayer and singing the congregation should respond. As much as God's Word should resonate in this response, it should be the congregation's response. It would even be presumptuous to claim that congregation's response could be God's Word.

Practical

Based on these principles, Schilder's contribution to the debate during the 1930s was practical, level-headed, and at times almost pragmatic. A few examples will illustrate this. First, although Schilder defended the possibility of "free hymns" being added to the hymnary, he advised the churches to look especially at *adding canticles* (hymns that are based on poetic passages in the Bible outside the book of Psalms).

Second, Schilder observed that we *will never have a perfect hymnary* and that we should learn to live with that reality. Although he supported the proposed expansion of the hymnary in the early 1930s, he also made it clear that it contained some hymns which he would have left out and that it missed some hymns which he would have included. Summarizing

his feelings, he wrote: "I am not really enthusiastic, but in all soberness and fairness, I believe that we should accept the proposed hymns."⁵ In this context it is interesting that Schilder was willing to accept a hymn even though he had certain reservations about the wording. Point in case was the hymn "Ere Zij God" (Glory to God) which had a line that was based on questionable exegesis ("vrede op aarde" – peace on earth). Even so, Schilder said, if I preached on Luke 2:14 and my sermon was based on the better exegesis, I would still ask the congregation to sing this hymn with joy after the sermon. To which he added the remarkable words: "Singing is always a compromise."⁶

Third, Schilder felt that *ecumenical considerations should play a role* in the process. He was critical of the tendency of Reformed synods to modify and mutilate hymns in an effort to make them "more Reformed" by changing the wording of certain phrases. This is problematic, not just because a synod is not a gathering of poets, but also because it sets the Reformed churches apart from other churches who are singing the same hymn. Quote: "We are already going to have our own particular Book of Praise. If we are to have our own versions of well-known hymns as well, we will be even more 'particular.'"⁷

As we noted in the previous article, Schilder never outlined his liturgical views in a systematic way.⁸ Much less do we believe that he has spoken the final word on these issues. At the same time it is refreshing to listen to his voice.

¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship* (transl. Harry Boonstra; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009), 37-42. The original Dutch book, entitled *Onze Eeredienst*, was published in 1911.

² Translated from K. Schilder, "Voorstellen inzake den kerkelijken liederenschat (1)," *De Reformatie* 13:8 (25 Nov. 1932), 58-59.

³ Translated from: *De Reformatie* 13:9 (2 Dec. 1932), 66.

⁴ *De Reformatie* 13:9 (2 Dec. 1932), 66.

⁵ Translated from *De Reformatie* 13:9 (2 Dec. 1932), 66.

⁶ Translated from *De Reformatie* 13:8 (25 Nov. 1932), 58.

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⁸ Dr. Jan Smelik has summarized Schilder's liturgical views in the article "Schilder, de kerkdienst en het kerklied" in George Harinck (ed.), *Alles of niets: Opstellen over K. Schilder* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2003), 47-77.

