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Schilder's Views Regarding the Reformed Psalter

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).

A major item on the agenda of the Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) which is convened in Burlington in May 2010 is the revised Anglo-Genevan Psalter. If we compare the words of the new version with the old, the first thing that strikes us is that so much of the old version was left untouched. If we take a closer look at the sections that were revised or rewritten, two aspects stand out: First, the language has become more contemporary. Second, some flowery language has been pruned back in order to represent the original text of the psalms more accurately.

As always, change causes a degree of restlessness in the churches. Questions are asked: Are these changes necessary? Are we actually improving anything or are we perhaps deviating from principles set out by previous generations? These are valid questions. Being a member of the Standing Committee for the *Book of Praise* myself, I want to refrain from evaluating the revised psalter. The matter is before the churches at the upcoming synod.

At the same time I have noticed that the allegation is easily made that the revised psalter is somehow deviating from principles formulated by "men like Calvin and Schilder." The name of Dr. Schilder is particularly important in this respect since he was a major influence on the thinking of the first generation of CanRC immigrants – the generation that produced the *Book of Praise*. Since few people are able to check what Schilder actually said (you need to be able to read Dutch), I thought it might be helpful to offer a brief overview of his views with respect to the church's psalter.

Dr. Schilder has never outlined his liturgical views in a systematic way.¹ He usually expressed his opinions in magazine articles as he interacted with current

developments. Interestingly, during the 1920s and 1930s the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands were going through a process that was quite similar to the one the CanRC is going through at the moment: They were expanding their hymnary and they were discussing the need to revise their psalter (which dated back to 1773).

Schilder felt strongly about the need for a revised psalter. He addressed the issue several times. In 1923 he published the book *Kerksaal en leven* (Church language and life).² The next year he wrote a series of articles entitled "*Onze Psalmberijming*" (Our Psalter).³ During the 1930s Schilder addressed the topic again when he reviewed a new psalter that was published by Rev. H. Hasper.⁴ Reading these articles together gives us a fairly clear picture of what Schilder considered to be the requirements for a Reformed psalter. What follows is a summary of his views.

Principles

First, the psalter should be *based on the full text of the psalms*. No psalm, not even Psalm 119, should be abridged to a summary of a few stanzas. The congregation should not be given a "bouquet of flowers" ("*bloemlezing*") from the psalms, but it should be able to sing through the complete text of the psalms. Based on this principle Schilder voiced concerns regarding the new psalter by Rev. Hasper because he had summarized certain sections of the psalms.

Second, the psalter should *reflect sound exegetical insights*. One problem of the old 1773 Psalter was that it did not always do justice to the original text of the psalms. Sometimes this was simply due to the fact that the psalter was quite old indeed. Recent exegetical insights could obviously not have been taken into account. A more significant problem was that the worldview of the poets sometimes overshadowed the meaning of the Hebrew original.

Third, the psalter should *leave room for the fulfillment of the prophetic aspects*. If a psalm contains a Messianic prophecy, the versification should not

conceal that aspect but rather reveal it or, at the very least, leave open the possibility for messianic interpretation. In this respect Schilder had a serious problem with Rev. Hasper's psalter because it often concealed Messianic interpretations. An example is David's prophecy about the "holy one" who would not see decay (Ps 16:10), a prophecy that was fulfilled with the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:31). In his version Rev. Hasper used the word "vrome" (pious) instead of "heilige" (holy), thus making it more difficult to see the Messianic aspect. Schilder criticized this approach and formulated as a guideline: After the congregation has heard a sermon in which the light of the New Testament shines over a Messianic psalm, the congregation should be able to find that same light reflected in the rhymed version of the psalm.⁵

Fourth, the psalter should use *contemporary language*. The 1773 Psalter was based on the old seventeenth century Bible translation (the so-called "Statenvertaling," comparable to the King James Version in English). Schilder was no admirer of the old *Statenvertaling*. He felt that this translation was too literal and that it did not do enough in terms of rephrasing the content in Dutch. Schilder also criticized the tendency to use a kind of "holy" and other-worldly language during worship. Church language should certainly be worthy and have dignity but it should not be archaic. The church should use language that is contemporary without being colloquial.

Fifth, the psalter should have *poetic quality*. Just like the original Hebrew psalms are impressive not just because of the content but also because of the high poetic quality, the psalter should impress by both content and poetic quality. Schilder judged that the 1773 Psalter lacked poetic quality. In this respect he had much more appreciation for the new psalter by Rev. Hasper.

2010 Psalter

The Standing Committee for the *Book of Praise* has submitted a revised Anglo-Genevan Psalter to the synod that meets in Burlington in May 2010. If we evaluate the 2010 Psalter, it is clear that Schilder's principles are reflected admirably. A quick recap of the five principles shows the following:

(1) The revised psalter is based on the full text of the psalms and is generally closer to the original Hebrew than the current version. See, for example, Psalm 3. With its three stanzas the new version is a more accurate reflection of the original than the older version by D. Westra which had four stanzas.

(2) The revised version continues the tradition of the old version in reflecting sound exegetical insights. Again, the new version is sometimes closer to the original text than the old version. See for example

Psalms 47 where the revised version includes references to Jacob (stanza 1) and Abraham (stanza 3). In the old version by Westra these names are missing. The revised version reflects the covenantal aspects of Psalm 47 more accurately.

(3) The revised version leaves room for the fulfillment of prophetic aspects. See for example Psalm 2, stanza 4: "Now kiss the Son, lest He in fury scorn you." The capital letter that is used ("Son") makes the Messianic aspect explicit. Similarly, in Psalm 16:5 it says that the "Holy One" will not see corruption. This leaves room for the fulfillment of this Messianic prophecy with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. One could argue about the question whether capital letters should be used. Some would argue that using capitals may reduce the interpretation too exclusively to a Messianic one. A counter-argument would be that these psalms are so evidently Messianic that it would be wrong not to use capitals. In such cases, a choice needs to be made between the two options.

(4) The revised version uses contemporary language without being colloquial. See for example Psalm 147:3 with its interesting use of the word "resources": "He does not value man's resources: the runner's legs, the strength of horses." Another example: In Psalm 121:3 the awkward line about the moon and the sun that "shall not afflict or smite you" has been rephrased with "will never harm or hurt you." Many more examples could be given.

(5) The revised version has poetic quality. Psalm 148 is an example of a psalm where beautiful phrases of the old version have been retained while at the same time archaic phrases like "days of yore" have been removed. The last four lines of the new version are beautiful: "His saints He blessed with praise and splendor, showed Israel His mercy tender. Close to His heart He keeps His own. O praise the LORD! Praise Him alone!"

In conclusion: Synod will decide whether the revised Anglo-Genevan Psalter is worthy of being adopted by the churches. The brothers do not need to be concerned about the underlying principles: The proposed revision of the Psalter is in line with principles that have always been held high among us.

¹Dr. 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.

²K. Schilder, *Kerktaal en leven* (Amsterdam, 1923). Republished in K. Schilder, *Om Woord en Kerk*, Vol. 3 (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1951), 96-227.

³Republished in K. Schilder, *Bij Dichters en Schriftgeleerden*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmij Holland, 1927), 310-356.

⁴K. Schilder, "Een nieuwe psalmberijming." *De Reformatie* 17:16 (15 Jan. 1937), 122-124.

⁵K. Schilder, "Iets over Psalm 16 in de berijming Hasper," *De Reformatie* 23:40 (3 Jul 1948), 335-336.

