

2010/1 A Reformed Baptist Anthem**by B. S. Poh**

For many years past, I have toyed with the idea of producing an anthem for the Reformed Baptist churches in Malaysia, and also one for the Reformed Baptist churches worldwide - yes, two anthems. The idea arose from the conjunction of three strands of thought.

Background

Firstly, there was the realization that singing is a gospel ordinance to which insufficient attention has been given, at least not to the extent that preaching and prayer have received. Singing played a crucial role as handmaid to preaching and prayer in the Great Awakening of the 18th century¹. The Wesleyan branch of Methodism was particularly vibrant in their singing. We can imagine the sound of "O for a thousand tongues to sing", sung to the tune of "Lyngham", ringing through the valleys and echoing through the glens. We can picture the wind carrying away the majestic strains of "Jesus! the name high over all", sung to the tune of "Lydia", in the crowds that gathered to hear the preachers². The revival of the 1740s was certainly helped by the singing of hymns, a practice introduced by the Particular Baptists of the 17th century amidst strife among themselves over the issue³. The Independent preacher and scholar, Isaac Watts had put the Psalms in metre for singing in worship. The Wesley brothers - John the preacher and administrator, and Charles the hymn-writer - built upon the foundation already laid. George Whitefield would have used the hymns of Watt's and Wesleys' in his branch of Methodism as well⁴.

Secondly, there was the intriguing practice of Charles Spurgeon - the prince of preachers at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London during a time of revival - of introducing anthems for the church and the Pastors' College. The hymn, "Grace, 'tis a charming sound", was sung to the tune "Cranbrook" as the anthem of the church, while "Hallelujah for the Cross!" was the College anthem. Each hymn was sung with voices and hearts, "as only a Tabernacle audience... could sing it".⁵ Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God", sung to the tune "Ein' feste Burg", could be considered the anthem of the Reformation. Every nation has a national anthem, many prominent schools have their school anthems. Even political parties and football clubs have their anthems. Why not our churches?

Thirdly, there was the thought that God has been pleased to cause a recovery of the Reformed faith in recent years, which is in danger now of stagnating in doctrinal integrity at the expense of spiritual vitality. Strife and contentions - often necessary and unavoidable - have sapped the energy of many and disheartened not a few. However, there have been situations that could have been handled better, and issues that could have been avoided, because they had more to do with personalities rather than principles. The enthusiasm for the cause of truth of earlier years has noticeably waned, while a notable new generation of preachers intensely committed to the Reformed faith seems to be no where in sight. We sigh as we are reminded that in every generation God has reserved His seven thousands who have not bowed their knees to Baal. The question is, are we in danger of sinning

against God by loosing heart over the present situation? What may we do, apart from continuing to preach faithfully and to pray earnestly for God to intervene?

It is here that the thought comes in - should we not be encouraging the hearty singing of soul-stirring hymns among our people? We have been concerned about Reformed churches that have veered away from traditional worship and adopted contemporary worship style - introducing modern choruses from the stable of the charismatic movement and instrumental accompaniment that has more entertainment value rather than spiritual edification. Other than issuing polemics against this deviation, should we not recognize the need to recover hearty singing as an ordinance prescribed in the New Testament? See Mark 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; and Rev. 5:9. Should we not choose hymns that are soul-stirring in the lyrics and the melody? Why must good hymns be sung to monotonous and boring tunes? And how about introducing an anthem for our churches? And what if we have an anthem for the Reformed Baptists?

A proposed anthem

Unlike a secular anthem, we would want ours to be Christ-centred, God-glorifying, and ecumenical in the correct sense. It would have to be a hymn suitable for worship. We would want a tune that is suited to the sentiments expressed by the lyrics. We may choose an existing hymn, and sing it regularly, and with gusto, and encourage our members to memorize it. We may also compose a new hymn, and sing it to an existing tune, or compose a new tune for it. A tune that I like is "Jerusalem", composed by Sir Charles Hastings Parry in 1916. It was composed for singing a poem written by William Blake for a political movement connected with women's liberation, while decrying the ugliness of industrial progress in England. From the lyrics, you can see that it is a semi-religious patriotic song, based on the myth that the Lord Jesus Christ accompanied his supposed uncle, Joseph of Arimathea, on a business trip to England.

And did those fields in ancient times
Walk upon England's mountains green.
And was the holy lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen
And did the countenance divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark Satanic mills

Bring me my bow of burning gold
Bring me my arrows of desire
Bring me my spears o'clouds unfold
Bring me my chariot of fire
I will not cease from mental fight
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Til we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land

The song featured in the film on the life of Eric Liddell, the olympic gold medallist who became a missionary in China, entitled "Chariot of Fire". I felt it was such a pity that a beautiful and lofty tune should be used for singing a lowly religious-political song. Why not redeem it for singing to a proper hymn? Since I was thinking of an anthem for the Reformed Baptists, why not use this tune? The next step was to compose a suitable hymn for that tune.

I have chosen to compose a hymn based on Psalm 46 - the Psalm that was supposed to have inspired Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God". While Luther's hymn was not a

paraphrase of the Psalm, I choose to keep as closely as possible to the wording of the Psalm. The Psalm consists of three sections, each separated by a pause (“Selah”). The hymn that I come up with is as follows:

Jerusalem city of God,
Whose streams of living water flow;
Make glad the saints with God their Lord,
Redeemed by blood their hearts aglow.
Though nations rage and kingdoms move,
Though Satan’s lies on us deluge,
The Lord of host is e’er with us,
The God of Jacob our refuge.

Is not our God the refuge, strength,
And present help amidst trouble?
Though earth be moved, the mountains shake,
The sea may roar, that all marvel;
Though pain, though trials, and sorrows come,
Though Satan hurls his subterfuge;
The Lord of host is e’er with us,
The God of Jacob our refuge.

Behold the works of God on earth,
Behold the desolations done.
He makes the wars to cease, and breaks
The bow, and spear, the chariots none.
Be still, and know that I am God;
When obstacles appear so huge,
The Lord of host is e’er with us,
The God of Jacob our refuge.

Except for the first line, this is a *tetrametre* (four-beat) poem consisting mostly of *iamb*s (light-heavy, dee-**dum**). The last line of each stanza ends with *trochee* (heavy-light, **dum**-dee, in “refuge”). Some of the lines similarly end with *trochees* - “deluge”, “marvel”, “so huge”. While this may constitute a problem to the purist, I reckon it should be no problem to us since we are singing it. (In fact, I think it should be no problem even when recited.) I was tempted to want to put the first line in *terametre* as well for the sake of symmetry, but decided against it in order to retain the words as a suitable title for the hymn. Afterall, the line is a *hemistich* -in two parts, with two stressed syllables each (Je-**ru**-**sa**-lem - **ci**-ty of **God**).

The first stanza of Psalm 46 is about God being in control of problems arising from nature. The second stanza is an affirmation of God’s presence in the midst of His people. The third stanza is about God being in control of problems arising from the nations. In the hymn, I have chosen to place the second theme first, so that we have the affirmation of God’s presence and help in the midst of the church, followed by the call to trust in God when faced with personal trials as well as trials that come from without.

Do you not think Psalm 46 most suited to be the anthem of the Reformed Baptists? Reformed Baptists uphold the independency of the local church, which is seen as “a garden enclosed”, “a spring shut up”, “a fountain sealed” (Song 4:12). This is related to the restored Garden of Eden, in which the river of water of life proceeds from the throne of God (Rev. 22:1), to which all God’s people are heading. Our spiritual forefathers lived out a radical discipleship such that “outside were

conflicts, inside were fears” - a life we do well to emulate. I offer this rendering of Psalm 46, sung to the tune “Jerusalem”⁶, as our anthem. Of course, our brethren from other communions are welcome to join us in singing this hymn. May this be blessed of God to the revival of His church. Amen.

References

1. On the Great Awakening of the 18th century, see Arnold Dallimore, 1970. *George Whitefield, Vols. 1 & 2*. Banner of Truth Trust.
2. The hymns would have been sung to other tunes, for the composers of *Lyngham* and *Lydia* were not born yet or too young to have composed the tune. The point being made is clear, however.
3. Michael AG Haykin, 1996. *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach*. Reformation Today Trust. pp. pp. 91-96.
4. Whitefield was closely associated with the Wesleys, though they had doctrinal differences in later years. Whitefield also thought well of Isaac Watts. See Dallimore, Vol. 2, p. 253.
5. S. Spurgeon and J. Harrald, 1976. *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography, Vol. 2: The Full Harvest*. A revised edition. Banner of Truth Triust. pp. 288, 299.
6. The tune is available on YouTube, e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ9tXToGEXI>

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