The introduction of evangelical hymns in the Dutch Reformed churches:
The reaction in the Secession of 1834

Introduction

The Secession of 1834 was a movement against liberalism and false church government in the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlands Hervormde Kerk) which resulted in the separation of several congregations from the state church. The Evangelical Hymns (Evangelische Gezangen), the collection of spiritual songs used by the church, played an important role in the Secession, for both in content and in the manner in which they were introduced, the hymns were seen as evidence of deviation from scriptural truths and the Reformed faith. Thus the Evangelical Hymns were a catalyst for the Secession and a factor in the formal decisions of the new congregations. Indeed, the singing of spiritual songs during the worship services was discussed so widely and seriously during the first half of the nineteenth century that the “Gezangenkwestie” (issue concerning the hymns) affected Reformed churches in The Netherlands for generations. The wary attitude towards non-scriptural, manmade compositions became a hallmark of the seceded churches, and was passed on eventually to the Canadian Reformed Churches via the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in The Netherlands and their ancestors, the Reformed Churches (Gereformeerde Kerken).

The Evangelical Hymns consist of 192 spiritual songs composed by European poets of diverse backgrounds. Foremost among the poets represented are Christian Gellert (1715-1769), Friedrich Klopstock (1724-1803), Georg Neumark (1621-1681), Jodocus van Lodenstein (1620-1677), and Isaac Watts (1674-1748). A wide range of subjects is covered, including meditations upon God and his attributes, faith and trust, prayer, and death and immortality. In subject and tone, the songs reflect a variety of theological and philosophical ideas, including Arminianism, rationalism, Puritanism, deism, and tolerance. One unreformed song is Hymn 72, a hymn of blessing for the one who out of sympathy for his fellow man provides help in time of need. The song implies that human capability and endeavour are to be highly regarded.

Particularly disliked by orthodox believers in the nineteenth century was Hymn 31, which begins with the words (in Dutch), “O Mortal, sense thy worth.” Hymn 77 has been called Arminian for its suggestion that salvation can be obtained by human efforts to combine virtue with intelligence and patience. Pietistic elements may be found in the poems written by van Lodenstein, namely Hymns 21, 43, 62, and 68. To be sure, several of the hymns would be approved by even the harshest of Reformed critics, but the overall impression given by the ideas, tone, and diction of the hymns is that they reflect many unorthodox and worldly values of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Leaders of the Secession summarized the shortcomings of the hymnbook by labeling it Remonstrant and supra-naturalistic.

Compiled by a committee appointed by the executive council of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Evangelical Hymns were implemented in 1807 by command of the governors of the provinces. Deeming the input of the churches via broader assemblies unnecessary, the government of the church (“Kerkbestuur”) introduced the hymns with the threat to depose ministers who failed to employ them. Perceived as embodying false teachings that caused the lapsing of the church, the Evangelical Hymns figure prominently in the critical writings of the leaders of the Secession.

Views of the Secession leaders

H.P. Scholte

One of these leaders was H.P. Scholte, who summarized the deterioration of doctrinal and ecclesiastical standards within the Dutch Reformed Church as follows. Due to tolerance and liberalism, unreformed...
teaching and conduct entered the churches. During the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment and much-praised culturalization led people to believe that Reformed teaching was out of date and irrelevant. Consequently, catechism instruction was superficial, and the pulpit no longer served as a means to instruct believers in sound scriptural doctrine. In place of substantial Reformed teaching, ministers promoted a shallow love, peace, and patience that were not based on the double-edged sword of the gospel but on humanist principles.

For Scholte, the declining theological and ecclesiastical standards were revealed in the changed attitude towards the singing of the 150 Psalms, which according to a decision at the Synod of Dordt (1618) were to be sung in the worship services. In a sarcastic tone Scholte writes of the way in which liberal leaders “solved the problem” of singing metrical Psalms. Whereas they could not be abandoned, the Psalms could be “supplemented” by spiritual songs composed in the spirit and tone of the fulfilled gospel – as the liberals put it. Scholte reminds his readers that the church of all times and places sang the Psalms, and that the apostles used the Psalms for the edification of the congregations. In his own day, however, a collection of songs (the Evangelical Hymns) was produced in which “was found all sorts of material for all sorts of singers except Reformed believers.”

Scholte reacts especially to the pathetic tolerance and “so-called love” promoted by modern thinkers. He may have been thinking of Hymn 70, which is about love towards one’s enemies. The poem suppresses the antithesis between righteous and wicked by stressing that love conquers all, and that suffering the onslaught of enemies is a noble virtue. Scholte exposed this and other unreformed teaching in the Evangelical Hymns especially in his catechism sermons. This does not imply, however, that he rejected the singing of hymns altogether, or even that he did not appreciate some of the poems in the collection. He was fond of the poetry of van Lodenstein – despite the admittedly Puritan elements in it – and considered his poems about conflict (in Dutch, the “strijdliederen”) apt for the time of persecution in which he and other orthodox believers lived.

**H. de Cock**

Hendrik de Cock (1801-1842), the most well-known leader of the Secession, influenced believers with strongly-worded brochures in which he attacked also the Evangelical Hymns. One widely-quoted tract is the introduction to a booklet denouncing the collection of songs, in which de Cock describes the Evangelical Hymns as “love-songs of the Sirens, which serve to seduce Reformed believers from the doctrine that leads to salvation.” Just as the Sirens of Greek myth distracted sailors from their true course by means of song and caused their ships to founder on the rocks, so too the Evangelical Hymns, with their attractive heresies, cause Reformed believers to be drawn from their path of orthodoxy.

For de Cock, the Hymns were characterized by notions such as conditional election on the grounds of foreseen faith, universal atonement, partial depravity and other Arminian notions that would appeal to the Christian living during an age when the capabilities of human reason are championed, cultural advances lauded, and tolerance for fellowman promoted. Their content was in conflict with the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity. He called the collection “so-called Evangelical Hymns,” implying that they did not accord with the complete gospel of damnation for the unbeliever and salvation for the righteous. The reader will not be surprised to learn that during the years of the Secession and thereafter, de Cock requested only the singing of Psalms during the worship services.

**A. Brummelkamp**

Anthony Brummelkamp (1811-1888) did not object to the Evangelical Hymns per se, but to the fact that they were foisted upon the congregations, and the stumbling blocks which they threw up for many of the members in the church he served. Readers may recall that no general synod had been held for many years, and the church was being governed by a council. For Brummelkamp this meant that the decisions made at the Synod of Dordt (1618) continued to be valid, including the one that the Psalms of David are to be used during public worship services. In August 1835, when the council of church government in the province Gelderland asked Brummelkamp to confirm that he had announced to the congregation at Hattem he would no longer request the singing of
hymns, Brummelkamp responded by stating that since the spirit and tone of the Evangelical Hymns, and the motivation for introducing them were contrary to Reformed doctrine, there were many believers who could not identify with the spiritual songs, which were a stumbling block. After all, Brummelkamp writes, since he does not know of a decision at a general synod that rescinded the one of Dordt, he did not think that he was acting contrary to church order.4

Brummelkamp realized that the “Gezangenkwestie” (issue concerning the hymns) was becoming a matter that pricked the Christian conscience, and that orthodox members in his congregation objected to the singing of one hymn per service, as required. Some members departed the building before the final song – the hymn – was sung. Others ostentatiously put on their hats, or stood up during the singing of the hymn. Brummelkamp knew that they objected out of concern that false teaching was entering the church through the singing of the Evangelical Hymns. In Brummelkamp’s view, his duty as minister to ensure that all things be done decently and in good order was being compromised by the “Gezangenkwestie,” as chaos resulted from the imposed rule.

One of the considerations of the church government in judging the actions of Rev. Brummelkamp was that he refused to abide by the decision of the provincial synods that as of January 1, 1807, the Evangelical Hymns would be sung during the worship services. Hereby Brummelkamp was opposing the authority of the church government (“Hervormd Kerkbestuur”) that had been instituted in 1816. Yet while the decision was made to punish Brummelkamp for his refusal to prescribe the singing of hymns, Brummelkamp rightly pointed out that the non-singing of hymns was in itself insufficient grounds to depose him. In other words, Brummelkamp knew the proper value that should be assigned to the issue of hymn-singing, and that it was not so much spiritual songs that were at stake, but these particular songs with their unreformed content.

The Secession of 1834

In the Declaration of Secession or Return, which formed the official statement of the seceders, the newly formed congregations express the wish “to direct our public worship services according to the time-honoured ecclesiastical liturgy.” As far as the psalter was concerned, this meant a return to the edition of the metrical Psalms published in 1773. Technically this change was against the synodical regulations, and numerous early worship services of the seceders were interrupted by town mayors, police, or militiamen. In response to the threatened or real disruptions, orthodox believers would sing the standard Calvinist “battle song,” Psalm 68:1, 2. In the Book of Praise, the first verse begins with the words, “God shall arise, and by His might / Put all His enemies to flight...”; the second verse starts thus: “But let the just with joyful voice / In God’s victorious might rejoice...”

Several leaders of the Secession were imprisoned for transgressing laws of church and state. Among them was Scholte, arrested in November 1834. Scholte kept a record of his days in jail, days which ended with Scripture reading, prayer, and the singing of a Psalm. One night, after his soul was encouraged by the singing of Psalm 34, Scholte writes:

“How is it possible that Christians, once they have learned what spiritual need really is, do not find sufficient sustenance in the Psalms of David – that overflowing source of divine consolation – but still desire and strive after human songs that are introduced for the purpose of removing those valuable Psalms from our church! To such an extent can the spirit of the times, with its secular and superficial judgement, mislead the senses.”

As time passed, the seceded churches were tolerated by the government and those appointed to enforce its laws. When the congregations settled, certain practices regarding corporate singing during the worship services developed. While a few congregations reverted to using the archaic versification of Datheen (De Psalmen Davids of 1566), most employed the Staatsberijming of 1773; in a very few places the custom was maintained of singing one hymn per service. Ministers now chose which Psalms were to be sung during the worship services, and abandoned the practice of singing in series, from Psalm 1 to 150. This change caused congregational singing to be linked more closely to the liturgy and the text of the sermon. In general, the return to psalm-singing was due to a conscious effort to return to the Calvinistic roots of the Dutch Reformed
churches, and to the early form of the federation as expressed by the Synod of Dort in 1618. Psalm-singing was a central part of the activities of the seceders, both at home and in public; it gave them a sense of joy, comfort, community, liberation, and unity with the church of all times.

**Conclusions**

It will be clear from the preceding that in the history of singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs the Secession of 1834 was a critical period. The aversion to the *Evangelical Hymns*, which conflicted with biblical teaching and the Reformed confessions in their Arminian and rationalist content, was linked closely to the response of orthodox believers to the liberal trends and increasingly improper government in the Dutch Reformed Church. The first synods of the seceded churches determined that only Psalms would be sung; it must be added that the singing of spiritual songs at events other than the worship services was commonplace. It appears that at gatherings where people of the Secession met with those who had not left the Reformed Church, there was little discord over the matter. This reveals that many of the seceders did not distort the issue concerning the hymns, or ascribe to it greater weight than it deserved.

Yet the Secession did identify the potential for the introduction of heresy via contemporary, manmade spiritual songs. By focusing upon the teaching promoted in particular spiritual songs, the leaders of the Secession drew attention to the trends in philosophy and popular belief that were contrary to the teaching of Scripture and the Reformed faith. Moreover, they alerted believers to the unbiblical language and secular tone of the *Evangelical Hymns*. In identifying the contemporary tendency to join concepts of the Enlightenment to the Reformed faith, the Secession taught the lesson that manmade compositions may introduce ideas current in popular belief or philosophy.

We may also note that the Secession did not oppose the singing of hymns as such; it opposed the contents of the poems included in the *Evangelical Hymns*. Secession leaders did not argue against the use of hymns from Scripture or the confessions; the Bible neither commands nor forbids the singing of spiritual songs. What the seceders did oppose is the unbiblical and unreformed teaching in many of the songs included in the official collection of the Dutch Reformed Church.

The Secession leaders argued positively for the use of the Psalms. In promoting the singing of the Old Testament Psalms, the Secession returned to the Calvinistic origins of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, and to the ecclesiastical principles and practices that were determined at the Synod of Dort. By pointing out that the catholic church has a treasury of songs in the 150 Psalms, by noting the New Testament passages in which the Psalms function in the liturgy and daily life of the early believers, by stressing the redemptive-historical function of the Psalms and the importance of maintaining biblical language, expression and meaning, the churches of the Secession remind us of the abiding value and significance of the Psalms.

R Faber

© 2012

[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)

---

1 For Dr. R. Faber’s previous article on this subject, please see issue 19.


3 Quoted from J. Verhagen, *De Geschiedenis der Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1881), 140.

4 In Officiële Stukken, p. 310-311.

5 In Officiële Stukken, 72.