



Die Arge Gereformeerde Kerk te Pretoria

775 Frates Road
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The Deputies for Liturgical Music
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Dear Brothers

See below our response to your letter sent to the congregations during January 2020.

Singing in the new covenant

Praising God for the riches of the new covenant

1 Introduction

The church council of Pretoria received a letter from Deputies liturgical music, requesting the church council's response to a number of questions, with the purpose to re-evaluate the criteria for extending the hymnal for the churches, as stipulated by Synod 2011.

The purpose of this document is to answer the questions of the deputies, and to come up with some practical proposals.

1.1 Situation in Pretoria

The church council of Pretoria has in the past ratified the decisions of Synod 2011 (and others) concerning the need for hymns. The church council has in the past decided to practise the then approved hymns before the start of the worship service.

There are a number of strong opposing voices in the Pretoria congregation that are convinced that the basis for singing hymns in addition to psalms is against scripture or could even be called heretical. The church council has received a letter with objections from a brother, containing a number of points trying to prove that hymns are against scripture. A commission was appointed to determine which of these objections were new objections, since a number of previous objections were not accepted by synod.

In its meeting of 10 March 2020, the church council discussed the findings of the commission, and decided:

- the church council does not support the objections raised by the brother
- the church council does support that hymns with a good foundation in scriptural principles and doctrine are indeed permissible
- However, seeing the strong feelings against singing hymns in part of the congregation, the church council thought it wise to postpone the singing of hymns for an indefinite period

This committee's work overlapped with the work of the commission, and with the church council meeting and decisions of 10 March, however, church council still thought it worthwhile to answer the original questions of deputies.

2 What is new about the new covenant

The 2011 report of deputies for liturgy made a great contribution towards a biblical view of singing in worship. This vision was adopted by Synod 2011 and new hymns were approved for use in worship services: "it is important that the congregation must live and sing according to the riches of the new covenant. According to this principle it is not merely "acceptable" to add new hymns to the Psalms, but necessary."

This is noticeably clear in the first 3 principles Synod adopted (Acts of Synod 2011, art. 23):

1. The Psalms form the basis of the Hymnal. New hymns that are included in the Hymnal, basically have the function to enlarge the Psalm book. It has the function to add to the Psalm book, not to replace the Psalms or to draw attention away from the Psalms.
2. The above-mentioned entails that hymns that are being added to the Psalms, will be hymns that deal with the "more" of the new covenant. Although in principle almost all God's works are already revealed in the Old Testament (and in the Psalms), it is important that the congregation must live and sing according to the riches of the new covenant. According to this principle it is not merely "acceptable" to add new hymns to the Psalms, but necessary (a practice that is also already known to us through the 'Skrifberymings').
3. To come to a balanced Hymnal for our worship services, it is necessary that this "more" of the new covenant is translated into themes and subjects according to which hymns can be looked for. Instead of evaluating all the hymns that we can possibly find, we think it will be better to look for hymns according to these specific themes and subjects, and even to encourage translations and new hymns on these subjects.

The Synod decision of 2011 speaks of the 'more' of the new covenant.

We want to highlight which doctrines reveal the bright light that shines in the new covenant:

- It is an outpouring of grace and truth in Jesus Christ, according to John 1,14 (ESV): "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." God becoming man: Unique! God suffering the punishment for sins against his holy law: that's unheard of!
- The mystery of Christ, hidden for ages, has been revealed. This brings Paul to songs of praise, and he works this out in the unity of Jews and gentiles (we both have access through the Spirit of Christ, in faith) and in a new lifestyle.
- Jesus made atonement for the sins of his people once for all, with a perfect sacrifice. This sacrifice replaced all animal sacrifices and made them obsolete. (Hebrews 10)
- Jesus poured out his Spirit on his church. His Spirit dwells in all believers. He unites believers with Christ. The New Testament brings out the work of the Holy Spirit in a much deeper way than the Old Testament.
- Jesus' Spirit is the source of new birth and the sanctification of his people.
- The apostles are described as the foundation on which the church is built, together with the prophets of the Old Testament (Eph4). They explain extensively the meaning of Jesus' suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. In order to do justice to this teaching and to praise God accordingly, the major themes in the teaching of the apostles should be represented in our hymnal.

This list is not exhaustive but gives you an impression of the magnificent revelation in the New Testament.

We recommend an article that gives a clear biblical argumentation for the need to sing the riches of the new covenant: 'Exclusive Psalmody or New Covenant Hymnody?' by Lee Irons. It can be found on https://www.the-highway.com/psalmody_Irons.html (still available as of 21 April 2020).

2.1 Unity in covenants and changes in the new covenant

The discussion to add new songs for worship is always affected by the fear that the Psalms will be devalued or might disappear completely. Synod 2011 has recognized this danger but took away this fear in the first principle: (emphasis added)

“The Psalms form the basis of the Hymnal. New hymns that are included in the Hymnal, basically have the function to enlarge the Psalm book. **It has the function to add to the Psalm book, not to replace the Psalms or to draw attention away from the Psalms.**”

Instead of approaching the hymnbook with fear, our churches have decided on a positive approach. This is based on the unity of the covenant we confess in Belgic Confession art 25:

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“We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ.”

We see here that the unity of the covenant guards us against two dangers:

- the danger of replacing the Psalms (“their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ)
- the danger of traditionalism and fear (“the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased” and “the shadows have been fulfilled”.)

What does this mean for the songbook we use to praise God?

Any songs that are added are not meant to replace Psalms that sing about the same theme but complement them with the richness of the new covenant.

When looking at a theme, the decisive criterion is not the number of Psalms we already have on that theme, but the question whether this theme has been **clearly expressed** in terms of the revelation we received in the new Testament. Even hymns about themes covered well in the Old Testament should be considered, because the teaching of the apostles sheds new light on things that were hidden in the shadows during the Old Testament. To give an example: even if we would find 20 Psalms that sing about the atonement, there would still be a need for songs that express the New Testament revelation about the atonement: the Father sending his Son, Jesus suffering and dying on the cross, and the Spirit uniting us with Christ and applying his work to our lives.

2.2 Themes that express the richness of the new covenant

Synod 2011 instructed deputies to “have a (new) look at the list of themes and subjects for our church hymns (Psalms, Skrifberymings, etc) as included in the supplement of the report 2011, with the purpose of possible expansion and improvement.”

Looking at the list of themes suggested in 2011, it strikes us that – with the exception perhaps of only the first two themes - all these themes have undergone a huge change in the New Testament: God gave surprising new revelations, and shed so much more light on these themes that we have

received a great deal of clarity. Hence the image of shadows and light, and Paul’s use of the mystery of Christ that has been revealed after being hidden for centuries.

We are convinced that the clarity and beauty of these truths in the new covenant must be expressed in our songs. In the following table we show what is the richness of the new covenant expressed in these themes:

Theme	What is new about this truth?
The origin of misery	Jesus is the new Adam, obedient where Adam was disobedient, bringing life where Adam’s sin brought death (Romans 5).
Punishment of sin	The cross of Jesus shows the total bankruptcy of sinners. God abandoned Jesus on the cross during the 3 hours of darkness. Jesus called out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” When we sing about God’s presence, we should now praise Jesus that He carried the punishment of hell in our place. This connects to the theme ‘Sacraments’, below.
The Trinity	<p>Belgic Confession art 9 states that we know that God is three in one “both from the testimonies of Holy Scripture and from the respective works of the three Persons, and especially those we perceive in ourselves.”</p> <p>These “respective works” are clearly visible in how God saves us, and especially the Son and the Spirit have a role that was not so clear in the Old Testament. Art 9. also mentions this:</p> <p><i>“we must observe the distinct offices and works of these three Persons towards us. The Father is called our Creator by His power; the Son is our Saviour and Redeemer by His blood; the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier by His dwelling in our hearts.”</i></p> <p>Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit is one of the most surprising new developments in the new covenant, which is hardly mentioned in the Psalms. Therefore, the work of the Holy Spirit was identified by Synod 2011 as a separate theme that needs more attention in our hymn book. See below.</p> <p>When we praise God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for the role they play in our salvation, we should do this in the way that reflects the richness of how God revealed himself in the New Testament!</p>
Providence of God	The New Testament reveals more about God’s providence in the world and especially his great care for his church until the return of Jesus. See further under the them ‘Ascension’, below.
Satisfaction: Christ’s atonement	Paul’s multiple explanations of the atonement that Jesus accomplished are the glorious highlights of revelation in the NT and a central part of Reformed theology. The book of Hebrews has explained the true meaning of the animal sacrifices, the temple, and the high priest (which are the images used in the Psalms): they are all about Christ.

	<p>His precious blood by which he made atonement is a strong motivation for believers to live a holy life (1Peter1,17-21).</p>
Death, burial, descent into hell	<p>Especially the death of Jesus was one of the things the disciples could not understand or accept. Jesus had to teach them repeatedly that his suffering, death, and resurrection were foresaid by the prophets and Psalms.</p>
Resurrection of Jesus	<p>The resurrection of Jesus was prophesied in the Old Testament. The Psalms that speak about his resurrection (Ps 16, 22 and 49) do so in the limited understanding and the shadow-language of the Old Testament.</p> <p>It was the centre of the Apostolic preaching. Romans, First Corinthians, and Hebrews teach how fundamental Jesus' resurrection is for our justification, sanctification, and our hope for the future (glorification).</p>
Resurrection of our bodies	<p>The glorious news of Jesus' resurrection and the resurrection of our bodies is one of the great surprises of the new covenant.</p> <p>When Jesus was raised from the dead, he was the first fruits, guaranteeing our resurrection and the total victory over death (1Cor15,20-28)</p> <p>Songs about the glory of Jesus' resurrection, his power raising us to a new life, and the promise of our resurrection do much more justice to God's full revelation!</p>
Ascension	<p>Jesus was glorified as a reward for his suffering and death.</p> <p>Seated at God's right hand, he pleads for us as high priest and rules over the world and over the church as king.</p> <p>He is present in heaven with his glorified human body, a guarantee for our resurrection.</p> <p>He receives divine glory from the angels in heaven.</p> <p>So, Jesus rules until he has submitted everything to the Father (1Cor15,20-28)). He brings judgments on the earth and calls unbelievers to repentance. From heaven he also protects and grows his church. We can praise him as king, express our trust and our expectation of his second coming much more clearly in our songs.</p>
God the Holy Spirit	<p>He is to be praised together with the Father and the Son (Nicene Creed). This is what we should do in our songs.</p> <p>God commands believers to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus in Ephesians 5. This is followed by a specific command to speak to each other in song and to thank God for everything in the name of Jesus: <i>"Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for</i></p>

	<p><i>everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Eph5,18-20) We cannot ignore this connection.</i></p> <p>See also what we wrote about the Trinity, above.</p> <p>The Holy Spirit is Jesus’ gift to his church after his resurrection. He unites us with him. And he gives believers a new heart, leading to a new love and obedience, impossible in the old covenant (Ezek36 and Jer31).</p>
The communion of the saints	<p>The OT shows a lot of idolatry and fighting within the people of God (some ‘enemies’ in the Psalms are within the church), but the New Testament gives the new reality in Christ (book of Acts) and instructions for the church to live in unity and love: Eph4 and 5, Col ..</p> <p><i>Under this theme, the following themes need to get attention in the hymn book: Christian love, unity in the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit in the congregation.</i></p>
Justification	<p>The OT often gives the impression that the believer is justified by living a righteous life (Ps 15; 24); this must always be explained with reference to Christ. We have several songs praising the beauty of the law, but very few that reflect Paul’s teaching of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Romans and Galatians.</p>
Sacraments	<p>We have only a few songs that can be sung after a baptism. Psalm 105 and SB 14 are popular, and SB 15 is limited in how it applies.</p> <p>The symbolism of baptism, namely of being buried with Christ and raised with him to a new life, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit can be expressed much clearer in songs.</p> <p>Everything that is said about the atonement applies also to songs for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. We celebrate his presence at his table, and he feeds us with his body and blood. We need joyful songs that clearly express this.</p>
The need for good works	<p>Jesus’ Spirit is the source of new birth and the subsequent renewal of his people.</p> <p>See above, work of the Holy Spirit.</p>
Predestination	<p>In the OT, this is mainly limited to Abraham and Israel. It is only in the NT that the full width and depth of God’s election is explained. Ephesians 1 and Romans 9-11 offer glorious truths that we need to sing!</p>
Proclaim the gospel, the good news of Jesus in the world	<p>The beauty of the gospel truths in the NT results in multiple commands to bring the gospel to all nations, especially Mt28,18-20. Only songs made after the Psalms can contain these commands.</p> <p>In the time the Psalms were written, ‘the nations’ were Israel’s enemies and often mentioned as such. There are some indications in the prophets that ‘the nations will come’ to Zion, but this remains in the shadows. The relationship of Christians to unbelievers is quite different from the relationship between Jews and gentiles. We have now received the revelation that the promise of Gen12 (God will</p>

	<p>bless the nations through the seed of Abraham) was fulfilled by Jesus, see Gal3,9 etc. We need to sing about this!</p>
<p>Songs for special services: baptism, confession of faith, marriage ceremony, and ordaining of office bearers</p>	<p>See above: sacraments and communion of saints.</p> <p>Marriage: marriage reflects the relationship between Jesus and his bride (Ephesians 5). This is quite a revelation!</p> <p>Office bearers: Jesus gave different office bearers to the church than we find in the Old Testament (Ephesians 4)</p>

2.3 New themes to be considered

There are some other themes that were not mentioned in 2011. It brings glory to God and adds to the joy of believers if they sing about the following glorious truths, as well:

4. **The Christian life and the fruit of the Spirit.** The call to a holy life is amplified in the New Testament by pointing us to the sacrifice of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is an expansion of the theme ‘the Holy Spirit’ above.
5. **Perseverance of the saints and the armour of God** in the fight against the devil.
6. **Jesus’ return:** we are called to await his return with expectation. Joyful singing is part of expressing our expectation. The final judgment is in the hands of our saviour. Therefore, we look forward to the final judgment without fear and we call the world to repent and believe in him.
7. **Prayer** (intercession by Jesus and the Holy Spirit praying with our Spirit (Romans 8)).
8. **Comfort when believers die:** the certainty that they will immediately be with Christ is taught in Philippians 1 and 1 Thessalonians 4 for our comfort. Therefore, it would be very helpful to sing songs that express this comfort at funerals. This is in addition to the theme ‘the resurrection of our bodies’ above and should be distinguished because it is immediate.

Please consider this in your report to Synod.

3 Answers to the questions posed by deputies

In this paragraph we are answering the specific questions that deputies posed.

3.1 Answers

- **Was the model chosen in 2011 really understood by the churches?**
Answer: The model is clear enough in the purpose, and the restriction around choosing new hymns. The lack of action by the churches may be partly due to a lack of understanding and partly due to strong resistance against hymns.
- **Was the model adequately described in the Deputies report of 2011? The theological basis for the shortcomings at each theme was not described in the deputies’ report.**
Answer: The model was adequately described, but the theological basis for the themes they proposed could have been described more fully in the report. We provided this theological basis in paragraph 2, above.
- **Was the model an ideal too high to be reachable?**
Answer: No, the model is not an ideal too high to be reachable. In paragraph 2, we offer biblical reasons and depth to the vision and themes accepted in 2011. Deputies, however, were too optimistic to expect the churches to identify new themes and hymns. They should have carried out that task themselves, with optional input from the

churches.

- **Is it because the matter does not live in the churches?**

Answer: There are differences of opinion around introducing new hymns in the liturgy. However, Synod 2011 has made a decision to add hymns that deal with the “more” of the new covenant. This path is biblical and does justice to the glorious revelation of Jesus, his work, and his Spirit in the New Testament. It is a biblical principle that his people should glorify God in their singing according to the way he has revealed himself. Resisting the singing of hymns does not do justice to this principle. A lack of interest within the churches does not carry any weight after Synod has made a decision. In line with article 30 of the church order, decisions about our song book are of common interest to the churches. In article 31, all churches agreed to accept Synod decisions, and nobody has substantiated that the 2011 decision was unscriptural.

- **Do we have the WILLPOWER AND CAPACITY in the churches to execute this project according to the specific model?**

Answer: we are a small bond of churches and do indeed have limited capacity. Nevertheless, we are convinced that this is not impossible if deputies use the Canadian Book of Praise as their starting point and co-opt help from members, as we propose in par. 4.3. The question of willpower should not even come up, if we are convinced that this is for the further glory of the Triune God.

- **Is it fair to continue this project if what is necessary to execute it is missing?**

Answer: this is a reformulation of the previous question, so the same answer applies.

3.2 Concluding remarks

The questions as originally asked by synod 2017 seem to probe why deputies did not receive any contributions from congregations and conclude with questions asking if we should even continue with this path. In our opinion there were a couple of reasons why no congregations came with proposals:

- It was not clear to our church council (and most likely to other church councils, as well) that deputies expected proposals for new themes and hymns from them. The expectation might have been that deputies *themselves* would take responsibility for this task (of course welcoming all contributions and proposals). This was therefore never a point on the agenda.
- The strong opinions of several members of the congregation (including some members of church council) led to the church council of Pretoria delaying the singing of the proposed hymns during worship services. If not even the 10 new hymns are being sung, it does not encourage members to spend energy on new proposals!

You might get the impression that there are many people objecting to hymns, there is also a considerable part of the congregation that advocates for the expansion of our liturgy with hymns, as well as a large part of members without strong opinions for or against.

4 Proposals

We are convinced that our churches need to recommit themselves to the vision of singing about the “more” (the richness) of the new covenant.

We propose:

9. that the churches continue without hesitation and delay on the path chosen by Synod 2011 for the following reasons:

- This path is biblical and does justice to the glorious revelation of Jesus, his work, and his Spirit in the New Testament. It is a biblical principle that his people should glorify God in their singing according to the way he has revealed himself. Resisting the singing of hymns does not do justice to this principle.
- We have agreed to accept Synod decisions (art 31) and nobody has proven that the 2011 decision was unscriptural.
- We need to be very wary of the mindset that new songs are dangerous, and the Psalms are 'safe'. Deputies for liturgy 2011 made an especially important argument which we quote in full here:
"We have to be careful not to associate the term 'Skrifberyming' with something good and the term 'Gesang' with something wrong per se. Any hymn (Psalms, Skrifberymings en Gesange) is not literally the original Scripture text, and therefore an interpretation of the Scripture passage(s). Some 'Gesange' is a mixture of a few direct Scripture passages, while some 'Skrifberymings' is a free and loose versification of a Scripture passage (e.g. some of the new 'Skrifberymings' that have been included in the Psalm book in 2009). All hymns are susceptible to false doctrine. The important factor is that all hymns (Psalms, Skrifberymings en Gesange) must be tested according to the doctrine of Scripture and must be saturated with Scripture. Therefore, these terms do not constitute something good or bad in itself, but the differentiation it wants to show is useful." Synod 2011 adopted this view.

10. That Deputies make the following proposal in their report to synod (reasons following):

To instruct deputies to compose a document that clearly shows the biblical reasons for singing hymns. This document should also address the objections that have been raised over the years, plus the reasons why these objections were rejected by synod.
 To instruct deputies to present the biblical view of Psalms and hymns as adopted by Synod 2011, in order to teach members who believe that the singing of hymns is against the will of the Lord, clarifying to the congregations the underpinnings of the decisions.

- Synod 2011 approved the singing of hymns and dealt with the objections after many years of discussion. This decision of synod still stands. We do have congregations where hymns already are part of the liturgy. It serves the unity of the churches when they share the same practice of singing Psalms and hymns.
- The grounds for the decision to add hymns to the songbook is not clear to all members. This leads to misperceptions about the motivation behind singing hymns which cause divisions.

11. That Deputies add a proposal to their report to synod:

To instruct deputies to use the Canadian Book of Praise as the primary source to select additional hymns.

- Synod 2011 also decided to approve the Canadian Book of Praise for general use. The Book of Praise has been used by our Canadian sister churches for many years and has been updated and expanded in 2014 after a careful process.

- There is a considerable overlap between some of their hymns and the Skrifberymings we already have in use. Where additional hymns are identified, translations into Afrikaans can be identified.
- These translations can then be measured against the criteria and principles adopted by Synod 2011. In the case of multiple translations, the best and most faithful translation can be chosen.
- Furthermore, we propose that the deputies co-opt additional volunteers to help with this task. This will ensure that the deputies don't necessarily have to do all the work themselves, but can play more of a coordinating role, ensuring that the volunteers each have a predefined amount of work, check that it is done according to the adopted criteria and principles.

12. That Deputies add the following new themes to the list of themes to be proposed to Synod:

(As mentioned in par. 2.3. See there for a description.)

- The Christian life and the fruit of the Spirit
- perseverance of the saints and the armour of God in the fight against the devil
- Jesus rules as king and we are called to await his return with expectation.
- Prayer (intercession by Jesus and the Holy Spirit praying with our Spirit (Romans 8).
- Comfort in the certainty of being with Christ when believers die.
- Christian love, unity in the Spirit and gifts of the Spirit in the congregation (see par. 2.3., where we added this cluster under the theme "the communion of the saints".

With brotherly greetings, in Christ

On behalf of the consistory



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