

Anarchy in worship in the Free Church of Scotland

1. Introduction

This paper contrasts certain innovations in worship with the constitution of the Free Church of Scotland, and the vows of her office-bearers. It borrows very heavily upon the work of James Begg, Doctor of Divinity, published in 1875, called “Anarchy in Worship or Recent Innovations Contrasted with the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church and the Vows of her Office-Bearers.” A great deal of water has passed under the bridge since Dr. Begg’s day, and one might ask what relevance Dr. Begg’s words might have for the Free Church of the twenty-first century. The most obvious connection is that both then and now it is the same God who is worshipped, the same unchanged Word overarching the centuries. Though greatly decimated since Dr. Begg’s day it is the same Free Church in which he played such an important role. Furthermore, the Constitution of the Free Church in the twenty-first century is for the most part unchanged from 1843. The Westminster Confession of Faith, then as now, is the major document summarising what we believe about the Bible. So it is that we hope to return to the old ways described by such giants of the Scottish church as Dr. Begg. It is true that Dr. Begg had many failings in common with us, yet we may be grateful that such a man lived and wrote, and that we are able to evaluate and consider his words, applying them to our hearts and praying God for a very Berean spirit (Acts 17:11).

“Every true minister of the Gospel is a watchman, as well as a pastor, and all Christians are bound to defend truth and purity, to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ, and to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints, When men act on other principles, Christianity is but a name, a “salt that has lost its savour.” Still men trifle with religion. Amidst hollow professions some would, in a bad sense, make “the best of both worlds,” and instead of coming into collision with sin and ungodliness, they would fain run quietly on opposite rails so as to avoid collision. Even true Christians sometimes seek to anticipate the rest of heaven by resting unlawfully here. The wise as well as the foolish virgins sometimes “slumber and sleep,” forgetting the solemn warning, “Woe unto you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers of the false prophets.” Thus begins Dr. Begg’s work “Anarchy in Worship”.

2. Thou shalt not commit idolatry

According to Dr. Begg the Free Church in the 1870's was rife with doctrinal and other problems. Various innovations in worship were being brought in; amongst other innovations there was hymn singing, as well as the inclusion of mechanical instruments of music. That these things would arouse to passion a great theologian of the Scottish Church may appear surprising to a modern reader. Certainly, a good paraphrase of Scripture set to music, or some other hymn, is lovely and often edifying poetry. Certainly, organs are but one of many mechanical instruments that can be used to the glory of God. Whatever we do ought to be for the glory of God. Organ playing and the writing of edifying poetry that agrees with Scripture rank highly with other works. But everything in its proper place; one would not find it humorous if a brilliant footballer were to claim that his gifts in the game mean that every worship service should begin as a sports clinic, nor did Dr. Begg consider it a trifle that hymns and organs were being used in the Church. In reading Dr. Begg’s comment we ought not to judge with some modernistic yardstick, as if Dr. Begg were a killjoy or wet-blanket for

turning away from high culture in worship. There is a higher reason than mere prejudice that animated the pen with which he wrote. To Dr. Begg it was a grave occasion that caused him to put pen to paper, and lash out forcefully against innovations and the various innovators. In our age we have lost somewhat of the Scriptural view of worship. Should we regain it we would find less interest in the techniques of drawing crowds, than in drawing the approval of our Father in heaven. The good news is that we can regain the Scriptural view - it is taught in the Scriptures and summarised in our Constitution. It is to these that Dr. Begg begs the attention of Christian people, especially those in the Scottish church. His booklet, "Anarchy in Worship," begins by considering exactly what is the doctrine of Scripture in regard to the acceptable way of worshipping God. It was a very sad indictment of the then state of the Free Church of Scotland that Dr. Begg felt impelled to instruct in detail regarding the acceptable way of worshipping God. And it was a shame that although he wrote to a general audience, the audience upon whom he hoped to have the greatest influence were his fellow office-bearers, men in the Free Church who either wavered in defence or had already departed from the Constitution. Men unschooled in the Bible might be expected to run after their inventions, but office-bearers in the Free Church are men who own the Westminster Confession as the confession of their faith, and who swear they know better about their Lord and His desires regarding worship. Of all men they ought to be the most cautious and seek the face of God alone in determining "Wherewithal shall I come before God, and bow myself before the Most High."⁽¹⁾ The detailed Scriptural proof to answer this question has been provided in numerous places by our forefathers⁽²⁾, and Dr. Begg provides a short summary of the Scriptural teaching. Here it will suffice to summarise from the Confession and Catechisms which form the Constitution of the Free Church of Scotland. The Larger Catechism lays down the principle that the second commandment forbids "all devising, counseling, commanding, using, and anywise approving any religious worship not instituted by God Himself."⁽³⁾ Dr. Begg felt it was important to italicise the words "not instituted by God Himself." The shorter catechism declares that the second commandment "Forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word."⁽⁴⁾ Dr. Begg here italicises "not appointed in His Word." It is obvious that these summaries of Scriptural teaching permit only that which God has appointed, and therefore forbid what He has not appointed. A child who is asked by the parent to buy a kilogram of sugar, and only a kilogram of sugar, and returns with bags of potato chips can no more claim ignorance of the fathers' will than can the Christian who innovates in worship. He exclaims indignantly regarding his illicit and innovative purchase with his fathers' currency, "But Father did not *forbid* me!" Yet this is precisely the foolishness that men have resorted to so that they can justify their innovations. This is not according to the Bible, but is the principle of the Romish communion-: as long as the Scriptures do not expressly forbid an innovation in worship, and that the said innovation is in harmony with the general tenor of Scripture, then it is permissible. "Many Presbyterians at present are so profoundly ignorant in regard to this whole controversy, that they argue as if this were the principle of their own Church and of Scripture; and they ask, with a foolish and stupefied air of triumph, where God has "prohibited" instrumental music and other corruptions of worship under the New Testament dispensation."⁽⁵⁾ Today the times are not unlike the 1870's, when innovators from within wounded the Church, and thus the cause of Christ. James Begg dared to speak up, in spite of the opposition from those who preferred a kind of peace that appeased the innovators rather than facing them. John Knox, that great man who preached gospel fire into the blood and muscles of his listeners famously declared, "All worshipping, honouring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without His own express commandment, is idolatry."⁽⁶⁾ We ought not to forget this.

3.The Constitution is clear

The teacher proclaimed “there is nothing new under the sun”. Generations have passed by, and another has come which seeks to innovate in the worship of God. They ask where has God prohibited the singing of hymns in worship, where has God prohibited the singing of portions of Scripture other than the psalms he appointed? But we beg for a *prescription* of God that makes it so, not Romish sounding appeals to *prohibition*. It is not that those engaged in innovative worship are ignorant of the Scriptures, for they profess it is the Word of God; they simply do not agree that the practise and Constitution are in agreement with the Scriptures⁽⁷⁾. It is sometimes contended that these issues of worship are unclear and vague, and it is best not to be dogmatic about them, since this allows for various differences of expression from congregation to congregation. Furthermore, flexibility with respect to worship is certainly not the case in the written confessional standards of the Free Church, standards that all office-bearers have vowed to uphold before God and man. Any interested person may examine these documents to see if what is written here is so. The Constitution of the Free Church of Scotland is particularly clear on the issue of worship, assigning to it a clarity appropriate to its importance in the life of the Christian Church. The teaching of Scripture as summarised in the Constitution is clear on this issue, as Dr. Begg asserts and writes, “Starting from the general principle of Scripture thus explained in regard to worship, its application is simple. What worship has God “prescribed” under the New Testament dispensation, the temple and all its services being done away?”⁽⁸⁾ The principle Dr. Begg speaks of has been illumined above, namely, that any worship not instituted by God Himself is forbidden in Christian worship. In answer to what it is that God has prescribed, all else being forbidden, Dr. Begg does not go into needless semantic arguments, or clever twisting of words. That is what we believe the innovators require in order to attempt their self-justifications. In answer to the question Dr. Begg simply quotes from the Constitution: “What worship has God “prescribed” under the New Testament dispensation...? This is set forth with equal plainness in the Westminster Confession of Faith, c. 21, s. 5, “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the word in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart, as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God; besides religious oaths and vows, solemn fastings and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are in their several times and seasons to be used in a holy and religious manner.” Anything else or different from this, and especially anything borrowed from heathenism or the abolished temple-service - as pretended priests, altars, altar-cloths, incense, symbolical vestments, or instrumental music- are entirely without divine warrant, and therefore unlawful.”⁽⁹⁾ We believe that we have Scriptural warrant for saying that God requires these authorised elements of worship mentioned in the Constitution, and our principle rejects as unlawful any additions. Additions to the list of prescribed worship would require amendments to the Constitution. Of course, one could simply claim the Constitution allows a certain addition, and simply go ahead and make it so in practice. But such changes require constitutional due process as well as amendments to the Constitution. Additions to prescribed worship are not properly introduced through congregational fiat, at least not in a Presbyterian Church. The Constitution of the Free Church is plain and simple to understand in regards to worship; those intent on innovating cannot honestly argue otherwise, and must find a different vein of interpretation in order to add to what the constitution authorises.

Dr. Begg continues, “It is worthy of observation not only that this is the only appointed worship under the New Testament, but that it was undoubtedly the worship practised by the Apostles and early Christians. The very meaning of our being Presbyterians, moreover, as distinguished from Congregationalists, is that the details of worship shall be uniform, and settled by a central authority, so that in going from church to church, as from room to room in one great house, we shall not be distracted in our devotions by diversity and individual crotchets, as when “there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” (Cf. Jud. 17:6f.; 21:25). To this “uniformity,” as well as purity of worship, all the office-bearers of the Presbyterian Church are solemnly pledged. They are bound to follow “no divisive courses;” although it is notable and painful at present to find that many are setting this obligation at defiance.”⁽¹⁰⁾ It should be mentioned that sometimes these obligations are set in defiance through the unchristian and dishonest expedient of simply calling good bad. By proclaiming that one is orthodox it is possible to slowly but steadily bring in all sorts of innovations. This is unacceptable in the Christian Church, but it does happen. Thus one minister may say that he is for purity of worship, and the addition of nothing but what the Bible and Constitution allows. Then one discovers that the session of their Church allows songs other than the psalms specified by the Constitution⁽¹¹⁾, and their minister publically proclaims that the real innovators are those who dare sing psalms only in worship⁽¹²⁾.

4. The death of Confessional Presbyterianism

Immediately prior to ordination as office-bearers in the Free Church of Scotland the following questions are put to the candidate:

- “1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and the only rule of faith and manners?”
2. Do you sincerely own and declare the Confession of Faith, approved by former General Assemblies of this Church, to be the confession of your faith; and do you own the doctrine therein contained to be the true doctrine, which you will constantly adhere to?”
3. Do you own and acknowledge the Presbyterian Church Government of this Church, by Kirk-Sessions, Presbyteries, Provincial Synods, and General Assemblies, to be the only government of this Church; and do you engage to submit thereto, concur therewith, and not to endeavour, directly or indirectly, the prejudice or subversion thereof?”
4. Do you believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, as King and Head of the Church, has therein appointed a government in the hands of Church-officers, distinct from, and not subordinate in its own province to, civil government, and that the Civil Magistrate does not possess jurisdiction or authoritative control over the regulation of the affairs of Christ’s Church; and do you approve of the general principles embodied in the Claim, Declaration and Protest, adopted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1842, and in the Protest of Ministers and Elders, Commissioners from Presbyteries to the General Assembly, read in the presence of the Royal Commissioner on 18th May 1843, as declaring the views that are sanctioned by the Word of God, and the standards of this Church, with respect to the spirituality and freedom of the Church of Christ, and her subjection to Him as he only Head and to His Word as her only standard?”
5. Do you promise to observe uniformity of worship and of the administration of all public ordinances within this Church, as the same are at present performed and allowed?”
6. Do you accept the office of an Elder [Deacon] of this Congregation and promise, through grace, faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully, to discharge all duties thereof?”⁽¹³⁾

I would like to draw attention to the portion marked five, which speaks of promising to “observe uniformity of worship”. All office-bearers in the Free Church of Scotland subscribe to the following formula at the time of their admission to office:

“I, -----, do hereby declare, that I do sincerely own and believe the whole doctrine contained in the Confession of Faith, approved by former General Assemblies of this Church to be the truths of God; and I do own the same as the confession of my faith; as likewise I do own the purity of worship presently authorized and practised in the Free Church of Scotland, and also the Presbyterian government and discipline thereof; which doctrine, worship, and Church government, I am persuaded, are founded on the Word of God, and agreeable thereto: I also approve of the general principles respecting the jurisdiction of the Church, and her subjection to Christ as her only Head, which are contained in the Claim of Right and in the Protest referred to me in the questions already put to me; and I promise that, through the grace of God, I shall firmly and constantly adhere to the same, and to the utmost of my power shall, in my station, assert, maintain, and defend the said doctrine, worship, discipline, and government of this Church, by Kirk-Sessions, Presbyteries, Provincial Synods, and General Assemblies, together with the liberty and exclusive jurisdiction thereof; and I promise that I shall follow no divisive course from the doctrine, worship, discipline, government, and exclusive jurisdiction of this Church, renouncing all doctrines, tenets, and opinions whatsoever, contrary to, or inconsistent with, the said doctrine, worship, discipline, government, or jurisdiction of the same.”⁽¹⁴⁾

In regard to worship in the Free Church of Scotland the Constitution is very plain and easy to understand. The vows office-bearers make at ordination in no way are supposed to set aside the Constitution, and cannot honestly be used for this purpose. No, instead it is the ordination vows that are qualified by the Constitution, and the vows profess to uphold this same constitution. The quote from the Westminster Confession of Faith (in the previous section of this paper) goes so far as to define the very parts of worship that God has prescribed. All that is not mentioned in that list is not acceptable worship, at least according to office-bearers in the Free Church of Scotland, who swear that this is their confession. Whatever one may believe about worship, it ought to be plain that office-bearers in the Free Church of Scotland have willingly sworn to uphold the purity of worship as practised by that Church, which practise is defined by the Constitution (cf. The above vows, and the elements listed in the Confession ch. 21, sec. 5). Office-bearers have sworn that the only acceptable public worship offered to the Lord is that which He has prescribed, and therefore all additions to the prescribed elements of worship listed in the confession are unlawful.

After proving from Scripture that the only acceptable worship is that which God has appointed, Dr. Begg writes, “Now we are not proving this for the sake of the office-bearers of the Presbyterian Church. They have all solemnly vowed that, according to their convictions, these are the principles of Scripture which they will defend to the utmost of their power. To do anything else therefore, to make any other profession, without abandoning the office which they received in connection with their previous avowal, is simply an act of perjury, fitted to bring disgrace on the Christian Church, and to give the enemies of truth cause to blaspheme. Every Presbyterian office-bearer is as much bound as we are to maintain and vindicate these principles, and neither directly nor indirectly to connive at their subversion. We live, however, unfortunately, in a day when “truce breaking” (cf.

L.C. 145) is not uncommon; and when many, instead of following “no divisive courses,” according to their solemn vows, seem to make the promotion of innovations in the worship of God one of their favourite employments. Religion is wounded in the house of her friends. We can imagine nothing more fitted to eat like a canker into the faith and morals of the community. For the sake of others, therefore, and especially of the Christian people at large, we feel bound to speak.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Our times are, if anything, even worse than in Dr. Begg’s day. If innovations are held forth as congregational liberties then the Free Church is in grave and mortal danger. In the past few years many good men have left the Church or been evicted. Without attempting to pass judgement on their other motives, no doubt part of the cause of this has been, at least on the part of some, the attempt to address some of these problem areas. Many good men remain. However, the overriding desire for peace has resulted in many ministers being silent presumably to avoid collisions. But even this appears to be contrary to the solemn vows of office-bearers, who swear to “assert, maintain and defend the purity of worship as presently practised in this Church.” No doubt a great part of the problem is that the training at the college level is not what it ought to have been, in that it has not asserted, maintained, or defended purity of worship. At least one minister with whom I have spoken has vehemently asserted that he would never have become an office-bearer if in worship the Free Church of Scotland only used the inspired materials of praise found in the Psalter. Where would this man get such an idea, for it is foreign to the Constitution? It is well known that at the Free Church college, which was ostensibly created for the training of Free Church ministers, and the propagation and promotion of Free Church principles, students will encounter teachings contrary to the Constitution. For example, they will hear from teachers that psalm singing is merely an obscurantist tradition⁽¹⁶⁾. Notwithstanding the mystique of the relationship between professor and student, I still find it hard to imagine how office-bearers who have passed through such a theological training have somehow managed to justify to themselves the taking of vows with which they do not agree, or with which they are uncomfortable. For how can one believe a Constitution which says that in worship only that which is “instituted by God Himself” is acceptable, and which follows up with the list of that which God has “instituted” (WCF. ch. 21, sec. 5), and yet somehow still come away feeling that it is acceptable to bring other additions into worship. It is terribly grievous that some office-bearers have somehow convinced themselves that respecting worship, the words of the Constitution can be interpreted to mean that hymns may be admitted. It is true that sincerely cherished desires sometimes lead men to believe contrary doctrines. It is true, but it is not right, and it ought to be pointed out. The words in the Constitution have meanings that are not easily subject to reinterpretation. Some may be offended that there are actually office-bearers who really believe that the Constitution is according to Scripture, who take the very letter and spirit of these vows to be serious and solemn, and who take steps to fulfill them. If the vows of office-bearers were at all lawful, then the real offence comes through those who fail to uphold their vows by failing to assert, maintain and defend the same against the innovators. Christ Jesus, in whose name the vows were sworn, will expect honesty of his servants. By all means, we are to seek peace, and be peacemakers; but the sincere and good desire for peace never, never, is at the price of holiness (Romans 12:18; Hebrews 12:14). Such peace is the peace of a graveyard and dead men’s bones. A Constitution that exists only on paper, but not in practice, has been violated and is a dead document. The irony is that those who impose corrupt worship practices are likely to be the same ones who think of the Constitution as an “organic document” to be interpreted as the times require. Many voices may cry out against those seeking to fulfill their vows and uphold the constitution. Those who shout loudest

might appeal to the xenophobic or racist card, that it is incomers who seek to change the Constitution and force people to follow “obscuranist” worship practices. The reader may judge for himself who is telling the truth. Dr. Begg writes, “The purity of worship practised in the Presbyterian Church ever since the Reformation has not been thrust upon her from without. It has been the result of her own view of Scripture, and of her own deliberate choice; nay, it has been maintained by a determined and heroic struggle for ages on the part of her noblest sons. The appointment of all her ministers, besides, is only made conditionally; the condition being that, before their settlement, or acquiring any rights, they shall vow and subscribe their adherence to all her distinctive principles and peculiarities. To allege that they may afterwards set these avowals at defiance, and still retain their offices, is to outrage morality and overthrow the liberty of the Church and her congregations. No man is forced to become one of her ministers. All enter into office and take the necessary vows with the most unconstrained freedom; and if they are afterwards dissatisfied, and wish to introduce novelties, they are at the most perfect liberty to withdraw and join a more congenial fellowship. Honest men, on finding that they cannot fulfil their vows, will surely adopt this alternative, -- will withdraw and take the consequences.”⁽¹⁷⁾

It is not only purity of worship that is being attacked, but the very idea of a Presbyterian Church is endangered. “The present state of things cannot continue. Men speak of liberty, but “liberty” can only exist where it is regulated by law. If every man or every majority in a congregation are to do as they please, Presbyterianism is impossible, and the liberty of some is the bondage of the rest.”⁽¹⁸⁾

5. The purpose of the innovators

One may wonder why it is that innovators and their innovations have so troubled the Church in the past and in the present. What is it that motivates this sort of person? One only needs to look into ones’ own heart for an answer. We find in Scripture numerous examples from which one may deduce the improper motives that innovators have followed. Scripture teaches that all men are innovators by nature, and desire, like Cain, the worship that is well pleasing to them. With this caution in mind we note the list Dr. Begg compiles in his booklet:

- a. The presumptuous and blasphemous innovator (e.g. Numbers 16)
- b. The popularity hunting innovator (e.g. Exodus 32)
- c. The politic and scheming innovator (e.g. 1 Kings 12:25-13:5)
- d. The aesthetic innovator (cf. 2 Timothy 3:4 with 2 Samuel 7:2; 1 Chronicles 17:1)
- e. The well-meaning innovator (e.g. 1 Samuel 15:22,23)

Present innovations of the twenty-first century Free Church of Scotland may be considered small. The vast majority of congregations sing psalms only in worship, so why should one make a fuss over the innovations of a few? The answer to this lies in the fact that office-bearers in the Church have sworn off all innovation; these vows are either binding or they are meaningless. They lose all power if they are malleable and subject to fashionable reinterpretation. “It is vain to say that the “innovations” at present in question are small. Even if this were true, it would only form an aggravation of the offence, as proving to how small a temptation men have yielded in their rage to novelty and change. We must not forget that their vow in the sight of God is not merely to avoid great changes. They have solemnly vowed to follow “no divisive courses” from the worship which has been authorised and practised in the Church; but, on the contrary, to defend that worship “to the

utmost of their power.”⁽¹⁹⁾

In our Presbyterian government does it belong to the authority of individual sessions to add or remove aspects of approved worship? The Act against innovation in the worship of God (Act 15, 1707), to which all office-bearers in the Free Church of Scotland are pledged, testifies: “The General Assembly taking to their serious consideration that the purity of religion, and particularly of Divine worship and uniformity therein, is a signal blessing to the Church of God, and that it hath been the great happiness of this Church, ever since her reformation from Popery, to have enjoyed and maintained the same in a great measure, and that any attempts made for the introduction of innovations in the worship of God therein have been of fatal and dangerous consequence: Likeas, by the 5th Act of the Parliament anno 1690 and 23d Act of Parliament 1693, and the Act lately passed for the security of the present Church Establishment, *the foresaid purity and uniformity of worship are expressly provided for*, and being well informed by representataives sent from several presbyteries of this Church that innovations, particularly in the public worship of God, are of late set up in some places in public assemblies within their respective bounds, and that endeavours are used to promote the same by persons of known disaffection to the present establishment both of Church and State; *the introduction whereof was not so much as attempted during the late Prelacy*. And considering also that such innovations are dangerous to this Church, and manifestly contrary to our *known principle (which is, that nothing is to be admitted in the worship of God but what is prescribed in the Holy Scriptures)*, to the constant practice of this Church, and against the good and laudable laws made since the late happy Revolution for establishing and securing the same in her doctrine, worship, discipline and government, and that they tend to the fomenting of schism and division, to the disturbance of the peace and quiet both of Church and State. Therefore the General Assembly, moved with zeal for the glory of God, and the purity and uniformity of His worship, *doth hereby discharge the practice of all such innovations in Divine worship within this Church*, and does require and obtest all the ministers of this Church, especially those in whose bounds any such innovations are, or may happen to be, to represent to their people the evil thereof, and seriously to exhort them to beware of them, and to deal with all such as do practise the same in order to their recovery and reformation, and do instruct and empower the commission of this Assembly to use all proper means, by applying to the Government or otherwise, for suppressing or removing all such innovations, and preventing the evils and dangers that may ensue thereupon to this Church.”

One novel argument regarding materials of praise makes much over the fact that the Constitution uses the word ‘psalms’ when speaking of materials of praise, rather than the word ‘Psalms’, with a capital ‘P’. This is used to prove that other songs are allowed besides the psalms of David approved by previous Assemblies. More ingenious is the tack taken by the session of the Dundee Free Church of Scotland. On their public world wide web page it is declared, “We sing scripture accapella. There are several reasons for this and perhaps one day on this website I will explain why we do this. However there are certain advantages in this practice – we know that whatever we sing is from God, it is simple and when done well, with four part harmonies, it can be really beautiful. There is also something quite appealing about singing words that are thousands of years old. We mainly sing the psalms of the Bible, although at times we do sing other parts of Scripture. We are led by precentors and we also have a worship group who are responsible for teaching us new tunes and bible songs.”⁽²⁰⁾ This innovation is interesting, if only because its advocates argue boldly that what they do is in accord with the Constitution. Perhaps they even believe that they are fulfilling their vows by fighting

against an exclusive psalmody. Indeed, the minister at Dundee argues that to sing psalms only in worship, as a matter of principle, is an innovation contrary to Scripture⁽²¹⁾. It appears that what has happened is that the Free Church has tolerated different views in worship, so that to some the practice of excluding psalms **is** what they consider to be authorised Free Church worship in accord with the Constitution. We would argue that the Constitution defines practice, and in the constitution the only songs one finds that are authorised for use in worship are the psalms contained in the Divine Book of Praise. However, should the Constitution be perceived to be in error when compared to Scripture then one ought to make corrections, because our final authority is the Scripture. But does it belong to individual congregations to enforce their perceived ‘corrections’ without one piece of legislation, or amendment to the present Constitution? Is a session allowed to add to the list of appointed worship found in the Constitution, by appending to “the singing of psalms”⁽²²⁾, the singing of “bible songs” based on any portion of Scripture? How bad can that be? This innovation would be applauded by the majority of Christendom as going in the right direction, although not far enough.

A Church whose office-bearers have not sworn any vows regarding purity of worship is surely entitled to innovate as they please, whether it is to introduce liturgical dance or the chanting of the book of Romans. God is their judge regarding the rightness or wrongness of their position. But for those who have willingly and publically submitted to a Constitution which anyone can read and understand, such liberties do not exist. The Session of the Dundee Church at one time swore that nothing is to be admitted in worship except that which is appointed by God. They swore to admit only the elements mentioned in the Constitution, and now they aver the opposite. One must ask, “Did you not swear to uphold that same Confession of Faith quoted from above?” Can the Dundee Session demonstrate how the “bible songs” they sing are the same ‘psalms’ that the Constitution recommends to our use, or how these innovative additions to worship are appointed by God? And can their minister go beyond his bold claim and actually demonstrate to the Church that exclusive psalmody is an innovation contrary to the Constitution? Scripture teaches that God’s prescription alone is the standard by which to judge the visible parts of Christian worship. One is not required to prove that liturgical dance, or hymns, or any of the uncountable hordes of innovations is forbidden; they are forbidden because there is no prescription. Can the Dundee session find the prescription in the Word of God that justifies why they **set aside** a psalm of David, prescribed by God as a song of praise, for a song of their own choosing, even if it be based on Scripture or in agreement with Scriptural teaching? However Scripturally sound our songs may be, if God has not commanded that we use them, then we dare not set aside what God has prescribed, for that would be will-worship. God’s prescription trumps all other reasons, for if we love Him and desire to please Him then we will follow His commandments (1 John 3:21-24).

Innovators may seek justification somehow in referring to the historical fact that such innovations have been tolerated in the past, as in Dr. Begg’s days, or in our days. Or they may temporarily ignore the Constitution, and refer to the words the presiding minister speaks at ordinations, “It is my duty to explain to you, and also to the Congregation here present, with reference to that part of the question which will be put to you as to ‘Purity of Worship as presently practised in this Church’ that, in 1910, the General Assembly reaffirmed the legislation of the Church as to uniformity in public worship going back to the year 1707; and that, in accordance with that legislation, it is the present practice of the Free Church to avoid the use in public worship of uninspired materials of praise as also of instrumental music. Such present practice determines the purity of worship to the maintenance of which the Ordinand pledges himself.”⁽²³⁾

Perhaps here a loophole is perceived? Perhaps one can focus on these words read by the presiding minister, and somehow use this to reinterpret the plain meaning and reading of the Constitution. What is the meaning of 'inspired materials of praise', and can the meaning be construed as allowing "bible songs" in addition to the 'psalms' spoken of in the Constitution? Rev. Hector Cameron deals with this interesting play on the words read by the presiding minister, "In the contrasting expression, 'inspired materials of praise,' the 1910 men set forth, of course, their own standard of practice. They meant such songs of praise, presumably, as occurred in Scripture in the very form of songs of praise: this in distinction from 'human hymns,' or from songs based upon passages of Scripture which, while making no claims themselves originally to being poetic texts, had been processed into metrical shape."⁽²⁴⁾ Materials of praise that are inspired are simply those songs that are found in the Bible. We have no right or prescription whatsoever to manufacture "bible songs" from passages of Scripture that take our fancy, as is the Dundee position. We require more than fancy or good intentions or the desire to mouth the word "Jesus" to dare offer God these "bible songs"; we need to find Divine appointment, and there is none for this innovation. What we can be sure of is that the entire collection of inspired materials of praise found in the psalm book alone that stand out as having the sign of divine appointment for worship, and so it is not a surprise that only these are approved in the Confessional standards.⁽²⁵⁾

6. Conclusion

It is important to realise that no matter what aberrations have been tolerated in Free Church worship, the Constitution has remained unchanged. It has remained unchanged, and office-bearers continue to swear to uphold it. What has happened is that Presbytery, Synod, and Assembly do not enforce the Constitution.

"The sum and substance, therefore, of the whole argument from Scripture is, that no worship should be offered to God, except such as He himself has "appointed." There must be simple, absolute, unquestioning obedience to God. This cannot be too strongly pressed in the present day, when men in defiance of Scripture and their own solemn engagements are attempting to "improve" the worship of God by their own inventions."⁽²⁶⁾

What is a Church to do? In the final part of his booklet Dr. Begg challenges the Church courts to apply the Constitution, "...if the office-bearers of the Churches follow a carnal policy, and impose vows which they allow to be disregarded, and the Church, instead of the citadel of truth, becomes a stronghold of corruption and falsehood, not only must the Church Establishment become indefensible, but such a state of things must eat as doth a canker, and there is a dark prospect before our land and our children."⁽²⁷⁾

Footnotes

1. Micah 6:6 states the question the King of Moab asked.
2. For example, see the following works
 - William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, London, Banner of Truth, 1967, pp. 27, 31ff.
 - John Calvin, *Institutes*, Beveridge Edition, I.II.2; I.IV.3; IV.X.8; I.X.13, I.XII.1 etc.

- James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, London, Banner of Truth, 1974, pp. 337-338.
- John Owen, *Works*, London, Banner of Truth, 1966, vol. XIII, pp.473ff.

3. L.C. 109

4. S.C. 51

5. Begg, James, *Anarchy in Worship*, Lyon and Gemmell, George IV Bridge, Edinburgh, 1875, pp. 6,7.

6. Ibid. p.7

7. For example, Donald Macleod, Principal of the Free Church College in Edinburgh writes, **“Attempts...to exclude all spiritual songs except the psalms (the Free Church way) are intolerable violations of our congregational liberties”**, Footnotes, West Highland Free Press, Friday, 6 September 1996, p.7. It should be noted that uniformity of worship is a Presbyterian distinctive, rather than this focus on congregational self-expression, which is a characteristic of a Congregational Church.

8. Begg, p.13.

9. Ibid., p.13.

10. Ibid., p.14.

11. Dundee web page at <http://www.stpeters-dundee.org.uk>

12. The full text written by Rev. David A. Robertson is off the Free Church message board found at <http://members3.boardhost.com/Freechurch/msg/4106.html>

To avoid misquoting the whole post is included, but we wish to draw attention to the final paragraph.
“Re: Inspired psalmody

Posted by David A. Robertson on 20/10/2001, 11:47 am, in reply to "Re: Inspired psalmody"

62.31.64.2

Dear Naomi,

I am sorry that you do not understand. It should not be that difficult. On the basis that it is better to sing the inspired' Word of God rather than 'uninspired' songs the Free Church legislates for the singing of 'inspired materials of praise'. Within that we have freedom to sing 1650 or modern psalms, other parts of Scripture etc.

I do not inhabit the black and white world you seem to live in where everything is uniform and either right or wrong. There are some things indifferent and there are some things that Christians can disagree about without forming new denominations over every single hair-splitting issue. For example within the Free Church we have freedom to use different translations of the Bible, use different types of music etc. We do not legislate on that because the bible does not do so and we are not entitled to bind men's consciences over things that the bible does not.

Which brings me to your second question - what is the biblical basis for singing other parts of the Word of God? The same basis on which we sing psalms - that it is the inspired word of God. There is also the absence of any command to sing psalms only, and the indisputable fact that the saints in heaven sing other songs. Plus there is no doubt that the NT churches sang

other songs as well - although one could argue that these were 'charismatic' and directly inspired.

It is the imposition of tradition upon the Church without any warrant from the Word of God that we have to resist. The desire to limit Gods people to singing psalms only is a human innovation contrary to the Word of God - which is why I cannot support it - although I support fully the idea that we should sing the psalms - but not exclusively. “ Compare these comments to Act I, 1910, Anent Public Worship, and Act V, Class II, 1932 which acts define purity of worship as practiced in the Free Church in terms of exclusive Psalmody without the use of musical instruments. We should allow the possibility that Rev. Robertson is confused on these matters, for in another place he claims that the Free Church allows office bearers to adopt his own understanding of the constitution and vows, or they may adopt the “exclusive psalmody” position.

13. From *“The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland in her several courts”*, Revised eighth edition, Knox Press, Edinburgh, 1995, p. 151.

14. Ibid., pp.153,154.

15. Begg, pp. 12, 13.

16. Rev. Donald MacLeod, Principal of the Free Church College, is quite infamous for numerous statements regarding his dissatisfaction with Free Church worship. The West Highland Free Press, Footnotes Column, contains a repository which can be searched for scores of such examples.

17. Begg, pp.44,45.

18. Ibid. P.46

19. Ibid. P.45.

20. The Dundee website can be accessed via the main Free Church of Scotland website at <http://www.freechurch.org> and also at <http://www.stpeters-dundee.org.uk>

21. See Footnote (12).

22. Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 21, section 5. “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the word in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart, as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God; besides religious oaths and vows, solemn fastings and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are in their several times and seasons to be used in a holy and religious manner.”

23. From *“The Practice of the Free Church of Scotland in her several courts”*, Revised eighth edition, Knox Press, Edinburgh, 1995, p.150.

24. Cameron, Hector, Purity Of Worship, in (ed.) Donald MacLeod, *Hold Fast Your Confession*. The full quote is as follows: **“We have an objection thus on our hands, and its merits it is only fair we should test. Take the matter of 'uninspired materials of praise' first. Did the 1707 Act against innovations have anything at all to do with uninspired materials of praise? In the contrasting expression, 'inspired materials of praise,' the 1910 men set forth, of course, their own standard of practice. They meant such songs of praise, presumably, as occurred in Scripture in the very form of songs of praise: this in distinction from 'human hymns,' or, from songs based upon passages of Scripture which, while making no claims themselves originally to being poetic texts, had been processed into metrical shape. Indeed, if Dr. Alexander Stewart can be taken as typical of the 1910 Assembly, it was the Book of Psalms itself, almost certainly, which was in mind. Dr. Stewart's history of the Free Church, from Disruption times till 1910,**

represented virtually the official version of this exercise. Of Free Church worship at that time (1910) he wrote: 'The Free Church confines herself to the words of Inspiration ... the hymns of the Holy Ghost. He then proceeds immediately to speak about 'objections to the Psalter as a manual of New Testament praise,' identifying in his own thought, the hymns of the Holy Ghost with the Book of Psalms, without including other Scripture songs.'

25. See *The Scriptural Warrant Respecting Song in the Public Worship of God*, by John Murray and William Young. This article may be found at <http://truworship.netfirms.com>

26. Begg, *ibid.* p.28.

27. *Ibid.* p.47.