

**The Evangelical Repository, Vol II, 1843, p 249-251,
concerning *A Discourse on Psalmody*,
delivered at Bethel Church, Laurens District, S. C., Aug. 2, 1841,
by Rev. W. R. Hemphill**

A Review by Joseph T. Cooper

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It appears that this discourse is two years old, though we had not the pleasure of seeing it until lately. We are well acquainted with the author, and are happy to find that in it he has displayed his characteristic strength of mind. He evidently understands his subject, and has not failed to present the claims to an inspired psalmody in a strong and convincing light. We were, however, sorry to find so much of the sermon taken up in criticizing the poetry of Dr. Watts. This mode of treating the subject presents it in a false light. For our part, while there are some places in our version that will admit of no improvement, and are unsurpassed as specimens of poetic taste, there many others which we think ought to be improved, and we are disposed to believe that the churches which make use of them are chargeable with no little delinquency in not attempting it at least. If we have a poetic version, let us make the poetry as good as possible. Now to assert that the poetry of our version is as good as it can be made, is a mere assumption. Have there been no improvements in the English language since the time of Rouse? Have no words become obsolete? Does every word possess the same number of syllables which it then did? No one will assert this. Let any one take up a poem that was written at the same time in which our version was written, and will he not, if he have any poetic taste, pronounce it inferior? He can scarcely read it without a smile. Why then should we not expect to find the same peculiarities in the version of Rouse? It is true that these peculiarities do not strike those who have been accustomed to the use of our version; but the reason is evident: constant use has rendered them familiar, and consequently less offensive to the taste. But put this version into the hands of one who has never before seen it, and the effect of it upon his mind will be apparent in a moment. We were sometimes called when itinerating to preach in those places where our version had never before been used, and we invariably found the Precentor to labour under a difficulty in reading it. Indeed, we have heard a great many ministers in our own church lamenting these defects. Now we would ask, is there any necessity that these obsolete phrases and deficiencies in metre should be continued? If this can be shown, we are silent, for if our version were ten-fold more defective than it is at present, it should not be displaced for any mere imitation or uninspired system of psalmody; for we regard the matter as of infinitely greater importance than the manner. But we are by no means prepared to admit this necessity, and indeed it ought not to be asserted, until the attempt be made. We do not wish to see a new version. We only wish our present version to be altered and amended in such a way as not to offend the taste of those who have not become so familiar with it as to appreciate its intrinsic worth, and to disregard its poetic deficiencies. Is it replied that the taste of such persons should not be consulted. This we deny. We believe that we are

under a solemn obligation to accommodate ourselves to it in so far as is consistent with faithfulness. If Paul felt it to be his duty to become all things to all men, why should not we? Surely the Christian who desires to win souls to Christ and to the knowledge and love of the truth, will make it a matter of conscience to conduct himself in such a way as not to excite a repulsive feeling in the mind.

Perhaps we may be told, that if we begin to alter, we shall not stop until we get to an imitation. This objection implies that our attachment to an inspired psalmody is merely an attachment to a certain set of words and phrases, and that when these are relinquished, we are prepared to sing the hymns of Dr. Watts. Well, we have only to say, that we would not like as an advocate for the use of David's psalms to urge an objection containing such an implication; we would wish it to be considered that our attachment to these psalms was based on a higher ground than this, namely, the authority of Jehovah, a ground from which we would not be removed by any change in the version.

Besides ought we not to consider that the use of the present version in its present form by the church may be the occasion of the disuse of an inspired psalmody by many who otherwise might have continued to use it, and of the refusal by many who otherwise might have adopted it? This we think is a serious consideration. What is the reason that it is such a rare circumstance for any to connect himself with the Associate church, who has not been habituated to our mode of worship? Is it not evidently owing in a great measure to the peculiarity of our psalms? Now, if this hindrance can be taken out of the way without a violation of any scriptural principle, are we not under a solemn obligation to do so? Should it not be an object with us to operate upon the natives of our own country? But it is well known that our influence, especially in the cities, is scarcely felt among such, and we have not the least hesitation in saying that this is owing in a great measure to the peculiarity of our psalmody.

The impression almost invariably made upon the mind of a stranger is, that the worship is peculiarly adapted to the Scotch and Irish, and this impression will be not a little strengthened by the appearance of the worshippers. Now in making this remark, great injustice will be done us if we are viewed as making any invidious distinction between Americans and foreigners. Were we to do so we would be reflecting dishonour upon ourselves, for both Irish and Scotch blood flows in our veins, and we have been too long acquainted with persons of both nations to be blind to their worth and intelligence. But as we are an American church, should we not make it a point to operate upon the natives of this country? Should we not seek to have our influence so directed that it will tell upon the sons of the soil where our standard has been planted and unfurled? Is it not a duty which we owe to the country of our birth or adoption? We think that this subject is deserving of our serious consideration.

In addition to this we would beg leave to suggest to our brethren the inquiry; whether, independent of the consequences to which we have adverted, the use of a version wanting in poetic excellence is consistent with that reverence and decorum that should characterize the worship of God? The Jews were prohibited from presenting in sacrifice to the Lord "the blind or broken or maimed." Now it is perhaps worthy of consideration whether the singing of lines defective in poetic excellence does not come under this prohibition. The sacrifice was not only to be an animal of a certain sort, but this animal must be perfect. Can we say that our sacrifices are always of this character

when we offer up to God “the calves of our lips?” And does it not become us to render them as perfect in this respect as a close adherence to the original will justify?

We think it highly probable that we have excited the prejudices of some of our brethren. If such has been the case, we cannot help it. If we are in an error, we are certainly open to conviction, and shall endeavour to weigh with deliberation any reasons that may be advanced to show that the ground we have taken is not supported by scripture and reason. Allowance may be made for prejudices that are not injurious to the general interests of the church: when this is the case, we think such prejudices should be opposed, and we are disposed to think that it is high time that prejudices on this subject should meet with opposition. We are free to confess that any alteration should be made with the greatest care, and for our own part a few slight amendments are all that we would desire, though if an entire version superior to the one that we now have were presented it should be received. This subject is assuming an importance which it did not heretofore possess, from the disposition that is manifested by some of the General Assembly, to return to the use of a scripture psalmody. We think it altogether improbable that our version in its present form will ever be adopted. The committee who reported on the subject declared that “after mature deliberation and a full examination of the subject they are of the opinion that an acceptable, literal and metrical version of them, could not at present be attained.” Now if these gentlemen were desirous of obtaining such a version as we are bound in charity to believe, is it not highly probable that our version would have been more “acceptable,” had it been improved in poetic excellence; and might it not have been adopted by them instead of the prose translation which we have reason to fear will not obtain general use in their churches. Let us think on this subject as its present importance demands. It is a subject in which we feel a deep interest, for we have no reason to expect true prosperity in the church, so long as the effusions of uninspired men occupy the place of the words of Jehovah.