Singing the Psalms through adversity: the Czechs

Indigenous Reformers

But it was another purchase at one of those stores that I keep returning to decades later. This was a small, thick volume called Malý Kancionál, or Little Hymnal, published in 1900 by the Unity of the Brethren, also variously known as the Bohemian Brethren, the Moravian Brethren and the Unitas Fratrum, founded by Jan Hus at the start of the 15th century. On the front cover is a stylized illustration of a chalice, a prominent Flusite symbol, stemming from their championing the right of the laity to receive the Eucharistic cup along with the bread to which ordinary believers were at that time restricted. Inside the covers I found a complete metrical psalter, along with some 350 hymns – a psalter hymnal, in short. This sat on my shelf for nearly a decade before I discovered the significance of this book. The 150 Psalms are in fact set to the Genevan tunes, as used in the Swiss, Dutch, Hungarian and other Reformed churches. I had had no idea that Czechs has ever sung these, but obviously some did. Where did they come from?

A few years ago I learned the full story. Jiří Strejč (also known as Georg Vetter, 1536-1599), was a Brethren minister born in Zábřeh in Moravia. Strejč studied in Tübingen and Königsberg, where he came into contact with the Psalter of Ambrosius Lobwasser, a professor of jurisprudence at the university there. Strejč was so favourably impressed by Lobwasser’s German translation of the Genevan Psalter that he decided to model his own Czech version on it, an undertaking he completed in 1587. Strejč is probably best known for his German-language hymn text, Mit Freuden Zart, familiar in English as Sing Praise to God, Who Reigns

The experience of Czech Christians singing the Psalms is inextricably linked to the Reformation. May God grant that Hus’s abortive efforts and Strejč’s metrical psalter, Czech Christians have a solid basis on which to reinvigorate their church life of Czech protestants by way of Strejč.

The Charles Bridge in Prague.

Above, the tune to which comes from the Bohemian Brethren’s Kirchengesänge (1566) and bears more than a passing resemblance to that of Genevan Psalm 138. Whether Strejč and Lobwasser ever met I have been unable to determine, but the latter’s psalter would come to influence the liturgical life of Czech Protestants by way of Strejč.

The modern Czech Republic is a largely secular society with abysmally low rates of church attendance, a condition undoubtedly exacerbated by four decades of communist misrule. Nevertheless, possessing such a rich heritage in Dvořák’s Biblical Songs and Strejč’s metrical psalter, Czech Christians have a solid basis on which to reinvigorate their church life six centuries after Jan Hus’s abortive efforts at reformation. May God grant that Hus’s work finally come to fruition in the churches of the Czech Republic.

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A Church body without bodies?

Over the past years, some people have begun to establish “virtual churches” online. Virtual worlds, like the one called “Second Life,” allow people to immerse themselves in computer-simulated environments using a graphical representation of their character called an avatar. In these virtual spaces, people direct their avatars to do the same things they do in the real world, such as traveling, using and building things, and interacting with other avatars. But what about attending a virtual church? Should churches embrace this new medium and worship as digital flocks in a virtual world?

Several years ago Flamingo Road Church established an Internet Campus and an Internet Campus pastor. Another online church, LifeChurch.tv, offers several online “weekly worship experiences” and has bought “real estate” in Second Life and built a church with seating for avatars to attend church. There are numerous other virtual churches such as St. Pixels, i-church and the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life. Supporters of virtual churches point to the millions of people in cyberspace, most of whom are unchurched. Simon Jenkins, one of the early virtual church pioneers, observed “It’s like someone has created a new town and no one has thought to build a church there. It’s almost scandalous.”

But can a virtual church really be a true church? The Belgic Confession teaches that the true marks of the church include the preaching of the word, the administration of the sacraments and the practice of church discipline. It seems plausible that one could preach the word and share the gospel in a virtual world, but what about the sacraments? Already, there have been virtual baptisms and virtual communion services online. Another question is whether the koinonia of a physical community can be reproduced online. Is there something distinctive about real physical interactions or might they one day become indistinguishable from virtual experiences? Should missions agencies associated with denominations like the Christian Reformed Church send church planters into Second Life?

New mission field?

In his book, SimChurch, Douglas Estes explores what the theology of “virtual church” might look like. Estes suggests that there are no Biblical directives that would forbid establishing a virtual church. In fact, he argues that Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman at the well place the emphasis in worship not on physical place or geography, but rather in the Spirit and in truth (John 4:20-24).

In contrast, several writers on the topic of faith and technology warn about the impoverished form of community and presence in cyberspace. Tim Challies writes in his book The Next Story that cyberspace is “a space that is really no ‘place’ at all.” Shane Hips notes in his book Flickering Pixels that social networks give the illusion of intimacy but at a level that is just enough to act as a substitute for real intimacy.

Douglas Groothuis, in his book The Soul in Cyberspace, writes that virtuality should not “beguile us into mistaking connectivity for community.” Brad Kallenberg provides an even stronger critique in his book God and Gadgets where he argues that human communication requires three conditions: time, place and bodies, things that technology “bewitches us into thinking we can ignore.” There are also concerns specific to virtual worlds: encountering avatars engaging in perverse activities, the separation of physicality and identity and the possibility of having multiple personas.

As technology continues to advance, there may come a point when we are able to see, smell, touch and move about in virtual environments that remove the boundaries of place and the restrictions that apply to our physicality. Once physical senses are captured and reproduced with fidelity in a virtual world, the arguments for a virtual church may become more challenging to refute.

Can a virtual church be an authentic church? Can there be a body of believers that meets without bodies? My instinct tells me that even in our high-tech world, there is something important about our bodies and about physical community. As we enter lent, we are reminded of Christ, the Word made flesh, who gave his physical body as a sacrifice and later rose bodily from the grave. And one day, we will live forever, not as disembodied spirits in an ethereal heaven, but with new physical bodies in a new heaven and earth.

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