

The Music Herald

“Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”

Colossians 3:16

No Unready Rhymer

Almost every English speaker today who has grown up in church knows the lines that begin, “All people that on earth do dwell.” A metrical setting of Psalm 100, this text is by far the most enduring of all metrical Psalms and is equally beloved by both Psalm singers and hymn singers alike.

But while the text itself is well known, the history of how it came about and the important figure who penned it have remained in relative obscurity. The author’s name was William Kethe. His story is an inspiring one, and he contributed much to the heritage that many of us as children of the Protestant Reformation enjoy today.

The date of Kethe’s birth is unknown, but he was into his adulthood by the late 1540s and by this time was already a preacher of the Gospel. A staunch Reformer of Scottish birth, he lived in England and was allowed free course to preach during the reign of the young Protestant king, Edward VI (1547-1553).

But when Edward’s early death brought his zealously papist sister, Bloody Mary, to the throne in July of 1553, Kethe’s course was altered. As early as August of the same year, serious discussions began taking place among Protestant preachers, planning a Protestant migration from England. And by January of 1554 this plan was being put into action. Some went to France and some to Germany.

These men, who have come to be known to history as the “Marian exiles,” were not fleeing in terror as some have supposed. Instead, this was a well-conceived, comprehensive migration that was designed not only to spare their lives from Mary’s sword but also to bring them to a place where they could discuss and prepare for a transformation of England according to God’s Word, both politically and religiously.

Kethe did not take his leave until December of 1554. He and his wife then traveled to Frankfort, Germany, where one of the colonies had formed. Here in the colonies of Germany and France, the Marian exiles began to preach and write, describing and advocating a transformation of England’s civil government and her church, bringing them into accordance with the Bible.

During these days in Frankfort, a touching scene was enacted each evening. The peal of a bell would call printers, artisans, merchants, students, and noblemen to cease from their daily activities, gather their families, and make their way through the streets to the church. There they would draw from their aprons and cloaks English metrical Psalters, recently written by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins. In this day, the new Psalter was still incomplete and

contained only forty-four Psalms, but this number William Kethe was destined to increase. The Lord had given him a particular ability in rhyming, such that he would one day be styled by a historian “no unready rhymer.”

But for now, the forty-four were all the people had. The tune for one of these precious few Psalms would then be raised, and the exiled voices of men, women, and children would mingle in the comforting, strengthening words of the Psalm. After the strains had died away, a preacher would rise and address the assembly from the Scripture. Then another heartfelt Psalm would close the meeting, and the exiles would make their way back to their homes. Many later testified of the great source of blessing and strength this was in those difficult days.

Despite such sweet scenes as this, the Marian exiles were far from a cohesive unit, and there was much division and quarreling within colonies and between colonies, and there were many errors and shortcomings in their work. But God’s grace was present to overrule, and many of their efforts were blessed and did much to advance genuine obedience to God’s Word in all of life.

Eventually in August and September of 1555, disagreements and quarrels led a man named William Whittingham, brother-in-law to John Calvin, to take several of the exiles and depart from Frankfort. Among those who departed with him was William Kethe. While most of those who left joined the Genevan exiles, it is believed that Kethe went with another who left with him, the famous historian of Christian martyrs John Foxe, to join the exiles in Basel. There Foxe labored on his remarkable book, and there it seems Kethe remained in his company for about a year.

It is notable that the exiles had control of the printing presses in Germany, something that was never achieved in France. This cooperation of preacher and printer was what one historian has called a “formidable alliance” and an “irresistible combination.” The published writings, coinciding with and reinforcing the preaching from the pulpit, proved to be a powerful influence in the work of reformation.

In November of 1556, Kethe and his wife left Basel to join the former Frankfort exiles in Geneva, joining the congregation of one of them, another name well known to history, John Knox. Here Kethe settled for a length of time and gave himself to writing and preaching. Here he contributed to one of the greatest achievements of the day, the translation of the Geneva Bible, the first English Bible to be translated entirely from the original languages. Whittingham, whom Kethe had followed from Frankfort, was

one of the chief translators of this Bible. The Geneva Bible was completed in 1560 and was the great force behind the English Reformation. It was also the Bible brought to the shores of America in the hands of the *Mayflower* passengers.

It was also here in Geneva that Kethe accomplished his work that is most remembered today. Kethe arrived in Geneva just in time to see an enlarged edition of the English Psalter published in 1556. Whittingham again, who had led the group of Frankfort exiles to Geneva and was spearheading the translation of the Geneva Bible, had also spent his year there putting seven new Psalms into meter and thus increasing the collection, which was published in 1556. Whittingham had now been joined by two other exiles, Robert Wisdom and John Pullain, to work on yet another edition which would add fourteen more metrical Psalms to the collection, which was to be published in 1560.

During these years, Kethe became recognized among the exiles for his unique ability to write poetry. "No unready rhymers," he began writing powerful pamphlets for the Protestant cause entirely in metrical verse. In 1558, he wrote a metrical version of Psalm 94, which was published in a tract written by John Knox. It was clearly applied to the case of the exiles under the persecution of Queen Mary, whom they called "Jezebel." It reads in part:

O LORD, since vengeance doth to thee,
And to none else belong:
Now show thyself, O LORD our GOD,
With speed revenge our wrong.

The widow and the stranger both
They murder cruelly:
The fatherless they put to death,
And cause they know none why.

But blessed is the man, O LORD,
Whom thou dost bring in awe;
And teachest him by this thy rod
To love and fear thy law.

But yet the LORD is my refuge,
In all those dangers deep:
And GOD the Rock is of mine hope,
Who doth me always keep.

He will reward their wickedness,
And in his wrath them kill:
Yea, them destroy shall GOD our LORD,
For he both can and will.

The Lord was fearfully swift in sending His answer to this prayer for vengeance. Mary was stricken with illness and died in November that very year. She was succeeded by her sister Elizabeth I.

Great rejoicing followed hard upon the hearing of this news. The exiles began, one by one, to

return to their homeland and institute the civil and religious reforms they had conceived in their exile.

Kethe, like the others, prepared to return to England. He drafted a letter of farewell from Geneva in May of 1560. But by this time his "readiness to rhyme" had become central to the work of increasing the metrical Psalter. He did not leave but stayed on until 1561 when a new Psalter edition appeared, with twenty-five new Psalms all from the pen of Kethe. Among these was the crowning work of his life, the now almost universally known Psalm 100:

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with fear, His praise forth tell;
Come ye before Him and rejoice.

This remarkable Psalm has circled the globe and brought countless blessings to countless souls through the centuries. It has brought comfort in distress, joy in sorrow, strength in weakness, assurance in doubt, and has formed the expression of gratitude in bounty and praise in joy. It has been sung in churches, in homes, in open fields. It is suitable at every occasion and can be heard alike on the lips of kings and commoners.

Kethe went on to live many more years and to lead a useful life. He returned to England to serve as a preacher in Okeford in southern England. Elizabeth, though her reign did much to advance Protestantism, cared more for politics than religion and was no committed friend of the true Reformers. Kethe's work caused her "to issue out" against him "angry declarations of her mind." Yet he labored on and twice served her as an army chaplain during military campaigns. The qualities of "courage, steadfastness, and laboriousness" were applied to him in those days.

Kethe's useful life drew to a close in the late 1500s or early 1600s. Like the day of his birth, the day of his death is unknown. Though the man himself and many facts about him have been lost to history, the work that the Lord was pleased to do through him has endured, and the words that flowed from his ready pen are still sung somewhere every Sunday. This is rare indeed. Even of the other metrical Psalms in the collection, none has survived so long or so well as Kethe's Psalm 100. It is the oldest metrical Psalm that has been in continuous use since its publication.

Kethe's Psalm 100 is indeed a treasure, a treasure of poetic beauty, of musical strength, of noble history, of Godly heritage, and chiefly of the enduring truth of Scripture itself. As the ready rhymers himself says:

His truth at all times firmly stood,
And shall from age to age endure.

“All People That on Earth Do Dwell”

The tune to Kethe’s Psalm 100 is as remarkable as the text, and even older by a few years. “Old Hundred” first appeared in Geneva in 1552, attached not to Psalm 100 but to the French metrical version of Psalm 134. In fact, it is due to the power and beauty of Kethe’s Psalm 100 that the tune is today called “Old Hundred” and not “Old Hundred and Thirty-Fourth.” The later-appearing Psalm 100 became the text associated with the tune, and together, tune and text have been the most enduring of all Psalm tunes and texts.

We have devoted an entire newsletter to this tune before, but here we will briefly discuss some of its features. We will begin with this brilliant description of its melody by William Henry Havergal. William Havergal was the father of the hymn writer Frances Havergal and was a scholar of music. He said of “Old Hundred”:

“The symmetry of the tune . . . is remarkably beautiful. . . . Among all the psalter tunes there is not one which is formed after the model of this tune. In no collection of tunes, whether foreign or domestic, has the writer of these lines ever discovered even one which resembles it in point of rhythmic structure.

“1. Each of its four strains comprises four long and four short notes; uniformly but peculiarly disposed. 2. The first note of each strain, to suit a line of eight syllables, is long, the next four short, and the remaining three long. 3. But the three concluding long notes of each strain seem to bear a certain symmetrical melodic relation to each other. 4. In the first strain, they **rise** in close succession; in the second they **fall**. 5. In the third and fourth strain, precisely the same alternation is kept up.

“The peculiar progression of the long and short notes in each strain, may be compared to the progress of a boat when breasting a succession of billows at sea. First, poised for a moment on the top of a wave, it rapidly descends; then, steadily labors up; is poised again, and so proceeds.”

It is interesting to note that, in Kethe’s day, “Old Hundred” was sung at a very sprightly tempo, perhaps more fitting for the joyful text of Psalm 100 than the tempo at which it is normally sung today. Queen Elizabeth referred to it and the other Geneva Psalm tunes as “Geneva jiggs,” an indication of how lively those Psalm tunes were. Also, “Old Hundred” was originally called “Jubilate Deo” and was used as a model tune for “Psalms of praise and cheerfulness.”

Most of Kethe’s metrical Psalms became part of the Scottish version of the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter, not the English version. But his beautiful rendering of Psalm 100 became the unchallenged setting of Psalm 100 in both versions. On the next page, we give the Psalm as it appeared in the Scottish Psalter of 1635, the first Scottish Psalter to contain all the tunes, all complete with harmonizations.

Together, the tune “Old Hundred” and the text by Kethe form a masterpiece of metrical Psalmody. They join together to express splendidly the Hundredth Psalm.

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Psalm 100

OLD HUNDRED

William Kethe, 1561

*Hee exhorteth all to serve the LORD, who hath chosen
and preserved us, and to enter into his assemblies to praise his Name.*

William Franc, 1552

Treble

Alto

Tenor (Melody)

Bass

1.(1)All peo - ple that on earth do dwell, Sing to the LORD with cheer - ful voice:

2.(3)The LORD ye know is GOD in - deed, With - out our aid he did us make:

3.(4)Oh en - ter then his gates with praise, Ap - proach with joy his courts un - to:

4.(5)For why? the Lord our God — is good, His mer - cy is for ev - er sure:

(2)Him serve with fear, his praise forth tell, Come ye be - fore him and re - jice.

We are his flock, he doth us feed, And for — his sheep he doth us take.

Praise, laud, and bless his Name al - ways, For it is seem - ly so to do.

His truth at all times firm - ly stood, And shall from age to age — en - dure.



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