

Q U O T E N D I M U S : Q U O R U I M U S ?

A R E S P O N S E

J. M. ROSS, London

(former Civil Servant : Member of the URC)

* * * * *

I read with great appreciation Mr Stobie's article in Issue 19, with the exception of the final section on the singing of AMENS at the end of psalms and hymns. He had previously expressed similar views in Vol V (1) of "Liturgical Review" (May 1975) on which no comment was made. This time I should like to call attention to some facts of which he may not be aware.

The question really boils down to this : Is the Church of Scotland a scriptural church, or is it bound by the practice of the late nineteenth century ? According to the New Testament, the word amen was used by the Early Church in three ways:-

- (1) At the end of a solemn ascription of praise or glory to God (eg. Rom1:25, Rev1:6);
- (2) At the end of a blessing (eg. Rom15:33);
- (3) By the worshippers to signify their assent to the prayer uttered by the leader (eg. 1Cor14:16).

These usages followed current Jewish practice. (Exceptionally, the Lord Jesus used to say "Amen" at the beginning of a specially solemn statement (eg. Matt5:18) to show that he spoke with authority; this was not copied by the Church).

If we are to follow Scripture in this matter, the whole congregation ought to say "Amen" at the end of every prayer uttered on their behalf by the leaders, to express their assent to what has been said, but not at the end of psalms or hymns, because their assent has already been expressed by singing; an exception should, however, be made in the case of psalms or hymns which end in a formal doxology.

Why, then, have we been singing AMENS at the end of all hymns until Church Hymnary 3 requested us not to ? The answer is that we took up this practice

only towards the end of the nineteenth century, in imitation of an Anglican mistake. Anyone who takes the trouble, as I have done, to inspect a large number of music editions of psalters and hymn books, will find no provision for the singing of AMENS until the middle of the nineteenth century. The earliest such provision I have found is in Thomas Helmore's Manual of Plainsong (1850), in which the mediaeval hymns are all supplied with amens, doubtless because they all finished with doxologies. Perhaps it was from this that the idea got around in advanced liturgical circles that AMENS should be sung to all hymns. At all events this was provided for in 1861 in "Hymns Ancient and Modern", even in the edition with words only. Gradually this new fashion spread, first to other Anglican hymnals such as "Church Hymns" (1874) and "The Hymnal Companion" (1877); the English Presbyterians took it up in 1883 in "Church Praise", the Scottish Presbyterians in the "Church Hymnary" (1901) and "The Scottish Psalter" (1903). The Baptists, Methodists and Congregationalists followed suit about the same time. The Anglicans were the first to withdraw from their mistake: the "English Hymnal" in 1906, while printing amens to all hymns, recommended that they should not normally be sung except after doxologies. The "Methodist Hymn Book" of 1933 and "Congregational Praise" of 1951 provided amens for only some of the hymns, in neither case on any clear principles. No provision for amens is made in the latest Methodist book "Hymns and Psalms" (1983). "Church Hymnary 3" has returned to good scriptural principles by providing amens only after formal doxologies; it is a pity that the book did not explain why.

J.M. ROSS
(London, N.W.11)

[Editorial Note: from "Congregational Praise" publ Independent Press Ltd, 1951 for the Congregational Union of England and Wales, Preface - "Explanatory Notes" p.v:

"It is suggested that "AMEN" should be sung only where it is given at the end of a tune. The custom of singing "AMEN" at the close of every hymn seems to have grown up less than a century ago. It is difficult to be consistent in its use, but the principle adopted here is to sing it after a doxology or prayer, or where it is an integral part of the tune."

T.G.L.]

* * * * *