

Psalm Singing

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AT the time of the Reformation the Church abandoned Latin hymns and adopted the practice of singing metrical psalms. John Calvin wrote in his 1542 service book: ‘What Augustine says is true, namely, that no one can sing anything worthy of God which he has not received from him. Therefore, after we have carefully searched everywhere, we shall not find better or more appropriate songs to this end than the Psalms of David, inspired by the Holy Spirit’.

Three years before writing these words, Calvin had published seventeen psalms in metrical French. Most of these were translated by Clement Marot who continued his work of versification, so that by the time of his death in 1544, there was available a total of 49 psalms. Calvin’s friend, Theodore Beza, took up this important project and by 1562 (just two years before Calvin’s death) the French Psalter was complete.

So impressive was the psalm-singing of the French Church that one visitor described just how it affected him: ‘Everyone sings, men and women, and it is a lovely sight... As I looked on this little company of exiles, I wept, not for sadness but for joy to hear them all singing so heartily.’

Now a number of the English Reformers, driven by Queen Mary’s persecution into Switzerland, learned there the duty of singing metrical psalms. When Elizabeth succeeded to the throne, they returned to this country and brought with them the practice of psalm singing. John Strype, the historian, in his great work, ‘The Annals of the Reformation’, records how psalmody was adopted by the English Church. ‘After sermon was done,’ he writes, ‘they all sung in common a psalm in metre, as it seems

now was frequently done, the custom having been brought in from abroad by the exiles.’

Strype further describes a service held on March 3rd 1560, when Edmund Grindal, the new Bishop of London, preached God’s Word. After the sermon, he says, ‘a psalm was sung - which was the common practice of the Reformed churches abroad -wherein the people also joined their voices’. And so it was that, in those early, thrilling days of the English Reformation, congregations of faithful men and women sang their praises from the Book of Psalms.

The Puritans, of course, were convinced and enthusiastic psalm-singers. As Nicholas Byfield wrote in 1615, ‘The singing of psalms is God’s ordinance, binding on all sorts of men.’ As for the nature of those psalms, Byfield insisted that they must be the biblical psalms. ‘The psalms we use’, he said, ‘must be...contained in the scriptures.’ In 1642, Arthur Hildersham wrote as follows: ‘It is an ancient and excellent ordinance of God that in his worship and service we should sing psalms, even David’s Psalms.’

Many other Puritans could be quoted to the same effect. A number of them were directly responsible for the statement made in the Westminster ‘Directory for Public Worship’ (1645): ‘It is the duty of Christians to praise God publicly, by singing of psalms together in the congregation...That the whole congregation may join therein, every one that can read is to have a psalm book.’

It may be helpful to state briefly and concisely the biblical arguments for unaccompanied exclusive psalmody. That Christians should publicly sing the

psalms – and only the psalms - is quite certain, I believe, from the following considerations:

In public worship, God has always been praised with inspired material.

While truth was still being revealed, prophets were repeatedly moved by the Holy Spirit to supply the Church with sacred songs. Hence, we read such scriptures as these: ‘Then sang Moses (the prophet, Deut 34:10) and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD...’ (Exod 15:1) and ‘Thou shalt meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe and a harp, before them; and they shall prophesy’ (1 Sam 10:5). Eventually, however, David was enabled to compose a great number of hymns for the use of God’s people in all future ages: ‘The anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue...’ (2 Sam 23:1, 2).

The inspired psalms have been divinely appointed for use in the Church.

Collected together in one book, included within the sacred Canon, and entitled ‘Sepher Tehillim’ or ‘Book of Praises’, there can be no doubt that these psalms were intended to be the vehicle of the Church’s public praise. Accordingly, the Bible refers to them, not only as ‘the songs of the LORD’, but also as ‘the songs of Sion’ - and that title ‘Sion’ belongs to both Jewish and Christian Churches (1 Chron 25:7; Ps 137:3; cf. Heb 12:22). Now, if the inspired psalms have been appointed, it surely follows that they are to be exclusively used in the worship of God. The appointment of the tribe of Levi for priestly service meant that only that tribe should minister in the sanctuary.

God has commanded his people to use the psalms when celebrating his praise.

‘Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works’; ‘Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms’; ‘Is any among you afflicted? let him

pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms’ (1 Chron 16:9; Ps 98:5; James 5:13). Here, it should be carefully noted that, in these and other scriptures, we are not told to use the psalms as ‘patterns’ for composing uninspired paraphrases or hymns. We are rather told to sing the exact words of the inspired psalms. In 2 Chronicles 29:30, it is written that ‘Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the LORD with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer’.

It was the practice of the ancient Church to sing only the psalms in worship.

When the ark was finally placed in Jerusalem, we read that David compiled for the occasion a special ‘psalm’ which he ‘delivered’ to those who led in praise, even to ‘Asaph and his brethren’ (1 Chron 16:7). The psalm, which begins ‘Give thanks unto the LORD, call upon his name...’, mainly consists of parts of three psalms, namely Psalms 105, 96, and 106. Thus, on that day, the people sang extensively from the Book of Psalms. Later, at the dedication of the Temple, when they ‘lifted up their voice’ and ‘praised the LORD’, they used one or more of the psalms which include the words, ‘For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever’ (2 Chron 5:13; cf. Pss 107:1; 118:1; 136:1). A number of other examples could be given. Evidently this was the common practice. There are no exceptions.

Prophecy declared that psalm-singing would continue in new covenant times.

In the psalms themselves there are expressions which plainly show that they were intended for the future: for example, ‘We will shew forth thy praise to all generations’ (Ps 79:13 cf. 89:1). Moreover, it is clear that the psalms are peculiarly suited to the present state of the church. They use, with reference to our Saviour, not so much the language of prophecy as that of historic fulfilment. ‘Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels...’ (Ps 8:5 cf. Heb 2:9); ‘I have preached righteousness in the great congregation’ (Ps 40:10); ‘the assembly of

the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet' (Ps 22:16); 'He asked life of thee, and thou gavest it him, even life of days for ever and ever' (Ps 21:4); 'Thou hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive' (Ps 68:18); 'The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thy enemies thy footstool' (Ps 110:1). The apostle Paul even quotes the psalms to prove that Christ is now being praised throughout the entire world. 'The Gentiles', he writes, 'glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name... And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles, with his people' (Rom 15:9 cf. Pss 18:49; 117:1).

The Lord Jesus Christ himself sang the psalms in services of praise.

He would have joined in the psalm singing of the Temple and Synagogue; and, when he met with his disciples to celebrate his last Passover, the Gospels inform us that it was after 'they had sung an hymn (margin, or psalm)' that 'they went out into the mount of Olives' (Matt 26:30 cf. Mk 14:26). 'As to the Hymn itself', remarks Adam Clarke, the commentator, 'we know from the universal consent of Jewish antiquity that it was composed of Psalms 113,114,115,116,117,and 118, termed by the Jews Hallel, from Hallelu-jah, the first word in Psalm 113th. These six psalms were always sung at every paschal solemnity'. This is beyond dispute; and there is no evidence that Christ ever sang an uninspired hymn. Indeed, even now he delights to be spiritually present with his people and to rejoice with them in the singing of the psalms. Quoting Psalm 22:22, the apostle shows that Christ has made this wonderful promise: 'In the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee' (Heb 2:12). Observe here that what he promises to sing is an inspired and inerrant psalm.

And it is quite impossible to conceive of the Son of God singing anything else.

Early Christians in their worship services sang from the book of psalms.

The fact that Christ sang the Hallel with his disciples after instituting Lord's Supper meant that psalm singing has been appointed an ordinance of the Christian Church. Time and again in the New Testament writings there is reference to the book of psalms or the psalms, which strongly suggests that these inspired praises were still to be acknowledged by the Church in the solemn worship of God (Lk 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33,35). Accordingly, when Paul and Silas were imprisoned at Philippi, we are told that 'they sang praises (literally, hymned) unto God' - and, most significantly, the word is the same as that used in Matthew and Mark to describe the singing of psalms (Acts 16:25 cf. Matt 26:30; Mk 14:26). When the apostle Paul writes to deal with various disorders in the Corinthian church, he mentions, almost incidentally, that it was the common practice to sing the psalms in Christian worship. 'How is it then brethren?', he says, 'When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm...' (1 Cor 14:26). The psalm here mentioned was probably chosen from the Old Testament; but even if it was extraordinary, spontaneous praise (as some maintain), it was certainly uttered under the immediate suggestion of the Holy Spirit. So this scripture provides no warrant whatsoever for the use of uninspired hymns.

There is an apostolic command to sing the psalms in Christian worship.

In Colossians 3:16, Paul writes: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord' (cf. Eph 5:18). The titles relate to the praises contained in the Psalter. Already, in connection with the first observance of the Lord's Supper, we have noted the New Testament use of the

term 'hymn' as a synonym for 'psalm' (Matt 26:30; cf. Acts 16:25). As for 'song', it is clear from the formal psalm-titles that 'song' and 'psalm' also mean the same thing: for example, some of the titles refer to 'a psalm and song', others to 'a song and psalm', and still others to just 'a song' (Pss 30;48; 120). Modern Christians may well have different ideas about the meaning of these terms. However, we believe it is a fundamental rule of interpretation that Scripture must be allowed to interpret scripture. If that rule is applied in this instance, we shall conclude with Dr. John Gill, the eminent scholar and commentator, that 'these are only another name for the Book of Psalms'.

The psalms were recognized as sufficient for the new state of the church.

The Lord Jesus Christ himself did not compose any new praises. He did not charge any of his disciples to perform that work, nor did he impart a spiritual gift for purpose (cf. Acts 1:2; Eph 4:8-13). The reason for this lies in the outstanding excellence of the inspired psalms. Indited by the infallible Spirit, there is in them truth without mixture of error. They also possess a remarkable fullness, variety and beauty. As someone has rightly said, 'In the Psalms there is an all-sufficient treasury of praise'. Christian believers do not need new praises. Instead, they need illumination to discern the glory of the biblical psalms. What did Christ do for those two disciples who were walking to Emmaus? He first taught them, saying 'all things must be fulfilled, which are written...in the psalms, concerning me' and then, after that, 'opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures' (Lk 24:44,45). In New Testament times, the Lord's people were not told to make psalms. They were simply told to sing them. 'Is any merry? Let him sing psalms' (James 5:13). Now that divine and immediate inspiration has ceased, it is surely presumptuous (to say the least) to attempt the composition of new praises. As William Romaine wrote in 'An Essay of Psalmody' (1775), 'I want a name for that man who should

pretend that he could made better hymns than the Holy Ghost.'

Divine blessing is promised to those who obediently sing the psalms.

We are presented in Scripture with a sublime view of Jehovah, the Holy One, taking his place among his people and surrounded by their sacred songs. David penned these words: 'Thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest (or, sittest enthroned upon) the praises of Israel' (Ps 22:3). This exceptionally beautiful statement rests on the fact that, in the singing of psalms, believers act as the Lord's subjects, not only acknowledging his right to order their worship, but also obeying what he has revealed in his written Word. As for the Lord himself, he delights in his people's humble submission and draws near to their souls, making himself known in his matchless grace and most excellent glory. Remember what happened at the dedication of the Temple. 'It came to pass as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD...saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the LORD' (2 Chron 5:13). Since the change inaugurated at Pentecost, should we not expect spiritual manifestations of his presence and power? In this connection, it is surely worth noting that the apostle links the experience of being 'filled with the Spirit' with that of 'speaking to yourselves in psalms...' (Eph 5:18, 19). Such scriptures lead me to believe that a return to psalm singing could be the means of bringing great blessing to the Church of God.

The choice is between men's books and God's book: and as a minister of the last century once wrote, 'The light of the former is that of the glow worm: the light of the latter that of the noonday sun. The former are like Job's deceitful brooks that pass away: the latter like the never failing, boundless ocean'.