The Church’s Perfect Hymn Book

Why we sing the Psalms of the Bible exclusively in public worship

by Douglas W. Comin
Many visitors to our churches may be surprised to find that we use a different hymn book than most modern evangelical
for Singing, contains only musical versions of the 150 Psalms
found in the Bible. We believe, as a matter of biblical
conviction, that to sing anything other than the Psalms of
our Bible as worship is a violation of God’s own design and
intention for the corporate worship of His people. This
little tract will attempt to offer a brief explanation for this
conviction. It is our hope that you will seriously and
thoughtfully consider the biblical argument for the position
which you have come to believe in with such popularity.

I. Foundational Principles

A. The Regulative Principle of Worship

The Regulative Principle of Worship is a doctrine that was
once widely held among churches springing from the tradition
of the Reformation. This principle is found in the Bible, in
Deuteronomy 31:12, which reads:

What things, soever I command thee, observe to do; thou
shall not add thereto, nor detract from it.

The Reformers of the 16th century explained this doctrine
with the words, “whatever is not commanded by God to be
done as worship, is forbidden.” The writers of the
Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), described by stating:

The unanswerable way of worshiping the true God is
instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own
revealed will, that He may not be worshiped according
to the suggestions and desires of men, or the
suggestions of Satan, under any vile imputation, or
the neglect of any of the divine worship set forth in the Holy Scriptures.

The basic idea is that God’s preceptive determine how
His people are to approach Him in worship. God has
commissioned His people to sing the Psalms of the Bible when
they gather together for worship. He has not commanded
them to sing songs of their own composition. The consistent
application of the Regulative Principle at Worship, then,
excludes the use of songs which God has not commanded
to be used in worship.

B. The Sufficiency of Scripture

The Apostle Paul wrote in Titus 2:11, “All scripture is given
by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for
discipline, for instruction in righteousness.” (2 Tim. 3:16)
God’s Word is sufficient for His people.

The Psalms of the Bible are God’s Word. They lack
nothing that is needed by the people of God in their
expression of praise and adoration to Him when they gather
for worship. The necessary implication of the use of
verbalized hymns in the worship of God is that the Psalms alone
are somehow not a sufficient volume of praise for God’s people.
We reject this notion and we believe that the 150
Psalms of our Bible are a perfectly sufficient hymn book for
the church of God throughout the ages.

C. The Continuity of the Covenant

It has been argued that the Psalms of the Bible are an Old
Testament book of praise, which must be supplemented by
psalms that reflect the person and works of Jesus Christ in the
New Testament age. It is argued that this would hardly
point out that the Psalms of the Bible were written for the very
purpose of positioning the New Covenant promises which
were fulfilled in Christ. In fact, Jesus Himself testified that the
Psalms were about Him (see Luke 20:44). The person and
work of Jesus Christ is wonderfully foreshadowed in
the book of Psalms. Would it not seem strange if the people of
God were commanded to sing the Psalms only until the time of
Christ’s appearing, and then to put them aside once they
were able to fully appreciate their true meaning?

We believe that the glory of the Psalms is precisely their
fulfillment of the covenant promises of God, anticipated by the
Old Testament saints, and realized by the work of Jesus
Christ. As heirs of the New Covenant, we look to the Psalms
and sing praises to God for the fulfillment of His promises
throughout the ages.

We believe that it is not without significance that the
Bible’s own book of praise is found in the pages of the Old
testament, rather than the New. More modern Christians
and so far from excusing the Old Testament, viewing the Old Testament as outdated. At best, the Old
Testament is seen as something foreign which some
would argue as invalid. We do not believe that the Old Testament is outdated. When Paul wrote that “all
revelation is given by inspiration of God and is profitable,”
we are referring to the Old Testament as well. When uncorrecting the things in the prophecies of the Old Testament
through the book of Psalms, God’s people are continually
reminded of their heritage among the chosen people of God
throughout the ages.

D. The Purpose of Worship

Another important reason is with regard to this issue is
the nature and purpose of worship. We believe that worship is
to be God-centered. Unfortunately, the worship of many
contemporary evangelical churches is man-centered. Man-centered worship focuses upon the feelings of the worshippers,
who go to the church in order to get something out of the
service. God-centered worship focuses upon the object of
worship, seeking to approach the living God "in spirit and in
truth." This is not to say that God-centered worship is not a
blessing to His people. Rather, it is to point out that the
reasons behind what we do in worship is not our own benefit,
but the praise and exaltation of God according to His Own
Word. When God’s people approach His worship in this
way, they will inevitably be blessed. When they approach
Him according to their own ideas of what is acceptable to
Him, they may experience some emotional uplifting, but God’s
heart has not been touched through the keeping of His Word.
Surely Naaman and Ahab thought that they were honoring
God when they presented “strange fire before the Lord, which
He commanded them not” (Lev. 10:2). Yet because their
approach to the living God was ennuminuous, rather than
designed according to God’s command, they were consumed in
his wrath and God’s anger before the Lord. Our purpose in worship
must never be to device means of approaching God which
we imagine will be pleasing to Him. Instead, we determine to
approach Him according to His own designs, and in doing
so, our attention upon praising Him in obedience to His will.

II. Some Benefits of Singing the Psalms

A. They are without error

Without a doubt, there have been some beautiful and edifying
hymns composed by godly men and women throughout the
centuries. Our conviction that the Psalms of the Bible should
be used exclusively in the worship of God’s people is not meant to diminish from this fact. Neither would we suggest that
these hymns do not have a place in the lives of the saints. We
would simply urge that their place not be in the formal
worship service.

When we gather as God’s people to offer our corporate
praise, we are not addressing the presence of the Father in a
spiritual way. Our prayers and our worship songs are presented
before the throne of the Holy God. Should we be
so concerned that we offer to Him praise in a formal and
without emotion, even as He is perfect? The hymns of
human authors, no matter how inspiring, are not sufficient.
Only God’s Word is without error, because only God’s Word is
directly inspired by His Holy Spirit. When we sing to God
for the songs which He Himself has written, we can be assured
that what we are offering to God in praise is not tainted with
error.

This is also a great help to us as His people. What
song has a tendency to impact how we think? As we sing
God’s songs, we have overwhelmingly seen the seeds of error
spring from one mind. Yet if we sing only God’s songs, we are drinking
in His own Word and learning to think His thoughts after Him.
B. They promote memorization

Another great benefit to singing the Psalms is the memorization of the Scriptures. There can be no doubt that the repetition of singing is one of the best methods for the memorization of material (how many commercial jingles can you remember?). The singing of Psalms in the weekly worship is a wonderful means of planting God’s Word in our hearts. What a joy it is to sit in a Psalm-singing congregation and see the little children passing God and singing from the Psalter without even looking at the page!

C. They carry the power of the Spirit

We have no promise from God that the words of man, no matter how well-intentioned, will pierce the heart and dominate grace to His people. But we have such a promise with regard to God’s own Word. Hebrews 4:12 assures us that:

...the word of God [is] quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and [is] a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The Holy Spirit penetrates our hearts as we sing the Psalms in a way that no man-written hymn could ever be made. A good hymn may stir the emotions, but the Word of God pierces the heart.

D. They properly balance themes

Give a child a choice between.brushed sprouts and jelly beans. Which is he likely to pick? We have a natural tendency to choose out those things which are most appealing to us. And yet, there are some things that we may not ordinarily choose which we most definitely need. The same is true of the songs we sing in worship.

There are some themes in the Bible in which we tend to take special delight. There are others which seem more difficult to swallow, but which are just as necessary for our growth in grace and in the knowledge of the whole counsel of God. If left to our own devices, we might tend to sing songs in worship which focus almost exclusively upon the themes that we find most appealing (such as grace, love and salvation) while ignoring the themes which are less outwardly appealing (such as judgment and condemnation of the wicked). A review of most modern hymnals will more than corroborate this point. Yet love and judgment are both important aspects of God’s dealings with mankind, and we are not free to neglect one in favor of the other. In order to fully appreciate the character of God, we must consider and meditate upon all of His attributes, not just the ones that we find comforting.

The book of Psalms presents many beautiful pictures of the grace, love and salvation offered by God through Christ, while not shying away from His righteous judgment and anger against sin. It is, therefore, a book of praise which keeps us anchored in the whole counsel of God, feeding our souls with both the “sweet” and the “sour” meat of God’s Word.

E. They provide a basis for unity

There are a number of hymn books in use among evangelical Christians, each containing songs of praise that reflect the particular theological heritage and convictions of the churches who use them. There are certain hymns found in them containing doctrinal statements with which Christians from another denominational background might disagree. But there is no such difficulty with the Psalms. They are the very Word of God. As such, they provide a hymn book for the church which truly cuts across denominational lines. They do not reflect the particular doctrinal understanding of any individual or group. They bring before us the mind of God and their content should be universally acceptable among all believers. Imagine what strife would be made toward uniting the church if all of God’s people could sing the same theme of their praise whenever they came together for corporate worship! Instead of filling our minds with regular doses of one set doctrine, we would be filling our hearts with God’s Word and learning together from the grand themes of the Biblical Psalms.

This short pamphlet has only scratched the surface with regard to the practice of singing the Psalms exclusively in corporate worship. We hope that it has been helpful to you in explaining why we hold to this conviction, as well as in urging you before you some of the marvelous benefits of singing God’s inspired songs. Should you have further questions about this subject, we would be glad to meet with you further reading. May God lead each of us to an ever deeper understanding of what it means to worship Him “in spirit and in truth.”

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