

# ON PSALMODY.

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*Prepared and published by order of the Synod of the Reformed  
Presbyterian Church for gratuitous circulation.*

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HAVE we Scripture authority for an exclusive use in worship of an inspired Psalmody? Are the Psalms of the Bible fully adapted to the needs of the Church in the present day? If these questions can be answered in the affirmative, the position taken in our Testimony and in the Westminster Directory is impregnable.

The only rule to direct us in the worship of God is His revealed will. In Deut. xii:32, where Moses refers particularly to the statutes that were to regulate worship, he says: "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it; thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." The second commandment, which was enacted with special reference to the purity and integrity of instituted services, begins with the significant words: "Thou shalt not make unto thyself." Here, as Dr. Owen has pointed out, "*All making to ourselves* is forbidden, though what we so make may seem unto us to tend unto the furtherance of the worship of God." Confirmatory of this is the teaching of the Church's Head and Lawgiver during His earthly minis-

try. On one occasion He reproved the Pharisees for making the "washing of hands before meat" a religious rite. The reason he did so was that such a rite was not commanded, and consequently could have no value as a religious service. "In vain," He said, "do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

This point established, the inquiry presents itself: Is the direct teaching of Scripture in favor of our position? So it seems to us. The Psalms are called the "Songs of the Lord," a phrase which, like the similar expressions, "Day of the Lord" and "Table of the Lord," carries with it the idea of Divine enactment. In the Old Testament we read of definite instructions being given to His people to sing them, as when David (1 Chron. 16) "delivered into the hand of Asaph and his brethren" a thanksgiving song to be used on the occasion of the removal of the Ark from the home of Obed-Edom to Jerusalem, which was afterwards transferred to the Psalter, where it appears in the 95th, 105th and 106th Psalms. The reign of Hezekiah furnishes another example. Among the Reform measures effected during the reign of that pious king was a return to the songs of the sanctuary and other long-neglected services. (2 Chron. 29.) "He commanded the Levites to sing praises unto the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer; and they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped." It need not surprise anyone that the restoration of this quickening service proved an effective agency in the spiritual reviving of the people, and filled their hearts with joy. And we believe that history will bear us out in saying that Psalm-singing was an important feature of Reformation times and of subsequent religious revivals that have left a lasting impression on the Church and the world.

On reading the Story of the Captivity we find that these same songs were sung not only during the exile, but on the return of the captives became the vehicle of special praise to God for the signal deliverance wrought for them. (Neh. xii: 24.)

Nor is the New Testament silent on this point. In two of his Epistles, and in almost identical terms (Eph. v: 19, Col. iii: 16), Paul lays down this command for the guidance of the saints and faithful brethren at Ephesus and Colosse: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord," and in both cases this command is linked with "giving thanks . . . unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Many imagine a difficulty here, and, to get rid of it, some expositors insist that the reference is not to worship, but to the way in which we should improve our social intercourse. In their opinion, the Apostle says in effect: "At your social gatherings sing only such songs as are consistent with the Christian character and will tend to promote your spirituality." Other expositors take a great deal of trouble to show that the words, "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" represent different forms of poetical compositions, of which we have examples in the Psalter. This is quite true. At the same time such reasoning is defective, and tends only to weaken one of the most forceful injunctions in the Bible for the exclusive use of an inspired Psalmody. The term "spiritual," unless it is used here in an entirely different sense from the meaning which must be attached to it in other passages of Scripture (see Eph. i: 3; Col. i: 9; 1 Cor. x: 3, 4), signifies, "having a Divine source," and it is an attribute not only of "songs," as our translation indicates, but also of "psalms" and "hymns." The order of the words in the original is, "psalms, hymns,

songs, spiritual" or "not of an earthly origin." In this way we are taught that, if we would "sing with grace in our hearts to the Lord," we must use compositions so distinctively "spiritual" that they may be spoken of, as in Colossians, as the "word of Christ," and that the singing of them, as the Ephesians are told, will be the means of filling us with His Spirit.

What more can any one ask for in the form of specific instructions? And yet we have more; for we have the example of our Lord Himself. And His example is precept in action. At the close of the observance of the first Supper, He and His disciples sang a hymn, presumably the "Hallel," which was composed of six consecutive Psalms, closing with the 118th, and which was usually, if not always, sung in connection with the solemn celebration of the Paschal feast. Nor is there wanting clearest proof that in the early ages of Christianity, and for centuries afterwards, only inspired songs were used in the worship of God. In the Apostolic Constitutions, which delineate the customs of the Church from the time of the Apostles to the fourth century, we are told that "the women, the children, and the humblest mechanics, could repeat all the Psalms of David. They chanted them at home and abroad, they made them the exercises of their piety and the refreshment of their mind." Occasionally a hymn of human composition was introduced into the service of the Church, as early as the third century, on the responsibility of the minister in charge; but, as Killen says in his "Ancient Church," "The practice was regarded with suspicion, and seems to have been considered irregular. Hence Paul of Samosata, in the Council of Antioch, held A. D. 269, was blamed for discontinuing the Psalms formerly used, and for establishing a new and very objectionable hymnology." In this way this brilliant repre-

sentative of early heresy hoped to propagate the Unitarian views that, for selfish reasons, he did not care to openly declare at once. Other errorists took the same plan to give their false teaching currency, thus leading many astray. This is the origin of hymn singing in the Church, and the evil effects of this practice are seen to-day in defective or superficial views of Divine truth and an almost universal failure to recognize the claims of Christ to the supreme loyalty of His professed followers.

"Thus saith the Lord" should put an end to controversy. With His Word on our side we need no further warrant for the exclusive use of an inspired Psalmody, yet it may not be unprofitable to note briefly how admirably the Bible Psalms are adapted to the needs of the Church in every age.

Nowhere have we more clear and satisfying views of Christ in His saving character and work. So far from lacking, as many insist, the evangelic element, essential to true worship, Jesus is the central figure in the Psalter. While some of the Psalms are notably Messianic, recording events and voicing experiences that can be true of no other, there is a sense in which every one of them is Messianic. As Dr. Ker says in the preface to his Psalms in History and Biography: "The vision of the perfectly righteous man, who delights to do God's will, and prospers in all that he undertakes, is never entirely fulfilled till it reaches Him who did no sin; the cries for pardon, the desires for fellowship with God, find their completeness only in the cross and spirit of Christ; the prayer for the relief of the oppressed, for the lifting up of the fallen, for the entrance of a Divine kingdom of righteousness and peace, go forward to Him who has all power given to Him in heaven and earth for carrying out His just and merciful designs." Of all the inspired songs

Jesus is the essence and glory, and not unfrequently the oneness existing between Him and His believing people is set forth so vividly as to thrill the hearts of worshippers.

The Psalter breathes the unselfish spirit of the Gospel, whose blessings are not limited to any age or people. "All ends of the earth shall remember and turn unto the Lord; and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before Thee." Do we need inspiration in His service? Do we need courage to face those that oppose His claims? We have both in this picture of a converted world, when all the nations shall confess His supremacy.

Not less noticeable is the fact that in every age the Psalter has proved itself sufficient to meet the varied needs of believers. In the fourth century the pious Ambrose wrote: "The law instructs, history informs, prophecy predicts, correction censures, and morals exhort. In the Book of Psalms you find the fruit of all these, as well as a remedy for the salvation of the soul. The Psalter deserves to be called the praise of God, the glory of man, the voice of the Church, and the most beneficial Confession of Faith. The Psalms teach me to avoid sin and to unlearn my being ashamed of repentance." In the nineteenth century Dr. Perowne writes: "It is the only entire book in the Bible which God has given expressly to aid and guide the worship of man; . . . and, whilst adapted to every capacity, in its range of experience it includes every case, from the depths of penitential remorse to the fullest and most exalting realization of God's friendship." Perhaps nothing brings out more clearly the relative value of two articles than contrast. Place, then, an uninspired hymn beside one of the inspired songs, and mark the vast superiority of the latter as a vehicle of praise. Take, for example, "I love to tell the story." How

feeble and unsatisfying, when contrasted with the majestic lines of the 145th Psalm, on which it is based:

I love to tell the story Of unseen things above, Of Jesus and His glory, Of Jesus and His Love.	I'll Thee exalt, my God and King, I will Thy name bless o'er and o'er; Each day I will Thee bless, and sing The praise of Thy name evermore.
I love to tell the story! It did so much for me! And that is just the reason I tell it now to thee.	Upon Thy majesty most bright, Thy grace and miracles, I'll muse! Of Thy dread acts men tell the might, Thy storied greatness I'll diffuse.

With these contrasted stanzas before us, we can appreciate the estimate of the Psalter ascribed to an old Scotch woman. The "Songs of Zion" had been her stay in times of trial, a means of spiritual refreshing, and an aid to her devotion for nearly a hundred years. A friend asked her whether she thought it wrong to sing hymns, and whether she would not like to unite in singing one. "Aye," was her reply, "I'm gaun to begin the hymns *when I've feenished the Psalms.*"

Finally, in the exclusive use of an inspired Psalmody, we proclaim our belief in the Unity of the Church of God and our desire for its visible oneness, "in our own land and throughout the world, on the basis of truth and Scriptural order." Denominational Hymnals are marks of division, and tend to foster the "schism and sectarianism" that we believe to be "sinful in themselves and inimical to true religion." The inspired Psalter is the symbol of Christian unity.