



Psalmody

by

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PSALMODY

Two hundred years ago the Psalms were used almost entirely in the worship of God. The change since then is due, to a great extent, to the work of Isaac Watts (1674-1748), who has been called "the father of the English hymn." As a lad he complained about the use of the Psalms in worship. He set out to replace them and wrote over 700 hymns, some of which are in use today. He grew up in the Congregational church, in which each congregation is almost independent. This contrasts with the Presbyterian form of church government. In the Congregational churches, each congregation is free to worship as it chooses. In the Presbyterian churches, any changes must first be approved by the General Assembly or Synod; then by the congregations. Then the change can be put into effect. So Watts only had to persuade one minister and one congregation to use his hymns to get them sung. Benjamin Keach, pastor of a Baptist church which is Congregational in its church government, used one hymn in a communion service. Six years later he used one in a Thanksgiving service. Then the congregation voted to use only Psalms in the worship service.

Fourteen years later he began using a hymn at the close of the service, just before the benediction. Some of the congregation walked out as soon as the hymn was announced, but they had already heard the sermon and given their offering. Since their protest against the use of hymns was of no influence, several members left this congregation and started a new congregation, which forbade the use of hymns in worship.

The use of hymns spread. Now it is hymns, not Psalms, which are used in the great majority of cases. Many think it odd that any denomination should use the Psalms exclusively in worship. One writer says, "The Psalms were hard to sing, a source of annoyance to the better educated believer and a weariness to the soul." Because many agree with him, the hymns have largely replaced the Psalms in the worship of God.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church, however, continues the exclusive use of the Psalms in the public worship of God for two principal reasons.

*Other Compositions Have Been
Destructive Of The True Faith*

1. We, as a denomination, continue the

exclusive use of the Psalms in public worship of God because the use of other compositions in His worship has been destructive of the true faith. I say this with both hesitation and regret, yet it is true. Isaac Watts may be "the father of the English hymn", but he was not the first hymn writer.

The early church sang nothing but Psalms. The church council of Laodicea, about 360 A.D., forbade the "singing of uninspired hymns in church, and the reading of the uncanonical books of Scripture." These uncanonical books from which it was forbidden to read were the books of the Apocrypha. This council of Laodicea was a small council, not one of the great ones. But the Council of Chalcedon was a great council and it confirmed the decree of the small council of Laodicea and forbade the singing of uninspired hymns in Christian worship. This proves that, while there were some who wanted to sing other songs, the Psalms of the Old Testament were the songs in the Christian church in 450 A.D.

One of the early heretical groups was the Gnostics. They taught that Christ is not the divine Son of God, but a Spirit-filled man. One minister, Bardesanes, was deposed from the Christian ministry for

accepting this heresy. He was not allowed to preach his heresy, but he did write some hymns, set them to catchy tunes and they were sung. One writer says, "A very dangerous heresy came into the church like a flood in the second century." He sugarcoated his heresy and many accepted it through the use of these uninspired songs. Apollinarius of Laodicea, about one hundred years after Bardesanes, did the same thing to spread his heresy, and he, too, turned many away from Christ.

The worst heretic of the early church was a man named Arius. He, also, denied that Christ is God. He was tried and deposed from the ministry. He, too, wrote songs, set them to attractive tunes and got them sung. His success must have surpassed his wildest dreams, for almost the entire church was carried away by his heresy. This heresy became so popular that it is said of Athanasius, who fought this heresy, that he was against the world. With good reason it has been said, "Let me make a people's songs and I care not who makes their laws."

These are men who set the example of breaking away from the use of the divinely given Psalms of the Bible and this is the reason why they did. These men, who denied the truth of the Bible, hoped to per-

suade others to believe by the use of their songs what they could never make the Bible to teach. The late Dean Farrar, a famous English minister, said of both ancient and modern hymns, "They abound, if not in heresy, yet in false theology." A modern teacher said that the Hebrew put his best theology into the Psalms, while modern man puts his worst theology into the hymns.

This fact, then, stands out in the early history of the church—those who sought the purity of the church and the honor of Christ used the Psalms in worship and those false leaders who tried to lure people away from the truth used songs of their own composition.

That was true in ancient times, and it is true today. No modern denomination has used hymns in the worship of God for 125 years without being disturbed by those who denied the infallibility of the Scriptures and other standards of faith. This is because men who are not inspired cannot express always God's truth. We would not accept as equal with the Bible, any book of purely human origin. When we accept songs of purely human origin and use them in the worship of God, we are actually doing the same thing—using uninspired songs instead of inspired ones. The hymns in the

average hymnbook were written by Protestants of various denominations, by Roman Catholics, by Unitarians who deny the deity of Christ and by others. They are almost certain to put their belief into their songs. When their belief is actually unbelief, their songs can hardly be in accordance with the Scriptures.

If our experience, then, would be the same as that of those who have used songs of human composition in the worship of God, we would, if we ceased to use the Psalms exclusively, surrender, sooner or later, some of the essential truths of the Christian faith. That result we do not want. Therefore, we use the Psalms exclusively.

The Psalms Are God's Inspired Book Of Praise

2. Again, we use the Psalms exclusively in the worship of God because God inspired them and gave them to be used in His worship.

Physically and spiritually the Psalms are the heart of the Bible. Open your Bible in the center and you open it to the Psalms. The Psalms were used in the worship of God in the Old Testament church. The leaders of the New Testament

church understood that the New Testament church was not given a book of praises because the Old Testament Psalter was sufficient. So they used it.

In his letter to the church at Colosse, Paul wrote, "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." (Col. 3:16) In his letter to the church at Ephesus, he wrote, "And be not drunk with wine wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord." (Eph. 5:18,19.)

These two verses may, at first sight, seem to contradict our position as to the use of Psalms--these believers were commanded to sing hymns. However, Greek scholars tell us that the word "spiritual" refers to all three nouns. Those Christians were to sing spiritual Psalms, spiritual hymns and spiritual songs. Dr. B. B. Warfield wrote that this word spiritual, in twenty-four out of the twenty-five times it is used in the New Testament means, "Spirit given, or Spirit led, or Spirit determined." The lone exception is in Ephesians 6:12. There Paul writing about the

Christian warfare spoke of "spiritual wickedness." But in both Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18,19, it means "Spirit given"--it means the songs to be used in God's worship are God inspired. Only the Psalms meet that requirement for use in God's worship.

Paul had a reason for using those three words to describe the Psalms. The Jews were then a widely scattered people. Many lived in and near Babylon where they had been taken as captives. Others were captured as slaves and sold into other parts of the world. Our history books tell us that many English pilgrims went to Holland to enjoy religious liberty. But they soon wanted to leave Holland because their children were learning the language of Holland. Many of these people later came to America where they could enjoy both religious freedom and the use of the English language. All these Jews could not get back to Palestine, although her very dust to them was dear. So they and their children began to use the most popular language of their day--the Greek. One who knew Greek could travel almost anywhere and be understood. Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Rome, but he did not write in Latin; he wrote in Greek. Matthew wrote his Gospel for the Jews, but he did not write in Hebrew; he

wrote in Greek. Paul commanded the Christians to sing inspired songs in the worship of God, and that meant the Psalms. Only the Psalms met that standard.

If you open your Bible to the Psalms, you can see why Paul used those three words to refer to the Psalter. Turn to Psalm 82, and you will notice that the title is, "A Psalm of David." Psalm 83 has as its title, "A Psalm or song of Asaph." When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, before the birth of Christ, the Psalms had the same titles. Some were "Psalms"; others were "songs"; and still others were "hymns." Psalm 67 is "A Psalm or song." But in the Greek translation, that word translated "song" is actually "hymn." When Paul wrote about "Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs", he was referring to the Psalms of the Old Testament. These songs, inspired of God, were to be used in His worship. God gave them to be sung and He gave nothing else.

As I tried to show earlier, it is dangerous to substitute an uninspired document for an inspired one, either in singing or in reading. If you have read several Bible commentaries, you will agree that there are many things written in these commentaries which are not in harmony with the teachings of the Bible. These commentar-

ies are not, and cannot be, substitutes for the Bible. Neither are uninspired, poetical writings of men good substitutes for God's inspired Word.

In a recent review of a hymnal in a theological journal, the reviewer named several hymns, not in this hymnbook, which are in many hymnbooks and are well liked by many. Then he said, "To be sure, some of these were not written by evangelical Christians." An evangelical Christian is one who accepts the plain Bible teaching about sin and salvation through Christ. The writers were not evangelical Christians—but many evangelical Christians sing their hymns. Is that not a strange situation? The believer sings songs written by an unbeliever—can they possibly strengthen and develop his faith? God is truth—the Psalms are inspired and therefore true. They are to be sung.

In the verses Paul wrote about singing, he wrote only about singing—there is not a word about writing songs. He took for granted that the songs they sang were already written, and they were—the one hundred and fifty Psalms. If any other songs were used then in God's praise, they have been lost.

The New Testament speaks often of the gifts which God gave early Christians to

be used for the glory of God and the advancement of the church. He gave ministers, evangelists, teachers and others, but nowhere in the New Testament, is there any mention of the gift of writing songs to be used in the worship of God. David said, "The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my mouth." But there is no comparable verse in the N.T., because there were no inspired N.T. song writers. The early Christians sang the inspired Psalms.

The King James translation of the New Testament of Matthew 26:30 makes it read, "And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives." What was this hymn Christ sang? It was not an hymn in the modern meaning of the word. The Jews sang the Great Hallel at the Passover Feast. That Great Hallel consists of Psalms 113 to 118. Those songs were the hymn He sang.

We sing the Psalms because they are full of Christ. The late Dr. and Mrs. John Coleman prepared a manuscript dealing with "The Life of Christ in the Psalms", choosing Psalms that referred definitely to Christ. They chose sufficient Psalms for an evening of Psalm singing, but they did not exhaust their subject. They had to leave out some of the Psalms referring to Christ. The Psalms are full of Christ.

Christ Himself said that the Psalms told of His coming and work. He appeared to some of His disciples on the evening of the Resurrection and said to them, "These are the words that I spake unto you while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the Psalms concerning Me." (Luke 24:44) John tells us that at one time the disciples remembered that it was written of Him, "The zeal of Thine house hath eaten Me up." (John 2:17) This was written in Psalm 69:9 and was a plain reference to Christ. The word "Save" or "Saviour" is found over fifty times in the Psalter. Whenever one sings, "Save me, O God, by Thy great name", (Psalm 54:1) he is praying that Jesus Christ will save him. No one can be saved without a Saviour.

We sing the Psalms because God gave them to be sung, because they praise God for all His attributes. The Psalter is the only book of praises that does. The songs of the Psalter praise God as Creator and Ruler. They praise Him for His great love shown to sinners. But the Psalter also praises Him for His justice. Many condemn what they call the "imprecatory Psalms" which are really the Psalms of justice. But God's justice is one of His great attributes for which we praise Him.

If God is not just, then no one can have any possible assurance of salvation. Only a just judge can be depended upon to give a just verdict. My assurance of salvation lies in both the grace and the justice of God. A just God cannot give life to an unrepentant sinner, and mankind needs to know that. Neither can a just God condemn one whose sins have been borne by Jesus Christ. But an unjust judge cannot be depended upon to deal rightly.

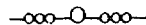
The praise service is to praise God for His greatness and goodness. Many hymns are exhortations to sinners. A once popular hymn, "Brighten the Corner where you are", is not addressed to God. But the praise service is to praise God, not urge men to better living.

We love the Psalms because of what they have done. Kilpatrick wrote, "If the history of the use of the Psalter could be written, it would be a history of the spiritual life of the church." Perowne wrote of the Psalter, "No other book of the Bible, unless it be the Gospels, has had so large an influence in molding the affections, sustaining the hopes and purifying the faith of believers."

Christ's spiritual life was nourished on the Psalter to a great extent. He sang the Hallel at the last passover and the first

Lord's Supper. He quoted from Psalm 22 while on the Cross. He gave up His life with the words of a Psalm, "Into Thy hands I commit My spirit." (Psalm 31:5)

The Psalms were the praise book of the Jewish church and still are of the orthodox Jew. The early Christian church sang nothing but Psalms. The modern Baptist, Congregational and all older branches of the Presbyterian church were at one time all exclusively Psalm singing. As Dr. M. G. Kyle said, in a lecture given shortly before his death, "The Psalms were never surpassed, never equaled and never supplanted." Therefore we, as a denomination, still sing them in our praise service.



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