

## WHY PSALMS?

Did you ever worship in a Church that sings only the psalms in worship? Today many people would probably say 'no.' But this wasn't always so. In fact, during most of the time since the Reformation, Churches have been singing the psalms. It is only in comparatively recent times that Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist, and Congregational Churches have forsaken the psalms of the Bible in favor of modern hymns. (Next time you have a hymn-book in hand notice how many were not even written until after 1850!) The practice of the Reformed Presbyterian Church did not seem strange in times when many Protestant Churches sang psalms. But it does seem strange today to those who are only familiar with modern hymns. Thus we are often asked, 'Why do you sing psalms?'

In answer to this question we would first say simply this: *we sing psalms because God has commanded us to do so.* "Is any among you afflicted?" asks James, "let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms." (James 5:13). We pray because God commands us to pray. We also sing psalms because God commands us to sing psalms.

But of course someone will ask, 'Why do you sing only the psalms?' The answer again is simple to state: we sing only psalms because God has not commanded us to sing anything else. Or, in other words, we sing psalms because we are commanded to sing psalms, and we do not sing the modern hymns because we are not commanded to sing them.

Here it is necessary to remind ourselves of the great Reformation principle of the sole authority of scripture. The Bible is the only rule of our faith and practice. Thus we can say to the Roman Catholic Church (for example) 'no, we cannot accept your

seven sacraments, because five are not commanded in scripture. We accept only two sacraments because only two are commanded by God.' We do not have the right to add what we want to that which God has given. This we call the regulative principle of worship. If God has not commanded a particular thing in divine worship, it is therefore no legitimate part of true worship. It was on the basis of this teaching of the Bible (Deut. 12:32; Lev. 10:1,2; Isa. 1:12; Mk 7:7; etc.) that the worship of God was purified at the time of the Reformation.

But again, someone may ask, 'Didn't the Apostle Paul command us to sing psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs?' (Col. 3:16 Eph. 5:19) The answer is obvious: of course he did. But what did he mean when he wrote these words. That is the real question. And it is our conviction that the older Protestant view is correct. When Paul wrote these words he obviously referred to existing compositions. He did not command the Ephesians and Colossians to compose psalms, hymns and songs that they did not yet have. No, he told them to sing compositions already in their possession. And where were these psalms, hymns and songs that Paul commanded them to sing? Well, strange as it may seem to us today, they were right there in the Greek Bible used by these early Christians. Yes, in the Septuagint (Greek) version of the old testament we find psalms, hymns and songs in the book of psalms. Just as we find "commandments, statutes, and judgments" as various kinds of laws, so we find "psalms, hymns, and songs" as various kinds of praise compositions in the old testament scripture.

Once this is understood, it will be easy to see why Paul commanded the Colossian Christians to

"let the word of Christ dwell in" them "richly" by singing these compositions. The word of Christ can only be scripture. It cannot be the uninspired poetry of men. We can also understand why Paul would command them to be "teaching and admonishing one another" as they sang. Protestants have always refused to be admonished or taught by any authority other than scripture. Only the Bible may be used for teaching and admonishing. And it is, if we sing only the psalms. Again we note that the psalms, hymns, and songs mentioned by the Apostle are to be "spiritual." The original ought to be translated "spiritual psalms, hymns, and songs." This is precisely what we have in the book of psalms. We have spiritual (that is, divinely inspired) compositions, some of which are entitled psalms, and some hymns, and some songs. (Note the titles to Psalms 120 - 134 in the English Bible, for example).

Perhaps it will help if we state the matter briefly, as we find it in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18,19. To express it in a positive way: 1) we are commanded to become filled with Christ's Word and Spirit; 2) we are to effect this through mutual instruction and admonition in singing; and 3) the manual for this is the psalter because it alone contains inspired psalms, hymns, and songs. To express it negatively: 1) we are not commanded to compose our own praises, nor to be filled with the spirit and words of men; 2) we are not commanded to engage in self-expression, nor to be instructed and admonished by the thoughts and feelings of men; and 3) therefore we are not commanded to submit to any manual of instruction or admonition other than the inspired psalter.

But someone may yet ask, 'Doesn't this make you feel a great sense of loss - not to be free to sing the

many well loved hymns of our day in worship?' In answer, let us say, emphatically, 'no!' The writer of these lines was brought up on the uninspired hymns. Yes, they do evoke familiar memories. When I hear them I do sometimes get a nostalgic feeling. But this is precisely the point. When I come to worship God I want to be free - free from everything that is of mere human origin. I want to be free to worship God with words of praise and adoration that I know he will accept. And when I lift up my voice to praise him with his own perfect word, I can be sure of this. With God's Spirit in my heart, and His Word in my mouth, I can indeed worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). This freedom I never had until I learned to sing the psalms alone in worship. Little wonder that Jesus said, "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

The writer once asked a friend two questions, 'When we worship God, should we offer up only the very best, or should it be less than the best?' His answer was immediate: 'Only the best.' 'Well then,' I asked, 'which is best: the divinely inspired psalms of the Bible, or the uninspired hymns that men write today?' Again his answer was without hesitation: 'The inspired psalms are better - far better - than the uninspired hymns. They may be good, very good. But the psalms are the very word of God.' 'Exactly,' I said, 'and that is why I can sing only the psalms in worship.'

And now, let me leave the reader with a final question. 'Why sing anything but the psalms in the worship of God?'

— G. I. Williamson