

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 church may be surprised to find that we use a different hymn book than most modern evangelical Christian churches. Our book of praise, *The Book of Psalms for Singing*, contains only metrical 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 the Bible in worship is a violation of God's own design and command 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 prayerfully consider the Biblical argument for the position which has come to be known as *exclusive psalmody*.

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 12:32, which reads:

What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.

The Reformers of the 16th century explained this doctrine with the words, "whatever is not commanded by God to be done in worship, is forbidden." The writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith (17th century), described the principle by stating:

the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

The basic idea here is that it is God's prerogative to determine how His people are to approach Him in worship. God has commanded 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 of 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 to Timothy, "All scripture [is] given by inspiration of God, and [is] profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, 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 man-written 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 the 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 songs that reflect the person and work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament age. In answer to this, we would humbly point out that the Psalms of the Bible were written for the very purpose of proclaiming the New Covenant promises which were fulfilled in Christ. In fact, Jesus Himself claimed that the Psalms were about Him (see Luke 24:44). 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 unfolding 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 praise 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. Many modern Christians tend to focus almost exclusively upon the New Testament, viewing the Old Testament as outdated. At best, the Old Testament is seen as a collection of stories from which some good moral lessons might be learned. We do not believe that the Old Testament is outdated. When Paul wrote that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable," he was referring to the Old Testament as well. By anchoring the church's praise 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 consideration 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 most contemporary evangelical churches is man-centered. Man-centered worship focuses upon the feelings of the worshipper,

who comes 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 *reason* behind what we do in worship is not our own benefit, but the praise and adoration 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 has not been honored through the keeping of His Word. Surely Nadab and Abihu thought that they were honoring God when they presented "strange fire before the Lord, which He commanded them not" (Lev. 10:1). Yet because their approach to the living God was man-centered, rather than according to God's command, they were consumed in His wrath and they died before the Lord. Our purpose in worship must never be to devise means of approaching God which we imagine will be pleasing to Him. Instead, let us determine to approach Him according to His own design, and to focus 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 detract from this fact. Neither would we argue that these hymns do not have a place in the lives of the saints. We would simply urge that their place is not in the formal worship service.

When we gather as God's people to offer our corporate praise, we are entering into the presence of the Father in a special way. Our prayers and our worship songs are presented before the throne of the Holy God. Should we not be concerned that what we offer to Him in praise is perfect and without blemish, even as He is perfect? The hymns of human authors, no matter how stirring, are not inerrant. Only God's Word is without error, because only God's Word is directly inspired by His Holy Spirit. When we sing to God 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 we sing has a tendency to impact how we think. If we sing man's songs, we may unwittingly sow the seeds of error into our minds. But 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 praising 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 men, no matter how well-intentioned, will pierce the heart and administer 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 used. 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 brussel 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 laying aside 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 strides would be made toward unifying the church if all of God's people made His songs the theme of their praise whenever they came together for corporate worship! Instead of filling our minds with regular doses of our pet doctrines, 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 bringing 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 recommend 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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