

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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Foreword

Our era is intoxicated with the desire for change and innovation. The church is also marked by interest in change, sometimes radical change. Within the church, however, concern for change is derived from at least two very different sources. On the one hand, the same impulses demanding change in the surrounding society are clearly being reflected within the church. On the other hand, developments outside the church are forcing the church to make changes in order to meet new challenges responsibly.

These two very different interests flow together to become a powerful and disturbing force in the contemporary church. At no place is this more visible than in the area of worship. This issue of *Christian Studies* is presented with a view toward aiding readers to sort through the present confusion regarding worship. Our desire is that these essays clarify, correct, and deepen our understandings of Christian worship.

Michael R. Weed, *Editor*

“Sing Where the Bible Sings” *Praising and Creating in Psalm Singing*

David Worley

In his European home a few years ago I asked my esteemed dissertation advisor what he expected in heaven. As if he had not heard my question, he began to tell me about his adult daughter who had made a commitment to daily read and chant the Psalms.

Then he said (as I remember), “What she does reminds and represents to me what shall, and even now does, fill the courts of heaven.” I found his answer intriguing.

Maybe, perhaps, possibly, the innumerable angels in festal gathering are singing selected Psalms around the throne of God in the heavenly Jerusalem. If they are singing such “old” songs (as well as the new song), it is not in chorus with us; in our churches, Psalm singing has small place indeed. At best we have been deaf to such angelic refrains.

For our Scottish forefathers in the faith, this “state of the assembly” would seem strange. In Scottish churches, the Psalms in metrical paraphrase were the overwhelming majority of songs.¹ Our Puritan cousins in the Massachusetts Bay Colony praised the Father above out of the very first book printed in America, the Bay Psalm Book.² Such strong interest in recovering “primordial” singing can be seen in John Cotton’s essay on *Singing of Psalms as Gospel Ordinance*.³

On the better authority of our brother Paul, our neglect of Psalm singing seems all the stranger, for Paul said to sing psalms as well as hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19). Unhappily, our legitimate claim to a *cappella* singing has obscured the word “psalm” in the passage.⁴

If this plea is beginning to sound like an exhortation to recover, revisit,

*The present essay is an adaptation of material from my eight *Staley Lectures* delivered at Abilene Christian University in 1990, entitled *The Culture of Praise: Recovering the Psalms for the Ordinary Routines*.

¹ Lynn McMillon, “Discovery of the Earliest Extant Scottish Restoration Congregation,” *Restoration Quarterly* 30 (1988) 49. For background, see Millar Patrick, *Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody* (London: Oxford, 1949).

² A facsimile of the 1640 edition was reprinted by Chicago University in 1956 with an extended essay by Zoltan Haraszti.

³ See the brief survey in David Music’s “America’s Hesitation over Hymns,” *Christian History* 10 (1991) 26–29.

⁴ Certainly there were other Jewish hymns called “psalms” (e.g. Psalms of Solomon) and “psalms” in other Jewish writings (e.g. 1 Mac 3:50–53; 11 QPs a–e; 2 Bar 10:6–19 et al.; T Mos 10:1–10;

restore, revitalize Psalm singing in churches of Christ, so be it. Amen.

A sower went out to sow

The instruction to sing the Psalms falls on different soils.

Be Alert. Some seed has fallen on the path. Not surprisingly, the *Evil One* has come along and snatched the Psalms from our assemblies. Taking a page from C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, we can hear the senior devil's advice to his nephew, to convince the churches that there is no need to sing the Psalms because there are spiritual songs enough which inspire and hymns aplenty which pump the adrenalin.

Because Satan is fundamentally opposed to the enthroning of Yahweh on the praises of the new Israel, the Evil One has and will in the future try to keep God's people from singing the Psalms. His reason: praise spells defeat for Satan. Jesus knew this (Matt. 4:10, 11). The praise of God in the words of the Psalter filled our Lord's understanding, his heart and his expressions. The Gospels well attest Jesus' use of the Psalms. They mediated God's will and comfort to Jesus in critical junctures of his life as well as providing refuge in the midst of wickedness (cf. Mark 14:26; Psalms 113–118).⁵

Satan desired that Job curse God, not bless Him (1:11–2:5). Through the canonical ordering in our English Bibles, Psalm 1 following Job 42, we remember Job as an immediate example of one who did not "walk in the counsel of the wicked nor stand in the way of sinners nor sit in the seat of the scoffers" (Ps. 1:1). The Lord indeed watched over the way of righteous Job (Ps. 1:6). Job's praise of God, i.e., his choice of the way of righteousness, was Satan's defeat. The Psalter functions to arm us with words and instructional praise for Satan's defeat.

Be Alert. Occasionally, the Psalms are read or sung in church, but because the soil is rocky, when the newness wears off, their use is abandoned because the enduring significance of the Psalter had no real root in the congregation's heart and understanding.

Congregations do not abandon the Psalter in singing because they consider the Old Testament of lesser value. No. It is because the course of this world, the spirit of the age, is to intensify the expectation of relevance, instantaneous applicability to me, myself, right now. The singing of the Psalms, however, requires a spirit of

Ps Philo). But, we must, without a doubt, give first referent to our canonical Psalter, for its pervasive influence as "psalm" in the New Testament is clear. In any event, commentators have too quickly read the musical triad in Ephesians 5:19 as synonymous, making "psalms" indistinguishable from hymns and spiritual songs. The singing of "psalms of David" in the second-century church is probably reflected in *Acts of Paul* 10, p. 7 (Hennecke, Schneemelcher, Wilson, *NT Apocrypha*, 2.380). References in the early church fathers to the church singing the Psalms are numerous; see E. Ferguson, "Psalms," in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* (New York: Garland, 1990) 765.

⁵ For Jesus' acquaintance with the Psalms, see Henry Shires, *Finding the Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 145–159, and Thomas Hawkins, "Disclosing the Heart and Mind of Jesus," in *The Unsuspected Power of the Psalms* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1985) 22–38.

community, a willingness to linger with the words of other believers, in other times, and a willingness to share in song the exasperations and elations of fellow believers in the present—even when I myself may not feel at the moment such hurt or such joy (Rom. 12:15).

For those few Psalms which sound vengeful or vindictive, we are allowed and permitted to repeat these words to God out of our own (or others'!) hurts, disappointments and anger.⁶ In the fourth century, Athanasius in his famous letter to Marcellinus observed that from the Psalter a person was able

to have the form of words for what he experiences and for what distresses him. These words become like a mirror to the singer for him to be able to understand in them the emotions of his soul and thus perceiving them to explain them.⁷

The loss of the Psalter in Christian life has only given further license and plausibility to the various alternative ways of dealing with anger proffered by the social sciences.

Wherein the Psalms presuppose and express historical memories of Israel, the church can transfer meaning within the new life in Christ.⁸ Difficulties in doing this have been exaggerated. Isaac Watts thought such deficiencies in relevance required interpretive paraphrases of the Psalms.⁹ Watts, however, would surely be shocked with what has come to be in our day, our inhospitality to singing metrical psalms in church.

Be Alert. In some churches, the Psalms are sung, *but because the soil has thorns*, the Psalms are soon abandoned because the pleasure from singing spiritual songs chokes out Psalm singing.

It is true. Singing the Psalms may not at first be delightful. It can be work. It is work. It requires effort and concentration. At first, it is awkward and wooden. Sometimes, this is because the content can seem so removed from the trappings of our world. Sometimes our hearts do not "feel" adoration for God. We may decline the opportunity to "hallelujah" in a certain Psalm thinking that expressed praise is only

⁶ C. S. Lewis' thoughts about the so-called imprecatory or cursing passages in the Psalms remain helpful, in his *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958) 20–33.

⁷ Migne, *Patrologiae Graeca*, 27.20D, 24B, trans. Everett Ferguson in *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* (1978) 388, 390.

⁸ An aid in this regard is R. E. O. White's *A Christian Handbook to the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). Also, the extended essay of Walter Brueggeman, *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity and the Meaning of History* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991).

⁹ From the preface of his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707): "There are a thousand lines in it [Psalms] which were not made for the Church in our Day to assume as its own. There are also many deficiencies of light and glory...You will always find in this Paraphrase [Watts' hymnbook] dark expressions enlightened and the Levitical ceremonies changed into the worship of the gospel and explained in the language of our time and nation" (quoted in Robin Leaver's "The Hymn Explosion," *Christian History* 10/3 [1991] 15).

accepted praise when it is heart felt *response* to God's goodness. Such is preposterous. Praise is not always response. Often praise in the Psalms is intentional determination to see things differently (see below). Praise constitutes a world, a culture, a way of perceiving.¹⁰ Praise can set forth and create. It is not always response!

In singing the Psalms we are training and nurturing our hearts in the pleasures of God, in what is pleasing to Him. In this respect, the praise of the Psalms is non-utilitarian.¹¹ Praise is obligatory by our being creatures. As creatures we in fact invite other aspects of God's creation, animate and inanimate, to praise God. Certainly in the singing of certain words in certain modes our own sensibilities are changed over time. Blessings will surely obtain. Praise in the Psalms does stretch and exercise us fully in our humanity and in our being especially loved by God, increasing our proximity to His presence and completing His reign as our only King.

Other seeds fell on good soil

Satan wants us to believe the lie that the Psalms are a relic of a bygone Israelite era and that for the church they can be no more than a sedative. The truth, however, is that the Psalms are the church's primer for learning how to praise God. The climate has rarely been more favorable than now for learning how to sing¹² and to better understand¹³ the Psalter.

Chanting the Psalter. To sing the Psalms verbatim, regardless of the translation, is of course preferable to singing the Psalms in paraphrase, metrical or otherwise. There is a profound wisdom in learning to speak in the vocabulary of scripture. To speak where the Bible speaks, or better, to speak *what* the Bible speaks, is a comfortable slogan in our tradition. It should not be despised, especially in the matter of reciting or singing the Psalms.

Recent work in cultural linguistics has drawn attention to the necessity of certain specific vocabulary and language to the formation and viability of a community and its culture.¹⁴ When words are not fully understood by newcomers to the community, the words are not changed but the community waits for the newcomer to change as he repeats the vocabulary and learns to use the words in certain contexts, in certain life situations. Over time, the language of the community, with its own logic

¹⁰ The insight of Walter Brueggeman in *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 1-28.

¹¹ As Walter Brueggeman says bluntly, "Praise is a useless act. It is not a means, but an end in itself. . . In the end we are able to see that our true end is 'to glorify and enjoy God.'" In "Praise and the Psalms: A Politics of Glad Abandonment," *The Hymn* 43/3 (1992) 18.

¹² Michael Hawn, "Current Trends in Hymnody: Psalm Singing," *The Hymn* 43 (1992) 31-42. And Massey Shepherd, "Renewal of Psalmody Today," in *The Psalms in Christian Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) 75-117.

¹³ See David Howard, "Editorial Activity in the Psalter: A State of the Field Survey," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. Clinton McCann (Sheffield: Academic, 1993) 52-71.

¹⁴ Applied to theology in George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 32-41.

and structure, actually shapes and changes the newcomer.

Each Psalm has its own structure and logic. It is not misbegotten. And the association of each Psalm with a neighboring Psalm (see below) builds the skeletal structure of the language of praise. And the Psalms together in a book, and then together in five books, accumulatively, form a culture with its own logic and language.

As a newcomer, I chant the Psalms, not fully understanding everything I sing nor fully appreciating the structured flow of my words. But I continue to sing because I believe that in praising God through the Psalms I am being changed and the words I repeat of the Psalmist are actually structuring my perceptions of the world and altering my sensibilities. The words of Athanasius are sobering:

Let no one ... attempt to alter or wholly change the phrases. Let him say and sing **artlessly** the things written just as they are. . . . Their words are better and stronger than those composed by us. . . . For in these words they were pleasing to God.¹⁵

Chanting the Psalms verbatim (in contrast to metrical versions) is certainly foreign to our tradition. It has, of course, had greater vitality in the Anglican tradition, though some have lamented its loss even within the disciplines of Anglicanism.¹⁶ Thankfully individual Christians (more difficult for congregations) can benefit from the collection of verbatim Psalm singing in the *Anglican Chant Psalter*, ed. Alec Wyton (NY: Church Hymnal, 1987).

Singing Metrical Psalms. First attempts may require singing metrical paraphrases rather than chanting verbatim texts of the Psalter!¹⁷ More practically, for congregational life, we are blessed with recent hymnals (metrical and paraphrase) of the entire Psalter from various Christian traditions. Songleaders in our churches would be well advised to spend time with two such recent hymnals: *A New Metrical Psalter*, ed. by Christopher Webber (NY: Church Hymnal, 1986) and *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC, 1988). We can only commend Edward Fudge for his valiant effort in 1974 to publish a short Psalter hymnbook for churches of Christ. It did not gain wide circulation or visibility.

¹⁵ Migne PG 27.41D, trans. Ferguson, "Athanasius," 400-401.

¹⁶ The "dean" of Anglican music writers, Erik Routley, wrote in a conversation with his American friends that "a hasty liberalism, in which there is little liberality, has conspired to withdraw the psalter from the worship of ordinary Christians. What the liberalism which has no sense either of poetry or of history has not wholly achieved has been completed by modernists, anti-medievalists, and, I regret to add, the misplaced pedantries of church musicians." In *Music Leadership in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967) 68.

¹⁷ For a review of the most frequent 3 meters (common, short, long), see William Reynolds and Milburn Price, *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, 3rd ed (Carol Stream, Illinois: Hope, 1987) xv-xvi.

There should be an evolving pleasure and delight in congregational Psalm singing. The praise of God has its own progression toward pleasure and delight!¹⁸

If the prospect of "enjoying" Psalm singing seems far fetched, it may be instructive to remember the circumstances surrounding the recovery of Psalm singing in the 16th century. The influential metrical Psalm book by Sternhold and Hopkins published in 1562 had its roots in the courts of France and England where the attempt was made by two court servants, Clement Marot in France and Thomas Sternhold in England, to paraphrase the Psalms into meter so as to provide "healthier" verse and song for the **recreational** enjoyment of the court. John Calvin adapted the metrical songs of Marot and set his churches to singing the Psalms in language they could understand.

In France to chant the Psalms meant in popular parlance to turn Protestant.¹⁹ In England the Psalter (Sternhold and Hopkins) became in the 17th century the most familiar verse known to the majority of Englishmen.²⁰ Though difficult to establish historically, one can imagine that the wide knowledge of the Psalms was a strong undercurrent in the tide of the Reformation. This extensive knowledge of the Psalter was surely the womb for the birth (fertility!) of spiritual hymnody of the 18th century.²¹

In the melodies and metrical paraphrases of the Psalms, there emerged for many a delight in the praise of the Psalter. For many the singing of the Psalms replaced the singing of unsuitable ballads.²² John Chrysostom lamented in a homily many centuries earlier, "Most of you know dirty songs, but who of you is able to say even one psalm?"²³ In our day, contemporary Christians artists are slowly (too slowly) putting the Psalms to music. We need so many more to fill the airwaves. Let us pray that the record companies will allow and encourage such composing.

But truthfully and practically, before our congregations can delight in Psalm singing, servants of the Word in our churches, and their shepherds, must first develop for themselves disciplined reading (and singing) of the Psalms.

¹⁸ Daniel Hardy and David Ford suggest "recognition" (attention) and "respect" (affirmation) as preludes to delight in praise in their thoughtful exploration of the phenomenon of praise, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

¹⁹ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England* (Princeton: University, 1970) 1.385-91.

²⁰ Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 143.

²¹ See Madeleine Marshall, "A New Species of Christian Song: Where did the English Hymn come from?" *Christian History* 10 (1991) 32-34.

²² From the opening page of Sternhold and Hopkins' metrical Psalms: "Set forth and allowed to be sung in all churches, of all people together, and after morning and evening prayer as also before and after sermons and moreover in private homes for their godly solace and comfort laying apart all ungodly songs and ballads which tend only to the nourishing of vice and corrupting of youth." The recent popular interest in the "sound" of the Chant (sung by Benedictine monks from Spain) may signal a "cultural" openness to the musical style of chanting.

²³ Quoted (without reference) in Josef Jungman, *The Early Liturgy*, trans. Francis Brunner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959) 168.

Inter-Psalm Interpretation. It is an encouragement to see the distance between Psalm and reader now being narrowed by recent illuminating observations about connections between consecutive Psalms, i.e. by recent "inter-psalm" interpretations. The laborers have been few so far but the field is white unto harvest!²⁴

Stimulated by the theory of Brevard Childs and its implementation by his student Gerald Wilson, interpretations of the Psalms now discern a flow from Psalm to Psalm and book to book.²⁵ Indeed a rule of thumb in personal Psalter reading is to read the Psalms three at a time, e.g. Day 1: Psalms 3, 4, 5; Day 2: Psalms 4, 5, 6; Day 3: Psalms 5, 6, 7 and so on.

Such care in reading provides an immediate surrounding context for each individual Psalm. For example, interpreting Psalm 22 in light of Psalm 23 reinforces what is clear even within Psalm 22: Jesus' cry "My God, My God" was not the declaration of some objective divine abandonment but rather the appropriate expression of the suffering son of man.

A further advantage of inter-psalm interpretation is that it provides an alternative to this century's rearrangement of the Psalms into categories according to their form and genre (e.g. royal, torah, thanksgiving, lament, et al.).²⁶ The inter-psalm interpretation allows the believer to read and sing the Psalms in the order we have them in the canon.

Psalm 1 and 2 as Overture. This context of surrounding Psalms must be used, however, in conjunction with the hermeneutic provided by Psalm 1 and 2. The fundamental character of praise is sounded in the overture to the Psalter, Psalm 1 and 2. The beginning and ending with "blessing" (1:1; 2:11) surely identify the first two Psalms as a unit which introduces the Psalter and offers us interpretive guidance.²⁷

Jesus' words to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness (Matt 6:33) encapsulate the heartbeat of the one who praises in Psalm 2 and Psalm 1. The blessing upon the one who speaks and lives the praise of Psalm 1 and 2 (1:1; 2:11) is expanded in blessings elsewhere in the Psalter and given memorable expression in the blessings of Jesus on the mountain.

From singing Psalm 1 to each other we learn that the praise first acceptable

²⁴ Franz Delitzsch's commentaries on the Psalms (1881) are some of the very few modern works concerned with inter-psalm connections. See also David Howard, "A Contextual Reading of Psalm 90-94," in McCann, *Shape*, 108-123.

²⁵ Brevard Childs, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 503-25; Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985). The most up-to-date assessment of this approach can be found in the collection of essays edited by McCann, *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*.

²⁶ For a more appreciative appraisal, see Roland Murphy, "The Psalms and Worship," *Ex Auditu* 8 (1992) 23-31.

²⁷ Recognized by Patrick Miller, "The Beginning of the Psalter," in McCann, *Shape*, 83-92; and Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) chaps. 1, 2.

to God is a life disciplined to avoid the company and conversation of the wicked. The prominence of warning as the beginning of praise at first seems strange. We would have expected the Hallelujah chorus to begin the Psalter. It does not.

It is those seemingly "insignificant" daily, hourly spontaneous decisions we make in our walking, standing and sitting which are, or turn out not to be, praise to God. The effort necessary to praise God by deliberately choosing righteousness is not of course some devious scheme of the Father to make our way tedious and filled with drudgery.

If the choice of associates and the way of righteousness constitute an elemental expression of praise through the Psalms (so Psalm 1), the second fundamental aspect of praise is the concern for the collective, i.e. society and nation (so Psalm 2). Just as our lives ebb and flow between life as an individual and life in society so Psalm 1 and 2 present what is praise to God individually and collectively.

Specifically, Psalm 2 confesses that God is sovereign. Just as final recompense of the wicked is hidden (Psalm 1) so God's reign can be unnoticed (Psalm 2). In singing Psalm 2, we hear prominently not our own voices but the sound of laughter, the laughter of God in the heavens. The laughter is occasioned by the pretension and arrogance of wayward nations and leaders who refuse to acknowledge, even rebelling against God's Kingdom. In Christ, we sing Psalm 2 with special reference to the anointed Jesus, regal son of God. We also remember his words that the Kingdom comes with power but evolves in often surprising, even hidden ways.

When we remember Psalm 2 as we sing through the Psalter, our hearts are indeed drawn to the inextricable connection of praise with honoring God as King. In singing the Psalms of David, especially in Book I, we express praise through one individual's struggle with the way of righteousness in the midst of attacks from the wicked (Psalm 1). But we also remember David as King and we sing, especially in Book III, of the hopes and dreams attached to David and Zion²⁸

In the opening of Book IV, in the midst of disorientation, we sing a prayer of Moses (Psalm 90), seeking guidance from Israel's great leader. Progressing through Book IV we come to sing of the Lord as King (95-100), no longer relying on nations or powerful leaders for security or deliverance or direction.

The Psalms drill us in the expression of praise. We do need help. While we had been created to live to the praise of God's glory (Ephesians 1) we nevertheless became children of disobedience. The Psalms help us recover our purpose for living, indeed our reason for having been created, through the repetition of the Psalter's words of praise.

²⁸ Gerald Wilson has noted the metamorphosis, from the first three books of the Psalter to the last two books, of the hope of David's kingship shifting from earthly realization to the trust in God being the only real king ("Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalm," in McCann, *Shape*, 72-82).

If our church hymnals lack the Psalms, the twin elements of praise in Psalms 1 and 2 may be sadly receiving inadequate attentive expression. On the one hand, if the Psalms whose themes are previewed in Psalm 1 are **not** sung in church, *the hostility in the world and Christian's dismay in response to such evil may have poor expression in a church's canon of hymns*. A certain comfortableness may deny endemic wickedness. Consistent singing of the Psalter will disabuse the singer of such sanguine understanding of the world. For others the onslaught of evil is overwhelming. Singing the Psalms airs the frustrations and anxieties of believers who may see little near term relief.

On the other hand, failure to sing the praise of God's Kingdom in the Psalms as anticipated in Psalm 2 *may elevate the seeming importance of political forces in the world or, worse, blind us to God's true oversight and lordship over every nation of the world*. Without realizing it, our education in American citizenship, with its strong separation of church and state, may have made it even more difficult for us truthfully to confess that God is king over all the nations of the earth. Singing the Psalms teaches us to consider and believe the reign of God over every nation, no matter its momentary rebellion. We must at least balance the interpretations of cause and effect in our daily newspapers and media broadcasts, with the presentation of the Kingdom of God in the Psalter.

Paul said that we understand the will of God not in intoxication but by singing in the Spirit, Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:17–19). May we as teachers be willing to go back to singing school, singing from our first and primary hymnal, the Psalter. Only then, can we encourage others in the elemental exercise of praise. Only then can we truly understand Jesus' words to seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness.

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