

# *Songs* of the *Spirit*



**THE PLACE OF PSALMS IN THE  
WORSHIP OF GOD**

**EDITED BY**

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# I.

## ***What Should We Sing in the Worship of God? An Argument from Scripture for Exclusive Psalm Singing***

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### **INTRODUCTION**

**M**ost church-going people will be aware of significant changes in worship content and style over recent years – particularly in connection with the songs offered to God as part of that worship.

Of course, it is natural for mankind to compose and to sing and it is no less natural for redeemed mankind to compose and to sing in praise of God. What is surprising, however, is the extraordinary rise in the number of Christian songs being written and performed since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No less surprising is the ease with which so many of these songs have found their way into the worship of the church.

In an area where many are, for several reasons, instinctively conservative, this development has provoked quite a reaction – on grounds both of principle and taste. However, those in favour of the development generally dismiss this reaction as ‘traditionalism’ - and, to be fair, they do have a point: after all, it is simply not

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true to say – as so many do – that the old songs are always better. Sometimes they are but sometimes they are not. In any case, it is hard to see how the mere fact of having been around for a long time entitles a worship song to hold its place forever against a newer rival of superior quality.

However, most people fail to address the deeper questions – and that is the case whether they are for the change or not. These questions concern the criteria we should be applying when it comes to choosing which songs we should use in the worship of God in the first place. For example, consider the following questions:

*‘Who should write the worship songs of the church? Who should decide their suitability for use? Who should decide which songs should be sung on any occasion? Is it acceptable for an unbeliever to write a worship song if the song expresses the truth? Does a song have to mention God or Jesus explicitly before it can be accepted for use in worship? Would it be acceptable for a song just to contain truth in general or would it have to contain expressly theological truth in order to be considered for use in worship? Does a worship song need to address God directly?’*

Have you ever thought of these questions? How confident would you be in answering questions of this kind? Would you even know where to begin in trying to answer them? The chances are that most people have never considered these questions seriously enough – if at all.

The purpose of this chapter is to present a case for using only the Psalms of the Bible when we offer our singing to God in worship – and that we should sing these Psalms without the accompaniment of musical instruments.

If your instinctive response to this argument is to see it as novel or bizarre, it may come as something of a shock to you to discover that this way of singing to God in worship was once the accepted norm in the Reformed Churches of Europe! In fact, the mighty movement of God in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – known as the Reformation – saw the establishment of the regular congregational worship of God, in almost all the Reformed churches, precisely

along these lines!

And this was no accident: The Reformation was not just a reformation of *doctrine* and *church government* but a reformation of *worship* as well. In the movement of Reformation, the authority of scripture was of paramount importance and this guiding principle determined the content and form of worship as well as the doctrine of

“The overwhelming majority of Reformed churches in Europe adopted the practice of unaccompanied psalm singing in their worship”

the church and its government. And for John Calvin – and indeed for most of the other leading 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers – the Bible only authorised the singing of Psalms alone without instrumental accompaniment.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the large family of Reformed churches which were distinguished from others by use of Calvin’s name (Calvinist) – and which made up the overwhelming majority of Reformed churches in Europe – adopted the practice of unaccompanied psalm singing in their worship.

Significantly, although they did stress that this was the practice of the church in the days immediately following the Apostles (see further below), their main reason for adopting this position was that they understood it to be the Biblical position on worship. And this is the conviction behind this chapter too – the conviction that God has given us a book of songs for singing and that we are obligated to sing these songs and to sing them exclusively in the worship of his name.

Sadly, however, over the last 150 years, this form of worship has become increasingly rare. Over recent years in particular, as

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we noted above, Reformed worship has changed almost beyond recognition and is now often dominated by songs of merely human composition and by instrumental musical performance.

To examine how, when and why all this changed would take too long and lies beyond our scope. My primary concern here is to defend this historic position and to promote it as the form of worship which God requires and which, therefore, most glorifies him and tends most to our spiritual health and edification.

To help you see where I'm coming from, it's important to state at the outset that I am writing from the standpoint of someone who believes that every part of worship (such as singing, prayer, preaching or reading) needs a *clear commandment of God to authorise it*. In other words, when it comes to worship, it is never enough to say 'God doesn't condemn it so it must be alright to do it'. Instead, we must be able to say 'God commands this to be done and therefore I must do it'. I will say something more on this as we go on.

Where, then, do we begin?

Perhaps it makes sense to begin with the following question: If unaccompanied psalm singing was the norm in the Calvinistic churches of Europe following the Reformation, what were the arguments used to move these churches in another direction?

When we address this question, we discover that the arguments used at that time to stimulate this change are the same arguments being used now to further it! We also discover that, however many forms these arguments seem to take, they seem to reduce down, in essence, to two – first, the Bible commands this change and, second, the events of the New Testament necessitate it!

Interestingly, these two arguments appeared recently (2010) in a paper specially written to defend the use of new songs, and of instrumental accompaniment, in the worship of the New Testament church. As I go on, I will make some references to this paper – just to clarify the arguments. The paper is entitled *Biblical Interpretation: Music and Song in Worship*, by Rev. A. I. Macleod,

and the full text may be consulted online at URL: [http://www.freechurch.org/images/uploads/Biblical\\_Interpretation\\_-\\_Music\\_and\\_Song\\_in\\_Worship\\_-\\_A\\_I\\_Macleod.pdf](http://www.freechurch.org/images/uploads/Biblical_Interpretation_-_Music_and_Song_in_Worship_-_A_I_Macleod.pdf).

In what follows, then, we will examine these two arguments for change in some detail. The issue of instrumental music will be dealt with in a separate chapter.

## **TWO ARGUMENTS FOR CHANGE**

### ***'Sing a New Song!'***

The first argument for using songs other than the Psalms is that the Bible tells us to do so – therefore, we should sing them!

Now, it is indeed true that the Bible does command us to sing 'new' songs. We see such a command, for example, in Psalms 33:3; 96:1 and 98:1. Also, some people argue that we have examples of such new songs in the New Testament book of Revelation.

In the same way, it is argued that the presence of other 'scripture songs' in the Bible is evidence of the on-going composing and singing of 'new songs' in the worship of the church as and when such songs were needed – these songs, of course, are additional to the ones which were later recorded for our use in the Book of Psalms.

Those who advocate this position, then, are not just asserting that we should sing these scripture songs themselves but that we should see their very presence as an indicator that we should be engaged in a constant process of writing and singing such songs for use in the worship of the church.

So then, the first argument asserts that the Bible commands the on-going composition of new worship songs.

### ***'The Psalms are no longer sufficient'***

The second argument for adding to the Psalms is a more familiar one: it is the argument that the Book of Psalms – as a book written during the time of the Old Covenant – is simply insufficient for the praise of the church under the New Covenant.

“Are the ‘heavenly’ songs recorded in the Bible for our use in singing the Songs of the Lord here on earth or are they recorded for some other purpose?”

I think it is important to note that this argument is the oldest, the most emotive (*‘Why can’t we sing the name of Jesus?’*) and the most powerful argument for the development of hymnody. Indeed, as a simple matter of fact, it has been the most effective argument in the process of first supplementing and then

gradually replacing the Psalms as the songbook of the Reformed Churches during the last 150 years.

Of course, these arguments have been well answered before. But it is important to keep answering them whenever they appear and what follows below is designed to do just that.

First, then, we need to examine what the Bible means by singing new songs.

## **I. ‘SING A NEW SONG!’**

When it comes to the command to sing new songs, we need to begin by finding out what these new songs are – as opposed to what we think they are!

For this, it is probably best to begin at the end – with the book of Revelation! After all, although the command to sing new songs is a command which appears in the Book of Psalms, most people are unaware of this command and are perhaps more familiar with the singing of new songs in the only place where we find them explicitly sung: the Book of Revelation. These new songs appear in Revelation 5:9-14, 14:3 and 15:3-4.

But what do these passages really teach?

### ***The Songs of Revelation***

When we study these songs, one thing is immediately apparent: all of them are being sung in heaven! This should prompt a question: are these 'heavenly' songs recorded in the Bible for our use in singing the Songs of the Lord here on earth or are they recorded for some other purpose? It is probably best to examine them in turn.

#### *Revelation 5:9-14*

The song most often appealed to in this debate is found in Revelation 5:9-14. This passage contains a 'new song' declaring the worthiness of the Lamb, praising him as the Redeemer of his people and ascribing honour, glory and power to him.

The writer of the paper I referred to earlier wonders why anyone should be prohibited from singing these words in a services of worship and, in a passionate plea for the worship of heaven to be copied in the worship of the church on earth, he closes his paper by asking a question which, for him, and probably for others, sums up the whole issue:

*"We too are called to sing, 'Worthy is the Lamb!' At the end of this paper, if anyone is looking for one issue that can absolutely focus the discussion, I offer this question: 'Can we sing, "Worthy is the Lamb!" in public worship?' If not, please tell me why not."*

On first reading, all this may seem convincing enough. However, the argument doesn't bear close scrutiny. Is it really as obvious as he claims it to be that the worship of heaven should be copied by us here on earth? Let us take a moment to follow such an idea through.

If you look more closely at the passage, you will see that the particular song he highlights is being sung in heaven by the 'living creatures' and by the 'twenty-four elders' around the throne. You will see also that while they sing, they all carry a harp and a vessel with incense which contains the prayers of the saints. Another new song (if that is what it is) in Revelation 7:10-12, is sung while waving palm branches and wearing white robes.

Now, if the singing of these new songs in the worship of

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heaven is our warrant for singing them right now in our worship on earth, then it would seem fairly obvious that it is also a warrant for singing them with the harp, the incense vessels, the branches and the robes! If, as the writer insists, this singing should be done *as it is done in heaven* then all of these are as much part of the worship as the words which are sung!

Indeed, on the principle of Bible interpretation being applied by the writer, *all the liturgical acts accompanying the offering of heavenly praise in Revelation should all be offered on earth too!* Now, I have seen this kind of thinking argued energetically before – most recently in Lutheran Reconstructionism – but I am surprised to see it in masquerading as classic Presbyterianism.

However, if heaven's worship is to be copied on earth then it is to be copied. Selective applications will not do.

### *Revelation 14:3*

The 'new song' of Revelation 14:3 is even more problematic. Look closely and you will see that this is a song which *no-one can sing at all* – except the 144,000 who are redeemed from the earth! What sense does it make to assert that we should be singing a song which *no-one can sing at all* – except the 144,000 who are redeemed from the earth!

Indeed, this particular example takes us rather neatly to the whole point at issue: all of these songs are clearly sung by angels and glorified saints and they provide glimpses of what is taking place in heaven. By what reasoning, then, should we conclude that these performances by the *church triumphant* in heaven are a mandate for the worship of the *church militant* here on the earth? Is it not far more natural to conclude that what we have in these new songs are heavenly scenes which are simply not meant to be copied on the earth at all?

All this is further highlighted when we ask a more fundamental question: In what way are these songs 'new'? And, here, it is really easy to be led astray by a false assumption regarding these 'new' songs. The false assumption is that the 'newness' of these

songs must consist in their being ‘*new covenant*’ songs and that they were written to be sung by us in our new covenant worship.

But is this really the case? No, it is not. In point of fact, the ‘newness’ of these songs is not a reference to these songs being ‘*New Covenant*’ songs but as being songs belonging to the *new order of things in the final state*!

To see this more plainly, just stop to think of the other ‘*new things*’ which appear in the book of Revelation: there is a ‘*new Jerusalem*’ (3:12,21:2), there is a ‘*new heaven and a new earth*’(21:2), there is a ‘*new name*’ given to God’s people (2:17,3:12) and, finally, we have ‘*all things new*’ (21:5). What do all these things have in common? They all they all belong explicitly to *heaven* or to the ‘*final state*’! The ‘newness’ of all of these things belongs to the future – to those who have ‘*overcome*’ (2:17). That is not true of us yet on the earth!

Again, it is worthwhile noting that all of these ‘new’ things are of immediate Divine origin. None of them are made by man: It is God who makes the ‘*new creature*’, it is God who makes the ‘*new cosmos*’, it is God who gives the ‘*new name*’ and it is God who inspires the ‘*new song*’ – and they all belong to heaven. In other words, we have no more warrant to make a new song than we do to give ourselves a new name! Both are God’s prerogative. I will say more on this below.

Clearly, then, these new songs in Revelation are not designed to form part of the content of our praise book here below. We are given these words simply as comforting insights into the praise of the church as it has overcome above and as a foretaste of a new order of things to be – but the worship performance of these songs awaits the pilgrim people of God in heaven.

For now, God wills that we use the songbook of the church *militant*, not that of the church *triumphant*.

So then, the presence of new songs in the book of Revelation has nothing to say to us in connection with which worship songs should be used here on earth.

### **Other 'new songs' in the New Testament**

What, then, about the other 'songs' which appear in the New Testament?

It may come as something of a surprise to you to discover that there are no such 'songs' in the New Testament at all! Significantly, apart from the Book of Revelation, and its insights into heaven, no other New Testament book speaks about singing new songs.

Unfortunately, that hasn't stopped those who wish to sing them from trying to find them! In fact, it has been alleged for years that we have fragments of such 'new songs' in Philippians 2:5-11, 1 Timothy 3:16 and elsewhere.

Frankly, it is always disappointing to find advocates of hymnody appealing to the alleged presence of so-called 'Apostolic hymn fragments' in the New Testament. If these 'fragments' are anything more than exalted prose they could just as easily be fragments of early creeds. But the stubborn fact remains that, despite the ingenuity of scholars determined to identify such fragments, there is simply no real evidence for their existence. The fragments cannot be proven to be fragments and the hymns from which the 'fragments' came have never been found.

The significance of this failure cannot be overstated: hymnody is an *enduring art form* and, this being so, the utter absence of hymns from the first 200 years (and more) of post-Apostolic church history is a huge problem for those who believe that they were sung throughout the churches by the Apostles and by their successors. Indeed, their absence is as much of a problem for the advocates of hymnody as the absence of musical instruments in the first 800 years of church history is for the advocates of instrumental music (see below).

This is particularly the case if these 'hymns' were so important as to be partly incorporated into the New Testament letters. After all, the argument for their existence is based on supposed fragments appearing in these letters. However, if they really did exist and if they were known and memorised by the Apostles, sung

regularly in their worship and incorporated into their letters, their disappearance from the record of history becomes simply and utterly inexplicable.

*Indeed, the fact of their apparent 'disappearance' becomes almost conclusive evidence against their alleged existence in the first place!*

In this connection, it may surprise most readers to discover that the only religious song surviving from this period is Clement of Alexandria's *Hymn to the Divine Logos* – which is not of good quality and which was probably not designed to be used in public worship. Indeed, there is no evidence that it was ever so used.

In fact, the original introduction of extra-biblical songs into the worship of the church appears to have been the work of the heretics and not of the orthodox. Arius used the writing of songs of praise as a vehicle to spread his false teaching while, according to Eusebius the historian, Paul of Samosata substituted new songs in place of the 'psalms (which are) in honour of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Also, and as late as 430 AD, Augustine – who, in spite of assertions to the contrary, never advocated the use of hymns – could say that the Donatists reproached the church for using Divine songs while they '*were inflaming their minds by singing songs of human composition*'.

Without digressing too much into the history of sung praise, it is worth noting that even when such songs began to be used in the churches, the opposition to them was strong: as late as 343 AD, the Council of Laodicea forbade the 'singing of uninspired

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hymns in church' as well as the 'reading of the uncanonical books of scripture' – a finding which was ratified by the famous Council of Chalcedon. Incidentally, it is important to note the logic applied by the Council – to read a book of human composition, however good it may be, in place of scripture in worship is the same kind of error as to sing a song of human composition in place of scripture in the same act of worship!

However, the purpose of all this is just to show that the attempt to find fragments of hymns in the New Testament literature is futile. The attempt to identify them has long since become an exercise in *scholastic speculation* - the kind of speculation indulged in by academics who have given up the study of what is revealed in exchange for the pursuit of novelty and spurious originality – not to mention academic degrees!

In the face of an utter lack of evidence for their existence, the quest to find them should simply be given up - they are less likely to be found than Atlantis or the Abominable Snowman. In point of fact, in this kind of debate, there should be no appeal to these so-called fragments anymore and the appearance of any such appeal must be interpreted as an admission of weakness in the argument on the part of those who make it.

### **'Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs' – are they new songs?**

Aside from the specific command to sing new songs, the most common argument for their use is found in Paul's command to the churches in Ephesus and Colossae to sing '*psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*' (Ephesians 5:18 and Colossians 3:16).

Admittedly, these are the only passage of scripture which can be appealed to as giving some express warrant to sing something other than the Psalms. And of course, such express warrant is important when it comes to a truly Reformed theology of worship. However, it is important to come to a command like this in a fresh way and, particularly, to see it through first century eyes rather than twenty first century ones! In other words, we shouldn't begin by asking what these words mean to us but what they meant, first

of all, to those who wrote them and those who heard them.

When we do this, we discover something interesting: most of the Psalms in the Book of Psalms contain either one or more of the terms '*psalm*', '*hymn*' and '*song*' in their titles! In 67 of these psalms, the word '*psalm*' appears in the title. In six of them, the word '*hymn*' appears while in another 35, the word '*song*' appears. Significantly, some of the psalms carry two of these titles together (for example, Psalm 65 is 'a *psalm* and *song* of David') while one psalm carries all three titles: Psalm 76 in the Greek translation – which the Apostles used and were familiar with – is a '*psalm*', a '*hymn*' and a '*song*'. These titles themselves would be simply the Greek translation of the three Hebrew words used in these Psalm titles: 'Mizmorim' (Psalms), 'Tehillim' (Hymns) and 'Shirim' (Songs).

In proper historical context, then, the presumption would be that Paul is referring to these titles from the Book of Psalms – indeed, that he is referring to the Book of Psalms itself. This becomes all the more plain when we consider some aspects of the translation and interpretation of the passage concerned.

It is significant that a legitimate translation of the Greek passage under discussion would read like this: '*psalms, hymns and songs – spiritual*'. In other words, the adjective '*spiritual*' could well be qualifying all three nouns. The significance of this lies in the fact that the word '*spiritual*' appears 25 times in the New Testament: On 24 of these occasions, it is a reference to what is produced by the Holy Spirit of God – the only exception to this rule is the reference to '*spiritual wickedness*' in Ephesians 6 – which is a reference to what is produced by the spirits of the demonic world. This being the case, the term would seem to be referring here to psalms, hymns and songs which have been *authored for use by the Holy Spirit himself through the process of inspiration*. If this is indeed the best translation, it would only serve to make Paul's reference here to the Book of Psalms even more explicit.

In fairness, however, it could well be the case that the adjective '*spiritual*' is merely describing the last of these nouns so

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that the meaning would be ‘*psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*.’ However, this does not affect the argument as much as one would think. After all, if these ‘songs’ are to be ‘spiritual’ – that is, inspired by the Spirit of God – why should it be the case that they alone are to be inspired while the ‘psalms’ and the ‘hymns’ could be uninspired? If, rather, the point is being made that the praise of the church must be inspired by the Holy Spirit,

then the attaching of the adjective to ‘songs’ alone would be on the assumption that the Psalms and hymns were understood to be inspired anyway and would be serving to draw attention to the nature of the Christian’s song - when filled with the Holy Spirit – as opposed to those who sing when they are ‘filled with wine’.

In other words, the meaning of the passage concerned would be as follows: ‘Don’t let your speech be the effusions of those who are full of wine, rather let it be the effusions of those who are filled with the Holy Spirit of God – and let your joyful singing not be the production of wine either but rather let it be the joyful singing of those who sing the songs the Holy Spirit himself has given.’

In context, then, it makes no real sense to interpret these terms in the way in which most people carelessly interpret them: the contemporary tendency to use the term ‘*psalms*’ for the songs of the Old Testament and the terms ‘*hymns*’ and ‘*songs*’ for our own compositions has no support in scripture at all. As far as the Bible itself is concerned, the evidence points to the three terms as referring to the same body of songs – the Book of Psalms!

And, again in context, such a reference to well-known songs is only to be expected: After all, these psalms were the songs known and learned by the apostles - and indeed by Christ - and from which they proved the Divinity of Christ (see especially the early chapters of Acts and Hebrews) and in which they saw his person and work most clearly demonstrated. Every instance of Apostolic singing in the New Testament, as we shall see, is best understood as a singing of the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs which were familiar to them but which had now become 'new' in the light of the resurrection of Christ.

Sadly, this understanding of the text has been dismissed, sometimes in a rather cavalier fashion, by more recent interpreters as a case of 'special pleading'. However, it was a commonly held opinion in exegetical texts of the past, is held by many still and remains - in context - the most natural meaning of the text. This interpretation is also strengthened by the way in which the three terms are used interchangeably in reference to the Book of Psalms by such ancient writers as Clement of Alexandria, Philo, Josephus and Athanasius. Indeed, Athanasius, in his celebrated letter to Marcellinus regarding the singing of Psalms, refers to the Psalms of the Bible by the three Greek terms under discussion within the space of a few paragraphs!

As for the various shades of meaning intended to be conveyed by the three terms, I think that a conclusive answer is elusive - but this shouldn't be surprising. After all, the Bible contains several instances of a single body of work, or a unit of some kind, being referred to by three distinct terms which are not always easy to distinguish. For example, in what is a clear reference to the body of 'law' given by God, what are the exact distinctions between '*commandments, statutes and judgements*' (Deuteronomy 30:16)? Or, in what is a clear reference to the entity of 'sin', what are the exact distinctions between '*iniquity, transgression and sin*' (Exodus 34:7)? Finally, in what is a clear reference to miracles, what are the exact distinctions between '*signs, wonders and miracles*' (2 Corinthians 12:12)?

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Finding these shades of meaning has its own importance – but is not crucial to the argument: after all, it is simply a fact that the three terms concerned are used as headings – either on their own or in combination – in the Book of Psalms and, at this level, that is all we need to know.

When all this is said and done, it may be useful to highlight that none of this is meant to discourage the writing or singing of songs which are in praise of God. Many such songs – for example, ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross’ – have found their way into the affections of many of the Lord’s people and, providing the content is honouring to God, the writing of such songs and their performance can be seen as the valid exercise of a valid gift. However, the questions at issue concern *when*, *where* and *how* such songs are to be used.

After all, it is the Reformed understanding of worship that worship takes place when we draw near to God by calling upon his name. This worship consists of an act, or a series of acts, in which God speaks to us (in reading, preaching and sacraments) and in which we present our offerings to God (in song and prayer – sometimes accompanied with vows and fasting). It is also the historic Reformed understanding that nothing is to be offered to God *as worship* without his explicit appointment – and that the songs which he has appointed to be offered in the context of worship are the Psalms!

This should alert us to the problem involved in binding up these merely human songs along with the Psalms in one volume of praise. And the problem is deeper than we realise. It is not simply a question of how many of God’s songs we sing and how many we sing of our own. Certainly, there is a problem there: after all, what does it say about the relative value and authority of God’s songs and ours if we choose to sing one of God’s in worship and three of our own? But the problem is deeper than that: when a congregation is assembling to offer its tribute of praise to God, what authority do we have for binding Divine and human songs together in that praise offering as though they are of equal value and authority in

the praise of God? Would we seriously consider binding up the sermons of John Piper, or even the Apocrypha, with the canonical books of the Bible for public reading? I assume we would not. In the same way, then, we should not be binding up human songs along with Divine songs for public praise.

Please note that this is not an issue of what we bind together *as such* – after all, the Westminster Shorter Catechism was often bound with the multiplication table! It is rather a question of what is of proper Divine authority and use. It appears obvious to me that, in all that is being done in connection with worship, the issues are simply not being thought through.

I suppose all this touches on a related issue – what does God appear to bless? For example, if God uses a hymn to move a soul in his worship, does this not sanction the use of the hymns in singing God's praise? Well, if it does, it would also sanction the reading of the Apocrypha if a reading from it was used to move a soul in the same way! However, as Reformed Christians, we must decide for once and for all whether principles and practice are to be governed by the word of God or by human experience.

*The fact is that, in the worship of God, a good song of our composing cannot replace a psalm for the singing any more than a good book of our composing can replace the Bible for reading!*

Bearing in mind, then, that the introduction of any form of worship needs explicit authorisation from the word of God – in other words, it is not enough to argue that it is not *forbidden*: it has to be shown to be *commanded* – even the most passionate advocates of hymnody would have to acknowledge that the case for singing uninspired songs is not proven on the basis of the command to praise God in '*psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*'.

What, then, about the other songs which appear in the Old Testament?

### **Other 'new songs' in the Old Testament**

As we saw earlier, there is indeed a clear command to sing new songs in the Old Testament. We find it repeatedly in Psalms 33:3,

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40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9 and 149:1. Is this command authorising or indeed commanding us, to write and sing our own worship songs? Again, we need to begin by asking what these songs are!

First, it is important to note that what these psalms actually command us to do is to '*sing*' new songs – not to '*write*' them! This may appear to be an insignificant distinction – after all, how are we to sing one unless we write it first! – but the distinction is not insignificant at all. On the few occasions on which this command is given, the most natural understanding of it is to see it as a reference to the singing of *that particular song itself*. In other words, the psalm which tells us to sing a new song *is itself* the new song!

Probably the most plain example of this is Psalm 40:3, which David describes as a 'new song' put into his mouth by God after his deliverance from the pit (Psalm 40:2,3). Psalm 40 is itself the new song. The principle, however, is applicable to every occasion on which this command appears.

Again, although it may sound unusual, singing a new song can be understood sometimes as singing an *old song with a new perspective* – in much the same way as the 'new commandment' of Christ is really a new issuing of the 'old commandment' – from a 'new perspective' (1 John 2:7,8). Christ's new commandment – to 'love one another' – was hardly 'new' after all: it was binding under the Old Covenant and from the beginning of creation – but it came from Christ with new meaning and, doubtless, with new power. Similarly, each time a song attains a new fulfilment, it is sung again as a 'new song' without any alteration to its content.

For example, Psalm 98 is a post deliverance new song, as is Psalm 96. Both these psalms, however, attain to their fullest application in the proclamation of God's salvation and justice to the nations through the Gospel. Their language, even when it retains elements of the old order, is designed to accommodate that application – as we shall see later.

We see something similar in Isaiah. In Isaiah 12: 1-7, the prophet tells of God being praised by the nations in song. The

content of such a song is revealed in verse 4 – which any regular singer of psalms will recognise from Psalm 105:1-2, a psalm which, to judge by its content, appears significantly to predate Isaiah himself. In other words, this functions as another case of a *canonical psalm becoming a 'new song' through the advent of Christ himself!*

“The psalm which tells us to sing a new song *is itself* the new song!”

Psalms like this, and others, are indeed to be sung *to* and *by* the nations in evangelism and praise: ‘Sing a new song to the Lord, all the earth sing to the Lord...show forth his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory to the nations and his wonders among the people’ - Psalm 96:1-3.

Finally, in eschatological passages such as Isaiah 42:10, the call to sing a new song is practically reduced to a figure of speech rather than a direct command to sing as such; note that this song is to be sung by the sea creatures and the islands! Note also the well-known examples of trees and streams clapping their hands as they participate in the ‘new songs’ of Psalms 98 and 96! These songs took on further newness with advent of Christ and, as we shall see, require no supplementation.

All of the above demonstrates that the command to ‘sing a new song to the Lord’ does not, of itself, amount to a mandate to compose hymns for the worship of the church.

Before we leave this argument, however, we need to look at the presence of other scripture songs outside of the Book of Psalms. Again, we need to see what these songs are, and whether they are to be sung in the worship of the churches. This will allow us to deal with the vital issues of *canon* and *inspiration* and their

bearing on what we should be singing in the worship of God.

### **Scripture Songs**

The term 'Scripture songs' is, strictly, a reference to songs found within the Bible but not contained within the book of Psalms.

Such songs were considered for use in the church by the 1707 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. However, the appetite for such songs in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish church seemed to die away – indicating, perhaps, that it wasn't all that strong to begin with. However, with the rise of the Moderates (orthodox but non-evangelical Ministers), the clamour for change grew and resulted in the introduction of Paraphrases for singing later in the century. (By way of explanation, paraphrases are passages of scripture which are not songs but have been versified for the purpose of singing – in distinction from 'scripture songs' which were designed to be sung in the first place).

In the case of the Old Testament songs – such as those written by Moses, Hannah and Habakkuk – it is interesting that the advocates of singing new songs show remarkably little enthusiasm for using them in a manual of praise! Perhaps the main reason for this is that they add little to the songs of the Psalter: the substance of most of these songs is found elsewhere in the Book of Psalms.

As for the scripture songs of the New Testament, two things in particular need to be said.

First, if you read around these songs carefully, you will notice that none of these so-called scripture songs are referred to as songs in the Bible. We are not told that Mary, Elizabeth or Zacharias 'sang' anything. In fact it is rather absurd to think of Mary coming into her cousin's house and proceeding to sing the Magnificat! So, in spite of the common tendency to refer to them as songs, they are probably not to be thought of as songs at all.

Second, it is remarkable to note that, like the scripture songs of the Old Testament, *they add virtually nothing, by way of information, to the Psalms!* In a way, this is not surprising; although

they appear in Luke's gospel, they are nonetheless old covenant songs and could really, in both form and content, be lifted straight from the psalter!

Now, this should give pause for thought to those who demand *new songs* to celebrate *new events*: the 'new event' of Christ's birth produces supposed 'new songs' from both Mary and Zacharias which are virtually indistinguishable, in form and content, from that of Hannah under the old covenant!

I wonder how many of those who profess a feeling of near gross deprivation at being unable to use the *Benedictus* or the *Magnificat* have really stopped to read them and to enquire as to how much further these 'songs' actually take them beyond the Psalms? Go on – read the *Magnificat* and then the Song of Hannah and you will see what I mean!

However, if it were to be granted that these compositions could pass for songs, then it is fair to say that the only ground on which they could be excluded from our sung worship today is that they appear to have been rejected from the final compilation of Psalms as found in the canonical Psalm book – a book which was closed, probably, by Ezra and never reopened by the Apostles. This raises the important and inter-related issues of canon and inspiration.

### **The importance of Canon and Inspiration**

These issues of canon and inspiration should loom large in this whole discussion: after all, the songs of Moses, Deborah and others are held up by the advocates of new worship songs as examples of how we should compose such songs: using situations of triumph, grief or joy to produce materials of praise to God.

However, it needs more than competence in writing or attainments in godly living to justify the inclusion of our productions into the church's praise book! Rather, it requires inspiration by the Spirit as well as the express command of God to do so!

Consider, first of all, the issue of canon.

“Significantly, the canon of psalms, compiled over a 1,500 year period, was not reopened by the Apostles to enable them to include the *Magnificat* or the *Benedictus*”

### **Canon**

‘Canon’ is the term used to describe the books which are inspired scripture and are, as such, our rule (canon) of faith. They are the books that, collectively, make up the Bible: Genesis through to Revelation.

Crucially, the closing of the canonical Book of Psalms is tied in with the *ceasing of prophecy and inspired psalmody* until the advent of the Saviour. By the time of Christ, no inspired song *outside*

of the canonical psalter appears to have been used in the temple service. Presumably, they would not have been used elsewhere, either – for example, in the Sabbath services of worship.

Significantly, the canon of psalms, compiled over a 1,500 year period, was not reopened by the Apostles to enable them to include the *Magnificat* or the *Benedictus*. This may be because the content of these ‘songs’ was already contained in the sung praise of the church or, as is more likely, because they were not actually ‘songs’ anyway – as I mentioned above, does anyone really believe that Mary called in to see Elizabeth and started singing? Or that Simeon sang with the child in his arms?

Clearly, then, while inspiration was essential for the inclusion of a song in the canonical psalm book, the mere presence of inspiration was not the sole criterion for including a song in the psalm book. *A song could be inspired but still left out of the canonical psalter!*

By way of example, Solomon wrote 1005 songs – however, only one or two of these appear to be included in the book of psalms. Of course, his ‘Song of Songs’ is included elsewhere, having its own distinctive place in the canon as the song par excellence. Solomon’s father, David – presumably, as the ‘sweet psalmist of Israel’, a more prolific writer of songs than his son – writes most of the psalter, as is fitting for the typical Servant-King.

However, as well as writing other psalms referred to in the narrative of Samuel – which are not incorporated into the canonical psalm book – he must have written thousands of songs which don’t appear in the psalm book either. Granted, we have no way of knowing how many of these were spiritual in nature, but the fact that they are not recorded in scripture is no reason to conclude that they were not.

Again, as indicated above, although inspiration is required for inclusion in the book of psalms, the mere fact that a song was inspired *did not mean that it therefore found its way into the psalm book!* For example, although Moses has at least three inspired songs included in scripture (Psalm 90, the song of Exodus 15 and the song of Deuteronomy 32), only the first of these was included in the book of Psalms. Similarly, many of David’s songs are obviously included in the psalm book but his lament for Jonathan, as well as at least one other song recorded in the narrative of Samuel, is not. The same of course is true with the songs of Deborah, Hannah, Habakkuk and others.

As I have stated elsewhere, I am not sure why these songs were not included – especially when, in the case of Habakkuk, I am happy to acknowledge that the prayer was designed to be sung in the temple itself. It is possible that it was originally sung in the temple but that it ceased to be sung as the church was led to the formation of its canonical psalm book.

This shouldn’t sound strange – after all, it is more than likely that a considerable amount of inspired apostolic speech and writings failed to find a permanent place in the New Testament canon also. Much was probably written and spoken by the Apostles

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which was inspired but didn't find its way into canonical scripture. This doesn't give us a license, however, to fill in the gaps ourselves!

This leaves us with what should seem fairly obvious anyway: the book of Psalms is compiled by the church, under the guidance and inspiration of God, to be *the psalm book of the church*. It is the church's book of praise. It is '*the book of psalms for singing*' designed to be sung by the church. That cannot be said of other passage of scripture which some may wish to convert into song material.

### **Inspiration**

The connection between inspiration, canon and song raises a further issue as well. Perhaps we can highlight the issue by asking a question. How does the command to 'sing a new song' – a song which is inspired by the Spirit and composed by a prophet – become a command to us to compose and sing our own songs for worship in the new covenant church?

Some will argue that it simply stands to reason that we must compose our own songs after the events of crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost. These events, it is claimed, simply demand new songs! Since the dispute in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church of America (OPC) on the issue of sung praise in the churches, much has been made of this particular argument: *new redemptive acts* in the Bible are always followed up by *new redemptive songs* – for example, the event of the exodus is followed by the song of Moses.

Those who argue in this way assert that the finished work of Christ, as *the great redemptive act*, should have its own outburst of song to follow it. The argument is apparently strengthened by an appeal to the outburst of song accompanying the incarnation. The argument runs as follows: if the birth of Christ is accompanied by the *Nunc Dimittis* and the *Magnificat*, surely Calvary must be followed by new songs more wonderful still?

The fact that they aren't followed by such songs – at least such songs don't appear in the Biblical record – would be explained

by the advocates of new songs as a kind of call to ourselves, as spirit-filled Christians, to use our gifts in writing these songs and singing them. I don't think I would be doing any injustice to those who hold to this position to say that they would argue that the church is free, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, to compose as many songs in its worship as it wishes.

However, again, what appears convincing and straightforward is flawed! The real situation is a little more complex than that. The sequence behind the writing of new songs, under the old covenant, is not simply that of a *Redemptive Act* being followed by *Redemptive Song*. It is rather that of a *Redemptive Act* being followed by an *Inspired Song*!

Now some may claim that this is not fair: after all, they would say, the only reason we call these songs 'inspired songs' is because we find them in the Bible! If they weren't in the Bible, they wouldn't be inspired! So, they would say, if others can write songs then we can write them too - whether they appear in the Bible or not is a moot point!

However, this is to miss the point: the songs composed in celebration of redemptive events are not inspired *because they are included in the scripture*: rather, they are included in the scripture *because they are inspired*! There's a big difference! To be precise, the Holy Spirit hasn't just recorded these songs for us in the Bible: he has actually authored them for the particular occasion and for the use of the church.

It is important to understand this distinction: Some words are inspired simply because they appear in the Bible – and these include the lies of the Devil. Other words are in the Bible because they are inspired in the first place – such as the words of Christ. We don't know if other songs were written at the time of great redemptive acts in the Old and New Testaments but we do know that the ones which we have – such as Psalm 126 after the deliverance from captivity - were *commissioned and inspired by the Holy Spirit for the use of the church*!

To highlight this issue further, note carefully the following:

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*those who write the songs of the church are invariably prophets!* For example, Moses, the author of the Exodus song, is a prophet; Miriam, a possible author, is a prophet also (Exodus 15:20, 21). Deborah, who composed her song, is another prophet (Judges 4:4 and 5); David is a prophet; crucially, *the officials overseeing the music and writing the songs of the temple service*, such as Heman, Asaph and Jeduthun, are prophets as well (see 1Chronicles 25:5 and 2 Chronicles 29:30, 35:15).

To extend this into the narrative of Luke (still, of course, under the old covenant), the utterances of Mary, Zacharias and Simeon are immediately inspired by the Holy Spirit. Moving into the new covenant, the charismatic psalms of 1 Corinthians 14 – assuming they are *new* compositions rather than choices of *existing* ones – are inspired by prophets also.

Are we getting the picture? What could be clearer? *The songs of the church are always inspired songs produced by prophets for the purpose of being sung in the churches!* The Reformed Churches have appeared to miss the point that creating new worship songs for the use of the church in worship is actually a *charismatic* activity – and have failed to spot the link between the rise of Pentecostal/Charismatic phenomenon and the proliferation of worship songs.

It is significant to note in this particular discussion how Hezekiah behaves when he undertakes national reformation during his reign. He begins the work with a reformation of worship in the temple and when it comes to the matter of praise, the criterion he applies is simply *'what does the word of God authorise us to do?'* As we will see below, he re-instates the instruments of worship appointed by David. However, he also appoints the songs to be sung: *'Moreover, King Hezekiah and the leaders commanded the Levites to sing praise to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer'* (2 Chronicles 29:30).

*The importance of this can hardly be overstated:* Hezekiah's kingdom would have plenty competent poets and musicians. However, because there were no songs composed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit since the days of temple construction, *Hezekiah*

*felt compelled to use only those songs which had been inspired by the Holy Spirit some 300 years before!* This is compelling evidence of the concern to use only the songs which the Holy Spirit has inspired in the worship of God.

We are nowhere told by God that this position has changed! If we need other songs under the New Covenant, apart from those we have, let a prophet inspired by the infallible Spirit of

God write them! The claim that such a thing can be done belongs to Charismatic theology, not to Reformed theology.

From all the above, we have seen that the command to 'sing a new song' does not allow us to create new songs for the worship of the church. This leads us to the second argument for the use of hymns which is that the Psalms are not sufficient.

## **II. 'THE PSALMS ARE NOT SUFFICIENT!'**

Almost every plea for hymnody rests, at some point, on an alleged insufficiency attaching to the psalm book as a new covenant manual of praise. The reasoning is plain enough: if it is sufficient as a praise book, then why supplement it? In fairness, it should be understood that the deficiency attaching to the psalm book not to be understood in terms of what it is in itself, as a praise book, but strictly in how it functions as a new covenant manual of praise. The writer of the paper referred to at the outset makes this argument as well. As well as being frustrated with the lack of clarity in the psalms, just because they are written in advance, he

“If we need other songs under the New Covenant, apart from those we have, let a prophet inspired by the infallible Spirit of God write them!”

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says that he is:

*'...unhappy with the entire and exclusive stance on more strictly theological grounds...the exclusivist position ... claims one book of Old Testament Scripture as forever sufficient for our sung praise, rather than the whole canon. I do not believe in the sufficiency of the psalms alone for Christian praise...the psalms do not say many things we want to say in our new covenant song'*

### **Do the Psalms say enough?**

Before we deal with the issue of sufficiency itself, I wish to make the important point – not in any facetious manner – that what 'we want to say' in a new covenant song should never be the issue. I'm sure I know what the writer means by this, but it is still important to assert, always, that we are not the judges of what is fit to be sung in new covenant praise.

However, aside from this, many would feel that his case is plausible, and some would assert that his claim hardly requires proof. How could old covenant songs be adequate for a new covenant church anyway?

However, this argument fails because it doesn't do justice to the uniqueness of the Book of Psalms in the biblical revelation or, specifically, to the particular way in which the psalms are crafted by the Holy Spirit, who designed them with language specially fitted to accommodate the new covenant 'event' when it arrived. There are several ways to show this.

### **Christ in the Psalms**

Not surprisingly, a lot of the discussion at this point will focus on the presence of Christ in the Psalms. Particularly, it will focus on whether he is there, the extent to which he is there and the clarity with which he can be seen.

It is perhaps as well to begin with a less obvious example: Christ singing in Matthew 26:30. It is more or less universally acknowledged that the psalm 'hymned' here is the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113-118) with the focus and climax being Psalm 118.

This psalm is not the easiest to interpret, but it is clearly Christ-centred (Acts 4:11). It bursts out into triumph from verse 15 onwards: the Day of the Lord (v24) has seen the arm of the Lord bringing salvation (v15) and rejoicing to God's people. It also opens the gates of righteousness into God's presence (v19). These gates are opened on the basis of the man whose claim to be the Christ was rejected by the 'builders' of God's house but who, nonetheless, through his sacrifice, becomes the very foundation-stone of God's temple (v22). The result is tremendous joy as the people welcome the Messiah into their midst (v26), while praying for the flourishing of his kingship (v25).

Now, this psalm, associated so closely with the both the coming of Christ as Saviour and the sacrament of the Passover, was applied by the multitudes to Christ as he rode into Jerusalem triumphantly on the donkey (Matthew 21:9). This was an all-too-rare instance of spiritual perception! However, the 'builders' of the church – the religious leaders of the day – reject his claim to Messiahship with the result that the prayer for the welfare of the Messiah, uttered by the crowd (Matthew 21:9) is apparently frustrated by the 'cutting off' of Messiah. However, as the Psalm describes, he would, in the Day of the Lord, be chosen to become the foundation stone after all (Acts 11:4). All this was somehow bound up with the Passover, for reasons which we can now understand.

Now, for our purposes, the interesting and indeed crucial point is this: as this psalm is taken up by Christ on his lips for the final time, he has just converted the old covenant Passover into the new covenant Lord's Supper.

*However, he clearly feels no sense of discomfort, inadequacy or incongruity in taking up the same old covenant psalm on his lips! If the psalm was inadequate for the transition taking place, he, or the Spirit of God, would surely have provided new words. However, nothing of the kind is done.*

Please note what is happening: the singing of the Psalm at the close of the first Lord's Supper has the function of *bringing*

“It seems strange that, at last, when the church can sing her covenant songs in the full light of the advent of her Servant-King, of whom they constantly speak, she wishes to supplement or abandon them!”

*the Psalm as well as the meal into the new covenant!*

The simple fulfilment of Passover in Christ is enough to enable the Psalm to be sung intelligently – indeed, I would go so far as to say that the Psalm, from then on, could be sung as it had never been sung before. It became, effectively, a ‘*new song*’! Undoubtedly, the disciples were unable to sing it with the necessary illumination on that particular

evening itself – it required the breathing of the Spirit, prior even to Pentecost, to illuminate the Psalms for them. However, the key point is that such illumination was *all that was required*.

With the passing of time, they would sing these wonderful verses with increasing appreciation and, certainly, without the need of supplement. ‘*I shall not die but live...set open the gate of righteousness...that stone has been made head of the corner...this is God’s day and God’s doing*’. Why would they need more? This Psalm, of course, continues to play its part at many communion tables just as it did at the first Lord’s Supper 2000 years ago. Why supplement it? Worse still, why *replace* it?

This principle can be extended throughout the psalter. For example, it is difficult to see how Psalm 110 could be sung with proper comprehension under the old covenant:

*‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘sit at my right hand until I make your*

*enemies your footstool. The Lord will make the rod of your power extend from Zion – govern in the midst of your enemies! In your day of Power, from the very womb of its morning, a youthful, holy people, as fresh as dew, will come to you. By God's oath, you, the King, are a priest forever, according to Melchizedek's order.'*

A moment's thought should reveal the difficulty of singing these words before the advent of Christ. The old covenant church must have been struggling, in a good sense, with these words – and perhaps their obscurity made them look forward, with a kind of holy envy, to those who would see them more clearly (I Peter 1:10-12). It seems strange that, at last, when the church can sing her covenant songs in the full light of the advent of her Servant-King, of whom they constantly speak, she wishes to supplement or abandon them!

We could go on in this way through the Psalm book to show that the facts regarding our Saviour's life and ministry are not dimly foreshadowed inside enigmas or riddles – as is often claimed to be the case - but *clearly stated in language from our Lord's own lips*. This language of Christ's was given to the prophets many years before for the benefit of the old covenant church and contemplates his work from the standpoint of the resurrection onwards: note that Psalm 110, referred to above, while written under the old covenant, speaks in plain language of events between the ascension and the consummation of all things. What more could one ask for?

Most Christians labour under the illusion that there are only a handful of Psalms which testify of Christ or which contain his words. The truth is quite different.

The resurrection, ascension, coronation and dominion of Christ are plain in Psalm 2, his exaltation to world-ruler in Psalm 8, his struggle in Gethsemane in Psalm 16, his distress in Psalm 20, his deliverance out of it and his glorification in Psalm 21, his distress and deliverance in his own feelings and words in Psalm 22, his leading of his people as their Shepherd/King in Psalm 23, his ascension to glory in Psalm 24, his incarnation, prophetic and

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priestly roles in Psalm 40, his betrayal in Psalm 41, his Kingship and Kingdom in Psalm 45, his ascension in Psalm 68, his universal Kingdom in Psalm 72, his intercession in Psalm 80, his preservation from evil in Psalm 91, his coming judgement and rule in Psalms 96 and 98, his Lordship in Psalm 102, his priestly Kingship in Psalm 110, and his resurrection and headship of the church in Psalms 118, 132 and 133 – and this list is not exhaustive.

### **Is Christ in them clearly enough?**

However, even when the force of all this is felt, the claim persists that it is still not plain enough. But this is not the case! On the contrary, the clarity with which all this is brought before us cannot be over-emphasised: could the events of the crucifixion be any more poignantly, graphically or accurately portrayed than they are in the twenty-second Psalm – one which, with its piercings of hands and feet, must again have been deeply perplexing under the old covenant when crucifixions were unknown? All that is needed to bring it into the new covenant is the simple recognition of its fulfilment in Christ. Nothing more is needed! The language is graphic, plain and in the first person! I was present recently when an extended meditation on the crucifixion was brought to a conclusion by the singing of a hymn when the occasion of corporate worship so plainly cried out for the singing of Psalm 22!

This is important because frustration is sometimes felt with songs which apparently require 'too much explanation'. Apparently, people would rather songs which need less explanation than the Psalms do. However, this is foolish. All of the New Testament literature – including the gospel story – requires explanation and illumination. Have you tried reading the letter to the Ephesians to the proverbial 'man on the street'? *The church simply needs to grow up and begin to teach.*

What makes the Psalms unique is that they are not dark prophecy, shrouded in obscurity - as, for example, the tabernacle with its symbolism was so shrouded – but are, in fact, specially conceived by the Holy Spirit using extremely selective vocabulary

and imagery to carry the church effortlessly into the new covenant and on through to the 'new song' of heaven itself.

In this respect, the Psalms are like a room full of intricate paintings of Christ. All we need to do to appreciate them is simply switch on the light. The light is provided by the Holy Spirit of the exalted Christ in heaven. We don't need any more pictures or, worse still, to throw them out and begin painting again ourselves. We just need to switch on the light – that's all!

Once this principle of illumination is grasped, the precise function of the Psalms as the church's songbook and its adequacy in that capacity under the new covenant, becomes plainer. Indeed, once this principle is properly grasped, the whole case against the sufficiency of the psalm book collapses!

### **Do the Psalms say too much?**

However, another issue needs dealing with and, surprisingly, is doesn't really concern the Psalms saying too little but the Psalms saying too much!

It is increasingly difficult to escape the conclusion that the desire to supplement or replace the psalms often proceeds from a discomfort with their theology. Sad to say, this discomfort appears in the paper advocating hymnody referred to above.

It comes out when the writer goes on to highlight what he sees as the unsuitability of some old covenant songs for new covenant use. In this connection, he makes the following remarkable statement:

*'I am far from suggesting that all the songs should be sung in our services, and for example I struggle to see how a metrical version of Judges 5:24-30 would make our praise more attractive and accessible. I have no wish to sing blessings on Jael, with her bowl of curdled milk and her skill with hammer and tent peg, or to recount the cries of Sisera's mother and her speculations about the spoils and 'a girl or two for each man'.*

Surely, I am not the only one who has a serious difficulty with this kind of thinking?

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First, is it wise or right to state, as the writer does, that 'I have no wish to sing blessings on Jael' - when God himself has told us to bless her? Deborah, the prophetess, calls Jael 'blessed among women' and yet the writer can say that he has no wish to bless her!

Second, is it really the case that we should contemplate leaving an inspired song out of our worship on the ground that it may not be 'attractive' or 'accessible' enough? Is it not strange that after spending his strength trying to build a case for singing things that aren't really songs in the first place, the writer then comes across a song in the Bible, inspired by a prophetess, and he 'has no wish to sing' it?

Significantly, it is vital to note that the kinds of things which the writer cites as being unattractive and inaccessible (Jael's tent peg and hammer) are things which *must render huge portions of the psalms equally unattractive and inaccessible to him as well!* Was this not precisely why Isaac Watts deliberately set out to 'Christianise' the psalms by rewriting them and removing what was supposedly inconsistent with the spirit of the new covenant?

But, in any case, who are we to judge the *attractiveness* of what God has inspired? Surely, when you begin to feel uncomfortable with the songs God has written, what you really need to do is not advocating new songs but examine your theology and the state of your heart!

Sadly, there is a sense in which these kinds of statements let the proverbial cat out of the bag: In spite of all the praise being heaped upon the psalms by the advocates of hymnody, and the requisite re-affirmations of their supreme value and peerless place in our worship - which invariably take the form of 'I love the Psalms *but*' - I cannot help feeling that there is considerable discomfort with them - and with some of their theological emphases in particular.

In an age of declension, the obsession is now with what is 'attractive' and 'accessible'. It is hard to conceive of a more unspiritual approach. Instead of choking on the difficult bits and

refusing to bless people with hammers and tent pegs, surely we should urgently rediscover the Psalms as the *praise book revealing God's Servant-King* and begin to teach it as well as sing it *with its own emphases*: the Servant-King's worldwide dominion, his righteousness, his judgement, his salvation, his peace, his goodness and his worship!

The sad fact is that the Psalms ceased to be properly understood and properly sung in Scottish Reformed Churches a long time ago. For far too long, they have been apologetically held as a praise book, unintelligently used and poorly sung. Sadly, in the case of some churches, their full-orbed Reformed theology finds little acceptance because a weaker and more general evangelical sentiment now reigns.

### **Alleged Deficiencies**

The writer of the paper I have been referring to closes by issuing five please for hymnody on the grounds of *edification, ecumenism, evangelism, emotion and exultation*. In all of these areas, he argues that the sung praise of the church will be defective if it relies on the psalms alone. I could hardly disagree more.

As to *edification*, it is difficult to make up for the lack of a good Psalm book – well memorised and often sung. The singing of the Psalms in a spiritual and intelligent manner, in the light of their fulfilment in and by Christ, is probably the single greatest aid

“The singing of the Psalms in a spiritual and intelligent manner, in the light of their fulfilment in and by Christ, is probably the single greatest aid to edification that I know”

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to edification that I know. Nothing forms the piety of a people as well as this (see Athanasius and his letter to Marcellinus referred to above). Here, it needs to be emphasised that the current trend to produce too many versions of the Psalter is as damaging to the memorisation of song as the production of too many versions of scripture is to scripture memorisation generally.

As to *ecumenism*, it is a notorious fact that hymnody, in the past at least, has been denominational, partisan and exclusive. The hymns and songs which do not fall so easily into these categories now are, not surprisingly, the least radical, the most celebratory and the least offensive of them. *Contemporary hymnody is alarmingly anaemic*. It is almost, if not altogether, devoid of any teaching respecting judgment or hell. More than any other genre or collection of songs, the Psalms belong to the *church catholic* and for whatever reason – and I could suggest a few – they are more valued in the oldest communions on the earth than in those which are ‘Reformed’.

As regards *evangelism*, it is worth stating that the church’s primary role, in its Lord’s Day worship, is not an evangelistic one – at least as ‘evangelism’ is commonly understood. It is rather to offer her covenantal tribute of worship to her Lord. That is not to say that evangelism is no part of her role, nor is it to say that the offering of her tribute is not, itself, evangelistic.

Unsurprisingly, there is probably an underlying assumption here about what God uses in evangelising and what evangelism really is: contemporary theological culture finds ‘kiss the Son in case you perish in his anger’ (Psalm 2) to be an unacceptable or ‘inaccessible’ form of evangelism whereas ‘come to Jesus’ always hits the mark. This says a lot about current views of Christ (who is now almost invariably, and not without reason, replaced by ‘Jesus’ – have you ever stopped to think why ‘Christ’ is now always ‘Jesus’?) and indicates a definite change in how the gospel is viewed. The Psalms simply *are* evangelistic. They do not need to contain manufactured appeals in our contemporary acceptable forms for them to qualify as such!

As to *emotion*, while the writer acknowledges that the whole range is covered in the Psalms, he nonetheless believes that the singing of the Psalms alone in worship leaves us emotionally deprived or stunted. I just cannot agree. I find a depth of emotion, in connection with the worship of the Saviour as he is in the Psalms, which I fail to find absolutely anywhere else. I increasingly find as I *go on* and, hopefully, *grow on* in the Christian pilgrimage, that only the Psalms will do. In my *real* lows and in my *real* highs, it is invariably to them I turn, instinctively so, and it is their language I find myself expressing. And, for whatever reason, the pleasure I have in singing different kinds of songs at different times would completely evaporate if I were to import them, particularly at the expense of the psalms, into the worship of God.

As for *exultation*, the writer says that ‘...it is central to our theology of worship that we share now in the worship of heaven. We are part of that fellowship and worship (Hebrews 12:22-24), and so we lift up heart and voice to join with the redeemed and with the angelic host around the throne.’ Indeed – but did that only commence under the new covenant? Even he must have noticed that the worship of heaven in Revelation is described with the symbolism of the old covenant! Coming to Mount Zion, in Hebrews 12, surely means something more than this!

Finally, although it should hardly need saying, doing God’s will on earth as it is done in heaven does not necessarily mean that *his will for the two places is exactly the same*: We are all in the dark as to what, precisely, he wills of the members of his church in heaven as to their work, their appearance, their speech and, of course, their song – apart from the glimpses in Revelation. We don’t even know which language he wills them to sing it in! Our concern, of course, should be with doing his will for us *on the earth* – and to do *that* as it is done in heaven: that is, immediately, without reservation and well. If this means singing the songs of the church militant until we get to sing the songs of the church at home and triumphant, we should be delighted to do so.

## **CONCLUSION**

The very least which can be said, then, is that the case for singing hymns is far from proven. And, for a person truly Reformed in approach and, therefore, jealous not to intrude into worship anything that lacks express authority from God, that should be enough. However, this is only the least that should be said and, in reality, it is nowhere near enough.

It is more needful and correct to say that the case for singing only the Biblical Psalms is *well proven!* It follows that the church badly needs to repent in this area and rediscover this truth which she once held and professed but has now largely forsaken – to her great cost.

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