



THE SONGS THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT WANTS YOU TO SING

The Holy Spirit must authorise our worship as well as enable us to offer it by Him. Where does the Holy Spirit provide this direction? In the infallible Word that He has inspired which is completely sufficient for all matters of faith and life. Sadly, the worship of God is often shaped by personal taste, fashions and what makes people feel most comfortable. Scripture warns that we must not add to or take away from what God requires in His word in relation to worship (Deuteronomy 4:2; Matthew 15:8-9; Isaiah 29:13). We must worship God in truth (John 4:24). This means that we must worship Him only according to the objective standard of what He has required in His Word. That is the only yardstick of true worship. Our individual opinions and preferences about worship are of no ultimate consequence compared to what the unchangeable God Himself requires.

The songs that the Holy Spirit commands us to sing in God's praise are those He Himself has provided for us in Scripture. He commands us to sing Psalms (Psalm 105:2; James 5:13). These are His songs (1 Chronicles 25:7; 2 Chronicles 29:27; Psalm 137:4). We have no command in God's Word to offer anything else to Him in praise. There is a command to "take a psalm" (Psalm 81:2) but not to make one. This leaflet explains these principles further. It is extracted and updated from a book written by Thomas Ford, who was a member of the Westminster Assembly.

1

WHAT ARE PSALMS, HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS?

In Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 we are commanded to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. There are many different opinions about what these are. The most reasonable interpretation is that these correspond to the Hebrew names of David's Psalms (mizmorim, tehillim, and shirim). All the Psalms together are called Tehillim, i.e. praises, or songs of praise. Mizmor and Shir are in the titles of many Psalms whether one or the other or both together. The apostle uses the same names for these as the Greek Translation of the Old Testament. This proves that he means nothing else except David's Psalms. Whenever the New Testament refers to the Psalms it means the Psalms of David. Surely David's Psalms are spiritual songs if ever there were any in the world.

Were they songs given by the Spirit as prophecy at the time?

Any such gifts ceased after the time of the apostles. But even if anyone was to claim such a gift how would others sing along with them? They would not know the words or the tune. It would be nothing but a sacrifice of fools and the confusion at the tower of Babel. It is clear and certain that David's Psalms were written and available for use. The Levites, Christ and His disciples, Paul and Silas all sang them (see 1 Chronicles 16:7; Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25).

2

DOES THIS INCLUDE UNINSPIRED HYMNS?

The word hymn is the same word used in Mark 14:26. Scholars all agree that this was a psalm according to the usual practice. At the Passover, the Jews sang some of David's Psalms after the cup of salvation or thanksgiving. These were called the Great Hallel or Hallelujah (Psalms 113-118).

We compose our own prayers, could we not compose hymns to use in the praise of God?

God has made and given us a Psalm book but not a prayer book. Yet some argue that just as we are not restricted to set forms of prayer so we are not restricted to set forms of praise. There is a clear difference. Set forms of praise are essential. We cannot compose and sing songs in an extempore way (like prayer). It is impossible to compose the words, metre and tune and then sing them with reverent results. We are also told what to sing: psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (different types of Psalms). In the Old Testament set forms of prayer were not prescribed, but

they were to sing in the words of David and Asaph (2 Chronicles 29:30). Since we must have a set form of praise, why should we prefer any others to those that God has appointed?

What if the uninspired hymns we use to praise God are spiritual?

Those who say that new hymns should replace David's Psalms must powerfully prove that we must not sing David's Psalms. Such uninspired hymns may contain errors whereas there are no errors in David's Psalms. There may be many valid objections to the content of hymns. But only unbelievers will find fault with the Psalms that the Holy Spirit has written. No one's compositions can compare to those of God's Spirit.

Sing completely spiritual songs. The Psalms are nothing but spiritual. Their author, content, purpose and application are entirely spiritual. The problem is not so much with composing (for private use) as imposing (for public worship). This happens when men set up their own new songs and shut out David's Psalms. The question remains, why would anyone want uninspired hymns to replace David's Psalms? Are they better? No one wishes to say as much, but they think that such hymns better suit the current condition of God's people. This is a mistake. Nothing composed by uninspired men will suit the situations, difficulties or emotional needs of God's people as the Psalms of David.

3

HOW CAN THE PSALMS BE SUITABLE FOR GOD'S PEOPLE TODAY?

It is true that the Psalms were written at a particular time and relate to the needs of God's people then. Yet this is the same with the rest of Scripture. It relates just as much to us now as it did to the people of God when first written. In Hezekiah's time, the Levites were to praise God with the words of David (2 Chronicles 29:30). This shows that the Psalms were to be used by God's people in praise after the time that they were written. This would include all kinds of circumstances.

What circumstances do God's people have now, have ever had or can have for which David's Psalms are not suitable? They are better than any songs composed by an ordinary poetic gift. What glorious things are spoken of Christ's Kingdom and His great work of redemption! Who can admire and adore the infinite perfections of God in better phrases and words than the Holy Spirit has given us in David's Psalms? Where can we find more heavenly meditations to refresh our spirits or prepare them for spiritual duties? If we want to magnify the power, wisdom and goodness of God for any mercy we receive - how can we do it better than in the words of David? If we do not find them suitable, the fault is our own.

William Perkins said that the Psalms remain relevant because the faith of believers in the Church in all ages is always one and the same. All who lay hold of God's promises are like each other in grace. Their meditations, inclinations, affections, desires, spiritual needs in enduring trials are the same. Their moral duties to God and man are the same. The same Psalms are equally suitable for the Church in these days. When they are sung they yield the same benefit for the Church in these days as when they were written.

If we reject David's Psalms because they were written for God's people in the past must we not discard the rest of Scripture for the same reason? There is no condition in which the people of God either are or can be that the Holy Spirit could not foresee. He has prepared and recorded Scripture Psalms suitable for it. When these Psalms are sung with new hearts by God's people in new circumstances they will always be new songs. Someone has said that words of eternal truth are ever new and never old. Daily and hourly mercies are new mercies to renewed hearts (Lamentations 3:23). When they praise the Lord for those mercies, there's a new song of praise put into their mouths. God has provided us with Psalms, songs made by His own Spirit for this purpose. Surely it is shameful ignorance and irreverence if we fail to make use of them.

4

HOW CAN WE SING ABOUT CHRIST IF WE ONLY USE PSALMS?

How can you better admire and adore the attributes and perfections of God and His Christ than in singing David's Psalms? Do you wish to admire the work of God in exalting Jesus Christ to be a Prince and a Saviour? Sing Psalms 8, 95, 96, 97, 98 and 99. Do Christ's sufferings and their saving benefits belong to you? You can sing Psalm 22 (see Matthew 27:35, 39, 43, 46).

What a vivid description of Christ's death and resurrection we have in Psalm 16 (see Acts 2:25-28)! In singing that Psalm Christians rejoice with triumph in the glorious conquest of Christ over death and the grave (1 Corinthians 15:55). Psalm 21 helps us admire the glory of Christ's kingdom which is great through God's salvation. The passages in David's Psalms that relate to his rule and government point forward to the kingdom of Christ.

In Psalm 45, we can behold the King (Jesus Christ) in His beauty. We also see the Church, His royal bride beautifully adorned with the perfections which He has bestowed. Most glorious things are spoken of Christ and the Church. Thus, Christians may sing that Psalm in holy rejoicing and thanksgiving.

A book on the same subject with a collection of chapters by various authors is also published by the Trust. *Songs of the Spirit: The Place of Biblical Psalms in the Worship of God* is available from our website or your local Christian bookshop.