

WHY WE SING PSALMS

Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*

Basic Praise

Have you ever worshipped in a church that sings only the psalms of the Bible in its worship services? It has become rather a rare experience for a growing number of people, although this has not always been the case. At the time of the Reformation most Protestant denominations returned to the practice of singing only the psalms in the formal worship of God.

In fact, during most of the history of the Christian Church the psalms have been the basic manual of praise. It is only in comparatively recent times that a growing number of churches have opted to sing more hymns and fewer or no psalms. The practice of singing only the psalms in worship may indeed seem strange to those who have rarely or never sung them at all.

Why Sing the Psalms?

We sing the psalms of the Bible because the God of the Bible has commanded us to do so. The psalms themselves are full of commands such as Psalm 95:2 and Psalm 105:2. In addition, "sing praises," an alternate translation of "sing psalms," appears frequently in all modern English translations.

There are similarly explicit commands to sing psalms in the New Testament scriptures in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19.

We might likewise ask the question, "Why pray?" We pray because God commands us to do so. We also sing the psalms in worship because God clearly and explicitly commands us to sing them to His praise.

Why Sing the Psalms Only?

We are to sing only the psalms in worship because this book of praise is what God has commanded us to use for praising Him. Negatively stated, we sing only the psalms in worship because God has not commanded us to sing anything else.

* *By G I Williamson, revised by James C Pennington.*

The practice of singing only the psalms in public worship is one application of what is called the regulative principle of worship. Simply stated, that principle is, "Whatever is not commanded in the worship of God is forbidden." The principle dictates that God and only God determines how He should be worshipped. If God has not commanded a particular thing in His worship, it has no legitimate place in worship. When approaching the King of kings and Lord of lords, we do not have the right to add what we want or prefer to that which He has clearly commanded and given for His worship.

This is one application of the great Reformation principle of the sole authority of the Word of God. The Bible is our only authoritative rule of faith and practice, including our practices of worship. It was on the basis of this clear teaching of the Bible (Deuteronomy 12:32; Leviticus 10:1-2; Isaiah 1:12; Mark 7:7; John 4:24) that the true worship of God was restored during the 16th Century Reformation under Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox.

What About New Testament Hymns and Songs?

What about commands in the New Testament to sing "hymns and spiritual songs" as well as psalms in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19? What did the Apostle Paul mean when he wrote these words?

He was referring to existing compositions of praise, namely the psalms of the Old Testament scriptures. In the Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) used by the early Christians, The titles "psalms, hymns and songs" are all used in reference to the psalms of the Bible.

So, the "psalms, hymns and songs" of Colossians and Ephesians are simply various kinds of praise compositions contained in the Book of Psalms. The Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is commanding these early Christians to sing those psalms of the Bible that they already had in their possession, not commanding them to compose new ones.

Let the Word of Christ dwell in You Richly

Colossians 3:16 begins with a beautiful phrase in the context of singing praise and mutual counselling. We are commanded to, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in (us) richly," as we sing praise. The Word of Christ can only be the inspired Word of God, known as the Bible. One important way that the Word of Christ can

dwelling in us richly is by singing the psalms of the Bible to the praise of God.

After His resurrection, Jesus Himself clearly told His disciples that the psalms spoke of Him (Luke 24:44-45). We are also commanded to "teach and admonish one another" as we sing praise. The Word of God only can be the basis for teaching and admonishing. And it is, if we sing only the psalms of the Bible in worship.

It is important to note in Colossians 3:16 that the "psalms, hymns, and songs" are all to be "spiritual." The phrase would be more accurately translated, "inspired psalms, hymns and songs." This is precisely what we have in the Book of Psalms.

This book of praise is verbally inspired by the Spirit of God so that all that is contained in it is spiritual in the truest sense of the word. Some of these spiritual compositions are entitled *psalms*, some *hymns*, and others *songs*. A reading of the titles for the psalms in any translation of the English Bible will confirm this. For example, the title used for each psalm of Psalms 120-134 is "A *Song of Ascents*."

Some conclusions

Here is a brief summary of these conclusions as we find them in the Colossians and Ephesians passages.

Negatively stated: 1) We are not commanded to compose our own songs of praise or to be filled with the spirit and words of men; 2) We are not commanded to engage in self-expression, or to be instructed and admonished by the thoughts and feelings of men; and therefore 3) We are not commanded to use any manual of praise other than the inspired psalms of the Bible.

Positively stated: 1) We are commanded to become filled with the Word of Christ and the Holy Spirit; 2) We are to do this by means of mutual instruction and admonishing through singing; and 3) The God-approved manual for praise is the Book of Psalms because it alone contains spiritual psalms, hymns and songs that are fully inspired by the Spirit of God.

A Question of Freedom

What about well-loved and familiar hymns? Aren't we missing something by not allowing freedom to use them in public worship? Furthermore, what about popular contemporary Christian songs? Don't they speak more to our present culture and shouldn't they therefore have a place in our worship?

The real questions are: What are we looking for in the choice of songs for praise in the worship of God? Do we sing those songs that evoke familiar memories or nostalgic feelings, or that are well-known and popular? Or, when we come to worship the living God, should we not feel free to worship Him only as He commands and expects? Should we not sing songs of praise and adoration that we know He will accept because He has commanded them to be used in His praise?

When we lift our hearts and voices in praise singing the psalms of the Bible, His own perfect Word, we can be certain that He will hear and accept our worship. With the Spirit of God in our hearts and the Word of God on our lips, we can and will worship our God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24; see Hebrews 13:15).

Offering Our Best in Worship

When we worship the living God, the King of all the universe, should we offer to Him in praise only the best, or can it be something less than the best? Obviously, our God is worthy of only the very best. When we worship God, therefore, singing His praise with the inspired psalms of the Bible, we are indeed offering up the very best. And at the same time, we are obeying the clear command of God to sing His psalms in worship. The psalms are the very Word of God, which is precisely the reason that we should sing only them in His worship.

Why then sing anything but the inspired psalms of the Bible in the worship of God?

For Further Reading and Study

Psalm Singing Revisited by Dr Bruce C Stewart.

The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God by G I Williamson.

Psalm-Singing in Scripture and History by Rowland S Ward.

The Songs of Zion by Michael Bushell*

[*New second edition, 1993, price £7.95, available from Covenanter Bookshop, 98 Lisburn Road, Belfast BT9 6AG, N Ireland (Tel. 0232-660689).

See also: *Psalms Only* and *Purity of Worship* by M C Ramsay, Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia - Ed.]