# *Sing a New Song*

# Sing a New Song

## Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century

edited by
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# Foreword

W. Robert Godfrey

For three thousand years the people of God have praised, studied, and cherished the Psalms. The Psalms are received as the inspired Word of God and share, with the rest of the Bible, in the character of the Scriptures taught by Paul: "the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:15–16).

The Psalms are indeed the Word from God like the Bible as a whole, but in addition they occupy a unique role in the Bible. The Psalms are also words to God from His people. Precisely because they give inspired voice to the deepest spiritual feelings of God's people, they have been treasured and used in both private and public worship, first in the temple and synagogue and then in the church.

The church believed that the Psalms spoke for Christ and for Christians. The ancient church studied and sang the Psalms. In the medieval church parts of Psalms were used liturgically, and the whole Psalter was chanted in the monasteries. In the Reformation the Psalms were given to the people of God as never before through the availability of printed Bibles and the introduction of metrical psalm singing.

For several centuries after the Reformation, especially in the Reformed churches, the psalms fed the piety of Christians. The more they studied the Psalms, the more they found in them. The Psalms deepen a sense of identity with the people of God in every age. They show ways in which

God was the covenant Lord of His people. They express the full range of emotions of those living for God, from grief, repentance, doubt, and struggle to joy, praise, thanksgiving, and assurance.

The poetry of the Psalter connects immediately with readers in the power and beauty of its expressions about God and the condition of Christians before Him. But the careful craftsmanship of the Psalms gives the serious student many layers of literary form to study for increasingly profound insights into the meaning of the Psalms. They are indeed a mine in which gold can continually be found.

In the last fifty years the impact of the Psalms on the church has seriously diminished. Several factors have tended to marginalize the Psalter. First, some modern theologies have stressed the discontinuity of the Old Testament and New Testament in ways that have led Christians not to look as much to the Old Testament for direction in their piety. Second, a diminished place for poetry in our culture and in our education makes the Psalter somewhat less accessible. Third, for the English-speaking world, the loss of the King James Version as the unifying translation of the Psalter has affected familiarity with the language of the Psalms. Fourth, liturgical and musical changes in public worship have not only led to a decline of the use of the Psalms but also introduced forms of worship and song very different from the rich, profound, and carefully crafted psalms of the Bible.

What has been the effect of the diminished influence of the Psalter on the church? Some look at the church of the last fifty years and see great strength and growth. Others, while rejoicing in evidences of numerical growth, see serious decline in Bible knowledge, sound theology, and biblical piety. My fear is that the latter are correct and that the church in our time has been seriously weakened. The diminished role of the Psalter in the church is a symptom and cause of that weakness.

The church today needs renewal in true biblical Christianity. A fresh appreciation of the Psalter is a key element for that renewal. My hope is that this book will be a significant contribution to renewing a love for the Psalms and a commitment to biblical truth and piety.

## About the Title

Five psalms in the Psalter are called "new songs" (Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1). Additionally, while Psalm 144 is not itself a "new song," it includes a promise to sing a "new song" (v. 9) after God grants a longed-for victory. In biblical Hebrew, a new song is not necessarily a song that was recently written. The phrase is an idiom for a certain kind of praise song—the kind of praise one sings loudly for all the nations to hear after God has granted a great victory. Psalm 40 is a good example: "I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings. And he hath put a *new song* in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the LORD" (vv. 1–3, emphasis added).

Such a song is sung when the old notes of lament have given way to a new melody of joy and gladness. It bursts forth from the heart because of some momentous deliverance that puts all the old griefs into the distant past.

The whole book of Psalms is called, in Hebrew, the Book of Praises (*Sefer Tehillim*). Not all the Psalms are praise songs. Some are cries of distress. But the book is called the Book of Praises because its many psalms meet us in our present experiences, whatever they are, and invariably point our hearts toward God's victories—realized or promised. Indeed, the whole Psalter reaches its climax with a "new song" (Ps. 149) and a "hallelujah" benediction (Ps. 150). Until that great day comes when all our tears will be wiped away and we will sing only "new song" praises (Rev. 5:9;

14:3), the variety of songs in the Psalter tune our hearts to that joy now. It is for this reason that the Psalter is called the Book of Praises, and this book about singing those ancient songs is called *Sing a New Song*.[1]

> O sing unto the LORD a *new song*: sing unto the LORD, all the earth. Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people. For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods (Psalm 96:1–4, emphasis added).

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1. Richard D. Patterson, "Singing the New Song: An Examination of Psalms 33, 96, 98, and 149," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164 (2007): 416–34.

Chapter 3

# The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church[1]

Terry Johnson

The canonical book of Psalms may be viewed properly as the Bible's own devotional book. Dietrich Bonhoeffer made this point in his brief work *The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*.[2] Indeed, it is the primary source from which all other devotional books have been drawn. "The Psalter is the great school of prayer," said Bonhoeffer elsewhere.[3] Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), for example, quotes the Psalms more than the Gospels in his *The Imitation of Christ*, "the most popular of all Christian devotional books."[4] The Psalter has provided the people of God with the verbal images, names, and terminology with which to understand God and how we are to relate to Him. They have taught us how to speak to God as we address Him with praise, confession of sin, thanksgiving, and intercession. "There is no one book of Scripture that is more helpful to the devotions of the saints than this," says Matthew Henry, "and it has been so

1. Some of this material appeared in T. L. Johnson, "Restoring Psalm Singing to Our Worship," in ed. Philip G. Ryken, et al., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2003), 257–86. It will also appear in a forthcoming publication: *The Case for Historic Reformed Worship*.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible* (1940; Oxford: SLG Press, 1982).

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 47.

4. Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 24.

in all ages of the church, ever since it was written."[5] But the Psalter is not only our prayer book, it is also and even primarily God's hymnbook, given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "God…by the mouth of thy servant David hast said," as the apostle Peter expressed it (Acts 4:24, 25). "From earliest times the Psalter has been both the hymn-book and the prayer book of the Christian Church," say Derek Kidner and J. G. Thomson.[6]

## Apostolic Church

"Psalmody was a part of the synagogue service that naturally passed over into the life of the church," says E. F. Harrison.[7] Morning prayers at the synagogue normally began with the chanting of Psalms 145 to 150. Not surprisingly, we find the early Christians lifting their voices "with one accord" (Acts 4:24), likely indicating singing or reciting psalms in unison. These were not spontaneous free prayers. Luke supplies us with the text of Psalm 146:6, likely indicating that they sang the whole psalm, if not a series of psalms, following the pattern of the synagogue: "And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is" (Acts 4:24).

The believers then sang or read a second psalm, Psalm 2:1–2. The phrasing in this verse may indicate a different mode of communication (i.e. reading) than was indicated for the previous psalm: "Who by the mouth of thy servant David *hast said*, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ" (Acts 4:25–26, emphasis added).

The recitation of the psalm was then followed by a meditation on its meaning in light of these believers' current situation: "For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before

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5. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament* (Philadelphia: Tavar & Hogan, 1829), in his introduction to the *Book of Psalms*.

6. Derek Kidner and J. G. Thomson, "Book of Psalms," in J. D. Douglas, et. al., *The New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1962), 1059.

7. Everett F. Harrison, *The Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 134.

to be done" (Acts 4:27–28). We do not know exactly how this meditation took place, whether by sermon, prayer, or discussion. But "taken simply," says Hughes Old, what the text "seems to indicate is that an exposition of Scripture is taking place in prayer."[8] The Word was sung, read, and preached in this service of daily prayer.

A prayer follows: "And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word, by stretching forth thine hand to heal; and that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus. And when they had prayed, the place was shaken" (Acts 4:29–31a). They pray for protection, for help, for boldness, for spiritual power in Jesus' name. All in all, Old reckons, this is "a rather thorough description of a daily prayer service."[9] Again he says, "This prayer service held by the Apostles, like the prayer service of the synagogue, was made up of three elements, the chanting of psalms, a passage of Scripture, and prayers of supplication and intercession."[10] Note as well the instinct to interpret the Psalms christologically and to allow the Psalms to shape the prayer life of the church.

"The Psalms formed the core of the praises of the New Testament church," as Hughes Old has observed.[11] The apostle Paul commanded both the Ephesian and Colossian churches to sing psalms (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) and commented on the Corinthian practice of doing so (1 Cor. 14:15, 26). James instructed his readers ("the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" [1:1], apparently referring to the whole church) to sing psalms (5:13, ψάλλω). With surprising frequency the New Testament cites the Psalms (e.g. Acts 2:24–26; Heb. 1:5–13; 2:5–10,12,13; 3:7–4:7; 5:1–7), demonstrating as they do a keen awareness of both their christological and devotional importance.[12] "From the earliest times the

8. Hughes O. Old, "The Service of Daily Prayer in the Primitive Christian Church: A Study of Acts 4:23–31," unpublished paper, 1979.

9. Hughes O. Old, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 9.

10. Hughes O. Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 145.

11. Ibid., 37.

12. According to William L. Holladay, there are fifty-five direct citations of the Psalms in the New Testament. R.E.O. White finds another 150 clear allusions to the Psalter and still another two hundred fainter ones. See William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three*

Christian community sang the psalms," summarizes Mary Berry, "following the practice of the synagogue."[13]

## The Patristic Church

The church fathers and earliest Christian writings demonstrate a devotion to the Psalms, and particularly to the singing of the Psalms, that is startling.[14] Calvin Stapert speaks of the fathers' "enthusiastic promotion of psalm singing," which, he says, "reached an unprecedented peak in the fourth century."[15] James McKinnon speaks of "an unprecedented wave of enthusiasm" for the Psalms in the second half of the fourth century.[16] The writers of *The Psalms in Christian Worship* and others, including most recently John D. Witvliet, have collected a number of testimonies of psalm singing from the church fathers that survive to this day.[17] For example, Tertullian (c. 155–230), in the second century, testified that psalm singing was not only an essential feature of the worship of his day but also

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*Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 115; "Psalms," R.E.O. White, in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible,* ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 373.

13. Mary Berry, "Psalmody" in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J. G. Davies (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 450; Stapert, citing the work of James McKinnon, "The Question of Psalmody," and J. A. Smith, "The Ancient Synagogue, the Early Church and Singing," argues that the psalms were not sung in the synagogue but the home and came from there into Christian households and finally into formal worship.

14. Holladay, 162–65. He notes that *1 Clement* (c. AD 96) has forty-nine citations from thirty-two psalms; *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. AD 130) has twelve citations from ten psalms; *Didache* ( second century AD) has three citations from three psalms; *Ignatius of Antioch* (c. AD 98–117) and Polycarp (fl. c. AD 175– c. 195) make virtually no reference to the Psalms, but Justin Martyr's writings (c. AD 150) are loaded with citations from the Psalms (e.g. *Dialogue with Trypho* has forty-seven references from twenty-four psalms), as are those of Irenaeus (c. AD 70–155/160).

15. Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*, The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 150.

16. Cited by Paul Bradshaw, "From Word to Action: The Changing Role of Psalmody in Early Christianity," in ed. Martin Dudley, *Like a Two-Edged Sword: The Word of God in Liturgy and History* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1995), 25.

17. John McNaughter, *The Psalms in Christian Worship* (1907; Edmonton: Still Water Revival Books, 1992); John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 3–10.

had become an important part of the daily life of the people. Athanasius (300–343) says it was the custom of his day to sing psalms, which he calls "a mirror of the soul,"[18] and even "a book that includes the whole life of man, all conditions of the mind and all movements of thought."[19] Eusebius (c. 260 – c. 340), bishop of Caesarea, left this vivid picture of the psalm singing of his day: "The command to sing Psalms in the name of the Lord was obeyed by everyone in every place: for the command to sing is in force in all churches which exist among nations, not only the Greeks but also throughout the whole world, and in towns, villages and in the fields."[20] Basil the Great (c. 330–379) comments, in his sermons on the Psalms, on the "harmonious Psalm tunes" that mix "sweetness of melody with doctrine" and are sung by the people not only in the churches but "at home" and "in the marketplace" as well.[21] Augustine (343–430), in his *Confessions* (ix.4), says, "[The Psalms] are sung through the whole world, and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof."[22]

Jerome (d. 420) said that he learned the Psalms when he was a child and sang them daily in his old age. He also writes, "The Psalms were continually to be heard in the fields and vineyards of Palestine. The plowman, as he held his plow, chanted the Hallelujah; and the reaper, the vinedresser, and the shepherd sang something from the Psalms of David. Where the meadows were colored with flowers, and the singing birds made their plaints, the Psalms sounded even more sweetly. These Psalms are our love-songs, these the instruments of our agriculture."[23]

Sidonius Apollinaris (c. 431– c. 482) represents boatmen, who, while they worked their heavy barges up the waters of ancient France, "[sing] Psalms till the banks echo with 'Hallelujah.'" Chrysostom (d. 407), the renowned Greek father and patriarch of Constantinople, says,

> All Christians employ themselves in David's Psalms more frequently than in any other part of the Old or New Testament. The grace of the Holy Ghost hath so ordered it that they should be recited and sung

18. McNaughter, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, 550.
19. Berry, "Psalmody," 451.
20. Ibid.
21. Witvliet, *Biblical Psalms*, 4, 5.
22. McNaughter, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, 550.
23. Ibid., 504.

> night and day. In the Church's vigils the first, the middle, and the last are David's Psalms. In the morning David's Psalms are sought for; and David is the first, the midst, and the last of the day. At funeral solemnities, the first, the midst, and the last is David. Many who know not a letter can say David's Psalms by heart. In all the private houses, where women toil—in the monasteries—in the deserts, where men converse with God, the first, the midst, and the last is David.[24]

He says again, "David is always in their mouths, not only in the cities and churches, but in courts, in monasteries, in deserts, and the wilderness. He turned earth into heaven and men into angels, being adapted to all orders and to all capacities" (Sixth Homily on Repentance). [25]

Over against this devotion to singing psalms, there was a growing skepticism about hymns "of human composition" throughout this period because of the use to which they were put by heretics. For this reason the Council of Braga (AD 350) ruled, "Except the Psalms and hymns of the Old and New Testaments, nothing of a poetical nature is to be sung in the church."[26] The important Council of Laodicea, which met about AD 360, forbade "the singing of uninspired hymns in the church, and the reading of uncanonical books of Scripture" (canon 59).[27] While these were not the decisions of ecumenical councils, nearly one hundred years later, the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), the largest of all the general councils, confirmed the Laodicean canons.

We cite these decisions to underscore the point that the Psalter clearly was the primary songbook of the early church. Worship in the early church was "according to Scripture" and consequently filled with scriptural praise.

## Middle Ages

It is certain that during the patristic period all of the people participated in singing psalms.[28] But during the Middle Ages, congregational sing-

24. Ibid., 166, 504.

25. Ibid., 170.

26. Ibid., 550; cf. Mary Berry, "Hymns," in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 262.

27. Ibid., 167; cf. Stapert, *A New Song*, 159.

28. Berry, "Psalmody," 451.

ing eroded. "More and more it was the monks who were charged with the praise of the church," notes Hughes Old.[29] The people gave way to the monastic *schola cantorum*. Over time the church's music also became increasingly sophisticated. The tunes were difficult, and the words were in Latin. The common people could neither sing nor understand them.

Still, the use of the Psalms was, if anything, intensified by the medieval monastic orders, which, following the rules of St. Benedict, chanted their way through the entire Psalter each week.[30] "Psalmody is also at the heart of the music of the mass," Mary Berry reminds us.[31] Most of the texts used for the choral propers (the parts of the service that changed according to the calendar) were taken from the Psalms. The Psalms dominated the music of the monastery and the cathedral, even if the music and language proved too remote for the town church or village chapel.[32]

## The Reformation

The Reformers were aware of much of this history, as Hughes Old has demonstrated, and sought to restore congregational psalmody.[33] They appealed to the kind of scriptural and patristic evidence that we have already noted. For example, Bucer appealed to Pliny the Younger's report on the worship of the early church. Calvin appealed to the church historians (e.g. Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen) as well as the church fathers (e.g. Augustine, Basil, Chrysostom). While the Reformers did not advocate the exclusive singing of Psalms, they did express "a partiality for Psalms and hymns drawn from Scripture," says Old.[34] The Reformers did not oppose moderate use of hymns "of human composition" in principle. Rather, congregational psalmody was a preference that grew out of their consistent concern that worship be conducted according to Scripture. For their ideal to be realized, it would be necessary to develop a simpler music as well as vernacular translations. The new psalmody would be designed for congregations rather than trained monastic choirs.

29. Old, *Worship*, 40; Westemeyer, *Te Deum*, 106–110.
30. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 161; Berry, "Psalmody," 451.
31. Ibid.
32. Old, *Worship*, 42.
33. Old, *Patristic Roots*, 253–69.
34. Ibid., 258.

It was Luther who first suggested that congregations should sing the Psalms. Luther specified in his *Formula missae* (1523) the use of German hymns in the still Latin mass. In a letter to Georg Spalatin he described his plan to develop vernacular psalmody. His reason for doing so is typical of the whole program of reform: "so that the Word of God may be among the people also in the form of music."[35] For this Luther can be called both the "father of congregational hymnody" and the "inventor of the vernacular metrical Psalm."[36] The Protestant conviction that people are to sing the Word of God was expressed in these two forms—hymns and psalms. Under Luther's guidance, the first Protestant hymnal was produced in 1524, the *Geistliche Gesangbuchlein*.[37] Within a year a hymnal also had been published in Strasbourg, whose example was followed by other south German and Swiss cities. The Protestant revolution in preaching and praying was paralleled by this other crucial liturgical revolution in church song. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," Luther's Psalm 46, is an example of his work. Similarly, Martin Bucer, writing in his seminal defense of Reformed worship, *Grund und Ursach* (1524), explained, "We use neither songs nor prayers which are not based on Holy Scripture."[38]

Moreover, among Reformed Protestants, it was whole psalms and the whole Psalter that were to be sung. Why sung? Because they were written to be sung—and sung in context. The biblical texts the Reformers cited, the same ones mentioned previously in this chapter, demonstrated that the early church sang Psalms and the New Testament commanded them to be sung, an understanding reinforced by testimonies from the early church fathers, also already cited in this chapter. The Psalms are not merely a collection of poems to be recited. They are songs, each one complete in itself and having its own integrity, to be sung. "The Psalms may be

35. Bartlett R. Butler, "Hymns," in ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2: 290.

36. Ibid., 2:291; cf. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1950), 344.

37. Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 104.

38. Martin Bucer, *Grund und Ursach*. Text is found in O. F. Cypris, *Basic Principles: Translation and Commentary of Martin Bucer's* Grund und Ursach, 1524 (Dissertation: Union Theological Seminary of New York, 1971), 208.

spoken," says Paul Westermeyer, "but they cry out to be sung."[39] That in itself is worth pondering. "The Psalms are poems," adds C. S. Lewis, "and poems intended to be sung."[40]

Calvin further explains the Reformers' partiality to the Psalms in his *Preface to the Psalter* (1543). The Psalms, he argued, were the songs of the Holy Spirit.

> Moreover, that which St. Augustine has said is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from Him. Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly, and searched here and there, we shall not find better songs nor more fitting of the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him. And moreover, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these, as if He Himself were singing in us to exalt His glory.[41]

John D. Witvliet points out that one of the distinguishing dynamics of Reformation era psalm singing was "the singing of whole or large portions of individual Psalms rather than the versicles used in the medieval Mass."[42] The Reformers would not have been content with the "versicles," or fragments of psalms, that are virtually all that have been available in recent years. This would be true of the partial collections of Psalms (sixty-five to eighty psalm settings) found in the Presbyterian hymnals of the last century (e.g. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* [1933], *The Hymnbook* [1955], *Trinity Hymnal* [1961, 1980], as well as their compilers' "too prissy" (as

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39. Westermeyer, 25.

40. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1958), 2. "The Psalms were written to be sung, not just read. To sing them is to honor God's intention in giving them to us" (Lawrence C. Roff, *Let Us Sing,* [Atlanta: Great Commission Publications, 1991], 65).

41. Calvin, *Preface to the Psalter,* 1543. From the facsimile edition of "Les Pseaumes mis en rime francoise par Clément Marot et Théodore de Béze. Mis en musique a quatre parties per Claude Goudimel. Par les héritiers de Francois Jacqui" (1565); published under the auspices of *La Société des Concerts de la Cathédrale de Lausanne* and edited, in French, by Pierre Pidoux and in German by Konrad Ameln (Kassel: Baeroenreiter-Verlag, 1935). http://www.fpcr.org/blue_banner_articles/calvinps.htm (accessed August 3, 2010).

42. John D. Witvliet, "The Spirituality of the Psalter: Metrical Psalms in Liturgy and Life in Calvin's Geneva," *Calvin Theological Journal,* 32 (1997): 296; also available in John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 203–229. See 228.

Hughes Old calls it) editing of those that were included. They "went much too far in trying to clean up the treasury of David."[43] Neither would they have been content with the practice of isolating particular verses of psalms to be sung as "Scripture songs." To sing the Psalms is to sing the Psalter. Each psalm has its own thematic integrity. The book of Psalms as a whole is characterized by theological, christological, and experiential wholeness. The Holy Spirit gave the Psalter as a complete collection whose strength is collective: laments not isolated from praise, imprecations not isolated from confessions of sin, but all together. The whole gospel of the whole Christ is found in the whole Psalter.

Consequently, the Reformers produced collections of psalms for singing as an early part of their liturgical reforms. The *Strasbourg German Service Book* of 1525 (just eight years after Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses) included a collection of metrical psalms. This collection was increased in the *Strasbourg Psalter* of 1526 and subsequent editions (1530, 1537). The *Constance Hymn Book* of 1540, called by Hughes Old "one of the most important monuments in the history of Reformed liturgy," included hymns by Zwingli, Leo Jud, Luther, Wolfgang Capito, and Wolfgang Musculus, among others.[44] But half of the collection was metrical Psalms.

Genevan psalmody began with the *French Evangelical Psalm Book* of 1539 and grew into the *Geneva Psalter* of 1542, and finally the *Geneva Psalter* of 1562, a complete psalter of 150 psalms, metered for singing, most with a distinctive tune.

The singing of psalms became one of the most obvious marks of Reformed Protestantism. The Genevan psalms were translated into Spanish, Dutch, German, and English, among others, twenty-four languages in all. English editions developed and evolved both in the Church of England and the Church of Scotland. The French refugees streaming into Geneva in large numbers immediately embraced psalmody. Louis F. Benson, the leading hymnologist of a previous generation, wrote a series of scholarly articles in 1909 for the *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* entitled

43. Hughes O. Old, "The Psalms as Christian Prayer: A Preface to the Liturgical Use of the Psalter," unpublished manuscript, 1978, 18.

44. Old, *Worship*, 44.

"John Calvin and the Psalmody of the Reformed Churches."[45] In these articles he discussed the impact that the *Geneva Psalter* had upon the French exiles in Geneva as they first encountered psalm singing: "The sight of the great congregation gathered in St. Peter's, with their little Psalm books in their own hands, the great volume of voices praising God in the familiar French, the grave melodies carrying holy words, the fervor of the singing and the spiritual uplift of the singers,—all of these moved deeply the emotions of the French exiles now first in contact with them."[46]

As these refugees flowed in and out of France, they took with them a love for the Psalms that they had learned in Geneva. By 1553 the *Genevan Psalms* were sung in all of the Protestant churches of France.[47] In 1559 it became the official "hymnal" of the Reformed churches of France. These psalms played a great part in "spreading the Genevan doctrines in France," says Benson.[48] When the first complete edition was published in 1562 it was immediately consumed, going through twenty-five editions in its first year of publication.[49] During this time of fervent devotion to the Psalms, the French church grew with extraordinary speed. In 1555 there were five underground churches in France. By 1559 the number had jumped to more than one hundred. By 1562 there were estimated to be more than 2,150 churches established in France with approximately three million attending.[50] Witvliet maintains that "metrical Psalm singing was a maker of the Reformation."[51] It popularized Reformed piety, "opening up the

45. Louis F. Benson, "John Calvin and the Psalmody of the Reformed Churches," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, 5, 1 (March 1909): 1–21; 5, 2 (June 1909): 55–87; 5, 3 (September 1909), 107–118.

46. Ibid., 57.

47. Ibid., 67.

48. Ibid., 69.

49. Ibid., 71. There were fifteen editions in 1563, eleven in 1564, thirteen in 1565, a total of sixty-four editions in the first four years of publication. Witvliet cites with approval the description of the rapidly selling psalter as "the most gigantic enterprise ever undertaken in publishing until then" (274).

50. Frank A. James, III, "Calvin the Evangelist" in *RTS: Reformed Quarterly*, fall 2001, 8; ed. W. Sanford Reid, *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 77.

51. Witvliet, "Spirituality of the Psalter," 296.

Scriptures to the laity,"[52] says Miriam Chrisman, joining the sermon and catechism, says Witvliet, "as the chief means of spiritual formation."[53]

The completion of the *Genevan Psalms* in 1562 proved to be a providential provision for the French Protestants, as attempts at reconciliation with Rome and the French crown failed, and civil war broke out that year. "They found in it," Benson says, "a well opened in the desert, from which they drew consolation under persecution, strength to resist valiantly the enemies of their faith; with the assured conviction that God was fighting for them, and also (it must be added) would be revenged against their foes."[54] "To know the Psalms," says Benson, "became a primary duty" for the Huguenots, as French Protestants became known.[55] The powerful appeal of the Psalms sung "made Psalmody as much a part of the daily life as of public worship."[56] Families at home, men and women in the workplace or engaged in daily tasks, were recognized as French Protestants because they were overheard singing psalms. "The Psalter became to them the manual of the spiritual life."[57] Moreover, the Psalter "ingrained its own characteristics deep in the Huguenot character, and had a great part in making it what it was," says Benson.[58] For the Huguenot, "called to fight and suffer for his principles, the habit of Psalm singing was a providential preparation."[59] Benson elaborates: "The Psalms were his confidence and strength in quiet and solitude, his refuge from oppression; in the wars of religion they became the songs of the camp and the march, the inspiration of the battle and the consolation in death, whether on the field or at the martyrs' stake. It is not possible to conceive of the history of the Reformation in France in such a way that Psalm singing should not have a great place in it."[60]

A similar story can be told of the Scottish Presbyterians. As John Knox and other Protestant refugees returned to Scotland from exile on the continent in the late 1550s, they came with a zeal for an English-

52. Cited in Witvliet, "Spirituality of the Psalter," 297.
53. Witvliet, "Spirituality of the Psalter," 296.
54. Benson, "John Calvin and Psalmody," 77, 78.
55. Ibid., 73.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.

language psalter corresponding to the *Genevan Psalter*. The result eventually was the *Scottish Psalter* of 1564, then of 1635, and finally of 1650. The last of these became the standard psalter for the Scots and "passed straight into the affections of the common people," says Millar Patrick, in his *Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody*.[61] "It was a godsend," he says, published a few years before the enormous suffering of the Killing Time (1668–88), by which time "it had won its place in the people's hearts, and its lines were so deeply imprinted upon their memories that it is always the language thus given them for the expression of their emotions, which in the great hours we find upon their lips."[62] Note what he says: the language that they used to interpret and express their experience was the language of the Psalms, which they sang. Patrick continues: "You can imagine what it would be to them. Books in those days were few. The Bible came first. The Psalm book stood next in honor. It was their constant companion, their book of private devotion, as well as their manual of church worship. In godly households it was the custom to sing through it in family worship."[63]

To their psalms they turned, he says, "to sustain their souls in hours of anxiety and peril," and from them they "drew the language of strength and consolation."[64] He continues, "It was there that they found a voice for faith, the patience, the courage, and the hope that bore them through those dark and cruel years."[65] The Scottish metrical psalms, he says, "are stained with the blood of the martyrs, who counted not their lives dear to them that by suffering and sacrifice they might keep faith with conscience and save their country's liberties from defeat."[66]

The singing of psalms has been an important part of the "strength and consolation" of all the churches of Reformed Protestantism, including their near cousins, the Congregational and Baptist churches, for three hundred years. Early collections of metrical psalms were published among the Dutch in 1540. In 1568 Peter Dathenus (c. 1531–1588) published a

61. Millar Patrick, *Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), 115.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 116.

Dutch translation of the French psalter "carefully molded after Genevan texts and melodies," as Butler explains, "which became the official Calvinist songbook for the next two centuries" in Protestant Netherlands.[67] Similarly, the German language edition of the *Genevan Psalter*, the work of Ambrosius Lobwasser (1515–1585), was published in 1573. Even today the Genevan psalms form the core of the sung praises of the French, Swiss, and Dutch Reformed churches.

The Reformed and Presbyterian churches in America were exclusively psalm singing for nearly two hundred years, from the Pilgrim fathers to the Jacksonian Era, as were the Congregationalists and Baptists. The first book published in North America was a psalter. The enormously popular *Bay Psalm Book* (1640) was the hymnal of American Puritanism, undergoing seventy printings through 1773.[68] When the *Bay Psalm Book* and the favorite among Scots-Irish immigrants, the *Scottish Psalter* (1650), were eventually superseded, it was by a book that purported to be yet another psalter, Isaac Watts's *The Psalms of David Imitated* (1719).[69] Ironically Watts's hymns and psalm paraphrases were the primary vehicle through which hymns finally were accepted into the public worship of Protestants, yet not without considerable controversy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Still, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that hymns began to overtake the Psalms in popular use.[70]

In addition to the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists, the Anglican and Episcopal churches boast a three-hundred-year history of exclusive psalmody, singing first from the Sternhold and Hopkin's *Old Version* (1547, 1557), then Tate and Brady's *New Version* (1696, 1698). Not until the publishing of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861 did hymns gain entrance to the Anglican liturgy.

B. R. Butler speaks of "the phenomenal success of Calvinist psalmody," and particularly of its impact on the people: "For the faithful it was God's Word they were privileged to sing, and it spoke to their most pro-

67. Butler, "Hymns" in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 2: 294.

68. *The Bay Psalm Book: Being a Facsimile Reprint of the First Edition in 1640*, with an introduction by Wilberforce Eames (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1903), ix.

69. Ibid. New England's churches began to vote to change to Watts in the 1750s.

70. Louis F. Benson tells this story in *The English Hymn: Its Development and Use in Worship* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 161–218.

found human needs and aspirations. The Psalms became their badge of identity, the banner of the people of God struggling for power or survival in France, the Low Countries, much of Germany, and elsewhere."[71]

## Decline

The supplanting of the metrical psalms by hymns was gradual in American Protestantism. From 1620 to 1800, metrical psalmody dominated the American church scene. The Pilgrim fathers arrived with their *Ainsworth Psalter*, which gave way, as we've noted, to the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640), the psalter of American Puritanism. Presbyterians sang from the *Scottish Psalter* of 1650, and Anglicans from either *Steinhold and Hopkins* (1562) or Tate and Brady's *New Version* (1696). In the 1750s the churches of New England and beyond began to vote to adopt Watts's *Paraphrases* (1719), the popularity of which, along with his hymns, could not be suppressed.

By 1800 the battles over the inclusion of hymns in public worship had largely been fought and won or lost according to one's perspective. Subsequent hymnbooks for the next sixty-five years included both psalms and hymns, typically with a large opening section of psalms. For example, both the New School Presbyterian hymnal of 1843, *Church Psalmist*, and the Old School hymnal of 1843, *Psalms and Hymns*, open with multiple versions of all 150 Psalms, making up forty percent of the former hymnal and over fifty percent of the latter.[72] The distinction between psalms and hymns was clearly maintained. As late as 1863, the New School General Assembly voiced its disapproval of hymnals which, "in the arrangement, blot out the distinction between those songs of devotion which are God-inspired and those which are man-inspired."[73] Yet with the publication of the *Hymnal of the Presbyterian Church* (1866), the distinction was gone, and the Psalms had all but disappeared, without even a scriptural index with which to trace them.[74] The 1866 book was soon superseded by the

71. Butler, "Hymns," in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 2: 297.

72. *Church Psalmist; or Psalms and Hymns for the Public, Social and Private Use of Evangelical Christians*, 5th ed. (New York: Mark H. Newman, 1845); *Psalms and Hymns Adapted to Social, Private, and Public Worship in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1843).

73. Benson, *English Hymns*, 386, n.69.

74. *Hymnal of the Presbyterian Church Ordered by the General Assembly* (Philadelphia: Board of Education, 1866).

first hymnal after the reunion of New and Old Schools in the north, *The Presbyterian Hymnal* of 1874. Again, psalms are nowhere evident. If one were to hunt carefully, he could find a few, but they are well hidden and nowhere identified.[75] The same is true of the hymnal of 1895 and its revision in 1911, which still lacked a Scripture index by which to hunt down the Psalms.[76] The southern Presbyterians published *The New Psalms and Hymns* in 1901, with a significant selection of psalms, but they too were scattered and unidentified,[77] prompting Benson's observation that it was "Psalms and Hymns in name only."[78] By the time of the southern church's *The Presbyterian Hymnal* of 1927, the Psalms had completely disappeared.[79] It, too, lacked a Scripture index by which to trace the Psalms, and even the obligatory "All People That on Earth Do Dwell" (Psalm 100) was missing. The northern church's *The Hymnal* of 1933 did have Psalm 100 and Psalm 23, but little else, and also lacked a Scripture index.[80] Psalm singing in the mainline had reached its lowest point. It would be left to the smaller Reformed and Presbyterian denominations to keep psalm singing alive in the twentieth century, as the United Presbyterians (UP), Associate Reformed Presbyterians (ARP), Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC) maintained their commitment to metrical psalm singing.

A similar story can be told about the Congregationalists and Baptists. The Connecticut Association commissioned Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College, to revise and complete Watts's psalms, to which was added a collection of 263 hymns, published as *The Psalms of David* in 1801. Dwight's work, plus that of Samuel Worcester, *Psalms and Hymns* of 1819 (revised in 1823 and 1834, and frequently reprinted), familiarly known as "Watts and Select," solidified the dominance of Watts's psalm-

75. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1874).

76. *The Hymnal* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian Board of Publications & Sabbath-School Work, 1911).

77. *The New Psalms and Hymns* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1901).

78. Benson, *English Hymns*, 256.

79. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1927).

80. *The Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1933).

ody and hymnody into the Civil War era.[81] Thereafter the Psalms quickly fell out of congregational hymnals. Indeed, with the advent of the gospel-song tradition in the post-Civil War era, this new hymnody, says Yale's Sydney Ahlstrom, "swept much of Isaac Watts," and "the older Reformed 'Psalms'…into disuse and oblivion."[82]

This eclipse of psalmody in the late nineteenth century is quite unprecedented. The Psalms, as we have seen, had been the dominant form of church song beginning with the church fathers, all through the Middle Ages, during the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras, and into the modern era. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the church had lost the voice through which it had expressed its sung praise for more than eighteen hundred years.

## Revival

Can we hope to see psalm singing revived in our day? Metrical psalmody must contend not only with classical hymnody and gospel songs, but it faces ever stiffer competition from Scripture songs and praise bands. There are some hopeful signs. We must first return our attention to the smaller Reformed churches. The United Presbyterians, still an exclusively psalm singing denomination in the nineteenth century, worked to reverse the downward trend with the publication of its *Book of Psalms* in 1871. It marked progress, in my view, in the development of psalm singing in the English-speaking world because it offered much greater metrical variety than before seen. It provided the foundation for *The Psalter* of 1912, largely the 1871 book, but a collaborative work of nine churches of the Presbyterian-Reformed family in the United States and Canada, who, after fifty years of decline, were beginning again to see the value of singing Psalms. Several Reformed denominations, such as the Free Reformed (FRCNA), Heritage Reformed (HRC), Protestant Reformed (PRC), and Netherlands Reformed (NRC), still use *The Psalter* today, as do a number of independent congregations.[83]

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81. See Benson, *English Hymns*, 161–68; 373–75; 388–89.

82. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 846.

83. *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999.)

Multiple texts from *The Psalter*, 1912, found their way into *The Hymnbook*, 1955, a collaborative work of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), UP, ARP, and Reformed Church in America (RCA). A similar number were to be found in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's (OPC) *Trinity Hymnal* of 1961.[84] A revival of psalm singing was well under way. Both of these publications clearly identified psalms as psalms and provided helpful indices by which to find them, though they remained scattered throughout the text. The editors of *The Hymnbook* boasted of "the interweaving of the strands from five denominations," resulting in "the inclusion of many of the Psalms in meter," which it describes as "a happy recovery of one of the great sources of strength of both the Genevan and the Scottish tradition."[85] The next generation of hymnals from the CRC, the *Psalter Hymnal* (1987),[86] and the PCUSA (the reunited northern and southern mainline churches), *Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (1990),[87] restored the Psalms to their own distinct sections and offered a complete (CRC) or nearly complete (PCUSA) selection of all 150 psalms. The revised *Trinity Hymnal* (1990)[88] expanded its psalm offerings without placing them in a distinct section. Meanwhile, the RPCNA published its *Book of Psalms for Singing* (1973),[89] which blended together the selections primarily from the Scottish and Genevan traditions and the 1912 *Psalter*. The *Trinity Psalter* (1994) condensed this work into a slender volume for hymnal-using churches.[90] It has sold forty thousand copies since publication. The Canadian and American Reformed churches maintain the Genevan tradition with their *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter,* first published in 1972 and significant because, for the first time, it provided English

84. *The Hymnbook* (Richmond, Philadelphia, New York: PCUSA, UPCUSA, RCA, 1955); *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: The Committee on Christian Education, Inc., The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1961).

85. *The Hymnbook*, 5.

86. *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 1987).

87. *Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

88. *Trinity Hymnal* (Norcross, Ga.: Great Commission Publications, Inc., 1990).

89. *Book of Psalms for Singing* (Pittsburgh, Penn.: The Board of Education and Publication, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1973).

90. *Trinity Psalter* (Pittsburgh, Penn.: Crown & Covenant Publications, 1994).

metrical versions of the Psalms that can be sung to the sixteenth-century Genevan melodies.[91]

## Benefits

The power of persuasion should not be discounted. Advocates of psalm singing have considerable ammunition at their disposal as they explain to the church why the Psalms ought to be sung.

1. Psalm singing is *biblical*. By this we mean that the Holy Spirit gave the canonical Psalms to be sung. Moreover, we are commanded to sing psalms and are given examples of the New Testament churches singing them.
2. Psalm singing is *historical*. It was the practice of the early church (as attested to by the church fathers), of the medieval monastic orders, of the Reformers, and of virtually all Protestants until the middle of the nineteenth century. Calvin R. Stapert is right in concluding, "There can be no doubt that the Psalms have been the most widely used and universally loved texts that Christians have sung."[92] The Psalms are at once catholic as well as the distinctive form of church song for Presbyterian and Reformed Protestants.
3. Psalm singing is emotionally *satisfying*. Its theological, christological, and experiential richness provides God's people with the language with which to understand and express the vicissitudes of life. Nothing touches the hearts of God's people like the Psalms, particularly sung. Calvin called the Psalms "an Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that it is not represented here as a mirror." Here, he says, "the Holy Spirit has drawn to life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated."[93]
4. Psalm singing is *sanctifying*. The act of singing (not merely reciting as poetry) the whole Psalter (not merely hymns or even

91. *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, Ltd., 1984).

92. Stapert, *New Song for an Old World*, 151.

93. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), xxxvii.

> psalm fragments), given the thematic integrity of each psalm and the divinely balanced content of the Psalter as a whole, has a unique capacity to shape and mold a biblical piety. A distinctive contribution to the health and vitality of the body of Christ is made by the singing of psalms.

Again we find that mainline Protestants seem to understand what the evangelicals have forgotten. Hughes Old waxes euphoric regarding the singing of psalms.[94] So also does Ronald P. Byars. He commends their balance: "Psalms portray the majesty of God as well as the neediness of human beings. Psalms don't ignore human strengths, but they're centered on God rather than on us.… The Psalms get the balance between God's trustworthiness and our need right.… Sung psalmody has a certain gravity because it takes God so seriously.… A virtue of psalmody is that the words come from Scripture."[95] Perhaps we can dare to hope that a revival is underway that will restore the Psalms to their rightful preeminence in the life of Christ's church. New psalters have been produced in recent years in Australia (*The Complete Book of Psalms for Singing*, 1991) and, most recently, from the Free Church of Scotland (*Sing Psalms: New Metrical Versions of the Book of Psalms*, 2003).[96] Also, *Psalter*, a compilation of the 1912 *Psalter* and the 1934 and 1957 *Psalter Hymnals* of the Christian Reformed Church, was published in 1997.[97]

New efforts are underway in both the OPC and RPCNA to publish psalters that combine the best of all that has gone before as well as incorporate the benefits of recent Old Testament scholarship. Whether or not the efforts of the enthusiasts bear fruit in the larger Christian community remains to be seen.

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94. Old, *Worship*, 92ff.

95. Ronald P. Byers, *What Language Shall I Borrow?: The Bible and Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 28–30.

96. The Free Church of Scotland, *Sing Psalms: New Metrical Versions of the Book of Psalms* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

97. *Psalter* (Grand Rapids: International Discipleship and Evangelization Associates; I.D.E.A. Ministries, 1997).