

Encountering the Reformation: Singing the Psalms

In the past two weeks, I've discussed a couple of the "culture shocks" I experienced when I first embraced the Reformed Church. Those lessons resulted in a significant shift of thinking concerning the nature of the authority God has entrusted to the elders of His Church.

But the difference I found most noticeable in Reformed Churches – and certainly the factor that registered first – was the singing. It was absolutely beautiful ... and, to my ears, entirely foreign.

You might not know this, but Methodists consider themselves to be "a singing people." (It's sort of funny, considering how hesitant most of them are to be heard over the piano.) I grew up with many of the familiar gospel hymns: *Amazing Grace*, *The Old Rugged Cross*, *Blessed Assurance*, *Just As I Am*. And now I found myself in a Church where those old favorites were unwelcome.

Let me back up a bit. You might remember that I was introduced to the Reformation as a student at Geneva College – a school of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. Doctrinally, the RPs are very similar to the URC. But in worship, they hold to a practice that most of our Churches gave up about 100 years ago. They practice *exclusive psalmody*, singing only psalms in worship. What's more, they reject the use of musical instruments in worship.

That's a bit different from gospel hymns plunked out on a piano.

At first, I tolerated the strange (to me) singing simply because the preaching was so good. But then I began to notice some strange things.

First of all, the words we were singing were far more powerful than the hymns I sang as a Methodist. They were more theologically rich, more passionate, and more varied in their expressions than any hymn book I seen.

On top of that, the congregation loved singing them. Having no musical instruments, they learned to use the instrument we all have: lips and tongue. They sang in harmony, guided by the waving arm of a precenter (fore-singer).

Nor did they stop singing Psalms when worship ended. They had Psalm tapes in their cars, sang Psalms as a family after meals, hummed psalter tunes while walking down the street, and installed siding on their houses while singing the words of a Psalm. (Did I mention that they loved the Psalms?)

It got me wondering: *why* do they sing the way they do? Why are they so passionate about it?

So I began studying their doctrine of worship, encountering for the first time the idea that worship is to be governed by God's Word. I was shocked to find that these folks had a Biblical reason for every element of worship – from the salutation that began worship to the benediction with which it closed.

Understand: I was seeing Reformed worship through the eyes of a lifelong Methodist. In general, Methodists have two guiding principles for worship: 1. Do what works for *you*. 2. Don't limit anyone's freedom to do what works for *them*.

This idea of worship based on the Bible seemed radical – and wonderful.

Think about it for a minute. If worship depends on what I like, what I enjoy, what *works* for me ... what's the ultimate standard? It's *me*. And what happens when *you* disagree with *me*? We have a vote, and the loser adapts or leaves. It's all about *me* – a mere man – and the worship that *I* enjoy.

But the Reformed Churches reject such man-centered foolishness. We worship God because He has called us to worship Him, and we worship Him in the way He has commanded. After all, *He* is the King. *We aren't!*

And He has commanded us to sing Psalms. One author notes, "If the Lord hands us a book of psalms and then commands us to praise Him in song, are we not then *obligated* to use the collection that He has given to us? ... The psalter derives its place in the Church from its place in the canon of Scripture."

As I researched, I learned that the early Church agreed. For the first four centuries after Christ, the only songs we can confirm that the Church used in worship were the Psalms and the New Testament hymns (the songs of Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, etc.). The only *hymns* we can confirm in the early Church were written by heretics to spread their error.

Let me be clear: I don't believe that God wants us to limit our singing to the Psalms. I have *no doubt* that He wants us to sing the other hymns found in Scripture (the N.T. hymns, Moses' song from Exodus 15, Deborah's song from Judges 5, etc.). I *also believe* that we are called to sing uninspired hymns – *but* I believe the case for that is not airtight, and I *deeply respect* the argument used by our brothers who do not sing uninspired songs in worship.

Because of my uncertainty, and because of the depth and richness of the songs God has given us in Scripture, I have a great appreciation for our Church Order's stipulation that "The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches" (CO Art. 39).

But my fear is that we and our children should fail to see the *treasure* those Psalms are. Luther found the doctrine of the Book of Psalms to be so complete that he called it "a little Bible, wherein everything contained in the entire Bible is beautifully and briefly comprehended." No book is more extensively quoted in the New

Testament, nor is any significant aspect of Jesus' life omitted from these inspired lyrics. Each Psalm sings of Christ, in ways both clear and veiled.

Here we have a song book that helps us to express both our praise and our sorrow. God has given us words with which to respond when we are oppressed and stanzas to express thanks for our greatest blessings.

What more perfect way could we find with which to praise and pray to the Lord our God than by taking up the words which He Himself gave us for that purpose? Nor should we *restrict* our singing of the Psalms to worship – for the songs He has given are just as comfortable in the workshop as in worship.

It is my prayer that I might be able to pass on to my children the love I have gained for the Psalms. What an excellent inheritance to leave for them! For that which we sing, we learn to love; and there is nothing we should learn to love more truly than the Word of God, which speaks at every turn of Christ.

Psalm singing is part of our heritage, as Reformed Christians – but we dare not sing the Psalms only out of tradition. Instead, let us sing them because they speak of Christ, and because they encourage Christian living, and because they help us to praise and pray to God. Let us sing them in obedience to Him.

And let us sing Psalms because they provide precisely the encouragement that our Father knew we would need to endure our time in this dark world!