

Sing Praise to the Lord – But Why Sing Psalms?

I will never forget the *culture-shock* I felt when I entered Geneva College.

Many were the things that struck me as new and strange: from the strict Lord's Day observance, to the pervasive influence of Scripture, to the simple novelty of living away from my family.

One of the practices I grew most to love was the *Psalm singing* that suddenly surrounded me.

Geneva belongs to the Reformed Presbyterian Church – a denomination which has become known for its practice of singing only Psalms in worship.

Up until that time, my worship experiences had always involved hymns: from the passionate refrains of Charles Wesley (*Rejoice, the Lord Is King!*), to the stately tunes of Isaac Watts (*Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun*), to the contemporary choruses (Amy Grant's *El Shaddai*; or Twila Paris' *We Will Glorify*), right down to the campfire-friendly *Kumbaya*.

I had enjoyed reading the Psalms as part of my devotions – but when it came to singing in Church, Psalms never occurred to me. Nor could I imagine worship without *Trust and Obey* or *Amazing Grace*.

Then I heard the beauty of a congregation pouring out its heart in harmony, exclaiming: "All peoples, clap your hands for joy; to God in triumph shout; for awesome is the Lord Most High, Great King the earth throughout!" (Psalm 47A). Whether with the familiar words of Psalm 23, the majesty of Psalm 97, or the relative obscurity of Psalm 71 – the love with which they embraced the Psalms was striking. Never had I seen such passion for the hymns of my youth.

It wasn't long before I became a fan of singing Psalms.

Yet there's something of a twist to the story. Although I learned to cherish the Psalms, I was never able to conclude from Scripture that we must sing the Psalms *exclusively*. In fact, that's why I left the Reformed Presbyterian Church: I believed that God was leading me to pursue the ministry, but I could not affirm that *exclusive* psalmody was the teaching of Scripture.

As a federation, our United Reformed Churches have a healthy love for the Psalms. The *Psalter Hymnal* has 310 arrangements of the Psalms, alongside only 183 hymns. And our Church Order stipulates: "The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches." Hymns, by contrast, "may be sung" – but we're under no obligation to use them.

That strikes many people as odd today. Why emphasize *Psalms*? When there are so many great hymns, so many catchy contemporary songs, so much *good music* ... why *Psalms*?!?

It's a question we must ask. Because if we emphasize Psalm singing just for the sake of tradition – well, that's not good enough. But if we're doing it on the basis of principle, we need to *understand* that principle, embrace it *whole-heartedly*, and teach it to our children and grandchildren – lest we will lose it.

We need to examine the question: *Why Psalms?*

Questioning the Question – Psalms in Church History

And even as I ask that question, I'm going to challenge it. Because the question itself assumes that Psalm singing is either unique or new – and it is neither.

In fact, Psalm singing historically has been the main practice of the Church.

Say what? That's right: In the history of the Church, it usually has been *Psalms* – not *hymns* – which God's people have brought to worship.

This obviously was the case before the time of Christ. The Psalms were read, chanted, and eventually sung in the synagogue services of Palestine. Before that, the Psalms were used in the temple services, both by Levitical choirs and, to a lesser degree, by the congregation. The people of God learned to love singing the Psalms – not only in worship, but also in the home and field.

That love for the Psalms continued in the worship of the New Testament Church. Tertullian in the second century and Jerome in the first wrote about how the singing of Psalms were essential parts of the Church's worship. Chrysostom, a Church leader who lived from 347 to 407, remarked: "Many who know not a letter can say David's Psalms by heart." Athanasius, a Church father who died in 373, warned the Church not to allow the words of the Psalms to be replaced with words that were common or filled with human persuasion.

Several important Church councils emphasized the important place of the Psalms. The Council of Laodicea in 381 prohibited the use of uninspired songs in the Church's worship. That decision was upheld by the Council of Chalcedon (451), the Council of Braga (561), and the Synod of Toledo (655).

Although the Middle Ages brought a decline in congregational singing and the introduction of various uninspired songs into the worship service, the Protestant reformers restored the Psalms to the principle place of honor.

Calvin wrote of the Psalms: “No one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from him. . . . We shall not find better songs nor more fitting for 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” (Preface to the Psalter, 1543).

Those Psalms so loved by Calvin were likewise loved by the saints throughout the Churches of the Reformation. In fact, the first book published in North America was the Bay Psalm Book of 1640, which enjoyed 70 printings. It wasn’t until the middle of the 1800s that hymns truly caught on in American Churches – and our own forefathers in the Christian Reformed Church accepted hymns only reluctantly in the early 1900s.

Until the last century and a half, then, few people have asked: *Why Psalms?* The *real* question has been: *Why hymns?*

So our challenge is to learn just *why* the Church has regarded the Psalms as its first and foremost songbook before the Lord.

Taking a Step Back: What Is Our Guide for Worship?

If we truly want to understand why the Church historically set the Psalms at the center of its worship, we need to recognize how that worship has been (and should be) determined.

What we do in worship is of immense significance. We are worshiping the God who created, sustains, redeemed and preserves us; who is perfectly holy and righteous; and who exercises perfect justice. Having saved us through Christ, He now calls us to be holy, even as He is holy (Lev. 19:2).

The way in which we serve such a God must be carefully considered!

Thankfully, He has not left us to figure it out for ourselves. In fact, the Lord commands us *not* to determine for ourselves how to worship Him. Instead, He has told us what we should and should not do in worship.

We must understand that claim to see why we sing the Psalms in worship.

The Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism make claims about worship which could be regarded as terribly restrictive. In an age of interpretive dance, PowerPoint sermons, and praise bands, it sounds old-fashioned to claim that God’s will is that we not “worship Him in any other way than He has commanded in His Word.” Yet that’s just what we confess in Lord’s Day 35.

Nor is it popular to recite Art. 32 of the Confession, saying that “we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever.” Yet we *must* confess this, just as we *must* confess with Art. 29 that that true Church is present “if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.”

This is the ground on which we and our forefathers have chosen to stand: that God is to be worshiped only in the ways which He commands in His Word.

Most people – and most branches of the modern Church – take a different approach to worship; an approach that says: “First, do no harm.” That is, they determine to avoid those things which God has expressly forbidden. Whatever He has not rejected, however, they regard as fair game for worship.

But our standard is higher: We want to offer only the worship which God has *positively ordained*, either by explicit command or by clear example.

Why the higher standard? Because Scripture itself demands it.

Throughout the Bible, we find the calling to worship in the way God commands, and in no other.

The first place we see this is in the Second Commandment itself. Here God commands His people not to worship Him by means of images – a practice nearly universal in the ancient world. But our God is different than the false gods. His people must worship without images – a living confession that He is too great for His image to be captured in the works of men’s hands.

Then, in Deut. 4:1-2, the Lord commands His people *positively* to hear and obey the laws He gives them. What He commands, they are to do faithfully. But *negatively*, they are instructed: “Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.”

This command is applied to worship in Deuteronomy 12, where God commands His people to destroy all the shrines, altars and religious devices of the Canaanites. He explains that the heathens’ ways of worshipping their

gods are abominable to the true God. Therefore, He says, “See that you do all that I command you; do not add to it or take away from it” (12:32).

The people of Israel could not doubt that God was serious about this command. They witnessed what happened when two of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, went beyond what God had commanded. Lev. 10:1-3 tells us their story – and what is truly striking about it is the apparent motivation behind their deed. Nadab and Abihu sought to offer *more* worship than God commanded – not less. They wanted to *increase* their service to Him. But because He had not commanded their extra service, “fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev. 10:2).

Yet God’s people eventually would forget this vivid object lesson. We can see that from the rebuke God sent through His prophets. In Jeremiah 7, the Lord emphasizes that His central command to Israel has always been: “Obey me, and I will be your God, and you will be my people” (Jer. 7:23). However, “they did not listen or pay attention; instead they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts” (Jer. 7:24).

Time and again, the Old Testament echoes that condemnation of the rebels among God’s people: They did not keep my commandments; they worshipped according to their own ideas, rather than mine.

But wasn’t there a profound change in worship once Christ came?

Indeed, there was. No longer was the temple worship acceptable, for Christ had shed the blood of the true Lamb once for all. No longer should sacrifices be offered day after day – because He offered the perfect sacrifice, which ended all need for sacrifices (Heb. 6:26-28). We now draw near to God Himself with confidence (Heb. 4:14-16), since our Mediator has opened the way for us by His blood (Heb. 10:19-22), giving us true perfection (Heb. 10:14).

Now we worship no longer by outward ceremonies, but by the preaching of the Word (Rom. 10:14-17), by the prayers we offer (1 Tim. 2:1-8), and by the songs we sing (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19).

We are not bound, like the Pharisees, to honor commandments and traditions of mere men (Mark 7:6-9). In fact, we’re commanded *not* to submit to the self-imposed worship of men – for in Christ, we have died to the bondage of such commands (Col. 2:20-23).

Yet we *are* called to worship according to *His* command. Our freedom is not a freedom *from* God’s Law – but a freedom *in* His commands, doing His will gratefully. Our worship is to be *Spirit-led* – and the Spirit leads according to the Truth God has proclaimed and commanded (John 4:24). Thus Jesus called His Church to make disciples not only through *baptizing*, but also through *teaching* new believers “to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Our privilege, as those who belong to Christ, is that we are not bound by the whims of mere men. We worship God as *He Himself* has instructed us.

The next question we must ask is: how does He command us to *sing*?

What Does God Command Us to Sing?

What does God command the Church to sing when we gather for worship?

It’s the central question that must be answered in order to know why we should (or should not) sing Psalms. As we saw above, our worship is immensely significant. As redeemed children of God, we enter the presence of our holy, righteous and altogether good God. We must not do so in a *presumptuous* manner.

Instead, we must worship Him in the way He has commanded, and in that way alone. If He says we should include X in our worship, then we must not fail to include X. But if He does not say to include Y, then we dare not include Y – lest our worship be as offensive to God as was the uncommanded incense of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-3).

And although the character of our worship has changed to some degree since Jesus fulfilled the Covenant promises, nonetheless we still are called to worship according to God’s Truth and by His Spirit (John 4:23-24). Still we must obey the commands of Christ (Matt. 28:20) – and especially so in our worship!

So ... what are we commanded with regard to singing?

Books could be written on that subject. (In fact, they have been.) But for our purposes, a summary should suffice.

Before the time of Moses, we are told very little about how God’s people worshipped Him. However, the Lord inspired Moses to give us extensive instruction in the manner of Israel’s worship. Nonetheless, the instructions are scant concerning singing, as the focus during that period was less on *praise* than on *prophecy*.

God's wanted His people to see what He one day would do – which they would recognize in the sacrificial rites of tabernacle and temple.

Through King David's leadership, God instituted a ministry of praise by means of Levites called to a music ministry. (See 1 Chronicles 16, 23 and 25, among others.) These Levitical musicians and singers were responsible for singing at the temple service, which was a function both prophetic (in teaching the people) and priestly (in singing on behalf of the people).

We learn all of this from snippets here and there. The Psalms themselves reflect much of that era's worship. The writings of the prophets and the historical writings (the books of Moses, Samuel & Chronicles) reveal the rest.

It is interesting to note that new psalms were written right up until the return from the exile – and then the writing stopped.

As with the prophetic writings, so too with Israel's songs: God inspired new compositions each time He took a significant step toward fulfilling His promise of redemption, then He caused them for a time to cease. That's why we find songs composed to mark the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 15), Israel's entrance into Canaan (Deuteronomy 32), the birth of the great prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 2), and the arrival of the ark at Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16).

But within a short time of Israel's return from the exile, new songs ceased to be written. Writings of ancient Jewish rabbis tell us that by 300 B.C., the Book of Psalms as we know it was recognized as a complete, inspired collection. Even new feasts were celebrated using existing Psalms (see 1 Macc. 7:17).

For Israel prior to Christ's birth, the songs of worship were exclusively inspired songs, given by God for His people to celebrate His excellent deeds and His gracious promises. The character of those Psalms varied from majestic anthems (98; 148), to responsive congregational songs (118; 136), to songs that addressed God in tones both personal and devotional (3; 23; 139). But all were recognized as having come by inspiration from God, for His people to sing in worship. Just as they gathered to *read* the Word God sent, so too did they lift their voices to sing the songs He had given.

What changed in the New Testament?

With the coming of John the Baptist, God again acted on His promise to redeem a new humanity from out of Adam's fallen race. As during former stages, so too in this one: both new Scripture and new song marked the event.

The new Scripture, of course, He preserved in the 27 books of the New Testament. And the songs included those proclaimed by Mary (Luke 1:46-55), Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79), the angels (Luke 2:14) and Simeon (Luke 2:29-32).

However, those examples don't mean that our worship can include any songs we wish. In fact, the "songs" Luke 1 and 2 might more accurately be called "poetic utterances," as none of the three verbs which indicate actual "singing" are present. Instead, we read that Mary, Zechariah, the angels and Simeon "said" or "spoke" these words.

Where we *do* find clear examples of singing in the New Testament, the songs were almost certainly Psalms. For example, in Matt. 26:30 and Mark 14:26, we read that after celebrating the Passover, Jesus led His disciples out to the Mount of Olives – but not before "they had sung a hymn." These verses use a verb to indicate that their departure occurred, "after having hymned" – a participle of the verb *hymneo*. What song would they have "hymned" at that time? Commentators are almost unanimous in saying that these Jewish men would have concluded their meal – which was both the first Lord's Supper and the last Passover – by singing the latter half of the group of Psalms known as the Egyptian Hallel, comprising Psalms 113 through 118. This was what Jews *always* sang to close the Passover Feast.

And just as Psalms were almost certainly on His lips at the close of the first Communion, so were they on Jesus' lips as He hung on the cross, speaking three times in fulfillment of the Psalms (Matt. 27:46; Luke 23:46; John 19:28).

So the *examples* of the New Testament – possibly excepting those found in Revelation – don't really give us warrant to sing anything other than Psalms.

However, those examples from Revelation and one command, repeated twice, *might* justify our use of singing hymns.

The Real Question: Why Hymns?

To recap: In the section above, we reviewed the Old Testament commands and examples concerning the Church's song. For Israel prior to Christ's birth, the songs of worship comprised inspired songs exclusively. Just as Israel gathered to *read* the Word God sent, so too did they lift their voices to *sing* the songs He gave.

With the coming of Christ, some new songs appear to have been written, as seen in the songs of Luke 1 and 2.

However, those "songs" are a relatively weak basis for introducing man-made hymns to our worship. In the first place, they are divinely inspired – a characteristic of which "Amazing Grace" and "Trust and Obey" cannot boast. In the second place, none of the Greek verbs which indicate *singing* is found in those passages. Instead, we read that Mary, Zechariah, Simeon and the angels "spoke" these words – which doesn't reveal the *manner* in which they spoke.

Examples from the gospels and Acts show us men singing to worship God, but little is said about *what* they sang. Jesus and His disciples sang after the institution of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26) – but it's likely that they sang Psalms 113-118. Acts 16:25 shows us Paul and Silas "hymning" to God – but David's laments seem the most likely songs for Jewish men singing to God in the midst of distress.

Yet the New Testament does reveal a set of examples which clearly involves songs *not* from the Book of Psalms. These we find in four episodes from the Book of Revelation.

- In Rev. 5:9-10, the four living creatures around God's throne and the 24 elders "sang a new song" to express praise to Jesus, the Lamb.
- In Rev. 7:10, an uncountable multitude clothed in white "cried out in a loud voice" concerning the salvation God has accomplished.
- In Rev. 14:3, the 144,000 whom God has chosen "sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders.
- In Rev. 15:3-4, those who had conquered the beast and its image "sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb."

It is obvious that these songs were not Psalms. But it is less clear whether these are intended to be examples to guide our worship.

On one hand, these songs appear to answer the *promise* of the Psalms with a beautiful echo of *fulfillment*. Yet on the other hand, this is the worship of the Church *perfected* – which has received a fulfillment for which we still long.

At the very least, we see in these examples a demonstration that our praise shall not *forever* be restricted to the Book of Psalms. A time will come (if it is not now here) when God's people shall sing a *new* song – a song celebrating the *new thing* which God has accomplished in Christ!

Personally, I believe that these examples from Revelation should inform the Church's singing *today*. But I don't believe it on the basis of the examples alone, for the examples alone leave too many questions unanswered.

Instead, I believe the case for singing songs other than the Psalms rests on a command, stated twice in the New Testament.

In Eph. 5:19, we read: "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." Similarly, Col. 3:16 commands: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

These passages call God's people to bring worship into all of life, using songs to teach, admonish and encourage one another to praise God. In the process, we are commanded to use "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs."

Some commentators believe that these three categories together refer to the Book of Psalms, in which "psalm," "hymn," and "song" are used as headings for various Psalms. But that argument is a stretch. Why would the Lord use three words when one would do? And why is only one of the titles qualified "spiritual" – which indicating something *originating* by the Spirit – when *all* of the Psalms are from the Holy Spirit?

The most natural understanding of these three categories is that our singing is to include three kinds of songs: Psalms, from the collection in Scripture; hymns, including those which are newly written; and songs inspired by the Spirit. For the early Church, the last category could have included songs directly inspired for the occasion (cf. 1 Cor. 14:26) – but it certainly would include the singing of Scripture, such as the songs of Mary or Zechariah.

In the light of this command, we can see how proper it is to anticipate the glories of heaven by singing the songs of Revelation. Likewise, we can confess what God has done in Christ by singing other passages of Scripture – or by singing songs written by mere men, which reflect the truths of Scripture.

But which should take priority?

No collection of songs can match the Psalms for beauty of expression, depth of emotion, and breadth of purpose. Nor can any other songs boast such widespread acceptance by the Church through the centuries. Scripture calls us to sing no other group of songs so clearly and vigorously.

It pleases the Lord when we sing these Psalms He has given us.

By all means, we should sing songs drawn from other portions of the Bible, as well as hymns written by men of our own age. Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19 encourage us to do just that, and to do so with joy.

But let us give priority to the Psalms which Christ Himself sang, which the Church has sung vigorously from the time of David down to our own day. Let us lift with joyful hearts the songs of David and Asaph, which Scripture so clearly and consistently commands us to use.

And let us thank the Lord for preserving such a marvelous collection of songs for declaring His praise!