

# The Psalms As Christian Worship

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## INTRODUCTION

The Psalms are the great hymnbook of the Bible, and have been at the heart of Jewish and Christian worship from the earliest times.<sup>1</sup> As such, they have persevered through centuries of Jewish history, the coming of the Messiah in Christ, the birth of the early church, the division of the Eastern and Western churches, and the reformation of the Western church. In more recent times, the usage of the Psalms has been on the decline, but there are efforts being made to recover their rightful place in contemporary worship. To be sure, the Psalms exist to be studied and preached, but are also intended to be read, sung, and prayed. They are wonderful teachers, but beyond informing worshipers about God, they transform worshipers and help to enact relationships with God.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike any other songbook, the Psalms are legitimized by the fact that they are actually Scripture. They are God's songs, inspired by the Holy Spirit and passed down from generation to generation. This puts them in a category all their own. The Psalms can shape the prayer lives of those who pray them,<sup>3</sup> acting as partners in the prayers

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<sup>1</sup> N T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York, NY: HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 1.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Reggie M. Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 27.

themselves.<sup>4</sup> With all of this in mind, it stands to reason that having access to such a resource in worship comes with great responsibility. As Margot E. Fassler puts it, “To have a canonical songbook of this complexity and antiquity is a priceless gift, and the stewardship of this gift belongs particularly to musicians.”<sup>5</sup> At times this gift has been stewarded well, but at the present it seems as if it is being neglected in many local churches. Why is this so? How did this happen? When did the Psalms become expendable? Can they be recovered in contemporary worship?

As these (and other) questions are answered, the truth remains that no matter the style or type of congregation, all of Christendom has much to learn from the Psalms.<sup>6</sup> The challenge for each local body of believers is to select, use, present, pray, read, and sing the Psalms in ways that are cohesive with the indigenous culture of the worshipping community.

#### THE PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Colossians 3:16, NIV).

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, A Pace Book (Winona, MN: Saint Mary, 1982), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Margot E. Fassler, “Psalmody and the Medieval Cantor: Ancient Models in the Service of Modern Praxis,” in “Musicians for the Churches: Reflections on Vocation and Formation,” ed. Margot E. Fassler, *Yale Studies in Sacred Music* (2001): 3.

<sup>6</sup> John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 47.

Paul was not afraid to use his epistles to instruct the churches to sing the psalms (1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 5:19, and Colossians 3:16). James also instructs his readers to sing Psalms (James 5:13), and the New Testament is full of references to the Psalms (indicating how familiar the writers were with the Psalm texts). In Acts 4, Psalm 146 is subtly referenced in verse 24 before Psalm 2:1-2 is quoted in verses 25-26.<sup>7</sup> This example shows the underlying influence of the Psalms (in the way Luke alludes to Psalm 146) and the continued use of the Psalms themselves (in the way he quotes Psalm 2). The book of Hebrews also makes a strong case for the regularity with which the Psalms were used in the worship of the New Testament era (Hebrews 1:5-13; 2:5-10,12,13; 3:7-4:7; 5:1-7). This illustrates what common sense already suggests: that psalmody was organically a part of early Christian worship because it naturally passed over from the synagogue to the early church.<sup>8</sup> This is true in large part because of the many Jewish converts to Christianity, and resulted in virtually no new forms of Christian music when the church was born.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that the Psalms were so familiar to Paul, James, Luke, and the writer of Hebrews makes a strong argument for how important they must have been to early Christians, but one important figure is missing from this list. As N.T. Wright so

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<sup>7</sup> Terry Johnson, "The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church" (lecture, Symposium on Congregational Psalm Singing, Erskine Seminary, February 26-27, 2009), accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.ipcsav.org/article/the-history-of-psalm-singing-in-the-christian-church/>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 1, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 232.

poignantly articulates, “Jesus himself quoted and referred to the Psalms in the manner of someone who had been accustomed to praying and pondering them from his earliest days.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus quoted the Psalms when dealing with the Pharisees (Matt 21:16, 22:44; Mark 12:36, 14:62; Luke 20:42-43), after he feeds the five thousand (John 6:31), when the Jews want to stone him (John 10:34), when he is hated (John 15:25), when talking about his betrayal (John 13:18), and while hanging on the cross (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34; Luke 23:46).<sup>11</sup> These instances (and others) show the fluidity of Jesus’ familiarity with the Psalms and gave precedence for the early church to continue studying, praying, and singing these ancient texts.

#### THE PSALMS IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

As the Christian communities of the New Testament era began to spread, they were singing the same Psalms they had sung as Jews, but now they were singing them differently. This transition took place because of the resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Learning to sing the Psalms through this new paradigm “formed the heart of early Christian spirituality and the taproot of early Christian mission.”<sup>12</sup> The Psalter had been the most important prayer book in Jewish worship, and it remained just as

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<sup>10</sup> N T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York, NY: HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 14.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffery Kranz, “Which Old Testament Book Did Jesus Quote Most?” *Biblia Blog*, April 30, 2014, accessed April 7, 2015, <http://blog.biblia.com/2014/04/which-old-testament-book-did-jesus-quote-most/>.

<sup>12</sup> N T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York, NY: HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 111.

important to Christians, shaping the vocabulary and perception of worship itself.<sup>13</sup> As the church extended into the world of Gentiles, Psalm-singing became a defining characteristic of its worship.<sup>14</sup> Psalms were used and understood as prophecy, teaching, hymns, praise, penitence, and intercession.<sup>15</sup>

With the growing diversity of the church came a growing diversity of worship practices. There is not one particular tradition of Psalm-singing in the early church,<sup>16</sup> but they were consistently present in worship. The church fathers from all over the expanding world of Christian faith demonstrate “a devotion to the Psalms, and particularly to the singing of the Psalms” in their writings.<sup>17</sup> Among others, Tertullian, Eusebius, Athanasius, Basil, Ambrose, Augustine, and Chrysostom all testified to the use of psalms in worship during the second to fifth centuries.<sup>18</sup> The Council of Laodicea (360 AD) forbade the church from using songs that were “uninspired” and from reading “uncanonical” books of Scripture. The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) confirmed these

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<sup>13</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 4, *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994), 309.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>15</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 130.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>17</sup> Terry Johnson, “The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church” (lecture, Symposium on Congregational Psalm Singing, Erskine Seminary, February 26-27, 2009), accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.ipcsav.org/article/the-history-of-psalm-singing-in-the-christian-church/>.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Westermeyer “Prospects of Psalmody in the American Church Today,” *The Hymn*, April 1, 1982, 74.

Laodicean canons, affirming that the “inspired” Psalter was in fact the primary (if not the only) songbook of the early church.<sup>19</sup>

From among these examples, Augustine writes (of the Psalms), “They are being sung in all the whole world and ‘there is none who can hide himself from your heat’ (Ps. 18:7).”<sup>20</sup> Presumably Augustine is only speaking of the “whole world” with which he is familiar, but there is another Christian report from the fourth century that validates this claim on a much broader scale. Egeria, a fourth century pilgrim (probably a Spanish nun), kept a record of worship practices in the various places she traveled to throughout the Holy Land. Her reports of recited Psalms, sung Psalms, hymns, antiphons, readings, and particular Psalm texts being “on the subject” for specific days (such as Good Friday), further attest to their widespread usage.<sup>21</sup> This is consistent with further scholarship that reports of an “unprecedented wave of enthusiasm for the singing of psalms that spread from east to west through the Christian population in the closing decades of the fourth century.”<sup>22</sup>

During the Patristic Period, congregations often sang the Psalms together (in various forms), but these practices did not last. During the Middle Ages, congregational

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<sup>19</sup> Terry Johnson, “The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church” (lecture, Symposium on Congregational Psalm Singing, Erskine Seminary, February 26-27, 2009), accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.ipcsav.org/article/the-history-of-psalm-singing-in-the-christian-church/>.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 160.

<sup>21</sup> *Egeria's Travels*, 3rd ed. (Warminster, WIL: Aris & Phillips, 1999), 46-47, 51, 66, 137, 157.

<sup>22</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 124-125.

singing began to erode as the psalm tunes became more difficult and the uniformed use of the Latin language made it difficult for common people to participate.<sup>23</sup> Through these years the Psalms maintained their prominent place in worship and dominated the music of both the monastery and the cathedral (albeit without widespread congregational participation). This led the reformers of the sixteenth century to seek the restoration of congregational psalmody (as they sought to return the liturgy to the people). Martin Luther desired that the Word of God would be available to all people in its book form as well as in the form of music. John Calvin believed that the Psalms were the songs of the Holy Spirit, and the singing of Psalms became one of the hallmarks of Reformed Protestant worship.<sup>24</sup>

As the Protestant movement grew and made its way across the Atlantic Ocean, the Psalms traveled with it. The first book published in North America was the Psalter, and “it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that hymns began to overtake the Psalms in popular use.”<sup>25</sup>

#### THE DECLINE OF THE PSALMS IN PROTESTANT WORSHIP

While John Calvin held the view that only the Psalms should be sung in worship, other reformers (like Martin Luther) promoted new hymns and songs (along with the

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<sup>23</sup> Terry Johnson, “The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church” (lecture, Symposium on Congregational Psalm Singing, Erskine Seminary, February 26-27, 2009), accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.ipcsav.org/article/the-history-of-psalm-singing-in-the-christian-church/>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

usage of the Psalms) and paved the way for the rise of hymns in the nineteenth century. From 1620-1800, metrical psalmody was the dominant music of the American church, and for about 65 years after that there was inclusion of both psalms and hymns. Through the closing decades of the nineteenth century and into the middle of the twentieth, Psalm-singing in the mainline churches reached its lowest point and virtually disappeared completely. This decline of psalmody in worship is unprecedented in worship history, and because of it, the church was at risk of losing the character (and voice) that had defined its worship for over 1800 years.<sup>26</sup>

Part of the movement away from the Psalms can be attributed to what Paul Westermeyer calls Protestantism's aversion to "Catholic sensibilities."<sup>27</sup> He notes that the traditional psalm tones have always been regarded as "Catholic," and that even as the tensions between Protestants and Catholics have begun to dissipate in the "ecumenical age," the association still makes them "suspect among many Protestants."<sup>28</sup> Regardless of these suspicions, the transition from the Psalms to songs written by human composers has caused much concern in Christian scholarship. The perception is that these new compositions are preferred to the divine compositions that have been paramount to Christian worship all along, and that people would "rather sing their own songs than the songs inspired by the Holy Spirit from God's Word."<sup>29</sup> N.T. Wright, noting that many

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Westermeyer, interviewed by author, St. Paul, MN, March 19, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Westermeyer "Prospects of Psalmody in the American Church Today," *The Hymn*, April 1, 1982, 76.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and J M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 79.

contemporary churches neglect the use of the Psalms, calls this a “great impoverishment” and goes so far as to write that this neglect is “crazy.” He then goes on to express major concern about current trends in Christian worship music and asserts, “To worship without the Psalms is to risk planting seeds that will never take root.”<sup>30</sup>

Another reason for the decline of the Psalms in worship can be attributed to simple confusion. Paul F. Bradshaw purports that although the Psalms have played a significant role in traditional Christian worship, many “modern worshipers are still uncertain about what it is they should be doing when saying or singing them in services.”<sup>31</sup> But where is this uncertainty coming from? Bradshaw believes it stems from a shift that took place in the mentality of the church when the usage of the Psalms became less focused on their content (from the fourth century onward). He posits that there is an important distinction to be made between the early church’s focus on the content of the Psalms and the later church’s focus on the action of singing them. Where the early church used the Psalms as prophecy, as teaching, and as hymns (based on their content), the later church used them as a vehicle for praise, penitence, and intercession (based on the intention of the singer). This reduced them to the “accepted currency for divine-human interchange: their value lay not in their intrinsic merit, but solely in the fact that God was thought to favor them.” This shift has resulted in the idea that the Psalms are almost interchangeable and has caused many who select psalm texts (even to this day)

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<sup>30</sup> N T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York, NY: HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 5, 165.

<sup>31</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 117.

to lack sensitivity regarding appropriate placement (especially in regard to the seasons of the Christian Year and the specific timing of their use in a given worship service).<sup>32</sup>

Whether this decline is attributed to an aversion to Catholicism, confusion regarding the appropriate way to use them, or simply the church's attempts at cultural relevance, the Psalms must regain their rightful place in Christian worship.

### THE RECOVERY OF THE PSALMS IN PROTESTANT WORSHIP

The argument in favor of regular Psalm-singing in worship seems obvious in light of the biblical support alone. Jesus' use of the Psalms (as mentioned above) and Paul's admonishment of the believers in Ephesus and Colossae to sing the Psalms (Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, respectively) should be enough to convince any well-intending believer of their importance. The current state of the contemporary church, however, proves otherwise. Regardless, even though many congregations "have set aside any Psalm-based music or liturgical texts," the Psalms still "remain one of the richest sources for inspiration, instruction, and use in worship."<sup>33</sup>

Singing the Psalms is biblical, historical, and emotionally satisfying. It provides the language to understand the ever-changing human experience, transforms those who sing them, and has a "certain gravity" because it "takes God so seriously."<sup>34</sup> Reggie Kidd

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 130-131.

<sup>33</sup> John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 117.

<sup>34</sup> Terry Johnson, "The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church" (lecture, Symposium on Congregational Psalm Singing, Erskine Seminary, February 26-27, 2009),

submits that “there is no better source for finding words to let us respond to who God is and what he does for and in us” (than the Psalms).<sup>35</sup> John Witvliet reminds the church that the Psalms (which have been a part of worship for three thousand years) still “cry out to be sung.”<sup>36</sup> There is much agreement among a wide range of denominations that psalmody is essential to Christian worship, and many people are contributing to their recovery.<sup>37</sup>

One of these contributors is N.T. Wright. Wright champions the transformational nature of the Psalms and argues for the value of making the Psalms habitual.<sup>38</sup> Another significant voice in this recovery effort is that of Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann notes that “the Psalms do not insist that we follow word for word or line by line” but rather they intend to give us “great freedom to engage our imagination toward a Holy God.”<sup>39</sup> In short, the Psalms inform (and transform) the Christian imagination. Wright and Brueggemann both point to what James K.A. Smith calls the development of a

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accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.ipcsav.org/article/the-history-of-psalm-singing-in-the-christian-church/>.

<sup>35</sup> Reggie M. Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 25.

<sup>36</sup> John D. Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 94.

<sup>37</sup> Margot E. Fassler, “Psalmody and the Medieval Cantor: Ancient Models in the Service of Modern Praxis,” in “Musicians for the Churches: Reflections on Vocation and Formation,” ed. Margot E. Fassler, *Yale Studies in Sacred Music* (2001): 9.

<sup>38</sup> N T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York, NY: HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 28, 157.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, A Pace Book (Winona, MN: Saint Mary, 1982), 35.

Christian “habitus,” or that “nexus of dispositions by which we constitute our world without rational deliberation or conscious awareness.”<sup>40</sup> If the Christian imagination is nurtured and developed by the Psalms, and if the essence of these Holy Spirit inspired songs permeates the foundation and growth of individual believers’ hearts, then each one can find their place within the larger story of God (leading to true worship).

## CONCLUSION

The Psalms are a dialogue,<sup>41</sup> just as worship itself is a dialogue. God instigates and sustains this dialogue in worship<sup>42</sup> just as he does in the Psalms. The Psalms beg us to respond and then give us the words to use in response. They illustrate for us the dialogical nature of worship and teach us how to participate in it (this is also represented in responsorial and antiphonal psalmody). There is no greater response to God than his own Word, for “we can only return what God has first given to us as utter gift.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 82.

<sup>41</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 1, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Star Song Publishing Group, 1993), 241.

<sup>42</sup> Constance M. Cherry, *The Worship Architect: A Blueprint For Designing Culturally Relevant and Biblically Faithful Services* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 45.

<sup>43</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 4, *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Star Song Publishing Group, 1994), 310.

The Psalms are designed not only *for* worship, but also *as* worship.<sup>44</sup> This puts them in a very unique category, as they are at once worship *and* the Word of God. The content of true Christian worship is rooted in the gospel and tells God's story,<sup>45</sup> but it does not stop there. The beauty of God's story is that it continues in the life of the Christian Church. As believers tell the story in worship, they become a part of the very story they tell. This is what it means to "do" God's story,<sup>46</sup> and there is no better place to start than with the Psalms! The Psalms *are* the story of God, and the Psalms *are* the worship of the Church.

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<sup>44</sup> N T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (New York, NY: HarperOne, An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 29.

<sup>45</sup> Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2008), 40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

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