

## Psalm Singing in the Church

### Introduction

This morning, we're going to begin a mini-series (of undetermined length) on the topic of singing the Psalms in the worship of the church. We all know about the "worship wars" in the church today. These wars not only have to do with the style of music, but also with the content of what we sing – with the kinds of words that we sing. It's a tragic thing that there should be such a thing as "worship wars" at all. But the reality is that most of these are ultimately driven by personal preferences rather than by a sincere desire to carefully shape every part of our worship in light of the word of God – to conform every aspect of our worship to the will of God. In this series, we're not going to bring an end to the worship wars in the church, but I believe that we will lay the foundation for seeing very, very clearly what the will of God is for our worship—and in particular, for our singing—as a church – not only for our singing of Psalms, but all other songs as well. We'll also be laying the foundation for understanding how the New Testament writers used and interpreted the Psalms. I'm praying that God will give to me, and to all of us, hearts that desire His will above all our personal preferences and that love His word above all the words and opinions of men.

This morning will really all be preparatory for next week. In fact, the whole goal of this morning is to leave us hanging at the end with a burning question – a question that we'll come back to next week and seek to answer. Before we come to God's Word—which, in the end, is our only authority—I want to begin with something I don't usually do, and that's with a short historical sketch of the singing of Psalms in the church beginning with the time immediately after the Apostles and continuing all the way down to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (so, that's 1800 years of church history). The goal of this sketch will also be to leave us with two pressing questions. When we're finished, I think we'll feel very much like we were living today in a very strange and unusual time.

### I. Singing the Psalms: Eighteen Centuries of Church History

#### The Early Church

“As Christianity spread in the early years, it seems always to have been accompanied by psalmody [the singing of psalms]. If one could have visited the congregations scattered around the Mediterranean during the second century, one would have found corporate and private worship living out of this book. **Psalmody was virtually a mark of the church.**” (Mays; quoted in Bushell, 248-49) One commentator writes: “The frequent quotations from and allusions to the psalms in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers demonstrate their **centrality in worship**, both in reading **and singing**” (Ross, 154). As we listen to the following description of a meeting of the early church, keep in mind that until the printing press, the vast majority of Christians never had their own copies of the Bible. “On the Lord's Day, services would typically include a reading from the Old Testament. Then a reading from the New Testament epistles would follow, and finally, a reading from a Gospel. Interspersed between these readings would be readings from the psalms. The psalms would be read or sung as the reader transitioned through the canon. The repetitive nature of these psalm readings made it easy for the people to learn them, and so congregants would join in the reading or singing—sometimes on a portion of a psalm

functioning as a refrain and sometimes repeating a psalm in its entirety.” (Blaising, 53; summarizing Holladay)

“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 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... Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340) [writes]: ‘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.’ Basil the Great (c. 330-379) comments... 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 market place’ as well. Augustine (343-430)... says, ‘[The Psalms] are sung through the whole world, and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.’” (Beeke, 44-45)

“Tertullian says that on the first day of the week after the reading of the Old Testament lessons ‘the hymns of David’ were sung” (Ross, 154). Jerome (d. 419), writing from the city of Bethlehem, describes the situation where he lived like this: “Wherever you turn, the labourer at the plough sings Alleluia; the toiling reaper beguiles his work with Psalms: the vine-dresser as he prunes the vine with his curved pruning-hook sings something of David’s. These are the songs of this province.” (quoted in Bushell, 249) Jerome says that he himself “learned the Psalms as a child, and continued to sing them in his old age” (Bushell, 250). “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’” (Beeke, 45). In a famous document from the fourth century we read: “The women, the children, and the humblest mechanics, could repeat all the Psalms of David; they chanted them at home and abroad: they made them the exercises of their piety and the refreshment of their minds. Thus they had answers ready to oppose temptation, and were always prepared to pray to God, and to praise him, in any circumstance, in a form of his [God’s] own inditing” (Apostolic Constitutions, 4<sup>th</sup> cent.; quoted in Bushell, 32). Chrysostom lived from 347-407 A.D., and he said this: “All Christians employ themselves in David’s Psalms more frequently than in any other part of the Old or New Testament... Many who know not a letter can say David’s Psalms by heart” (Chrysostom, 347-407 A.D.; quoted in Bushell, 32).

Summarizing all of this, the famous church historian, Philip Schaff, says this: “So far as we are able to gather from our sources, nothing, except the Psalms and New Testament hymns (such as the ‘Gloria in Excelsis,’ the ‘Magnificat,’ the ‘Nunc Dimittis,’ etc.), was as a rule sung in public worship before the fourth century” (Schaff; quoted in Bushell, 249). Schaff says in another place: “The Greek church of the first six centuries... long adhered almost exclusively to the Psalms of David, who, as Chrysostom, says, was first, middle, and last in the assemblies of the Christians: and [the Greek church] had, in opposition to heretical predilections, even a decided aversion to the public use of uninspired songs” (Schaff; quoted in Bushell, 250).

The first really solid evidence that we have for the writing of uninspired psalms and hymns for use in the church comes from the fourth and fifth centuries when false teachers wrote their own songs to express their heretical theology. So listen to what Augustine says in the fifth century about the Donatist false teachers: “The Donatists reproach us with our [reverent] chanting of **the divine songs of the prophets** in our churches, while they inflame their passions in their revels

by the singing of psalms of human composition... but when brethren are assembled in the church, why should not the time be devoted to singing of sacred [inspired] songs...? ... I do not see what could be a more excellent, useful and holy exercise for a Christian congregation” (Augustine, d. 430; quoted in Bushell, 252).

Since the heretics were writing heretical hymns, eventually, some of the orthodox attempted to counter these heretical hymns with new, uninspired hymns of their own, but this didn't always go over very well. In AD 364, the Council of Laodicea prohibited “the singing of uninspired hymns in the church, and the reading of uncanonical books of Scripture” (Beeke, 46). This decision was confirmed eighty-seven years later in AD 451 at the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon. More than 100 years later, in AD 561, the Council of Braga ruled, “Except the Psalms and [inspired] hymns of the Old and New Testaments, nothing of a poetical nature is to be sung in the church” (Beeke, 46). Twenty-six years later, in AD 587, “the second Council of Nicaea, decreed that no one was to be consecrated bishop unless he knew the Psalter thoroughly... The eighth Council of Toledo (A.D. 653) ordered that ‘no one henceforth shall be promoted to any ecclesiastical dignity who does not perfectly know the whole Psalter’” (Bushell, 253-254). That would certainly disqualify me and basically all other pastors today from the ministry! But this requirement only made sense. The Psalter was *the primary*—and for much of the time even the exclusive—songbook of the early church (at least the first 600 years of the church) – and also a guardian of sound doctrine.

### **The Middle Ages**

So what happened in the Middle ages? Just like the Scriptures were taken away from the “common” people, so also was the gift of singing. Congregational singing was replaced with professional choirs singing in a language that no one understood – and yet guess what they still sang? The Psalms. The Benedictine monks were required to chant their way through the Psalter once a week (Beeke, 46-47; cf. Bushell, 259-260). “Both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic service calendars... called for the cathedral choirs to sing through the entire Psalmbook, beginning to end, every week” (Lefebvre, 21). And still, even among the private people, there were those who sang the Psalms if they could. “Among the wealthy who could afford it, many purchased their own copies of the Psalms for private, devotional singing. King Alfred the Great (849-899) spent time singing Psalms every day and carried the Psalms with him for that purpose” (Lefebvre, 21). This was the state of affairs throughout the Middle Ages, until the dawning of the Reformation in the 1500's.

### **The Reformation and Following**

So what do you think happened when the Reformation came? Not only were the Scriptures returned to the people, but so also was congregational singing in the language of the people. And guess what the people sang? They sang the Psalms. “The Reformers gave music back to the people. They translated the Psalms into the vernacular... selected a simple melody wherever they could find it, and encouraged the people to sing” (Bushell, 260). In Germany, “[Martin] Luther taught the people to sing the biblical Psalms again, and he composed new hymns which he called, ‘German psalms for the people’” (Lefebvre, 22; cf. Bushell, 260). Martin Luther has been called both the “father of congregational hymnody” [A Mighty Fortress Is Our God], but he's

also known as the “inventor of the vernacular metrical Psalm” (Beeke, 48). Metrical Psalters [the Psalms metered and set to music] were produced in England, in John Knox’s Scotland, and in Calvin’s Geneva. “The Genevan psalms were translated into Spanish, Dutch, German, and English... twenty-four languages in all” (Lefebvre, 50).

One man writes of the experience of Christian exiles from France first arriving in Geneva: “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” (Benson; quoted in Beeke, 51). Another visitor to Geneva described his experience with congregational Psalm singing like this: “[When the congregation is assembled,] each one draws from his pocket a small book which contains the psalms with notes, and out of full hearts, in the native speech, the congregation sings before and after the sermon. Every one testifies to me how great the consolation and edification is derived from this custom” (Quoted in Lefebvre, 22-23). Someone else writes about the days when the Christians were being persecuted in Scotland: “‘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.’ To their psalms they turned... ‘to sustain their souls in hours of anxiety and peril,’ and from them they ‘drew the language of strength and consolation... 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.’ The Scottish metrical psalms... ‘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’” (Beeke; quoting Patrick).

In America, the very first English book to be published was a hymnbook of the Psalms. The Reformed and Presbyterian churches in America, along with the Congregationalists and the Baptists, and the Anglicans and Episcopalians were exclusively Psalm singing for the first 200 years of American church history (Beeke, 54). “[Until] 1800, [psalm singing] dominated the American church scene” (Beeke, 55). It wasn’t until 1865 that the Psalms finally disappeared from the worship of most, though not all, of the church.”

## **Two Questions**

How this could happen after eighteen centuries of committed and devoted Psalm singing in the church is a question we’ll come back to in the coming weeks, but for right now, listen to how one person concludes: “This eclipse of psalmody in the late nineteenth century is quite unprecedented. The Psalms... 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” (Beeke, 57). From the perspective of 2000 years of church history, it’s not the singing of Psalms in the church that’s strange, but the complete absence of Psalm singing that has to leave us wondering, “What happened?” We might be inclined to ask after all of this: “What’s wrong with us?”

But there's another question we could also ask: "How is it that we're to explain 1800 years of the church singing the Psalms? To answer this question, we have to go back to the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments. This morning, we'll only be looking at the Old.

## **II. The Psalms in the Old Testament**

To find out how the official collection of Psalms originally began, we have to go back to 1 Chronicles 25. David is completely immersed in the work of getting everything prepared for the building of the temple and for all of its service and worship. It's in the midst of all this that he begins the preparations for singing at the temple.

- **1 Chronicles 25:1–7** — *David* and the chiefs of the service also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun [all Psalm writers along with David], who **prophesied** with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals. The list of those who did the work and of their duties was:

Of the sons of Asaph: ... [the] sons of Asaph, under the direction of Asaph, who **prophesied under the direction of the king**.

Of Jeduthun, the sons of Jeduthun: ...who **prophesied** with the lyre in thanksgiving and praise to the LORD.

Of Heman, the sons of Heman: ...All these were the sons of Heman **the king's seer**... They were all under the direction of their father in the music in the house of the LORD with cymbals, harps, and lyres for the service of the house of God.

Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were **under the order of the king**. The number of them along with their brothers, who were trained in singing to the LORD, all who were skillful, was 288.

### **Divinely Inspired Songs**

There are at least two things that this very detailed Scripture is meant to emphasize as strongly as possible. The first is that all those who composed the songs for singing at the Temple were divinely inspired by God with the result that the songs themselves were also divinely inspired, infallible, and perfect. We're told at the beginning, in summary, that Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthan who wrote many of the Psalms and oversaw their production "**prophesied** with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals." Then we're told specifically that Asaph "**prophesied**," that Jeduthan "**prophesied** with the lyre in thanksgiving and praise to the LORD," and finally that Heman was "the king's *seer* [or, prophet]." It was obviously very important that all of the songs used in public worship at the temple must be divinely inspired. This was the first prerequisite for songs sung at the temple. And so we can see that one reason "the church has historically esteemed and treasured the Psalms [is] because they alone are inspired and inerrant hymns" (Lefebvre, 37).

That's saying something that I think we might easily take for granted! I am incessantly on the lookout for doctrinal error in our hymns. What I'm emphasizing here is the songs we sing together in corporate worship. These songs, especially, must meet the highest standard of truth and biblical faithfulness. But I would suggest that today, many Christians are content just so long as the song says sincere and "Christian sounding" things. This is an attitude not worthy of the glory of God. Some hymns we don't sing because they aren't in harmony with the Scriptures and

some hymns we revise. All of us, as we sing, should always be asking ourselves if what we're singing is true – if the songs we're singing are faithful to the Scriptures not only in their meaning, but in their spirit. But, of course, when God's people in the Old Testament sang from their hymnbook, they sang without question – with the complete assurance that all the words they were singing were actually given to them to sing by divine revelation. Athanasius wrote in the fourth century: “Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with persuasive phrases of the [uninspired], and do not let him attempt to recast or completely change the words... their expressions [are] superior to those we construct... [for it is] the Spirit who speaks [through the Psalms] in the saints... [to] render assistance to us” (quoted in Lefebvre, 37).

We have to admit that even if we allow for uninspired songs in our worship services (and we do), there has to be a categorical difference between inspired and uninspired songs. To deny that would be the same thing as to deny that there is a categorical difference between inspired Scripture and other uninspired religious writings. The songs for corporate worship at the temple were all divinely inspired songs. Israel's temple hymnbook was authored and authorized by God Himself. But there's one other exceedingly important thing that this passage in Chronicles emphasizes.

### **Songs Led by the King**

We know that David personally wrote only about half of the Psalms, but really all of the Psalms are Psalms of David – all of the Psalms are ultimately compositions of the king. How can that be? We're told in 1 Chronicles 25 that it was “*David* [who] set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun.” Then we're specifically told that Asaph “**prophesied under the direction of the king.**” And then we're told at the end that Asaph, Jeduthun, and Heman were all “**under the order of the king**” (cf. 1 Chron. 6:31-32). So why should Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, and ultimately all of the psalm writers who were composing songs for the temple worship be prophesying under the direction of the king? First of all, we remember that David himself was an inspired prophet.

- 2 Samuel 23:1–2 — These are the last words of David: The oracle of David, the son of Jesse, the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel: “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue.”

In the Bible, though many people wrote Psalms, there is only one “sweet psalmist of Israel” and that's David the king. When we think of kings today, we usually don't think of musicians and song writers, do we? But it wasn't at all uncommon in Israel for the leaders of the people to be both song writers and song leaders. In Exodus 15, after Israel passed through the Red Sea on dry ground it was Moses who led the people in singing:

- Exodus 15:1 — Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD...

The book of Revelation refers to this song as “the song of Moses” (15:3). In Deuteronomy the Lord Himself says to Moses:

- Deuteronomy 31:19, 44 (cf. 31:22) — Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths... [So] Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua the son of Nun.

See how Joshua, the man of war and future leader of Israel, is now also involved in singing and song leading (cf. Josh. 10:12-13)! In the book of Judges, we have Deborah and Barak composing and then singing a song, and most likely teaching it to the people and leading them in singing.

- Judges 5:1 — Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day...

One of the signs that Saul was to be Israel's first king was that he would prophesy in song:

- 1 Samuel 10:5-6 — As soon as you come to the city, you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre before them, prophesying. Then the Spirit of the LORD will rush upon you, and you will prophesy [in song] with them.

In the end, the song-writing and song-leading of leaders like Moses, and Joshua, and Deborah and Barak, and Saul was all just a preparation for the song-writing and song-leading of King David. But what does the king have to do with singing? When David wanted to build God a house, God made a covenant with David, saying that He would build David a house, and then He said:

- 1 Chronicles 17:11-14 — When your days are fulfilled to walk with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. **He shall build a house for me**, and I will establish his throne forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from him who was before you, but **I will confirm him in my house** and in my kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever.

In Israel, the king's role wasn't just political – it was primarily religious and sacred. Because of God's covenant with him, David understood that it was his role as the king to plan for the building of the temple (1 Chron. 22; under divine inspiration – 1 Chron. 28:19), it was his role as king to organize all the temple worship (1 Chron. 23-24), **and it was his role as the king to oversee the writing and editing of a prophetic and inspired hymnal containing all the songs for worship in the temple** (1 Chron. 25). This was the unique and God-ordained responsibility and calling of the king in Israel! So, for example, even though all of the Psalms are intended for all of God's people to sing, many of them could really only be sung *along with* the king or as an extension of *his* voice. We still feel this today as we read the Psalms. In so far as the people were identified with the king and represented in the king, the king's songs could become their songs and the king's words their words. And, so, many of the Psalms ultimately picture the king as the one leading the people in worship. The king leads the people in singing from their inspired hymnal as their royal song-leader. Many of the Psalms are sung with the king, to the king, or about the king. But all of the Psalms are sung ultimately under the king's direct authority and oversight. When David died, the responsibility for overseeing the production of inspired psalms passed to his son Solomon, of whom we read:

- 1 Kings 4:32 — He... spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005.

Solomon didn't compose all of his songs for temple worship, but he did compose at least two (Ps. 72, 127), and very likely more. Other psalms were written by other kings following Solomon as well as by those song-writers who still prophesied under their direction (the sons of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun among others; cf. Ezra 3:10-11). In Isaiah 38, King Hezekiah composed a psalm\* and ended it with these words:

- Isaiah 38:20 — The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD.

Why would the people sing Hezekiah's songs? Because in the king the people were all represented; and also because we know it was the king's role to oversee the production of inspired and prophetic songs for the people to sing in public worship. One of the marks of the great revivals under Hezekiah and Josiah is that the kings once again took up their responsibility to oversee the singing of psalms at the temple (2 Chron. 29:25-26, 30; 35:15-16; cf. 2 Chron. 23:18; Ezra 3:10-11; Neh. 12:45-46).

We could say that all of the Psalms are ultimately the Psalms of the king because they're either composed by a Davidic king, or composed under the oversight of a Davidic king, or included in the Psalter at the end of the day under the authority of the Davidic king or looking forward longingly to the coming of the Davidic king. So, as one writer says: "In biblical worship [at least in the OT], it is the king who leads the congregation into worship, and it is the king's own [prophetic and inspired] songs that the congregation sings with him" – as it were, "in the king's voice" (Lefebvre, 42).

## Conclusion

Are you beginning to get a feel, now, for why the reading and singing of the Psalms might have been so central in the worship of the New Testament Church for more than 1800 years? Who is Jesus? He's the King, the Messiah – the Son of David and the ultimate fulfillment of His line. So what might this tell us about the relationship between our Lord Jesus Christ and the Psalms? We know that Jesus never gave to the church a new prophetic and inspired hymnal. He composed no new songs or hymns that we're aware of, and we don't know of any prophetic or inspired songs composed under His direction. After all that we've seen, isn't this *most* surprising? Shouldn't this tell us that maybe we're missing something? Why would this be? Well, maybe—just *maybe*—the Psalms were already His songs, and more ultimately His songs than any king that came before Him – even King David himself. Maybe the work of this Davidic King was to make all of the Psalms "new" so that as we sing them now with Christ our King and under His

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\* Nor would a king so zealous for the organization and enrichment of the temple-worship (compare Isaiah 38:20) be indifferent to its body of sacred song. It seems certain that his was, in all the nation's history, the greatest single agency in compiling and adapting the older Davidic Psalms, and in the composition of new ones. Perhaps this union of collecting and creative work in psalmody is referred to in the mention of "the words of David, and of Asaph the seer" (2 Chronicles 29:30). To Hezekiah himself is attributed one "writing" which is virtually a psalm, Isaiah 38:20. (ISBE)



direction, they finally become what they were ultimately written to be – the songs of Christ and His New Covenant people, the church. *If* that is so and *how* that could be remains to be seen, but I hope your appetite has been whetted to come back next week.

May God give us always a hunger for His good, and perfect, and acceptable will above all else in this world.