**A Case for Singing Psalms in Public Worship (Part 1)**

***Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works***

***Psalm 105:2***

Spring 2022

OCCASIONAL NOTES

S t r a n g e r s R e s t E v a n g e l i c a l C h u r c h

**Background**

In September 2021, Strangers Rest switched to singing exclusively from the Psalms and I would like to explain why we have made this change. It all started at the Banner of Truth Conference in 2015 which I was introduced to by a local pastor, Henry Dixon, from Poplar Baptist Church. Up until that time I had only ever sung, Psalm 23, the 100th Psalm (All People that on Earth do Dwell) and Psalm 40 (I waited for the Lord my God). I was never particularly conscious that we were singing God’s Word but when I experienced the singing of the Psalms during that conference I was quite amazed by the glory of it. Here were over 250 men singing God’s praises from His Word and it touched my soul beyond anything I had previously experienced. Coming from a Pentecostal background this was particularly significant. Previously I had considered singing hymns from Redemption Hymnal to have been the highpoint of my spiritual experience but now I had found something altogether of a different sphere. When we returned I decided to introduce the singing of Psalms to our worship. We started by singing just one Psalm per service but it did not take long before we were singing two per service and also at other times as well. I was drawn to the Psalms in an extraordinary way which I could not really understand. When it came to singing hymns from the hymnbook I did

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so with increasing reluctance.

I came increasingly to identify with John Calvin who wrote in his 1542 Service Book: “What Augustine says is true, namely that no one can sing anything worthy of God which he has not received from him. Therefore after we have carefully searched everywhere, we shall not find better or more appropriate songs to sing inspired by the Spirit.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

Then in the summer of 2021 I travelled to Scotland and attended the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Glasgow and the Free Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh on the Lord’s Day. Afterwards I attended the School of Theology organised by the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing). I had a number of conversations about Psalmody Only and I read the arguments for it with renewed focus. I was impressed that Kenneth Stewart, whose preaching I greatly admire, considered the issue so serious that he was willing to, and indeed did, leave the Free Church of Scotland over their decision to abandon exclusive Psalmody in November 2010. I wondered what it was that made him take the issue so seriously and whether I should as well.

**Hymn Book of the Church**

The strongest argument it seems to me is that the Book of Psalms is the hymn book of the Bible. It contains Psalms written, some (although by no means all) think by Adam (Psalm 92), Moses (Psalm 90), David who wrote the majority (73 Psalms contain the heading “A Psalm of David”), Solomon, who is believed to have written Psalm 72 and Psalm 127, Psalm 73 bt Asaph (one of David’s musicians), the sons of Korah (Psalm 84). Significantly a number of Psalms were written after the Babylonian exile including (Psalms 126 and 129, thought to be by Ezra, and Psalm 137). We know that the compilation of the Psalms in the Old Testament is the same as ours today because Paul quotes from the second Psalm in Acts 13:33 (“as it is written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee”). Now this compilation appears to have been completed in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra (see Nehemiah 12:24, 45-6). That being the case, who could this book of Psalms be intended for if not the New Testament Church?

That this hymn book was written for the church seems to be borne out by Isaiah 52:8 where we read: “Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion”. This was foretelling the time the Lord’s messenger would bring “good tidings, that publisheth peace: that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth” (v7). In Romans 10:15, Paul interprets this as the gospel period. So the duty to sing included the Gentiles as we also see from Psalm 100:1-2:- “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord all ye Lands. Come before his presence with singing.”

Now *what* are the Gentiles to sing? The answer is in Psalm 95 and Hebrews 4. In verses 1-2 the Psalmist exhorts as follows:- “O come, let us sing unto the Lord. Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us make a joyful noise unto him with Psalms.” The Psalmist speaks here about the duties of the Sabbath. First he mentions thanksgiving in singing of Psalms with a loud voice (and the reasons for it) in verse 1-5. This is followed by solemn prayer and the reasons for it in verses 6-7. This is followed by faithful attention to preaching on that day, not hardening their hearts against it, through unbelief (verses 7-8) so the end of the Psalm says, “Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts,” (Psalm 95:7,8 and 11). The writer to the Hebrews (who I assume to be Paul) applies this day not to the seventh day of rest from the creation, nor of the day of rest, where Joshua gave the people inheritance and rest in the Old Testament (Hebrews 4:3-9). The Apostle implies here another Sabbath, or day of rest, which is in the days of the Gospel. This day of rest is the day where the Lord Jesus entered into his rest which is the Lord’s Day.

David foretold in Psalm 95 that it should be celebrated with solemn prayer, preaching and hearing the word, and singing of Psalms, and that with a joyful noise.[[2]](#footnote-3) It is my observation that singing Psalms on the Lord’s Day has become a very wonderful and enriching addition to the Lord’s Day and truly has made it a delight (Isaiah 58:13).

What is it then that makes the singing of Psalms so special? The simple answer is that the Lord Jesus sang those songs in the midst of the congregation and by his Spirit continues to – see Psalm 22:22:- “I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee.” Let us note the Baptist Commentator, John Gill, on this verse:-”it seems best to understand this of the church of God, particularly among the Gentiles, under the Gospel dispensation, where Christ in his members sings the praise of electing redeeming and calling grace.” Gill goes on to refer to Psalm 18:49 (therefore will I give thanks unto thee, O Lord, among the heathen, and sing praises unto thy name) and compares that scripture with Romans 15:9 (And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name). Gill goes on, “This is a proof of singing of psalms and hymns in Gospel churches, and of its being a duty to be publicly performed by the members of them, who may expect the presence of Christ in the midst of his church, seeing he here promises to be there: these words are applied to Christ in Hebrews 2:12 (v9 “but we see Jesus….v12 ”saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.”

**John Gill and Exclusive Psalmody**

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Description automatically generatedIt may surprise the reader to discover that John Gill was an advocate of exclusive psalmody which is particularly interesting since he followed Benjamin Keach at the church at Horse-lie-down in Southwark. This congregation eventually moved to the Metropolitan Tabernacle in Elephant and Castle. Benjamin Keach had been the minister there for 36 years (1668-1704) and promoted the introduction of Hymn singing in the Baptist Churches. According to Joel Beeke he introduced hymns, in addition to psalms and paraphrases. He began by allowing one hymn after each administration of the Lord’s Supper, then moved to one hymn per Sabbath. Eventually he became “a pioneer of congregational hymn singing”. It was partly his influence that led to the 1689 Baptist Confession to include “Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” for worship, broadening the Westminster Confession’s exclusive psalmody[[3]](#footnote-4) (depending of course on the correct interpretation of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs which we shall examine shortly).

One wonders whether the congregation was still singing hymns when John Gill took over the pastorate in 1719 but it shows that the controversy was one with which he must have had to engage. Indeed, a copy of a sermon he gave on 25th December 1733 is still available.[[4]](#footnote-5) The title is “A Discourse on Singing of Psalms as a part of Divine Worship” and it was preached to a society of young men who carried on an exercise of prayer on the Lord’s Day morning at Horse-Lie-Down. It would also appear, by the date, that John Gill did not observe the festival of Christmas.

**The Meaning of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs**

John Gill additionally made his position clear in his verse-by-verse Bible commentary on Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 where Paul exhorts the singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. In Ephesians 5:18-19, Paul exhorted the Ephesian Church to be filled with the Holy Spirit; “speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” Having interpreted “Psalms” to be the Psalms of David and others in the Book of Psalms John Gill went on to define “hymns” “not such as are made by good men, without the inspiration of the Spirit of God; since they are placed between psalms and spiritual songs, made by men inspired by the Holy Ghost; and are put upon a level with them, and to be sung along with them, to the edification of churches; but these are only another name for the Book of Psalms, the running title of which may as well be the Book of Hymns …; and by “spiritual songs” are meant the same Psalms of David, Asaph etc. and the titles of many of them are songs, and sometimes a psalm and song, and song and psalm, a song of degrees; together with all other scriptural songs, written by inspired men; and which are called “spiritual”, because they are indited by the Spirit of God, consist of spiritual matter, and are designed for spiritual edification...”

The word humnos (hymns) appears 17 times in the Septuagint and in 13 of those it appears in the Book of Psalms. In five or six cases it appears in the titles of the Psalms as the translation of the Hebrew Neginoth or nginah. Psalmos occurs 67 times in the titles to the Psalms. In most cases it is the translation of the Hebrew *mismor*, but in a few cases it translates other Hebrew words. Psalmos means simply “song of praise”. The word *ode* appears 36 times in the titles of Psalms. Interestingly, Psalm 67 contains all three words in the title: “To the chief Musician on *Neginoth* (or humnos), A *Psalm* or *Song*.”[[5]](#footnote-6)

It is also worth remembering that Paul used the Septuagint (the Old Testament in Greek) which uses the same Greek words Paul used in Ephesians and Colossians to translate psalms, hymns and songs within the Psalms themselves.

It is questioned by some, why Paul would use three words to mean the same thing (ie psalms)but that is not uncommon in scripture. We find scripture using triplets for emphasis in the following six other places:

1. Genesis 26:5:- “Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”
2. 1 Kings 6:12:- “Concerning this house which thou art in building, if thou wilt walk in my statutes, and execute my judgments, and keep all my commandments to walk in them”; the words statutes, judgments and commandments are three interchangeable words all meaning God’s law;
3. Daniel 9:24:- “Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end to sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity...” Here Daniel uses three expressions which mean the same thing in relation to our redemption;
4. Matthew 22:37:- “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind”.
5. Acts 2:22:- “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know.” Miracles, wonders and signs are interchangeable words for God’s supernatural signs;
6. 1 Timothy 2:1:- “I exhort therefore, that, first of all supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving thanks, be made for all men.” The words supplications, prayers and intercessions are interchangeable;

It is worth adding that the word spiritual comes at the end of the phrase containing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and could properly be applied to all three terms. Spiritual means given by God. It is the same word used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:3:- “And did all eat of the same spiritual meat, and drink of the same spiritual drink”. In other words, the songs are to be given by God. Some contend that the meaning is “such as were composed by spiritual men, and moved in the sphere of spiritual things”, As Richard Trench contends (Synonyms, LXXVIII)[[6]](#footnote-7). However, I think the preferred meaning is as John Murray states, quoting Meyer’s commentary on the Hebrews, “proceeding from the Holy Spirit”. In the context of Ephesians 5:19 the word spiritual would then mean “indited by the Spirit”, as in 1 Corinthians 2:13 which speaks of words inspired by the Spirit and taught by the Spirit (Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual).

It is interesting to note that spiritual gifts did not include the gift of writing hymns although in 1 Corinthians 14:26, bringing a psalm, is listed as one of the gifts that may be brought by members of the congregation in a service. I agree with Malcolm Watts on the correct interpretation of this verse when he wrote: “It is possible that this was a song composed under the extraordinary influence of the Holy Spirit (and therefore immediately inspired), but it is more likely that believers were choosing their preferences from the canonical psalms. There is no evidence for charismatic songs in the New Testament (Luke 1 and 2 contain only prophecies that were spoken, not sung)… Furthermore, the word *psalm*, in the New Testament, seems always to indicate a song from the book of Psalms (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). The church of the first century, then, certainly appears to have used the Psalter for its book of praise.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

It has been suggested that Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 are not addressing public worship. In other words if the apostolically enjoined media or materials of song in the more generic exercises of worship are psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs, then surely nothing inferior to psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs would be enjoined for use in the more specific exercises of worship in the assemblies of the church. If psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs are the limits of the materials of song in praise of God in less formal acts of worship, how much more are they the limits in more formal acts of worship.

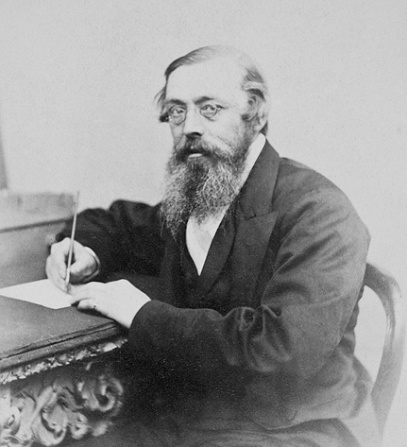
There is one place in the New Testament where we find the Lord Jesus singing. It is after the Passover before the Lord Jesus and his disciples went out to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30). It is accepted by most commentators that the Lord Jesus sung Psalm 118 with his disciples. Yet the Greek word used is humneo meaning to sing a hymn. This also supports the interchangeable nature of the word hymn and psalm in the New Testament.

While we are on the subject of the New Testament, it is worth noting that there is an express direction to sing Psalms in James 5:13:- “Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms.”

The day I introduced exclusive psalmody to Strangers Rest (19th September 2021), Peter Masters preached against exclusive psalmody in his sermon on Ephesians 5:19. It was an unexpected providence and certainly, if nothing else, it has caused me to test my position carefully for I, like others, hold Dr Masters in high regard. Dr Masters took his interpretation from contemporary Greek literature where the word hymns and spiritual songs were, he contended, frequently used words and they referred to various kinds of composition. He went on to conclude that the phrase Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs “most probably” means: Psalms of the Old Testament; hymns of human composition but directed to God in praise of him. He added that even the heathen in those days acknowledged this. He then said that spiritual songs were words of human composition about any spiritual theme.

However, I suggest it is unlikely that Paul would have mixed Psalms of divine composition with hymns and songs of merely human composition. Kenneth Stewart made the point by referring to 343AD, the Council of Laodicea which forbade the ‘singing of uninspired hymns in church’ as well as the ‘reading of the uncanonical books of scripture’. He noted the logic applied by the Council – “to read a book of human composition, however good it may be, in place of scripture in worship is the same kind of error as to sing a song of human composition in place of scripture in the same act of worship!”[[8]](#footnote-9)

In the same book[[9]](#footnote-10), John Keddie made this point, “the singing of hymns of merely human composition – uninspired hymns – will tend to produce a piety no deeper than that of the human author. The piety will reflect his grasp of the truth. And that may be good as far as it goes. However Biblical it may be, it will still fall short of the piety and devotion reflected in the Psalms. For the Psalmists experienced the direct and powerful intervention of God’s Spirit in their lives. This ensured that they were the possessors of the reality and power of God’s truth in the fullest sense. As a result, the type of piety flowing from a use of the Psalms in worship will be a devotion based entirely on the knowledge and faith, and the reality and power, of the truth of God.”

Hugh Martin (1822-1885), a Free Church of Scotland Minister said this in 1871[[10]](#footnote-11), “You may think your hymns are in accordance with His Word, but the Psalms are His very Word itself. You can sing them in faith untainted with doubt, in the full assurance of faith, unshackled from the spirit of criticism which man’s word continually provokes, yea, demands – in that faith which cometh by hearing, when the hearing is the hearing of the Word of God, and which goeth forth in songs of faith, when the songs are the songs of the Spirit of God.”

Moving on, it sets a questionable precedent to interpret the meaning of hymns and spiritual songs primarily from contemporary secular literature when, comparing scripture with scripture we find a different meaning as I have already explained. It is also worth referring to Colossians 3:16 (where Paul exhorts the singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs) because that verse begins with the words “Let the words of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom;” before going on “teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”. At the time that Paul was writing there was no New Testament canon and so the words of Christ really belonged to the Old Testament. Christ, by His Spirit, is the author of them and the speaker in many of them, as Malcolm Watts points out, referring to:

1. 1 Peter 1:10-11:- “Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.” cf. 1 Peter 3:18:- “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit”;
2. Psalm 2:7:- “I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.”
3. Psalm 22:1:- “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring”;
4. Psalm 40:7:- “Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me” (interpreted in Hebrews 10:5 as being Christ’s incarnation).

Having demonstrated that Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in the Old Testament are words that appear in the titles of the psalms themselves, we need to consider the use of these words in the New Testament. Psalmos occurs 7 times in the New Testament. It occurs twice in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. It also occurs in the following four verses:

1. 1 Corinthians 14:26:- How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying: I have already mentioned that this is likely to refer to a Psalm of David that was on the heart of one of the saints.
2. Luke 20:42:- And David himself saith in the book of Psalms, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand;
3. Acts 1:20:- For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick let another take.
4. Luke 24:44:- And he said unto them, these are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, **and in the psalms,** concerning me.) Acts 13:33 refers to the second Psalm.

None of these references are to uninspired songs of human composition.

The word humnos (hymn) occurs twice in the New Testament (in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16). The verb humneo (to hymn) occurs four times:-

1. Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26:- And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives;
2. Acts 16:25:- And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them; and
3. Hebrews 2:12:- Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.

As already intimated the gospel passages are generally accepted to refer to what is called the Hallel (Psalms 113-118) – both referring to the Lord Jesus singing with his disciples after the Last Supper following the Passover. Acts 16:25 refers to Paul and Silas singing in prison. Whatever they were singing they must have known by heart. Professor William Binnie (1823-1886), a Free Church of Scotland Minister, who was Professor of Systematic Theology to the [Reformed Presbytery Synod](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformed_Presbyterian_Church_of_Scotland) is worth quoting[[11]](#footnote-12): “The explanation doubtless is ‘that they had been taught to say and sing the Psalms in their childhood; and that their habitual attendance in the Synagogue and participation in its services had prevented the early familiarity with ‘the praises of Israel’ from being lost or impaired.” Malcolm Watts made the point that “since they would have been in pitch darkness and therefore wholly reliant upon their memories, it is almost certain that what they sang was what they had learned from childhood: the Psalms of David.”[[12]](#footnote-13)

Hebrews 2:12 is a quote from Psalm 22:23. None of these references support the interpretation that they are uninspired songs.

The word ode (song) occurs 5 times in the New Testament apart from Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16). All the references are in Revelation (5:9; 14:3 (x2); and 15:3) (x2). Let us set them out:

1. Revelation 5:9:- “They sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by the blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.”
2. Revelation 14:3:- “And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth.”
3. Revelation 15:3:- “And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints.”

It is important to note that each of these references is to an inspired song since these are the songs of the victorious saints in heaven. They cannot be said to the uninspired words of men since they are sung in heaven. It is said by some that we too are called to sing “Worthy is the Lamb”. Yet when we look at the passage the words are being sung by the twenty four elders around the throne and as they sing they all carry a harp and a vessel with incense containing the prayers of the saints. In Revelation 7:10-12 a great multitude was worshipping, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands. If our singing is to be done as it is in heaven then it follows that we should be worshipping in white robes, carrying harps, a vessel of incense and waving palm branches which of course no one suggests we should. When it comes to Revelation 14:3 we should note that the song sung by the 144,000 is a song that only the 144,000 redeemed from the earth can sing. The songs of Revelation are sung by the church triumphant whereas we are the church militant. I would suggest that in these songs we are being shown heavenly scenes which do not shed any more light on what we are to sing here on earth in the church militant.

**New Testament Worship**

Moving onto another point. In the New Testament worship has been greatly simplified. In John 4:24 the Lord Jesus told the Samaritan woman, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.” True spiritual worship will then be using the songs that the Lord has given to His people to sing, namely the Book of Psalms because these and only these are written by the Holy Spirit. It may be suggested that there are other inspired songs that were sung in the Old Testament but if there were they are no longer available today because the Holy Spirit saw fit not to include them in the biblical Psalter. It might also be suggested, that if there were other inspired songs sung which were not in the canon of scripture that in fact those not included were not the Word of God, but we must be careful here. At the end of the Gospel of John, John wrote: “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written.” Every word that the Lord Jesus spoke was divinely inspired and every act was directed by His Father. Yet we have only a very small portion recorded in scripture, the canon of which is closed (Revelation 22:18). There will not be further biblical revelation this side of the Lord’s Second Coming so we will never be given further hymns written by the Holy Spirit to sing.

Let us also be clear that the reason the Psalms are contained in the canon of scripture is not to make them inspired by the Holy Spirit but because they were inspired by the Holy Spirit as David himself testified in 2 Samuel 32:1-2:- “The sweet psalmist of Israel said, The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue”. As John Gill wrote, “The psalms and songs he composed were not the fruits of his own genius, but were written by him under the inspiration of the Spirit of God … not only the matter of his psalms was indited by the Spirit of God, and suggested to his mind; but the very words in which they are delivered were given to him...”

**Singing the Name of Jesus**

One of the objections raised by Peter Masters in his sermon on Ephesians 5:19, is that limiting singing to the Psalms means you can never sing the name of Jesus. I remember another pastor I also greatly respect saying to me that he would miss singing, “Jesus, the Name High Over all”.

It is certainly true that we cannot in the Psalms sing the name Jesus but perhaps we need to pause and reflect what we mean by that. I dare to suggest that we should be less concerned with singing the Name of Jesus than singing accurately about him and to him. After all there are many false Jesus’ which the Bible warns us against in 2 Corinthians 11:4:- “For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we have not preached...” Merely singing the Name of Jesus is no guarantee that we are worshipping Him as we ought. It has always troubled me when singing hymns written by men with doctrinal aberrations. A hymn that I took to when I was a student at university was “And Can it be” by Charles Wesley. I was so taken by the hymn that I over-sang it and found it was never the same again. I have not had this experience with Psalms, even Psalm 23, which I have sung far more times than any other psalm. In addition, “And Can it be” contains the doctrinally erroneous line, “Emptied himself of all but love”. This is not true. The Lord Jesus did not divest himself of any of his divine attributes. Some hymn books have admittedly changed the words to “Emptied himself and came in love.” Then we have hymns written by such men as Bernard of Clairvaux who promoted the crusades and is likely not to have believed in the doctrines of grace. Isaac Watts was a prolific hymn writer and yet he was known to have held heterodox beliefs concerning the Trinity. Then there is the hymn, “Crown Him with many Crowns” by Matthew Bridges. In the words of William Mackay, writing in “Songs of the Spirit” on page 85, “you have a vain intrusion into things unseen, with Christ walking in a flowery pagan meadow and hailed as the fruit of the ‘Mystic Rose’, - the Virgin Mary, - the Virgin Mary, and the writers stage-managing the heavenly attendants.”

I confess that I felt uneasy singing hymns which came from wells that did not produce the cleanest and clearest of waters. Yet when it comes to singing the Psalms we sing the pure word of God – songs composed by the Lord Jesus himself for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Revelation 19:10).

Consider, for a moment, Psalm 138:2:- “I will worship towards thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.” In the pages of Holy Scripture we find that God has magnified his word, who is none other than the uncreated word, the Lord Jesus. As Robert Hawker commented:- “Surely Jehovah hath made his dear, and ever-blessed Son most glorious above all the other discoveries of his love! Oh! How sweet to trace Christ through whatever part of the sacred volume!” If we want to engage in the purest worship of the Son of God then we must sing psalms. It is here, and here alone, that the Lord Jesus is magnified above all his name.

Before leaving this objection let me suggest that we do indeed sing the name of Jesus in the Psalms when we remember that Jesus means Saviour (In Matthew 1:21 the Angel appeared to Joseph and told him “thou shalt call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins.”). *Yeshua* can also be translated, ‘rescue’, ‘welfare’ and victory.[[13]](#footnote-14)According to Trevor Fentiman we find *Yeshua* some 43 times in the Psalter. He also pointed out that the Greek word for Christ (or Messiah) crops up ten times in the Psalms.

**Sufficiency of the Psalms**

In his sermon on Ephesians 5:19, Peter Masters objected that by singing exclusively from the Psalms you would never sing about the blood, conversion, the priesthood of all believers and the return of Christ and that we would reign with Christ for all eternity. He insisted that we do need to sing in Christian terms.

I respectfully respond that while we may not sing specifically about his blood in the Psalms, Psalm 22 and 69 describe the scenes of the crucifixion in the greatest of detail. The following are included: the mockery, the shaking of the head and parting the garments, the casting lots on the vesture, the thirst, the vinegar and the gall, the pierced hands and feet, the cry of the forsaken, the committing of His Spirit to God. Indeed Psalm 22 opens with the cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me,” and the closing words have been rendered, “it is finished”.[[14]](#footnote-15)

We can indeed sing of conversion from, for example, Psalm 34:4-6:- “I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They looked unto him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.” And what about Psalm 103:2-4:- “Bless the Lord, O my soul: and forget not all his benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving kindness and tender mercies”? Is it not better to use the words of scripture to sing of our conversion than the uninspired words of another sinner, albeit a forgiven sinner?

It is also possible to sing about the priesthood of all believers. Consider Psalm 132:9:- “Let thy priests be clothed with righteousness”. John Gill commented on this verse: “or else all true believers; who are priest as well as kings unto God”. We can also sing of the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus in Psalm 50:3-4:- “Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him and it shall be very tempestuous round about him. He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people.” Finally, do we not have a psalm on the saints reigning with Christ in Psalm 8:5-7? (“For thou hast made him (man) a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.   Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all *things* under his feet”)

**Warrant to Christianise the Psalms?**

In his sermon on Ephesians 5:19, Dr Masters asked rhetorically what we should do with the Psalter of the Old Testament? He considered we should read the psalms as songs of human experience and teaching about how to praise and pray. Dr Masters conceded that we can also sing them. He queried whether we should sing the Scottish paraphrases (referring, I presume, to the 1650 Metrical Psalms). He considered that they presented a problem to us by using the language and theology of the Old Testament including Old Testament sacrifices and all the Old Testament order. Other than obliquely in words of prophecy they don’t mention Christ because he comes in the future. He advocated that we should Christianise the Psalms. We should then translate Old Testament language into the New Testament. He admitted that it sounded terrible but nevertheless it is what we should do.

It does seem to be something of a concession that even Dr Masters himself accepts that to alter the Word of God, as he is advocating we do with the Psalms we want to sing, to bring it up to date “sounds terrible”. It is significant that when Paul wrote 2 Timothy 3:16 (All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness) it was only the Old Testament canon that was completed. Now, the Old Testament canon included of the Book of Psalms. It is interesting to note that in Hezekiah’s reforms in 2 Chronicles 29:30, he commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer. Thus some 300 years after David’s reign, the Temple worship still consisted of David’s psalms because, presumably, no new inspired songs had been written although, as we know there were to be some additions post-exile.

We would have to question what warrant we have to Christianise the psalms in singing given that the canon of the New Testament contains no inspired songs? Dr Masters considered that Revelation 4:8-11 and chapter 5:8-12 were our warrant to Christianise the psalms and sing New Testament doctrines and that this is why “we love the psalms of Isaac Watts”. However, as we have already noted the scenes in Revelation are of the church triumphant in heaven. I would like the suggest that what we see in heaven is not our warrant for worship here on earth but a glimpse of what shall be when we leave our earthly tabernacle and go to be with the Lord Jesus.

The problem here is that even excellent men like Peter Masters may have lost confidence in the sufficiency of the Book of Psalms for worship and, dare I say it, consider it proper to sing what are in effect commentaries on the Psalms, not considering that the Psalms, with appropriate explanation from the pulpit, are sufficient for every aspect of Church worship. I suggest that what has gone wrong is that by allowing psalms to be modified it is the equivalent of reading a commentary instead of the Word of God. This point was well made by Kenneth Stewart when he wrote: “The fact is that, in the worship of God, a good song of our composing cannot replace a psalm for the singing any more than a good book of our composing can replace the Bible for reading!”[[15]](#footnote-16)

Dr Masters makes the point that the Psalms use the language and theology of the Old Testament whereas we are now living in the realm of the New. However, is this not like saying that we should not read the Old Testament now that we have the New? Of course, he would not say that, and scripture is quite clear of the importance of the Old Testament for New Testament believers. Consider 1 Corinthians 10:6:- “Now these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition...” What is plain is that we need to interpret the Psalms in the light of New Testament revelation. However, I suggest that the Psalms are far richer now than they ever were in the Old Testament because the types and shadows now have their fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is worth remembering Luke 24:44 when the Lord appeared to the disciples before His ascension. There he said: “These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.” I would suggest that we may legitimately borrow the words of 1 Corinthians 13:12 and apply them to the Psalms in the New Testament era. The Old Testament saints looked through a glass darkly while we see, as it were, face to face.

It is worth quoting William Balfour[[16]](#footnote-17) on the alleged insufficiency of the Psalms in public worship (which is just as much an indictment on myself as on anybody else since I had until September 2021, sung hymns all my life):

It is urged against the exclusive use of the Psalms and in favour of hymns that it is desirable to have material for public praise in which the name and work of Christ and the Holy Spirit and the Christian privilege of sonship are brought more prominently and distinctly forward than, it is alleged, they are or could be in the Psalms, written as they were so long before the coming of Christ and the sending of the Spirit…. It is enough to reply to such men, the want is not in the Psalms but in themselves. If Christ and His Spirit dwelt richly in their own hearts they could not fail to find them in those Psalms which the Spirit of Christ indited and in which Christ, if we may say so, found Himself, when He expounded to His disciples the things concerning Himself in the Psalms. But there are those who allow that the name and work of Christ, the Holy Spirit and the sonship of believers are found in the Psalms; only they do not come so much to the surface, so to speak, as they do in what they term good Gospel hymns. Well, we allow there is a difference, and a very great difference, but it is altogether in favour of the Psalms. Of course it all depends upon what men are seeking after. If it is to have allusion made to those glorious truths always in so many words in the praise of the sanctuary you have this done, certainly, in a way in the hymns which you have not in the Psalms. But if what is sought is that the soul, in the faith of those truths, should ascend in praise to God, then I maintain that you are shut up to this in the Psalms in a way which you are not and cannot be in the hymns. In order to sing the Psalms intelligently and with edification you are shut up to those truths in their reality – to the personal Christ and Spirit and to the experience of sonship which is the fruit of this gracious work in a way which does not necessarily attend the singing of hymns where these truths, it may be, are expressed in so many words. Many are too apt to imagine that they have got the thing when they sing the hymn in which it is named. It is no valid objection to the Psalms, in my opinion, that these truths are not brought before us in the same way as in hymns. The question is, Are they there? If we are sure of that, as we certainly are, then it must be our own fault if we do not find them. We must have failed to get into the spirit of the Psalm; and if so, the remedy is not to be found in providing a hymn or hymns in which mention is made of these truths in so many words, but rather in seeking the Spirit of adoption without whom the most evangelical hymns ever written will not enable us to praise God aright, and with whom the Psalms will furnish the richest and most inexhaustible material for praising God, even the God and Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ…. Even when you have got the very words in the hymns you must go far deeper down to get the thing; and the danger is that you should content yourselves with the words without the thing. In the Psalms, I may say, it is not till we have got hold of the thing that we really understand the words, whereas in the hymns you may have the words and never get hold of the thing.

Let me close this section with a quote from the Anglican minister, William Romaine:[[17]](#footnote-18)

A picture containing text, person, indoor

Description automatically generated “I want a name for that man who should pretend that he could make better hymn than the Holy Ghost. His collection is large enough; it wants no addition. It is as perfect as its Author, and not capable of improvement. Why, in such a case, would any man in the world take it into his head to sit down and write hymns for the use of the Church? It is just the same as if he were to write a new Bible, not only better than the old, but so much better that the old may be thrown aside. What a blasphemous attempt! And yet our hymn-mongers, inadvertently I hope, have come very near to this blasphemy; for they shut out the Psalms, to introduce their own verses into the Church, sing them with great delight, and, as they fancy with great profit; although the practice be in direct opposition to the command of God, and, therefore, cannot possibly be accompanied by divine blessing.”

**Psalms in Meter**

An objection that I have heard is that we have no warrant in scripture to convert the Hebrew Psalms into meter. We should instead sing them in prose since it involves paraphrasing. It was hard to escape noticing that Dr Masters described the metrical psalter used in Scotland as the Scottish paraphrases. It seemed to contain a hint of criticism as if to suggest that the Metrical Psalter isn’t in fact the pure word of God at all.

The answer, I think, is that it is recognised that the psalms were written in meter. The Puritan, John Cotton, reasoned that if it is "lawful to translate and turn the Hebrew bible into English prose in order to read, then it is lawful to translate David’s Hebrew Psalms, and verse into our English Psalms and verse, in order to *sing*.”[[18]](#footnote-19). Cotton went on to remark that a metrical psalter makes “the verses easier for memory and fit for melody.”[[19]](#footnote-20) Hence, the singing of David’s psalms in meter is not only proper but also wise.

Thomas Ford, in A gospel-Ordinance Concerning the Singing of Scripture, Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs addresses head on this criticism. This is what he said[[20]](#footnote-21):

1. “that in these Psalms and Songs, there was a set meter, fitted to tunes, and voices, and musical instruments. None can deny that and you must observe the dedication of most of the Psalms...
2. To go so far to say that there is corruption in the translation is spurious, and not to be approved of, but corrected. If the translation is wrong, then correct the translation and make a good one. Do not abuse the act of exegesis and translation as a straw man’s argument.
3. Keep in mind that translations according to the import and understanding of the words and sense of the text are as much the Word of God as the text in the original. For the coherence of the word and sense make up the copy entire and perfect. It is not simply the words that are inspired by God but the meaning behind them which must be explained.
4. Which follows, the translation of the words in meter, if it has the full sense of the words, it is as much the Word of God as it were translated in prose, or ordinary sentence for reading. For it is not only the way or method, but the sense and meaning of the words that is the Word of God. So that I may as well say when I sing in such a composition, it is as much the Word of God as when I read the same words in the Bible, only they are orderly disposed for that action. None must by this reason pretend to know the Word of God in reading or expounding, but he that knows the Hebrew and Greek.”

Thomas Ford went on to address the objection that because the translation of Psalms into Meter is a human invention then a person who worships using the Psalms does so after a human form. Thomas Ford answers this objection as follows:

1. To know the significance of the tongues and how to translate them to edify the saints is a special gift of God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:28-30, 1 Corinthians 14:1-6);
2. If this was a fair criticism then we read human inventions whenever we read a translation of the scriptures from their original language;
3. It is surely more of human invention to sing something of our own composition than to sing the very matter and sense of the Word of God in our own language?

A Discourse by “the worthy brethren of New England” on the singing of psalms addressed the matter of tunes remarking that as the Lord “has hid from us the Hebrew tunes, lest we should think ourselves bound to imitate them; so also the course and frame (for the most part) of their Hebrew poetry, that we might not think ourselves bound to imitate that, but that every nation without scruple might follow as the graver sort of tunes of their own country songs, so the graver sort of verse of their own country poetry”[[21]](#footnote-22). According to Joel Beeke, writing in “Sing a New Song”[[22]](#footnote-23) Cotton added this important caveat in terms of tune by saying that God has given us the freedom to compose reverent tunes, so long as the rhythm and tunes are pleasing to God and edifying to His people. Dr Beeke added that we should, of course, never use this liberty to satisfy our selfish desires. It is sad that the Contemporary Christian Music scene does not observe this advice even in relation to the tunes used, let alone the content of the words.

**Extemporary Prayer and Singing**

Another criticism of exclusive psalm singing is that the Psalms contain prayers and we are not confined only to the prayers of the Bible so why should we be confined to the songs of the Bible? The short answer is that God has given us a book of Psalms to be sung (“Sing Psalms!” Psalm 105:2). However, when it comes to prayer God has given us the "spirit of grace and of supplications” (Zechariah 12:10). In Ephesians 6:18, Paul exhorted the Ephesians to be “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the spirit”. We see examples of extemporary prayer throughout the Bible whereas we do not see examples of extemporary singing in congregational worship. However we do see the use of the Book of Psalms throughout the Bible. I have had to add the caveat of congregational worship in the light of 1 Corinthians 14:15 where Paul wrote that “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also”. John Gill, with whom I agree, interprets this verse to mean that Paul could sing with the extraordinary gift of the Spirit, by which the apostle was capable of delivering out a psalm, or hymn, extempore, and that in an unknown tongue: but then he also determines, [to sing with the understanding also]; not to his own understanding of what is sung … but to the understanding of others”. It is noteworthy that none of these spiritually inspired songs have survived today and, in any event, even if we allow that this gift may still be in use today (and I am unwilling to exclude the possibility) then it is not a warrant for congregational singing of uninspired hymnody.

We should note that there is no reason why a set form of prayer is unlawful. If it was then no one could decide beforehand what to pray for. As Thomas Ford put it: “For if I meditate on what I need, and what God has promised, I form such petitions, and tie myself to them as necessary to be petitioned for, and it may be that I have no occasion for a long while to beg anything of God, but the substance of these premeditated considerations of my lack.”

Thomas Ford also makes the point that that while the method of praying and singing differ, yet the duty is the same. He went on to enlarge as follows:[[23]](#footnote-24) “For the very words, to sing psalms, and hymns, and songs, import a special method of the voice in a set tune, and proportion, where prayer in the method of performance requires no such exactness. If one should take on him to sing and not in a set form, and in some random tune, he would be ridiculous to all hearers. But a man has a larger liberty in prayer, and is not tied to such straight connections, heights, and falls, stops and pauses. The nature of this ordinance calls for it, or else it cannot be done gracefully, though there may be grace in the heart. And if the Apostle had not meant by singing of Psalms, singing musically, he would have only bid them to praise in general, and would have left out the outward expression of it, which cannot be acted but in a set form.

He also made the point that if singing was not to be in a musical manner then it would not differ from prayer. After all a number of psalms consist purely of petition, yet they were sung “with faith and confidence in God”. We have already considered James’s exhortation to sing psalms in James 5. Note that he distinguishes between praying and singing when he wrote: “Is any sick? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing Psalms. Paul did the same in 1 Corinthians 14:15 when he wrote: “I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.”

In the next edition of Occasional Notes we will consider the Regulative Principle, the use of musical instruments in worship and a history of the early church hymnody.

**Praise and Prayer Requests**

For Praise:

* For the Lord’s Keeping and Prospering the Work for 145 years;
* For returning children and the family of 6 children regularly attending the Friday Club;
* Assistance from London City Mission for evangelism.

For Prayer:

* Please pray that the Lord would send workers for the harvest field at Strangers Rest;
* Please pray for good fruit from outreaches;
* Please pray for Lorna as she undergoes treatment for cancer;
* Please pray for the children of a local family that they would return to Strangers Rest regularly and be converted;
* For fruit from evangelism.

A tree with white flowers

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You are invited to our

**145th Anniversary Service in Person and Online**

**PASTOR JONATHAN MUNDAY**

**On Saturday 28th May 2022**

**At 2:30 pm**

**Details:**

**Zoom**

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Or call 0131 460 1196 using the above details.

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*Friday Children’s Bible Club* 6:30pm, *Sunday School* 4:00pm.

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1. https://www.salisburyemmanuel.org.uk/assets/public/articles/worship/Psalm-Singing.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Taken from chapter 3 of John Cotton’s Treatise on the Singing of Psalms a Gospel Ordinance [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. I have lifted most of this sentence from Joel Beeke’s chapter “Psalm Singing in Calvin and the Puritans” at page 37 from “Sing a New Song” edited by Joel Beeke and Anthony Selvaggio © Reformation Heritage Books published in 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. http://articles.ochristian.com/article12515.shtml [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The information in this paragraph is taken from the Minority Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God Submitted to the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It was written by John Murray and William Young. The report is contained in the Appendix of *Sing a New Song* edited by Joel Beeke and Anthony Selvaggio. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Songs of the Spirit, Appendix – Minority Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God Submitted to the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church by John Murray and William Young, Kindle Location 3598 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Sing a New Song, chapter 8 (The Case for Psalmody by Malcolm Watts) at page 138 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Songs of The Spirit: The Place of Psalms in the Worship of God, Chapter 1 by Kenneth Stewart (Kindle Location 417) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Chapter 5, Location 2404 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. ‘The Psalms and Uninspired Hymns. Extracts from Speech by Dr. Hugh Martin, in the General Assembly of the Free Church, 3rd June, 1872’, Free Presbyterian Magazine, 2, no. 1 (May 1897), p. 27 - https://reformedcovenanter.wordpress.com/2021/09/02/hugh-martin-on-Christ-our-worship-leader/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Songs of the Spirit, chapter 5 (Sing the Lord’s Song by John Keddie at Kindle location 1878 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty First Century Edited by Joel Beeke and Anthony T Selvaggio, chapter 8, The Case for Psalmody at Kindle Location 678 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Biblical Praise compiled by Jorge Ruiz Ortiz. At page 92, Travis Fentiman refers to The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. This is an extract from a tract called “Why Psalms Only” by Rev. Professor RJ George taken from the Young People’s Magazine, July 1947, of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Songs of the Spirit at page 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. The Psalms versus Hymns in the Service of the Sanctuary (Pamphlet 1881) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Taken from An Essay on Psalmody, 1757 by William Romaine (https://archive.org/details/cihm\_57965 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. The Puritans on Exclusive Psalmody (edited by C Matthew McMahon and published by Puritan Publications and A Puritan’s Mind) at page 231 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. ibid at page 232 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Ford, Thomas; Holmes, Nathaniel; Sydenham, Cuthbert; Cotton, John. The Puritans on Exclusive Psalmody (p. 111-112). Puritan Publications. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Ibid at page 165 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Ibid at page 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Ford, Thomas; Holmes, Nathaniel; Sydenham, Cuthbert; Cotton, John. The Puritans on Exclusive Psalmody (p. 115). Puritan Publications. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)