

Psalm Singing: A Reformed Heritage

Excerpt from the pamphlet: "The Reformation and Psalm Singing." The full pamphlet is available at Protestant Reformed Churches or http://www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_37.html.

It is a well-known fact that God used the work of Martin Luther and John Calvin to restore the Word of God to its proper place. Who can forget the Diet of Worms, before which Luther was ordered to recant all his writings, and his answer came with such determination, "My heart is captive to the Word of God!" It was authoritative for his belief and every aspect of his life.

It is significant, then, that when the reformers looked for a songbook for the people of God they turned to the Psalms.

That was a book which the Holy Spirit had already prepared for the purpose of singing. In this connection we rejoice in the determination of the reformers to restore congregational singing to the worship service. The apostate Romish church had taken the reading of God's Word from the common folk. Similarly, the singing was left to the "professionals," to the chanting of priests and trained choirs. The reformers recognized that God's people constituted God's choir. Besides this, they were used by God to give the people something to sing about. How their hearts were lifted up when the burden of the guilt of sin was taken away by the blood of Christ, Who was raised for their justification! Not their works formed the basis of justification, but the finished work of Jesus Christ. That was liberty, that freed the soul from the burden of work—righteousness and gave the people the motivation to sing. What could better express the heart's desires than the Psalms of David? Those Psalms gave expression to God exactly what they felt in their hearts.

Both Luther and Calvin had a strong commitment to the Word of God. Both stood very close to each other concerning the doctrines taught in the Bible. They differed in the area of the sacraments and in the area of exclusive use of the Psalms in the singing of the congregation in worship. From the very beginning, Calvin saw the need to direct the church toward the singing of Psalms. When he arrived at Geneva in 1537, he and Farel set up the order of worship to include the singing of Psalms. During his forced absence and retreat in Strasbourg, Germany, he came to appreciate the lusty singing of the Psalms by the German folk. He himself began to write versifications of the Psalms along with Marot and Beza. When he returned to Geneva and could begin to implement his idea of proper worship, Psalm singing assumed its proper place. From then on Psalm singing became a Reformed and Presbyterian heritage.

To appreciate the thinking of Calvin on this point, let us allow him to speak for himself. Notice in the following quote how Calvin viewed singing as a reverent act involving the tongue, which should be viewed as common prayer.

Moreover since the glory of God ought in a measure, to shine in the several parts of our bodies, it is especially fitting that the tongue has been assigned and destined for this task, both through singing and through speaking. For it was peculiarly created to tell and proclaim the praise of God. But the chief use of the tongue is in public prayers, which are offered in the assembly of believers, by which it comes about that with *one common voice* as it were (emphasis J.K.), with the same mouth, we all glorify God together worshipping him with one spirit and the same faith.¹

Since singing is a joyful expression, he also cautions us that that joy must be sanctified by the Word.

It is not without reason that the Holy Spirit exhorts us so carefully by means of the Holy Scripture to rejoice in God and that all our joy is there reduced to its true end, for He knows how much we are inclined to delight in vanity. Just as our nature, then, draws us and induces us to seek all means of foolish and vicious rejoicing, so to the contrary, our Lord, to distract us and withdraw us from the enticements of the flesh and the world, presents to us all possible means (the Word of God, JK.) in order to occupy us in that spiritual joy which He so much recommends to us.²

This applies to the melody of our songs. On this he writes,

Yet, we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words. Augustine also admits in another place that he was so disturbed by this danger that he sometimes wished to see established the custom observed by Athanasius, who ordered the reader to use so little inflection of the voice that he would sound more like a speaker than a singer. But when he recalled how much benefit singing had brought him, he inclined to the other side. Therefore, when this moderation is maintained, it is without any doubt a most holy and salutary practice. On the other hand, such songs as have been composed only for sweetness and delight of the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest degree.³

It certainly is consistent with such a reverential approach to the singing of God's people in worship that Calvin sought to limit the expression to the Psalms. Even though the Psalms had to be versified in order to be sung, and music had to be prepared for the singing, Calvin repeated over and over that Psalms were God's songs for such singing.

Now what Saint Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from Him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate to the purpose than the Psalms of David which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if He Himself were singing in us to exalt His glory.⁴

Psalm Singing Throughout History

We must be careful to put Calvin's concern for Psalm singing into historical perspective. John Calvin did not begin something new when he introduced exclusive Psalm singing during worship. If that were true, we might have occasion to raise our eyebrows. The singing of Psalms already then had a long, glorious history.

The Old Testament Psalms were written for the purpose of singing. The title to the Psalms is, "Book of Praises." The notation "Selah," written throughout the Psalms, is a musical indicator. Already in II Samuel 6:5 reference is made to the playing of musical instruments in connection with the moving of the ark to Jerusalem. Jehoshaphat, as he led his army to battle, sang Psalms (II Chron. 20:21). Later the Prophet Isaiah spoke of singing in connection with a holy solemnity (Is. 30:29). Ezekiel had singers in the inner court of the temple (Eze. 40 :44). All of them sang the Psalms.

As far as we know, there was no singing in the synagogue; at least there is no reference to this in Scripture. Our Lord Jesus sang a Psalm in connection with the last Passover (Matt. 26:30). This "hymn" was the great Hallel, "Praise God," from Psalms 113-118. The author to the Hebrews expresses, "In the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee," a reference to congregational singing. Part of the abuse in the church of Corinth was that each "has a Psalm" (I Cor. 14:26). Instead of waiting for the orderly singing of the congregation, the spirit-filled Christians began to sing Psalms on their own. The church was commanded to "sing Psalms" (Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16). These passages contain instructions given to the church as to how they are to admonish one another in worship. The Christian is instructed in James 5:13, "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing Psalms." A recorded instance of this is found in Acts 16:25 when the bruised and beaten Paul and Silas sang Psalms in the prison.

This same tradition was carried over to the post-apostolic period of the early church. Dr. Phillip Schaff, in his *History of the Christian Church*,⁵ makes the point that during this period there were no hymns in the church, only Psalms. Drawing from the excellent article on Psalmody from the McClintock and Strong *Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Cyclopaedia*,⁶ we learn that Chrysostom, the church father of the

fourth century, in his sixth homily on Repentance, extolled the Psalms above the rest of Scripture to be sung by all classes of men, at all places, and on all occasions. During this same period, the heretics introduced the singing of hymns into the churches. The Gnostics, the Arians, and the Donatists all began to introduce songs other than the Psalms. This led to the decision of the Council of Laodicea in A.D. 360 to make a decision forbidding the use of hymns in the churches. During the long period of the Dark Ages, from the fifth to the sixteenth century, Psalm singing was preserved in the monasteries, while chanting was introduced into the worship services. Wycliffe and Huss, the morning stars of the Reformation, re-introduced into the churches the singing of Psalms.

During the post-reformation period, Psalm singing took hold and spread like wildfire throughout all of Europe: France, Switzerland, Germany, England, Netherlands, Scotland. Psalm singing is not a Dutch heritage alone. The churches of Presbyterian heritage also became exclusively Psalm-singing churches. This heritage they took with them to America, and under the direction of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church of North America, two conventions were held in 1905, the first in Pittsburgh and the second in Chicago, to promote Psalm singing in worship. The book, *The Psalms in Worship*,⁷ is a compilation of lectures given at these conventions in which all aspects of Psalm singing are treated. This is the most exhaustive and thorough treatment of this subject. The same thing was true of the Dutch churches. Psalm singing was championed in the Netherlands. Petrus Datheen, along with others, composed many of the Psalm versifications. Many variations of music and words appeared, and from these the well-known Psalm Book was composed. The Synod of Dordt in 1618-19 included Article 69 of the Church Order in which only the 150 Psalms of David could be sung in the churches—though there was a concession⁸ that a few other songs, e.g., the morning and evening hymn, the 10 commandments, Songs of Mary, Zacharias, etc. might be included. After that, the desire to maintain the exclusive use of the Psalms for worship without including hymns became the occasion for controversy. Among other issues, exclusive Psalm singing was maintained by the leaders of the Afscheiding of 1834 when they separated from the state church in the Netherlands. Similarly, in America it was included in the formation of the Christian Reformed Church from the Reformed Church of America. The RCA allowed the singing of hymns during worship, which the CRC did not want. Those Reformed and Presbyterian churches that still maintain exclusive Psalm singing during worship are certainly in good company and possess a goodly heritage.

Endnotes

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, chapter 20, section 31.
2. John Calvin, Preface to the *Genevan Psalter*.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, chapter 20, section 32.
4. John Calvin, *Epistle to the Reader*, June 1543.
5. Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. I, p.463
6. McClintock and Strong, *Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Cyclopaedia*, Vol.8, page 735.
7. *The Psalms in Worship*, 1907; The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, page 486, 487; Lecture by Rev. T.H. Hanna on “Specimens of Eulogies on the Psalms.”
8. Viewpoint expressed by Rev. D. Engelsma in an excellent series of articles on “Music in the Church” published in the *Beacon Lights*, a magazine for Protestant Reformed youth, February, March, April, 1983.