

MINUTES OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

ATTACHMENT 1

REPORT OF THE "PSALM SINGING" SUBCOMMITTEE

INTRODUCTION

The task of our committee, as appointed by the 20th General Assembly, is to "formulate practical ways in which Psalm-singing can be encouraged in the congregations of the Presbyterian Church in America and other Reformed churches and to make a report regarding this at the next (i.e. the 21st) General Assembly."

In pursuance of this task we have divided our work into two sections. First, a preamble answering the question, "Why the Psalms?" Second, seven practical recommendations.

WHY THE PSALMS?

Why the Psalms? Rather than asking the above question, the real question should be, "Why not the Psalms?" Most Christian traditions hold to a high view of Biblical authority. Conservative Christians even proclaim the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. Scripture study and memorization are eagerly encouraged. How can it be that the Psalms, which God gave to His people specifically *to be sung*, particularly in public worship, and which for centuries were sung among all the major Protestant groups (exclusively so among Presbyterian, Reformed, Baptist, and Congregational denominations), are universally neglected? How has it happened that the Psalms, which undeniably are the very word of God, have been completely supplanted by hymns in our day?

Let's look at the question from another angle. Should one's reading priority be good Christian literature or the Bible? "Oh that's easy to answer," you say, and we agree. While the reading of good Christian literature is profitable and good and should be encouraged, it should never be allowed to replace the greater good of Bible reading, the ultimate source material upon which good Christian books are based. Case is closed. Yet this is precisely what has happened in the area of the church's songs. It is not our intention to argue for Psalm-singing to the exclusion of hymn singing. But what should be the priority? Isn't itself-evident that even the best hymns are nevertheless of human composition and should never be allowed to replace the greater good of Psalm-singing? That this obvious truth has nearly completely "slipped the mind" of the modern church is yet another sign that things are seriously amiss in the worship of our churches.

Old Paths Made New

Perhaps a little more background may help. That the Biblical Book of Psalms was the hymn book of Israel cannot be doubted. From the time of David to the time of Christ the people of God learned to express their praise of God through the singing of Psalms. While this is universally understood to be true of the Old Testament church, it is seldom recognized that the Psalter has served as the primary hymnal of the New Testament church throughout most of its history.

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Consider the evidence, both implied and direct. When Jesus and the disciples sang a "hymn" at their Passover observance, the Last Supper, it was undoubtedly the Hallel section of the Psalter (consisting of Psalms 113-118) that was sung (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). When the early church "lifted their voices to God with one accord," it was to the words of the 146th and 2nd Psalms (Acts 4:24ff). The church at Corinth sang Psalms (I Cor. 14:15,26), and Paul commended the singing of "Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). Whatever one makes of "hymns" and "spiritual songs" (some argue that these are merely the Psalm titles used in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament - eg. Psalms 30, 67, 75), the singing of the canonical book of Psalms is encouraged, even commanded. James asks (Jas 5:13), "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms" (Greek = *psalmoi*). There can be no question that the Apostolic church sang the Psalms, thus making it a practice normative for the church today.

Among the church Fathers, Tertullian (2nd Century) and Jerome (mid-4th to 5th Centuries) testify that Psalm-singing was an essential feature of the worship of their day. The singing of Psalms received the strongest commendation from Chrysostom and Augustine. The Fifth Century marks the beginning of the "Dark Ages," and the onset of a number of ecclesiastical developments regretted by Protestants. Among these was the disappearance of congregational song. Singing became the sole preserve of the monasteries. Yet even then it was the Psalms that the monks read and sang with an almost fanatical zeal. For a thousand years the Psalms inspired the monastic orders. The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century then revived the *congregational* singing of the Psalter, which dominated the church-music scene until the middle of the last Century. For most of its history the Psalter has been the hymnal of the Christian church.

Let's look at the past 450 years more closely. Louis Benson, the noted Presbyterian hymnologist from earlier in this century, speaking for the Stone Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1907, observed that the distinctive contribution of the Reformed churches to the music of the church has been the congregational singing of metrical Psalms. The development of the proto-type of all subsequent Psalters, the *Genevan or Huguenot Psalter*, took place over a twenty-four year period as a result of the will and vision of one man, John Calvin. Rejecting both the Latin and Protestant hymns, Calvin preferred Psalm singing, arguing that "we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him" (*Preface to the Psalter*, 1543). He consciously sought to revive the practice of the early church. Clement Marot, a court poet and leading lyricist of the day, provided renderings for the first 30 Psalms. Theodore Beza, head of the Geneva Academy and eventual successor of Calvin in Geneva provided the other 120. Louis Bourgeois wrote 83 original melodies, an achievement of outstanding genius. An unknown hand contributed tunes formost of the remaining Psalms. The finished product, all 150 Psalms put in metrical form for singing, a distinctive tune provided for nearly every Psalm, was unprecedented, and its influence profound.

One could argue that the *Genevan Psalter* has been the most used "hymn book" in the history of the church. As the Calvinistic Reformation spread, so did the practice of congregational Psalm singing. The Reformed churches in France, the Netherlands, and Germany, as well as the Presbyterian church in Scotland and later the Puritan churches in America were all exclusively Psalm singing until the beginning of the 19th Century. In

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the French and Dutch churches, the old Genevan settings and tunes are still used extensively four hundred and fifty years later!

Psalm-singing crossed the English channel in 1556 with the publishing of the first *Anglo-Genevan Psalter*. Subsequent English-language Psalters were heavily influenced by this work. The first *Scottish Psalter*, 1564, the *Ainsworth Psalter* (the metrical Psalm-book which crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower and used by the Pilgrim Fathers), and all the first English Psalter, the *Sternhold and Hopkins*, or "Old Version," published in 1562, all showed considerable Genevan influence. While the Huguenot distinctives later waned in England, Scotland and America, Psalm-singing did not. Psalters continued to be developed in the English-speaking world and cumulatively to dominate the church's music. In England the *Tate and Brady Psalter*, sometimes called the "New Version" (1696) was often printed in the back of the Book of Common Prayer until the later years of the 19th Century. The *Scottish Psalter*, 1650, reduced drastically the metrical variety of its renderings (it was almost entirely common meter) and in so doing eliminated most of the Genevan tunes. But Scotland remained exclusively Psalm-singing until the 1860's, and still today the Psalms are sung in every service of the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland. The *Bay Psalm Book*, the first book published in North America, the Psalter of the Puritans, similarly reduced the metrical variety. Yet it enjoyed enormous popularity, undergoing seventy printings through 1773. American Protestantism was virtually exclusively Psalm-singing until the Great Awakening in the 1740's. Our fore-fathers, both Evangelical and American, were Psalm-singers!

A Stronger Spirituality

All this history and heritage are well and good, even reassuring for those who respect the tradition of the church. But our chief concern is with the worship and piety of God's people. It is our conviction that the revival of the Psalms is crucial if the Christian church is ever to regain the militant spirituality of the Reformation era. Benson argues that the *Genevan Psalter* played a vital role in the spread of the Genevan doctrines as well as shaping the piety of the Reformed churches. "The singing of Psalms became the Reformed cultus, the characteristic note distinguishing its worship from that of the Roman Catholic Church," he argues. Moreover,

The familiar use of Psalms in worship only emphasized the power of their appeal to the individual experience, and made Psalmody as much a part of the daily life as of public worship. The family in the home, men and women at their daily tasks, were recognized as Huguenots because they were heard singing Psalms. The Psalter became to them the manual of the spiritual life. It ingrained its own characteristics deep in the Huguenot character, and had a great part in making it what it was...to the Huguenot, called to fight and suffer for his principles, the habit of Psalm singing was a providential preparation. The Psalms were his confidence and strength in quiet and solitude, his refuge from oppression; in the wars of religion they became the songs of the camp and the march, the inspiration of the battle and the consolation in death, whether on the field or at the martyrs stake. It is not possible to conceive of the history of the Reformation in France in such a way that Psalm singing should not have a great place in it (*Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, "John Calvin and the Psalmody of the Reformed Churches," vol. V, June, 1909, p 73).

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Thus there is a distinctive piety that develops as a result of Psalm-singing, a strong, militant and even masculine spirituality. Calvinism produced what Roland Bainton called "a race of heroes," and Psalm-singing had no small part in bringing this about. The Huguenots in their struggle against the French monarch, the Dutch in their fight for independence from the Spanish Empire, and the Parliamentary armies in their civil war against the Stuart monarchy all sang the Psalms into battle, often against overwhelming odds. The 68th, "Let God arise," was known as the battle Psalm of the Huguenots. Our Reformed Fathers favorite metaphor for the Christian life was that of warfare. Nearly every Psalm refers to the conflict between the righteous and the wicked (148 of 150 by onecount), a theme which is almost non-existent in modern hymns. As the church in America finds itself more and more in a hostile environment, perhaps it is indeed "of the Lord" that the congregational singing of the Psalms be revived.

Biblical Wholeness

Finally, the Psalms are unrivaled as a complete guide of spiritual life, precisely what they were meant to be. In them we find the whole range of human emotions and experiences. The Psalms are authentic. The joy of praise, the pain of persecution, the comfort of adoption, the sorrow of death, the hope of heaven, the cry for justice all find full expression, often with vivid realism. This is to say that the Psalms are *human* in a way that few hymns dare to be. The whole body of Christian doctrine is to be found in the Psalms. They are virtually a "little Bible" as Luther called them. What about the gospel? Showing the profound insight that we regularly expect from him, Luther says the Book of Psalms "should be precious and dear to us if only because it most clearly promises the death and resurrection of Christ, and describes His kingdom, and the nature and standing of all Christian people" (*Preface to the Psalms*, 1528). Likewise Augustine believed, "the voice of Christ and His Church is well-nigh the only voice to be heard in the Psalms." The time has come to bring them back into the mainstream. A revival of Psalm-singing can only add depth to the shallow waters of contemporary Christianity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Therefore we urge the adoption of the following recommendations:

1. That the General Assembly reaffirm that Psalm-singing in the worship of God is a Gospel ordinance, is commended by the Westminster Confession, and is an historic practice of Reformed churches.
2. That congregations be encouraged to sing at least one Psalm at each of their services.
3. That congregations be encouraged to identify Psalm-settings as Psalms, when they are sung.

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4. That hymnal-using congregations be encouraged to use the Psalm-rich *Trinity Hymnal* (since it averages 10 times the number of Psalms as the comparable Evangelical hymnals).
5. That a program of re-education be undertaken by the CE&P Committee including:
 - a. Articles in the *Messenger* that explore such things as the history and value of Psalm singing.
 - b. Providing instruction in its educational material on the Scriptural mandate and historic precedent for Psalm-singing in the worship of God, and the many ways in which the person, sufferings, resurrection, and ongoing Messianic work of Christ are set forth in the Psalms.
 - c. Produce worship bulletin inserts which feature two Psalm settings as found in the *Trinity Hymnal*, thereby promoting both the hymnal and Psalm-singing.
6. Form an ad hoc committee of the CE&P to complete the discussion with the RPCNA to the end that a simplified edition of *The Book of Psalms for Singing* might be produced with this format:
 - a complete Psalter
 - words only (normally one tune and version per Psalm)
 - a slender, inexpensive hymnal supplement
7. The funding be private, details to be worked out by the CE&P Committee in discussions with the RPCNA's Crown and Covenant Publications.
8. That Christian Education and Publication contact other Reformed denominations informing them of the above recommendations and of the availability in the near future of the adapted edition of *The Book of Psalms for Singing* with a view to encouraging the use of this metrical version of the Psalms in those Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in America which do not currently use a denominational Psalter.