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RESTORING PSALM SINGING TO OUR WORSHIP

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When I was a freshman in college, the minister leading our Bible study asked us to turn to Psalm 92, which he then began to lead us in singing to the tune of “If I Were a Rich Man”:

It is good to give thanks,
And sing praises to the name of the Lord, O Most High;
To declare Your lovingkindness,
In the morning and by night.

It is good to give thanks,
And sing praises to the name of the Lord, O Most High;
To declare Your lovingkindness,
In the morning and by night.

And with the ten-stringed lute and with the harp,
With resounding music on the lyre.
For You, O Lord, have made me glad by what You have done,
I will sing for joy at the works of Your hands.
How great are Your works, O Lord!
Your thoughts are very deep.

It is good to give thanks,
 And sing praises to the name of the Lord, O Most High;
 To declare Your lovingkindness,
 In the morning and by night.¹

In my California Christian way, I thought that it was “neat.” The psalms were meant to be sung, and we were singing them—or, at least one of them. What could make more sense? What a great way to memorize Scripture, I thought.

That for me was the beginning of a fascination with the psalms that has continued to the present. Nearly five years passed before I received any more encouragement. In March 1978, I rode British Rail up to Edinburgh to begin a one-month internship at St. David’s Broomhouse Church as part of my degree requirements at Trinity College in Bristol. The first Sunday there I learned that more psalms than just the ninety-second had been put to music. The hymnal of the Church of Scotland had nothing but psalms in the first 190 pages—all 150 were rhymed and metered for singing. I was amazed. Where had these been hiding all my life? Why did not American churches use them? It seemed odd to me. Why would Bible-believing Christians in America not care about singing the psalms? For me this was what we would later call a “no brainer.” God wrote the psalms. He wrote them to be sung. Therefore, we ought to sing them.

The psalms are the 800-pound gorilla of evangelical worship. There they sit in the middle of our Bibles, the book that provides the content of our worship. They make up the longest book in the Bible. They are the only canonical hymnbook. Yet they are mostly ignored even by those with high views of Scripture. Nearly a decade has passed since the *Trinity Psalter* set all of the psalms to familiar and singable tunes.² The whole Psalter is easily and inexpensively accessible to hymnal-using congregations. Though nearly twenty-five thousand copies have been sold, this number represents less than 10 percent of the membership of the Presbyterian Church of America, James Boice’s denomination. The anecdotal evidence is that few congregations in the Presbyterian Church of America sing psalms on a regular basis from any source. Extend the survey to include the broader evangelical world and one would probably find that the typical worshiper is more likely to be struck by lightning on Sunday morning than to sing a psalm in church. What has been obvious to me for the last quarter of a century—

that psalms should be sung—is obvious to only the tiniest of remnants. The 800-pound gorilla sits, largely ignored.

Toward the end of his life Dr. Boice complained with increased volume about the replacing of the great hymns of the church “with trite jingles that have more in common with contemporary advertising ditties than with the psalms.”³ In his last written work (published posthumously) the direction of this thought is clear. There he notes that the “praise songs of the Psalter” do not fall into the trap of narcissism that characterizes so many “contemporary praise songs.” Instead of self-absorption, they are focused on God, and for that reason, he argues, “they are such good models for our worship and . . . *should be used in worship more often than they are.*”⁴

It is upon this growing conviction of Dr. Boice that I would like to build. The psalms should be used—that is, sung—in worship more often than they are. The case is essentially a simple one, requiring merely that evangelical pastors admit the existence of the 800-pound gorilla and begin to use it as God intended that it be used. It is helpful at times to step back from familiar things and practices and ask “Why is this here?” or “Why do we do (or not do) this or that?” Let’s ask these questions about the Psalter.

What are the implications of a psalter in the canon of Scripture? Is it not that the psalms should be sung as a regular part of our worship? Let’s begin our review with a survey of the nature and virtues of the psalms and then examine the value of singing (as opposed to merely reading) them.

THE PSALTER

The canonical Book of Psalms may correctly be viewed as the Bible’s own devotional book. Bonhoeffer made this point in his brief work *The Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*.⁵ Indeed the Book of Psalms is the primary source from which all other devotional books have drawn. Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), for example, quotes the Psalms more than the gospels in *The Imitation of Christ*, which is “the most popular of all Christian devotional books.”⁶ The Psalter provides the people of God with the verbal images, names, and terminology with which to understand God and how we are to relate to him. They teach us how to speak to God, providing us with the language to use in each of the following categories (included are a few examples of each):

1. Praise:

O Lord, our Lord,
How majestic is Your name in all the earth. (Ps. 8:1a)

The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands. (Ps. 19:1)

The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains,
The world, and those who dwell in it.
For He has founded it upon the seas
And established it upon the rivers. (Ps. 24:1–2)

2. Confession:

I acknowledged my sin to You,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord";
And You forgave the guilt of my sin. (Ps. 32:5)

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my
transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin. (Ps. 51:1–2)

3. Sorrow and complaint:

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. (Ps.
22:1)

Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord.
Lord, hear my voice!
Let Your ears be attentive
To the voice of my supplications. (Ps. 130:1–2)

4. Thanksgiving:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And all that is within me, *bless* His holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
And forget none of His benefits. (Ps. 103:1–2)

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.
Give thanks to the God of gods,
For His lovingkindness is everlasting. (Ps. 136:1–2)

5. Trust:

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want. (Ps. 23:1)

Do not fret because of evildoers,
Be not envious toward wrongdoers. (Ps. 37:1)

God is our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble. (Ps. 46:1)

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. (Ps. 91:1)

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills,
from whence cometh my help. (Ps. 121:1 Authorized Version)

These fourteen psalms are but the tip of the iceberg, 10 percent of the Psalter, whose richness has stretched the capacity of commentators to express. “There is no one book of Scripture that is more helpful to the devotions of the saints than this,” says Matthew Henry, “and it has been so in all ages of the church, ever since it was written.”⁷ Authors from ancient to modern times note the following virtues.

The Doctrinal Completeness of the Psalms

In his 1528 “Preface to the Psalter,” Luther refers to the Psalter as a “little Bible.” He says, “In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible.” He calls it a “short Bible,” in which is provided an “entire summary” of the whole “comprised in one little book.” Before him Athanasius (ca. 296–373) referred to the Psalter as an “epitome of the whole Scriptures.” And Basil (ca. 330–70) called it a “compend of all divinity.”⁸ All that the Bible teaches is found in summary form in the Book of Psalms.

The Christological Completeness of the Psalms

The Psalms prophesy Christ’s life and ministry and especially his suffering. Note the following references to Jesus’ life and ministry:

- ✧ deity: Psalms 8:4–6; 27; 45:6–7; 102:25–26; 104:4 (Heb. 1:5–2:9)
- ✧ incarnation: Psalms 22:9–10; 40:6–8; 98 (Heb. 10:5–7)
- ✧ adoration of the magi: Psalm 72:9–15 (Matt. 2:1–11)
- ✧ baptism: Psalm 2:7–8 (Mark 1:9–11)
- ✧ temptation: Psalm 91:11–12 (Matt. 4:1–11)
- ✧ ministry: Psalm 146:7–9 (Luke 4:16–26)
- ✧ obedience: Psalm 40:6–10 (Heb. 2:10; 10:5–7)
- ✧ teaching: Psalm 78:1–6 (Matt. 13:34–35)

In addition one finds references in the Psalms to the last week of Christ’s earthly life:

- ✧ triumphal entry: Psalm 118:20–29 (Matt. 21:1–11)
- ✧ cleansing of the temple: Psalm 69:9 (John 2:13–17; Matt. 21:12–17)
- ✧ betrayal: Psalm 41:7–9 (John 13:12–30; cf. Ps. 55:12–14)
- ✧ rejection: Psalm 35:19–21 (John 15:18–27)
- ✧ trial and mocking: Psalm 69:17–21 (Matt. 27:24–34)
- ✧ crucifixion: Psalm 22:13–18 (John 19:17–24)
- ✧ insults: Psalm 22:6–8 (Matt. 27:35–44)
- ✧ forsaken: Psalm 22:1–3 (Matt. 27:45–49)
- ✧ committal: Psalm 31:1–5 (Luke 23:46–49)
- ✧ death: Psalm 34:15–20 (John 19:28–37)

- ✧ resurrection: Psalm 16:8–11 (Acts 2:22–32)
- ✧ ascension: Psalm 110 (Acts 2:33–36)

Nowhere in the New Testament is the internal suffering of Christ described as in the psalms (especially Ps. 22). There is a sense in which all psalms are messianic (Luke 24:27). Augustine says: “The voice of Christ and His church is well-nigh the only voice to be heard in the Psalms.”⁹ The lack of gospel content is not a defect that may rightly be attributed to the psalms. Luther labeled his favorite psalms the *psalmi paulini* (Pauline psalms). He had in mind several of the penitential psalms (Pss. 32, 51, 130, 143), where clearly and forcefully human depravity and guilt, spiritual repentance, and free grace are taught. Luther says in his “Preface to the Psalter” (1528) that 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.” Bishop William Horsley (1774–1858) put it this way: “There is not a page of this Book of Psalms in which the pious reader will not find his Savior, if he reads with a view of finding Him.”¹⁰ Henry observes: “So much is there in it of Christ and His gospel, as well as of God and His law, that it has been called the abstract, or summary, of both testaments.”¹¹

The Experiential Completeness of the Psalms

The whole range of Christian experience finds expression in the psalms. Athanasius says that they “embrace the whole life of men, the affections of his mind, and the motions of his soul.” One may find, he says, “a Psalm suited to every occasion, and thus will find that they were written for him.”¹² Whether one has plunged to the “depths” (Ps. 130:1) or to the “lowest pit” and the “dark places” (88:6) or is stuck in the “deep mire” (69:1–2, 14–15), there is a psalm suited to the occasion. Pursued by enemies (7)? God seem distant (10)? Lonely or afflicted (25:16–22)? Needy (86:1)? Despairing (42–43)? Encompassed by the cords of death (116:3–4)? Walking through the valley of the shadow of death (23)? On the other hand, are you delighting in God and his law (1:2; 19; 37:4; 40:8; 73:25; 94:19; 112:1; 119:16, 24, 35, 77, 97, 103, 162, 174)? Are you glad and exulting in God (4:7; 9:2; 122:1)? Rejoicing in the Lord and enjoying his pleasures (16:11; 32:11; 33:1, 21; 87:7; 89:16; 100:2; 104:34; 105:2–3; 145:7)? Experiencing satisfaction or fulfillment in him (17:15; 63:3–8; 65:4; 90:14)? Have you tasted and seen

that the Lord is good (34:8)? Are you thirsting, yearning, for his presence (42:1–2; 63:1; 84:1–2; 143:6)?

The positive side of Christian experience is given full play as well. Luther says: “In whatever situation he may be,” the Christian will find “in that situation Psalms and words to fit his case.” Indeed he will find words better than his own, “so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.”¹³ Calvin concurs in this judgment, referring to the psalms as “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul” in which “there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.” The Holy Spirit, he says, “has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions, with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”¹⁴

There is a wholeness to the psalms as designed by their divine author that addresses the whole of human life. There is a realism as well, teaching the positive and negative sides of spiritual experience: the light and the dark, the delightful and the degrading, the victorious and the defeating, the hopeful and the discouraging. Upon these three virtues of doctrinal, christological, and experiential completeness authors both ancient and modern agree. Basil summarizes this view: “The Book of Psalms is a compendium of all divinity; a common store of medicine for the soul; a universal magazine of good doctrines, profitable to everyone in all conditions.”¹⁵

On September 11, 2001, the United States suffered the worst terrorist attack in the history of the world. Thousands died, billions of dollars of property damage was suffered, landmarks were destroyed. The American people were profoundly shaken. The next morning I happened to turn to a contemporary Christian radio station. A very serious, pastorally sensitive discussion was taking place. Naturally enough, this discussion was broken up by the broadcasting of songs from the world of contemporary Christian music. Invariably the songs were utterly ill suited to the mood of the occasion or even of the rest of the program. There seemed to be nothing in their collection of contemporary genre that could express in word or music the sorrow, grief, tears, complaints, pleas for justice, or cries for God to avenge the blood of the innocent. So back and forth the morning program went, from serious, somber discussion to upbeat, exuberant, happy, and frankly frivolous songs, and back again.

The following Wednesday (September 12) our congregation concluded a special service of prayer by singing Psalm 94 to the tune Austrian Hymn (“Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken”). The contrast was notable:

God of vengeance, O Jehovah,
 God of vengeance, O shine forth!
 Rise up, O You Judge of Nations!
 Render to the proud their worth.
 Lord, how long shall the wicked,
 How long shall the wicked boast?
 Arrogant the words they pour out,
 Ill men all, a taunting host. . . .

Can destructive rulers join You
 And by law disorder build?
 They conspire against the righteous,
 Sentence just ones to be killed.
 But the Lord is still my stronghold;
 God, my Refuge, will repay.
 He'll for sin wipe out the wicked;
 Them the Lord our God will slay.

I doubt if any song written in the last hundred years compares with these pleas to avenge, from “God of vengeance, O Jehovah, / God of vengeance, O shine forth!” to its powerful conclusion: “He’ll for sin wipe out the wicked; / them the Lord our God will slay.” When one is a victim of wicked violence and remains vulnerable to further attacks, these are profoundly comforting and satisfying words. That such expressions may sound strange to modern evangelicals is a fact to be seriously pondered, especially as we examine what evangelical piety has become today. Doubters may wish to consult Romans 13:4 and Revelation 6:10.

That Friday (September 14) the president asked for “Services of Prayer and Remembrance” at noon throughout the nation. We organized a service in which, among other things, we sang psalms. First we sang psalms of grief:

- ✧ Psalm 130:1–2, 5–6, to the tune Martyrdom (“Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed?”)
- ✧ Psalm 13:1–6, to the tune Passion Chorale (“O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”)
- ✧ Psalm 25:16–20, to the tune Trentham (“Breathe on Me, Breath of God”)
- ✧ Psalm 142:1–6, to the tune Rockingham Old

We sang “LORD, from the depths to Thee I cried. . . . O hear my voice and hearken to my supplicating plea” (Ps. 130:1), “O LORD, my God, consider and hear my earnest cries” (13:3), and “My griefs of heart abound; my sore distress relieve. . . . Consider Thou my foes because they many are; and it a cruel hatred is which they against me bear” (25:17, 19). We concluded this section of the service with this psalm:

All unprotected, lo, I stand,
 No friendly guardian at my hand,
 No place of flight or refuge near,
 And none to whom my soul is dear.
 O Lord, my Savior, now to Thee,
 Without a hope beside, I flee,
 To Thee, my shelter from the strife,
 My portion in the land of life. (Ps. 142:4–5)

When one has plunged into the depths, is feeling unprotected, or needs refuge and shelter, it is deeply comforting to express in song these emotions with the words that God himself has given to us.

Second, we sang psalms that cry for protection and justice (see also Pss. 28; 58:6–11; 60:2–5, 11):

- ✧ Psalm 54:1–7, to the tune Ebenezer (“O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus)
- ✧ Psalm 57:1–5, to the tune Germany (“Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness”)
- ✧ Psalm 71:1–6, to the tune St. Christopher (“Beneath the Cross of Jesus”)

Again, it was deeply comforting and satisfying to identify our wicked oppressors, those “strangers” who “have come up against [us], even men of violence,” who “seek my life’s destruction” (54:3); to plead in song for God to defend us from those “who would [my] life devour,” from “cruel men” who are “like hungry lions wild and fierce,” “whose teeth are spears,” whose words are “envenomed darts and two-edg’d swords” (57:3–4); to cry for deliverance from “wicked hands . . . hands cruel and unjust” (71:4). “Now save me,” we sang. “Grant me justice by your strength.” Yes, even “in your truth destroy them all!” (54:1, 5):

Thy mercy, God, to me extend;
On Thy protection I depend,
And to Thy wings for shelter haste
Until this storm be overpast. (57:1)

They tried to snare us in their net; yet “they are fallen, by Thy decree, into the pit they dug for me” (57:6):

Be Thou my rock, my dwelling place,
My constant safe resort.
Thou my salvation hast ordained;
Thou art my rock and fort. (71:3)

Third, we sang psalms of trust:

- ✧ Psalm 23, to the tune Crimond
- ✧ Psalm 37:1–2, 10–19, to the tune Forest Green
- ✧ Psalm 46:1–3, 10–11, to the tune Bethlehem
- ✧ Psalm 91:1–12, to the tune Hyfrydol (“Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners”)

For us to sing “The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want,” “Have no disturbing thoughts about those doing wickedly,” “God is our refuge and our strength, in straits a present aid,” and “Who with God Most High finds shelter, in the Almighty’s shadow hides,” was remarkably comforting, bringing unparalleled words of unequaled spiritual power to bear upon our hearts.

SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

Our rich experience of the psalms during the week of September 11, 2001, only underscores the testimony of the saints throughout the ages. Because the Psalter is God’s hymnbook, given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (“by the Holy Spirit, *through* the mouth of our father David”—Acts 4:25), we find that they are what we would expect: theologically, christologically, and experientially complete. God has provided a psalm for every occasion, a psalm for every need. Because they are not merely human words but God’s, their spiritual efficacy is experienced through their use without

respect to the generation, age, race, or culture of the user. The psalms are a powerful means of shaping a distinctive biblical piety. They express the inner experience of believing hearts even as they transform them.

Thus from the Scottish Covenanters to the Benedictine monks (what Hughes Oliphant Old suggests might be seen as the “infrared and ultraviolet of the liturgical spectrum”), one finds “a determined commitment to the use of psalms as Christian prayer.”¹⁶ This determined commitment goes back to Israel itself, which from the time of David wrote and compiled these psalms for use in temple and synagogue worship.¹⁷ The glimpses of the worship of the apostolic church in the New Testament demonstrate what Old claims: “The Psalms formed the core of the praises of the New Testament church.”¹⁸ When the church gathered for prayer as recorded in Acts 4, they sang (“lifted their voices . . . with one accord”) first from Psalm 146 and then from Psalm 2 (Acts 4:24–26). Apparently they had no trouble in making the transition from the old covenant to the new. The psalms were immediately, even instinctively seized upon as suitable Christian devotional literature. Paul commanded both the Ephesian (5:19) and Colossian (3:16) churches to sing psalms, and he observed that the church at Corinth did so (1 Cor. 14:15, 26). James instructs his readers (“the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad,” apparently a way of referring to the whole church) to sing psalms (*psallō*; James 5:13). Moreover there are 55 citations of the psalms in the New Testament¹⁹ and by one count nearly 150 additional clear allusions to the Psalter and still another 200 fainter ones.²⁰

This instinct to own and christologically interpret the psalms has continued throughout the centuries, as is clear from the earliest Christian writings and liturgies.²¹ The writers of *The Psalms in Worship* and others collected a number of testimonies from the church fathers that survive to this day. For example, Tertullian, 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 says it was the custom of his day to sing psalms, which he calls “a mirror of the soul.”²² Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 340) left this vivid picture of the psalm singing of his day: “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.”²³ Augustine (343–430) in his *Confessions* 9.4 says of them:

“They are sung through the whole world, and there is nothing hid from the heart thereof.”²⁴ Jerome (died 420) said that he learned the psalms when he was a child and sang them daily in his old age. He also writes:

The Psalms were continually to be heard in the fields and vineyards of Palestine. The plowman, as he held his plow, chanted the Hallelujah; and the reaper, the vinedresser, and the shepherd sang something from the Psalms of David. Where the meadows were colored with flowers, and the singing birds made their plaints, the Psalms sounded even more sweetly. These Psalms are our love-songs, these the instruments of our agriculture.²⁵

Apollinaris Sidonius (ca. 431–ca. 482) represents boatmen working their heavy barges up the waters of ancient France and “singing Psalms till the banks echo with ‘Hallelujah.’” Chrysostom (died 407), renowned Greek father and patriarch of Constantinople, says:

All Christians employ themselves in David’s Psalms more frequently than in any other part of the Old or New Testament. The grace of the Holy Spirit hath so ordered it that they should be recited and sung night and day. In the Church’s vigils the first, the middle, and the last are David’s Psalms. In the morning David’s Psalms are sought for; and David is the first, the midst, and the last of the day. At funeral solemnities, the first, the midst, and the last is David. Many who know not a letter can say David’s Psalms by heart. In all the private houses, where women toil—in the monasteries—in the deserts, where men converse with God, the first, the midst, and the last is David.²⁶

He says again:

David is always in their mouths, not only in the cities and churches, but in courts, in monasteries, in deserts, and the wilderness. He turned earth into heaven and men into angels, being adapted to all orders and to all capacities.²⁷ (Sixth Homily on Repentance)

During the early centuries of the church these many observations of ordinary believers carrying out common tasks with the psalms constantly on their lips tell us much about the worship of the early church, as well as about the piety of the early Christians.

Indeed over against this devotion to singing psalms was a growing skepticism about hymns “of human composition” throughout this period because of the use to which they were put by heretics. For this reason the Council of Braga (350) made the following enactment: “Except the psalms and hymns of the Old and New Testaments, nothing of a poetical nature is to be song in the church.”²⁸

The important Council of Laodicea, which met about 360, forbade “the singing of uninspired [i.e., noncanonical] hymns in the church, and the reading of uncanonical books of Scripture” (canon 59). While these were not ecumenical councils, nearly one hundred years later, the Council of Chalcedon (451), the most important and largest of all the general councils, confirmed the Laodicean canons. We cite these decisions, not in order to promote exclusive psalmody, but to make the point that the Psalter clearly was the primary songbook of the early church: “From the earliest times the Christian community sang the Psalms following the practice of the synagogue,” says Mary Berry.²⁹

The use of psalms by medieval monastic orders (which typically sang their way through them each week), by the Reformers, and by all branches of Christendom testifies to the central role that the psalms should play in the life of a healthy Christian community. “The use of the Psalms in centuries of Christian worship is sufficient to show that . . . there is no part of the Old Testament in which the Christian finds himself more easily and more completely at home,” says J. A. Motyer.³⁰ *The New Bible Dictionary* chimes in: “Moreover from earliest times the Psalter has been both the hymn-book and the prayer book of the Christian Church.”³¹

THE PSALMS SUNG

Perhaps it would be wise to pause at this point and collect our thoughts. We have, after all, told only half of the story. But given the woeful ignorance of the Psalter in our day, it is a story that had to be told. It may be that some are now persuaded to give more emphasis to the psalms in public worship. It may even be that most of our readers have been persuaded of this all along. What remains unproven, they might say, is the argument that they must be *sung*. Why not just read them, even read them responsively?

Our answer would be that reading the psalms should be encouraged, not disparaged. But better yet is to use a thing in the manner for which it has

been designed. My son may say, “But, Daddy, I like to ride my two-wheel bike by dangling my feet to the ground and pushing myself along.” I would answer him, “You can do that and enjoy yourself, but it works so much better if you use the pedals for their real purpose.” Given the texts that specify that psalms were sung or are to be sung (Acts 4:24–26; 1 Cor. 14:15, 26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; James 5:13) and given the testimonies from the early church that they were sung (Tertullian, Eusebius, Athanasius, Augustine, Jerome, and Chrysostom), we would answer the psalms were made to be sung. They are not merely a collection of the poems to be recited. They are songs to be sung. “The Psalms may be spoken,” says Westermeyer, “but they cry out to be sung.”³² That in itself is worth pondering. “The Psalms are poems,” adds C. S. Lewis, “and poems intended to be sung.”³³

The command to sing is the most frequently repeated command found in Scripture. Thirty-nine times we are commanded to sing. Thirty-two additional times we declare that we will sing (e.g., Pss. 30:4; 47:6–7; 66:1–2; 81:1; 100:1–2; 149:1; Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:18–19). “No command is more frequently and emphatically imposed upon God’s people in the Old Testament than is the duty of singing praise to God. In the New Testament these commands are renewed and made emphatic.”³⁴ It would seem that God is keenly interested in both *that* we sing and *what* we sing: “Language in the form of a command could not insist more clearly and distinctly upon the duty of singing praise to God.”³⁵

Singing must have its own inherent properties that God values. So we ask, What is it about singing that God values? What are its positive properties? This is a subject concerning which evangelical Christians have paid little attention. The two components of song, words and tunes, are both almost universally assumed to be secondary issues, matters of taste or personal preference. Many ministers, who typically have the highest level of theological and pastoral training in a given congregation, turn music matters over to music directors and worship teams. He may have no opinions on these things at all. This indifference flies in the face of the common consent of humanity going back to the Greeks, Hebrews, Reformers, and Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophers and scholars. Carson Holloway demonstrates the utmost seriousness with which the philosophers from Plato to Aristotle to Rousseau to Nietzsche have taken music. He notes the “lack of seriousness” today “about music and a failure to come to grips with its power.”³⁶ By way of contrast, in his *Republic* Plato gives the first

place in education to music because of the capacity of “rhythm and harmony” to “insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul” and “most vigorously lay hold of it.”³⁷ Aristotle argues much the same, observing that “we are altered in soul when we listen to such things.”³⁸ Essentially their argument was that good music has the capacity to order and discipline the soul, teaching young people in particular to practice restraint and self-control. Control of one’s passions and impulses makes a life lived for noble ends possible since it frees one from the disordered and random pursuit of immediate gratification. Bad music, however, has the opposite effect. It breaks down discipline and encourages the casting off of restraint, resulting in a disordered and consequently unworthy manner of living.

The Reformers (Calvin³⁹ in particular) were very attuned to this power in music. Building upon the thought of Augustine, Calvin recognizes that music is a “gift of God” whose aim is “recreating man and giving him pleasure.” However, he urges its moderate use lest it become the “occasion for our giving free reign to dissolution, or making ourselves effeminate in disordered heights” or “become the instrument of lasciviousness” and “shamelessness.” Taking a cue from Plato (whom he names) Calvin observes: “There is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men, as Plato prudently considered it. And, in fact, we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another.”

Because of this “incredible power,” the use of music ought to be carefully regulated. Calvin cites the precedent of the “ancient doctors of the church” who denounced the “dishonest and shameless songs” to which their contemporaries were “addicted” as “mortal and Satanic poison for corrupting the world.” He distinguishes words from tunes, arguing that when bad words are joined to appealing melodies, the song “pierces the heart much more strongly, and enters into it, in a like manner as through a funnel, the wine is poured into the vessel; so also the venom and the corruption is distilled to the depths of the heart by the melody.”

Calvin’s solution to this potential corruption is words that God himself selected and tunes that are appropriate. Respecting the words he said:

Moreover, that which St. Augustine has said is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from him. Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly, and searched here and there, 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. And moreover, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory.

Regarding tunes:

Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but that it have weight and majesty (as St. Augustine says), and also, there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain men at table and in their houses, and the Psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels.

In contrast to the world, whose songs are “in part vain and frivolous, in part stupid and dull, in part foul and vile, and in consequence evil and harmful,” Calvin insists that psalm-singing Reformed Christians should use melodies that are “appropriate to the subject” and “proper for singing in the Church.” The church, in other words, is to have its own distinctive music that is, unlike that of the world, characterized by “weight and majesty.”

A narrow biblicist might object that “the Bible says nothing about this alleged power of music” or about the suitability of one kind of music over another. Calvin and his tribe might respond that this is a matter of wisdom. The Bible says nothing about the relative properties of rocks, sand, and buildings, yet Jesus expects us to be wise about the nature of things and build accordingly (Matt. 7:24–27). The Bible says nothing about the relative properties of wine and wineskins, yet Jesus expects that we should be shrewd enough observers of the nature of things to know not to put new wine into old wineskins (9:16–17). The essence of biblical wisdom is this understanding of the nature of things: whether one is a farmer (Prov. 10:5–6; 12:11), shepherd (27:23), orchardist (27:18), a person walking down the street (7:6–23), or an attendant of the king (23:1–2; 25:6–7), one is to carefully discern the nature of people, things, and circumstances and bring one’s life into conformity with the realities uncovered. Consequently the wise person will pay attention to the relative properties of music and human nature and draw correct conclusions about its power to influence and corrupt. It has not been wise of evangelicals to ignore the issues raised by tunes, words, and tunes and words in combination.⁴⁰ Regrettably, those who raise

concerns are often branded as elitists, legalists, and narrow-minded fundamentalists and ignored.⁴¹

One might summarize the commonly noted properties of music as follows:

1. Music has the power to move and express the emotions. Even as David was able to soothe Saul's troubled spirit with his harp (1 Sam. 16:23), so there is music that saddens, gladdens, arouses a martial spirit, entices lust, readies for sleep, and so on. Music may both arouse the whole range of human emotions and provide a vehicle for expressing them when they are already present.
2. Music has the power to stimulate the memory. As anyone who learned the A-B-C song knows, music is a great aid to the memory.
3. Music has the power to discipline or corrupt the soul. This at least is the argument of the philosophers and theologians. Good music—that which consists of ennobling lyrics and moderate tunes—edifies and disciplines the soul. Bad music—that which consists of unworthy lyrics and tunes—inflames the passions, breaks down restraint, and corrupts the soul.

Thus the right words (God's own) with appropriate tunes are a powerful tool of sanctification. This is the primary virtue of the psalms. They carry all the sanctifying power of God's word, but driven more deeply still into the soul by the music. So God commands, "Sing!" But it is critical that these things be kept in proper proportion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sing the Biblical Psalms

Why sing biblical psalms? Because psalms are God's word and as such possess all the power of inspired Scripture. Those who are not currently singing psalms as a regular part of public worship might perhaps ask the question: What is worship? Or more to the point: What are we to do in worship? The correct answer is twofold: we listen as God speaks to us in his word; and we speak back to him in the way that he himself commanded. This includes using the language that he provided ("Lord, teach us to pray"). New Testament worship is both spiritual and simple (John 4:20–26). We simply:

1. Listen as God speaks to us:
 - ✧ read the Bible
 - ✧ preach the Bible
 - ✧ administer the “visible word” (as Augustine called the sacraments)
2. Speak back to God in the language he has provided:
 - ✧ pray the Bible
 - ✧ sing the Bible⁴²

The reason for this Bible centeredness is obvious: faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17). It is by the word that we are born again (1 Peter 1:23–25). We grow by the “pure milk of the word” (2:2). We are sanctified by the truth of God’s word (John 17:17). God’s word is profitable and equips us for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17). God’s word is “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword . . . and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). It is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). It is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16; cf. 1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thess. 1:5.) It performs its work in us (2:13). It is “like fire . . . and like a hammer which shatters a rock” (Jer. 23:29). It does not return void, God says, “without accomplishing what I desire, / and without succeeding *in the matter* for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). If these things are so and if today’s Christians believe them, then why have the innovations in worship of the past fifty years gradually reduced the biblical content of evangelical Protestant worship services? Less Bible is read, preached, prayed, sung, and administered. One might quibble about particular churches and particular practices, but the trajectory is emphatically undeniable. Our particular concern is the word sung. The transition in the church from the metrical psalms of the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries to the classic hymns of the eighteenth century (e.g., Watts, Newton, Cowper, Wesley) to the gospel songs of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries to the Scripture songs of today demonstrates a dramatic reduction of the theological and biblical content of the church’s songs. If God’s word has the converting, sanctifying, and edifying properties noted above, this reduction is a spiritually disastrous development that begs to be reversed. As the psalms are sung, their converting and sanctifying power will be released.

Sing Whole Psalms and the Whole Psalter

It will not do merely to sing psalm fragments. John D. Witvliet points out that one of the distinguishing dynamics of Reformation-era psalm singing was “the singing of whole or large portions of individual Psalms rather than the versicles used in the medieval Mass.”⁴³ Regrettably “versicles,” or fragments of psalms, are virtually all that have been available in recent years. This is true of the partial collections of psalms (containing sixty-five to eighty psalm settings) found in the Presbyterian hymnals of the last century (e.g., *The Presbyterian Hymnal* [1933], *The Hymnbook* [1955], *Trinity Hymnal* [1961, 1980]), as well as what Old calls their compilers’ “too prissy” editing of those that were included. With regard to the imprecatory psalms, Old says that *The Presbyterian Hymnal* “went much too far in trying to clean up the treasury of David.”⁴⁴ This criticism would also include the practice of isolating particular verses of psalms to be sung, as in many of today’s Scripture songs. To sing psalms is to sing the Psalter. The Book of Psalms as a whole is characterized by the theological, christological, and experiential wholeness noted above. It was given by the Holy Spirit as a complete collection whose strengths are collective—laments not isolated from praise, imprecations not isolated from confessions of sin—but all together. The whole gospel of the whole Christ is found in the whole Psalter. Our recommendation is that churches commit to singing at least one psalm in every service of worship.⁴⁵

Sing Psalms with Appropriate Tunes

The key word with regard to tunes is “appropriate.” Can this ever be anything other than a subjective judgment, a personal opinion, or preference? Indeed it can be and must be. The Scriptures regularly ask us to make judgments on the basis of what is proper or fitting. This includes such things as hair length (1 Cor. 11:14), speech (Titus 2:1), and clothing (1 Tim. 2:9–10). Most of our decisions in life, including worship, are wisdom issues:

- ✧ what to say or not say
- ✧ what to wear or not wear
- ✧ what it means to love my neighbor in a given situation
- ✧ what it means to live with my spouse in an understanding way
- ✧ what it means to practice wise stewardship
- ✧ what it means to let my mind dwell on things that are excellent and lovely (Phil. 4:8)

In each of these cases wise judgments must be made. Miss the mark, and one falls into sin. Say something unseemly or unkind, wear something immodest, fail to love or be understanding or make the most of my time or resources (Eph. 5:15–16), or become absorbed with the unlovely, the unworthy, and the mediocre, and I fall short of the will of God.

It is no different with worship and music. The music we use must be lovely, excellent, and appropriate. This outlook is clearly behind Calvin's distinction (noted above) between tunes that are light and frivolous and those that have weight and majesty. The latter have a place in worship conducted in church "in the presence of God and his angels," the former do not. The tunes used in singing psalms should underscore the message. Music, as Luther said, is the handmaiden of theology. This leads to the following principles:

1. The tunes should be well crafted (Ps. 33:3), blending melody, harmony, and rhythm in balanced proportions.
2. The tunes should be lovely (Phil. 4:8), exhibiting true beauty by reflecting the beauty of God (Pss. 27:4; 50:2; 96:6).
3. The tunes should be universal in their appeal. By this I mean that they should avoid narrow generational or cultural classification in the same way that the psalms transcend sect, race, generation, and party. The psalms are truly catholic, the songs of the whole church, not merely of Watts and the evangelicals, of Keble and the high church, of Sankey and the revivalists, or of Maranatha Music and the charismatics. The best tunes in our hymnals, psalters, and songbooks do just this. Because they tap into universal aesthetic principles, they transcend the "cultural moment"—the time, place, and group out of which they have arisen—and appeal broadly.⁴⁶ Whether our tunes have medieval Jewish, Greek, or Latin roots or arise out of the timeless European folk traditions or are of African, Asian, Latin American, or contemporary origins, they should appeal beyond the circumstances of their composition.
4. The tunes should be emotionally suited to the words. Centuries ago Augustine wrestled with the relationship between the words and the tune. He was eager in the first instance that the tune should never overpower the words. Indeed in his *Confessions* he labels it "a grievous sin" when he finds "the singing itself more moving than the

- truth which it conveys.”⁴⁷ He also argued that the tune should fit the words, the sound corresponding to the mood communicated by the words. Augustine’s view is that “there are particular modes in song and in the voice, corresponding to my various emotions and able to stimulate them because of the mysterious relationship between the two.”⁴⁸ The tunes should fit the words, matching their mood or tone.
5. The tunes should be singable. That is, they should not be beyond the reach of the congregations. They should not be overly difficult because of complexity or what Witvliet calls “idiosyncratic rhythms.”⁴⁹ Neither should they be comparatively trite, insulting the taste and ability of the congregation (what we might call the “Deep and Wide” phenomena). Again, wisdom is needed.

INCLUSIVE HYMNODY

Most churches today practice exclusive hymnody or exclusive “chorus-ody.” They sing only hymns or choruses and rarely or never sing whole psalms. The subject of this essay is inclusive psalmody. The word *inclusive* is a play on the word *exclusive*, which refers to the position of those who say that only psalms may be sung in worship. Inclusive, then, means that psalm singers need to be persuaded to include some hymns in their worship. Clearly this is not the focus of our concern. What we really are arguing is for exclusive hymnody to become inclusive hymnody—hymnody that makes room for the practice of the psalm singing. Today few evangelical congregations ever sing metrical psalms outside of the obligatory Psalm 100 (“All People That on Earth Do Dwell”) and Psalm 23 in the Scottish metrical version (“The Lord’s My Shepherd”). The standard evangelical hymnals have few psalm versions if any beyond these two.⁵⁰ If persuading psalm singers to begin singing hymns is a crying need, we will leave it to others to make the case. Our goal is to persuade the thousands and thousands of exclusively hymn-singing congregations to begin singing psalms. There remains for us yet two tasks before we complete this work: first, to summarize our argument; second, to answer pragmatic concerns.

Let me summarize our arguments for psalm singing:

1. Psalm singing is biblical. The songs we wish to sing are the canonical psalms, given by the Holy Spirit to be sung. Moreover, we are

- commanded to sing psalms and are given examples of the New Testament churches singing them.
2. Psalm singing is historical. It was the practice of the early church (as attested by the church fathers), of the medieval monastic orders, of the Reformers, and of virtually all Protestants until the middle of the nineteenth century.
 3. Psalm singing is beneficial. Because the psalms are Scripture, they partake of all of the inherent spiritual virtues of Scripture to convert sinners and sanctify saints.
 4. Psalm singing is satisfying. Its theological, christological, and experiential richness provides God's people with the language with which to understand and express the vicissitudes of life. Nothing touches the hearts of God's people like the psalms, particularly sung.
 5. Psalm singing is unique. The act of singing (not merely reciting as poetry) the whole Psalter (not merely hymns or even psalm fragments), given the divinely balanced content of the Psalter as a whole, has a unique capacity to shape and mold a biblical piety. A distinctive contribution to the health and vitality of the body of Christ is made by the singing of psalms.

I will now attempt to answer the pragmatic concerns that might lie behind the neglect of the psalms today. Perhaps the primary reason why most evangelicals are not committed to psalm singing is ignorance. Few know that the psalms have been sung historically, and few have ever been exposed to its actual practice. We have long been convinced that those who try psalm singing grow to love it. But the chief secondary reasons for not singing the Psalms are probably pragmatic. Ministers and music leaders who know that they ought to sing them do not because they think that it will not work for one reason or another. They may be intimidated by their own lack of musical background. They may think that it would not be user friendly enough for a church interested in attracting visitors and growing. They may have a variety of objections such as preference for other forms of psalm usage or more contemporary musical forms. Let me try to answer some of these concerns.

Currently Available Versions of the Metrical Psalms Are Inadequate

The current metrical psalm versions that are available (e.g., *Trinity Psalter*, *Scottish Psalter*, *The Book of Psalms for Singing*, *Book of Praise*:

Anglo-Genevan Psalter) are better than those that are nonexistent. This point here is similar to that made by D. James Kennedy in answering critics of *Evangelism Explosion*: “I like the method of evangelism that I use better than the one which you do not use.” Traditional metrical psalm singing is not without its limitations, but complete psalters are available: for example, the *Trinity Psalter* (with whose publication I was involved) is ready to use today and contains every verse of all 150 psalms. Critics periodically note what they regard as the poetic weakness of English-language psalmody. One critic refers to “artlessly rhymed psalms”⁵¹ as characteristic of the whole tradition. Among the Scots, whose 1650 psalter is the primary English-language version and the basis for nearly all subsequent English-language psalters, the importance of poetic quality has long been debated. It needs to be noted, though, that compromises must always be made when moving from one language to another. English-language versions have always favored textual accuracy over poetic grace. For some observers this is a weakness; for others it is a virtue. When revisions were being considered in the early 1800s in Scotland, no less a literary authority than Sir Walter Scott shared little enthusiasm for the project. He argued that “the ornaments of poetry are not perhaps required in devotional exercises.” He claimed that though the old versions were “homely,” they were “plain, forceful, and intelligible,” possessing, he said, “a rude sort of majesty which perhaps would be ill exchanged for more elegance.” He urged that they be touched only with a “lenient hand.”⁵² “Literal simplicity” has been the goal of English-language psalmody rather than poetic grace. The very title page of the 1650 *Scottish Psalter* boasts, “The Psalms of David in metre, more plain, smooth, and agreeable to the Text than any heretofore.” As Millar Patrick points out, the aim has not been “to satisfy literary critics.”⁵³ Moreover, he claims, “Critics of weight have been found to praise these psalms because of the suitability of their style to the purpose they were meant to serve, and to regard their very lack of the smoother graces as a count in their favour.”⁵⁴ We would maintain the same point today. Current versions are suitable to the purpose that they were meant to serve, though certainly there is room for improvement. Better renderings may need to be written for some psalm versions. Better music may need to be composed for others (see below). But there is no sense in damning the imperfections of what we have now until there is something better with which to replace it. Any such replacement is at least a decade away even if a monumental effort were begun today.

Musical Forms Associated with Metrical Psalm Singing Are Outdated

The form of the psalm itself will determine to a significant degree the form of the music. The hymn/psalm tune style has developed over many centuries to its present form. It is the best style or form of music for congregational singing that the church has been able to produce given the requirements of the psalm form. Specifically, a psalm is a song that develops a theme over multiple lines and stanzas, using minimal repetition (e.g., Pss. 57, 99, 136). Consequently, if the psalms are to be sung, then musical forms must be developed that are multistanza, multiline, with multiple beats, syllables, or words to each line. Tunes must be capable of handling sentences long enough to express a thought, enough lines to develop the thought, and enough stanzas to complete the thought, while remaining singable by congregations. They must look, in other words, like the hymn-tune form that Christendom has developed over the past two thousand years. This has nothing to do with when the tunes were written. Indeed the hope is that the current generation will add quality tunes to the current musical treasury of the church. There may be other forms that may serve the church equally well, but they have yet to be developed. If they exist, we have yet to discover them.

Chanting Is a Better Form of Psalm Usage Than Singing

Some readers will find psalm chanting to be a remote issue, given the relative difficulty of chanting and the minuscule interest in it. But since some raise the issue we will try to answer it. Chanting has the advantage of leaving the prose text unchanged and making the “music” fit the text rather than the text fit the music. This advantage seems significant at first, but upon reflection is less so than initially thought. The reasons are as follows:

1. Compromises inherent in the process of translating songs and poetry from one language to another go beyond the problems associated with translating prose. Rhyme, rhythm, cadence, wordplays, and letterplays are often lost. A strict English translation may literally convey the meaning of the text, but may not be its “dynamic equivalent,” to use a term employed by translators. What is the dynamic equivalent in modern English of the songs of the ancient Hebrews? It may be that rhymed and metered renderings do a bet-

ter job of conveying Hebrew poetry and song than do more prosaic chant versions. What our culture sings is typically rhymed. What our culture sings collectively usually follows a regular meter for the sake of simplicity and group participation. Moreover the metrical psalms in the English/Scottish tradition purport to be rhymed and metered translations. They were not viewed as paraphrases but as translations, though translated in a scheme of meter and rhyme. French metrical psalms were more like paraphrases. English language psalmody sticks close to the original text.

2. Chants are difficult. Witvliet points out that Calvin deliberately promoted metrical psalmody over the current Roman Catholic psalmody in which the actual words of the biblical text were used. He favored a poetic reworking of the text because, says Witvliet, “the Psalms needed to be rendered in a singable musical form and metrical psalmody was judged to be the most singable.”⁵⁵ A fundamental principle of Protestant worship is simplicity. Whatever songs are sung in church must be simple enough to be sung by ordinary laypeople. Congregations rarely, if ever, are able to master chants. The history of their use follows a straight line from their introduction to the formation of specialized choirs that alone were able to sing them properly. Rare is the layperson or congregation that can sing them well.⁵⁶ If our goal is congregational singing, chanting is probably not a viable option.
3. Chanting lacks the dynamic of singing. It lacks the emotional punch, the power to move the passions that is characteristic of singing. We might even ask, in what sense is chanting singing? Of course it falls broadly under the category of song, but it is called chanting because it is significantly unlike singing. Its lack of regular rhythm distinguishes it from ordinary song and the powerful emotive impact that results when we make a “melody” in our heart (Eph. 5:19).⁵⁷

Psalm Singing Inhibits Church Growth

In response to the issue that psalm singing inhibits church growth, let me ask, Will Bible reading inhibit church growth? Will Bible exposition? Will biblical praying? Regrettably there are those whose answer to all of the above is yes. Consequently they have eliminated all but token elements of

each in their services of public worship. To such we really have nothing to say. The Bible either has converting and sanctifying power or it does not. If faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17), then the key to creating and building faith in sinners and saints is God's word. Psalm singing will build the kingdom of God. That does not mean that there is not a learning curve. That does not mean that one does not need to proceed slowly and wisely in introducing new words and music. But unless one has lost all confidence in the power of God's word, the question of church growth should not be an issue.

We could also point to historical precedent. Church growth? Yes, indeed. Partial versions of the *Genevan Psalter* were published in 1542 and 1547. They were instantly embraced by the French refugees streaming into Geneva in large numbers. Louis F. Benson, the leading hymnologist of a previous generation, wrote a series of scholarly articles in 1909 for the *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* entitled "John Calvin and the Psalmody of the Reformed Churches."⁵⁸ In these articles he discusses the impact that the *Genevan Psalter* had upon the French exiles in Geneva as they first encountered psalm singing:

The sight of the great congregation gathered in St. Peters, 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.⁵⁹

As these refugees flowed in and out of France, they took with them a love for the psalms that they had learned in Geneva. By 1553 the Genevan psalms were sung in all of the Protestant churches of France.⁶⁰ In 1559 the *Genevan Psalter* became the official hymnal of the Reformed churches of France. Rather than inhibiting the growth of the French churches, the psalms played a great part in "spreading the Genevan doctrines in France," says Benson.⁶¹ When the first complete edition was published in 1562, it was immediately consumed, going through twenty-five editions in its first year of publication.⁶² Yet during this time of fervent devotion to the psalms, the French church grew with extraordinary speed. In 1555 there were 5 underground churches in France. By 1559 the number had jumped to more than 100. By 1562 there were estimated to be more than 2,150 churches established

in France with approximately three million attending.⁶³ Growth from 5 to 2,150 in only seven years is phenomenal growth by anyone's standard, not in spite of, but in part because of psalm singing. Witvliet maintains that "metrical Psalm-singing was a maker of the Reformation."⁶⁴ It popularized Reformed piety, "opening up the Scriptures to the laity,"⁶⁵ says Miriam Chrisman. Joining the sermon and catechism, says Witvliet, it was one of "the chief means of spiritual formation."⁶⁶ There is no reason, besides blinding personal preference, for thinking that psalm singing is not compatible with church growth today.

In addition to all the reasons for returning to psalm singing argued in the preceding pages, we would also note that we are, in one sense, only urging that evangelical Christians return to their roots. Most Christians of the conservative or Bible-believing sort are keenly aware that the cultural trends of the last hundred or more years, and especially of the last fifty years, have not been conducive to serious Christian discipleship. Evangelical Christianity has struggled to stay afloat among the flood of secular, materialistic, and hedonistic influences. A bolder, more militant spirituality is needed if we are to meet the challenges of today with the same courage and resolve as did our ancestors. The psalms will nurture such a piety, stiffening the resolve of Christians today as they did in the past. All evangelical Protestant denominations have psalm-singing roots. Let's briefly review the story.

The early French and Swiss Protestants, under the leadership of Zwingli and Farel, made no provision for congregational singing in their liturgies. Calvin first urged the singing of psalms in his Articles of Church Order presented to the Genevan civil authorities in January 1537. At the time, no singable version of the psalms existed. Over the next twenty-five years, through his urging the metrical versions of Clément Marot (the leading poet of his day) and of Theodore Beza (Calvin's assistant in Geneva) were collected. They were joined to tunes written by Louis Bourgeois and others. In 1562 the complete *Genevan Psalter* was ready. As noted above, it proved to be a providential benefit for the French Protestants, as attempts at reconciliation with Rome and the French crown failed and civil war broke out that very year. "They found in it," Benson says, "a well opened in the desert, from which they drew consolation under persecution, strength to resist valiantly the enemies of their faith; with the assured conviction that God was fighting for them, and also (it must be added) would be revenged against their foes."⁶⁷ "To know the Psalms," says Benson, "became a primary

duty” for the Huguenots, as French Protestants became known. The powerful appeal of the psalms sung “made Psalmody as much a part of the daily life as of public worship.” Families at home and men and women in the workplace or engaged in daily tasks were recognized as French Protestants because they were overhead singing psalms. “The Psalter became to them the manual of the spiritual life.” Moreover, the psalter “ingrained its own characteristics deep in the Huguenot character and had a great part in making it what it was,” says Benson. For 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.

A similar story can be told of the Scottish Presbyterians. As John Knox and other Protestant refugees returned to Scotland from exile in Geneva in the late 1550s, they came with a zeal for an English-language psalter corresponding to the *Genevan Psalter*. The result eventually was the *Scottish Psalter* of 1564, then of 1635, and finally of 1650. The last of these became the standard psalter for the Scots and “passed straight into the affections of the common people.”⁶⁸ “It was a godsend,” Patrick says, published a few years before the enormous suffering of the “Killing Times” (1668–88), by which time “it had won its place in the people’s hearts, and its lines were so deeply imprinted upon their memories that it is always the language thus given them for the expression of their emotions, which in the great hours we find upon their lips.” Note what he says: the language that they used to interpret and express their experience was the language of the psalms that they sang. Patrick continues: “You can imagine what it would be to them. 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.”

They turned to their psalms, Patrick says, “to sustain their souls in hours

of anxiety and peril,” and from them they “drew the language of strength and consolation.” He continues: “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, Patrick says, “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 and save their country’s liberties from defeat.”

The singing of psalms has been an important part of the “strength and consolation” of all the churches. The Reformed and Presbyterian churches were exclusively psalm singing for over 250 years, as were the Congregationalists and Baptists. The first book published in North America was a psalter. The enormously popular *Bay Psalm Book* (1640) was the hymnal of American Puritanism, undergoing seventy printings through 1773. When the *Bay Psalm Book* and the favorite among Scots-Irish immigrants, the 1650 *Scottish Psalter*, were eventually superseded, it was by a book that purported to be yet another psalter: Isaac Watts’s *Psalms of David Imitated* (1719). Ironically Watts’s hymns and psalm paraphrases were the primary vehicle through which hymns finally were accepted into the public worship of Protestants. Yet even then it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that hymns began to overtake the psalms in popular use. In addition to the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists, the Anglican and Episcopal churches boast a 300-year history of exclusive psalmody, singing first from Sternhold and Hopkin’s *Old Version* (1547, 1557), then from Tate and Brady’s *New Version* (1696, 1698). Not until the publication of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* in 1861 did hymns gain entrance to the Anglican liturgy.

Our ancestors were psalm singers! The Psalter gave to their faith the bold, robust quality that we still admire today. A revival of their use has begun in our time. May it continue with vigor and may the modest hopes of Dr. Boice be fulfilled. Perhaps we will yet see the “praise songs of the Psalter . . . used in worship more often than they are.”⁶⁹ Indeed, may they become a fixed element in the worship of evangelical Christians once more.