

## Psalm-Singing Churches? (Part 1)

By W.L. Bredenhof

When it comes to discussions about worship and liturgy, we sometimes hear the statement that we are psalm-singing churches. But what exactly does that mean? That's a good question because any church with Psalm 23 in its hymnal might be able to make the same claim – which would mean that a lot of churches are psalm-singing churches. However, that's not what we mean. We recognize quite readily that one psalm or even several snippets of psalms (as often happens in so-called praise and worship music) does not a psalm-singing church make. In this series of articles, I want to explore what it means to be psalm-singing churches. In my view, there are at least three components.

First, it means that the psalms are given priority in our singing because they are God's Word given to the church for singing. God himself designed these songs to be sung by his people. The thoughtful minister will keep this priority in mind as he selects the music for public worship services. It's potentially problematic if hymns begin to predominate. On the other hand, one can never go wrong in selecting only psalms. The congregation may not appreciate it (for whatever reason) and it may not be wise, but there is nothing inherently wrong or unethical with singing only psalms. Quite the contrary!

There is a historical background to this and it stretches back to the Reformation and before. While the early Reformed churches in Europe were not exclusive psalmodists, they did give the highest priority to the psalms and consequently the psalms made up the bulk of their congregational singing. In fact, the singing of uninspired hymns was rare to non-existent. In the old blue *Book of Praise* (1972), there was a quote from John Calvin on congregational singing at the front. Notice how Calvin appeals to the early church, particularly to Augustine:

*As for public prayers, there are two kinds: the one consists simply of speech, the other of song...And indeed, we know from experience that singing has great strength and power to move and to set on fire the hearts of men in order that they may call upon God and praise him with a more vehement and more ardent zeal. It is to be remembered always that this singing should not be light or frivolous, but that it ought to have weight and majesty...Now, what Augustine says is true, namely that no one can sing anything worthy of God that he has not received from him. Therefore, even after we have carefully searched everywhere, we shall not find better or more appropriate songs to this end than the Psalms of David, inspired by the Holy Spirit. And for this reason, when we sing them, we are assured that God puts the words in our mouth, as if he himself were singing through us to exalt his glory.*

It is deeply regrettable that later editions of the *Book of Praise* dropped this quote.

In the years after the Reformation, the emphasis continued to be on psalm-singing, with some allowances made for hymns derived from Holy Scripture. This is readily evident in some of the early Dutch Reformed Synod decisions:

**Synod of Dort, 1578, article 76:** "The Psalms of David in the edition of Petrus Dathenus, shall be in the Christian meetings of the Netherlands churches (as has been done until now) sung, abandoning the hymns which are not found in Holy Scripture."

**Synod of Middelburg , 1581, article 51:** "Only the Psalms of David shall be sung in the church, omitting the hymns which one cannot find in Holy Scripture."

**Synod of 's Gravenhage, 1586, article 62:** "The Psalms of David shall be sung in the churches, omitting the hymns which one does not find in Holy Scripture."

**Synod of Dort, 1618-19, session 162:** "In the Church only the 150 Psalms of David shall be sung. The 10 Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Articles of Faith, the Songs of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, the hymn 'O God who is our Father,' and so on, shall be left in the freedom of the churches, whether they want to use them or not, as they see fit. The rest of the songs shall be taken out of the church, and similarly any which have previously been imported into the church shall be omitted in the most decent way possible."

Despite these good intentions, by the early nineteenth century the Reformed churches had all but abandoned psalm-singing in favour of uninspired hymns. This was not an isolated development, but went hand-in-hand with an abandonment of the confessions and indeed, of the gospel itself.

During the 1830s, a Reformation took place (known as the Secession or *Afscheiding*). As part of that Reformation, the practice of congregational psalm-singing was recovered. The synodical decisions quoted above were rediscovered and republished by men like Hendrik de Cock. In fact, some of the Secession leaders (such as de Cock) essentially went in the direction of exclusive psalmody. This is why some of the churches descended from the Secession hold that practice to this day – churches such as the Free Reformed and the Protestant Reformed.

Of course, the Canadian Reformed churches are also descended from the Secession. However, we also have other elements in our pedigree (such as the Doleantie of 1886) and that partly explains why we are not exclusive psalmodists. Nevertheless, while allowing for Biblical hymns, we continue the Reformed practice of giving priority to the psalms.

In the next instalment, we'll consider the second characteristic of psalm-singing churches.

## Psalm-singing Churches? (Part 2)

By W.L. Bredenhof

In the first instalment of this brief series, we considered that psalm-singing churches are characterized by the priority given to the singing of psalms.

Next, it means that *in principle* we sing all the psalms. As a university student, I had a Jewish Hebrew professor who gently mocked Christian churches for their squeamishness about so many of the psalms. He said that he had never seen a Psalter used by Christians that included a straight-forward rendition of Psalm 137, babies being smashed against the rocks and all. He was not a little surprised to hear about the Canadian Reformed *Book of Praise*.

Of course, in practice, how often do we sing Psalm 137? Like many of my colleagues, I keep track of the number of times that I pick a psalm for public worship and I have selected this psalm once, and that was only because I was preaching on it. Now I should say that there could be other appropriate times to select it. For instance, one could select this psalm in connection with Lord's Day 21 – after all, it is a psalm about love for the church. Perhaps one could also select it then for the beginning or end of a worship service. Doing so, however, would definitely mean that a minute or two of explanation would be in order. In fact, that holds true for many of the psalms.

There is often a dissonance or a disconnect between the psalms and our contemporary understanding of the Christian life and that may prevent us from a meaningful “off-the-shelf” use of the psalms in our public worship. Think about it: almost anyone can see that most of the 150 psalms are laments. Where can we find a place for lamenting? Or does the fact that we can't envision lamenting as part of public worship indicate some deficiency in how we conceive of worship, or perhaps how we have been adversely influenced by our therapeutic culture and, more particularly, the broader “Christian” sub-culture? The psalms are there to teach us how to communicate with God and how to relate to him in all the weals and woes of life. When the church ignores large portions of the Psalter and fails or refuses to sing them, are not God's people being impoverished? Are they not being deprived of the voices that will lead them to respond biblically to adversity?

So, *in principle*, we sing all the psalms. Historically, we have recognized that all the psalms are appropriate for Christian public worship because God himself has said that they are appropriate. That is why we have a complete Psalter with all 150 psalms. We have not deleted the parts that moderns (or post-moderns) may find offensive. It could be argued that some of our renditions leave something to be desired in terms of faithfulness to the original Hebrew, but also that is in the process of being remedied at this very moment.

My Hebrew professor was wrong in his generalization about Christian Psalters, but he was correct in putting his finger on Christian squeamishness about the psalms. There is no sound Biblical reason for it. The psalms are God's inerrant Word. They are inspired compositions given to the people of God for worship. They are God's Word given to teach us, to reprove us,

to correct us, to instruct us in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16-17). They are God's Word given to us so that we can encourage, teach, and admonish one another as we sing (Eph. 5:19, Col.3:16). The psalms are infallible witnesses to us of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44). When we hold the psalms and psalm-singing in contempt, we are holding God's Word in contempt and that is **always** a bad idea.

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Psalm 137 (mentioned in the above article) is an imprecatory psalm. For more information about imprecatory psalms and their use in the Christian church (including worship), I highly recommend *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*, James E. Adams (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1991).

## Psalm-singing Churches? (Part 3)

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In this brief series so far, I have argued that a psalm-singing church makes the singing of psalms a priority and also, *in principle*, sings all the psalms. A final characteristic of a psalm-singing church is that it encourages and promotes psalm-singing, not only in the public worship services and other official activities of the church, but throughout the lives of believers. Let me illustrate with a few examples.

When it comes to evangelistic outreach/missions, a psalm-singing church is not ashamed of the psalms, but gladly, enthusiastically, and zealously uses them. We don't hide our Books of Praise under the proverbial bushels, but keep them out in the open and eagerly use them. After all, we recognize that the psalms are God's Word and the Spirit works with the Word to produce faith.

Some might say that the psalms are inappropriate for evangelistic contexts because they were written for God's covenant people. However, that argument proves too much because in fact the entire Bible was written for God's covenant people. If that argument is correct, then actually the entire Bible is inappropriate for evangelistic contexts. I'm sure no one wants to take that absurd position.

No, a psalm-singing church is going to be unabashedly singing the psalms in missionary milieus as well. As we do so, a lot of explanation and teaching will have to take place. If believers in established churches frequently need these explanations, how much more a new believer or someone on their way to becoming a believer?

This all boils down to what we are actually trying to accomplish in our missionary and outreach efforts. Is our goal to see people believe the gospel and be brought into Christ's church (where the psalms are sung) or to establish a Reformed church (where psalms are going to be sung)? If that's our goal, then it's only appropriate that we begin with the end in mind. Some have tried to use other songs to introduce people to our Reformed churches. When (or: if) they finally attend a Reformed worship service, they wonder what happened to the music they loved so much from the program they had been involved with. We call that "bait-and-switch." If our goal is to bring people into our churches as members (which it should be), I would argue that bait-and-switch tactics can have no place in our evangelistic outreach.

Next, a psalm-singing church is going to love singing psalms in its group Bible studies. If the focus of these groups is the Bible (as well it should be), then why not also sing from the Bible and discuss what's being sung? Why not use these inspired and inerrant songs to encourage one another and to reflect with one another on how they testify to us of the gospel of our Lord Jesus?

Finally, the families of a psalm-singing church are going to be singing the psalms in their homes with their children. We could never conceive of Sunday worship without singing, so how can

we have family worship without singing? Then we'll also want to use the riches of the psalms and teach these to our children.

Connected with that, we could think of the relationship between the family, the church, and the Christian school. We have a rich heritage of having Christian schools where memory work is assigned to the primary students. This memory work typically includes and even emphasizes the psalms. The parents in a psalm-singing church will guard this practice within the Christian school and encourage it.

Of course, what I've written in these articles portrays the ideal psalm-singing church. In reality, things may be a lot different. That may lead us to consider whether we're still psalm-singing churches or perhaps whether we're moving away from that. For instance, I wonder how many readers still regularly sing at all (to say nothing of singing psalms) during family devotions. Though I would love to be proven wrong, I have a hunch that it would be a very slim number. Moreover, it seems that the psalms are rarely used in missions and evangelism and, generally, the closer to home the less likely they are to be used.

Psalm-singing is one of the things that defines our identity as Reformed churches. It sets us apart from many others. But at the same time, it links our identity with the early church. With its emphasis on psalm-singing, the Reformation did not introduce anything new. From the time of the early church into the late middle ages and early sixteenth century, the church used very few non-canonical hymns. The Reformers continued this practice. The main change introduced by the Reformation was to have the congregation do the singing (rather than a choir) in the vernacular (rather than in Latin). There was no essential change in content – only a change in terms of who was doing the singing and in what language.

So, what does the future hold for psalm-singing in the Canadian Reformed churches? Do we have reason for optimism? To be sure, there are pressures to resist. There is laziness to surmount. There are negative attitudes to overcome. But at the end of the day, the psalms are still God's Word and his Word is guaranteed to prevail and to be treasured by his people – if not among us, then certainly among others. But, dear reader, wouldn't it be worlds better for us to treasure his Word (also in the psalms) and continue to be blessed by it?