

# Preface

An excerpt from *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship* by John Witvliet:

## **This brief book arises out of three observations.**

First, the Psalms are a font of inspiration, encouragement, and instruction in the life of both public and private prayer. From Basil to Bonhoeffer to Bono, the enthusiasm that emanates from wise Christian writers of every historical period points to the Psalms as one of richest sources of wisdom for the practice of worship and to the indispensability of the thoughtful use of the Psalms in the practice of worship. The historical testimonies found throughout this volume are a compelling call to recover the practice of praying the Psalms.

Second, there is relatively tepid enthusiasm for the Psalms in worship throughout vast stretches of North American Christianity. This is the bad news. Indeed, as I visit worship conferences and congregations across the spectrum of denominations, I often find great enthusiasm for a particular musical or dramatic setting of a Psalm, but relatively little interest in promoting a sustained program of publicly praying the Psalms (though there are notable exceptions). Many churches do use lectionary-based Psalms each week, but often they are rendered without enthusiasm or understanding.

Most often, those who dismiss the Psalms associate them with music they don't like, usually by mistakenly assuming that Psalmody necessarily entails either overly sumptuous Victorian choral harmonies, dirge-like chorales, sentimental folk music, or inaccessible chant. The good news is that this volume can catalogue hundreds of worship resources in many spoken, musical and visual idioms—so much so that nearly everyone will find resources here they will both love and hate. The last thirty years has witnessed an outpouring of

creativity! The problem is that these resources are not often used in a consistent way that encourages deep participation in worship. We live in a time of both need and opportunity in the practice of worship in general, but particularly with respect to the role of the Psalms in worship.

Third, we have unprecedented access to vast amounts of information about the Psalms, as well as copious resources for using them in worship. Taking into account all commentaries, introductions, devotionals, musical settings, and historical studies, there are now over 3000 volumes on the Psalms in print, in addition to thousands of websites. One goal of this work is to provide an orientation to this material. The quality of a good deal of this material is heartening. The challenge is putting this material to good use for the sake of the church.

## **Aims and Audience**

In light of these observations, this book is designed to be a catalyst for a renewed engagement with the Psalms in the context of public worship. My overarching goal is both to promote and to discipline the creativity we bring to praying the Psalms in community. With this goal in mind, I do not aim to provide a summary of all possible themes related to the Psalms, but rather to highlight those themes that bear especially on their use in worship. Specifically, I gather up insights from and provide some orientation to four bodies of literature that are often disconnected from each other:

- biblical scholarship on the Old Testament and Hebrew Bible,
- writings on the history, theology, and pastoral practice of worship, liturgy, and preaching,
- writings on the history and practice of church music, and

- currently available liturgical and musical resources.

Given the complexity of each body of material, I am very aware of how difficult it is to present a fair and balanced account of each, especially in a relatively brief publication. I already look forward to opportunities to revise this material in light of reader feedback and new and emerging resources that will be published in the next few years.

My primary intended audience consists of people who would be drawn to at least one of these four bodies of literature. The audience includes:

- students in courses in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, liturgy or worship, preaching, and church music, (my hope is that this is a brief enough volume to function as a supplemental text in any of these courses—and preferably, within a seminary, divinity school, or church-related college, it could be used in courses in each of these areas),
- practitioners in local congregations, including pastors, preachers, musicians, artists, worship planners and leaders, and church educators,
- scholars and teachers in one of these four areas, particularly among those looking for an orientation to the other fields,
- songwriters, artists, dramatists, hymnal and resource development committees, and publishers looking for access to a wide range of available resources and for strategies to help congregations pray the Psalms, and
- librarians (one good place for all readers to begin with this book is by talking with your school or congregational librarian about the resources described here. Relatively few libraries have strong holdings in each of the four literatures catalogued here).

Each of these audiences tend to read quite different books on the Psalms and to approach the Psalms in quite different ways. This volume offers some cross training to each group. With these multiple audiences,

each reader will likely find some sections that are of more interest than others. My hope is that each reader might discover some helpful insights from literature they might not normally read. This can be a “passageway” book: it will be well used if it leads readers to other fine sources.

Also, I have set aside the normal aversion to footnotes in short introductory volumes. My intention is that the footnotes serve as a guide to further research. Students who want to explore a topic found here could begin by studying noted material. The bibliography at the end of the volume is supplemental to the footnotes. I realize that producing a compressed digest of all this material makes the book a bit less lyrical than I might have liked. But if it leads readers to some of the wonderful scholarly, devotional, and artistic materials cited in the notes, it will have been worth the sacrifice.

Part of this more lyrical voice is also supplied by the interludes from major historical studies of the Psalms. Every one of these quotations qualifies as an “encomium,” an expression of high praise. In preparing this material, I was struck time and time again by how so many of the most significant pastoral and theological figures in the history of the church reserved some of their most glowing words of gratitude for the Psalms. This material not only introduces a rhapsodic tone to the book, but may also offer some quotable epigrams for course syllabi, congregational newsletters, or email signatures!

## **Ecumenical Audience**

I am also attempting to write this volume with an awareness of a very broad ecumenical range of practices, including lectionary-based Psalmody in Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian sources, Presbyterian and Reformed metrical Psalmody, and the growing use of the Psalter in evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic and emerging worship traditions. Our work at the Calvin Institute of

Christian Worship addresses congregations in nearly every Christian tradition. We aim to do so with strong confessional convictions shaped by our Reformed identity, but also with an eagerness to be in conversation with Christians in many traditions.

I begin with a vivid awareness of what radically different practices come to mind when readers across this spectrum of Christianity think about the Psalms in worship. Some readers will come from churches whose liturgy and music is quite fixed, liturgical, and well-established. Churches in this group frequently limit their use of Psalmody to Psalms recommended by the lectionary and limit their mode of rendering the Psalms to the published offerings of a favorite musical publisher. I hope that readers from these traditions will find questions in this material that will lead to new appreciation for historic practices, as well as approaches that suggest fitting improvisations that will enhance and deepen participation.

Others readers will come from congregations that pour enormous resources into creative worship expressions, generating new songs, dramatic scripts, video clips, and other elements of worship on a regular basis. I hope that readers from these congregations will reconsider the ancient Psalms as one of the most trustworthy sources and models for creativity in worship.

Perhaps the majority of readers will come from congregations with limited resources for worship, in terms of preparation time, musical or artistic talent, and collaborative planning processes. My hope is that these readers will discover here a resource or a way of rendering the Psalms that is at once accessible and challenging for their particular congregation.

It has also occurred to me that nearly every reader will find some of what follows to be a bit perplexing! Preachers who do not use, or are not aware of, the lectionary may not realize its value for their use. Lectionary users may not realize how much of the

Psalms they are missing in worship. Congregations who chant Psalms do not often read material about praise choruses. Emerging church leaders may not be aware of the outpouring of recent music in multiple musical styles for responsorial psalmody. Congregations with quite formal worship may not have considered using a speech choir alongside of an “anthem choir.” Congregations with informal worship may not have considered the value of careful study of the texts for public reading or singing. All of this means that readers will use this material in remarkably different ways, depending on where they find themselves in the broad Christian landscape.

The breadth of the intended audience has led me to a different approach to the topic than some volumes on this topic. Earlier volumes on the Psalms in worship, such as those by J.A. Lamb and Massey Sheperd, addressed an audience of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed congregations, and primarily outlined the history of liturgical development in West. My audience includes these traditions, but also includes congregations known variously as evangelical, free church, low-church, contemporary and/or emerging. In this context, a more topical approach seemed a wiser route, with historical examples interspersed occasionally throughout.

There are also inevitable limitations to the ecumenical scope of any volume. For example, this volume does not address in detail the role of Psalmody in Orthodox worship, in monastic worship, in worship in the global South and East. Perhaps there will be occasion to develop a second edition that more fully engages with these parts of the body of Christ.

Further, this book focuses primarily on a congregations’ weekly assembly for worship. I acknowledge and celebrate the tradition of daily public prayer that has provided the most regular setting for psalmody in many Christian traditions. I am eager to promote the recovery of public daily prayer, with copious Psalm singing. But for the majority of congregations in North America, the

primary focus for worship renewal remains the weekly (usually Sunday) assembly of the church.

This ecumenical approach has some downsides. The space of a brief book does not allow me to speak to the specifics of the liturgical use of the Psalms in any particular tradition—a Reformed or Methodist Lord’s Supper service, for example, or a Pentecostal prayer meeting, or a Catholic morning prayer service. It also does not provide me with the best context to speak in a sustained way about inclusive language translations. The nuances of that discussion across Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal communities are so complex that they easily could occupy a full volume on their own.

But this ecumenical approach also has some decided advantages. Over and over again, I have been struck by how the Psalms encompass both sides of some of the most striking divisions within Christian communities today. They speak of both social justice and personal transformation, they embody hand-clapping exuberance and profound introspection, they express the prayers of the exalted and the lowly, they are fully alive in the present, but always point to the future, they highlight the extravagance of grace and the joy of faithful obedience, they express a restless yearning for change and a profound gratitude for the inheritance of faith, they protest ritualism, but embody the richest expression of ritual prayer. It’s little wonder then that any journey into literature on the Psalms will quite quickly lead us to materials produced by neo-Puritan Calvinists, Catholic mystics, social justice activists, and Charismatic worship leaders. (Perhaps some of these groups can encounter each other through this book!).

A danger that results from this breadth is that we all have a bit of the Psalms to latch on to, regardless of our confessional identity or personal idiosyncrasies. At the same time, the good news is that the Psalms give each community and each believer an opportunity to work their weak sides, to develop habits and modes of prayer that do not come naturally.

Indeed, may God’s Spirit use this work to help us all work our weak sides, and to grow in us a deeper faith and more robust public prayer.