

Come to sing the Psalms:
Explaining the Sufficiency of the Psalms for Public Worship in the Chinese Church

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What is the most popular hymn in the Chinese churches now? It is certainly not the Psalms. Chinese Churches rarely sing Psalms for Public Worship. One of the reasons is that the Chinese churches do not recognize the Psalms as sufficient for public worship. Thus, this paper attempts to answer these questions: “What are the content and themes in the Psalms that satisfy Public Worship (An argument from Scripture)?” “What is the difference between psalms and hymns from a theological perspective (An argument from Theology)?” “What can we learn from the testimonies and experiences of previous churches about singing the Psalms in public worship? (An argument from History)?” “What does all this mean for the Chinese Churches?”

The Themes of Psalms for Public Worship

Christ in the Psalms

Some Chinese Churches would argue that they prefer to use hymns than Psalms in public worship because they want to worship Jesus, which suggests that there is no rich content about Christ in the Psalms. But, on the contrary, the Psalms are full of Christ.

First, the person of Christ is revealed in the Psalms. On the one hand, Christ is the Son of God (Ps. 2:6), Christ is GOD (Ps. 45:6-7), Christ is eternal, and He is the creator of the world (Ps. 102:25-27). On the other hand, Christ was cast on God from his birth (Ps. 22:9-10) and obeys the will of Father (Ps. 40:7-8), etc. The redemption of Jesus Christ is revealed in the Psalms. There is the crucifixion of Christ (Ps. 22:1-2,14), the sacrifice of Christ (Ps. 40:6-7), the resurrection of Christ (Ps. 16:10), the ascension of Christ (Ps. 80:17) and the second coming of

Christ (Ps. 50:3-6), etc.¹ Some may say that the Psalms about Christ are typological and prophetic, which is true. However, it should not be ignored that the various books of the Bible have the same author, the Holy Spirit. Understanding the Psalms in the context of the Bible as a whole, which does not suggest that the Psalms are insufficient. “It simply means that the Psalms must be read and sung in the light of their New Testament realization ...In a very real sense, then, the Psalms are far more appropriate to the New than to the Old Dispensation.”²

Clearly, the Psalms contain sufficient revelation about Christ so that the church cannot have any excuse for not finding it. “It should be apparent that the Psalms are sufficient songs for accompanying the preaching of the gospel of Christ’s person, death and resurrection (1Cor 15:1-5. They are sufficient for Christian devotion and gratitude to the Son...The Psalms are therefore wholly fitting for Christian worship.”³

Doctrine in the Psalms

Worship that does not know the object of worship is idolatry, as mentioned in the book

Living Water Studies in John 4:

The Samaritans thought they were worshipping God, and we ourselves know from our own experiences that we have often imagined that we have been worshipping God when we have been doing nothing of the kind according to the standpoint of this teaching in John 4...there is no knowledge in connection with worship apart from that revealed to us in the

¹ Joel R. Parkinson, *Praise the Lord in Psalms* (n.p., 2000), 17.

² Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody*, 3rd ed. (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 1999), 24-25.

³ Parkinson, *Praise the Lord in Psalms*, 16.

Scriptures.⁴

Worship requires doctrine, and uninspired hymns do not become the standard of faith.

The Psalms are full of doctrine. “A survey of the Psalms shows that virtually every Christian doctrine is represented: General revelation (Ps. 19:1-4) and Special Revelation (Ps. 19:7-11)...The Trinity (Ps. 33:6)...Universal Sin (Ps. 14:2-7)...Humanity of Christ (Ps. 45:2) and Deity of Christ (Ps. 45:6-7)...Redemption (Ps. 49:7-15) and Salvation (Ps. 62:1-8) ...The Church (Ps. 133:1-3)...Second Coming (Ps. 50:3-6) etc.”⁵

Therefore, the Psalms are doctrinally sufficient for praising God in public worship.

“Taking no other texts than those which they furnish, an almost complete system of theology might be arranged from the Psalms.”⁶

Devotion of Psalms

Some churches may argue that hymns are more expressive of human affection for God and inner devotion than psalms. However, the human affections evoked by hymns may not be biblical, which may be subjective, self-centered, self-absorbed, or even self-worshiping. “Hymns are subjective. Men sing about themselves, their states and experiences, their high resolves.

Hymns are introspective. They are self-centred.”⁷

⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Living Water: Studies in John 4* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009), 76-77.

⁵ Parkinson, *Praise the Lord in Psalms*, 18-19.

⁶ Harry H. Crawford, “The Doctrinal Completeness of the Psalter,” in *The Psalms in Worship*, ed. John McNaughter, (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992), 272.

⁷ William Mackay, “The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God,” in *Songs of the Spirit: The Place of Psalms in the Worship of God*, ed. Kenneth Stewart (Glasgow: Reformation Scotland Trust, 2014), 63.

The Psalms are full of biblical devotion. There are “Adoration (Ps. 2:12), Petition (Ps. 5:1-3)...Confession (Ps. 32:3-6), Contrition (Ps. 6:6), Repentance (Ps. 51:6-13)...Joy (Ps. 5:11)...Fear (Ps. 23:1-6), and Refuge (Ps. 5:11-12)...Sorrow (Ps. 6:7).”⁸ It is not really piety to deny that the Psalms have rich content about piety and want to express their feelings.

Obviously, the Psalms are sufficient to express the various affections of the human heart and biblical devotion to God in public worship. “The Psalms are objective. They are God-centred, the soul looks outward. They lead the soul reverently to adore God in the beauty of holiness, as the object of praise, and devoutly to bow before Him on His throne, as the hearer of prayer. This is true devotion: ‘Worship God.’”⁹

The Attributes of the Psalms for Public Worship

The Inspiration of Psalms

All the Psalms are inspired by God. God is the initiator, the controller, and the preserver of the Psalms. “The words of the Holy Scriptures did not originate from men, but from God. Therefore, we may say that inspiration is the work of the Holy Spirit to produce the Bible through human authors so that it is God’s Word just as surely as the breath of our mouths produces our own words.”¹⁰ The hymns are not inspired, but rather the human author's

⁸ Parkinson, *Praise the Lord in Psalms*, 22-23.

⁹ Mackay, “The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God,” 63.

¹⁰ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, *Revelation and God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2019), 329.

expression of their Christian faith and their responses of the Scriptures, which is illumination.

“Uninspired hymns will tend to produce a piety no deeper than that of the human author. The piety will reflect his grasp of the truth.”¹¹ Even if that is good illumination, based on the nature of the divine origin of the Psalms, man cannot surpass God and illumination cannot surpass inspiration.

Further, the Psalms were inspired for a particular purpose. They were inspired by Holy Spirit through prophets in redemptive history to celebrate the great redemptive event. “To be precise, the Holy Spirit hasn’t just recorded these songs for us in the Bible: He has actually authored them for the particular occasion and for the use of the church.”¹² In other words, it is God’s intention that the Psalms be used in the public worship of the church.

The Authority of Psalms

The Psalms themselves are authoritative, and their authority comes from the author God Himself. “The Bible’s property of authority arises directly from its divine origin: it is God’s Word. As the testimony of God, the Bible has infinitely more authority than the testimony of man (1 John 5:9).”¹³ Thus, the authority of the Psalms far surpasses that of the poetry. If one supports the hymns to oppose the authority of the Psalms, in fact this is opposing the authority of God with human autonomy, which should be repented. “The pathway to overcoming evil and

¹¹ John W. Keddie, *Sing the Lord’s Song: Biblical Psalms in Worship* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2003), 61.

¹² Mackay, “The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God,” 41-43.

¹³ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 335-336.

abusive authority is submission to true authority, grounded in the authority of God. Our Creator has the right to demand our submission to his Word, and his Word is “true and righteous altogether” (Ps. 19:9).¹⁴

The Psalms are divinely authorized in the worship of God. God reveals to His people what and how to praise Him by Psalms. And the church is one in all ages, and the Psalms are authoritative for both the Old Testament church and the New Testament church. “These Psalms were directly commanded to be used in the formal worship of the Church under the Old Testament dispensation... There is no repeal of that regulation... It is a very strong evidence of the divine intention that these songs should be used to the end of time that they seem always to view the Christ from the Post-Advent standpoint.”¹⁵ Therefore, the Psalms are beyond the ages because of its authority over the church. There is no authority on hymns, and they need time to sift through to get hymns that are sure to be classics.

The Inerrancy of Psalms

The Psalms themselves are truthful and reliable because its author is true and faithful. “... the trustworthiness of the Bible is the trustworthiness of God. It is ‘impossible for God to lie’ (Heb. 6:18). Therefore, God could never knowingly communicate falsehood in his Word.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 340-341.

¹⁵ W.I. Wishart, “The Psalms the Divinely Authorized and Exclusive Manual of Praise,” in *The Psalms in Worship*, ed. John McNaughter (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992), 53-54.

¹⁶ Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 377.

The attributes of God's omniscience and faithfulness give Christians faith and strength to keep using Psalms in Worship. "Inerrancy is not a cold, academic doctrine, but a great encouragement to faith and the foundation of all sustaining comfort and solid hope, for we know that God will never break his promises to us in Christ."¹⁷ Insistence on singing the Psalms in worship is an expression of trust in the Word of God, and glorifies God by doing so.

Hymns is not inerrant because man is not omniscient and pure because of the Fall. The vertical aspect of worshipping God is that it is not pleasing to God for the congregation to offer hymns that contain errors. The horizontal aspect of worshipping God, where the congregation sings hymns to one another that contain errors, does not contribute to the faith of the community. The inerrancy of the Psalms sufficiently satisfies the vertical and horizontal needs in worship.

The History of Singing Psalms

The Early Church

The early church fathers rejected Roman pagan music and were enthusiastic about the Psalms. Such zeal about praising God in Psalms was inherited from the New Testament. "The fathers enthusiastic Promotion of psalm-singing reached an unprecedented and unsurpassed peak in the fourth century, when church fathers such as St. Basil, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Ambrose gave it their unstinting praise."¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 380.

¹⁸ Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 150.

On the other hands, the Psalms in the early church came from the Jews. The early church had many Jewish Christians who would also go to synagogues for worship. Although there is no direct evidence that the Psalms were used for public worship in the early church, it is undeniable that the Psalms occupied an important place in the daily life of Christians in the early church. “In any case, it is clear that psalms were not only——probably not even primarily——songs for formal, public worship among the early Christians any more than they were among the Jews, Wherever Christians sang, psalms were their songs.”¹⁹

Psalm singing in Calvin’s Geneva ministry

Calvin wrote about the richness and excellence of the Psalms in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms in Geneva: First, Calvin argued that the Psalms are closely related to Christian godliness, which illuminate the hearts of Christians and are the best guide to repentance; Second, Calvin believed that the Psalms enable Christians to use this privilege of coming before God, exposing weaknesses they are ashamed to display, and increasing their faith in God’s promises; Finally, Calvin considered the Psalms to have been the most perfect and correct way for Christians to praise God.²⁰

Calvin promoted the singing of the Psalms in public worship in Geneva. He led his co-workers working on metrical versions of Psalms for using in public worship for nearly twenty-

¹⁹ Ibid., 158.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1, trans. James Anderson (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2010), xxxvi–xxxix.

five years until the first complete version of the Geneva Psalter was published in 1560.²¹ The Geneva Psalter has a beautiful testimony: “The *Genevan Psalter* was an instantaneous success. Twenty-five editions were printed in the first year, and sixty-two editions within four years of publication...As a devotional book, it warmed the hearts of thousands, but the people who sang from it also understood that its power was not in the book or its words, but in the Spirit who impressed those words on their hearts.”²²

Psalm singing among the Puritans

The Puritans only sang the Psalms in public worship based on their exaltation of the authority of the Scriptures. “Their motivations were rooted in their conviction of what would later be called the regulative principle of worship—anything not expressly commanded in Scripture was forbidden in worship.”²³ Thus, Puritans believed that church leaders are also not authorized to decide what to sing in public worship because there are already inspired psalms for public worship. “The issue at stake was not their distaste for music, but their deep conviction that Scripture must be obeyed at all costs.”²⁴

²¹ Joel R. Beeke, “Psalm Singing in Calvin and the Puritans,” in *Sing a New Song*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Anthony T. Selvaggio (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 19.

²² *Ibid.*, 23-24.

²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

The Puritans also emphasized the importance of the Psalms for the spiritual life of Christians. In *Matthew Henry's commentary on the Psalms*, he said this book brings us into the sanctuary, draws us off from converse with men, with the politicians, philosophers, or disputers of this world, and directs us into communion with God, by solacing and reposing our souls in him, lifting up and letting out our hearts towards him. Thus may we be in the mount with God; and we understand not our interests if we say not, *It is good to be here.*²⁵ Therefore, singing the Psalms is not only a command, but there is also a sufficient reason to do so.

Conclusion

Psalms are full of Christ, doctrines and biblical devotion, which are inspired by God, and are authoritative and inerrant. The early church, Calvin's Geneva ministry, and the Puritans have wonderful testimonies about singing Psalms. Thus, Chinese churches should recognize that all of these testify to the sufficiency of Psalms in public worship and their insufficiency of knowledge about Psalms, and Chinese churches should take the initiative to systematically study the Psalms and use them in public worship.

²⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 742.

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