

Why we sing God's inspired Psalms in public worship (Christ's Church RPC)

One of the things you will notice when you worship with us is that we sing the Psalms. We sing Psalms because they were used by God's people in Old Testament worship and New Testament worship.

Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. (Psalm 95:2)

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord...(Ephesians 5:18-19)

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16)

Our rationale for singing *only* inspired Psalms is based on the fact that there is no command or example in Scripture of *uninspired* songs being used in the public worship of God.

The astute student of Scripture will ask, "What about Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16? Doesn't Paul command that we sing hymns?" The answer is, "Yes."

Assuming that the passages from Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 pertain to public worship, the real question is not whether we are exhorted to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs but whether Paul was referring to *uninspired* hymns.

The "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" of Ephesians 5:18,19 and Colossians 3:16 refer to the *inspired* Psalms of the Old Testament. The word for "psalms" occurs about 78x in the Psalms and Psalm titles; the word "hymns" occurs 13x in the Psalms and Psalm titles; the word "songs" is found about 45x in the Psalms and Psalm titles; and all three terms appear together 3x in the *Greek* version of the Psalms.

In addition, "hymns" and "songs" were terms used in the first century A.D. to refer to the *inspired* book of Psalms:

- Josephus was a first century Jewish military officer and historian who tells how David composed songs and hymns and refers repeatedly to the Psalms as hymns.
- Philo, a first century Jewish philosopher, always uses the word “hymn” when referring to the Psalms of the Old Testament.

Singing *inspired* Psalms was not only the practice of the Old Testament and Apostolic Church, but also the post-Apostolic Church. The *Apostolic Constitutions* is regarded as being of the highest value of a historical document, revealing the moral and religious conditions and the liturgical observances of the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. They repeatedly extol the Psalms for private and public use,

If thou stayest at home, read the Book of the Law, with the kings and the prophets, and sing the Hymns of David ... If thou desirest something to sing, thou hast the Psalms ... But assemble yourselves together every day, morning and evening, singing Psalms and praying in the Lord’s House; in the morning saying the 63rd Psalm, and in the evening the 140th Psalm; but principally on the Sabbath day.”
(*Apostolic Constitutions* VI; LVII; LIX)

Church historian Philip Schaff wrote, “So far as we are able to gather from our sources, nothing, except the Psalms and New Testament hymns (such as the “Gloria in Excelsis” [Luke 2:14], the “Magnificat” [Luke 1:46-55], the “Nunc Dimittis” [Luke 2:29-32],” &c.), was as a rule, sung in public worship before the fourth century...” Another prominent church historian said, “until near the end of the fourth century, in the services of the Catholic Church only the Old Testament Psalms and the hymns or canticles from the New Testament were sung: the other hymns were for personal, family, or private use” (Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, p. 207).

Chrysostom (c. 347–407) said of the book of Psalms,

“The grace of the Holy Ghost hath so ordered it that they should be recited and sung night and day. In the church’s vigils, the first, the midst, 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. 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 private houses where the virgins spin—in the monasteries—in the deserts, where men converse with God,—the first, the midst, and the last is David. In the night, when men are asleep, he wakes them up to sing; and collecting the servants of God into angelic troops, turns earth into heaven, and of men makes angels, chanting David’s Psalms.”

Athanasius (d.373), an important church father, wrote to a friend explaining how the Christian uses the Psalter. He observed,

“the Book of Psalms is like a garden of all these kinds, and it sets them to music....in addition to the other things in which it enjoys an affinity and fellowship with the other books [of the Bible], it possesses, beyond that, this marvel of its own -- namely, that it contains even the emotions of each soul” (Athanasius, *Letter to Marcellinus* , pp.102, 108). He warned, “Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with the persuasive phrases of the profane, and do not let him attempt to recast or completely change the words.” (ibid, 127) “For as much better as the life of the saints is than that of other people, by so much also are their expressions superior to those we construct and, if one were to speak the truth, more powerful as well” because “the Spirit who speaks in the saints, seeing words inspired by him in them, might render assistance to us” (ibid, 127).

If Jesus, Paul, or any of the other Apostles had used or authorized the use of *uninspired* hymns then it is odd that the ancient church did not use them in public worship.

The church has sung God’s inspired psalms, hymns, and songs throughout the centuries. It has been pointed out that,

The psalms are not only transgenerational; they bridge both time and culture. The psalms are the most popular songs in history....The psalms have been translated into more languages than have any other songs in the world. Every Sunday from Argentina to Austria, from Zambia to Zillah, Christians sing the psalms (Donald Van Dyken, *Rediscovering Catechism*, 87).

In addition, no uninspired hymnal can serve to unite the church better than God’s hymnal. So the question should not be, “Why do you sing God’s inspired psalms” but, “Why doesn’t everyone?”