

The Standard Bearer

A Reformed Semi-Monthly Magazine • April 1, 2014

CONTENTS

Special Issue:

Sing Psalms Unto Him

- ◆ Meditation: Singing to the Lord in Psalms 290
- ◆ Editor's Note 292
- ◆ In Praise of Psalm-Singing 293
- ◆ "Through Endless Ages Sound His Praise":
The History of Psalm-Singing in the Church 296
- ◆ A History of Psalm/Psalter-Singing in the PRC 300
- ◆ Various Reformed Traditions of Psalm-Singing 304
- ◆ Singing the Imprecatory Psalms 307
- ◆ Improving the Psalter: Has the Time Come? 309

Singing the Psalms

There are in brief three things that our Lord has commanded us to observe in our spiritual assemblies, namely, the Preaching of his Word, the public and solemn prayers, and the administration of his sacraments. As to the public prayers, these are of two kinds: some are offered by means of words alone, the others with song.... We know by experience that song has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. It must always be looked to that the song be not light and frivolous, but have weight and majesty as Saint Augustine says, and there is likewise a great difference between the music one makes to entertain men at the table and in their homes, and the psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels.... Wherefore, although we look far and wide and search on every hand, we shall not find better songs nor songs better suited to that end than the Psalms of David which the Holy Spirit made and uttered through him. And for this reason, when we sing them we may be certain that God puts the words in our mouths as if he himself sang in us to exalt his glory.

—John Calvin

Singing to the Lord in Psalms

O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.

Psalm 95:1, 2

Let us begin with a few thought-questions?
Do you enjoy singing?
How much do you sing?

What kind of songs do you sing? Psalms? Hymns?
Secular songs?

In a similar vein, do you listen to music?

To what kind of music do you listen?

We are instructed in the passage we consider for this meditation to sing unto the Lord. We are to come into His presence. There we are to sing unto Him in praise and thanksgiving. Mention is made especially of psalms. We are to make a joyful noise before Him in psalms.

It is good that we meditate on this instruction. The

singing and music that this word of God sets before us does not often receive the place it should in our lives. All too often the music that fills our lives is music that is not pleasing to the Lord and certainly not music we can sing before Him.

We must sing before the presence of the Lord.

And we must sing psalms.



Let us come before His presence!

To come before God's presences is to stand before Him face to face and there to commune with Him.

We are able to come before the presence of God because He is Jehovah, the covenant God. He has established with us in Jesus Christ a most delightful relationship of friendship and fellowship. In that covenant we have the right at any time and from any place to come before His presence and commune with Him.

In the Old Testament, Israel came before the presence of the Lord especially in the tabernacle and later the temple. Although God is spirit and thus invisible, He represented Himself with the Ark of the Covenant that

Rev. Slopsema is pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The Standard Bearer (ISSN 0362-4692) is a semi-monthly periodical, except monthly during June, July, and August, published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association, Inc.: 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the *Standard Bearer*, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

Reprint and Online Posting Policy

Permission is hereby granted for the reprinting or online posting of articles in the *Standard Bearer* by other publications, provided that such reprinted articles are reproduced in full; that proper acknowledgment is made; and that a copy of the periodical or Internet location in which such reprint or posting appears is sent to the editorial office.

Editorial Policy

Every editor is solely responsible for the contents of his own articles. Contributions of general interest from our readers and questions for the Reader Asks department are welcome. Contributions will be limited to approximately 300 words and must be signed. All communications relative to the contents should be sent to the editorial office.

Editorial Office
Prof. Russell J. Dykstra
4949 Ivanrest Ave. SW
Wyoming, MI 49418
dykstra@prca.org

Business Office
Standard Bearer
Mr. Timothy Pipe
1894 Georgetown Center Dr.
Jenison, MI 49428-7137
PH: 616-457-5970
tim@rfpa.org

Church News Editor
Mr. Ben Wigger
6597 40th Ave
Hudsonville, MI 49426
benjwig@juno.com

United Kingdom Office
c/o Mrs. Alison Graham
27 Woodside Road
Ballymena, BT42 4HX
Northern Ireland
alisongraham2006@hotmail.co.uk

Rep. of Ireland Office
c/o Rev. Martyn McGeown
Apartment 10, Block D
Ballycummin Village
Limerick, Ireland

Subscription Price

\$21.00 per year in the US, \$35.00 elsewhere
New eSubscription: \$21
eSubscription for current hardcopy subscribers: \$10.50.

Advertising Policy

The *Standard Bearer* does not accept commercial advertising of any kind. Announcements of church and school events, anniversaries, obituaries, and sympathy resolutions will be placed for a \$10.00 fee. Announcements should be sent, with the \$10.00 fee, to: *SB* Announcements, 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137 (e-mail: mail@rfpa.org). Deadline for announcements is one month prior to publication date.

Website for RFP: www.rfpa.org
Website for PRC: www.prca.org

was in the Holy of Holies. This was the face or presence of the Lord. And there, above the mercy seat, the Lord met with Israel to commune with her (Ex. 25:22). When the Israelites gathered at the house of the Lord, they were before the face of the Lord. They communed with the Lord through the priest, who came before the presence of the Lord on behalf of the people with the blood of the altar and then blessed the people at the door on the Lord's behalf.

Many things have changed since the time the Psalms were written. This is due to the fact that Jesus Christ has come and through His perfect work made atonement for sin, thus establishing the legal basis for the covenant. Because of Christ's perfect work, the covenant is no longer limited to the physical descendants of Abraham but is now found among all nations, as many as belong to Jesus Christ. The signs of the covenant are different. Circumcision has given way to baptism. The Lord's Supper replaces the Passover.

And so the way that we come before the presence of the Lord has also changed. The temple is no longer of any importance and is no longer the place where we come before the presence of the Lord. We come before the face of the Lord to commune with Him, first, in the official worship of the church. God has replaced the altar and the priest and the temple with the preaching of the Word and the sacraments. Through the Word and sacraments God proclaims the same gospel to us His covenant people as He did in the Old Testament temple. When we gather to hear the Word and receive the sacraments, we are come into the very presence of the Lord. In addition, we also come into the Lord's presence when we gather for family worship in our homes. And we come before the Lord's presence when as individuals we commune with God in prayer.

Let us come before His presence.

This call the psalmist gives to the church of all ages.

What a great privilege the Lord has given His covenant people.

What a delight to the Lord that His people come into His presence to commune with Him.

How foolish to neglect this privilege!



When we come into the presence of the Lord, we are to come with singing.

And the songs we are to sing are songs of praise and

thanksgiving. Notice the instruction of the psalmist: "O come, let us sing unto the LORD." The word "sing" means to sing praises. We are also instructed to come before His presence with thanksgiving. The word "thanksgiving" means songs of thanksgiving.

For what are we to thank and praise Him?

The psalmist answers this question when he tells us to make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

We must think of a rocky cliff. Such rocks were places of refuge, safe places in which one could either hide from the enemy or from which one could easily defend himself. Here we have the phrase "rock of our salvation." This explains more fully the idea of a rock. A rock of salvation is a rock in which or on which one finds salvation or deliverance from his enemies. It is a saving rock.

Certainly Jehovah had been a rock of salvation for Israel. The book of Hebrews (4:7) attributes this psalm to David. The Lord had led David to deliver Israel from her enemies and secure peace in her borders. Certainly the Lord had been a rock of salvation for Israel.

Israel's deliverance from her enemies through David pointed to a deeper deliverance and salvation—a salvation from sin and death and hell. Behind Israel's enemies stood the devil, who sought to destroy the church spiritually by leading her back into the slavery of sin. This is the church's real enemy. And so David, whom the Lord led to deliver Israel from her enemies, was a picture of the greater Savior, Jesus Christ, through whom the Lord rescues His people from the powers of darkness and sin. It is ultimately in Jesus Christ that God is the rock of our salvation.

The church must come before the Lord as the rock of her salvation with songs of praise and thanksgiving for His deliverance and salvation.

And for this purpose the Lord has given us the psalms. Psalms are songs of praise and thanksgiving. The word "psalm" means song of praise.

David calls the church of the Old Testament to use the psalms to sing praises and thanksgiving to the Lord. There is good reason for this. The psalms were given to the church by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They were written by various men of God—David, Solomon, Asaph, Moses, and others. But these men were moved by the Holy Spirit to compose these songs of praise for the edification of the

church. They were given exactly so that the church could thank and praise the Lord through song. This certainly implies that we must also praise God in psalms.

There is a sad neglect of psalm-singing in the church world today. The psalms have been virtually replaced with hymns, many of which bring false teaching into the church.

We must sing the psalms.

We need not sing psalms exclusively. The Psalms are the songbook of the Old Testament church. With the coming of Christ, God has given us the fuller revelation of the New Testament. Certainly songs of praise and thanks to the Lord reflecting the fuller revelation of the New Testament are quite proper. And so we could properly include them in our worship as we come before the presence of our covenant God. But we must not neglect the inspired psalms in our singing. They are treasures that the Lord has given His church to praise and thank Him. How He delights to hear us praise and thank Him with the psalms.



Make a joyful noise unto Him with psalms!

The idea here is that we are to shout for joy with psalm-singing.

There must be joy in our heart as we sing. His joy must be the joy of salvation. It must be the joy we receive from the fact that the Lord is the rock of our salvation and we find ourselves standing on that rock.

This joy must be evident by the look on our faces as well as by the volume and vigor with which we sing.

We must cultivate this kind of singing in our churches, homes, and Christian schools. We must develop the talents God has given us for singing. We must develop opportunities to use these gifts. We must be a people who are daily in the presence of the Lord to sing His praises.

And we must be careful that our ability to come into the presence of the Lord to sing psalms is not destroyed by the songs of the world. The world has its songs that praise sin and the prince of darkness. We cannot sing songs in praise of sin *and* songs of praise to the Lord. It is either...or.

Let us take our stand on the rock of our salvation.

And let us sing psalms of praise and thanksgiving for the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ. [m](#)

EDITOR'S NOTE

You have in your hands a special issue on the church's long-treasured practice of singing psalms in public worship. Although our Psalter's anniversary was not in view when we planned the issue, 2014 does mark 100 years since our fathers adopted the 1912 Psalter for use in the churches. God's faithfulness explains our continuing in psalm-singing.

The logic of the articles should not be missed. First, Rev. James Slopsema, one of our long-time writers of meditations, helps us reflect on God's Word in the psalms. The editorial encourages us in the use of this songbook called "the Psalms" and the great blessing of them. Three articles look at the rich history of psalm-singing. Rev. Brian Huizinga's moving article traces the history of psalm-singing from the earliest times of the New Testament church. Rev. Kenneth Koole writes a

fascinating history of the use the 1912 Psalter in the PRC. Rev. Martyn McGeown, whose churches use the Scottish Metrical Version of the Psalter, writes about the present use of the psalms in various Reformed and Presbyterian churches. That *all* the psalms should (and can be!) sung by New Testament Christians is the purpose of Rev. Ronald Hanko's article on the imprecatory psalms. Then there is careful reflection, by Prof. Russell Dykstra, on how the PRC's Psalter might be improved.

Thank you for subscribing to the *SB*. We thank God that you read it, praying earnestly that it is a blessing to you. If you have friends who might profit from it, please pass it on to them. And encourage them to subscribe.

— BG [m](#)

In Praise of Psalm-Singing

I speak for God's people in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and for our friends: We love to sing the psalms. One of our great joys when we assemble on the Lord's Day is the privilege of "psalm-singing" the praises of God. How impoverished would our worship be without singing, and how very poor would it be if the singing were without psalms. As long as our worship is not merely drawing nigh to God with our lips (and hearts far distant), psalm-singing makes for a rich worship. And we feel rich.

With this special issue, and with this editorial, we sing the praises of psalm-singing in public worship.

The sentiments of Calvin are ours: "Although we look far and wide and search on every hand, we shall not find better songs nor songs better suited to that end [that is, to 'inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with vehement and ardent zeal'] than the Psalms of David which the Holy Spirit made and uttered through him."

The PRC do not believe that all songs other than the psalms are evil, but we have resisted including them in public worship. The Church Order, which regulates the singing in public worship, calls the churches to sing the 150 psalms of David and a few hymns, most of which we do not sing because they

are not found in our Psalter.¹ In the past, we have heard proposals to sing more hymns than the Church Order presently allows. Others have suggested that we exclude even those that are allowed. But we have kept the course of being an almost-exclusively-Psalm-singing denomination. For good reasons, we believe.



We love the Psalter. We use the Psalter. I know we use it, or it would not be so difficult to consider improving it. And we use it because we treasure it. The recent story of the northern California couple who found millions of dollars worth of nineteenth-century gold coins reminded me of the psalms. To my soul, the psalms are "more precious than thousands of silver and gold" (Ps. 119). For me, the psalms "are to be desired above the finest gold; Than honey from the comb, more sweetness far they hold" (Ps. 19). I would not give up the psalms for all the gold coins on earth.



We sing and want to keep on singing the psalms in the *churches*. Pastors and elders lead the children in singing them in catechism

¹ In addition, the opening doxology of almost all PRCs is a psalm-like hymn found in the back of the 1912 Psalter.

instruction. Sunday schools give Psalters as the graduation gift. Bible studies open the meetings with a psalm or two. Then, the good *Christian schools* teach the psalms to the children. Although the schools use other songs as well, we want psalms to have pride of place in these institutions. I am envious of those who had 10 or 12 years in a good Christian school that taught the psalms. In the Christian school available to me in my youth, we learned "Onward Christian Soldiers," "Faith of Our Fathers," and I'm sure some other good hymns, but we did not memorize the psalms. Eventually I memorized many psalms with our children in family worship as they grew up. But these psalms stick in their adult minds now better than in mine because they learned so many of them in their formative youth. I thank God for our good Christian schools, which hold the psalms in high esteem. Many *Christian homes* use the psalms in their family worship. Especially where the Lord has given children who can make the family's singing a little heartier than a duet, how blest are they who sing the psalms at their daily altar. I have blessed memories of the family worship of our friends in Northern Ireland during our frequent visits there in years past. After the evening

meal was finished, the family would retire to the living room, where the coal fire warmed the otherwise cold house. Each family member and guest was given a Bible and their Scottish Psalter so that we could read the Word and sing the Word.

We love the psalms and the Psalter. Singing! What a gift God has given to His people! The psalms! What a good book God gave us from which to sing!

So, encouraging us to sing psalms makes me feel a little like I'm reminding a greyhound to run, a red-blooded man to enjoy a good steak, or a Christian man to love his wife. It's part of who we are as God made us, what we want to be.



Yet it is a good thing to grow in our love for the psalms by realizing how beautiful and rich they are, in so many dimensions. And it is those many dimensions that are worth pointing out. One could write a separate article on each of the many rich facets of psalm-singing.

First and foremost, God gave us this songbook (it's the *only* songbook in Scripture) so that we would offer high praise to Him, and in His own words. "I know that the Lord is almighty, Supreme in dominion is He, performing His will and good pleasure In heav'n and in earth and the sea" (Ps. 135). The overarching theme of the psalms and the purpose of psalm-singing is the worship and praise of God. By the psalms the people of God ascribe worth to God, and then extol that worth. How many of the psalms have us sing to

God to speak of His greatness! "O God, we have heard, and our fathers have told What wonders Thou didst in the great days of old" (Ps. 44).

As we sing, though, notice that not all psalms serve that purpose as *directly* as we might think. How many of the psalms have the believer singing *about* God. How many of the psalms have believers singing to each other. And that's not surprising, because the New Testament speaks of "teaching and admonishing one another in psalms" (Col. 3:16). Some even are the believer's cries of distress, in which he sings to himself: "O why art thou cast down, my soul, And why so troubled shouldst thou be?" (Ps. 42). As we sing "with understanding," ask whether the other dimensions of the psalms are *aspects* of extolling God's worth or something else.

Primary among these "other dimensions" is that singing the psalms is instructive. Singing psalms has a didactic purpose. The psalms teach us to pray, to relate to God. Paul's call to sing the psalms (Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16) includes the reminder that real instruction is taking place, "teaching and admonition." But this instruction is not from the preacher expounding Scripture but from the other members of the congregation as they sing to one another these "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."²

The psalms teach *theology*. The psalms treat biblical doctrine in surprising depth and breadth, from the

² Others have shown that these three designations refer to three different kinds of psalms in the book of Psalms.

The present editorial is not the place to argue the case against a Psalter-Hymnal. The editorial's purpose is to encourage us as to the great blessing of psalm-singing. However, it's worth saying a couple of things, especially if we find in ourselves a yen for more hymns. First, as I read the magazines of Reformed and Presbyterian denominations determined to be faithful to Scripture, confessions, and history, I note how many of them are again lauding the practice of psalm-singing, some as though they have found a long lost friend, or discovered in their attic some valuable antique. For us who sometimes feel quite alone in our practice, that's helpful. Second, it's helpful to know that others lament the loss of psalm-singing in their churches—a hurtful loss. A music historian in one denomination, regretting his church's increase of hymns and decrease of psalms in public worship, said, quite some years ago already: "Our decline in singing psalm texts has meant, I suggest to you, an equal decline in our understanding of the cosmic expanse of the Christian gospel, of the heart of the biblical message. I am saddened by this serious limitation of our Christian maturity by the loss of understanding and singing the psalms from our hearts.... [It] has greatly contributed to making our denomination more blandly pietistic and fundamentalistic in a number of aspects than what one would expect of our reformed theology and confessional statements. I want to plead with you for more psalm singing!" Other articles in this special issue will add to the reasons to give psalms the primary, perhaps even the exclusive, place in the church's music repertoire.

doctrine of God to eschatology and all in between, even Christology—yes, Christology, for Jesus Himself said that the psalms were about Him (Luke 24:27, 44). In one's own personal devotions it would be worthwhile to take note of just how many doctrines are actually taught in the psalms. The psalms teach *history*, the history of God's works in creation and with His church, history that we should not so easily skip over when we come to those extra long psalms, for example, 78 and 104-107. Sadly, the Psalter versifications of these psalms (for example, 213 and 285-297) may be referred to more in jokes about how many stanzas they have—"Who would ever sing all those!"—than in calls actually to sing them. God declares that it is good to sing history in worship.

And the beauty of psalm-singing is that we are teaching one another doctrine and history from the Word of God itself. We sing what *God* says about Himself, creation, man, the last things, and history—which highlights the importance of *faithful* versifications of the psalms. Because the psalms are the Word of God in old-covenant language, it does take some Christian maturity to sing them. But someone once said that only six concepts of typology need to be learned in order for New Testament Christians to sing the Old Testament psalms properly. Learning these is simply part of heeding Paul's call to "sing with understanding" (I Cor. 14:15). Growing up with the psalms makes this almost second nature.

Singing the psalms is instructive in

a multitude of other ways, too. The *first* psalm ("That man is blessed...") teaches about what lifestyle (path) is blessed by God, and what judgment falls on those who depart from that path. In the psalms we learn the subtle deception and terrifying power of sin, and how easy it is for a child of God to cover them, only to "spend our strength in grief" where our souls find "no relief" (Ps. 32). Psalm 51 teaches us how to confess our sins. We learn the beauty of the communion of saints (Ps. 133), the joy of family life (Ps. 127, 128), the blessing of many children (Ps. 127). The Psalms teach the power of God to protect His people, and His tender mercies toward us in our misery (where does one start listing *these* psalms?).

And the psalms are not as inhibited as we might be. So when we sing together we sing about grown men crying (Ps. 77), who cannot sleep and are ready to give up (77:3); about men tempted to flee when life is hard (Psalm 11), whose faces are cast down because they have not been turned up to see God (Ps. 42, 43).³

Yet another dimension of psalm-singing is that the people of God are admonishing each other, where "admonish" might mean "rebuke," but might also mean "remind" or "encourage." In normal conversations, it's a terrible embarrassment to me when I find myself distracted and not listening. It's worse when we sing in worship and I don't listen

³ How significant is it that that Psalm 127 on the beauty of family life has only one versification in our Psalter, but Psalm 42 about being spiritually cast down has 5!

to you calling me, "Bless the Lord, ye saints below, Who in His praise delight." When I am sinfully jealous of the rich, I must hear you remind (rebuke?) me that "God loveth the righteous, His goodness is sure; He never forsaketh the good and the pure." In the same breath, we hear all the believers confessing, "Yet once my faith faltered, I envied the proud.... I cried in my pain that pure hands are worthless and pure hearts are vain." How good to hear you call me to humility and quiet trust in Psalter 366: "Ye people of the Lord, In Him alone confide; From this time forth forever more His wisdom be your guide."⁴

Exercising this prophetic gift of ours in singing, we even have the privilege of addressing the angels, indeed the whole creation and all the creatures in it, directing a kind of cosmic choir: "Praise ye, praise ye the Lord In yonder heavenly height; Ye angels, all His hosts, In joyful praise unite; O sun and moon, declare His might, Show forth His praise, ye stars of night" (Ps. 148; now go look at the rest of Psalter #404).



When we reflect on all these dimensions of the psalms, and more, we begin to appreciate our fathers' determination not to lose the precious treasure of singing them in worship. By psalm-singing, the word of *Christ* dwells in us richly (Col. 3:16). In psalm-singing we ascribe power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and

⁴ For more examples of this, page through the Psalter; if you need a start, try 175:3; 260:5; 289:3; 308:4; 309:3.

glory and blessing to the Lamb that sitteth upon the throne. In psalm-singing we grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Sing ye praise to God,
Tell His fame abroad,
Take a psalm and shout,
Let His praise ring out,
Lift your voice and sing
Glory to our King;

He is Lord of earth,
Magnify His worth.
Praise His majesty,
Understanding...”

(Ps. 47, Psalter 418) **m**

REV. BRIAN HUIZINGA

“Through Endless Ages Sound His Praise”: The History of Psalm-Singing in the Church

What among men has endured as many ages under the sun as the psalms...the psalms sung...the psalms sung *in corporate worship*? Precious little. Psalmody has seen Solomon’s temple used and burned, doleful children of the covenant marched to Babylon and jubilantly returning, the Son of God incarnate humiliated and exalted, Rome risen and fallen, the mighty wave of the gospel of salvation sweeping through the Mediterranean world, into Europe, over the seas to America, and now to the ends of the earth, always with the bitter death of apostasy following in its wake. Over the past three thousand years much has come and much has gone. Psalmody has seen it all. Psalmody remains. Psalmody is rare. Psalmody is not popular. But psalmody remains. Because Jesus Christ defends and preserves His church to the end, psalmody will certainly remain to the end. None may doubt that psalmody will see the antichristian world-kingdom and then Christ Himself—the one of whom the psalms spoke, and that by His own testimony (Luke 24:44)—appear in splendid majesty arrayed more glorious than the sun. Through endless ages the church sounds Jehovah’s praise—with psalms.

The Old Testament Age

The Old Testament church sang the psalms, one of

Rev. Huizinga is pastor of Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Redlands, California.

them perhaps already in the wilderness on the way to Canaan (Psalm 90, written by Moses), most in Solomon’s temple (those written mostly by David), and others thereafter. So much was psalm-singing a part of Israel’s life and worship that when the Jews were deported by Nebuchadnezzar as captives into Babylon in 586 B.C., they were identified as psalm-singers. As they sat weeping by the river, their proud captors taunted: “Come sing us one of Zion’s songs.” Even the ungodly knew what took place in Zion. Israel sang the psalms. Would to God Babylon of today would have reason to know and say the same.

The New Testament (Apostolic) Age

The New Testament church of Jesus and the apostles’ day sang the psalms. As part of the worship in the upper room in the night of the betrayal, Jesus and His disciples finished their communion service singing “a hymn” (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26, “a Psalm” in the Geneva Bible 1599). It is universally acknowledged that this “hymn” was what the Jews called “the Great Hallel” (“Praise God”), which consisted of Psalms 113-118. When the old (Passover) gave way to the new (Lord’s Supper) and disappeared, the old psalms remained.

The inspired apostle Paul exhorted the saints in Ephesus and Colossae to sing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, which was the Bible used by Jesus and the apostles, “psalms,” “hymns,” and “songs” (odes) appear as headings of the

150 psalms. “Hymn” did not mean what it does to us. When the Israelites sang the 150 psalms they were singing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” “Hymn” does not refer to a song outside of the book of 150 psalms any more than “testimonies,” “ways,” “precepts,” “statutes,” “commandments,” or “judgments” in Psalm 119:1-8 refer to something outside of the book of the law. Sing and make melody with psalms!

When imprisoned (Acts 16:25, “and sang [literally, *hymned*] praises unto God”), when in the midst of the church (Heb. 2:12, “will I sing [literally, *hymn*] unto thee”), when needing to express merriment (James 5:13), the saints sound Jehovah’s praise—with psalms. Even the members of the oft-admonished congregation of Corinth came together, each one with “a psalm” (I Cor. 14:26). How or why they brought them notwithstanding, they gathered with psalms.

It has been said that in the New Testament there is a quote from a psalm or an allusion to a psalm about once every 19 verses! That is unsurprising, for the Holy Spirit of inspiration is the same Spirit who put in the hearts of the human writers of Scripture and all the true disciples of Jesus a love for the psalms.

The Age of Early Church

Psalm-singing did not die with the apostles. We have books and books containing the writings of the early church fathers who lived in the centuries immediately after the apostles. Where are all the man-made hymns they composed and sang? One looks in vain. In fact, where hymns were to be found in the church they were composed by and worked their way in through Gnostic, Manichean, Apollinarian, Donatist, and Arian heretics as a vehicle for introducing heresy. For example, Bardesanes, a Gnostic of the second century, and his son Harmonius composed a songbook of 150 hymns to rival the Psalter of the 150 Psalms.¹

For private personal edification at home, at sea, and in the field, and especially for corporate worship, Christians sang psalms. Men like Tertullian (d. 230), Eusebius (d. 340), Athanasius (d. 373), Basil (d. 379), Ambrose (d. 397), Chrysostom (d. 407), Jerome (d. 420), and August-

¹ Michael Bushell, *Songs of Zion: The Biblical Basis for Exclusive Psalmody*, 4th Edition (Norfolk, VA: Norfolk Press, 2011), p. 251.

tine (d. 430) spoke of the church’s love for and universal use of the psalms. For example, Eusebius noted, “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.”² Chrysostom famously stated:

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 Ghost hath so ordered it that they should be recited and sung every night and day. In the Church’s vigils, the first, the midst, 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. 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 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.³

Surely it was love for the psalms and a conviction to maintain their unrivaled place in worship that led the Council of Laodicea (360) to forbid the introduction of hymns into the church. The great ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451) confirmed this ruling. The early church was determined to sound Jehovah’s praise in psalms.

The Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, when little of the church’s doctrine and practice was encouraging, more and more hymns were introduced. Furthermore, Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome (590-604), replaced congregational singing with choirs. The tongues of men, women, and children were stopped while liturgical choirs sang, and sang in Latin. But that does not mean the psalms

² Cited in Terry Johnson, “The History of Psalm Singing in the Christian Church” in Joel R. Beeke and Anthony T. Selvaggio, eds., *Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), p. 45.

³ Cited in Bushell, *Songs of Zion*, pp. 32-33.

disappeared. In fact, Presbyterian George Robinson contends:

In all the history of the Psalter there is nothing more strikingly significant than its unique record in medieval times. In an age when the true gospel was virtually unpreached, and the Bible was practically unread, and pure religion was largely unknown, even then the Psalms were not unsung, but, on the contrary, enjoyed a vogue which, in passionate devotion at least, has never been excelled before or since. When almost all other portions of the Holy Scriptures were inoperative upon the masses, shut up as they were in the cloisters, or jealously guarded by a corrupt priesthood, the Psalms continued to cast their spell upon the minds and hearts of men. While the reign of many of the holy things of God was, at this time, temporarily interrupted, the historical continuity in the use of the Psalms suffered no slightest fracture.⁴

It is true, the psalms were often abused in ritualistic ceremonies connected with marriage, burial, and canonization of saints or in superstitious monastic chanting. Yet, the psalms remained.

The Age of the Great Reformation

Powerfully moved by the Word of God and by singing, Martin Luther worked tirelessly to restore congregational singing so that *all* could sound Jehovah's praise. However, it was especially John Calvin who labored to restore to psalmody its unrivaled place in worship.

Banished from Geneva in 1538 over certain liturgical practices to which he would not submit, Calvin later conceded on many issues in which he had mistakenly been too rigid. Instituting psalm-singing in Geneva was not one of them. It was a *sine qua non* of his return to Geneva.⁵ Thus, while pastoring a French-speaking congregation in Strasbourg with no French Psalter available, Calvin began working to produce a Psalter. He recruited the skilled Clement Marot, and later Louise Bourgeois and Theodore Beza, to produce what became the Genevan Psalter. It was first printed in 1542 after Calvin had returned to Geneva, and the final edition ap-

⁴ George Robinson, "The Psalms in History," in John McNaughton, ed., *The Psalms in Worship* (Edmonton, AB Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1992), pp. 506-507.

⁵ Bushell, *Songs of Zion*, p. 265.

peared in 1562. No Psalter was so widely popular and oft-translated.

The Genevan Psalter was well-used, especially on Sunday, and in church. For example, in Geneva:

The Lord's Day was a special time for psalm-singing. Before each service, the churches would post on their doors what psalms would be sung. Devoted families would send a family member to check the numbers posted and the entire family would practice singing those psalms before each service. Also, between the Lord's Day services, people were encouraged to sing psalms.⁶

In his "Preface to the Psalter," Calvin expressed his conviction regarding congregational psalmody,

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 of 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.⁷

The Reformation/Post-Reformation Age in the Netherlands

Wherever the Reformation flourished, psalm-singing was always prevalent. "To the extent to which the sacred Psalter spread throughout Europe, to that extent the Reformation prospered," for the psalms, "crept into the highways and byways of the people, stole into kingly courts and royal chambers, and thus touched with their illuminating truths those of high and low degree who would have been wholly inaccessible to preacher or evangelist."⁸ The Netherlands ("Lowlands") was no exception.

In 1566 our Dutch forefathers warmly welcomed their first Psalter, composed by Peter Datheen and modeled after the Genevan Psalter of 1542. Datheen's Psalter would remain popular in the churches for over two hundred years, until another Psalter was published.

⁶ Joel R. Beeke, "Psalm Singing in Calvin and the Puritans," in Beeke, Selvaggio eds., *Sing a New Song*, p. 23.

⁷ Cited in Johnson, "History," p. 49.

⁸ Robinson, "History," p. 511.

Our fathers gave their tongues to knives for confessing their faith summarized in the Belgic Confession. They were also martyred for singing the psalms. In fact, they endured martyrdom *by the power of the psalms*, for “when the iron was in men’s souls and they needed it in their blood, they sang the Psalms.”⁹

The great Synod of Dordt (1618-1619) required psalm-singing in the Dutch Reformed churches. Although a handful of scriptural songs that had been included in Datheen’s Psalter were permitted in Article 69 of the Church Order of Dordt, the Synod expressly stated, “All other Hymns shall be barred from the Churches, and where some have already been introduced, these shall be set aside by means found to be most appropriate.”¹⁰ The determination of the Remonstrants to introduce hymns into the church compelled the Synod to express itself so. The conviction of the delegates was that men, women, and children sound forth Jehovah’s praise in congregational worship with *psalms*.

Sadly, love for the psalms waned over time. By 1807 a committee representing various provincial synods introduced 192 hymns, which were eventually forced upon the churches. Many of the hymns were openly Arminian. One year after the well-known Secession of 1834 (the *Afscheiding*), Hendrik DeCock wrote a short pamphlet. The telling (and unwieldy) title is, “The so-called evangelical hymns, the darling of the enraptured and misled multitude in the synodical reformed church and even by some of God’s children from blindness, because they were drunk with the wine of her fornication, further tested, weighed and found wanting, yes, in conflict with all our Forms of Unity and The Word of God.”¹¹ Fundamental to the reformation of 1834, and that in the eyes of DeCock himself, was a return to Dordt and psalmody. We share this heritage and his convictions.

1912 to the Present Age

The collection of metrical versifications of the psalms

⁹ Robinson, “History,” p. 514.

¹⁰ Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House 1954), p. 283.

¹¹ In J.A. Wanliss and W.L. Bredenhof, “Rev. DeCock’s Case Against Hymns,” translation from the Dutch by authors, accessed Feb. 15, 2014, <http://www.gcc-opc.org/docs/DeCock.dir/hymn-decock.htm>.

used at present in the PRCA is an edition of the 1912 Psalter published by the United Presbyterian Board of Publication. Spearheaded by the United Presbyterian Church, nine Reformed and Presbyterian churches from Canada and the United States, including the Christian Reformed Church, gathered to produce a Psalter. The careful and joyful work began already in 1895 with the establishment of a Joint Committee. The objective was to render the inspired psalms into choice English verse while preserving the freshness, strength, and sober dignity of the Hebrew originals.¹² The committee said of the book of psalms it produced, “it presents anew the immortal songs of the Holy Spirit, those matchless hymns of the Bible which have been sung in far-off countries and centuries, which were chanted by our Lord and his disciples, and which with their measured language of religious feeling and devotion will abide until the end.”¹³

Through the twentieth century some of the hands and hearts embracing this Psalter waxed cold. The CRC adopted it in 1914 but replaced it with the Psalter Hymnal by 1934. When Rev. Hoeksema and others were ousted from the CRC over the controversy concerning the Three Points of 1924, they took the 1912 Psalter with them into what would become the PRCA. In these churches congregational psalmody is still practiced and loved by young and old alike.

Psalmsinging is not new. Psalm-singing is old, very old. It is not merely a practiced tradition. Psalmody is reverent, joyful, grateful worship rendered by tongues touched by the same Spirit who inspired the psalms and by hearts quickened by the same Jehovah these psalms extol. Through ages the psalms have been sung. Through endless ages the church will sound Jehovah’s praise—with psalms.

In reverence and in godly fear,
Man finds the gate to wisdom’s ways;
The wise His holy Name revere;
Through endless ages sound His praise.

(Psalter 304:7) **m**

¹² Preface in *The Psalter with Responsive Readings* (Pittsburg, PA: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1912), p. 4.

¹³ Preface in *The Psalter*, p. 5.

A History of Psalm/Psalter-Singing in the PRC

While it is true that the PRC has a reputation for being a psalm-singing, Psalter-using denomination, this is not to say that this ‘exclusiveness’ has not been challenged in our ninety-year history. It has been, and on a number of occasions. The most significant challenge (proposing the addition of non-psalm-based songs to our Psalter, that is, in addition to the select few already found in “the back of the Psalter”) came from what might sound like an unlikely source, namely, the first editor of the *SB*, Rev. H. Hoeksema himself (identified in the *SB* by the initials HH—and in what follows).

We realize that if that old stalwart were still living, the previous statement would almost certainly prompt a strongly worded letter to the *SB*’s present editor(s) requesting (demanding?) an apology and a correction to such a misleading and inaccurate statement. After all, the overture addressed to the 1959 Synod to revise Article 69 of our Church Order (CO) and to allow for synodically-approved hymns (and by implication, to revise our Psalter) came from his First Church consistory (GR), not over his signature.

Be that as it may, read the *SB*s of the years 1959-1962 (vols. 36-38) and it is transparent who ‘gently persuaded’ his consistory to write the overture and then added his considerable weight (in large measure as editor of the *SB*) in promoting the proposed revision. It was an overture that created no small stir. All one has to do is read the letters to the editor (contributions on the issue invited by HH himself—‘Surely we can discuss this issue in a calm, logical, and brotherly way! Why not?’) and it is readily evident what issue became *the* hotly debated issue throughout the churches. And not necessarily always in such a brotherly spirit. One old worthy wrote the esteemed editor to state that he heard “the bark of the wolf” in the overture!

The sheep were more than a bit agitated.

Rev. Koole is pastor of Grandville Protestant Reformed Church in Grandville, Michigan.

The issue became known as ‘the hymn question’—the churches were being asked to revise Article 69 of the CO in order to make room for adding ‘man-made hymns’ to the Psalter. There was reason for this label. First Church’s overture (1959) proposed revising Article 69 to read: “In our church services only the 150 Psalms and any hymn [!] as approved and adopted by the Synod shall be sung.”

In HH’s defense, his motivation for favoring the above change of Article 69 was not an interest in opening the PRC to all kinds of popular hymns. From his editorials it is clear that his chief concern was that the psalms were of Old Testament vintage, whereas we are in the New Testament age, when the great redemptive events only foreshadowed in psalms were fulfilled in clarity and by name. Why shouldn’t the New Testament church, which confesses these things so clearly in creedal form, not also have the freedom to confess them in song—as for instance, explicit reference to Pentecost and the Holy Spirit? And to Christ *JESUS* crucified and risen bodily from the dead? The New Testament church displeases God by singing songs that explicitly mention *His* name? How can that be? Let the New Testament church, which has received the Holy Spirit to expound New Testament Scripture, compose biblically-based songs that set forth Christ’s New Testament saving work to His glory and praise (cf. *SB*, vol. 37, pp. 436-7, etc.). HH thought some hymns of that caliber already existed. More could be composed.

Synod placed the overture in the hands of a study committee, which was to report to the 1960 Synod with advice on the issue. This it did, a recommendation that followed a lengthy historical survey of the ‘psalmody/hymnody issue’ as it has faced the Christian church since the days of the church fathers—a historical review that can be found in the 1960 Acts. We recommend it for your reading.

Based on their study, the committee proposed a revision of the overture so that it would now read: “In the churches only the 150 Psalms of David shall be sung, as also such Hymns which are faithful versifications of the Holy Scripture (!), in each case the General Synod being

the judge.” This revision met with the general approval of the 1960 Synod, but, due to a lack of attached grounds, was referred back to the committee with the mandate to report to the 1961 Synod with grounds clearly stated. It did—six of them. Oddly enough, though the committee’s grounds were adopted, synod did not yet approve the revision of Article 69, which was what the grounds were meant to support. A divided synod came to the conclusion that more denominational discussion was needed.

It was this overture with its revised wording—now speaking only of faithful versifications of Scripture passages in addition to those of the psalms—that became the subject of ongoing debate. What the people thought of the overture as now reworded (both pro and con) is plain from the numerous contributions found in the *SB*, volume 38. HH indicated his hearty approval of the revised wording, reminding his correspondents that, from this point on, the issue before the churches was no longer one of singing hymns, but now was about adding faithful versifications of Scripture to those of the psalms. In fact, in 1961 the committee recommended replacing the word ‘Hymns’ with ‘songs’ due to the unhappy connotations ‘Hymns’ had. So, let there be no more referring to the issue as ‘the hymn question.’

It made no difference. The designation could not be shaken.

Adding more ‘hymns’ to our worship services was what First Church’s overture originally proposed, and that was the word that remained in the revised proposal as well.

And that’s what stuck.

HH made reference in the *SB* to the synodically approved grounds (vol. 37, pp. 412-3). As he pointed out in editorials following the 1961 Synod, what the special committee was proposing as a revision of Article 69 (and, for that matter, what his First Church had originally proposed!) was not introducing anything substantially new to Article 69. Nor, for that matter, would the revision add anything new to the current practice of the PRC.

Say what one will, the great Synod of Dort in its CO and Article 69 as we have it did not bind the Reformed churches to exclusive psalmody. To be sure, it promoted the primacy of singing psalms, but not exclusive psalmody. Consider: it approved the singing of the Ten Commandments. That is not psalm-singing. And then there is reference to the evening and morning hymns. And as for current PR practice, what shall we say of our well-

beloved trinitarian doxology “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow”? And what is more, by including Rev. J. Heys’ renditions of the Lord’s Prayer in the Psalter, the PRC had already in principle conceded what the overture proposed. And what are the Songs of Mary, of Zacharius, and of Simeon but versifications of Scripture passages in addition to the psalms?

What principle objections could there then be against adding more of the same?

One might think the case was proved and won. Not so. In the year following the 1961 Synod, voices of growing dissent to adding songs to those already in place for worship could be heard. And it was the voice of the people, agitated sheep, and of a number of their undershepherds, that prevailed in the end.

The overture as reworded was presented to synod one last time in 1962 and acted upon. The editorial following that synod was written over the initials of another HH (this one not with the last name ‘Hoeksema’). He wryly commented:

The “hymn question” came up for final decision at this Synod. Although there was still difference of opinion on the entire question, and perhaps in part *because* there was difference of opinion, the motion to change Article 69 of the Church Order was voted down unanimously. The Synod felt that there were pressing practical reasons why a matter of this nature should not be brought into our Churches at this time. One could almost say that the “hymn question” died in three minutes – unmourned (*SB*, vol. 38, p. 431).

Evidently, putting to rest at last this source of growing friction within the denomination was a relief to all.

But what is also clear is that synod’s defeat of the overture (with its recommendation of adding versifications of more Old Testament and New Testament passages to our songbook) was not based on principle objections. No grounds were given for the unanimous defeat of the overture—just the words “The motion fails.” Rather, what is clear both from the above quotation of one who was personally involved in the whole issue and from various letters found in the *SB* prior to the 1962 Synod, is that the deciding factor was practical. It was becoming plain that the “pro’s” and the “con’s” on the issue were becoming increasingly exasperated with each other. And this in a denomination that had just come through the searing split of 1953 and was now in the middle of the divisive issue of

how to receive schismatics back again. Was this really the time to deal with 'the hymn question,' which, throughout church history, has always proved so divisive?

Voices of wisdom prevailed.

But, while it is true that the 1962 Synod defeated the proposed change without giving its grounds, it is not a mystery what the reasoning for those so adamantly opposed to changing Article 69 was. A perusal of the letters published in the *SB* makes plain their arguments.

Chiefly these three:

1. The Psalms have always been recognized by the church as the Spirit-inspired songbook for the church of all ages. Why introduce something new? To be sure, other passages of Scripture are inspired, but they were not written as poetry to be sung.

2. History proves the danger of introducing hymns into worship services: first, because many of them have proved to be vehicles introducing false doctrine into the church; and second, because where hymns have been introduced, in time they have invariably supplanted the psalms to the impoverishment of the church.

3. Though, admittedly, the psalms were written in the age of types and shadows, sufficient material anticipating the Messiah's great New Testament redemption works can be found if one searches carefully enough.

Let it be noted that these are not principle reasons for exclusive psalm-singing, for disallowing all hymns. If they were, Article 69 as it now stands would have to be revised and all those songs referred to in addition to the 150 Psalms of David would have to be expunged, starting with the evening and morning hymns. But these practical arguments were the reasons why, at least in part, the PRC synods of the early 1960s decided it was the better part of wisdom not to tamper with Article 69 and let it stand as written.

Indeed, at times discretion is the better part of valor.

Interestingly, the early 1960s was not the first time our synods had to deal with the issue of adding hymns to the denominational songbook. In the 1940s our churches were confronted with the issue as well. The issue did not begin with a request to turn the Psalter into a Psalter-Hymnal. It began with a synodical decision indicating a growing sentiment that our Psalter could and should be improved.

The 1943 Acts reads: "Synod instructs the Synodical [Psalter] committee to appoint a broad committee con-

sisting of those having musical, poetical, and theological ability, to consider the metrical and poetical revision of the Psalter and to submit the proposed improvements to the Synod of 1944" (Art. 82). When that committee (from the West) indicated it did not have the means to accomplish this monumental project, the 1944 Synod appointed another committee, giving it the following mandate: "That a committee be appointed to purge the Psalter of doctrinal errors and if possible, to make recommendations for some revisions" (Art. 53).

The committee to which synod entrusted this work was not composed of lightweights. Names such as Revs. G. Ophoff and M. Schipper are listed, along with H. Hoeksema as advisor, as well as that of a certain D. Jonker. Adherents of orthodoxy one and all, and for those familiar with the Jonker name, at least one who was gifted in both poetry and music.

The committee reported to the Synod of 1945 and informed synod that it understood its mandate, among other things, to be: to search out and suggest correction of doctrinal errors; to determine whether or not the content of each psalm has been included in the versification and, if not, to suggest additional verses to correct such exclusions; to suggest new tunes as well as the elimination of some tunes in the present Psalter; and to determine to what extent the present tunes fit the words and, if necessary, suggest any improvement (cf. 1945 Acts, Art. 19, pp. 26, 27).

A perusal of the 1945 through 1947 Acts reveals a remarkable amount of work done. A rather long list of recommended versification revisions can be found in those Acts, along with a list of tunes to be eliminated and suggested tunes to be added. The various synods took note of their work, indicated approval, and instructed them to continue.

In 1949 the committee requested the expansion of its mandate, namely, for permission to search for scripturally-based songs appropriate for the various redemptive events of Christ's life—His birth, death, resurrection, etc.

The resulting motion brought to the floor of the 1949 Synod reads: "Motion....to grant permission to work on versifications of other passages of Scripture and to advise the committee to search the field of existing hymns [!] for doctrinally sound hymns for special occasions" (Art. 27).

The motion was defeated.

Evidently all that was forbidden by the defeated motion

was their spending of time looking for doctrinally sound hymns, because the committee continued to work on revising the Psalter, though they did not report back to synod until 1952. They informed that synod of the progress in their work. That synod took note of the report but did little else. In 1955 the committee reminded synod of its ongoing existence, reporting on its work once more. Interestingly enough, having thanked the committee for its years of labor, the synod disbanded it. Some thanks! Its work was to be put in an archive and kept for future reference.

But as planes sometime mysteriously disappear from the radar, all that work has mysteriously disappeared into some unknown void as well. A mystery to this present day.

Why the synods of the early to mid-1950s did not see fit to use all the hard work of the committee and to revise the Psalter accordingly we are not told. The simple reality, of course, was that in the late 1940s the storm that culminated in the 'split of 1953' already loomed on the horizon. Those synods did not have the unity or energy needed to publish a new Psalter. And post-1953 those early synods did not need to add new issues of potential debate to their agendas.

So, a revision committee labored mightily for some ten years and was disbanded. And, in the end, the Psalter and Article 69 remained as written.

There was one other overture to revise Article 69 of the C.O. that made it to the synodical level in our churches. That was an overture that came from Edgerton PRC in 1999. The overture did not aim directly at Article 69, but requested a wide-ranging revision of the C.O. to remove outdated references and bring it up-to-date for our era. But, interestingly enough, the article that ended up receiving the most attention was Article 69.

A study committee was appointed to review Edgerton's suggested revisions and to come to the 2000 Synod with advice. It did, with synod adopting most of its recommendations. But not its advice on Article 69. When it came to Article 69, the committee was mandated to review the history of the issue back through the church age and report to the 2002 Synod. It returned with the survey of the history found in the 1962 Acts. And it came with both a majority and a minority report.

The majority proposed revising the Article 69 to read: "In the churches only the 150 Psalms of David shall be sung, along with the Lord's Prayer, the Songs of Mary, Zacharius, and Simeon, and the doxologies." In other words, advice to bring the article into keeping with the current practice in the churches.

This was defeated!

The minority report proposed: "In the churches only the 150 Psalms of David shall be sung." Essentially what was being proposed was exclusive psalmody—although in the following motion the report requested synod to retain the doxology "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow," designating it as an honorary psalm.

The motion promoting exclusive psalmody was defeated, and, as a result, no action was required on our much beloved trinitarian doxology.

Once again, Dordt's Article 69 and the Psalter 'weathered the storm' and remained as written.

Maybe history and the Spirit through this history are trying to tell us something? I am convinced He is and has. What that is this writer intends to reflect on in a couple months when the duty of writing editorials falls to him again.

Stay tuned. [m](#)

REV. MARTYN MC GEOWN

Various Reformed Traditions of Psalm-Singing

Psalmsinging is a uniquely Reformed tradition. Whether in Europe, America, Africa, Australasia, or Asia, wherever the Reformed have established

Rev. McGeown is missionary-pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Northern Ireland stationed in Limerick, Republic of Ireland.

churches, they have brought with them the singing of the psalms. In fact, it can be argued that the farther a church departs from Reformed and biblical orthodoxy, the farther it drifts from psalm-singing.

Go to an evangelical—Arminian, Pentecostal, Baptist, or Dispensationalist—church, and the psalms will be, and historically have been, conspicuous by their absence.

Indeed, apart from a few of the old favorites—Psalm 23 or Psalm 42—the psalms are almost unheard-of in such circles. Modern worship has pushed out the psalms. Go to a liberal Presbyterian church—one that, generations ago, still sang the psalms—and you will notice that these churches have almost entirely rejected the psalms in favor of modernistic hymns or, in the trendier congregations, choruses.

Indeed, this should not surprise us, because only the genuinely Reformed can sing the psalms with any consistency. The rich theology of the sovereignty and glory of God in the psalms; the personal language of the covenant in the psalms; the experiential language reflecting the ups and downs, the joys and the sorrows of the Christian life in the psalms—these things fit with the Reformed saint’s confession, but they are a jarring note in an Arminian church.¹ Arminianism needs hymns as a vehicle to bring the heresy of freewill into the churches. It is no accident that the Wesley brothers did exactly that! A Reformed man who preaches Calvinism while leading the congregation in the singing of hymns is fighting a losing battle. The songs do not fit his sermons! Eventually, the people will choose their beloved songs over the biblical doctrines he is preaching, because the songs will fill their heart and stir their emotions more than the preaching will.

My task is to examine various Reformed traditions of psalm-singing. Traditionally, psalm-singing has been the practice in the British Isles among Presbyterians. Some Presbyterian denominations retain exclusive psalmody, but the majority of them have moved from that position to accepting some, or indeed many, hymns. In some Presbyterian churches today, you would do well to find *even one* of the announced songs a psalm of David. Popular among Presbyterians is the Scottish Metrical Version of the Psalter (SMV) of 1650. Until recently, all psalm-singing churches in the British Isles used it. The advantages of this Psalter are its beautiful language, its accuracy to the original Hebrew—it is a translation, albeit into meter, a measured arrangement of words in poetry, not a paraphrase—and its familiarity: Presbyter-

rians of all kinds grew up with it and loved it. Hence it was a unifying force. Just as it promotes unity to have one Bible, so it promotes unity to sing from the same songbook. Allow me to quote some lines for SB readers who are unfamiliar with it:

That man hath perfect blessedness
who walketh not astray
In counsel of ungodly men,
nor stands in sinners’ way (Psalm 1:1)
Lord, thee my God, I’ll early seek:
my soul doth thirst for thee;
My flesh longs in a dry parch’d land,
wherein no waters be (Psalm 63:1)
O thou my soul, bless God the Lord;
and all that in me is
Be stirred up his holy name
to magnify and bless (Psalm 103:1)

When the CPRC was organized, and even while it remained a mission work, we were determined to sing the psalms. Quite naturally, therefore, we chose the SMV, rather than the PRC-Psalter, because that is the Psalmbook familiar to the people here. Several of our members are originally from various Presbyterian churches, which, if they sang psalms at all, used the SMV. The CPRC has maintained and defended this position from the beginning—Rev. Stewart even debated a fundamentalist Free Presbyterian preacher on the subject in January 2005. In addition, the CPRC sing only the psalms, and do so a capella, that is, without musical accompaniment, and aided by a presenter who leads us by helping us get the first note. The Presbyterian Directory for Public Worship states, “In singing of Psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord.” That is our aim. The SMV is also used in family devotions, Bible studies, and at the meetings of the British Reformed Fellowship Conference.

Typically in the CPRC—and the same is true of the LRF—we sing four times in the worship services. Each of these songs is a psalm. We have no other songs, not even doxologies, in our worship. A handy way to remember our order of worship is the term “psalm-sandwich,” that is, the psalms are “sandwiched” between the other elements of worship, so you can expect every

¹ Rev. Steven Houck wrote an excellent pamphlet, *God’s Sovereignty and the Psalms*, demonstrating the glorious, God-centered instruction given to us in the psalms. The pamphlet, although out of print, can be read online on the CPRC website, <http://www.cprf.co.uk/pamphlets/godssovereigntyandthepsalms.htm>.

second element to be a psalm (Call to worship [with Votum, Salutation, Benediction], Psalm, Prayer, Psalm, Reading, Psalm, Offering and Sermon, Psalm, Benediction). Moreover, we do not use the term “Psalter number,” because in the SMV the “Psalter numbers” correspond to the psalms themselves. We do not need to say “Psalter 175, which is a versification of Psalm 66” because in the SMV Psalm 66 is simply Psalm 66. There are a few psalms with two versions in the SMV. These are called “another of the same.” One famous “another of the same” version is Psalm 124:

Now Israel may say, and that truly,
If that the Lord had not our cause maintain'd (v. 1)

In addition, we sing consecutively through the Psalter for the second song per service, so that, for example, the LRF began with Psalm 1 in July 2010 and finished with Psalm 150 in February 2014, completing the Psalter in just over three and a half years. The obvious advantage of this is that the people sing and become familiar *with the whole Psalter*, not just a few favorites picked by the minister.

The only other denomination that practices exclusive psalmody in Ireland is the Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPC), commonly known as the “Covenanters.” Recently, the RPC commissioned a new translation of their Psalter, called *The Psalms for Singing, a 21st Century Edition* (2004). Around the same time, in Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland published a new metrical Psalter, called simply *Sing Psalms* (2003). There are a few Reformed or Presbyterian denominations in Scotland, such as the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, and the Free Presbyterian Church Continuing, that still adhere to exclusive psalmody.

Both of these Psalters, as well of course as the SMV, have found their way into churches across the sea. Psalm-singing Presbyterian denominations in America include the American Presbyterian Church, the Associated Presbyterian Church, Free Church of Scotland Continuing (Presbytery of the United States), Presbyterian Reformed Church, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, and the Westminster Presbyterian Church in the United States.² Other better known

² “Exclusive Psalmody churches,” accessed February 28, 2014,

denominations—the CRC, URC, OPC, etc.—still sing psalms to various degrees. The Spring 1987 edition of *Reformed Worship*, an American worship magazine, included an article, “We Used to Sing Only Psalms; What Happened?”³ About the CRC, one contributor wrote, “Although the church has officially sung hymns since 1934, it also continues to include all 150 psalms in its *Psalter Hymnal*.” John Frame, contributing for the OPC, remarked, “In the 1950s the church carried out a study of exclusive psalmody at the General Assembly level, but did not accept that position (despite its vigorous defense by Professor John Murray of Westminster Theological Seminary) though some congregations in the denomination to this day sing only psalm versions in worship.” Both the PCA and OPC use the *Trinity Hymnal* (rev. edition 1990), which is a mixture of psalms and hymns, the psalms being interspersed among the hymns, so, for example, “O Come My Soul, Bless Thou the Lord thy Maker” (6; a versification of Psalm 103) is beside “God, My King, Thy Might Confessing” (5; a hymn by Richard Mant [1776-1848]).⁴ It would be better, in my view, to have the psalms separated from the hymns, so that worshipers know what they are singing—an inspired psalm or an uninspired human composition. Plus, even if a church does not practice exclusive psalmody, psalms should take precedence in any book used for worship.

Psalm-singing has also made its way to Australia. The Australian Free Church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia, the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia, and the Southern Presbyterian Church all practice exclusive psalmody. The EPC, with whom the PRCA have a corresponding relationship, sing the psalms with great enthusiasm. Their website even includes some beautiful videos of their young people singing the psalms from their beloved SMV. The young people of the EPC have already produced two CDs of psalm-singing, and I am informed that a third is in the pipeline. The EPC still

<http://exclusivepsalmodychurches.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/edifying-links-promoting-psalm-singing/>

³ *Reformed Worship*, March 1987, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1987/we-used-sing-only-psalms-what-happened>

⁴ “The Trinity Hymnal,” accessed February 28, 2014, <http://www.hymnary.org/hymnal/TH1990>

use the SMV, so they have the same songbook as the CPRC and LRF.⁵

Our sister church in Singapore, as well as the PRCA mission in the Philippines, sing the psalms. Thus we see the psalms sung also in Asia. As the SMV of Psalm 66 says:

All lands to God in joyful sounds,
aloft your voices raise!

Or as the Psalter used in the PRCA renders it:

O all ye peoples, bless our God,
Aloud proclaim His praise (Psalter No. 175).

This is indeed a remarkable fulfillment of prophecy: “All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee” (Ps. 22:27). Universal praise from the psalms, a fruit of the cross of Christ!

The CERC (Singapore) sing six times per service. Four are Psalter numbers, one is a doxology, and one is an offertory song after the offering (in accordance with Article 69 of CERC’s church order).⁶ In addition, the saints in Singapore inform us that they sing through the Psalms consecutively each Sunday. This helps the people become familiar with the 150 psalms that God has given for the praise of His name. This is especially important in a place like Singapore, where there is not a longstanding tradition of psalmody in the churches. The youth especially, we are told, have embraced psalm-singing. That bodes well for the future of worship in our sister church.

The situation is similar in the Philippines. The Berean PRC, the First Reformed Church of Bulacan, Maranatha PRC in Valenzuela, Provident Christian Church in Marikina, the Reformed Fellowship in Bacolod City, and various Reformed churches in southern Negros Occidental all use the Psalter in worship. Some of these churches were formerly hymn singers, but they are learning to appreciate the God-centered and God-glorifying language of the psalms. When the Berean PRC and the

First Reformed Church of Bulacan federate, they will follow, with the PRCA, the Church Order of Dordt. Psalm-singing in the Philippines is mostly in English. However, the First Reformed Church of Bulacan, for example, has translated about 30 Psalter numbers into Tagalog. For one of their services the saints sing in English; for the other they sing in Tagalog. Clearly, more work could be done in translating the Psalter into the language of the Filipino people. On the mission field it is always difficult to introduce unfamiliar songs. Thankfully, this is being done wisely in the Philippines, and the people are responding well to the instruction.⁷ Often, evangelicals from various backgrounds find psalm-singing a strange practice. Therefore few evangelicals sing the Psalms. It seems almost an alien practice. One would think—from the attitude of some—that God did not give a book of praises in the Bible and that praise began with Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts, or even with Graham Kendrick and Keith Green!

By singing the psalms, we keep our worship theocentric and biblical. We not only *preach* God’s Word, we *sing* it. And surely this is the best way in public worship to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:19) and to have the word of Christ dwell in us richly in all wisdom (Col. 3:16). What better words could we use to teach and admonish one another than the words given us by the Holy Spirit Himself (Col. 3:16), who anointed David and others to be the sweet psalmists of Israel (II Sam. 23:1; II Chron. 29:30)?

Finally, while we honor the Lord by singing psalms, we do *not* honor the Lord by singing psalms *in pride*. Sometimes psalm-singers can be guilty of condescension towards non-psalm-singing brethren in other churches. This is deplorable. Instead of hitting them over the head with the Psalter, so to speak, we do better to encourage our brethren to rediscover the beauty and majesty of the Psalter, so that we can, by God’s grace, wean them off the songs that they sing, which, although often they are good, cannot hold a candle to the God-breathed psalms of David. **m**

⁵ “Youth,” Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia website, accessed February 28, 2014, <http://www.epc.org.au/youth/3.html>

⁶ “O Lord, accept our offering. Receive and bless the gifts we bring. To thee as prophet, priest and king, I yield my heart, my offering.”

⁷ I thank Rev. Dr. David Torlach (EPC), Rev. Andy Lanning (minister-on-loan to the CERC), and Rev. Daniel Kleyn (missionary to the Philippines) for their help in researching the practices in their respective countries.

Singing the Imprecatory Psalms

Thy Church rejoices to behold
Thy judgments in the earth, O Lord;
Thy glory to the world unfold,
Supreme o'er all be Thou adored.

Psalter #260, 4 (Psalm 97:8, 9)

That, in a few words, is why we sing the imprecatory psalms. God's judgments, the main subject of the imprecatory psalms, are God-glorifying and therefore also a matter of joy for the church.

Psalm 97 is not usually listed as one of the imprecatory psalms. Every list of them is different, but Psalms 35, 69, 109, and 137 are psalms that are always included. Certain parts of them are "considered to be among the most troublesome passages,"¹ but nearly all the psalms contain imprecations.

Imprecations are curses. The imprecatory psalms are those in which the author wishes or pronounces evil upon others, evil from God, asking Him to curse and destroy evildoers. They are very specific in what is asked, as for example that the little ones of Babylon might be beaten to death against the stones (Ps. 137:9), and that this be the happiness (blessedness) of those who carry it out. They are not just wishes and prayers, however. Because they are part of the inspired Word of God, they are in fact God's curses and pronouncements of judgment and destruction.

These psalms are not popular. C. S. Lewis, in his *Reflections on the Psalms*, has a whole chapter with the title, "The Cursings," in which he calls these impre-

cations "devilish" and sinful and denies that they reflect the attitude of God.² In other words, Lewis refuses to believe that they are the inspired and divine Word of God.

What is worse (we expect no better from Lewis' brand of Christianity) is that most of the modern church world has rejected these curses, if not explicitly, then by implication. They are no more liked by most Christians today than they were by Lewis.

Pick up any modern hymnbook and you will see what I am talking about. Hymns rarely speak of God's judgments and never in the same terms as the psalms. It is difficult to find in any hymnbook a reference to these judgments, much less to our praying for them and rejoicing in them.

I have on my shelf the *Worship and Service Hymnal* that was used at one time in the Reformed Church of America.³ In it are 543 hymns, mostly traditional hymns, and a few psalms. Of the 543 only *four* speak at all of God's judgments, and the strongest of them with the rather mild words, "Then before our King the foe shall disappear."⁴ There is nothing in them of the imprecations that are everywhere in the psalms.

Indeed, you would hardly know from the majority of hymns that there is a day of judgment coming, that all unbelief and wickedness will be destroyed and God's enemies forever punished. There is no evidence in the hymns that "the church rejoices to behold [God's] judgments in the earth" or that the coming judgment day is expected with "most ardent desire" by God's people as a part of their joy and blessedness. You would think from

¹ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 2nd ed. (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 1993), p. 33.

² C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1958), pp. 25, 31, 32.

³ *Worship and Service Hymnal* (Chicago: Hope Publishing, 1959).

⁴ Daniel W. Whittle, "The Banner of the Cross," stanza 4.

Rev. Hanko is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church of Lynden, Washington.

the hymns that God never pronounced a single word of hatred, curse, or destruction.

In its de facto denial of God's wrath and judgment, the modern church is only following the example of Isaac Watts, who did more to destroy the singing of Psalms than anyone else and who also denied the inspiration of such imprecations, considering himself in his emasculated versions of the psalms "more of a Christian than David."

In his metrical versions of the psalms, he said of the imprecatory parts of Psalm 69, the same psalm that has Christ's own words as the crucified One in it, "I have omitted the dreadful imprecations on his enemies." Of Psalm 92: "Rejoicing in the destruction of our personal enemies is not so evangelical a practice; therefore I have given the eleventh verse of this Psalm another turn." He considered Psalm 137 and others not "so well suited to the spirit of the gospel" and omitted them entirely in his version.⁵

Our own Psalter⁶ is somewhat weak at this point. While usually not omitting the imprecations, it does at times weaken them, as for example in its metrical version of Psalm 137, where the words "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones" are rendered, "How happy he who shall repay the bitter hatred of her foes."

If we are committed to psalmody and believe that the psalms are the inspired songbook of the New Testament church, we must sing these psalms. If we believe that the New Testament church is the Israel of God (Rom. 2:28, 29; Gal. 3:29; Heb. 12:22, 23), then we cannot excuse ourselves from singing them by saying that they were the songs of a different age and a different people, whose feelings and emotions are not suitable to New Testament Christians.

If we believe these psalms to be the inspired Word, then our attitude toward them must be different from that of C. S. Lewis. We must take the position of Calvin, who says in his explanation of Psalm 137: "We are to notice...that the Psalmist does not break forth into these

awful denunciations unadvisedly, but as God's herald."⁷ Then, we view them as "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:16, 17).

But why sing them? In some ways we have already answered this question, but we should be as clear as possible about the reasons. Interestingly, the great English theologian and high Calvinist William Ames answered this question nearly four hundred years ago and gave three reasons. He offered them in answer to the question, "How may we sing those Psalms aright, which contain dire imprecations in them?"

8. A. 1. We may upon occasion of those imprecations meditate with fear and trembling, on the terrible judgments of God against the sins of impenitent persons.

9. 2. We may thereupon profit in patience and consolation, against the temptations which are wont to [habitually] arise from the prosperity of the wicked, and affliction of the godly.

10. 3. We may also pray to God that he would hasten his revenge (not against our private enemies but) against the wicked and incurable enemies of his Church.⁸

There are some points in Ames' words that are worth emphasizing. In his first point he mentions the fear of God, something sadly lacking in modern Christianity, and something both necessary and valuable—necessary in that it leads to the knowledge of God (Prov. 2:5) and valuable in that it is the beginning of wisdom, of knowing how to serve and glorify God in every area of life (Prov. 9:10).

The second thing mentioned is the problem that Asaph faced in Psalm 73 and that is indeed a habitual problem for God's people, that the wicked prosper in their wickedness and the righteous suffer. Singing of the just judgment, the wrath and curse of God, is a reminder that all will be right in the end, and for that reason, too, the church does indeed rejoice to behold God's judg-

⁵ Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to the Christian State and Worship* (London: J. Buckland et al., 1784), pp. 140, 172, 226.

⁶ *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1927), p. 324. This is the metrical version of the psalms originally copyrighted by the United Presbyterian Board of Publications in 1912.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), vol. 5, p. 196.

⁸ William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* (no publisher's information: 1639), "The Fourth Book of Conscience Concerning the Dutie of Man Towards God," p. 44.

ments evident in history and recorded in the imprecatory psalms.

In 10. 3. Ames makes the very valuable point that this is about God's enemies, not about our private enemies. We may sing these imprecations and sing them joyfully without violating our calling to love *our* enemies by doing good to them that hate us and praying for those who despitely use *us* and persecute us (Matt. 5:44). We leave, then, the matter of the judgment of those who do us wrong with God, while rejoicing in His righteousness and justice.

One modern writer puts it this way, "Hatred may be moral repugnance not personal vengeance,"⁹ and that, I believe, is to the point. There is no need, when singing these psalms, to hesitate, with the thought that we may only be expressing sinful and inappropriate feelings of our own.

These psalms, then, can be used as recommended in Ephesians 5:19, in the way of making melody in our hearts to the Lord, and as recommended in Colossians

⁹ John Piper, "Do Not I Hate Those Who Hate You, O Lord" (http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/do_i_not_hate_those_who_hate_you_o_lord).

3:16, in the way of teaching and admonishing one another. Indeed, they ought to be so used in obedience to God's Word in those passages.

Then, too, the word of Christ dwells in us richly (Col. 3:16), for the psalms and not human compositions are the word of Christ. The psalms are His word in a very special way, in that in them He Himself speaks personally of all that He experienced as our Lord and Savior when He was touched with the feeling of our infirmities. Any doubts of that are laid to rest by Psalm 69, one of the major imprecatory psalms, and a psalm in which He speaks plainly as the suffering Savior.

What is more, when Christ's word in the psalms, including these imprecatory psalms, is sung, then He joins His voice with the singing church, as Psalm 22:22 and Hebrews 2:12 remind us. Then He too, the one through whom God executes His just judgments, carries out the word of His curse, destroys all wickedness, and rejoices with His church as she beholds God's judgments. It is better to join our voices with His, even in singing of terrible judgments, than with men who deny the inspiration of these judgment words. **m**

PROF. RUSSELL DYKSTRA

Improving the Psalter: Has the Time Come?

Singing in worship to God is a highly emotional activity for the believer. Singing involves the whole being—mind and will, body and soul. Words put to music can convey joys or sorrow, praises and petitions, with feeling that far surpasses merely *speaking* the same words. Any believer who has lost a loved one has experienced that sudden flood of emotion unexpectedly overwhelming him or her while singing a psalm in

church. When trouble strikes, do not the *songs* of lament and cries for help come to our hearts, and our lips? The union of poetry and music powerfully expresses our thoughts and desires. The songs of our youth live in our souls and are an essential part of our worship.

Exactly for that reason, even the suggestion of improving the Psalter will cause some consternation, dismay, perhaps anger in some. I approach this topic with that recognition. I fully admit that if a committee were appointed to recommend changes in the Psalter, I would be concerned, and keenly interested.

Prof. Dykstra is professor of Church History and New Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

Still, a special issue on singing the psalms requires us to examine the book we use to sing those psalms, and to face the questions 1) how can the Psalter be improved? and, 2) ought it to be improved?

Before we delve too deeply into this, allow me to set some boundaries. First, this discussion involves possible improvements to the Psalter, that is, versifications of the psalms. We have no interest in making it into a Psalter-Hymnal. Hymns are not an improvement of the Psalter.

Second, while some chafe at the versification that sets the psalms into verses with rhyme, we are convinced that such rhyming has much value, and ought not be done away with. I have especially two reasons for this. Poetry is a powerful medium for conveying truth in the form of praise, prayer, and lament. Poetry captures the emotions of the heart, and even draws them out. Singing to God should involve the soul, should carry along our souls, so long as the words accurately convey the truth of the Bible well. And, in addition, rhyme makes memorization of the songs easier for children, and easier for adults to remember. No, the Hebrew poetry of the psalms did not rhyme. But their kind of poetry would not be as moving to us. Keep the poetry—our kind of poetry—with rhyme.

Third, recognize that evaluation of music is very subjective. That is true when one is discussing quality, but especially is this true of taste in music. The tune that I detest may well be the favorite of my fellow church member sitting three rows ahead. Since any changes of tunes will cause distress somewhere, even changing tunes must be done carefully and for good reason.

Carefulness. Caution. Wisdom. Theological acumen. A poetic soul. A love for singing. A greater love for the church. A much greater love for God. All this, as a minimum, a “revision” committee needs.

By this time, it should be rather obvious to the reader that from this article you can expect but modest suggestions for changes in the Psalter. And yet, as noted earlier, any songbook produced by men can be improved. We start with a brief evaluation of the music.

According to one very experienced piano teacher in the PRC, a major plus for the tunes of the Psalter is that they are fairly easy to play. Beginning piano students can learn to play many of the Psalter numbers relatively early in their development. We ought to appreciate that, and

consider that to be a feature of the Psalter that is worth preserving.

At the same time, some of the tunes in the Psalter are difficult for the average congregation to sing. What accounts for that? First, some tunes are set too high for most voices. In my first congregation, this difficulty was somewhat eased by the purchase of an electronic organ that would allow organists to lower the pitch one note. However, that is not always possible without causing problems on the other end of the scale, namely, putting the bass notes out of the reach of most bass voices. And today, with the shortage of organists increasingly leading to piano accompaniment in the worship service, lowering the pitch is not an easy option.

What else makes a tune difficult to sing? Large jumps in the scale from one note to the next, as well as many runs of notes in a song. Difficult timing can also contribute to making a song hard to sing. All this can be found in some Psalter numbers.

A serious evaluation of the tunes would include trying to match appropriate tunes with the words sung. A cry of distress ought to have music appropriate to that. Very different should be the tune of a song of praise. However, recognize the difficulty in this endeavor. Almost all psalms that start out with weeping, or as cries for help, conclude with praises to God. One tune will not fit both.

One final point on the Psalter tunes. Some of the songs sound like, well, honestly, a waltz or a folk dance. Others repeat the same note or line to the point that they can be monotonous. The tunes are quite familiar to us, so we may not even “hear” that. A bit more critical ear will alert you to the fact that Psalter tunes can be improved.

Then there are the words—even more important, and having their own difficulty. As noted earlier, the Psalter consists of versification of the psalms. Taking the English translation of the Hebrew psalms and conveying the words and thoughts accurately and powerfully—that is a difficult task indeed. Overall, the Psalter does a good job (in my estimation) of capturing the message of the psalms. However, improvements can be made in some. There are places where the rhyme is forced and it distracts the thoughtful singer. Such forced rhyme may result in the introduction of foreign ideas or words not found in the psalm at all. A couple examples will suffice.

In Psalter number 137, stanza four begins: “I will receive from out thy fold no offering for my holy shrine.” Shrine rhymes with “Mine” in the next line. However, it is not found in the psalm, nor does the Bible ever speak of God’s altar as a shrine.

More than one of the psalms speak of God bringing Israel through the Red Sea using the expression that He the waters “clave,” and then creating rhyme the next line with “brought His people through the wave.” “A wave”? Poetic license, perhaps, but not language with “weight and majesty.” (Recall Calvin’s comments, front cover.)

More serious it is when the versification not only departs from the psalm, but sets forth something contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Psalter number 4 has God’s wrath falling on those “who tempt His wrath and scorn His love.” In others, God’s command to repent and believe is described in terms of “pleading” (e.g., 222, stanza 4) or God’s offering peace and pardon (255, stanza 4).

A related problem, one that could be easily resolved, is misleading and inaccurate titles like “Responsibility of Civil Officers” (223), which is a reference to Israel’s (that is, the church’s) rulers, not the civil government. Or, along the same line, “National Prosperity” (393).

One additional thought. Would it not serve the churches well that the numbering of the Psalter would be such that when we sing *number 73* we are singing a versification of *Psalms 73*? That would be a difficult adjustment for adults, to be sure. But children and grandchildren would especially benefit from that renumbering—gaining familiarity with the psalms.

In my judgment, it is worth pursuing the goal of improving the Psalter. When I sing hymns, too often I stop singing for a line or two because the words are not correct. When I sing the versification of the psalms in worship, that ought not be necessary. But occasionally it is. Also, when I choose Psalter numbers for worship, too many times I have to avoid tunes because they are too high or too difficult to sing. Tunes have to be switched in order to find a suitable tune for the psalm I want to sing. Really, that should not be necessary. A couple of psalms I have never used in a worship service because a tune cannot be found that can be sung. That is not good.

The Protestant Reformed Churches once had a dedicated, capable committee appointed by synod to bring

recommendations for improving the Psalter. This was back in the 1940s and 50s (Rev. Koole’s article documents some of this history). The committee seemed to be doing good work. In 1945 the synod approved many of the committee’s recommended changes—changes in seriously flawed or poor wording, and changes in tunes. In 1949 the committee reported that they had begun their work “with the first number of our Psalter, carefully checking to see whether it measures up to the following requirements.” The stipulations are worth noting (Acts, p. 57):

- a. That the versification is as close to the language of the Psalm as possible, and that the Psalm is fully covered.
- b. That there are not doctrinal errors in the versification.
- c. That the tune fits the words of the song, prayerful when the Psalm is a prayer, joyful when the Psalm is a song of praise.
- d. That the tune is singable, especially for a congregation.

The committee reported that they had covered the first sixty numbers and believed it necessary to change the tune of seven numbers, and the versification of six of them. That sounds like careful, cautious, and wise work.

Sad to say, the good endeavor stalled. Synod approved many changes, but none of them were implemented. And in the aftermath of the schism of 1953, the churches lacked the energy to continue the project. The 1955 synod tabled the entire project, though with much praise for the committee’s work. Synod decided to place all the work in the archives of the PRC for possible future use in revising the Psalter (Acts, p. 33).

And in that connection, I issue a plea to our readers. All that archived work of the committee has vanished. It cannot be found in the PRC archives. Nothing. Someone must have that material. Perhaps someone will find it buried in some old papers and give it to the PRC archives. It would be much appreciated.

My hope is that the Protestant Reformed Churches will take up the cause again, and implement improvements in the Psalter. We might join with others who use the Psalter, or do the work and offer it to them. It can be improved. It ought to be. The worship of God in singing the psalms is worthy of our best. **m**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Resolution of Sympathy

■ The Men's Society of Trinity PRC express Christian sympathy to member Mr. Travis VanBemmel in the death of his father,

MR. ALVIN VAN BEMMEL.

May the family be comforted in the words of Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

Steve Bylsma, Secretary

Wedding Anniversary

■ With thankfulness to God, we rejoice with our parents and grandparents,

ROGER and FLORENCE KEY,

as they celebrate 60 years of marriage on April 20, 2014. We are thankful to God for all His blessings He has given them, and us through them, throughout these many years of marriage. "One generation shall praise thy works to another; and shall declare thy mighty acts" (Psalm 145:4).

- ✦ Rev. Steven and Nancy Key
- Rev. Andy and Stephanie Lanning
- Jon and Michelle Drnek
- David and Elisabeth Faber
- David and Mary Anne Flier
- ✦ Daniel and Judith Key
- Jonathan and Michelle Key
- Rev. Heath and Deb Bleyenbergh
- Tim and Lacey Key
- Brian Key
- ✦ Thomas Key
- 18 great-grandchildren

Hudsonville, Michigan

Classis East

■ Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, May 14, 2014 at the Trinity Protestant Reformed Church. Material to be treated at this session must be in the hands of the stated clerk by April 15, 2014

Jon J. Huisken, Stated Clerk

Resolution of Sympathy

■ The Council and congregation of Hull PRC express their sympathy to Ken and Dori Hoksbergen and Kurt Hoksbergen in the death of their mother and grandmother,

DOROTHY DECKER.

May the Spirit apply the words of Christ to their hearts: "When Christ, who is our life, then shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory."

Rev. Laning, President

Gerald Brummel, Clerk of records

Resolution of Sympathy

■ The Council of Southwest PRC expresses its Christian sympathy to fellow officebearer Mr. Ed Reitsma and his family in the death of his mother,

MRS. THERESA REITSMA.

May God comfort the brother with these words from Isaiah 25:8: "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from off all faces."

Pastor Arie denHartog, President

Dirk Westra, Clerk

Synod

■ All standing and special committees of the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as individuals who wish to address Synod 2014, are hereby notified that all material for this year's synod should be in the hands of the stated clerk no later than April 15. Please send material to:

Don Doezema
4949 Ivanrest Ave. SW
Grandville, MI 49418

Notice

■ The Council of Covenant of Grace PRC in Spokane, WA is soliciting for private unsecured 5-year loans to fund the purchase of a church building. These notes will bear interest at a rate of 4% per annum with principal due in full at maturity. Interested parties should contact either Fred Johnston (f.l.johnston@hotmail.com or 509-638-8438) or Rev. Rodney Kleyn (r.kleyn@prca.org or 509-850-5120).

Reformed Witness Hour April 2014

Date

April 6
April 13
April 20
April 27

Topic

"God Is Greater than Man"
"Father, Forgive Them"
"Risen According to the Scriptures"
"The Lord Answers Job"

Text

Job 33:12
Luke 23:34
I Corinthians 15:4
Job 38:1-4