

Commentary

Partial Psalmody

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Within the Reformed tradition, there has been considerable discussion of the question of exclusive psalmody (the belief that the Church of Jesus Christ should sing in worship *only* canonical psalms). There has been less discussion of the propriety of what I call “Partial Psalmody,” singing portions (or even snippets) of psalms but not in their entirety. I think we should discuss this question also, ideally with the same mutual respect and charity with which we discuss exclusive psalmody. I ordinarily object to Partial Psalmody, on grounds I will mention below. Let me say beforehand that contemporary worship music is the graver offender here. Exclusive Psalmist communions, such as The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), frequently sing partial psalms, breaking biblical psalms into several portions, and singing each of those as its own separate part of a service of worship, ordinarily to different tunes.² But at least the parts of psalms they sing are *larger* parts, whereas in the contemporary worship music it is common to sing very small portions.

I write this because I often bump into people who say to me, “Well surely you cannot object to people singing straight from the Bible, do you?” And, of course, I say that I do *indeed* object, and they look at me as though I were a Martian. On such occasions, I almost never have opportunity to explain myself, so I just get into my UFO and fly back to Mars. But there is a rationale for my objection to Partial Psalmody, and I record that rationale here, for whomever may be interested.

Argument Ad Absurdum

First, the argument *ad absurdum* is a useful tool: push an argument farther than its proponents do, to its logical conclusion, and you may find a problem with the argument itself. The argument *ad absurdum* tests the logic of an argument by following it to its ultimate conclusion. So, here are two admittedly *ad absurdum* arguments (the second not so absurd, because it, in fact, is done) to reveal the problem.

Suppose we were to sing the following chorus, repeated several times: “There is no God, there is no God; there is no God, there is no God . . .” (supply your own catchy music here; I recommend well-known Jewish wedding music; if you prefer, you could supply the

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² Of the 150 canonical psalms in the RPCNA psalter, only seven are sung in their entirety: 12, 80, 83, 92, 124, 129, and 142. See the chart comparing the older and newer versions at <http://www.crownandcovenant.com/v/vspfiles/assets/images/PsalterComparisonTable.pdf>.

melody to “My hope is built on nothing less”). Even though these words come directly out of Psalm 14 and Psalm 53, we would not select just those words to sing, because their context refutes them (“The fool hath said in his heart, “There is no God.”). That is, we could, however clumsily, select some words from the Bible that actually say something different (or, in this case, the exact opposite) from what the passage actually teaches.

Consider this chorus: “This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” This one is technically not *ad absurdum*; people actually do this.³ What is the evident meaning of such a chorus? Something like this: “God is sovereign over his entire created order, and he has made this particular day for his own benevolent and wise purposes. Realizing this, we should rejoice, and take pleasure in his good will and wisdom.” Right? This may be how the chorus is understood, but it is not what the psalm says. Here is what it says in its context:

The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Ps 118:22–24)

This was a well-known psalm (known as “the Hallel”), ordinarily sung at the Passover feast. Indeed, there is a good case to be made that this was the psalm Christ sang with his disciples after instituting the Lord’s Supper (“And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives,” Matt 26:30). Similarly, this is a commonly cited psalm in the New Testament (e.g., Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Rom 9:32–33; 1 Pet 2:4–8). The apostles routinely refer to the crucified Christ as the stone that the builders rejected. The Lord’s “doing,” here, is *not* his general work of providence in sovereignly establishing every earthly day, but his special work of *redemption* that requires his Son’s suffering. Indeed, the earlier parts of the psalm also call attention to his suffering:

¹⁰ All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! ¹¹ They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! ¹² They surrounded me like bees; they went out like a fire among thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off! ¹³ I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me. . . . ¹⁷ I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

It is “marvelous in our eyes” that the rejected, suffering Christ is then raised to become the cornerstone of the Christian faith. *This* is what we are called to rejoice in by this psalm: the day when the rejected stone became the cornerstone, when the dying Christ became the rising Christ. So, to sing about God’s *providence* from a psalm that sings about God’s *redemption*

³ This chorus appears in nearly forty hymnals, including: African American Heritage Hymnal #108, Baptist Hymnal 1991 #359, Baptist Hymnal 2008 #571, Celebration Hymnal #209, Chalice Hymnal #286, Church Family Worship #319, Church Hymnary (4th ed.) #194, Complete Anglican Hymns Old & New #691, Hymns for Today’s Church (2nd ed.) S. #28, Lead Me, Guide Me (2nd ed.) #305, Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal #219, Psalms for All Seasons: A Complete Psalter for Worship #118K, Psalter Hymnal (Gray) #241, Sing and Rejoice!: New Hymns for Congregations #118, Sing Joyfully #84, Songs for Life #3, The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook #841, The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration #590, The New Century Hymnal #84, The United Methodist Hymnal #657, The Worshiping Church #801, Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada #412, Worship and Rejoice #652.

is not really to sing the psalm. We sing (some of) the *words* of the psalm but not its *message*, its words but not its word. What we sing, in such a case, is not what the Israelites sang, nor what the apostles sang, nor, in all likelihood, what our Lord sang before his betrayal.

The Literary and Theological Integrity of the Psalms

The psalms are carefully composed and, with one or two exceptions, show remarkable literary unity: They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. To extract portions from that literary unity, at a minimum, shows disrespect for the composition as a whole (like listening only to the opening measures of the second movement of a symphony), but may also *misconstrue* what is being conveyed (as in the example of Psalm 118, above). This is true of all genres of psalms, but more significant to some than to others. The hymns of praise, for instance, constitute the second most-common genre of psalm, and they almost always have at least two parts or aspects: the call to praise, and the *grounds* for that call. Indeed, the grounds for praise in the hymns of praise are not only just as important as the call to praise, they are *more* important and actually constitute the larger part of those particular psalms. Here is an example from Psalm 97:

First Part: Call to Praise:

¹ The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!

Second Part: Grounds for Praising God:

² Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. ³ Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. ⁴ His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. ⁵ The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.

In this case, the earth itself, and specifically the coastlands, are called to praise God (v. 1) *because* he reigns judicially over all the earth: righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne (2). Though he has delayed his final judgment, he will indeed judge the earth one day, in a furious judgment that is likened to lightning (4), and mountain-melting fire (3, 5), because God will remove from his kingdom the insurrectionists against it in a display of power that will cause the earth itself to tremble (4).

The substance of the hymns of praise is primarily the *reasons* God is worthy of our praise. If we were to sing just the first portion (the call to praise), we would be calling ourselves, others, or the created order itself to praise God, but we would not be supplying any *reason* to do so. Failure to offer an impetus would alter the very *nature* of biblical hymns of praise, which do not call people to praise without reasons. Further, since no reason is provided for the praise, the praise is not truly corporate; each believer, at some intuitive level, supplies his or her own ground for the praise, but the congregation itself is not offering unified praise to God for a common reason. Indeed, younger or less-well-instructed individuals

may even supply erroneous reasons for praising God (such as, not inconceivably, praising him because he loves everyone and will never judge his created order in fury).

The psalms have not only literary unity but also theological integrity. This integrity is true of other genres of the psalms also, but I will mention just one other, to make the point. Of the sub-genres of the psalms, the largest is the lament. Seventy-three (roughly half) of the biblical psalms are laments. Laments can be very complex, and some have as many as seven parts (Invocation, Plea for help, Complaint(s), Confession of sin or assertion of innocence, Imprecation, Expression of confidence in God, and Hymn or blessing). Others only have a few of these parts, but what makes the lament so significant theologically and liturgically are two parts: the complaint itself and the expression of confidence in God. That is, the psalmist candidly (often intensely) describes his complaint/lament, but he also expresses confidence in God. Like Job, as it were, his lamentable circumstance does not cause him to lose trust in God; to the contrary, he expresses trust *in the midst of* his situation. Effectively, the lament proclaims: “Though he slay me, I will hope in him” (Job 13:15).

Suppose we sang just the complaint, or just the expression of trust. This would change the fundamental nature of what lament does, by separating the two parts that together constitute its religious and liturgical genius. The complaint, without trust, is just whining; the trust, without the complaint, could seem to be “fair-weather Christianity,” as it were. Many of the praise songs I have heard remove the expression of trust from its context of despairing lament, and in so doing just become, in my opinion, a trivial chorus that is entirely different in its religious meaning from a biblical lament.

After our first daughter Marian had died of leukemia, one of my wife’s favorite hymns became even more special to us. Among its verses were these:

Whate’er my God ordains is right: his holy will abideth;
I will be still whate’er he doth; and follow where he guideth;
He is my God; though dark my road,
He holds me that I shall not fall:
Wherefore to him I leave it all.

Whate’er my God ordains is right: though now this cup, in drinking,
May bitter seem to my faint heart, I take it, all unshrinking.
My God is true; each morn anew
Sweet comfort yet shall fill my heart,
And pain and sorrow shall depart.

Whate’er my God ordains is right: here shall my stand be taken:
Though sorrow, need, or death be mine, yet I am not forsaken.
My Father’s care is round me there;
He holds me that I shall not fall:
And so to him I leave it all.⁴

⁴ Samuel Rodigast, 1675; translated by Catherine Winkworth, 1863.

From the lips of a grieving mother, the words are very different than they are from someone whose children are all healthy. Expressing trust when grieving differs from the same sentiment when all is well. When, therefore, we remove heart-breaking lament from our expressions of trust, we fail in several ways:

- We fail to praise and thank our God whose grace is always sufficient in those difficult moments;
- We fail to prepare ourselves for such moments when they occur;
- We may suggest to others that a life of faith will always be smooth sailing.

Therefore, unless a person is extremely skilled literarily and theologically, the selection of some of the words *from* a psalm, taken from their context, could constitute a very *different* song altogether. My observation has been that we have not had many such individuals since Isaac Watts. One of my psalms students several years ago decided to write his paper on laments in contemporary worship music, and he studied the little book of songs we use in the chapel services here at the college. He did not find a single lament. Half of Israel's songs were trusting laments; none of ours are. If my friend (and former colleague) Gordon Fee was right ("You show me a church's songs, and I'll show you their theology"), our religion/theology is not that of the Bible any more. What is worse, by using words *from* the Bible, we do not even realize it.

For years, I have suspected that there are at least two different kinds of people (I see each in myself) who refer to themselves as "Bible-believers." One such individual is like Francis Schaeffer (*He Is There and He is Not Silent*), someone who is so grateful that God's last words to his creation were not those recorded in Genesis 3: "Cursed be you because of this." This first person recognizes both his own individual folly and the collective folly of a rebellious race, and delights in the great reality that God has not abandoned us entirely to our folly, but has continued to speak in Holy Scripture, shedding light on our dark paths. Such a person longs for whatever beams of light shine from God's revealed Word. A second individual has read some portions or snippets from the Bible from time to time, and had discovered that he sometimes happens to agree with those snippets. However, his opinions are not much changed by the Bible, and he does not labor much to uncover its actual meaning. Some of its words remind him of what he already knows and believes, and when that occurs, he is happy to cite those words.

These are two very different kinds of people, though both are known as "Bible-believers." Perhaps we need another expression so that we could distinguish these people. Isaiah spoke to those who "tremble at his word," which might be a helpful designation. Who, among us, *reveres* God's address to a fallen race? Who, among us, *treasures* what he discloses to us whose sin has dis-merited such disclosure? Who, among us, *trembles* when God speaks, regarding his revelation with loving *fear*? If, by God's grace, any of us ever found ourselves in that category from time to time, we would not be content just to snatch from Scripture a snippet or two that reminds us of our current opinion; we would study Scripture carefully to discover what it actually says and conform our opinions (and practices) to those revealed there.

The issue here is whether the Word will shape us or whether we will shape the Word. Will the Word dictate to us what the content of our praise should be, or will our sensibilities

sift through the Word as they do through a restaurant menu, selecting only what we regard as appetizing? One of the surest ways to *avoid* the latter is simply to leave the psalms with their literary and theological integrity intact. One of the surest ways to *commit* the latter is to permit ourselves to pull a given string of words from a psalm, like a piece of paper from a fortune cookie, with no regard for its contextual meaning.

I myself am not an exclusive psalmist; I believe the apostle Paul required that the Christian churches sing about Christ (Eph 5, Col 3), not merely about the Old Testament *types* of Christ. But when/if we do elect to sing canonical psalms, we should exhibit some deference to their literary and theological integrity, and not cut them up into dismembered parts.