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Reformation
& Revival



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were divinely inspired, any more than the *aner pneumatikos* (spiritual man) is an inspired man (1 Cor. 3:1; Gal. 6:1); but only that they were such as were composed by spiritual men, and moved in the sphere of spiritual things" (*Op. Cit.*, Trench, 280).

31 Eadie, *Ephesians*, 400.

32 Piper, John, from a recorded sermon titled, "Worship That Comes by the Word, Satisfaction in the Greatness of God."

33 Smith, Frank J., and David C. Lachman, *Worship in the Presence of God*, 193-226.

34 "If the heart of the composer/performer of musical expression is set on God and bringing Him praise and honor, then he will be bound to offer a sacrifice of integrity. He will seek a text which is biblically sound and set it to music which helps communicate that text in an artistic, relevant way. And we can evaluate those words in the light of biblical truth. In Christian expression the music must always be the servant of the text—it must help make it meaningful and communicative" (*Op. Cit.*, Allen, 167).

35 The participle *lalountes* (speaking) is general; these next two participles *didaskontes* and *nouthetountes* specify and define the speaking. The way you are to speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is by "singing and making melody with your heart."

36 Peterson, David. *Engaging with God, A Biblical Theology of Worship*, 100, 102.

37 *Op. Cit.*, Lincoln, 346.

38 Hustad, Donald P. *Jubilate, Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition*, 92.

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"I just like to sing the old hymns of the faith." All of us have probably heard a statement like that. Many of us have said something like it. The irony is that often the "old hymns" on close examination are actually hymns written in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What was the song of the church like long ago—say 1800 years ago? What was the ancient praise of the church?

The praise of the ancient church is not easy to reconstruct. Beyond the writings of the New Testament the evidence of the earliest centuries is scarce and ambiguous. For example, did the ancient church sing only or primarily the Psalms of David, or did it sing hymns of its own composition? The evidence to answer such a question is very limited and not really clear. If we read in an ancient writing that the church sang a Psalm or a hymn, do we know with certainty what that means?

Actually, the words psalm and hymn are used interchangeably in some ancient writings and in the New Testament. In Matthew 26:30 we read that after the Last Supper, Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn before they went out. That hymn was almost certainly Psalm 118. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 the reference to a psalm is most likely a song inspired by the Spirit in the Corinthian church.

Scholars can be very divided in evaluating the limited evidence that we do have. Ralph Martin in *Worship in the Early Church* stresses the role of hymns composed by early Christians in New Testament worship. Michael Bushell in *Songs of Zion* argues that only the Old Testament Psalms were used.

What can be said with certainty is that the early church in many ways followed the pattern of worship in the synagogue. The synagogue certainly made significant use of the Psalms of David in worship and it is clear that the early church did also.

Testimonies to the value of the Psalter are plentiful in the ancient church. Athanasius, the great champion of Christ's eternal divinity, wrote,

I believe that a man can find nothing more glorious than these Psalms; for they embrace the whole life of a man, the affections of his mind, and the motions of his soul. To praise and glorify God, He can select a psalm suited to every occasion, and thus will find that they were written for him. And Basil of Caesara declared, "The Book of Psalms is a compend of all divinity; a common store of medicine for the soul; a universal magazine of good doctrines, profitable to everyone in all conditions."¹

Many monks in the ancient church memorized the entire Psalter and glorified in reciting it in full during a vigil.

Another feature of ancient praise which is rather certain is that the ancient church did not use musical instruments in its worship services. That may come as a major surprise to most modern Christians, but the evidence is very strong. For example, Clement of Alexandria wrote during 200 A.D.,

When a man occupies his time with flutes, stringed instruments, choirs, dancing, Egyptian krotala and other such improper frivolities, he will find that indecency and rudeness are the consequences. Such a man creates a din with cymbals and cult.... Leave the syrinx to shepherds and the flute to superstitious devotees who rush to serve their idols. We completely forbid the use of these instruments at our banquet.²

The ancient fathers seem to have had three reasons for opposing the use of instruments. The first is clear in the quotation from Clement. The fathers feared that the instruments would over-stimulate and make worship too emotional, leading to sexual immorality. The second reason is that the musical instruments were closely linked to the pagan sacrificial worship. The fathers linked instruments with idolatry. The third reason was that the instruments were linked to the worship of the Old Testament temple. Some fathers believed that the use of instruments would "Judaize" Christian worship.

Only in the late ancient or early medieval period did the use of instrumental music in the churches develop in the Western church. The organ, developed in the eighth century, remained a controversial instrument for church use for centuries. The Eastern Orthodox churches do not permit the use of instrumental music in their churches to this day.

The ancient praise of the church—focused on the Psalms and sung without musical accompaniment—must have been simple, spiritual and reverent. The function of that music was not so much to raise the emotions as to lift the heart and mind to God. Calvin learned that lesson from the ancient church. In the Genevan church the praise of God came almost exclusively from the Psalter and was sung without instrumental accompaniment.

The modern evangelical church has wandered far from its ancient and Reformation roots. Is the church better off?

Author

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