

# Manifesto on Psalms and Hymns

A common practice in our day is for Christians to speak of the “culture wars.” By this they usually mean the political and cultural skirmishes between leftist secular thinking and the more moderate and traditional thinking of believers. But the problem is that the phrase “culture wars” is a particularly inept way to refer to this problem. “Culture wars” would indicate a collision between two distinct cultures, but this is not what we have. Rather, we see intramural debates within one culture, and that culture is the form of modernity. One side of the debate is clear-sighted and wants the unbelieving assumptions permeating that culture to come to a full and complete fruition. The other side of the debate is confused, and wants to pretend that the culture surrounding them is something other than what it is.

Our phrases *right-wing* and *left-wing* came from the seating in the revolutionary legislature of the French Revolution. The moderate revolutionaries sat on the right, while the radicals sat on the left. They had their debates, of course, but they were all revolutionaries. What they held in common was more fundamental than what divided them. Separated by a ravine, at the bottom of the ravine they were still joined together. While Scripture speaks of a bottomless pit, a place of unending and horrible judgment, there is another bottomless chasm as well, a chasm which we

must come to understand fully. This bottomless ravine is the divide between faith and unbelief—and nothing joins them at the bottom.

We are not currently in a culture war, but we do need to get into a culture war. But there are prerequisites. Before you can have a war, you need weapons. And before you can have a culture war, you need to have a culture. And this is the central problem that confronts Christians today as they look around at the cultural manifestations of unbelief. What we see is the outworking of the “faith” established in the Enlightenment of the mid-eighteenth century,

Many Christians live within this broad Enlightenment culture, but they belong to churches that have made their peace with this modernity. Our religion is safe, tucked and hidden away from all alarms. Behind our eyes and between our ears we have that gnostic spark that we call a personal relationship with Jesus. Non-believers have their equivalent spark, but all of them accept the external dictates of science and the state. We have accepted as a matter of faith that our internal spiritual reality does not and cannot have any particular cultural embodiment that might threaten the status quo.

The ancient Christians in Rome had this option open to them, an option that they refused to take. Rome allowed for the

formation of a *cultus privatus*, religion that accepted its duty to not challenge the authority of the emperor. Because Christians would not accept this—Jesus Christ was Lord of all, and that included Caesar—they were viciously persecuted. Because we have accepted the modern equivalent, we are left alone like Lot in Sodom, free to wring our hands in dismay over the way things are going.

We call our spiritual weekend conferences *retreats*, which kind of figures. We evangelicals affirm our faith in an inerrant Bible—inerrant in the autographs, which of course no one possesses. We sing feel-good ditties in the public worship of God, but they are songs which have been aptly characterized as “Jesus is my boyfriend” songs. And you ask me how I know He lives; He lives within my heart. In all of this, we have not grown a Christian culture. Despite the fact that millions of Christians have lived on this continent for hundreds of years, we have not built a distinctively Trinitarian and Incarnational culture. We are too busy going along with the latest currents in the river of unbelief.

But the Incarnation is the central reality of human history. Enlightenment philosophy would have preferred ultimate reality to be a disembodied abstract truth somewhere else, but the Scripture tells us that the Word was with God, the Word was God, and the Word took on flesh and dwelt among us. We are Christians, and our faith in Jesus Christ demands embodiment in every aspect of life, and settling for anything less than this is at root a denial of the lordship of Jesus Christ.

What does this have to do with the singing of psalms? Why are these things being written in a preface to a psalter/hymnal?

The need of the hour is reformation in the Church. As reformation comes to the Church and sweeps through it, the first thing we will notice is that reformation is nothing like revival. Revivals, at least as we have come to define them, are readily contained within the walls of our churches. Periodic religious excitements are part of our North American religious tradition, and we know the tradition. We go slack, we get stirred up, we go slack again. But Trinitarian, incarnational reformation requires embodiment in every aspect of life; it requires that the teaching of the Word of God take shape in our lives, in our culture. I never tire of saying that theology comes out our fingertips—and what actually comes out our fingertips is our true theology.

We will discover in such reformation that the doctrine of Christ encompasses all that is true, all that is good, and all that is lovely. It takes on the form of a culture and affects how we prepare our meals and how we serve them. It affects how we plant our gardens, and how we cultivate the delights of the marriage bed. It affects the making of beer and the mowing of lawns. But at the center of all this is how reformation affects the public worship of God, and this is obviously related to the music we sing. Liturgical culture drives all other expressions of culture. The culture we exhibit in the presence of our gods is the defining element of every culture. If we

would repent of our cultural polytheism, we must turn back to the worship of the living God, resolved to worship Him with reverence and godly fear, for He is a consuming fire. Because He is a consuming fire, we do not approach the unapproachable light humming a few snatches of *Shine, Jesus Shine*. Moses did not walk toward the burning bush with a praise CD in his Walkman.

We reveal musically whether or not we are Christians who acknowledge that the praise of the Church should reflect and honor the glory of God in the face of Christ. Our praise of God should glorify the Lord both in the music and the lyrics, and one test of whether this is happening or not is whether our music and lyrics result in a true cultural antithesis.

We believe that God is bringing many in His Church to the point of a holy discontent with all the liturgical happy-clappy that surrounds us. As a consequence, we have decided to publish this psalter/hymnal. We do not do this because we believe ourselves to have our reformational act together. Rather, we have been brought to a deep conviction of our own abiding ignorance in these things. We are merely confessing that ignorance, and inviting others to join us as we seek to recover a small portion of our heritage.

Just a few practical considerations remain. Because we are recovering a number of older forms of musical and lyrical expression, some of the psalms and hymns contained do represent a challenge. Learning them will not necessarily be easy—but one of the things we are abandoning is

a convenience store approach to musical worship. There are many songs here that are an acquired taste. We can have confidence as we seek to acquire this taste because we know that in the history of the Church, generations of average Christians used to rejoice in and with these songs. We also have the testimony of modern Christians, like our congregation, who have set themselves to learn this music and have come to experience how wonderful it is. Psalm 95 used to sound just as strange to us as it does now to you, and more than a few of us thought the “funky beat” version of “A Mighty Fortress” was more than a little much. But this was the original form of the hymn, and it illustrates why Queen Elizabeth I did not call many of these songs “Geneva jigs” for nothing. Learning these songs is like trying to drink a hearty oatmeal stout after years of lite beer. There *will* be a period of contorted grimaces, but, when all is said and done, there is no looking back. This psalter/hymnal contains the glories of aesthetic *depth*.

Some may wonder whether this emphasis on the psalms may be giving too much credence to what is called the exclusive psalmody position. It is not our purpose here to enter into that controversy, but we do want to say that fear of overreaction is not a theology of worship. We believe our exclusivist brethren are in error when they demand that we sing nothing more than the psalms. But we want to give credit where credit is due and say that they are quite right in their insistence that we sing nothing less. Any form of hymn

or chorus singing that prevents the Church from learning all 150 psalms is profoundly wrong-headed, and so we have dedicated ourselves to a full recovery of the psalms. We have lost an enormous treasury and fallen a great way—as illustrated by our need to speak of “introducing” the psalms to Christian churches! Whatever our differences, no one maintains as a point of doctrine that we are *prohibited* from singing psalms. The apostle Paul, on

the contrary, calls us to it (Eph. 5:19).

And last, we must recall that Jehoshaphat sent the choir out ahead of the army, and God gave a glorious victory. We need to do the same thing, trusting for the same result. But before we head out there, in the vanguard heading into this cultural fray, we must have something to sing.

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