



How Can We Use the Psalms in Worship?

Short Guide No 8: How Can We Use the Psalms in Worship?

The Psalter is Scripture's own hymn book; its contents speak to a vast range of human emotions and experiences. Therefore they should not be ignored. Traditionally the psalms have held an honoured place in Christian worship, but there is no universal agreement within the church as to how best or how often they should be used.

Different denominations, different approaches

- Some denominations adhere rigidly to the practice of selecting their praise exclusively from the Psalter, with the human voice alone, rejecting all instrumental assistance.
- Churches of the Reformed tradition have tended to sing the psalms in rhymed metrical versions, which J.R. Watson once described as “God’s own word at one slight remove”.
- After the 19th Century Oxford Movement, many Anglican churches sang the Prayer Book Psalter to Anglican chant, a practice still used to great effect in Choral Evensong within cathedrals and choral foundations. A contemporary translation of the psalms is found in the *Common Worship Psalter with Chants* (RSCM, 2001,2002). Prose psalms can also be sung to Gregorian chant.
- Roman Catholics have developed the Gelineau versions and commended the practice of antiphonal reading, or the singing being led by a cantor, while the congregation responds with a refrain.
- The psalms have provided a rich source of inspiration for the composition of freer hymns—a practice begun by Isaac Watts (1674–1748) who produced his versions “imitated in the language of the New Testament”, thus making David sing like an English Christian gentleman.
- After years of neglect, the Jubilate Group has rediscovered this practice, and several of its writers have produced fine hymn versions in contemporary language. See *Psalm Praise* (CPAS, 1973), *Psalms for Today* and *Songs from the Psalms*, (both Hodder & Stoughton, 1990) and *Sing Glory* (Kevin Mayhew, 1999) whose various sections are subdivided into psalms, hymns and songs.
- The *Revised Common Lectionary* prescribes a psalm for almost every Sunday of the Christian Year, which poses its own challenges as well as providing opportunities. Many Christians balk at the imprecatory verses of certain psalms which they find too violent, vindictive and vituperative. How many people could sing the endings of Psalms 94, 137 and 139, for example, with a clear conscience? Editors and worship leaders will exercise liturgical and cultural discretion – and relevant commentaries on Psalms.

Where are we to find the best versions for singing?

- The Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland published *The Church Hymnary: Fourth Edition* in 2005 (Canterbury Press), later issued as *Hymns of Glory, Songs of Praise* (2008). This contains around 100 versions, in different styles, taken mainly from the *Scottish Psalter* (1650), but often with modernised language. Some from the *Irish Psalter* (1880) are included, as are more contemporary versions by authors like Ian Pitt-Watson, John Bell and Ian White.

- In 2003 the Free Church of Scotland produced a complete metrical psalter in the traditional “Dutch Door” format, enabling the mixing and matching of texts with tunes (of which more than 300 are provided). All texts are in contemporary language, based mainly on the *New International Version* of the Holy Scriptures.
- *Praise!* (Praise Trust, 2000) includes at least one version of each psalm; the tunes are fixed, and the texts are selective, but all are in contemporary language. Christopher Idle, David Preston and Timothy Dudley-Smith are all represented here.
- Single-author collections include the words-only volume by Martin Leckebusch, *The Psalms* (Kevin Mayhew, 2006). A few psalm versions can be found in *Come Celebrate*, edited by Michael Saward (Canterbury Press, 2009).
- John Bell’s *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise* was published by the Iona Community’s Wild Goose Group (1993). 24 psalms are tackled in a variety of ways.
- From America comes *Psalms for All Seasons: A Complete Psalter for Worship*, edited by Martin Tel, Joyce Borger, and John D. Witvliet (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2011; UK distribution by Baker Press). It gives the complete *NRSV* text and a variety of settings of all 150 psalms, and is designed for corporate worship, daily prayer, and Bible study. All items are couched in contemporary language; most have musical settings for congregational use. This comprehensive anthology gives many imaginative ideas for the profitable use of the psalms. Its Introduction repays careful study.
- Another trans-Atlantic publication is Michael Morgan’s *Psalter for Christian Worship*, whose revised edition (2010) eliminated the classical English extensively employed in the first edition (1999). All 150 psalms are tackled, but in short compass, to make them accessible to congregations. Some of the suggested tunes will be unfamiliar to worshippers in the UK, as will some of the expressions in the texts of the psalms.
- The most recent edition of the Christian Reformed Church’s *Psalter Hymnal* (1987) is more modern than its predecessors, and tackles all 150 psalms, but has only one selection from each. There is a preponderance of Dutch chorale tunes.
- Similar to this is the Canadian Reformed Churches’ *The Book of Praise: The Anglo- Genevan Psalter* (1984), although this does tackle every psalm in full, crafted to suit Dutch chorale melodies. The language is entirely traditional, and many of the texts, though well written, are incredibly prolix.
- From the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia there is Rowland S. Ward’s compilation *The Complete Book of Psalms for Singing* (1991), a complete metrical psalter, with texts and tunes for all 150 psalms. The approach to language is rather uneven, mixing traditional and contemporary forms, with some items unrhymed.
- Of limited interest and appeal will be *Psalms & Hymns of Reformed Worship* (Wakeman Trust, 1991). The book has a total of 857 texts, beginning with metrical versions of all 150 psalms, under the heading “The Spirit of the Psalms” but is not a complete metrical psalter. The language is uncompromisingly traditional, and because the book makes no concessions to modernity, it has a very old-fashioned feel to it.
- See also *The Book of Praise* (Canadian Presbyterian Church, 1997), items 1–108, and *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1990), hymns 158–258.

Graham D.S. Deans – September 2012 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland Ref HSSG108. For more in this series, see the web site below.

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