

THE PSALMS OF DAVID,
The only inspired and authorised Service of Praise,

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"IN that book, for well nigh three thousand years, the piety of the Saints has found its most refined and choicest food, to such a degree, that the rank and quality of the religious frame may in general be tested, at least negatively, by the height of its relish for them."
- GLADSTONE.

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IT is not easy to over-rate the importance of the duty of rendering praise to God in connection with, and as part of, the Service of the Sanctuary. Every one familiar with the Psalms is aware of the frequency with which the command or invitation to "praise God " is repeated. And it must also be of great importance to us to know what is the Divine approved material wherewith to render this praise. Bound up in the Volume of Inspiration we have what are commonly called the Psalms of David, though other inspired writers, Moses and Asaph among the number, wrote for the collection.

Through ages past, in the Church of the Old Testament and in the Church of the New Testament, the inspired Psalms have been sung in the public worship of God, the worshippers believing that God was best praised in language written under His own guidance. In the various sections of the Christian Church today, the Psalms of David, in some one or other version, are still in use; while, almost the world over, there have been added to these Psalms numbers of uninspired hymns by modern composers.

To this rule there are a few exceptions.

A few Christians still survive, who refuse to allow to these modern hymns the place and the honour which they believe the inspired Psalms are alone entitled to claim.

Now, majorities, strong majorities especially, are sometimes intolerant, and hence it should not excite wonder that the position of the minority — the rejection of hymns in public worship — is regarded as evidence of want of culture, if not of want of piety. In what follows it is proposed to state some of the facts, and examine some of the reasons on either side.

One reason given for the use of hymns is that there is "not enough of Christ in the Psalms" That the Book of Psalms having been completed before the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, we require poetical compositions containing fuller references to these great facts than, in the view of the hymn-singers, are to be found in the Psalms of David. Before examining this position at length, it may be well to assume that the friends of the modern hymns, equally with the critics of those productions, admit the Inspiration of the Bible and the Unity of Revelation as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Such being the case, let us now proceed to look at the statement that there is "not enough of Christ in the Psalms " — first, as it casts light upon the mode of interpreting Scripture adopted by those who make the statement, and, next, as to whether it is or is not a statement of fact.

In theology there is a well-known school, whose disciples make the Christian consciousness, not the Scriptures, the source of certainty in matters of religious truth and conviction. Their interpretation of Scripture is dominated by their idea of what the Scriptures "ought" to teach. They are not careful to explain whence this judicial Christian consciousness arose. The question is therefore reasonable — "Is it the result of contact with those Scriptures which in its maturity it undertakes to judge, and to which it is not ashamed to dictate?" Whence did those who want more of Christ than, as they allege, is to be found in the Psalms, learn what they know of Him? From the Bible. But they believe in the inspiration of the Bible, and in the unity of revelation as contained in the Old and New Testaments. Having then, as disciples, "sat at the feet" of Scripture in order to learn of Christ, they now, become, "wiser than their teacher," demand additions to be made to these Scriptures, as they imply a defect in them.

This is a most unsatisfactory position to occupy. It is one that ought to be to every intelligent Christian not only unsatisfactory, but untenable. It is a striking, if not repulsive example of what a writer of note in the present day calls "regenerate individualism." This is the poetic Christian consciousness making the rules for the Scriptures — after the fact.

So much for the statement as indicating a mode of interpretation, next comes the enquiry whether it is or is not true.

There is no other book of the Old Testament so often quoted in the New Testament as the Book of Psalms. On turning to the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 1, we find the writer quotes from at least seven of the Psalms. These seven Psalms are not very close together — The lowest number is 2, the highest 110. — Six out of the seven refer to Christ. The quotations are made to exhibit the superiority of Christ over the Angels — to exhibit indeed His Divinity. The 1st chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews is a short one, comparatively. Yet there is room in it for quotations from six Psalms in which the writer "found Christ."

Other instances might be given. They will be easily found by the seeker after truth. In order rightly to understand the subject, there is one thing which it is most important for us to keep in mind. It is this: — we are not to conclude that only those Psalms contain allusions to Christ which New Testament writers have quoted. This would be a great mistake on our part. The writers in the New Testament whose quotations from the older record we have, quoted with an immediate purpose in view. That purpose certainly was not to make the searching of the Scriptures unnecessary. It is worthy of notice in this connection that we have the bare fact recorded that on a certain occasion Christ delivered a discourse to an audience of two; a discourse in which, beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Yet we have not one word of that discourse. We have simply the record of its delivery, and the record of the effect produced upon those who heard it — "Their hearts burned within them."

Christ in the Psalms! Yes, verily He is there. He is there in His offices as Prophet, Priest and King. He is there in His Divinity and in His humanity. He is there in His power and in His love — in His humiliation and exaltation. The Divine Spirit, the Author of truth, is the best judge of the manner in which the person and work of Christ should be referred to in His word, and He has decided. And, not only is Christ in the Psalms, He has been found of them who have sought for Him there. And, if these Psalms were used by Old Testament saints, and were by them found to be all-sufficient for purposes of praise, what is the difference between their position and ours? Is it not a difference of circumstance in which the advantage is on our side? We have a completed revelation. We ought to be able clearly to see much that to the ancients appeared as "in a glass darkly." From before our eyes the veil is taken away. But if this be so, and if it proves anything, it proves that we should be better able to appreciate the ancient Psalmody, and not that we require to have additions made to it. If Christ was visibly in the Psalms to the ancient worshipper, is He less visibly there to us, from whose view so many obstructions have been removed? And we have the same reasons for rendering praise. Salvation — the soul's deliverance from sin and regeneration in holiness — is not this the grand theme of praise to God? If so, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day and he saw it and was glad," said Christ to the Jews: and Abraham lived before the Psalms were written. Are the friends and apologists of modern hymns possessed of a finer or a more durable type of piety than their fathers, that they should need a "new and improved" Psalmody to give it voice, But further: The God who is praised today is the same God for whom, of old, praise "waited in Zion." He is unchangeable. He is the same "yesterday, to-day and for ever." Those who write new hymns have not discovered a new attribute in the Deity which requires glorifying. The relations between man and his Saviour are essentially the same as in times past.

And man, the being who is to offer praise, is the same. This is true from the psychological point of view.

The force of true religion in the human soul is a force which acts centrifugally. It lays hold upon the "inner man," and thence affects the "outer man." So far as man has power to think, to feel and to resolve, so far will religion influence and control him, that he may think, feel and resolve aright. That the "words of his mouth and the meditations of his heart" may be acceptable in God's sight. Now the Psalms of David contain a complete psychology. We realise that the men who lived in the days when the Psalms were written were men of like passions (nature) with us. In these Psalms we find the mournful notes of the penitent and the triumphant tones of the victor, and we feel that the penitent and the victor are our brothers. The Psalms give full and beautiful expressions to the aspirations of him who is longing after a holy life and in them is language suited to the man who sings on the heights, or, on the other hand, who "cries from the depths." Within the whole range of possible Christian experience, the Psalms of David leave no soul-state dumb. This was true, and we have yet to learn that any new department has been lately added to the human spirit, or any "innovation" introduced among its powers. The startling announcement has not yet been made, that man has recently come into possession of a new faculty, which would suffer atrophy if deprived of the stimulus of contact with the sentiments and music of the modern hymnbook!

Bearing on the arguments already adduced is a consideration to which deserved prominence has been given by different writers on this important subject. It is this: that the writers who, under Divine guidance, produced the New Testament did not recognise the necessity for composing hymns to be sung in the Christian Church. If the reasonings of hymn-writers were worth anything it is astonishing that the alleged facts upon which such reasonings are based did not occur to the mind of any one of the Apostles or Evangelists. We have not a hymnwriter among the inspired New Testament penmen. If the ancient Psalms were not sufficient for purposes of praise in the Church for all time, it is just to infer that the task of writing supplementary spiritual songs would have been entrusted to the men best able to perform it. If deficiencies existed or wants were likely to be felt by the Church because of incompleteness in its Psalmody, would not the duty of completing that Psalmody have been assigned to some such writer as Paul or John? These men loved the Saviour supremely. They lived and wrote after Christ's ascension. They were guided to write of the noblest themes. They deal largely with such heavenly subjects as grace, love, faith and hope. They were zealous for the glory of God and the salvation of men. One of them, notably, founded many Churches, and laid down rules for congregational procedure. Did these men, far-seeing and large-hearted as they were, fail

to perceive that the Church of the future must be furnished with an enlarged and completed (and expurgated?) Psalmody?

One can fancy what beautiful poetry the author of the Apocalypse could have written. One can easily imagine that the man who wrote the 13th and 15th chapters of 1st Corinthians, might have contributed some poetic gem not unworthy to be set in one of our modern hymn-books. It might have been equal to anything from the pen of a Heber, a Watts, or a Sankey! Yet neither Paul nor John wrote hymns. Why did they and their brethren refrain from this pious exercise? Perhaps the answer is that they lived in an age prior to the rise of "regenerate individualism." Or, if that answer be not correct — and, as a matter of history, it is not correct — then we must conclude that the Apostles and Evangelists were enabled to escape from the taint of this individualism, and that they believed in having Divine authority for what they wrote as well as for what they taught. The (poetic) silence of New Testament writers is significant. Modern hymnwriters, however, perversely shut their eyes to the truth implied by this silence.

To proceed with our enquiry it must be pointed out that sins of omission are not the only sins laid to the charge of the Psalms. They have been assailed on the ground of what they contain as well as on the ground of what they lack. Want of space forbids any lengthy refutation of this charge. It may be dealt with in a sentence. To exhibit its almost blasphemous absurdity, we have only to refer once again to the admission respecting the Inspiration of the Bible — Are we to have a proposal made to publish an expurgated edition of an inspired Psalm-book? Between Scylla and Charybdis neat steering is needed.

An examination of the facts on either side requires that we should take a look at some of these famous and popular hymns. The following objections to their use in congregations engaged in the exercises of public worship are presented for the considerations of Christians: —

(1.) They are not authorised in the Rule of Faith and Judge of Controversies — the Bible.

(2) Whereas on their introduction into the services of the Church the programme was Psalms and hymns, that state of things did not last. It has been said of the Jesuits that they are never satisfied to be merely tolerated. Wherever they secure toleration — they will aim at ascendancy. This is exactly applicable to the hymn-singing practice in public worship. These hymns secured a place after the Psalms and were tolerated. But their claims soon advanced a stage. Precedence must now be given to hymns; and, if, as Luke did to Theophilus, we are to state things "in order," the order of today is hymns and psalms, and as few of the latter as possible. But hymnsingers are aspiring! They have yearnings after an ideal state. In it the modern shall be unfettered by association with the ancient, and we shall soon have hymns without Psalms. This is no exaggeration, — in many places at the present time the Psalms are threatened with a fate similar to that which overtook the bondwoman and her son; we read that they were "cast out." In the more modern contention hymns seem likely to occupy the place of successful Isaac over defeated Ishmael; for the hymns are to be found nearly everywhere. At matins and at vespers we must sing hymns. At weddings they help forward the merriment, and at funerals they contribute to the solemnity. Even at meetings held to promote the circulation of the Scriptures in connection with Bible Society work, some hymn-book — one of the many hymn-books — must be in use in the "service of praise." And this is permitted by men who seem hopelessly unconscious of the irony of the situation. To enlarge, in the course of a vigorous speech, on the Inspiration of the Bible; on the nature of the blessings it has brought to man; on its triumphant emergence from the fires of hostile criticism; on the beatitudes of those who accept and obey its teachings, and immediately afterwards to offer an oblique or direct insult to this same Bible by practically refusing to praise God in the language of a Bible Psalm — all this is possible and actually takes place in our day.

(3) The number of these hymns is very great. This ought to be powerfully suggestive to those who believe in and use them. There is no doubt about the vast number of hymns now in use. They are like the stars of heaven for multitude,¹ and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

Nor is there any prospect of the supply failing, so far as one can judge from current events. The fertility of "regenerate individualism" is simply alarming when so-called sacred poetry is the form of its manifestation. Yet, in the large number of these hymns is found the judgment of the theory on which they were introduced.

If there was not "enough of Christ" in the Psalms, the discovery should soon have been followed by the remedy. A few dozen of hymns might well have sufficed to supply omissions made by inspired men in one age and ignored by inspired men in a subsequent age! But, if the continued production of hymns is necessary, each hymn writer in his turn says, to all intents and purposes, that his predecessors have not supplied the omissions noted. Each composer says in effect that the hymns of former composers have not

¹The only point of resemblance between the hymns and the stars.

"enough of Christ" in them. There is no doubt that each composer in such a case speaks the literal and unvarnished truth.

(4.) Hymn singing in public worship is opposed to the unity of the church. It is well-known that the visible union of the various branches of the Church of Christ is the dream of enthusiasts. In Reviews and the religious press generally many plans are discussed for promoting greater unity amongst Christians. So far there seems to be something of the nature of the *ignis fatuus* about the schemes for securing this visible unity. If, however, the discussions have done nothing else, they have rendered many people familiar with some good Scriptural phrases. "One Faith One Baptism." How would One Psalmody act? It is possible that it might act in the direction of greater unity among Christians, in minor matters at any rate. There were those in Ephesus of old who used curious arts. The interests of the Christian Church demanded from them a little book-burning. The example of the Ephesian magicians is at this point a noble one, and worthy of our imitation.

Suffer, brethren, the word of exhortation, Have you ever seen a large congregation sitting silent, while a few here and there in the Church were singing? Why was it so? The minister announced the number of the hymn. Immediately the hymn-books of the hearers were opened the melancholy truth became apparent. Hymn No. 220 in one book was Hymn 63 in another book, or it was not there at all! Conference after Service amongst the singers and the silent brought the fact to light. One had a compilation authorised (?) by this or that Church or Committee of a Church. Another had a collection authorised by no one in particular. A very few were found to be in so utterly primitive a state as to go to Church carrying with them a Psalm-book only!

(6.) Hymn-singing has been and is attended by the introduction of false doctrine into Churches whose confessions are orthodox. This is not a doctrinal age if we attach the old meaning to the word *doctrinal*. It is not rare for us to hear that truths once believed to be of vital importance are now regarded as "open questions." Still, however, even among the comparatively lax, fundamental doctrines are respected. But these are in danger, or, rather, man is in danger of occupying a wrong relation to them. And if we study the genesis of more than one heresy now bulking largely in the Churches, we shall find that in the beginning a hymn had a great deal to do with the matter. Churches, whose members believe in the Trinity, notwithstanding such belief, permit the use of hymns savouring more or less of Unitarian error. Churches, whose members profess the most sharply defined Protestantism, use spiritual songs full of popery and the glories of Mary. (It is perhaps worth enquiring into whether the "Kindly Light" of Newman is the "dim, religious light" of Milton.) Churches, stoutly asserting, in prose, the necessity for spiritual worship to be offered to the God who is a Spirit, play with Ritualism in poetry.

The enemy of all righteousness thus shows his wisdom. A false doctrine wrapped up in poetry, even though it be, as it often is, very poor poetry, is harder to assail than if it were stated in prose. One cannot fail to admire the ingenuity of this plan, while deploring the result of its adoption. The ordinary druggist advertises *sugar-coated* pills. The ecclesiastical druggist *sugar-coats* or *rhyme-coats* some subtle and dangerous heresy, and the soul-sick patient swallows the heresy because of the wrapping.

(6.) The purposes which hymn-singing is made to serve, constitute a serious objection against the practice. It is alleged that it makes the services of the church "attractive." This is a kind of spiritual homœopathy. By virtue of their divine origin the Psalms are unsuited to any such illegitimate purpose as this is. Cold waters are, without any additions, attractive to a thirsty soul. Salvation is, in itself, attractive to the sinner who is convinced of his sin. "But," says some hymn-singing brother, "we use hymns to convince and convert. We sing the Gospel." Poetic conviction! Poetic conversion! Not much depth of earth! Prosaic backsliding! It must be admitted that, as a general rule, a fair measure of success attends the efforts to make the services of the Church attractive by the introduction of hymns. More especially, is this true, where the instruction from the pulpit is of an inferior kind, and where the occupant of the pulpit is indolent or incapable. The people are expected to forgive the pastor and to ignore both his indolence and incapacity, provided that their attention can be centred upon a musical display. If the choir is efficient, and visiting soloists not too rare, the preacher may be saved a vast amount of trouble. Cases have been known where this rendering of the services attractive has succeeded so admirably, that in a short time it has been all attraction and no service.

It will be a good day for the services of the various churches when those connected with them return to some of the "old simplicities;" when regenerate individualism disappears; and when the question is asked and answered in its bearing upon the conduct of public worship, "By what authority doest thou these things?"

Then, may we expect to see, as part of the future Reformation, the inspired Psalms restored to the place of honour in the Church which of right belongs to them.

The words of God are words most pure;
They be like silver tried
In earthen furnace, seven times
That hath been purified.
