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## Psalm Hymns and Spiritual Songs

In 1934 the Christian Reformed Church made a radical departure from what it had been doing for centuries: it gave permission for churches to sing hymns in public worship. Let me give a brief history:

- 1957 – The Christian Reformed Church was established in North America when several hundred people separated themselves from the Reformed Church of America. The CRC, at that time, consisted of almost entirely Dutch-speaking people, and they used the Dutch Psalter (containing versions of the Psalms set to Genevan tunes). A few other songs found in Scripture were also included in the psalter, for example, *The Song of Mary*.
- 1914 – As English became more common in the CRC congregations, the denomination adopted an English Psalter which had been developed by the United Presbyterian Churches. For the first time in North America, singing in public worship was heard in English. Outside of the worship service, hymns were sung regularly, but in church only psalms were permitted.
- 1934 – The CRC developed its own songbook, and for the first time, hymns were included. Hymns were not based on the psalms but, rather, were written by Christians praising God using their own words. The argument was made that these hymns were suitable expressions of our praise for God and they gave opportunity for believers to express their faith in contemporary ways. Hymns celebrating the Christian year were also included, and thus Christmas and Easter hymns became part of the worship services in the CRC. This first Psalter Hymnal is known as “The Old Red Psalter Hymnal.”
- 1959 – Two years after the CRC 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a new Psalter Hymnal, a blue book, was produced, expanding the number of hymns available for churches to sing.
- 1987 – Another new Psalter Hymnal was produced, the Grey Psalter Hymnal, and it made some more changes. Unlike the previous red and blue Psalter Hymnals which contained several renditions of many of the Psalms, the Grey Psalter Hymnal included one rendition of each psalm and, if there was more, it included them, not in the psalter section of the book but later, scattered among the hymns.
- 2013 – Together with the Reformed Church of America, the CRC produced a new songbook which contains renditions of all 150 psalms, but they are scattered throughout the book. Unlike the previous songbooks, this one is not called a Psalter Hymnal but, rather, is given its name: *Lift Up Your Hearts: Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. It is the longest of all the songbooks, and it includes a number of more contemporary songs.

This latest songbook may be the last produced by the CRC. Today, almost all churches project the words of the song onto a screen and few pick up the songbook with the exception, perhaps, of those who read music and enjoy singing in harmony. Many churches in the CRC today select their Sunday worship music from websites such as *Song Select* which contains thousands of Christian songs both old and new. More are added each week. A new songbook is unlikely to be perceived as necessary or desirable by many congregations.

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There are advantages to being able to choose songs from the Internet. There are many beautiful songs which express biblical truths very well, and they have become a blessing to many. Singing only from a songbook, as was done in the past, limits the options for congregational singing, and may prevent believers from expressing their praise to God in ways that are meaningful to them.

But there are concerns as well. When the CRC published a songbook, it did so under the guidance of theologians who carefully evaluated the lyrics of each song to ensure that they were true to Scripture. Sometimes they would change a few words to make them more appropriate. One example of such a change can be found in the beautiful song, *Amazing Love*. The chorus originally contained the words, “That you, my God, should die for me,” but that is theologically incorrect, for God did not die. One word was changed, and now the line reads, “That you, my Lord, should die for me,” making it biblically sound.

Not so long ago, when musicians chose songs for public worship, if they were not included in one of the official denominational songbooks, before they were sung in church, the elders would evaluate the song to ensure that it was theologically correct. Usually this work was passed off to the pastor, but eventually that requirement was dropped altogether. Today, in most churches, songs are chosen by musicians who may or may not be theologically trained.

This concern was raised already in 1934 in the Foreword of the Old Red Psalter Hymnal, and I quote:

*We were aware of the unsound or unsatisfactory character of many current hymns, and we feared that in an environment where the Psalms are seldom sung, the introduction of hymns in public worship would lead to the neglect of these deeply spiritual songs of the Old Testament which the Church should never fail to use in its service of praise.*

Nevertheless, in spite of this concern, the denomination proceeded to produce a songbook which included songs not found in Scripture, but it was careful to ensure that those songs were biblically rooted.

We rarely sing psalms in church anymore and when we do, we are probably not aware that we are doing so. The old Genevan tunes don't connect with us, and we find them difficult and even a little boring. Our experience and attitude is not unique, for others feel the same. And some are doing something about it. There has been a resurgence of the desire to sing psalms again, and some talented young musicians are setting the old psalms to new music. Interestingly, they have discovered that some of the old Genevan tunes had their roots in famous composers like Beethoven and Bach, and they are going back to those old tunes and reworking them to give them a modern feel. There is a lot of work to be done, but we can look forward to singing the beautiful biblical songs again but in ways that are new and vibrant and edifying.

In the meantime, we have many songs by which we can express our praise to God. Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs give us an opportunity to praise God for all that he has done.

Pastor Gary