



# THE SALTSHAKER

A PUBLICATION OF COVENANT REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

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## Singing from God's Hymnbook

By Rev. Sean McCann

Over the past few months we have begun to intentionally include at least one psalm to be sung in both the morning and evening worship service. I wrote a brief explanation for this a few months ago, but I thought it might be helpful to elaborate a bit more on this topic by answering a few questions.

### Why Are We Singing Psalms?

First, *God wrote the psalms for us to sing*. The book of Psalms is a divinely inspired hymnbook filled with a variety of different songs that God wrote in order to be used in the worship of God by his people. When we sing the psalms we use the very words that God desires to hear. Through these ancient songs we sing the same words that have been sung by God's people for thousands of years and in so doing join in "the mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is one." God certainly intended the psalms to be read – individually and aloud in worship – but first and foremost they were written to be sung.

Second, *God commands us to sing the psalms*. In two separate letters Paul address the early church and instructs both of them to "Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly...singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16, cf. Eph 5:19). Scripture seems to allow for much variety in worship music to accommodate a variety of cultures, traditions, and convictions, but one thing is certain: God has given us lyrics that we must sing. I do not believe that we are honoring these commands by *only* singing hymns inspired by or based upon the psalms, rather I take these texts to mean we must at least sing *some* psalms in worship.

Finally, *God records for us how the psalms were sung*. A brief overview of the early church provides a number of examples of psalm-singing. The gospel writers record for us that on the night before His arrest Jesus concluded the Passover dinner by singing a hymn (Matt 26:30; Mk

14:26), most likely the last part of the *Hallel* (Psalm 114-118). The early church is found mingling psalm-singing with their prayers (Acts 4:24ff), and making psalm-singing a regular part of worship (1 Cor 14:15, 26). In the second century, Tertullian testified that "psalm singing was not only an essential feature of the worship of the day, but also had become an important part of the daily life of the people." Even through the Middle Ages and the years of the Reformation, despite all of the theological arguments and divisions, it was the consistent witness of the church to sing the psalms.

### What Are the Benefits of Singing Psalms?

First, the congregation committed to psalm-singing will find that *the psalms balance heart-felt emotions with theologically-rich content*. Jesus teaches that we are to worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), and the psalms help us do just that. They help to anchor our experiences in God's truth and to orient our emotions. They give us structure while still allowing for the full range of our hearts' emotions.

A second and related benefit for a congregation is that *psalm-singing provides words for every season of life*. The variety of themes found in the psalms – praise, confession, sorrow and complaint, thanksgiving, trust – means that we can always find the right words to give voice to our thoughts and feelings. The church father Athanasius has said that the psalms "embrace the whole life of men, the affections of his mind, and the motions of his soul." I have even heard a pastor say of the darkest psalm – Psalm 88 – that it is there "when you need it." Like those snow boots you only get out once or twice a year, you won't often have experiences similar to Psalm 88, but when you do you will be grateful that there are words provided in your time of need.

And finally, *psalm-singing promotes scripture memorization*. This final point needs no further explanation: if you repeatedly sing the word of God then over time it

## Upcoming Events

### January and February

January 7	11:00 am	The Lord's Supper
January 7	Noon	Elder Groups
January 14	6:00 pm	Officer Installation
January 21	11:00 am	The Lord's Supper
January 21	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
January 28	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
February 4	11:00 am	The Lord's Supper
February 4	Noon	Elder Groups
February 11	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
February 18	11:00 am	The Lord's Supper
February 18	6:00 pm	Evening Worship
February 25	6:00 pm	Evening Worship

### Weekly Events

<b>Sunday:</b>		
Opening Exercises	9:30 am	
Sunday School	9:45 am	
Morning Worship	11:00 am	
Evening Worship	6:00 pm	Except for 1st Sundays
<b>Wednesday Evenings:</b>		
Supper	6:00 pm	
Bible Study/Prayer	6:45 pm	
		<b>Bible Study</b>
<b>For Men:</b>		
Men's Prayer Breakfast	8:00 am	2nd & 4th Saturdays
ROMEOS	8:00 am	Every Thursday
(Retired Old Men Eating Out)		
at J&S Cafeteria, River Ridge		
Norm Bomer's Home	7:00 pm	1st & 3rd Thursdays
		<b>For Women:</b>
Carol Belz's Home	9:30 am	Every Tuesday
Fellowship Hall	10:30 am	Every Wednesday
Debbie Cate's Home	7:00 pm	1st & 3rd Thursdays

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will embed itself in your memory just as so many of the well-loved hymns have done over time.

**Why Don't More Churches Sing the Psalms?**

In my experience, not everyone is thrilled about singing psalms. They may acknowledge the Biblical basis and benefits of Psalm singing, but they remain unconvinced. Broadly speaking, these objections fall into one of two categories, the first one is theological and the other practical. From the theological side comes the argument that the psalms are not really Christian since they don't sing about Jesus. While it is true that the psalms don't mention Jesus by name, Jesus himself understands all of the Old Testament, including Psalms, to be all about him (Matt 5:17, Luke 24:44). Since Jesus is God, and the psalms sing to and about God, they are to be read as explicitly Christ-centered hymns. Terry Johnson has helpfully noted the following references to Jesus' life and ministry in the Psalter: his deity (Ps 8:4-6; 45:6-7); incarnation (22:9-10; 40:6-8); adoration of the magi (72:9-15); baptism (2:7-8); temptation (91:11-12); ministry (146:7-9); obedience (40:6-10); teaching (78:1-6); crucifixion (22:13-18); death (34:15-20); resurrection (16:8-11); and ascension (110).

The other objection to psalm-singing comes from the practical side and claims that even if the psalms are Christocentric, they are just too hard to sing. While I cannot speak to the intricacies of their musical arrangements, I think a big part of the problem

is that of familiarity: if you are unfamiliar with a psalm, then it will inevitably be hard to sing. This is a legitimate concern, which leads me to the final question.

**How Will We Learn More Psalms?**

This congregation is already familiar with a number of psalms in the *Trinity Hymnal*, including Psalm 23 ("The Lord's My Shepherd"), Psalm 51 ("God Be Merciful to Me"), Psalm 100 ("All People that on Earth Do Dwell"), and Psalm 148 ("Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah!"). This past fall we have learned together one new psalm from the *Trinity Hymnal*: Ps 72 ("Now Blessed by the Lord our God"); and two psalms from the *Psalter*: Psalms 1 and 91. This spring I plan to slowly introduce new psalms (such as Ps 2, 5, 32, 42, 103, and 117) by singing them on successive Sundays, as well as teaching on them on select Wednesday nights as part of our series through Psalms.

I know that learning new words and tunes can be challenging, so I encourage you to spend some time studying the words of the psalms we are learning, and even practice singing the lyrics. Some helpful resources include the website [www.psalter.org](http://www.psalter.org), and a great smartphone app I've used called "1650 Split Leaf Psalter" that includes tunes, commentary, and themes of every psalm. Many of these psalms are new to me as well, so I look forward to learning them with you as we seek to fill our worship with the word of God.

**The Sacred Desk**

By Rev. Sean McCann



After such an eventful year following the Israelites through Exodus, it is not without reluctance that I leave our forefathers at the base of Mt. Sinai as they embark on their great journey to the Promised Land, and turn our attention elsewhere. Maybe one day we will return and pick up their story, but in the new year we will turn to another beginning of sorts in Paul's letter to Titus.

In the final sermon of the Exodus series, we looked at how the church fulfills (in part) the promises of the tabernacle as the bride of Christ is filled with the glory and presence of God (Acts 2:1-4; Eph 2:22). One theme that stuck out was the detailed instructions that God gave to his people for the construction of his house in the desert; and we will find that same theme in Titus as God gives detailed instructions on how to build his New Testament house: the church. Titus is one of Paul's so called "Pastoral Epistles" (along with 1&2 Timothy): letters written specifically to pastors to

instruct them and their congregations in matters pertaining to the local church.

Paul's letter to Titus confronts the false teachers of his day by showing how life in the early church not only required a sound faith based on doctrinally-sound truth, but even more how that faith was to be lived out in clear, practical ways that served to adorn the doctrine of God. Dr. Bill Barclay sums up this approach:

Paul's letter to Titus is filled with ethical instruction and is heavy on the imperative. There are fourteen imperative verbs in this short letter. But it is all rooted in the truth of gospel. The true gospel transforms, leading God's people to live differently from the world. The indicative of who God's people are in Christ comes before the imperatives calling God's people to live a holy life. Paul's desire is that God's people live differently before a watching world.

After finishing Titus, I anticipate moving back to the Old Testament for a short series in Haggai, and then around Easter we will embark on another evangelistic sermon series answering the question, *What Happens After I Die?* As always, keep the pulpit and the preached word in your prayers, boldly asking God to work in mighty ways through his word and Spirit.

Preaching Schedule		
Date	Morning	Evening
Jan. 7	Titus 1:1-4	
Jan. 14	Titus 1:5-9	Officer Installation
Jan. 21	Titus 1:10-16	John 14:15-31
Jan. 28	Titus 2:1-10	John 15:1-17
Feb. 4	Titus 2:11-15	
Feb. 11	Titus 3:1-7	John 15:18-16:4
Feb. 18	Titus 3:8-15	John 16:4-15
Feb. 25	Haggai 1:1-15	John 16:16-33

**The Remaining Days**

By Rev. Bill Clark

You have heard that Cecelia and I will launch out on a new venture: I will be going to serve as the Interim Pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Coventry in Coventry, CT. This will most likely be a ministry of 12-15 months, at the end of which we will be waiting to see what the Lord has planned for us next.

Why did we decide to go? First of all, this opportunity was completely unsolicited by me. It actually came as quite a surprise, which caused me to give it more prayerful consideration. I knew this might be one of those times when the Lord might be especially trying to get my attention

A second element was that many people gave thanks to the Lord for my transition work here at CRPC. So, I thought, "Is the Lord really desirous of Cecelia and me doing something similar again?" As doors continued to open, we began to think that might be just what He had in mind.

The Lord made things easier for us in that our immediate family is now scattered about the country. Andrew and Vanessa are in Newark, NJ. Daniel and Georgia Ann are about to relocate to Aurora, CO. Josh will still be here for the time being, but that could also change. Other family members are in Alabama.

But it was some of my recent studies for Wednesday nights that helped to clarify the decision for me. I had studied the prayer of the Apostle Paul in Romans 15:30-33. In the larger context of that prayer, I read Romans 15:18-24, in which Paul confesses his desire to preach the Gospel in Spain. Paul was surely in his 50's at this time and still filled with zeal to bring the Good News of Christ crucified to others. I began to feel somewhat torn. Would I just tell the folks in Connecticut, "No," and go on with the known and normal duties at CRPC, which are important and needful of being done? Or was I willing to be stretched further by the Lord, taken out of my "comfort zone," and challenged with a move to an unfamiliar area of the country...to a congregation in need of making that journey from the start of their leadership transition to the other side, where they will see the Lord provide for them their next pastor?

After prayer, we decided we could only say, "Yes," to Connecticut! That leads me to the title of this article, just how will I live out the rest of the days the Lord gives me? We all need to answer this question. My decision may make my life harder, at least at this point. But any simple reading of the Bible tells us that walking in the very center of God's will is not necessarily an "easy way". We are to walk by faith and not by sight.. We are to desire that Christ will be honored in our bodies [and lives] (Phil. 1:20).

There is still plenty to be done at CRPC. Perhaps we all need to sincerely ask the Lord, "What would you have me be doing for the work of Your church and kingdom? Please give me ears to hear you directing me into fuller ministry for the glory of your name." Let us all be strong and work, FOR THE LORD IS WITH US. (Haggai 1:4)

**The Company We Keep**

by Rev. Sean McCann



It has been a full and ambitious year in the Pastor's Reading Challenge, so I know my fellow readers were grateful to end the year on a bit of a lighter note as we explored the theme of biblical friendship in Jonathan Holmes short book, *The Company We Keep: In Search of Biblical Friendship*. Holmes brief treatise is a primer on the topic from a uniquely Biblical perspective that attempts to convince us of the importance of having distinctly biblical friendships, to explain what those friendships should look like, and to guide us in how they might be formed.

Holmes describes biblical friendship as a relationship that is explicitly Christ-centered, then goes on to elaborate:

Biblical friendship exists when two or more people, bound together by a common faith in Jesus Christ, pursue him and his kingdom with intentionality and vulnerability. Rather than serving as an end in itself, biblical friendship serves primarily to bring glory to Christ, who brought us into friendship with the Father. It is indispensable to the work of the gospel in the earth and an essential element of what God created us for.

One of the more convicting parts of the book for me was the section on what Holmes called "everyday substitutes." He identifies three types of relationships that when taken for the real thing fall woefully short of God's purposes. These substitutes are *social media* friendships ("We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the social robot may offer the illusion of companionships without the demands of friendship"), *specialized* friendships ("content to reduce a relationship down to a common activity or interest"), and *selfish* friendships ("seeks friendship purely for what can be gained for the all-important Me").

The reason these types of relationships are so common is that – for the most part – they are easy and require little effort on our part. The challenge of moving beyond these substitutes is that forming biblical friendships takes time and effort. Holmes wisely notes "the forging of biblical friendship all comes down to investing time wisely." Relationships are not formed overnight, and they are not maintained without effort. And since we all have experienced the pain of hard friendships and relationships, we often wonder if they really are worth the trouble.

Holmes concludes by offering a compelling case that biblical friendships not only wonderfully enhance our individual lives, but they take on a greater significance by telling the story of the gospel in cultivating and displaying true unity within the body of Christ and before a watching world. I share Holmes hope that we would grow in these types of relationships as God weaves a people into himself and into one another for his own glory.