

THE SUITABLENESS AND SUFFICIENCY OF THE PSALTER FOR CHRITIAN WORSHIP

By the Rev. John A. Henderson, D.D., Allegheny, PA.

The very first concern in this discussion is to have the right conception of what Christian worship is. Christian worship is the formal showing forth of the character and works of God by the observance of appointed ordinances, whereby men offer to God true homage, adoration, praise, confession, thanksgiving, and service, and all this through Christ Jesus, Whose mediatorial work finishes the only ground of acceptable approach to the Divine Being, and all this also for the sole purpose of honoring God and enjoying His favor. It will be readily agreed that no other kind of acceptable worship by men is, or has even been, possible, since sin entered into the world, than that just defined as Christian worship. Old Testament saints worshiped God through Christ no less certainly than did New Testament saints, or than do we, the former through the prophetic Christ and the latter through the historic Christ. In this view, the true worship of all dispensations is Christian worship. Of necessity it is the same thing essentially from first to last.

As God has made provision for men in all ages to come near to Him in salvation-experience through Christ, so has He made adequate provision whereby they may approach Him with acceptance in every feature of appointed worship. He has directed men to pray to Him, and has told them how to make their prayers. He has directed them to sing to Him, and has told them, not how to make their songs, but where to find them ready-made to their hand. He has directed men to make their offerings of worldly wealth, and has placed His own image and superscription upon the tithe. He has directed them to give to Him a share of their time, and has specified as holy unto Him the seventh part. Christian worship, then, is just simply to follow God's direction in our approach to Him for the purpose of declaring His glory and obtaining His favor. Obedience, indeed, is the essence of such worship. Nothing can take its place, however good in itself and substitute may be; for "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams."

The question just now is as to the suitableness and sufficiency of the Bible Psalter for such Christian worship. Second. Multitudes of devout saints have accepted and Psalter from God for such use, and have found it suitable and sufficient. The former of these facts, if made out, amounts to a demonstration of the claim. The latter of these facts does not reach an equal height in importance and value, but is strongly corroborative of the claim.

Let me urge attention to the former fact, namely, that God gave the Psalter for use in Christian worship. The very fact that God prepared the Psalms to serve an appointed purpose is presumptive proof of their suitability and sufficiency – proof which amount to almost a demonstration. The demonstration becomes a positive one to clear knowledge and unquestioning faith. It is only ignorance and doubt that wait to see the print of the nails. When God gave the Psalter, He did so in order to meet the needs of His worshiping people. Evidently the Psalter came to be what it is by a process of gradual growth, by the

compilation, finally, out of the material at hand, of a collection for permanent employment by the Church as its matter of praise. It is not our contention that this Book contains all the songs that God ever gave for His people's use in their approach to Him. It is quite possible, as alleged by some, that in the earlier history of divine worship by men there were songs given by God for temporary use, which, for good reasons, were not preserved in the collection we call the Psalter. This collection, which is the Hymnary of the Church Universal, is what it is, therefore, by the "survival of the fittest," determined, not through natural, but supernatural, selection. The Psalter is therefore a development under divine supervision, as is the entire Bible, and at all states in its development its full adaptation to the end designed much be taken for granted. The Psalter was completed several centuries after Christ, it was without doubt designed to meet the demands for a divine revelation for all time. In completing this written revelation to the world and the Church, there were added, after Christ, sections of history, biography, epistolary instruction and exhortation, and even prophecy; but it will be observed that there is not to be found any book of New Testament lyrics in order to complete the divine provision for the matter of praise. No more "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" were provided. Why this omission? Was it an oversight on God's part, to make amends for which modern hymn-writers are to be invoked? By no means. God knew what He was about when He completed the Psalter. When it was finished, compiled in its present form, it was just as He wanted it; and so it needed no amendments or addenda to fit it for permanent use by the Church of Christ. These are the whole suitable, all-sufficient "spiritual songs" – the songs that Spirit has edited, and so much be possessed of infinite adaptation.

The second fact mentioned as strongly corroborating our claim is that multitudes of devout worshipers have accepted the Psalter for its divinely appointed use, and have found it suitable and sufficient. Human judgment or experience is not the criterion by which to settle absolutely a question like this. But where such judgment and experience coincide with the mind of God in an actual test of his appointed provision, it is worthy to be noted as very encouraging to the faith of those who are seeking to follow the divine directions. Clearly the Psalter has long been used for Christian worship. As to such use it had no competitor in Old Testament times. Nor was there anything to divide the honors with it in New Testament times, or in the early times that any serious attempt was made to displace the Psalter by substituting for it man-made songs. It is clear from the history of the movement that the displacement of the Psalter as the matter of praise began, but in an effort to satisfy a feeling or conviction as to its want of suitableness and sufficiency, but rather in the well-laid plan of a disturbing element to introduce heresy into the doctrinal views of the Church. This led the conservators of the true teaching to seek to bring to bear a counter-influence by resort also to man-made songs. Herein was the first serious error. But it was a strong temptation, and their yielding should be regarded charitably. They thought the ark of God was about to be overthrown, and this act was the presumptuous putting forth of the hand, Uzzah-like, to steady it. The motive was good, but how far-reaching and disastrous to the cause of the purity of worship was the result of that zealous but unwise act. Sectarian hymns began to abound. The desire to emphasize many controverted points of doctrine led to the wide extension of the use of human hymns in the song service of the churches, so that in these present times the songs of men have come to take the place of the songs of god in by far the larger part of God's

great family. In thus attempting to do battle for the cause of truth, which was the worthy professed purpose of these soldiers of the cross, we cannot but feel that they, to a large extent, played into the hands of the enemy, and thus weakened, rather than strengthened, their defense of fundamental doctrine. God's warriors did not remain in their God-given citadel, the impregnable fortress of truth – the divine Psalter, but went out into the open, to fight after the manner of the enemy with rudely constructed implements of their own devising. This discrimination against the Psalter was not at first an expression of adverse judgment as to its suitability and sufficiency for Christian worship; it was rather an acknowledgment that it was not well adapted for use in a sectarian squabble.

But what of these multitudes who have used the Psalter for Christian worship, and have found it suitable and sufficient? Who are they? Not to mention the pious Jews, whose discovery of the Messiah in these songs, sung by them for centuries before Christ, made their worship distinctly Christian, I would name, first of all Christ and His Apostles. It is scarcely disputed by anyone that the Psalter furnished them their matter of praise. It furnished the songs with which they closed the first Holy Communion service. It is more than probable that it afforded the material for that it afforded the material for that memorable midnight praise service in the jail at Philippi. This use of the Psalter by Christ and His Apostles is more than corroborative of its claim to be suitable and sufficient for Christian worship. It is authoritative. The example thus furnished determines positively, not only the question of its divine appointment for Christian worship. Christ's use of it sets the seal of His approval upon it as just the thing for Christian worship. We may be sure He did not make use of it as an imperfect praise-book, nor permit His apostles to do so just because he could do no better. He was under no such embarrassing necessity. For He who multiplied the loaves and fishes, made the dumb to speak, the blind to see, the lame to walk, and the dead to live, was entirely competent to have formally provided other songs, or to have raised up and inspired for that purpose one or many sweet psalmists of the new Israel. He did neither, for the reason that there was already at hand the song-book that was both clearly appointed and fully adapted for Christian worship. "He Who could have inspired every disciple to have been a David." What was then so fully suitable and sufficient to meet the needs of Christ and His Apostles ought certainly to do a like service for those in subsequent times who would aim to be like Christ.

To be continued....