

²⁰ Churches that seek to incorporate Psalms into their song repertoire should also seek to compensate for the challenges. These ministers would also do well to prepare and present brief Christ-centered introductory explanations to the Psalms—as well as some of the hymns—to help God’s people sing and pray not only in a new covenant key but also with understanding (1 Cor. 14:15). I hope, D.V., to write a future booklet to provide suggestions for ministers towards preparing such introductory explanations and other helps.

²¹ See Lee Irons, “Thoughts on Exclusive Psalmody” <https://www.the-highway.com/psalmody_Irons.html>

²² “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord” is specifically based on Psalm 137:5–6. Timothy Dwight, Jonathan Edwards’ grandson, wrote 3 hymns to together reflect through Psalm 137 in its totality, but this is the only one of the 3 that endured.

²³ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture* [John Knox Press, 1984], 54–55.

²⁴ Irons, *Ibid.*

²⁵ See *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* (Orthodox Presbyterian Church), II.B.2.c. or *The Book of Church Order* (Presbyterian Church in America), chapter 51.

How Can Old Covenant Psalms Voice New Covenant Realities?

by Larry E. Wilson, April 2026

Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that neglecting the Psalms had cost the church an “*incomparable treasure*,” and that recovering them would bring “*unsuspected power*.”¹ This may sound compelling. But can Old Testament Psalms—rooted in old covenant realities—really voice New Testament realities?

The answer lies in Scripture’s own testimony. The Psalms are God-breathed (see 2 Timothy 3:16), and the living God designed them not only for old covenant believers but also for new covenant believers (see Romans 15:3–4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). Accordingly, the Holy Spirit shaped every psalm to reveal Jesus and life in union with him (see Luke 24:25–27, 44; John 5:39–40). That’s why Jesus himself expected those who truly knew the God of the Word (including the Psalms) to recognize *him* (see John 8:12–59). It’s also why, as Christopher Ash points out, “For most of church history, Christians read the Psalms through the lens of fulfillment in Christ.” They viewed them as “the songs of Jesus—songs sung by Jesus in his life on earth, and songs in which the risen and ascended Jesus still leads his church in singing on earth.”² Accordingly, they could sing and pray them “in a new covenant key” (i.e., as fulfilled in Christ).

We need to learn to refract the Psalms through the prism of Jesus

But to sing and pray Psalms in a new covenant key, *we need to learn to “refract” them through the “prism” of Jesus*. Just as passing white light through a prism breaks it into its full spectrum, so also passing the Law, Prophets, and Psalms through the “prism” of Jesus breaks them into their “fulfillment spectrum.”

Under the old covenant, godly Israelites saw the Law as an indivisible whole—and they were right. For their time. But now Jesus has

come and fulfilled the Law (see Romans 10:4). Now, when we pass it through the prism of Jesus, we can see the Law refract into moral, ceremonial, and civil aspects. This helps us discern how to learn from and apply the old covenant laws in our new covenant setting.

In the same way, we need to refract the Prophets and the Psalms through the prism of Jesus to understand and apply them rightly today. The New Testament shows us how. The apostles show how all the Psalms are personified in Jesus by the way they quote and apply many specific Psalms.³

The New Testament shows us how to refract the Psalms through the prism of Jesus⁴

When we try to pray or sing Psalms, though, don't their old covenant terms, symbols, history, and settings often confound us? This may make us wonder: *How can old covenant words voice new covenant realities?*

We know they can because the Holy Spirit himself models this throughout the New Testament. Consider some examples:

- **Hebrews 10:19–22** takes Old Testament tabernacle/temple language and uses it to describe *our* meeting with God in worship. It portrays the high priest passing beyond the curtain into the Most Holy Place after having washed in the bronze basin (see Ex. 30:17–21). Yet it uses these old covenant words to describe *our* experience as new covenant believers entering God's very heavenly presence to meet with him through Christ's mediation and merits and by the Holy Spirit's supernatural empowering.
- **Romans 15:15–16** uses priestly and sacrificial terms from the old covenant to describe the apostle Paul's new covenant ministry of the Word—“... *the priestly service of the gospel of God ... the offering of the Gentiles ... acceptable ...*”
- **Ephesians 5:2** portrays Christ's death as “*a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*,” using “sacrificial language to underscore Christ's

that's Biblical. No, “Biblical theology” is a branch of Bible study, focusing on how God's revelation unfolds in a unified, organic way over time throughout the biblical narrative. See authors like Geerhardus Vos, Graeme Goldsworthy, Meredith Kline, Edmund Clowney, Richard Gaffin, O. Palmer Robertson, Vern Poythress, D.A. Carson, G.K. Beale, etc. These writings are helpful, but still, there's no substitute for first-hand knowledge of the Old Testament.

¹³ See “Of Public Reading of the Holy Scriptures” in *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God* by the Westminster Assembly (1643–1653).
<<https://thewestminsterstandard.org/directory-for-the-publick-worship-of-god/#3>>

¹⁴ Reformation churches profess allegiance not only to *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) but also to *tota scriptura* (“the whole Scriptures”).

¹⁵ Timothy and Julie Tennent, *A Meditative Journey Through the Psalms* [Seedbed Publishing <psalms.seedbed.com>, 2017], 211.

¹⁶ See Nathan Eshelman, “*Nearer, My God, to Thee: Why I Sing Only Psalms in Worship*” <<https://gentlereformation.com/2025/05/06/nearer-my-god-to-thee-why-i-sing-only-psalms-in-worship/>>; Brian E. Coombs, “*Why We Only Sing Psalms without Instruments*” <<https://messiahchurch.org/why-we-only-sing-psalms-without-instruments>>.

¹⁷ I've personally encountered exclusive psalmody practiced with attitudes that seemed legalistic, elitist, censorious, and anti-evangelistic—almost cultish-feeling. That this does exist, and that many have encountered it, contributes to the wide-spread perception that the practice of exclusive psalmody militates against welcoming, hospitable evangelism. But I've also encountered exclusive psalmody practiced in atmospheres that seemed very welcoming, warm, and evangelistic. A good example of the latter—and I could give more—would be the late RPCNA minister, Kenneth G. Smith. See <<https://rpglobalalliance.org/2024/10/21/ken-smith-a-tribute-by-barry-york/>> and *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield (Crown & Covenant Publications, 2012). This seems to indicate that factors other than the conviction of exclusive psalmody gave rise to the legalism (i.e., exclusive psalmody became the *occasion* for legalism, not the *cause* of it).

¹⁸ See Ronald E. Pierce, “*What Do We Sing in Worship? Only the Psalms?*” <https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/files/pub/articles/Ronald-E-Pearce_What-do-we-sing-in-public-worship.pdf>, Scott F. Sanborn “*Inclusive Psalmody: Why 'psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs' Refer to More Than the Old Testament Psalter*” <<https://kerux.com/doc/2303A3.html>>.

¹⁹ *What Happens When We Worship?* [Reformed Heritage Books, 2020], 157–158

³ Michael LeFebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms* [Christian Focus, 2011], 67.

⁴ The first booklet in this series (<https://opc.org/cce/Psalms_in_NC_Key_for_the_pew_12%20February_2026_booklet.pdf>) suggested six rules of thumb for “refracting” the Psalms through the “prism” of Jesus in order to sing (and pray) them “in a new covenant key”:

1. Treat Psalms as God-inspired words meant to shape your heart-response to him—formative words that you’re still growing into.
2. Look for “praising conversations” in the Psalms, noting different voices going in different directions. Stay alert to who is speaking to whom.
3. Accordingly, look for the LORD’s Anointed (his Messiah or Christ)—Jesus the Prophet, Priest, and King—as the primary “I” and “me” of the Psalms.
4. In view of that, look also for Christ’s Kingdom—the church—as the “we” and “us” of the Psalms.
5. Look in the Psalms for the clear contrast and conflict between Christ’s Kingdom and the world, the godly and the ungodly.
6. Trace the plot and big picture—the God-given journey from the beginning to the end of each Psalm, and from the beginning to the end of the entire Psalter.

⁵ LeFebvre, *Op. Cit.*, 370.

⁶ A helpful tool for learning to notice and understand these is the *Connecting Scripture New Testament: A Study Bible of Biblical Allusions and Quotations* [Holman Bible Publishers, 2025].

⁷ C. John Collins, from “How the New Testament Quotes and Interprets the Old Testament” in *The ESV Study Bible* [Crossway, 2008], 2605.

⁸ D.G. Hart and John Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* [P&R, 2002], 163.

⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, *Psalms in Congregational Celebration* [Evangelical Press, 1995], 7–8.

¹⁰ Edith Schaeffer wrote a book to try to counter this weakness, *Christianity is Jewish* [Tyndale, 1975].

¹¹ Carl Trueman has warned against this weakness as a destructive heresy. See “*The Marcions Have Landed!*” <<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-marcions-have-landed/>>. Trueman highlights two features of Marcionism that are widespread in evangelicalism: (1) an emphasis on God’s love to the utter exclusion of anything else, and (2) a constant tendency to neglect the Old Testament.

¹² Many writings in the discipline of “biblical theology”—if heeded—would do much to help remedy this. “Biblical theology” does not merely mean doctrine stated in a way

typological fulfillment of Israel’s sacrificial system (see Ex. 19:18; Lev. 2:12; 4:31; Num. 15:7; 28:2).⁵

- **Philippians 4:18** calls a financial gift for the Lord’s work “*a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.*”
- **Hebrews 13:15–16** urges new covenant believers to praise God and serve their neighbors in love, “*for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*” These verses describe our worship, witness, and compassionate service to others in the old covenant terms of offering up sacrifices to God.
- **1 Peter 2:9–10** takes Old Testament titles for Israel from Exodus, Deuteronomy, and the Prophets—as well as a specific prophecy from Hosea 2:23–25—and applies them to the new covenant people of God—drawn from all nations—united to Christ and to one another in Christ.
- **James 2:2–4** even calls a Christian gathering (or assembly) a “synagogue.”
- **Colossians 2:11–12** applies circumcision language to a new covenant believers’ union with Christ. In Christ, new covenant believers receive the reality that circumcision used to signify and seal—that baptism now signifies and seals—so that terminology can apply to them.
- **1 Corinthians 5:6–8** takes Old Testament Passover imagery and applies it to church discipline: “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened.” Since Christ, our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed, we must celebrate the festival without the leaven of sin.
- Examples like these can be multiplied.⁶ “As C. S. Lewis once observed, ‘one of the rewards of reading the Old Testament regularly’ is that ‘you keep on discovering more and more what a tissue of quotations the New Testament is.’”⁷

The New Testament repeatedly clothes new covenant realities in old covenant terminology. So, the Holy Spirit’s own exegesis shows that it’s not only *possible* but also *appropriate* to voice new covenant realities using old covenant words—so long as we understand them in light of

Christ's fulfillment. Our difficulty, however—as Darryl Hart and John Muether point out—is that “churches that ... sing from the Psalter ... need to have a good understanding of the Old Testament and how it reveals Christ. ... this is not easily done. But the early church did sing Psalms, and therefore *it is possible to sing them from the perspective of redemptive-historical fulfillment.*”⁸

It *is* possible, but it's *not* easily done. It would be a lot easier just to give up without even trying. But if we did that, we'd shortchange ourselves. We'd shortchange one another. We'd shortchange our loyalty to our Lord. We'll do much better to heed O. Palmer Robertson's admonition to make greater use of the Psalms:

“The full-orbed testimony of the Psalter, as it touches every possible experience of weal and woe in the life of God's people, has not found a voice in the current worship of the church. Yet perhaps nothing could be more needed. How else can it be communicated adequately to God's people that only the person with ‘clean hands and a pure heart’ can enter the house of the Lord? (Psalm 24:4). What better way could be devised to enforce the folly of the fool who says there is no God than to have that neglected truth reiterated by the multiple voices of the holy ones assembled for adoration and worship in his presence? (Psalm 14:1). How could comfort for Christians suffering under the oppression of the proud be communicated more effectively than by a community of believers joining in united testimony to the sudden devastation that God brings on his enemies? (Psalm 73:2–3, 18–19).”⁹

Modern Christians tend to be unfamiliar with the Old Testament, often glossing over the many Old Testament quotes and allusions in the New Testament. This isn't a virtue. It's a weakness.¹⁰ It might even be a sign of serious error.¹¹ Recovering deeper knowledge of the Old Testament will strengthen our understanding of the New Testament and its gospel.¹²

Surely then, we'd do well—and we'd benefit ourselves and the broader body of Christ—to work harder at getting more exposed to and

fulfillment, which is of the essence of prayer. To glimpse this is an exciting experience ... It is for this reason that psalmody should be balanced with hymnody and hymnody with psalmody. There is an important dynamic between the two ... There is a sense in which Christian hymnody is the fulfillment of psalmody.”²³

Lee Irons adds:

“For this reason, we should not go to either extreme. We should not exclusively sing the canonical Psalms, without complementing them with hymns that reflect the fullness of praise that flows from the climactic accomplishment of redemptive history in the person and work of Christ. But neither should we only sing new covenant hymns, lest by such neglect we forget the original text of the Psalter that these new hymns are meant to be a Christological commentary upon. We will impoverish our own understanding and enjoyment of our hymns if we abandon the Psalms altogether.”²⁴

So, it seems that neither singing only Psalms nor neglecting the Psalms is ideal. It seems rather that a wise, biblical approach recognizes that congregations should sing hymns that reflect the full scope of God's revelation in Christ while also regularly singing Psalms.²⁵

Even if we do use other prayers and hymns and songs, then, we 21st century believers would greatly benefit from recovering the Psalms as the backbone of our piety and worship, learning to refract them through the prism of Jesus. It could boost both the depth and breadth of our prayers and new songs. It could deepen our communion with the Triune God of grace, bringing him glory and heightening our edification and joy in worship. It could help make Christ's followers brighter light and saltier salt in the midst of a dark and decaying world.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* [Augsburg, 1970], 26.

² from <<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/savor-christ-in-every-psalm>>

popular culture and tradition than by conformity to Scripture. We need to sing the Psalms more often in worship ... to get used to the language of the Psalter, [and] to acclimate ourselves to the flavor and spirit of songs that we know God delights in. Only when we are steeped in the hymnody of Scripture will we be in any position to begin writing new hymns that breathe the spirit of Biblical hymnody in terms of their poetic form, emotional impact, thematic patterning, and redemptive symbolism.”²¹

It’s no wonder that many classic Christian hymns grew out of refracting Psalms through the prism of Jesus. Many of our most beloved, potent, and abiding classic hymns are rooted in deep meditation on specific Psalms by ministers who were steeped in repeatedly reflecting through the entire book of Psalms. To give some notable examples, reflecting on:

- Psalm 46 gave rise to “A Mighty Fortress is our God” (Martin Luther).
- Psalm 72 gave rise to “Hail to the Lord’s Anointed” (James Montgomery).
- Psalm 87 gave rise to “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” (John Newton).
- Psalm 90 gave rise to “O God, our Help in Ages Past” (Isaac Watts).
- Psalm 98 gave rise to “Joy to the World” (Isaac Watts).
- Psalm 103 gave rise to “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty” (Joachim Neander).
- Psalm 104 gave rise to “Oh, Worship the King” (Robert Grant).
- Psalm 117 gave rise to “From All That Dwell Below the Skies” (Isaac Watts).
- Psalm 130 gave rise to “From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee” (Martin Luther).
- Psalm 137 gave rise to “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord” (Timothy Dwight).²²

Hughes Oliphant Old observes:

“One has to have the canonical text in mind when one hears the Christian interpretation. The beauty of this form is that in the movement from the text to the interpretation one catches sight of the movement from promise to

familiar with the Old Testament, the God-given backdrop of the New. Historic Christian worship included both Old and New Testament readings as part of their order of worship. In the Reformed, Puritan tradition, these were consecutive readings through the whole Scriptures, generally with brief explanations to help people to understand and get familiar with the Scriptures.¹³ Ordinarily, a Psalm (or Psalms) would be sung between these Scripture readings, with a brief explanation given to help God’s people sing with understanding. Wouldn’t modern churches benefit from recovering these—or similar—practices? Surely they would, not least because it would expose God’s people even more to the sword of the Spirit, the whole Bible.¹⁴

Apart from the prism of Jesus, Old Testament words—by themselves—are not adequate to fully voice New Testament realities

Augustine famously captured the relationship between the two Testaments well: “*The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.*” The Holy Spirit has now taken what was latent and implicit in the Old Testament and made it patent and explicit in the New Testament. Timothy and Julie Tennent express it this way: “... the entire New Testament is found in seed form in the Old Testament, and the entire Old Testament finds its full flowering in the New Testament.”¹⁵

The Old Testament reaches its full meaning only in the New Testament. That’s why—by themselves—the Psalms cannot explicitly express new covenant realities. For that, we need what the Old Testament does not give—the New Testament’s full revelation of the mystery of Christ (see Ephesians 3:4–5—“*the mystery of Christ ... was **not** made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has **now** been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit*”). Still, because the New Testament really is implicit in the Old, we can sing and pray Psalms in a new covenant key without distorting their meaning—and we should! Refracting them through the prism of Jesus deepens our understanding of their meaning.

Some Christians sincerely believe that we should sing only the canonical Psalms in worship (“exclusive psalmody”). They sincerely believe that those songs are adequate for new covenant worship.¹⁶ This view deserves respect because its adherents follow their consciences—as they should (Rom. 14:23)—and it has a storied history in the church. Its advocates rightly insist that the Psalms *are* implicitly about Christ and life in union with him. Nevertheless, those who practice exclusive psalmody tend to put the onus on God’s people to refract the Psalms through the prism of Jesus for themselves—to make explicit in their thoughts what is only implicit in the Psalms. But that’s asking a lot—especially in a biblically-illiterate, post-Christendom culture. Few are equipped to do this. Frankly, this is one reason why so many fellow believers perceive that the practice of exclusive psalmody militates against welcoming, hospitable evangelism. In fairness, the conviction of exclusive psalmody—in itself—does not *necessitate* an anti-evangelistic mentality.¹⁷ All the same, those brothers and sisters who practice exclusive psalmody should be attentive to this challenge. They should take positive steps to compensate for it. One way to help compensate would be for ministers diligently to prepare and present pithy Christ-centered explanations to the Psalms they sing to help God’s people sing and pray them in a new covenant key, not only with their spirit, but also with their understanding (1 Cor. 14:15).

Most Christians, on the other hand, sincerely believe that not only does God’s Word warrant our praying and singing more than just the Psalms, but also that it’s wise to do so.¹⁸ Hymns aim to provide biblical content that’s “pre-interpreted”—with new covenant teaching that’s already explicit. This often makes the songs easier for the singers to quickly understand and apply to themselves. At the same time, however, it’s often not immediately apparent how these songs connect to Scripture. And—especially in our biblically-illiterate, post-Christendom culture—this presents a different challenge. Without safeguards to prevent this, these songs can more easily lead congregations to inadvertently drift away from many of the concerns, values, and emphases of Scripture. For instance, antinomianism pervades modern evangelicalism. Ironically, antinomianism is almost always taught—not by positively asserting it

but—by omitting and neglecting the things that would rebuke and correct it. The Psalms make much of God’s righteous character, God’s holy law, our attitude toward it, our obedience to it, our loyalty to God and his people, the believer’s conflict with sin, the church’s conflict with the world, lamentation because of these struggles, the hope of God’s judgment, etc. How well do our hymns and worship songs reflect these God-inspired concerns? In this case, the onus is on church leaders. They should carefully vet the songs they use in worship so as to ensure that they provide not only biblically healthy fare but also a biblically balanced diet for Christ’s blood-bought sheep. Jonathan Landry Cruse warns:

“If the Word of Christ is dwelling richly in you, you will be unable to do anything but sing. Therefore, it is paramount that our songs be filled with the Word—and nothing but the Word! Word-centered song will produce a people who are Word-centered. Songs based on and filled with Scripture are songs that are Godward, not manward; Christ-focused, not self-indulgent; grounded in objectivity, not aimlessly floating in subjectivity. The overemphasis we find in many churches today on feelings and emotions in worship is destructive to the formation of godly character. The sad reality is that many Christians evaluate the merit of a worship service based on the emotional thrill they get from the music. This is dangerous; if we say that true worship happens when we feel good, then we impress on the hearts of worshippers that anything which feels good is therefore true.”¹⁹

Accordingly, those who adopt this practice should be aware of this challenge. They should strive to compensate for it. One way to help compensate would be to incorporate a substantial mix of Psalms as a regular part of congregational singing and praying, perhaps even with the goal of routinely singing/praying through the entire Psalter.²⁰

This is why—even in the midst of arguing against exclusive psalmody—Lee Irons wisely exhorts:

“The inspired hymnody of Scripture ought to be sung in worship. This may seem like an obvious point, but it needs to be stressed—especially today, when our tastes in the area of song in worship seem to be dictated more by