

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."



## *A Controversial Newsletter "The Printed Voice of Summit Theological Seminary"*

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Regarding the Psalms, he wrote, "The Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons." I believe this statement is misguided and intend to prove it.

**First:** It runs contrary to the statements of other learned men. For example, in the fourth century Athanasius called them Psalms, "the epitome of the whole Scriptures." Also in the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea called them, "a compendium of all theology". In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther called them, "a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament."

While it is true that the Psalms are not, nor were they meant to be, a systematic theology, it is foolish to say that they are not doctrinal treatises. Doctrine in Scripture is found in all sorts of genres. It is found in historical books, personal letters, prophetic books, books of law, and yes even books of poetry.

**Second:** This statement ignores the frequent references in the New Testament to the Psalms. It is a fact that the Psalms are quoted in the New Testament more than any other book in the Old Testament. In fact one-fifth of Paul's quotations from the Old Testament were from the Psalms.

I don't believe there is any New Testament or Old Testament writer who focused more on doctrine than Paul did. Yet he quoted the Psalms frequently. Often it was to support a specific teaching that he was putting forth. In

the book of Romans alone, Paul quoted from the Psalms to teach such things as the universal wickedness of mankind, the forgiveness offered by God to man, and the failures of national Israel. If there is any book in the Bible that is not poetic, it's Romans.

**Third:** While the Psalms themselves may not have been sermons, the New Testament preachers sure did quote them in their sermons.

The most obvious example of this is Peter's sermon on Pentecost. He quoted from **Psalms 16, 132, 110, and 68** to establish that Jesus' resurrection and ascension were both fulfillment of prophecies about the Messiah.

Of course, this leads immediately to the conclusion that Jesus is The Messiah. Notice the effect of this sermon. About 3,000 were baptized as a result and the Church began.

In **Acts chapter 4**, Peter was defending John and himself. He quoted from **Psalms 118:22** to prove that the Jesus those rulers had rejected was actually the chief cornerstone.

In **Acts chapter 7**, Stephen referred to **Psalms 102:25** to show that God did not need a temple made with human hands to dwell in since He created all things.

In **Acts chapter 13**, Paul was preaching in Antioch of Pisidia and, much like Peter on Pentecost, he quoted from **Psalms 89, 132, and 16** to show the Lordship of Jesus as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy.

I suspect that the Psalms were quoted in many more of the sermons for which we have only summaries or a short statement about them preaching Jesus.

But note carefully that the Psalms were used in preaching by the apostles and early Christians to teach the truth of Jesus as Messiah.

**Fourth:** The Scripture makes it clear that the Psalms were intended to teach us.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, **teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and**

**hymns and spiritual songs**, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” **Colossians 3:16**

To say that the Psalms are not doctrinal (teaching) treatises is misleading at best and downright false at worst.

**Finally:** It should be pointed out how powerful poetry and singing is in teaching. This is true whether what is being taught is true or false.

Almost everybody in the English speaking world learned their alphabet with a song. Why it's the same tune as "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" I'll probably never know. I imagine that most people are like me. Even now, I hear the melody as I recite the alphabet. The letters and the tune are forever linked in my brain.

Back in the 90s the "Hooked on Phonics" reading program was marketed with the slogan that your child would learn to read easily, like a song. I occasionally hear a song on the radio from my childhood that I thought I had completely forgotten about. Yet, to my surprise and delight, I find I can still sing every word.

Music touches our emotions in a special way, but it also affects our memories in an undeniable way. It is the way many people have memorized the books of the Bible, the names of the apostles, etc.

But this can also be used to teach error. You probably remember the little ditty you heard as a child about Lizzie Borden.

Lizzie Borden took an axe  
Gave her mother forty whacks  
When she saw what she had done  
She gave her father forty-one

It is uncertain how this song originated; it may have been created to sell newspapers. But the truth is that most everything in the song is untrue. She was acquitted of the murders for starters.

Secondly, the number of whacks was not even close to the actual number of wounds her parents sustained, which totaled somewhere around thirty for both parents.

But who remembers the truth? Not many people. Recent surveys have shown that most people think she was guilty and that the song is accurate despite the truth.

The effect of music on the memory, along with the repetitious nature of songs in general, is a powerful thing. This is one of the arguments that used to be used against the music to which teenagers listen. They remember the lyrics and repeat them over and over again. Eventually they begin to believe them even when they know better logically. This is a real danger that we need to guard against in our own minds. It's true for adults too, not just teenagers and young children.

This situation is not limited to the secular world either. Ancient falsehood about the deity of Christ was spread this way.

In the early fourth century, a man named Arius taught that Christ was not fully God, but was a created being. He taught that Jesus was somewhere between man and God in essence. He was branded by many as a heretic, but his idea still spread rapidly and widely. The spread was due in part to the fact that he put his ideas to music. The tunes were catchy and people sang them repeatedly, leading to a rather wide acceptance of his ideas.

This controversy has come to be known as the Arian controversy. It was a large part of what led to the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.

This illustrates the power of music and repetition in forming our memories and beliefs.

One obvious lesson from this is that we need to be careful about the doctrinal content of our songs in the Church today. (How many angels could Jesus have called before His crucifixion?) Is it 10,000 angels like the song says, or is it more than 12 legions (72,000) as Jesus said? People may or may not remember the sermon, but they will likely remember the songs we sing.

A second lesson is the obvious wisdom of God in teaching us through the Psalms, which were put to music and sung over and over again.

Why does music have this affect on us? I can think of three factors.

**First** - The repetitive nature of it.

We don't like to hear the same sermon over and over, but we love to hear the same song over and over. Sometimes a tune actually gets stuck in our head. It is called "an earworm" and it occasionally afflicts an estimated 98% of people.

Authors from Twain to Poe to Arthur C. Clarke have written about this. This can be an irritating thing especially when we don't like the tune or the message. But think what a positive thing it could be if it's God's Word that gets "stuck in our head".

**Second** - The cadence and uniqueness of expression in music.

Memory experts are well aware of the power of these as memory devices. Even if you are not singing it, speaking a passage aloud with a cadence and unique emphasis on certain words helps you to memorize it. Hebrew poetry doesn't use rhyme like English poems do, but still the way particular words are emphasized is an aid to memory.

**Third** – It has to do with our emotions.

Music has a way of engaging our emotions in a way that goes beyond what you get without it. Convincing somebody of a truth logically is important. But convincing them logically at the same time you make them feel it emotionally is incredibly powerful. In fact, many people will be moved emotionally and therefore convinced whether they are persuaded logically or not.

Music drives the point home past our intellect into our emotions. In some ways it can be harder to dislodge it from there than from our intellect.

Some Christian singers recognize this and admit that they have a responsibility to use this power wisely and not to misuse it. The story of the Pied Piper is probably intended as a warning about the misuse of the power of music.

I'm not saying that the Psalms are intended to bypass our intellect in teaching. What I'm saying, is that they are designed to teach us at a deeper level than intellect alone. While they do touch our intellect, their impact goes beyond that, touching our very soul.