Singing with Jesus: The Psalms in Christian Worship

By Ken Michell, DWS

In the conversations surrounding worship music in the North American Protestant church, discussions tend to revolve around a simple dichotomy: traditional hymnody versus contemporary worship. Into this debate, Barry Liesch proposed that both be recognized as sources of light that function in different ways and for different lengths of time. This binary framework, even when it is respectfully acknowledged that either category is representative of a variety of song forms, is incomplete.

Contemporary worship and traditional hymnody, or what is commonly referred to in the vernacular as “choruses and hymns” are non-canonical compositions. Their light-shining capacity is limited not only by virtue of the song forms themselves, their range of expression, and their longevity, they are limited in authorship, authorization, and authority. The psalms, not as inspiration for our compositions but as the inspired Word of God in their fullness, are missing from most of these discussions.

Paul’s writings to the churches in Ephesus and Colossae affirm a diversity of song forms that include the Old Testament psalms along with songs composed from human origin. Following on from her Jewish forebears, the New Testament church embraced this diversity in her worship even as the psalter was supplemented by songs and hymns that centred on Jesus. In the fourth century, the church faced a major challenge to inculcate new converts to faith in the ways and rhythms of Christian worship. They turned to a form of psalm-singing to both teach the faith and safeguard it.

For musical worship leaders today, who assume that their primary choices are between traditional hymnody and contemporary worship music, and all that those terms represent, there is hope. The biblical testimony and the historical witness affirm that the psalms can lead the way.

Worship Music as Binary

By the mid-1990s, Protestant churches in North America were embroiled in a conflict regarding worship. For the following twenty years, considerable ink was spilled to advance ideas related to one side or the other or, at times, to consider a

way to reconcile the differences.[1] Although the worship wars were muti-faceted, combatants on either side commonly expressed their respective positions by the simple dichotomy of “traditional” versus “contemporary.”[2]

Musical differences revolved around a range of issues including song repertoire, suitable instrumentation, and how songs function within the worship context.[3] Yet, in musical terms, the battle was further reduced to a musical binary. Traditional hymnody had hymns while contemporary worship music had choruses.[4]

Fireworks and Stars

In 2001, in his book, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, Barry Liesch proposed a way forward. Working within the binary framework, he attempted to resolve the tension of a traditional *versus* contemporary approach to worship music. Liesch described both hymns and choruses as sources of light that reveal and edify but do so in different ways.[5] Contemporary worship music is like fireworks that provide an instantaneous burst of light but fade thereafter. Hymns, on the other hand, are like stars – long-lasting fixtures in the heavens that shine on the path.

Liesch’s light metaphor is helpful as he draws attention to what hymns and choruses have in common as well as what differentiates them. At their best, both choruses and hymns reveal God to his people and illuminate the pathway of faithful and obedient response. The metaphor further highlights a marked difference in their respective capacity to endure. Here, traditional hymnody has the advantage of being time-tested whereas contemporary worship music is only beginning its journey. The corpus of hymns that represent traditional hymnody have been handed down over decades if not centuries. In practice, contemporary worship music offerings, by definition, have a considerably shorter lifespan. Only time will tell which pieces from the contemporary worship music movement will hold their light.

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[1] Google Books Ngram Viewer shows a surge in uses of the term “worship wars” between 1993 and 2009 with a peak in 2005. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=worship+wars&year_start=1965&year_end=2022&corpus=en-2009&smoothing=0&case_insensitive=false
[2] Lester Ruth, “The Eruption of Worship Wars: The Coming of Conflict,” *Liturgy*, *32* (2016): 3.
[3] Ibid., 3.
[4] Traditional hymnody predominantly refers to hymns of the Western church produced from the Reformation until the middle of the 20th century.
[5] Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 16-31.

The metaphor is effective in terms of describing the source of light and its enduring quality; however, it falls short regarding provenance. Both hymns and choruses are Spirit-inspired but of human origin. Neither deserve the honoured position as God's handiwork in the firmament.

Moving Beyond the Binary

Even if the terms 'hymns' and 'choruses' represent a larger body of song forms suitable for worship, the list is incomplete.[6] Congregations need to move beyond the binary limitation. The Psalms represent worship content that is not accounted for in this classification. The Psalms are the very worship words God has given. When Liesch's metaphor is applied, the Psalms are more accurately the stars of the utmost enduring quality. As light sources, they are God's word even as they function as the people's words to God.

Hymns might, therefore, find their rightful place in this metaphor as satellites that shine in the sky and relay information to guide the church's steps. Given that satellites are not sources of light in and of themselves but rather reflect light, it may help to reframe the metaphor as guiding lights rather than sources of light. Thus, while hymns and choruses offer light and endure for a time, they are outshone and outlasted by the psalms.

A further limitation relates to the content of traditional hymnody and contemporary worship music which does not cover the breadth of content reflected in the psalter. The psalms include all aspects of human experience and emotion and bring them into the presence of God in worship. The early church theologian, Athanasius, wrote that, "the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter."[7]

When the congregation sings and make music in worship, their song content should reflect the breadth of emotion and expression seen in the psalter. In doing so, they promote honesty before God as they perform with words they embrace with their

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[6] For a more fully developed list of song forms that may be represented by this binary, see Constance Cherry's chapters on short- and long- song forms that serve a wide range of functions in worship. Constance M. Cherry, *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 121-173.
[7] Athanasius. *The Life of Antony and The Letter to Marcellinus*. Translated by Robert C. Gregg, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 126.

hearts.[8] Even if worship leaders were to write more songs that reflect the breadth of the content of the psalter, their non-canonical offerings remain limited in their authorization and authority. Ultimately, the binary constraints, regardless of the scope of their content, fail to include the God-given and God-written material in the Psalms.

Diversity of Song Forms – Biblical Foundations

An oversimplified song classification not only represents the vernacular of the worship wars era, it reflects a common oversight in the church today. The debate over which musical worship offering is better suited to helping the church know God and be known by him does not begin with songs of human origin. Hymns and choruses – and all the song forms they represent – were intended to supplement the psalms in worship, not supplant them.[9]

In the apostle Paul's letters to the churches at Ephesus and Colossae, he commends them to musical worship with "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16 New International Version). Paul makes the case that the fullness of the gospel is best reflected through the fullness of musical worship offerings.[10]

When referring to "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit," commentators tend to agree that Paul is not using a form of parallelism here.[11] The terms do not appear to function as one singular idea expressed in three ways. Instead, their repetition connotes an understanding that "the various terms are used loosely to cover the various forms of musical composition."[12] A similar pattern is found in Exodus 34:7 where the superlative degree conveys the fullness of a concept by using three related terms. In the Exodus passage, God's forgiveness of "iniquity, rebellion, and sin," refers to his forgiveness of *all* manner of offense.[13]

While some writers contend that the terms may be understood as distinct and separate, generally, commentators acknowledge that, "Paul was probably indicating something of the variety and richness that was to characterize the songs included in

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[8] John Witvliet, "Words to Grow Into: The Psalms as Formative Speech." *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*, edited by C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste, (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2012), 8-9.
[9] Micahel Lefebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms*, (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 20.
[10] Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 650.
[11] David F. Detwiler, "Church Music and Colossians 3:16," *Bibliotecha Sacra*, 158 (July–September 2001): 359-63.
[12] Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 47.
[13] Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 243.

corporate worship."[14] Paul's instruction that the message of Christ dwell richly in believers (Col 3:16) is reinforced by the richness of the Christian community's musical expression.[15]

While the texts point to a diversity of song forms, there is also evidence of overlap in the way the terms 'psalms' and 'hymns' are used in the New Testament. In the gospel accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn before going out to the Mount of Olives (Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26). The Greek term used in these gospel accounts is the word for hymn, but it is very likely a reference to one of the Hallel psalms that would be commonly sung in preparation for Passover.[16]

In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul uses the Greek term for psalm to describe the song that people are to sing when they come together. The context of Paul's instruction for good order in worship implies that this was not an Old Testament psalm, and as a result, most translations render it as a 'hymn.'[17]

Despite these overlapping examples of the terms in the New Testament, commentators generally agree that "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" signify a breadth of song forms offered in worship. While we cannot map a direct route from these terms to biblical psalmody, traditional hymnody, and contemporary worship music (of any era), they are included in the generous provision of Paul's instruction.

Diversity of Song Forms – Historic Foundations

Commentators offer further support for reading these terms as a diversity of song forms when set within both the Jewish and Greek context of the first century. While the term for psalms in these passages has a broader application, the Old Testament psalms are still in view. In his commentary on the book of Ephesians, Frank Thielman summarizes that "these three terms were used by Greek-speaking Jewish authors of roughly Paul's time to refer to songs of praise to God, including the songs in the canonical book of Psalms."[18]

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[14] David F. Detwiler, "Church Music and Colossians 3:16," *Bibliotecha Sacra*, 158 (July–September 2001): 362-63.
[15] Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 34.
[16] William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 509.
[17] Ralph P. Martin, "Worship," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters,* ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), 986.
[18] Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 361.

All three sacred spaces of Jewish life in the first century, the Temple, the synagogue, and the home, routinely incorporated the Old Testament psalms in their worship rhythms.[19] Psalms, hymns, and songs were already musical forms of celebration to God in Jewish practices.[20] Paul is not articulating a new way of worship for the church. He is describing well-known forms of worship – well-known to the Jewish converts – while infusing them with the message of Christ.

The early Christian community sang hymns to Christ. Scholars contend that many of the early hymns of the church, including the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55), the *Benedictus* (Lk 1:68-79), the *Gloria in Excelsis* (Lk 2:14), and the *Nunc Dimittis* (Lk 2:29-32) were in circulation before they were eventually incorporated into the gospel text.[21] Likewise, the Christ-hymns of John 1:1-18, Philippians 2:6-11, and Colossians 1:15-20 were sung in worship by the early Christians to proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The psalms, meanwhile, remained central in the worship practice of the church as patterns established in the Temple, synagogue, and home imbued Christian worship rhythms even as the focus shifted from the first Exodus to the second Exodus in the Christ event.[22]

Authorship, Authorization, and Authority

The early church embraced the full inclusion of the psalms in Christian worship because they recognized the singer of the psalter as Jesus himself. In the Old Testament, the psalms became the worship words of God's people because of their authorship, their authorization, and their authority.

Regarding their *authorship* – who wrote them – they were divinely inspired and authored by God. We receive them as God's word even as we acknowledge the prophetic ministry given to those who were ordained to write them – including David himself. In 1 Chronicles, we have an extensive list of those who were set apart

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[19] R. T. Beckwith, "The Jewish Background to Christian Worship" in *The Study of Liturgy*, eds. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold SJ, and Paul Bradshaw, (London: SPCK, 1992), 70-73. Daniel Block writes: "Borrowing heavily from temple worship, in synagogue liturgies the Psalter was used like a hymnbook. Specific psalms were read on holy days and special occasions, and within the service psalms or portions thereof were read or sung in response to Scripture readings. Liturgical prayers involved quotations of entire psalms or borrowing expressions and excerpts extensively from the Psalter." Block, *For the Glory of God*, 230.
[20] Lynn H. Cohick, *Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 181.
[21] Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 36.
[22] Ferdinand Hahn, *The Worship of the Early Church*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), ch 4.

to the "ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres, and cymbals." (1 Chron 25:1) This was the guild that David established to serve in worship leadership.[23]

Not only are they called to the ministry of songwriting for worship, they are *authorized* to do so by the king himself. 1 Chronicles 25 repeats the phrase "under the supervision" four times to emphasize the point that the beauty of the song was not in the eye of the beholder. The standard for what was acceptable in worship was established by the king as God's representative. He was the quality control to assure that what was produced measured up to God's holy standard.

Furthermore, as king, it was David's royal responsibility to lead the nation in worship. The psalms were led in his *authority*. This is not unique in the ancient near east where "the kings of the ancient world were viewed as mediators between the nation and the nation's deity."[24] Among David's many accomplishments (along with his struggles), the books of 1 & 2 Chronicles and 1 & 2 Samuel document David exercising his authority to lead the nation's worship. The Psalms are commonly referred to as the 'psalms of David' because of his authorship, his authorization, and his authority.

It is in fact the king's authorship, the king's authorization, and the king's authority that affirms the psalms as the standard of worship practice. The central declaration of worship in the psalms relates to the declaration of who is king and reverberates in the words of Psalm 97:1 which reads, "The Lord is King, let the earth rejoice!" (New Revised Standard Version). Worship proclaims who is king, not just of our own lives but king overall. In the New Testament, God's people acknowledge Jesus as King and proclaim his Lordship.[25]

Jesus is the Singer of the Psalms

Jesus is the son of David who fulfills the kingly office once and for all.[26] Jesus not only quotes from the Psalms more than any other book in Scripture, he testifies that the psalms speak about himself. In John 6, his disciples ask him about a passage in Psalm 78 (v23-25) that speaks of God giving the Israelites bread from heaven to eat.

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[23] Cf. 1 Chron 17 – God's covenant promise to David regarding his offspring.
[24] Micahel Lefebvre, *Singing the Songs of Jesus: Revisiting the Psalms*, (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 46.
[25] Philippians 2:9-11.
[26] Revelation 22:16; Ephesians 1:20-23.

And Jesus responds declaring that he is the bread of heaven that gives life to the world.[27]

On the cross, Jesus offers the words of Psalm 22:1 as his fervent prayer: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46 NIV). It would not be until after the resurrection that his followers would understand how the psalm portrays additional aspects of the crucifixion including the piercing of his hands and feet and his unbroken bones (part of the Levitical requirement for sacrifice in Num 9:11-13). Further, the psalm speaks to the resurrection itself: "future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, . . . He has done it!" (Ps 22:30-31).[28]

More than simply assuming that Jesus sang from the psalter (as we know this was part of the Jewish culture), the New Testament writers state that Jesus is the singer of the psalter. Paul refers to Jesus when quoting from Psalm 18 in Romans 15:

> For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed [9] and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I [Jesus] will praise you among the Gentiles; I [Jesus] will sing the praises of your name."

Further on, Hebrews chapter 2 tells believers that through Christ, they are being made holy and, being made holy, they are considered one with Christ in the same family. Continuing in verse 11, it says, "Jesus is not ashamed to call [us] brothers and sisters. [Jesus] says, [quoting from Psalm 22], "I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises." In other words, Jesus will declare God's name to his brothers and sisters; in the assembly where Jesus will sing God's praises. The psalms of David are the psalms of Jesus.

Michael LeFebvre summarizes: "The New Testament [writers] want us to recognize Jesus, not simply as one who fulfills things about Himself in the Psalms, but as the song leader who leads us in singing them."[29] Jesus is the author, who authorizes

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[27] John 6:32-35.

[28] Psalm 22 anticipates the song of Jesus. Cf. Reggie M. Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Dhrist's Song in Our Worship*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 73.

[29] Michael LeFebvre, "The Hymns of Christ: The Old Testament Formation of the New Testament Hymnal," in *Sing a New Song: Recovering Psalm Singing for the Twenty-First* Century, eds. Joel R. Beeke and Anthony T. Selvaggio, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 108.

worship and leads his people by his authority. When God's people pray and sing the psalms, they pray and sing with Jesus.

The early church writers continued to recognize Jesus in the psalms, making the Christological interpretation a priority in their teaching.[30] In the second century, apologist Justin Martyr understood the doors and gates of Psalm 24 to be opened by Jesus who was raised to life and ascended to heaven. He is the King of glory that is welcomed in the lives of his people.[31]

The psalms remained the worship standards for the early church even as hymnody developed. The church was faithful to the musical principle that imitation comes before improvisation. The early church writers embraced cultural adaptation as a reflection of God's glory in creation but were simultaneously cautious of cultural forms that were inconsistent with the gospel.[32] Singing and praying the psalms were a form of imitation as the early church sang and prayed the psalms that Jesus sang and prayed. Further, as they sang and prayed the psalms, they did so with the risen and ascended Lord Jesus.[33]

Responding to the Crisis

In the fourth century, when Christianity was recognized as the religion of the state and no longer under persecution, the world changed, and the church had to adapt her worship practices. For many new converts to Christian faith, there was little to no connection to the early Christian rhythms of worship developed from Jewish practices.

In response, the church incorporated a form of psalm-singing to both teach elements of worship and faith and to safeguard the principles of worship and faith. They introduced the responsorial psalm, part of the call and response tradition of music, to encourage full participation, and frame worship practice in the Scripture.[34] In so

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[30] Craig A. Blaising, "Prepared for Prayer: The Psalms in Early Christian Worship," in *Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship*, eds. C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste, (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2012), 60.
[31] Craig A. Blaising and Carmen S. Harden, eds., *Psalms 1-50*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT Series, Vol 7, ed. Thomas C. Oden, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 187.
[32] Cornelius Pantinga Jr., and Sue A Rozeboom, *Discerning the spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Christian Worship Today*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 68, 48.
[33] Over time, the psalms became more connected with personal devotion. Cf. Paul F. Bradshaw, "Liturgical Time," in *Historical Foundations of Worship: Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Perspectives*, eds., Melanie C. Ross and Mark A. Lamport, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 35-36.
[34] James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 70.

doing, the congregation were invited into the dialogical rhythm of worship that is a holy conversation between God and his people.[35]

To begin, the congregation is taught a simple melodic phrase – what might be called a chorus or refrain. In the rhythm of the psalm, the melodic phrase might be a key verse or central theme from the psalm itself. Psalm 136, for example, has a built-in responsorial rhythm where the congregation responds with, “his love endures forever” after every line.

After teaching the melodic phrase, the leader might read, chant, or sing a verse or two from the psalm to which the congregation responds by returning to the melodic phrase or refrain. This pattern alternates back and forth such that the leader continues through the psalm while the congregation returns to the sung refrain after every verse (or verses).[36]

In this way, the congregation reads, sings, and prays the psalm in its entirety. Numerous psalms already have a phrase or idea that the writer returns to which is the natural responsorial element. Psalms 42 and 43 repeat the question and answer, “Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God” (Ps 42:5, 11; 43:5). Psalm 80 draws strength from the repetition of variations of the phrase, “Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved” (Ps 80:3, 7, 19).

Some psalms have summary proclamations that would be suitable as the responsorial refrain. The writer in Psalm 71 acknowledges God’s faithfulness and provision in the past, present, and future and declares, “as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more” (v. 14). Psalm 116 celebrates the Lord’s deliverance from distress and sorrow and resolves in verse 7: “Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.”

Psalms that begin and end with the same phrase, called an inclusio, give a hermeneutic through which all understand the passage. Psalm 8 begins and ends with “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Ps 8:1, 9). Psalms 103 and 104 frame their content within the call to direct the soul’s attention to praising God: “Praise the Lord, my soul” (Ps 103:1, 22; 104:1, 35). The final six psalms begin and end with a call to “praise the Lord” (Ps 145-150).

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[35] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 15.
[36] Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 18.

Psalms incorporate elements of repetition to facilitate remembrance, which is a key component of worship practice. God's people remember God's work of creation and re-creation in worship. Further, many of the psalms serve as a framework that narrates participation in worship.[37] For example, when God's people pray and sing and read psalm 103, they connect their praise to God for the gifts of all his benefits (vv. 1-6). They remember God's righteousness and justice and how he makes known his ways and deeds (vv. 6-7). They celebrate his compassion and grace, the slowness of his anger and the abundance of his love (v. 8). They confess their sin before God who forgives them and removes their transgression "as far as the east is from the west" (vv. 9-12). Forgiven and restored, they affirm their identity as dearly loved children who "keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts" (vv. 13-18). They acknowledge the Lord as king and join the ongoing chorus of praise in heaven and earth (vv. 19-22). With the writer, they conclude as they began, "praise the Lord, my soul!" In this way, their participation through the psalms forms them a people who love God and love what God loves in the way that God loves.

Conclusion

It is still common for church debates regarding worship music to be framed within the binary description of traditional hymnody and contemporary worship music. While these descriptors may be more categorical than singular, they neglect to include the essential worship song found in the psalter. Respectfully, a considerable amount of worship material is inspired and drawn from the psalms but rarely do these songs embrace the fullness therein.

Following Liesch's lead, worship leaders can affirm the contributions of each song form while expanding the metaphor to include the psalms as the very worship words God has given to his people. The biblical testimony and the early church practice give them a way forward to incorporate a diversity of song that honours the psalms in their worship. By including a form of psalm-singing in their regular worship practice, they embrace imitation alongside improvisation, they are mentored by songs that are authored by God, and they are invited to sing with Jesus.

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[37] Walter Bruegemann refers to the psalms as scripts. Walter Brueggemann with Steve Frost, *Psalmist's Cry: Scripts for Embracing Lament*, (USA: The House Studio, 2010), 57.

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