

A NEW PSALTER FOR A NEW GENERATION

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From 1549, with Sternhold's abbreviated metrical psalter of nineteen psalms to Isaac Watts' lengthy *Psalms of David Imitated*, the church was inundated with opportunities and resources to sing from the Psalter, the hymnbook of ancient Israel and of the Early Church. By 1850, the practice of Psalm-singing had largely fallen out of favor on the American church landscape and was replaced by hymn-singing and eventually, the singing of Gospel songs and other contemporary media. The same is true today. With the exception of a handful of Reformed Presbyterian Churches, many churches only sing versified psalms that have made their way into the hymnbooks of various denominations over the years. How did the church, once dependent upon Israel's hymnbook for its worship language and its music, lyrics, and poetry, move so far away from the Psalter? The *Timeless Psalter & Commentary Project* sensed this very question over a decade ago as a brainchild of Old Testament Scholar, Dr. Mark Shipp of Austin Graduate School of Theology. After twelve years of effort, the project is about 75-80% complete. Already, two volumes consisting of settings of Psalms 1-90 are published through Abilene Christian University Press, and have our third and final volume coming in about three years. Each of these volumes and the upcoming third volume includes new, original translations, brief devotional commentaries, a word for those who sing the Psalm, and two or more settings of original music and lyrics for each Psalm.

Composers and lyricists use the commentaries in their compositions as reference, "creating insightful and fresh interpretations of each psalm in a musical setting¹," explains Shipp. In addition, Timeless seeks to bridge that gap between the oft-debated struggle over divergent worship styles. Two or more musical settings will be provided for each psalm: a more traditional setting, a contemporary one, and sometimes a chant. Each Psalm represents a diverse musical language, style, and freshness to help the church find a way to sing each of the Psalms.

Both music and lyrics pass through a rigorous review process, but one that is centered on collaboration. The hymns and spiritual songs composed for this project are not restatements of the psalms but interpretations that allow the words and the music to join in creating praiseworthy of our God and King. The lyrics of each hymn or song are based on a new translation of the psalm from the biblical Hebrew.

Ancient Hebrew poetry used different conventions than today's poetry. While chants lend themselves well to putting unaltered text into music, other styles benefit greatly from a lyrical adaptation. The new compositions attempt to represent faithfully the themes, emphases, and poetic structure of the psalms. Each composer focuses on the literary structure found in the psalm. Because each composer works from scholars' commentary and translation the poetry is fresh, insightful, and biblically sound.

Each psalm is represented by multiple new, original musical compositions from a wide gamut of both new and experienced composers from within and outside of Churches of Christ, some who are respected, published composers. Generally, this includes a more traditional setting and a more contemporary setting. Some psalms are also produced as

¹ Shipp, Mark. From the Foreword to Timeless, Volume 1.

chants. Composers collaborate with lyricists to produce songs that reflect the style of setting and the emotional and theological content of the psalms. Our goal is an aesthetically pleasing and biblically insightful composition.

For the last seven years, I have been blessed to serve as both a composer and an associate musical editor for the *Timeless* project. As I've worked with, studied, meditated on Israel's hymnbook, I am increasingly convinced that the Psalter is one of the best worship resources the church has at its fingertips. To not make use of it in our worship gatherings is a tragic loss. But, as with any cycle of music or worship style, there seems to me to be not only a desire for a return to worshipping with the words of scripture, but a new freshness that comes with its introduction into our liturgical environments again.