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Lyrical Theology[1]

The term *lyrical theology* requires considerable definition if it is to be used with clarity and integrity. Obviously the noun *theology* is itself problematic in terms of what it means to speak of a "God word" or a "word about God." Nonetheless, its constant usage, though in diverse ways, in the arenas of church and theological science makes it a familiar term used with confidence and regularity. It acquires many adjectival modifiers: *systematic* theology, *pastoral* theology, *biblical* theology, etc. Here we speak, however, of a *lyrical* theology.

The word "lyric," which derives from a song accompanied by the lyre, applied to poetry may designate a text of songlike rhythm characterized by emotional and sensual expression, as well as subjectivity. Sonnets, odes, hymns, and elegies may be lyric poetry. In other words, a lyric poem expresses emotion through verse, which possesses a songlike quality.

Lyrical theology designates a theology couched in poetry, song, and liturgy, characterized by rhythm and expressive of emotion and sentiment. One may speak of lyrical prose, and much of our understanding of what theology means and is, is bound to the prose page. Certainly the content and boundaries of continental theology, of which North Americans in particular are often the well-meaning but wrong-headed inheritors, is ensconced in the world of prose.

1. The author expresses deep appreciation to Dubuque Theological Seminary of Dubuque, Iowa, and to United Theological Seminary of Dayton, Ohio, for lecture opportunities, which provided the impetus for the precipitation of the ideas expressed in this chapter, originally published in the *Journal of Theology* [Dayton, OH] (1994) 18–43, and which has been in part adapted for this volume.

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Theology of Song

Lyrical theology, then, is a "sung" theology, or at least a theology expressed in poetry and song. This means that the mode of expressing what we so often are accustomed to hear and see in prose comes to fruition in a different world of language. Of course, the diverse definitions of "poetry" which saturate the world of literature are as varied as its distinguished authors. T. S. Eliot views poetry as an experiential, structured organic unit, which combines numerous resources of language.[2] For Hart Crane poetry requires saturation with words in order for appropriate patterns to be distilled at the proper moment. Henry Vaughan claims:

> O! 'tis an easy thing
> To write and sing;
> But to write true, unfeigned verse
> Is very hard! O God, despise
> These weights, and give my spirit leave
> To act as well as to conceive.[3]

Foreboding indeed is the task of poets, for they are mortals *and* artists; their verse issues from a mysterious inner effervescence of soul and spirit, as well as from the conscious exercise of technical discipline. They bring together life and language; they wed method and meaning. Vital to the understanding of their creative process, however, is the realization that no matter what gives birth to the poem—be it emotion, sense, character, scene, event, insight, idea—it is not born nor developed in a vacuum. It has a context in the world, a social location.

When we imagine a world without poetry and poets, it is a deeply unsatisfying image. To poetry and poets we owe the pleasure of sensation, the awakening of the senses, exhilaration, ecstasy, the voice of conscience, the awareness of morality, truth, and justice. In their words, metaphors, similes, figures of speech, and imagery we see our own lives pass before our eyes. As Tanner says in Shaw's *Man and Superman,* "The Artist's work is to show us ourselves as we really are. Our minds are nothing but this

2. See Eliot, *Selected Essays*, especially the chapters "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "The Function of Criticism," "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry"; and also his *Essays Ancient and Modern.*

3. Drew, *Poetry,* 19.

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knowledge of ourselves and he who adds a jot to such knowledge creates new mind."[4]

What of the distinction between poetry and prose, especially when we discuss theology? Will it serve us well? Will it help us with Henry Vaughan "to act as well as to conceive?" No doubt most of what is written in poetry could be reduced to prose, especially whatever "message" is found therein, but poetry is not measured by its claims or assertions about life, rather by the way it perceives, illuminates, and creates moods and intensity.

Finally, I turn to Yeats for a description of poetry which is essential to a discussion of lyrical theology: "It is blood, imagination, intellect running together. . . . It bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrink from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories and sensations of the body."[5] In other words, poetry engages, vitalizes, and animates mind and body.

Poetry, however, is not merely printed or written word. It is a symphony of sounds, rhythmical patterns, metaphorical language, and imagery. And words we sometimes hear daily take on different meaning or come to mean more in the context of poetical language and song than they do in normal usage.

Unquestionably books are filled with the pros and cons of what constitutes the best kind of poetical expression—rhymed or free verse, for example. Even great poets differ on the qualities of poetry, which should constantly characterize it. Here are but a few examples. On the sounds of poetry Alexander Pope says, "The sounds must seem an echo of the sense."[6] Robert Frost claims that the imagery of poetry often says one thing and means another.[7] Coleridge comments on the words of poetry: "The best words in their best order."[8]

4. Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 16.
5. Yeats, *Autobiography;* see also *Discoveries* and *The Cutting of an Agate*.
6. Drew, *Poetry*, 19.
7. Frost, "Constant Symbol," and "Figure a Poem Makes."
8. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria,* 183.

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Biblical Poetry

Given such comments about poetry, one asks—How do they apply to sacred poetry, biblical poetry? What of the Psalms as poetry—Do the sounds echo the sense? Does the imagery of the Psalms say one thing and mean another? Do the Psalms indeed provide the best words in their best order? Is the design of the Psalms "performance in words"? We may have "yes/no/but" answers to all of these questions, because of our perspective on the Psalms as sacred poetry, as the Word of God, as a Word and as words from God somehow communicated to us through the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we cannot expect that the human creativity expressed in poetic art has been nullified by divine intervention, since this art is so blatantly evident in the Psalms.

Let us ask a more basic question. Why does theology embody lyric song? It is because there is a need for the lyric in a fallen world, and human need is the author of lyricism. What is the world's song? It is as diverse as the need. It is not only a song of anguish and death, but one of jubilation and celebration. But some cry out in the midst of suffering and destruction for silence:

> By the rivers of Babylon,
> there we sat down and wept,
> when we remembered Zion.
> On the willows there
> we hung up our lyres.
> For there our captors
> required of us songs,
> and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
> "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
> How shall we sing the Lord's song
> in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1–4 RSV)

There are those who cry out in the midst of suffering in our time—can there be a song, can there be poetry after the Holocaust?

Qoheleth resounds, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc 1:9). Yet, the Psalmist pleads, "Sing a new song to the Lord" (Ps 96:1). There are old songs, new songs, and old songs sung in new fashion! There is silence! And songs are a response to a fallen history. Note the verb tense in the line of the worldwide-known Civil Rights anthem "We shall over-

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come." The "overcoming" is in the future; it is incomplete in this world. Like so many of the biblical Psalms, this song tells the story of the human predicament in a fallen world. A song emerges from misery, pain, and joy. Hence, the art of poetry provides a paradigm of life and death, which spans the spectrum of human emotions. An old song dies, a new song is born. Hence, lyrical theology is a dynamic ongoing creative process, and its songs exist inside and outside of time. They can transcend time!

An African-American woman stood before the Texas state legislature to testify in the face of massive budget cuts in the arts a few years ago and said in essence: Give me a pair of shoes and they are gone in a year; give me a bag of groceries and they are gone in a week; give me a song and I have it for life! The song of the human soul indeed can transcend time and space and has incredible staying power to sustain.

The Psalms

Where do we turn for the songs of lyrical theology? First of all, we turn to the songbook of Scripture, the Psalms. There are other songs of the Hebrew Scriptures, but this is the largest single collection, which has continued to have an impact on Jewish and Christian traditions and worship, as well as world literature. It is fair to say that not all of them qualify technically as "lyrical," if one adheres to a strict definition of "lyric," e.g., the historical Psalms, but since by *lyrical theology* we generally mean "a sung theology," we shall not quibble over such definition.

What of the language of the Psalms? Interestingly it is precisely the poetry that is often not translated in the translation process. Even when we speak of the Psalms as the "Word of God," we must reckon with the human words and artistic form in which they come to us. When we read a Hebrew psalm with a distinct verbal sequence, embedded in rhythm and organized by a literary structure such as parallelism, we know we are in the presence of poetry. This is a characteristic of the Psalms, which is vital to their singing and reading. It identifies two parallel lines of verse, in which the second functions in different ways: it may express the idea of the first line in a different manner, it may express a contrasting idea, or further develop the idea. These three types of parallelism are commonly known as *synonymous, antithetical,* and *synthetical,* for example:

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synonymous:	The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell there. (Ps 24:1 KJV)
antithetical:	For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish. (Ps 1:6 KJV)
synthetic:	God sits in the heavens and laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. (Ps 2:4 own translation)

In addition to parallelism one finds stresses primarily of 3:3 and 3:2 within the lines of Hebrew poetry but never in the sense of Greek or Roman poetry with poets' careful observance of iambs and hexameters. While meter, such as may be designated meter, grows out of the parallel structure of Hebrew poetry, most translations pay little attention to it.

Alliteration, assonance, and word play are also characteristic of Hebrew poetry. Alliteration has to do with the repetition of the initial sound of a word or syllable in one or more closely following words or syllables. An English translation of Ps 122:6,

> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
> "May they prosper who love you!"

does not adequately express the musical cadence of *sh* and *l* in the Hebrew text:

> *sha^{a}lu sh^{e}lom y^{e}rushālāyim*
> *yishlayu oh^{a}vayik*

Assonance has to do with the resemblance or correspondence of sounds in accented vowels and is especially characteristic of Hebrew poetry where pronominal suffixes and verbs recur. Notice the inadequacy of the translation of Ps 23:2 to capture the assonance of the Hebrew poetry:

> The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures,
> leads me beside still waters.

The Hebrew reads:

> *bin'ōth deshe' yarbbitsēni*
> *'al-mē m^{e}nuḥōth y^{e}nah^{a}lēni*

There are, of course, other characteristics of Hebrew poetry, but here we only wish to illustrate that the language is not merely a dead language on

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the printed page, rather one of sounds. It is created out of sounds and formed for vocalism and singing.

While parallelism is perhaps the characteristic of Hebrew poetry one can grasp best in English translation, because some translations do at least delineate parallel lines, it is extremely important for lyrical theology to be acquainted with the dynamic movement from one verse to another in Hebrew poetry. Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Poetry* speaks of the "impulse of intensification" as "the motor force in thousands of lines of biblical poetry."[9] Hence, he describes how one often moves from a rather standard term to a more literary one in the next line, e.g., from *qol* (voice) to *'unrah* (speech) or from *shema'an* (hear) to *ha'zena* (give ear, listen).

There is sometimes a cascading effect wrought in the Psalms by the doubling of words and intensification of dynamic meaning from line to line. For example, Ps 88:10–12:

> Do you work wonders for the dead?
> Do the shades rise up to praise you?
> Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,
> or your faithfulness in Abaddan?
> Are your wonders known in the darkness,
> or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?

There is, however, what one might call free verse in the Psalms, which makes no use of parallelism at all. Psalm 137, which has already been cited, is a primary example of a psalm that avoids parallelism throughout. In the Psalms we find parallelism that intensifies and specifies; we find dynamic reverse movement as well as forward movement, and there is also static parallelism.

It is most interesting that among the literatures of the ancient Near East biblical poetry tends to avoid narrative. The writers of the Hebrew Psalms utilize poetry for songs of celebration, lament, prophecy, oracle, reflection, liturgy, didactic argument, but rarely to tell a story. Nor do the Hebrew poets feel the need to examine nature and objects as contemporary poets do; rather they let them speak for themselves.

9. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 135.

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Why Biblical Poetry?

Aside from the former assertion that there is a need for a song or lyric in a fallen world, why is there poetry in the Bible? Why does one find there this mode of lyrical expression? Unquestionably some of the Psalms were indeed songs, but what makes them really different from the rest of the Bible? What difference does it make to what they say that it is expressed in poetry? After all, poetry must function via connections of sounds, rhythms, words, images, themes, ideas, specific literary structures (parallelism), and sentence structure. Miraculously this complex process in the poetry of the Psalms elucidates hidden meanings, even contradictory meanings, which are often not as readily conveyed in other forms of writing and speech. Poetical language coagulates and distills the thought, ideas, events, and emotions of the moment and enables the interrelation and future communication of them. Through poetry Israel articulated a broad spectrum of human emotions, needs, and intellect in a fallen world, from a monotheistic worldview, and in an encapsulated language of succinct verbal structures, which at times seem quite oversimplified.

Here it is important to note that lyrical theology does not require narrative theology. It assumes it. This becomes extremely clear, when one reads Psalm 8 over against Genesis 1 and 2. Psalm 8 captures the moment—the instant of perceiving the world that surrounds the psalmist. As Alter claims, "Ps. 8 is a luminous instance of how poetic structure was made to yield a picture of the world that eloquently integrated underlying elements of Israelite belief."[10] More than the narrative of Genesis 1 and 2, however, it is the short lyric poem, Psalm 8, which has the tremendous potential to evoke a sense of awe about creation, yes, even to experience creation dynamically—to feel who one is—in a way almost impossible through narrative. Psalm 8 translates the impulse of creation into the human heart. Here we have part of the genius of lyrical theology.

Notice the dynamic power of the movement between the lines of Psalm 8. Four elements characterize its parallelism.

(1) *Specification*: the majesty of God, 8:1–2,

> O Lord, our Lord,
> how majestic is your name in all the earth!

10. Ibid., 117.

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> Your glory is chanted above the heavens
> by the mouth of babes and infants;
> you have set up a defense against your foes
> to still the enemy and the avenger.

(2) *Focusing*: the observance of creation and the value of human beings, 8:3–4,

> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars which you have established;
> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
> and mortals, that you care for them?

(3) *Heightening*: the description of the place of human beings in creation, 8:5,

> Yet you have made them little less than God,
> and crowned them with glory and honor.

(4) *Sequentiality*: the order of human dominion in creation, 8:6–8,

> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
> you have put all things under their feet,
> all sheep and oxen,
> and also the beasts of the field,
> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
> whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
> O Lord, our Lord,
> how majestic is your name in all the earth!

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Does Poetry Matter?

Having described what we mean by *lyrical theology,* located its large corpus in Holy Scripture, and addressed some aspects of biblical poetry integral to both the understanding and practice of lyrical theology, it is important to ask: Does the poetry matter? By all means, for it is the "auditory imagination" that enables fallen language to be redemptive. By "auditory imagination," I mean what T. S. Eliot describes as "the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious level of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and

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forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end."[11]

Language comes to us from the past, a social context, and human experience, which are as evil as ours. We are claimed by words which are not our own even when they seem elusive, obscure, confused, and weary. But this language is not dead. Bodies have given it birth, minds have thought it, hands have written, eyes have read it, tongues and lips have spoken it, bodies have responded to it. Therefore, the Christian view of Incarnation is vital to the language of lyrical theology, for the Word and words of Scripture become incarnate in the flesh. The word becomes flesh in human experience—in the flesh-experience of word. It is a human body experience. Just as the writer of a psalm attained a temporary oneness with language, so the incarnational experience of vocalizing the Psalms involves receiving though the words the breath of life breathed into them by divine Spirit. This incarnational experience is at the same time a resurrection experience, for "The best writing offers a glimpse, insofar as we are capable of imagining it, of the resurrection of the body and of more than the body."[12] This most certainly applies to the Psalms and to lyrical theology. Lyrical theology does not allow us to think of the Scriptures merely as God's Word which nullifies human experience in order to reveal itself. The words incarnate themselves in human bodies—minds and hearts, heads and hands, lips and mouth, diaphragm and pharynx. There is an incarnational power of biblical language we cannot know and experience until we engage the Psalms in singing, chanting, and oral reading. What Wordsworth says at the end of Book 5 of *The Prelude* applies here to the Psalms.

> Visionary power
> Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
> Embodied in the mystery of the words:
> There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
> Of shadowy things work endless changes,—there,
> As in a mansion like their proper home,
> Even forms and substance are circumfused
> By that transparent veil with light divine,
> And, through the turnings intricate of verse,

11. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 164.
12. Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics*, 136.

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> Present themselves as objects recognized,
> In flashes, and with glory not their own.[13]

The language of lyrical theology, i.e., poetry/verse both with and without music or other form of lyrical setting or presentation, can usually express in fewer words more truth than volumes of theological rhetoric.

The Primary Aspects of Lyrical Theology

What then are the primary aspects of lyrical theology to be gleaned from the Psalms? We shall address them remembering that the Psalms are liturgy; they are for worship, private—yes, but more particularly, corporate. They are for the community, which they engage in a vocation of doxology and praise. It is precisely this vocation that shapes the community of the faithful and its view of reality. It is this vocation that allows polarities and conflicts to be held in creative tension. It is the lyricism of doxology and praise that guards against over-ambition and definition. This vocation enables the community of the faithful to sing about what it often cannot talk about.

(1) *Lyrical theology is world-making.* Walter Brueggemann has addressed this subject pertaining to the Psalms rather thoroughly in his volume *Israel's Praise*. What he has to say is vital for lyrical theology, since it is grounded in worship and liturgy. The Psalms were created for use in the Temple of Jerusalem and became integral to Israel's worship and self-understanding. However, imagine the dichotomies to be held in tension by these powerful texts. As just stated, the Psalms were created for the Temple of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the city of God, once ruled by David. But this city would be lost to the hands of other nations. Even so, God was still proclaimed the God of all nations. The songs of God's people, however, could no longer be sung in the Temple of Jerusalem, and the people of God became the dispossessed of the earth. How could a balanced view be held amid such paradoxes and dichotomies? Only in the language of poetry in which a vast repertory of conflicting images and ideas may be held in tension could Israel find the instrument of expressing such polarities and diverse meaning. In transcending time and space the psalmists succeed in juxtaposing the brevity of human existence with the eternity

13. Lines 595–605 of Book 5 of *The Prelude*. Online: http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww291.html.

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of God so as to provide, as Alter says, "a certain access through contrast to the inconceivable timelessness of God."[14]

Brueggemann asserts: "In liturgy, world-making is indeed effected. The making of this world would be impossible without this dramatic enactment of liturgy. Implicit in this argument, then, is the provisional claim that social reality (and here we dare say religious reality) is a dramatic reality always to be enacted again. The claim of reality makes no sense unless its dramatic character is understood."[15]

The importance of "auditory imagination," which enables fallen language to be redemptive, has been noted above. Ricoeur maintains that behind what we conceive to be real there is imagination.[16] Hence, the "auditory imagination" of Israel—words, sound, language—functions to form reality. Therefore, in the celebration of liturgy, in the recital of the Psalms, those who speak and those who hear are involved in a world-making process. "In the moment of speech and imagination the person awakes, embraces, and experiences a new world."[17]

In the vocation of doxology and praise the act of liturgy does not create God, but it does create a new world. And if, in fact, in our own time clergy are not engaged through worship and liturgy in the social construction of reality, creating a new world, they are faithless to the ministerial office. A faithful community is formed by doxology and praise, by self-examination and reflection.

Psalm after psalm reveals that the world in which Israel exists is different from the world God wills. Israel calls the community to inquire:

> Why do the nations conspire
> and the people plot in vain? (2:1)
>
> Why do the wicked renounce God,
> and say in their hearts, "You will not call to account"? (10:13)
>
> How long must I bear pain in my soul,
> and have sorrow in my heart all the day? (13:2)

14. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 125.
15. Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise*, 11.
16. Ricoeur, *Essays in Biblical Imagination.*
17. Ibid., 22.

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> O Lord, who shall dwell in your tent?
> Who shall dwell in your holy hill? (15:1)
>
> For who is God except the Lord?
> And who is a rock besides our God? (18:31)
>
> O why am I so burdened,
> and why am I so troubled? (42:11)

Israel calls the faithful to create a world different from their own.

> Do not be afraid when some become rich,
> when the wealth of their houses increases,
> for when they die they will carry nothing away;
> their wealth will not go with them. (49:16–17)

In the liturgy of the Psalms the community of faith is called to a new social reality in which justice prevails, the dispossessed and oppressed are nurtured and loved, and love and peace reign.

The vocation of doxology and praise, the vocation of lyrical theology, may well be one of remembering and recital but never without enactment. It is the poetry of the Psalms that provides the world-shaping and world-making liturgy for the community of faith. It offers a world more viable than the one in which Israel lived and in which we live.

We may assert as did Israel that God is at the helm of history and that God is in control, but one swift glance at Israel's history and our own world reveals that God does not literally rule in the daily life of that ancient history and in ours. This is the reason why doxology and praise cannot stop—this is why the singing will and must continue.

Hence, lyrical theology is a theology of hope, which creates an alternative world. Its song evokes commitment and an actualization of the world the poets of Israel set before the community. It focuses on human need, personal and corporate, the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, and dares to create out of this social reality, a new social possibility. Lyrical theology, therefore, can prevent the church from getting out of touch with its enabling memory.

(2) *Lyrical theology is a theology of sound.* Its words, rhythm, and stylistic characteristics are made for the ear, lips, body, and senses. Lyrical theology is therefore an experience. This is in part why it can be world-making, for it elicits response. Sentence structure, parallelism, rhetoric,

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etc., become a song on the lips, in the heart, in one's life. Hence, the Psalms are the heartbeat of life, worship, and service.

Here it becomes clearer that lyrical theology does not make theology a mere object of consciousness. It engages the forces that shape worship and life.

Lyric and music are our response to remake a fallen world. That we should be the sound-boards of that theology should not surprise us, since we live as hearers between the sound of Adam's, Eve's, God's, and the Serpent's words in Eden and the sound of Paradise in John's vision on Patmos. Creation itself is filled with sound and is in part brought into being by sound—God's Word, speech. Pentecost is accompanied by "a sound . . . from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind" (Acts 2:2 RSV). The return of Christ will come with "a cry of command, the sound of the trumpet of God" (1 Thess 4:16 RSV). And in Psalm 65 the pastures, hills, meadows, and valleys "shout and sing together for joy" (Ps 65:12–13 RSV).

The Psalms perceive what is at the heart of lyrical theology—human need for words, action, gesture, movement, light, color, music, sound, and silence. Page after page of the Psalms illustrates that a lyrical theology allows for celebration and baring of the human soul without manipulation of the subject addressed, a grave pitfall of theological science in general.

(3) *Lyrical theology, the Book of Psalms in particular*, *has the ability to appropriate itself to us where we are.* It is not bound by time and space. It may move through time without linear chronology. St. Augustine poignantly makes this point in his own response to the Psalms:

> I am about to repeat a Psalm that I know. Before I begin, my expectation is extended over the whole; but when I have begun, how much soever of it I shall separate off into the past, is extended along my memory; thus the life of this action of mine is divided between my memory as to what I have repeated and expectation as to what I am about to repeat; but "consideration" is present with me, that through it what was future, may be conveyed over, so as to become past. Which the more it is done again and again, so much the more the expectation being shortened, is the memory enlarged; till the whole expectation be at length exhausted, when that whole action being ended, shall have passed into memory. And this which takes place in the whole Psalm, the same takes place in each several portion of it, and each several syllable; the same holds in that longer action, whereof this Psalm may be a

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> part; the same holds in the whole of life, whereof all [our] actions, whereof all [our] lives are part.[18]

Some years ago it was my destiny to arrive at the steps of the Duke University Chapel just as a woman had leaped to her death from the chapel's tower. This tragedy transpired immediately prior to the beginning of a worship service in the chapel. All who entered were devastated and bound by silence. I recall my inner dilemma over what I would do as the director of music that day. That aspect of my anxiety subsided as the worship leader announced that the complete liturgy would consist only of the Psalms. For over thirty minutes all who had come to worship heard and spoke only Psalms. The way in which the words appropriated themselves to me, and others in those moments, is literally indescribable. Such words as:

> The Lord is my shepherd,
> I shall not want. (Ps 23:1)
>
> God is our refuge and strength,
> a very present help in trouble. (Ps 46:1)
>
> Out of the depths have I cried to you, O God. (Ps 130:1)

This may well be a passive appropriation of the Psalms, but it is nonetheless powerful, for it sustains the human spirit, gives strength where there is weakness, and is psychologically and physiologically stabilizing.

The Psalms, however, also appropriate themselves to us actively and dynamically. They engage us in social realities.

Psalm 146:5–9 immediately engages the human desire for happiness.

> Happy are those whose help is in the God of Jacob,
> whose hope is in the Lord, their God,
> . . .
> who keeps faith forever;
> who executes justice for the oppressed;
> who gives food to the hungry.
> The Lord sets the prisoners free;
> the Lord opens the eyes of the blind;

18. *Confessions*, 11.38 (Pusey, 274–75).

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> the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
> the Lord loves the righteous.
> The Lord watches over aliens,
> and upholds the widow and the orphan;
> but the Lord brings the way of the wicked to ruin.

The happy ones are those whose help is in the God of Jacob. One can have hope because the God of creation is faithful, executes justice for the oppressed, feeds the hungry, sets prisoners free, gives sight to the blind, lifts up the bowed down, loves the righteous, watches over aliens, upholds the widow and orphan, and brings the way of evil to ruin. This is but a description of the society God wills, and obedient servants are those who seek to make it a reality. Creating this world, the world God wills, is praise to the Lord. It is a doxology of song and service.

In singing the Psalms God's words become our words, God's will for the world becomes our will:

> The Lord says, "Now I will arise,
> because the poor are plundered,
> because the needy groan;
> I will place them in safety for which they long." (Ps 12:5)

If as Ps 33:5 claims,

> The Lord loves justice and righteousness,
> the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord,

we too must love justice and righteousness.

(4) *Lyrical theology does not seek to impart information to be turned into articles of orthodox belief.* It does not dissect belief. It celebrates, complains, rejoices, agonizes, weeps, and rages, bringing the full spectrum of human emotion unashamedly and without timidity before God. The Psalms illustrate such theology from beginning to end. Within them lyrical theology functions as a verbal art. It is a world of imperatives.

> Answer me when I call. (4:1)
> Be angry, but do not sin. (4:4)
> Commune . . . on your beds, . . . be silent. (4:4)
> Offer right sacrifices. (4:5)
> Lead me, Lord. (5:8)
> Turn, . . . save my life. (6:4)
> Depart from me, all you workers of evil. (6:7c)

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Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers. (10:15)
Prove me, O Lord, and try me;
test my heart and mind. (26:2)
Wait for the Lord. (27:14)
Be a rock of refuge for me. (31:2c)
Love the Lord. (31:23)
Rejoice in the Lord. (33:1a)
Praise the Lord. (33:2a)
Do not be angry because of the wicked,
do not be envious of wrongdoers! (37:1)
Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!
Do not be angry; it only leads to evil. (37:8)
Hope in God. (42:5c)
Be still and know that I am God. (46:10a)
Hear this, all peoples! (49:1a)
Create in me a clean heart, O God. (51:10a)
Cast your burden on the Lord. (55:22)
Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked. (64:2a)
Sing to the Lord a new song. (33:3)

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The Psalms direct our thoughts, voices, and actions to God, others, and all creation without requiring that we have closely reasoned each word and guarded all affirmation about God, ourselves, faith, community, and the world. They allow us to go out as Abram, not knowing where we are going with confidence that God is there in the midst of the darkness. We can hold the dichotomies and polarities of the world in tension and cry out with Jehoshophat: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chron 20:12 NRSV). In one moment we plead in the words of a Psalm, "Be angry and sin not" and in another moment in words from another Psalm, "Do not be angry; it only leads to evil."

Hence, lyrical theology helps us in faith to hold the paradoxes and inconsistencies of life in balance without subjecting them to theological logic and without translating theological affirmations into canons of belief. In so doing lyrical theology transforms our thoughts and actions, and it reorients our lives.

(5) *Lyrical theology emanates from a life of prayer.* If we want to learn how to pray, we must, sing, chant, say, and pray the Psalms. They are the language of prayer, a language that is both personal and corporate, private and social, a language which is divine and human.

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If we pray the Psalms, we shall verbalize in the complaint passages not only our own failings but those of society. Even when we pray the words of a royal psalm, as though we were royalty, we will discover what it is like to ignore the deepest concerns and needs of the masses. Why must one plead that God will give the king justice to deal with the righteous and the poor? Because there have been so many rulers who have exploited the needy and the oppressed. The Psalmist reminds us of how readily one forgets to execute justice. Hence, even in our own small domains, even in the words intended for a king, we may learn to have pity on the weak and needy, to deliver the needy when they call, to save the lives of the needy, and to redeem them from oppression and violence (see Psalm 72).

We may be imbued with humility, penitence, love, forgiveness, and justice as we pray the Psalms, which communicate these character traits and more. It is possible to pray the Psalms until we personify them, until we are the answer to the prayers of ages past and become the answer to our own prayers. It is possible to be arrogant and become humble; it is possible to be hard-hearted and to become penitent and of a contrite heart. This is the miracle of lyrical theology, of the Psalms, of transformation. We can become what we think, say, sing, and chant. It is the miracle of which Jean-Paul Sartre speaks when he says that human beings may become what they are not. It is also the miracle of which St. Paul speaks when he declares that all things become new.

(6) *Lyrical theology evokes a life of service.* When we sing "serve the Lord with gladness" in Psalm 100, we cannot engage in a spiritual thumb-sucking exercise and thus fulfill the breadth of the mandate of the Psalms for a life of service. We must also sing Psalm 101!

> I will sing of loyalty and justice. (101:1a)
> . . .
> I will walk with integrity of heart. (101:2c)

We must become the source of unity when we sing:

> Behold, how good and pleasant it is,
> when kindred live together in unity. (133:1)

We must sing Psalm 10 and emulate a God who would do justice to the orphan and the oppressed. We must sing Psalm 11 and be vulnerable to be judged:

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> The Lord . . . examines all mortals,
> hates the lover of violence,
> and loves righteous deeds. (11:4–5b, 7b)

The Psalms demand transformation! They affirm that we cannot love violence and serve God.

Lyrical theology affirms that the vocation of doxology and praise is one of service to God, others, and creation. We must sing Psalm 104 and become a part of God's renewal of the face of the earth (104:30b). In fact, we can only sing with integrity Ps 104:33,

> I will sing to the Lord as long as I live!
> I will sing praise continually;

if we are willing to be personifications of renewing service not only to God and others, but to the earth also. Lyrical theology's evocation of a life of service embodies an ecological imperative too!

(7) *Lyrical theology mandates proclamation.* There is evangelism in the Psalms. There is a call to transformation and conversion, as already noted; however, the vocation of doxology and praise is not merely a vocative one in which we pray the Psalms to God personally and corporately for the sake of our spiritual nurture and that of the community of faith. The Psalms call us to proclamation—to tell what God has done and to make that known from generation to generation!

> I will tell of all of your wonderful works. (9:1)

> Tell God's deeds among the people! (9:11)

> Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness
> and of your praise all the day long. (35:28)

> Sing to the Lord, bless God's name;
> proclaim God's salvation from day to day. (96:2)

If we do not fulfill the mandate of proclamation, if we do not sing Jerusalem's song, we must also pray with the Psalmist:

> Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,
> if I do not remember you. (137:6ab)

There may be times when we ask with Israel in Babylon,

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How shall we sing the Lord's song
  in a foreign land? (137:4)

When we do, in our silence our tongues may stick to the roof of our mouths and we will no longer be able to sing. Yes, the vocation of doxology and praise demands that we "tell to all generations what God has done."

One generation shall laud your works to another,
  and shall declare your mighty acts. (145:4)
. . .
They shall celebrate the memory of your great goodness,
  and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. (145:7)

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord;
  let all flesh bless God's holy name forever and ever. (145:21)

Conclusion

Where then does lyrical theology lead us in attempting to understand and actualize a word of God, a word about God, in the contemporary church and world? What is there to be *said* theologically which has not already been *said*? That is precisely the point—theology, as mundane as it sounds, is a world of words—lyrical theology is more than words, for it involves sound—the sounds of human speech, yes, but more—music! *It is an experience!* Lyrical theology is the experience of word and music, and the sound thereof, which mediate the knowing of God, more directly and effectively than the words themselves are capable of doing.

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