Children need to be taught what to say. Christians also need “speech-coaching” when it comes to addressing God. This collection of essays edited by Ray Van Neste and C. Richard Wells is calling churches back to the Psalter for Christian speech-coaching. Made possible by a grant from the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship, the essays in this volume are the product of a series of lectures and events dealing with the Psalms at Union University in 2008. The recent devastation on Union’s campus due to a tornado made the conference especially appropriate given the university’s shared trial.

This volume is inviting because of the range of topics addressed by its authors. All the chapters are accessible to readers, lay and clergy alike. At the same time, the chapters address matters across a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from more technical academic engagement (e.g., John Collins and Ray Van Neste on the significance of the Psalter in the Christian canon) to pastoral advice on how to incorporate the Psalter into Christian worship—without getting fired!—(James Grant’s chapter) to the Psalms in pastoral counseling (Richard Wells). In other words, the potential for the Psalms to shape Christian thinking, worship and life before God is packaged together for the reader in a holistic fashion. One can only hope the vision on offer in this volume has a broad hearing among churches whose liturgical instincts have displaced this ancient, Christian tradition.

Speaking of long-standing Christian practices, several matters in this volume arrested the attention of this reviewer. Van Neste’s pathos for this project was evident in an anecdote he shared in the introduction. He introduced the practice of Psalter singing to his family. The chapters by Blaising and Bond demonstrate how within the earliest history of the church down through the Reformation and beyond it was second nature for Christians in public and family
worship to do so. Moreover, Van Neste concludes his chapter on the Psalter in the New Testament with this beautiful turn of phrase: “Jesus died with the psalms on his lips, and the early church was birthed making its first key decision by appeal to the psalms, preaching its first sermon from the psalms, and praying, the psalms in its first prayer meeting after Pentecost” (p. 50). The haunting question from the evidence amassed in the Christian canon and the church’s habitual practices is: how, indeed, did the psalms become “Forgotten Songs?” The pastoral energy emanating from this volume could prove an antidote to the problem for those willing to hear.

Justin Wainscott provides a helpful appendix including several examples of metered psalms for those unaccustomed to singing the Psalter. Pastors, students, and lay readers will find in J. Michael Garrett’s bibliographic essay a treasure trove of resources for those wishing to broaden and deepen their reading and study of the Psalter. Certain matters in the volume could be quibbled with here or there. Collins mentions the five-book structure of the Psalter and its possible mirroring of the Pentateuch, but then does not make much of the Psalms as Torah. Gerald Wilson’s ground-breaking work is relegated to a footnote, again with the canonical shaping of the Psalter receiving a nod but without critical engagement with what is hermeneutically on offer here.

But these are quibbles. This volume is a gift to churches and Christians alike. But I think the volume is especially (and rightly!) concerned about the former. Private Christian devotional practice has long included the Psalter—my mother, for example. But corporate worship suffers from biblical and ecclesial malnutrition when the Psalter is relegated to the individual at the expense of the corporate. This volume can hold the hand of many local churches as they plot their way back to the Psalter for spiritual benefit of corporate worship.

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