

# Exclusive Psalmody: A Biblical Defense, Appendix

## The Westminster Confession and Psalmody

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Does the phrase “singing of psalms” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* refer to the Canonical Psalter; or, is it a broad term which includes uninspired human compositions? In the Confession of Faith (21.5) we read regarding religious worship: “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God.” According to the Confession what are Christians to sing during the ordinary religious worship of God? They are to sing Psalms.

The question that is often raised concerning this section of the Confession is: does the term psalm refer to the book of Psalms, religious songs in general, including man-made hymns, or to all inspired Scripture songs? Advocates of neo-Presbyterian worship like to point out the fact that the word psalm is not capitalized, as if this proves the word is used in some vague, generic sense. The problem with this argument is the simple fact that the authors the Westminster Standards only capitalized the word Psalms when it was used as a *title* of the whole book. Note the following quote from the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*:

We commend also the more frequent reading of such Scripture as he that readeth shall think best for edification of his hearers, as the book of Psalms, and such like. When the minister who readeth shall judge it necessary to expound any part of what is read, let it not be done until the whole chapter or psalm be ended...After reading of the word, (and singing of the psalm,) the minister who is to preach...It is the duty of Christians to praise God publickly, by singing psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family.

In singing of psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord.

That the whole congregation may join herein, every one that can read is to have a psalm book; and all others, not disabled by age or otherwise, are to be exhorted to learn to read. But for the present, where many in the congregation cannot read, it is convenient that the minister, or some other fit person appointed by him or the other ruling officers, do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, pp. 376, 393.

The quote above proves that the word psalm or psalms refers not to worship songs in general whether inspired or uninspired but to the book of Psalms in particular.

Further examination of the *Minutes of the Westminster Assembly* proves that the only song book approved by the assembly for public worship was Mr. Rouse's version of the book of Psalms:

Mr. Reynolds made a report of an answer to the Lords about Mr. Barton's Psalms. It was read and debated...This answer to the House of Commons.

*Ordered*—That whereas the Honorable House of Commons hath, by an order bearing the date of the 20th of November 1643, recommended the Psalms set out by Mr. Rouse to the consideration of the Assembly of Divines, the Assembly hath caused them to be carefully perused, and as they are now altered and amended, do approve of them, and humbly conceive that it may be useful and profitable to the Church that they be permitted to be publicly sung.(1)

*Ordered*—The Committee that perused the Psalms shall carry this up to the Honorable House of Commons.

Dr. Temple, Dr. Smith, Dr. Wincop, to carry up the answer to the House of Lords.<sup>2</sup>

A footnote tells us the response of the House of Lords: “(1)The House in consequence resolved ‘that this Book of Psalms set forth by Mr. Rouse, and perused by the Assembly of Divines, be forthwith printed.’—*Journals of House of Commons*, vol. iv. p. 342.”<sup>3</sup>

The only debates that occurred in the Westminster Assembly regarding the singing of praise were over whether or not other translations of the book of Psalms should be sung in the churches. The assembly only authorized the Rouse version because “it is so exactly framed according to the original text” and for the sake of uniformity and edification:

The Committee made report of an answer to the House of Lords about Mr. Barton's Psalms. It was read; and upon debate it was.

Resolved upon the Q., To be transcribed and sent to the Lords as the answer of this Assembly to their order. Mr. Carter, jun., enters his dissent to this vote of sending up this answer to the Lords.(1)

(1)This answer is not inserted in the Minutes, but it has been preserved in the Journals of the House of Lords, and is as follows:—TO THE RIGHT THE HOUSE OF LORDS ASSEMBLED IN PARLIAMENT.

---

<sup>2</sup> Alex F. Mitchell and John Struthers, eds., *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines While Engaged in Preparing Their Directory for Church Government, Confession of Faith, and Catechisms (November 1644 to March 1649) from Transcripts of the Originals Procured by a Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991 [1874]), p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The Assembly of Divines received April 9th from this Honourable House an Order, bearing date March 20th, 1646, to certify this Honourable House why the translation of Psalms by Mr. Barton may not be used and sung in the churches, by such as shall desire it, as well as any other translation; do humbly return this answer: That whereas on the 14th of November 1645, in obedience to an order of this Honourable House concerning the said Mr. Barton's Psalms, we have already commended to this Honourable House one translation of the Psalms in verse, made by Mr. Rouse, and perused and amended by the same learned gentlemen, and the Committee of the Assembly, as conceiving it would be very useful for the edification of the Church in regard it is so exactly framed according to the original text: and whereas there are several other translations of the Psalms already extant: We humbly conceive that if liberty should be given to people to sing in churches, every one that translation they desire, by that means several translations might come to be used, yea, in one and the same congregation at the same time, which would be a great disruption and hindrance to edification.—*Journals of House of Lords*, vol. viii. pp. 283, 284.<sup>4</sup>

The last debate, regarding whether or not Mr. Barton's translation of the Psalms (or any other version other than the Rouse version), occurred on Wednesday morning, April 22, 1646.<sup>5</sup> As noted in the quote above, it was resolved that only Mr. Rouse's version would be permitted in the churches. Only six months later, on Friday morning October 30, 1646, chapter 21—"Of Religious Worship" was voted on and agreed to by the assembly.<sup>6</sup> The idea (that is rather common today) that the word "psalms" in the chapter regarding religious worship includes uninspired hymns is clearly false. Did the Puritan and Presbyterians go beyond the Standards (as Frame asserts) in their insistence upon exclusive Psalmody? No, absolutely not! If neo-Presbyterians want to include hymns and campfire ditties in their worship services, their backslidden General Assemblies do allow it. They, however, should be open and honest and admit that they are anti-confessional on this matter.

In his *Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (1845) Robert Shaw teaches that the "singing of psalms" in the *Confession of Faith* means the biblical Psalms:

3. Singing of psalms. This was enjoined, under the Old Testament, as a part of the ordinary worship of God, and it is distinguished from ceremonial worship.—Ps. lxi. 30, 31. It is not abrogated under the New Testament, but rather confirmed.—Eph. v. 19; Col. iii. 16. It is sanctioned by the example of Christ and his apostles.—Matt. xxvi. 30; Acts xvi. 25. The Psalms of David were especially intended by God for the use of the Church in the exercise of public praise, under the former dispensation; and they are equally adapted to the use of the Church under the present dispensation. Although the apostles insist much upon the abolition of ritual institutions, they give no intimations that the Psalms of David are unsuitable for gospel-worship; and had it been intended that they should be set aside in New Testament times, there is reason to think that another psalmody would have been provided in their room. In the Book of

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 221-222.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 298.

Psalms there are various passages which seem to indicate that they were intended by the Spirit for the use of the Church in all ages. “I will extol thee, my God, O King,” says David, “and I will bless thy name for ever and ever.”—Psalm 145:1.<sup>7</sup>

Not only is the teaching of the Confession of Faith and Directory of Public Worship clear on this issue, it is a fact of history that Presbyterians in Scotland, Ireland and North America were exclusive Psalm singers until the latter part of the eighteenth century. What is of particular interest regarding the abandonment of exclusive psalmody by the large Presbyterian bodies in the eighteenth century is that exclusive psalmody was not abandoned as a result of careful study and refutation by pastors, scholars and theologians. The departure of various Presbyterian denominations from exclusive psalmody (i.e., biblical worship) occurred primarily for three reasons.

(1) Various Presbyterian churches lost the biblical understanding of the regulative principle of worship and thus only applied it to the public worship service. “Private” gatherings, family and private worship were considered areas of life outside the strict parameter of divine warrant. Virtually all the innovations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came into the churches through practices that were *arbitrarily* placed outside of the “sola scriptura” divine regulation of worship (e.g., family worship, Sunday School, revival meetings, etc.).

(2) Many Presbyterians were influenced by the pietistic, sentimental revivalism that swept through the colonies in the eighteenth century. During this time a number of families and pastors began using Isaac Watts’ *Psalms of David Imitated* (1719) instead of the carefully translated 1650 psalter employed by Presbyterians of the day. Watts’ version of the Psalms was a radical departure from exclusive psalmody which went far beyond even a paraphrase of the Psalms. In many instances it amounted to uninspired hymns loosely based on the Psalms. One must never forget that Isaac Watts, in the preface to his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707), openly admitted that he regarded the Psalms of David as defective, “opposite to the Gospel” and liable to cause believers to “speak a falsehood unto God.” Watts’ version of the Psalms became accepted by many families and various ministers and was a stepping stone to the blatant uninspired hymnody of Watts’ hymnbook.

(3) The innovations of the eighteenth century would not have taken root if the presbyteries in the colonies had done their job and disciplined ministers who had corrupted the

---

<sup>7</sup> Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith* (Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, [1845]), 224-225. Orthodox Presbyterian pastor G. I. Williamson concurs: “Another element of true worship is ‘the singing of psalms with grace in the heart.’ It will be observed that the Confession does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the use of modern hymns in the worship of God, but rather only the psalms of the Old Testament. It is not generally realized today that Presbyterian and Reformed churches originally used only the inspired psalms, hymns, and songs of the Biblical Psalter in divine worship, but such is the case. The Westminster Assembly not only expressed the conviction that only the psalms should be sung in divine worship, but implemented it by preparing a metrical version of the Psalter for use in the Churches. This is not the place to attempt a consideration of this question. But we must record our conviction that the Confession is correct at this point. It is correct, we believe, because it has never been proved that God has commanded his Church to sing the uninspired compositions of men rather than or along with the inspired songs, hymns, and psalms of the Psalter in divine worship” (*The Confession of Faith for Study Classes* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964], 167).

worship of God and departed from Scripture and the Westminster Standards. There was an unwillingness to make purity of worship an issue of discipline. There were various battles over the Watts' version from 1752 through the 1780s. The outcome, however, was always the same. The presbytery or synod involved refused to take decisive action, thereby allowing the Watts imitations to continue. As a result, those unwilling to pollute themselves separated to smaller, more biblical Presbyterian bodies. The declension was codified in 1788 when a new directory for worship was adopted which changed the statement of the 1644 directory, "singing of Psalms," to "by singing Psalms and hymns."

Michael Bushell warns us to learn from the sins and mistakes of the PCUSA. He writes,

Under the pietistic and humanistic influences attending and following the Great Awakening, the American Presbyterian Church eventually came to the conclusion that the peace of the church was best to be served by allowing considerable diversity in the worship practices of the churches under its care. The worship practice of the Presbyterian church was, in effect, cut loose from the bonds of Scripture and allowed to run its own course. It was this situation as much as anything else that led eventually to the Presbyterian church's defection to Modernism. If a church will not keep its worship pure and biblical, if it will not jealously guard its own practice when its people come before God in self-conscious praise and adoration, then it is not to be expected that it will long maintain its doctrinal purity. It is no small wonder that men have so little respect intellectually for the Scriptures when daily they ignore their clear commands concerning how their Author is to be worshiped. The worship of the Presbyterian church in this country is dictated now largely by the demands of convenience, not the demands of Scripture, and there is no basic difference between liberal and evangelical churches on this score, not at least as regards outward form. To our brethren in the various Reformed communions who would disagree with this, we would ask this simple question: "If the regulative principle were not taught in the Scriptures, what difference would it make in your worship?" The answer in most cases would have to be, "very little." We would also ask our brethren whether they have sought self-consciously to apply the regulative principle to their worship practice. We have a suspicion that most of the people in our Reformed churches have never even heard of the regulative principle, much less sought to apply it. Our Reformed churches have inherited a pattern of thinking which will countenance virtually any practice in worship as long as it does not offend the wrong people. These are harsh words, but we are fully convinced that they are accurate.<sup>8</sup>

If the "conservative" Bible believing Presbyterian churches of today are to be faithful to their own standards, they must first return to a strict interpretation and application of the regulative

---

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 210-211. For a more thorough discussion of the abandonment of exclusive psalmody by the PCUSA, see Bushell, 198-212. The abandonment of exclusive psalmody by other Presbyterian denominations and Dutch Reformed churches is discussed in pp. 212-220. For further reading on the PCUSA and Watts' *Psalms* see Charles Hodge, *The Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1851), part 2, 244-306 (Reprinted in 1980 by The American Presbyterian Press, 1459 Boston Neck Road, Saunterstown, RI 02874).

principle of worship. Such an interpretation will return the Reformed churches to God's inspired hymnbook.

Copyright 2002 © Brian Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)