

Exclusive Psalmody: A Biblical Defense, Chapter 2

The Testimony of Scripture

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The question regarding whether or not God's church is required by God to sing the Psalms in public worship may seem absurd, yet there are Reformed pastors and scholars opposed to exclusive Psalmody who actually argue that singing the Psalms is not required.¹ One pastor has argued that while the Scripture requires believers to sing praise, it does not require the singing of Psalms in worship. A Reformed Baptist scholar says that "since neither the Old nor the New Testament directly command the singing of Psalms by the congregation in the public worship of God, we can see that it is a privilege more than a duty."² The reason that opponents of exclusive Psalmody argue that Psalm singing is not commanded is that if the singing of uninspired songs is not by divine appointment, then one could argue that the content of praise is a circumstance of worship. Arguing that the Psalms are not commanded is an attempt to circumvent the regulative principle of worship. If it can be shown from Scripture that the singing of inspired song was by divine appointment, then the singing of uninspired human compositions is automatically excluded from public worship. One must show a divine prescription for the use of uninspired songs in Scripture. This (as noted below) is impossible.

Those who argue that Psalm-singing is not commanded and therefore is merely a circumstance of worship must ignore a wealth of scriptural evidence. The singing of the Spirit-inspired Psalms is supported by specific command, historical example, and deduction.

1. Specific Commands

The book of Psalms contains several commands to praise Jehovah with the singing of Psalms. "Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises. Sing to the LORD with the harp, With the harp and the sound of a psalm, With trumpets and the sound of a horn; Shout joyfully before the LORD, the King" (Psalm 98:4-6). "Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; Talk of all His wondrous works!" (Psalm 105:2). "Oh come, let us sing to the Lord! Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms" (Psalm 95:1-2; cf. Psalms 81:1-2; 100:2).

¹ One apparent example is Stephen Pribble's *The Regulative Principle and Singing in Worship* (Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1995; originally published in *The Harbinger*, January-February, 1994). After reading Pribble's book one has the impression that he believes Psalm singing in worship is optional. However, when confronted personally Pribble admits that Psalm singing is authorized by scriptural historical example.

² R.A. Morey, "Exclusive Psalmody," *Baptist Reformation Review*, Winter 1976, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 43 ff. For an excellent refutation of Morey's view, see Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, pp. 13-15.

2. *Designed by God for Singing*

That the book of Psalms is clearly designed by God to be sung is indicated by the musical terminology found in the Psalm titles and throughout the Psalms themselves. There is the mention of chief musicians and various types of musical instruments as well as the names of melodies by which certain Psalms were to be sung. The Psalms are constantly referred to as songs, psalms (melodious songs), and hymns. While it is true that the Psalms can be read, chanted, prayed, and so on, they were and are clearly intended to be sung by God's people.

3. *Historical Examples*

There are several biblical historical examples of Psalms used in public worship recorded in the Bible (cf. 1 Chr. 16; 2 Chr. 5:13; 20:21; 29:30; Ezra 3:11). "There are, in fact, numerous indications in the Scriptures that the Psalms or their contemporary (inspired) counterparts were not only performed by the Levitical choirs before the people of God but taught diligently to the 'common' people as well (e.g., Ex. 15:1; 2 Sam. 1:18; 2 Chr. 23:13; Ps. 30:4; 137:1 ff.; Mt. 26:30; Jas. 5:13)."³

4. *Placed in the Canon*

The fact that God has placed within the canon of inspired Scripture a collection of 150 worship songs itself proves that God requires these songs to be used in public worship. Bushell writes,

The Lord has given to us in Scripture a whole book of inspired psalms and then has commanded us to 'sing psalms.' Quite apart from the question of whether or not we may sing other songs in worship, is it not the height of foolishness and impiety to stare the Lord in the face, as it were, and insist that we have no obligation to sing the particular psalms that He has been gracious enough to place in our hands?... We would argue that the inclusion of a collection of songs in the canon of Scripture, without any demonstrable limits to their use, constitutes a divine command to use the whole of that book in services of worship. If the Lord hands us a book of psalms, as He has done, and commands us to sing psalms, we have no right, without further instruction, to exclude certain psalms from those that are made available to the Church.⁴

³ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, [1980] 1993), p. 15. "The Old Testament emphasizes the divine appointment of the song service in the temple (1 Chronicles 6:31-48; 25:1-31; cf. 2 Chronicles 29:25). Although this worship often fell into decay, when it was Reformed the warrant was found in the law given by God through David. This can be seen in the reform of 835 B.C. (2 Chronicles 23:18), in the reform about 715 B.C. (2 Chronicles 29:30), in the reform of 622 B.C. (2 Chronicles 35:15), in the laying of the foundation of the second temple about 537 B.C. (Ezra 3:10), and in the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem around 434 B.C. (Nehemiah 12:45-46). Song was not considered a mere circumstance which did not need specific warrant, but was regarded as a proper area for divine prescription" (Rowland Ward, *Psalm-Singing in Scripture and History* [Melbourne, Australia, 1985], p. 5).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

Those who argue that the placing of an inspired hymnbook in the middle of the canon is not significant and is not a clear indication of what God intends to be used in the church's worship "might as well argue that the composition of the canon provides no specific indication that the sixty-six books in the canon are those to be used when the word of God is read in the church's worship."⁵

5. Only Inspired Songs Used

A careful examination of the Scripture passages which discuss the songs used in worship and how worship songs were composed reveals that God only authorizes and accepts divinely inspired songs for the praise of Himself. "If when the Bible speaks of the source of worship song, it portrays the text as one produced by divine inspiration, then inspiration is a biblical norm for this ordinance as well."⁶ There are so many examples in the Bible which show the connection between writing songs of praise for the church and prophetic inspiration that it is astounding that this point has been largely ignored by those who claim to hold to the regulative principle. There is the example of the prophetess Miriam who, by divine inspiration, composed a song to celebrate God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Ex. 15:20-21). We also have the inspired song of Deborah the prophetess (Jdg. 5). There are the Spirit-inspired songs of the prophet Isaiah (e.g. 5:1, 26:1 ff., etc.) as well as the divinely inspired song of Mary (Lk. 1:46 ff.). If 1 Corinthians 14:26 refers to Christians composing songs for public worship, these songs were "as is universally admitted, charismatic songs and therefore products of the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit."⁷ (The question of whether the new covenant church should sing divinely inspired songs outside of the book of Psalms is dealt with below.)

The Old Testament saints whom God used to write the Psalter wrote by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Note once again that prophetic inspiration and the writing of songs of praise go hand in hand. King David, whom the Bible calls a prophet (2 Chr. 29:25-30), wrote his songs by a special gift of the Holy Spirit (2 Sam. 23:1, 2; Ac. 1:16). The New Testament repeatedly refers to David as a prophet when it quotes his songs (cf. Mt. 22:43-44; Mk. 12:36; Ac. 1:16-17; 2:29-31; 4:24-25). The worship of the temple musicians and singers is referred to as prophecy in Scripture (1 Chr. 25:1-7). This designation, when applied to song content, obviously means that what they sang was the product of divine inspiration. Thus, the temple musicians and singers who were involved in writing songs for worship did so under the special operation of the Spirit. Heman (who was appointed by David as a worship leader of the sanctuary) is called a "seer" (1 Chr. 25:5) in Scripture; a term synonymous with the word "prophet." Bushell writes, "Prophetic titles and roles are consistently attributed to the chief temple musicians and singers. Asaph, for example, one of David's principle musicians (1 Chr. 6:39; 15:17; 16:5 ff.; 2 Chr. 5:12),

⁵ Sherman Isbell, *The Singing of Psalms* (Presbyterian Reformed Church, 1996), Part VIII, no pagination.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 31.

appointed by him over the service of song and by Solomon in the Temple service, is also called a ‘seer’ and placed alongside David as far as authority in Temple music is concerned (2 Chr. 29:30). Nor ought we to miss the significance of the fact that some 12 of the Old Testament Psalms (50, 73-83) are attributed to Asaph, thus confirming his role as a writer of inspired worship song. Jeduthun, another chief temple singer, is also called a ‘seer’ (2 Chr. 35:15; cf. 25:1; and Pss. 39, 62, and 77 titles).⁸

The writing of worship songs in the Old Testament was so intimately connected with prophetic inspiration that 2 Kings 23:2 and 2 Chronicles 34:30 use the term “Levite” and “prophet” interchangeably. The worship of Jehovah is so important that nothing less than infallible Spirit-inspired lyrics are acceptable for praise in the church. James A. Kennedy writes,

What is praise? The word is derived from the word “price.” But who knows God’s price or value? To prepare a complete and sufficient manual of praise one must know, on the one hand, all the divine excellences, for they are to be set forth in sufficient measure and due proportion; and, on the other hand, the whole range of human devotional feeling called forth by contemplating the divine perfections. But such vast knowledge is only possible to one to whom a divine revelation has been made. And to give adequate expression to this knowledge, divine inspiration is an absolute prerequisite.... God evidently deemed it necessary to have His praises prepared thus, for as a matter of fact He inspired David, Asaph, and others to compose them. And He never puts forth divine power unless it is necessary. God kept the manual of praise strictly under His control. Why should he be indifferent to this matter now? And why should we be put off without a divine book for this dispensation? Are we not as worthy of such a perfect book as the Old Testament Church?⁹

There have been attempts (by opponents of exclusive Psalmody) to refute the assertion that divine inspiration was a requirement for the composition of worship songs to be used by the church. One author argues that the Scripture only requires theological accuracy in the composition of worship songs. The problem with his argument is that he does not offer any scriptural texts or examples to back up his claim—not one. Another author quotes several examples of worship songs that are not found in the book of Psalms as proof that divine inspiration was not necessary. The problem with this person’s argument is that every song he refers to was given by divine inspiration (e.g. Ex. 15:20-21; Jdg. 5; Is. 5:1; 26:1 ff.; Lk. 1:46 ff.; 1 Cor. 14:26). His own argument is self-refuting.

Another author quotes from Isaiah 38:20 (“The Lord was ready to save me; therefore we will sing my songs with stringed instruments all the days of our life, in the house of the Lord”) as proof that uninspired songs were used in public worship in the Old Testament era.¹⁰ This author assumes that since these songs, written by King Hezekiah, were never inscripturated into the canon, therefore they must be uninspired. This argument falls to the ground when we consider

⁸ Ibid., p. 60.

⁹ The Psalms: the Divinely Authorized and Exclusive Manual of Praise in *The Psalms in Worship*, Ed. John McNaugher (Edmonton: Still Water Revival Books, [1907] 1992), pp. 60-61.

¹⁰ Stephen Pribble, *The Regulative Principle and Singing in Worship*, pp. 11-12.

that many prophecies and inspired writings did not make it into our Bibles. (There are Old Testament prophets named of whom we have no surviving oracles. There is the missing letter of Paul to the Corinthians as well as the volumes of sayings, proverbs, and teachings that Christ spoke to His disciples, etc.). The fact that Hezekiah's songs (except the one recorded in Is. 38) did not make it into our Bible does not tell us at all whether or not they were inspired. In fact, the passage under discussion, if anything, indicates that his songs were inspired. Note the transition from the singular ("me") to the plural ("we"). The king identifies himself with the Levitical choir of the Temple, which as noted above functioned as a musical prophetic guild. In any case, there certainly is not a shred of evidence that Hezekiah composed uninspired songs. That assertion is assumed, not proven.

There are "Reformed" pastors who argue that the fact that every instance of worship song in the Bible is divinely inspired holds no significance for today's church. They reason that since worship songs are in the Bible, which in itself is divinely inspired, they of necessity must also be inspired. This reasoning is fallacious for two reasons. First, the Bible contains many infallibly recorded statements of uninspired people speaking. The Bible records people lying, people with bad theology, and even Satan lying to Jesus. No one would argue that Satan's lies were divinely inspired. Second, and even more significant, is the fact that the Holy Spirit emphasizes that worship songs came not from anyone who decided to write a song, but *only* from seers and prophets. The only way to argue against the sole use of divinely inspired songs in the church is to abandon the regulative principle of worship, either explicitly or by subterfuge. Abandoning the scriptural laws of worship places one outside of Reformed Christianity (with regard to worship) and sets him squarely in the Episcopal, Lutheran, and Anabaptist camp.

6. The Psalms and Apostolic Worship

The Bible teaches that the Psalms were sung for public and private worship in the apostolic church. The singing of divinely inspired songs in worship is not only an Old Testament worship ordinance, but also a new covenant era ordinance.

Matthew 26:30

In fact, it was Jesus Himself who specifically used the Psalms for praise when He introduced the New Testament ordinance of the Lord's Supper. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that immediately after the institution of the Lord's Supper Jesus and the apostles sang a hymn. "And when they had sung a hymn [lit. 'when they had hymned'], they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Mt. 26:30; cf. Mk. 14:24). The majority of commentators believe that the word "hymn" here refers to a Psalm or Psalms from the "*Hallel*" (i.e., Ps. 113-118). James Morison writes, "Or *Psalm*, as it is in the margin and the Geneva: or very literally, And when they had hymned (*humnesantes*). The word does not imply that it was but one hymn or psalm that was sung or chanted. And if the tradition, preserved among the Jews, is of any weight in such a matter, the hymning at the conclusion of the supper would embrace Psalms cxv., cxvi., cxviii., which

constitute the second part of the Jewish Hallelujah, or *Hallel*, as they call it. The other part of the *Hallel* consisted of Psalms cxiii., cxiv., which it was customary to chant at the commencement of the feast.”¹¹

Matthew Henry points out (in his commentary on the passage) that if Jesus and the disciples had departed from the normal Jewish practice of singing the Psalms after the Paschal meal, it probably would have been recorded in the Gospel accounts, for it would have been a new practice. He then writes, “Singing of psalms is a gospel-ordinance. Christ’s removing the hymn from the close of the passover to the close of the Lord’s Supper, plainly intimates that he intended that ordinance should continue in his church, that, as it had not its birth with the ceremonial law, so it should not die with it.”¹² The Holy Spirit tells us that the Lord of glory sang Psalms at the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Bushell writes, “Psalmody and the Lord’s Supper are no more separable now than psalmody and the Passover ritual were in Old Testament times. There is thus no instance of Scripture that shows more clearly than this the abiding significance of the Old Testament Psalms for the New Testament Church.”¹³ Does your church follow the example of Jesus Christ and the Apostles by singing the Spirit-inspired Psalms of Scripture whenever you partake of the body and blood of our precious Savior?

It is providential that when Jesus was about to enter the humiliation, torture, agony, abandonment, and darkness of Golgotha He had the words of victory upon His lips:

The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. Save now, I pray, O Lord; O Lord, I pray, send now prosperity. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! We have blessed you from the house of the Lord. God is the Lord, and He has given us light; bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You. Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever (Ps. 118:22-29).

If the head of the church choose the Spirit-inspired Psalms for praise, comfort, and edification, should not His bride do likewise? Who are we to set aside the ordinance of the Son of God?

¹¹ James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, [1884] 1981), p. 537. A.A. Hodge concurs: “Four cups of wine, the Mishna tells us were always drunk... They also always sang the Hallel, or praise-psalms, consisting of all the Psalms in our Bible from the 113th to the 118th inclusive. The first part, including the 113th and 114th Psalms, was sung early in the meal, and the 115th, 116th, 117th, and 118th Psalms at the close, after the fourth or last cup of wine had been drunk. This is the ‘hymn’ alluded to (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26) when it is said, ‘And when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives’” (*Popular Lectures on Theological Themes* [Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, 1887]). The following commentators teach that Christ and the Apostles sang the *Hallel* (i.e., Psalms 113 through 118) at the Last Supper: Alfred Plummer, R.C.H. Lenski, Art Gundry, John Peter Lange, William Hendriksen, G. Campbell Morgan, R.V.G. Tasker, C.H. Spurgeon, Matthew Henry, etc.

¹² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Pub., n.d.) Vol. 5, p. 392.

¹³ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, pp. 78-79.

Acts 16:25

In Acts 16 Paul and Silas are cast into “the inner prison” (v. 24) as a result of mob influence upon the civil magistrates at Philippi. Luke records that “at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God” (v. 25). The verb used in this passage (*humneo*) translated as “singing hymns” (NKJV, NIV, RSV), “sang praises” (KJV), “sang hymns” (ASV), “singing hymns of praise” (NASB) is the same word used to describe Psalm singing in Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:24 (cf. also the section below on Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16). Given the fact that pious Jews often committed many of the Psalms to memory for devotional use, many commentators believe Paul and Silas were singing from the book of Psalms. Kistemaker writes, “Paul and Silas not only edify and strengthen themselves, but also provide a witness and a source of encouragement to the other prisoners who listen to their prayers and psalms (compare Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Jas. 5:13).”¹⁴ Lenski writes, “What hymns they sang we, of course, do not know, but the psalms of David have ever been dear to those who suffer, especially also to those who suffer wrong.”¹⁵ Hackett writes, “Their worship consisted chiefly of thanksgiving, the language of which they would desire more or less from the Psalms.”¹⁶ Alexander says, “*Praying, hymned (or sang to) God*, seems to express, not two distinct acts...but the single act of lyrical worship, or praying...by singing or chanting, perhaps one or more of the many passages in the Book of Psalms peculiarly adapted and intended for the use of prisoners and others under persecution.”¹⁷

Although there is no way for us to know conclusively what Paul and Silas sang, given the fact that there is not a shred of evidence for uninspired hymnody within the New Testament, it is very likely that they were singing Psalms. “In any event, there is certainly no evidence here requiring the supposition that materials other than Biblical Psalms would have been used—quite the reverse.”¹⁸

Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16

Two passages which are crucial to the exclusive Psalmody debate are Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. These passages are important because they are used as proof texts by both exclusive Psalm singers and those who use uninspired hymns in worship. Paul writes, “And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:18-19). “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16).

¹⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 598.

¹⁵ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, [1934] 1961), pp. 672-673.

¹⁶ Horatio B. Hackett, *Commentary on Acts* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), p. 190.

¹⁷ J. A. Alexander, *Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1991), p. 121.

¹⁸ J. W. Keddie, *Why Psalms Only?*, p. 5.

Before we consider the question of how these passages relate to public worship, we first will consider the question “what does Paul mean by psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs?” This question is very important, for many advocates of uninspired hymnody (who claim to adhere to the regulative principle) point to this passage as proof that uninspired hymns are permitted in public worship by God. When examining passages such as Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, one should *not* make the common mistake of importing our modern meaning or usage of a word, such as hymn, into what Paul wrote over nineteen hundred years ago. When a person hears the word “hymn” today, he immediately thinks of the extra-biblical non-inspired hymns found in the pews of most churches. The only way to really determine what Paul meant by “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” is to determine how these terms were used by Greek-speaking Christians in the first century.

When interpreting religious terminology used by Paul in his epistles, there are certain rules of interpretation that should be followed. First, the religious thinking and worldview of the apostles was essentially from the Old Testament and Jesus Christ, not Greek heathenism. Therefore, when Paul discusses doctrine or worship, the first place to look for help in understanding religious terms is the Old Testament. We often find Hebrew expressions or terms expressed in *koine* Greek. Second, we must keep in mind that the churches that Paul founded in Asia consisted of converted Jews, Gentile proselytes to Old Testament Judaism (God-fearers) and Gentile pagans. These churches had a Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. When Paul expressed Old Testament ideas to a Greek-speaking audience, he would use the religious terminology of the Septuagint. If the terms hymns (*humnois*) and spiritual songs (*odais pneumatikais*) were defined within the New Testament, then looking to the Septuagint for the meaning of these words would be unnecessary. Given the fact, however, that these terms are rarely used in the New Testament and cannot be defined within their immediate context apart from a knowledge of the Old Testament, it would be exegetically irresponsible to ignore how these words are used in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament.

When we examine the Septuagint, we find that the terms psalm (*psalmos*), hymn (*humnos*), and song (*odee*) used by Paul clearly refers to the Old Testament book of Psalms and not ancient or modern uninspired hymns or songs. Bushell writes, “*Psalmos*...occurs some 87 times in the Septuagint, some 78 of which are in the Psalms themselves, and 67 times in the psalm titles. It also forms the title to the Greek version of the psalter.... *Humnos*...occurs some 17 times in the Septuagint, 13 of which are in the Psalms, six times in the titles. In 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah there are some 16 examples in which the Psalms are called ‘hymns’ (*humnoi*) or ‘songs’ (*odai*) and the singing of them is called ‘hymning’ (*humneo, humnodeo, humnesis*).... *Odee*...occurs some 80 times in the Septuagint, 45 of which are in the Psalms, 36 in the Psalm titles.”¹⁹ In twelve Psalm titles we find both “psalm” and “song”; and, in two others we find “psalm” and “hymn.” “Psalm seventy-six is designated ‘psalm, hymn and song.’ And at the end of the first seventy two psalms we read ‘the hymns of David the son of Jesse are ended’ (Ps. 72:20). In other words, there is no more reason to think that the Apostle referred to psalms

¹⁹ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, pp. 85-86.

when he said ‘psalms,’ than when he said ‘hymns’ and ‘songs,’ for all three were biblical terms for psalms in the book of psalms itself.”²⁰ To ignore how Paul’s audience would have understood these terms and how these terms are defined by the Bible; and then instead to import non-biblical modern meanings into these terms is exegetical malpractice.

One of the most common objections against the idea that in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 Paul is speaking of the book of Psalms is that it would be absurd for apostle to say, “sing psalms, psalms, and psalms.” This objection fails to consider the fact that a common literary method among the ancient Jews was to use a triadic form of expression to express an idea, act, or object. The Bible contains many examples of triadic expression. For example: Exodus 34:7—“iniquity and transgression and sin”; Deuteronomy 5:31 and 6:1—“commandments and statutes and judgments”; Matthew 22:37—“with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (cf. Mk. 12:30; Lk. 10:27); Acts 2:22—“miracles and wonders and signs”; Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16—“psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” “The triadic distinction used by Paul would be readily understood by those familiar with their Hebrew OT Psalter or the Greek Septuagint, where the Psalm titles are differentiated psalms, hymns, and songs. This interpretation does justice to the *analogy* of Scripture, i.e. Scripture is its own best interpreter.”²¹

The interpretation that says that “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” refers to the inspired book of Psalms also receives biblical support from the immediate context and grammar of these passages. In Colossians 3:16 we are exhorted: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly....” In this passage the word of Christ is very likely synonymous with the word of God. “In 1 Pet. 1:11 it is stated that ‘the spirit of Christ’ was in the Old Testament prophets and through them testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory which should follow. If, as is definitely stated, the Spirit of Christ testified these things through the prophets, then Christ was the real Author of those Scriptures. Prominent among those prophecies, which so testified concerning Christ, is the Book of Psalms, and therefore Christ is the Author of the Psalms.”²²

After Paul exhorts the Colossian church to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly, he immediately points them to the book of Psalms; a book which comprehends “most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible;”²³ a book far superior to any human devotional book, which Calvin called “an anatomy of all parts of the soul;”²⁴ a book which is “a compendium of all divinity.”²⁵ Do we let the Scriptures, the word of Christ dwell within us when we sing uninspired human compositions in worship? No, we do not! If we are to sing and

²⁰ G.I. Williamson, *The Singing of Praise in the Worship of God*, p. 6.

²¹ J. W. Keddie, *Why Psalms Only?*, p. 7.

²² M.C. Ramsey, *Purity of Worship* (Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia: Church Principles Committee, 1968), p. 20.

²³ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Psalter*, [1528] 1545, *Luther's Works* (tr. C.M. Jacobs; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) Vol. XXXV, p. 254.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (tr. James Anderson; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), Vol. I, pp. xxxvi-xxxix.

²⁵ Basil, quoted in Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 18.

meditate upon the word of Christ, we must sing the songs that Christ has written by His Spirit—the book of Psalms.

The grammar also supports the contention that Paul was speaking of the book of Psalms. In our English Bibles the adjective “spiritual” only applies to the word songs (“spiritual songs”). In the Greek language, however, when an adjective immediately follows two or more nouns, it applies to all the preceding nouns. John Murray writes,

Why does the word *pneumatikos* [spiritual]²⁶ qualify *odais* and not *psalmois* and *hymnois*? A reasonable answer to this question is that *pneumatikais* qualifies all three datives and that its gender (fem.) is due to attraction to the gender of the noun that is closest to it. Another distinct possibility, made particularly plausible by the omission of the copulative in Colossians 3:16, is that “Spiritual songs” are the genus of which “psalms” and “hymns” are the species. This is the view of Meyer, for example. On either of these assumptions the psalms, hymns, and songs are all “Spiritual” and therefore all inspired by the Holy Spirit. The bearing of this upon the question at issue is perfectly apparent. Uninspired hymns are immediately excluded.²⁷

If one wants to argue that spiritual does not apply to psalms and hymns, then one must answer two pertinent questions. First, why would Paul insist on divine inspiration for songs, yet permit uninspired hymns? We can safely assume that Paul was not irrational. Second, given the fact that “psalms” refers to divinely inspired songs, it would be unscriptural *not* to apply spiritual to that term. Furthermore, since we have already established that the phrase “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” refers to the divinely inspired book of Psalms, it is only natural to apply “spiritual” to all three terms. Since the book of Psalms is composed of divinely inspired or spiritual psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, we obey God only when we praise Him using the biblical Psalter; uninspired hymns do not meet the scriptural criteria for authorized praise.

Another question that needs to be considered regarding these passages is: “Do these passages refer to formal public worship services or to informal Christian gatherings?” Since Paul is discussing the mutual edification of believers by singing inspired songs in private worship situations, it would be inconsistent on his part to allow uninspired songs in the more formal public worship settings. “What is proper or improper to be sung in one instance must be seen as proper or improper to be sung in the other. Worship is still worship, whatever its circumstances

²⁶ We should be very careful not to define the word “spiritual” in these passages in the modern sense of “religious.” The word “spiritual” here refers to something which comes from the Spirit of God, and thus is “inspired” or “God-breathed.” B.B. Warfield writes of *pneumatikos*: “Of the twenty-five instances in which the word occurs in the New Testament, in no single case does it sink even as low in its reference as the human spirit; and in twenty-four of them is derived from *pneuma*, the Holy Spirit. In this sense of belonging to, or determined by, the Holy Spirit, the New Testament usage is uniform with the one single exception of Ephesians 6:12, where it seems to refer to the higher though superhuman intelligence. The appropriate translation for it in each case is spirit-given, or spirit-led, or spirit-determined” (*The Presbyterian Review*, Vol. 1, p. 561 [July 1880] quoted in Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, pp. 90-91).

²⁷ John Murray, *Song in Public Worship in Worship in the Presence of God*, (ed. Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, Greenville Seminary Press, 1992), p. 188.

and regardless of the number of people involved.”²⁸ “If psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are the limits of the material of songs in praise of God in less formal acts of worship, how much more are they the limits in more formal acts of worship?”²⁹

James 5:13

James 5:13 says “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.” The verb translated “sing psalms” in the KJV can also legitimately be translated “sing praise.” The phrase “sing praise” (*psalleteo*) itself does not identify the content of what is used to sing praise. Therefore, one must let Scripture interpret Scripture in order to determine its meaning. In Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 the noun form of this word (*psalmois*) refers to the Old Testament Psalms. In 1 Corinthians 14, it refers either to Old Testament Psalms or to divinely inspired songs not preserved in the New Testament canon. In Romans 15:9, it is used in a citation from the Septuagint version of Psalm 18:49. This citation alludes to the Messiah praising God among the nations. When Christ praised Jehovah during his earthly ministry He used the Old Testament Psalms (cf. Mt. 26:30).

There is not a shred of biblical evidence that James 5:13 refers to uninspired praise. All the scriptural evidence points in the opposite direction: Spirit-inspired praise. Therefore, this passage cannot be used as a proof text for uninspired materials in worship.

1 Corinthians 14:15, 26

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul deals with revelatory gifts and the need for intelligibility in the assembly for the edification of the body. He also deals with the closely related issue of proper order in public worship. In this context Paul speaks of the praise as practiced at Corinth: “I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding” (v. 15), “Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification” (v. 26). Although there are writers who believe that these passages refer to Old Testament Psalms, the majority of interpreters believe that Paul is referring to a type of charismatic hymnody. That is, there were believers at Corinth who received songs of praise by the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Whatever position one holds to regarding these passages, one thing is certain: divine inspiration was a prerequisite for writing worship songs at Corinth. Therefore, this passage cannot be used to support the uninspired hymnody practiced today. Since in God’s providence none of these inspired songs were inscripturated, their use was limited to the first century prior to the close of the canon.

These passages, however, are often used to raise a question regarding the sufficiency of the book of Psalms for praise in the new covenant era. If the book of Psalms is sufficient for

²⁸ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, pp. 83-84.

²⁹ J. Murray and W. Young, *Minority Report, Minutes of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (14th General Assembly, 1947), p. 61, as quoted in Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 84.

praise in new covenant churches, then why were other inspired songs of praise used? These passages do not disprove exclusive Psalmody for two reasons. First, these passages do not refer to congregational singing, but rather to a single individual who speaks in tongues or prophecies while singing. Since the revelatory gifts have ceased, this practice is no longer a part of congregational worship. Second, the churches in the apostolic age had to function without a complete New Testament to interpret the Old Testament, thus direct revelation was needed. Bushell writes,

The Old Testament psalms are in a sense insufficient for the worship needs of the Church in this dispensation, but only in the sense that they require the interpretation of completed New Testament canon to be properly understood, used, and sung. God may well have given the Corinthians such charismatic songs to ‘fill the gap’ until this need was met. This was, in fact, what the charismatic gifts were all about. So the presence of charismatic singing in the early days of the Church cannot be offered as justification for composing new songs now, any more than the exercise of prophetic gifts in the same context can be seen as suggesting the need for new prophetic oracles in the present day.³⁰

Furthermore, even if one accepts the interpretation that 1 Corinthians 14:15, 26 proves that churches today can sing other songs besides the book of Psalms, these passages would only permit the few inspired songs given in Scripture that are not in the book of Psalms and no others. When the revelatory gifts ceased with the death of the apostles, so did the possibility of divinely inspired hymnody.

The Hymns of the Apocalypse

The Book of Revelation contains a number of examples of worship song (e.g., 4:8, 11; 5:9-13; 7:10-12; 11:17-18; 14:2-3; 15:3-4; 19:1, 2, 5, 8). A question that needs to be answered regarding these songs is: “Do these allusions to worship in heaven teach us anything regarding what we are to sing in public worship and how we are to conduct public worship at the present time?” No, they clearly do not.

The Book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature, and therefore was not meant to be a literal guide or pattern for public worship. If it was, we would all be Romanists, for Revelation describes an “altar” (6:9; 8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7); “incense” (8:4); “trumpets” (1:10; 4:1; 8:13; 9:14); “harps” (5:8; 14:2; 15:2) and even the “ark of the covenant” (11:19). We also would have to be mystics, for Revelation has every creature, including birds, insects, jellyfish, and worms, etc., praising God (5:13). Apocalyptic literature uses figurative language and dramatic imagery to teach spiritual lessons. “The important thing in watching a drama is not the props, but the message they help to portray.”³¹ “The Book of Revelation is filled to overflowing with obscure rites, with thrones and temples, and with a whole host of liturgical acts that cannot

³⁰ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 81.

³¹ William E. Cox, *Studies in Final Things* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966), p. 159.

possibly relate to our own circumstances of worship. The attempt to derive elements of worship from such apocalyptic literature can only lead to liturgical chaos.”³²

Furthermore, even if one wanted to take the apocalyptic scenes of worship in heaven as normative for the church today, they still would not authorize the use of uninspired hymns, for the songs sung by the angels, four living creatures, and sinless heavenly saints “are in the nature of the case inspired compositions, proceeding as they do from heaven itself and the very throne and presence of God.”³³ But (as noted) the apocalyptic worship scenes with their altar, incense, harps, and other ceremonial images clearly cannot be applied to the new covenant church without Scripture contradicting itself, which is impossible.

Some writers appeal to the “new song” mentioned in Revelation 14:3 as scriptural authorization for the composing of “new songs” today. A study of this phrase in Scripture, however, will prove that the biblical phrase “new song” has nothing to do with composing new uninspired songs after the close of the canon. The phrase “new song” in the Old Testament can refer to a song which has as its theme new mercies or new marvels of God’s power (e.g., 40:3; 98:1). But keep in mind that this phrase is only used to describe songs written under divine inspiration. This fact limits “new songs” to the inspired songs of the Bible. Since the phrase “new song” is only used to describe songs written by people who had the prophetic gift, and did not apply to just any Israelite, it therefore certainly does not apply to Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley, or any other uninspired hymn writer.

Another meaning of “new song” refers not to a song describing new mercies, but rather to singing a song anew; that is, with a thankful, rejoicing heart; with a new impulse of gratitude. The song may in fact be very old, but as we apply the inspired song experimentally to our own situation, we sing it anew. This is probably the meaning of “sing a new song” in the Psalms, which use the phrase, yet do not discuss new mercies. For example, Psalm 33 uses the phrase “sing a new song,” and then discusses general well-known doctrines: creation, providence, and hope and trust in God. Also, there is a sense in which all the Old Testament songs are “new songs” for the new covenant Christian, in that we sing the Psalms with an understanding and perspective unknown to Old Testament believers. Because of God’s expression of love in and by Christ, Jesus and the Apostle John can even refer to a well-known Old Testament commandment (Lev. 19:18) as a “new commandment” (Jn. 13:34; 1 Jn. 2:7; 2 Jn. 5).³⁴

³² Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 94-95.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

³⁴ Some think that new in new song merely means that the psalmist is asking God’s people to sing an inspired song with which they are not yet familiar. Others think that the phrase sing a new song is a liturgical phrase equivalent to “give it all you’ve got.” “Calvin regards *new* as equivalent to rare and choice” (W. S. Plumer, *Psalms* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1867] 1975], p. 408). Speaking of the phrase new song in Revelation, Bushell writes, “The concept of ‘newness’ in the Book of Revelation is thus used as a poetic device to express in a heightened sense the fullness and scope of the eschatological redemption of all things. The ‘new song,’ the ‘new name,’ the ‘new heavens,’ the ‘new earth,’ and the ‘new Jerusalem’ are all yet future. The fact that we have in these visions a present anticipation of this newness, provides no more warrant for the production of ‘new’ worship song than it does for the building of a ‘new Jerusalem.’ Quite the contrary is the case. It is very significant, in fact, that worship song is placed in the category of the ‘new’ things of John’s vision. The distinguishing character of the ‘newness’ attributed to these objects is its divine origin” (*The Songs of Zion*, p. 96).

Alleged Hymnic Fragments

A common method for arguing against exclusive Psalmody is to appeal to the existence of hymnic fragments within the New Testament. The existence of these hymnic fragments, we are told, teaches us that the apostolic church was engaged in hymn writing, and thus we also ought to compose our own hymns. The problem with this argument is that it is not based on solid scriptural evidence, but is basically the *speculation* of modernistic theologians and commentators. The Greek scholar Delling writes, “Attempts have been made to identify various primitive Christian hymns or hymnal fragments in the N.T. But such identifications must remain hypothetical, particularly as there is in the N.T. no attempt—and this is a point worth noting in itself—to use the Greek style of metrical hymns.... The pieces in the N.T. which take the form of praise are in general so little controlled by any discernable laws that for the most part judgment as to their character as hymns can claim only limited validity.”³⁵ A study of the literature which speaks of these so-called hymnic fragments reveals that the methodology for determining what is and is not a hymn fragment is totally subjective and unreliable. Subjective speculation does not provide a biblical foundation for church practice, especially in light of the biblical evidence in favor of exclusive Psalmody.

Furthermore, if hymnology flourished in the apostolic church, as many suppose, “it is indeed remarkable that not a single one of these hymns has survived intact outside the New Testament writings. Nor is there a single shred of undisputed historical evidence suggesting the use of such hymns in the Church in the second century. It is just as astounding that not a single one of these ‘hymns’ is identified as such in the New Testament writings themselves.”³⁶ Since Scripture never identifies the poetic or rhythmical passages as songs or hymns fragments, and since there is not a shred of evidence that these fragments were used for worship songs in the apostolic church, or even in the second century, we can refer to the hymn fragment argument against exclusive Psalmody as the grasping after invisible straws argument.

Conclusion

Thus far we have examined the foundation of biblical worship (the regulative principle) and the testimony of Scripture regarding the content of worship songs. The regulative principle of worship, which is clearly taught in Scripture and which is clearly stated in all the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds, places the burden of proof for the use of uninspired hymns in worship upon the believers who advocate their use. For the Reformed believer, it is not enough to say that uninspired hymns are not forbidden; one must provide a biblical warrant for their use from Scripture.

³⁵ Gerhard Delling, “*humnos*” in Ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), Vol. 8, p. 500. Delling is a modernistic German scholar and is not an exclusive Psalm singer.

³⁶ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 98.

When examining the scriptural testimony regarding worship songs, we have noted that the singing of divinely inspired Psalms is commanded in both the Old and New Testaments. There are historical examples in both the Old and New Testaments of Psalms used in worship. Also, there is abundant evidence that divine inspiration was a prerequisite for writing worship songs for the church. However, when we look for authorization in Scripture for the use of uninspired songs in worship, we cannot find a command, historical example, or authorization of any kind. Those who find justification for the singing of uninspired songs in worship from Ephesians 5:19 or Colossians 3:16, or from the “hymn fragment” argument, are letting their presuppositions and emotional attachment to uninspired hymns influence their exegesis. Simply put, it is impossible to find a warrant in Scripture for singing uninspired hymns in worship. The exclusive Psalmody debate, in its essence, boils down to whether people who say they are Reformed are really willing to submit themselves to the regulative principle of worship.

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