

Exclusive Psalmody: A Biblical Defense

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Introduction

One of the most (if not the most) important activities that believers engage in is the worship of the thrice holy, triune God of Scripture. While all Christians agree as to the importance of worship, there is not agreement as to the content of worship. Some churches sing “hymns” of merely human composition; some churches sing uninspired hymns and inspired songs from the biblical Psalter, while some churches sing *only* from the 150 Psalms of the Bible. Using the book of Psalms alone as the manual of praise in the church is referred to as “exclusive Psalmody.” Today exclusive Psalmody is so rare among churches that many people have never heard of it or encountered it. When some people do encounter it, they often think it is odd, antiquated, and dull. What most Christians do not know is that at one time most churches practiced exclusive Psalmody. During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and most of the eighteenth centuries, the book of Psalms was used as the *only* manual of praise in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The purpose of this study is to show from Scripture that Reformed worship, or exclusive Psalmody, is not just a bizarre tradition inherited from Calvin or Knox, but is the teaching of God’s holy word.¹ “This is necessary, for due to our Church’s long continued practice of the apostolic and reformed mode of worship, there is persistent danger that people outside our Church will regard our worship as simply the perpetuation of an ancient tradition, and as not broad-based on Scripture.”² It is our earnest prayer that this little book will be used of God to bring many of our Reformed and non-Reformed brethren back to the purity of worship attained by the Calvinist wing of the Reformation.

Chapter 1: The Scriptural Law of Worship

There are a number of important doctrines in the Bible which are deduced from many parts of Scripture and cannot be conclusively proven from one or two verses. Exclusive Psalm singing is one such doctrine. Exclusive Psalmody flows directly from the overall teaching of Scripture regarding the worship of Jehovah. The Bible teaches that “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that

¹ This short treatise on exclusive Psalmody contains nothing new or original. In fact, the author would prefer that everyone purchase a copy of Michael Bushell’s *The Songs of Zion* (Available from Crown and Covenant Publications, 800 Wood St., Pittsburgh, PA 15221) and read it carefully. But, because we have found few believers willing to read a long scholarly treatise such as Bushell’s, we have organized many of the arguments for exclusive Psalmody together in a small booklet.

² M.C. Ramsey, *Psalms Only: Objections Answered* (Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, 1971), p. 3.

He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or *any other way not prescribed in holy Scripture.*³ When it comes to the elements of worship and the content of praise, we must have a warrant from God's word. God sets the parameters on what is permissible in worship, not man. In other words, anything that the church does in worship must be proved from the Bible. This proof can be attained by an explicit command of God (e.g., "Do this in remembrance of Me," Lk. 22:19); or by logical inference from Scripture (i.e., there may not be an explicit command, but when several passages are compared, they teach or infer a scriptural practice); or by biblical historical example (e.g., the change from the seventh day to the first day of the week for corporate public worship).

The Reformed doctrine of worship called "the scriptural law of worship"; "the puritan principle of worship"; or, "the regulative principle of worship" is clearly taught in both the Old and New Testaments.⁴ In Genesis 4:3-5 we read that God rejected Cain's offering of the fruit of the ground, but accepted Abel's offering of animal sacrifices. Why? Because even though offering fruit is not prohibited, it also was not commanded. Leviticus 10:1-2 records that God killed Nadab and Abihu because they offered strange fire, which God "commanded them not." The offering of strange fire is not prohibited in Scripture, but it also is not commanded. In Deuteronomy 12:32, in the specific context of avoiding false heathen worship practices, God said, "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (cf. Dt. 4:2; Jer. 7:24,31; 19:5; I Kgs. 12:32-33; Num. 15:39-40). In 2 Samuel 6:3-7 we read of God's judgment on David's men who were moving the ark. Why were they judged? God was angry because they did not follow "the due order...as Moses commanded according to the word of the Lord" (1 Chr. 15:13-15). Jesus chided the Pharisees for adding to God's law: "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" (Mt. 15:3). Jesus told the women at the well that "they that worship Him [God] must worship Him in spirit and in *truth*" (Jn. 4:24). When Jesus Christ gave orders to the apostles before His ascension into heaven, did He give the church the authority to make up their own doctrine, government, worship, and holy days? Absolutely not! He said to teach "them [the nations] to observe all things that *I have commanded you*" (Mt. 28:20). Jesus told the Pharisees who made up their own rules regarding worship, "In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mt. 15:9). Paul says that adding the commandments and doctrines of men to Christianity is "*self*

³ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chap XXI:1. "It was the application of this principle which enabled the Protestant Reformers to accomplish their great work of reformation. They denied for example the validity of five of the seven sacraments of the corrupt Church, and retained only Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Likewise the application of this principle enabled them to purify the worship of God by ordering it in accordance with God's will as set forth in His Word. Thus the work of the Reformation had its positive and negative aspects. It involved the rejection of the use of altars, crosses, crucifixes, candles, incense, and a host of other unscriptural practices, as well as the reinstatement of free prayer as distinct from set forms of prayer, the reading and exposition of God's word, and the congregational singing of the Psalms. Where this principle that what is not prescribed is forbidden is rejected or ignored, purity of worship is imperiled" (M.C. Ramsey, *Psalms Only*, pp. 24-25).

⁴ For more on the Regulative Principle of worship see: B. Schwertley's *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God*, Chapter One; also, *Sola Scriptura and the Regulative Principle of Worship*, chapters 4 and 5.

imposed religion, false humility” and is of “*no value* against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:20-23).

The biblical teaching regarding worship is crystal clear. The church’s job is *not* to innovate and create new worship forms or ordinances, but simply to see what God has declared in His word and obey it. “The power of the church is purely ministerial and declarative. She is only to hold forth the doctrine, enforce the laws, and execute the government which Christ has given to her. She is to add nothing of her own to, and to subtract nothing from what her Lord has established. Discretionary power she does not possess.”⁵ John W. Keddie writes, “The great Church historian William Cunningham pointed out that the implication of this [principle] ‘if it were fully carried out, would just be to leave the Church in the condition in which it was left by the Apostles, in so far as we have any means of information—a result, surely, which need not be very alarming, except to those who think that they themselves have very superior powers for improving and adorning the Church by their inventions [*The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, p. 32].’ It scarcely needs to be pointed out that the consequences of the adoption of the laxer view—a basically *permissive* one, and unquestionably the predominant one today even in evangelical churches—has been the tendency for biblical materials in worship to be displaced and countless innovations of one sort or another, having no warrant in God’s word, to be introduced.”⁶

The regulative principle of worship is crucial in understanding exclusive Psalmody, for while there is abundant biblical evidence that Psalms were used for praise in both the Old and New Testament eras, there is no evidence in the Bible that God’s people ever used uninspired human compositions in public worship. Churches which use uninspired hymns in public worship must prove that such a practice has biblical warrant from either a command, historical example or by deduction. In a moment we will examine the standard arguments used by Reformed authors to justify the use of uninspired songs in public worship. It will be shown that these arguments are based on either a faulty exegesis of Scripture, a misunderstanding or perversion of the regulative principle (e.g. praise as a circumstance of worship), or on unsubstantiated speculation (e.g., the hymn fragment argument). We will see that the Calvinistic Reformers, Scottish Presbyterians,

⁵ James H. Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1872) 2:163.

⁶ J.W. Keddie, *Why Psalms Only?* (Cambridge, England: Scottish Reformed Fellowship, 1978), p. 8. People of Reformed and Presbyterian persuasion should note that all the Calvinistic Reformers and Churches of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries held to a very strict interpretation of the regulative principle. Calvin’s view can be found in his *Institutes* I, XI, 4; I, XII, 1 and 3; II, VIII, 5 and 17; IV, X, 1 and 8-17; cf. commentary on Jeremiah 7:31; sermon on 2 Samuel 6:6-12; tract on “the necessity of Reforming the Church”; and, the confession drafted by Calvin for the Reformed churches of France (1562). John Knox’s view is clearly set forth in *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry* (1550). The Reformed Creeds also teach the regulative principle of worship; cf. the Belgic Confession (1561) Art. VII, XXIX, XXXII; the Heidelberg Catechism Question 96; The Westminster Standards, Confession 1:6,7; 20:2; 21:1; Shorter Catechism 51; Larger Catechism 108, 109. A strict interpretation of the regulative principle can be found in the writings of: George Gillespie, William Ames, Samuel Rutherford, Jeremiah Burroughs, Thomas Watson, Thomas Ridgeley, Thomas Boston, William Romaine, John Cotton, Thomas Manton, Matthew Henry, John Owen, R.L. Dabney, James H. Thornwell, John L. Girardeau and many others. The regulative principle is still officially recognized by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, the Presbyterian Reformed Church, the American Presbyterian Church, the Free Church of Scotland, and many other Reformed denominations.

French Huguenots, Dutch Reformed and English and American Puritans were biblically correct in maintaining exclusive Psalmody.

Chapter 2: The Testimony of Scripture

Is Psalm Singing Commanded? Is Uninspired Hymn Singing Authorized?

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.⁷ 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."⁸ 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).

2. Designed by God for Singing

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

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)."⁹

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.¹⁰

⁹ 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).

¹⁰ *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."¹¹

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."¹² 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."¹³ (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), appointed by him over the service of song and by Solomon in the Temple service, is also called a

¹¹ Sherman Isbell, *The Singing of Psalms* (Presbyterian Reformed Church, 1996), Part VIII, no pagination.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 31.

‘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).¹⁴

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?¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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 that many prophecies and inspired writings did not make it into our Bibles. (There are Old

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Stephen Pribble, *The Regulative Principle and Singing in Worship*, pp. 11-12.

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.”¹⁷

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.”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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?

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Pub., n.d.) Vol. 5, p. 392.

¹⁹ 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).”²⁰ 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.”²¹ Hackett writes, “Their worship consisted chiefly of thanksgiving, the language of which they would desire more or less from the Psalms.”²² 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.”²³

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.”²⁴

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).

²⁰ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 598.

²¹ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, [1934] 1961), pp. 672-673.

²² Horatio B. Hackett, *Commentary on Acts* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), p. 190.

²³ J. A. Alexander, *Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857] 1991), p. 121.

²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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

²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷

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.”²⁸

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;”²⁹ a book far superior to any human devotional book, which Calvin called “an anatomy of all parts of the soul;”³⁰ a book which is “a compendium of all divinity.”³¹ 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

²⁶ G.I. Williamson, *The Singing of Praise in the Worship of God*, p. 6.

²⁷ J. W. Keddie, *Why Psalms Only?*, p. 7.

²⁸ M.C. Ramsey, *Purity of Worship* (Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia: Church Principles Committee, 1968), p. 20.

²⁹ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Psalter*, [1528] 1545, *Luther's Works* (tr. C.M. Jacobs; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) Vol. XXXV, p. 254.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (tr. James Anderson; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), Vol. I, pp. xxxvi-xxxix.

³¹ 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]³² 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.³³

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

³² 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).

³³ 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.”³⁴ “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?”³⁵

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

³⁴ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, pp. 83-84.

³⁵ 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.³⁶

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.”³⁷ “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

³⁶ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 81.

³⁷ 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.”³⁸

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.”³⁹ 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).⁴⁰

³⁸ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 94-95.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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.

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² 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.

Chapter 3: Objections to Exclusive Psalmody

Christians who say that they adhere to the regulative principle of worship, and yet sing uninspired hymns in worship, must (unless they are willing to admit they have abandoned the regulative principle or are willing to admit their worship practice is unauthorized and sinful) justify the use of uninspired songs from Scripture. Since there is no evidence of the use of uninspired songs in the Bible, the approach that most Reformed pastors have taken is to either circumvent the regulative principle, or offer excuses for abandoning this biblical practice. Note the following arguments.

1. The Insufficiency of the Psalter

One of the most common arguments used against exclusive Psalmody is “that the psalter is doctrinally and spiritually insufficient to meet the worship needs of the New Testament church.”⁴³ It is argued that the church needs worship songs written *after* the redemptive work of Christ on earth was completed to look back upon what Christ has accomplished, and reflect upon it. This argument would have merit if the Psalms did *not* discuss and reflect upon the work of Christ. When the Psalter is examined, however, we find more information and doctrine regarding the person and work of Christ than any humanly devised hymnbook. The idea that the book of Psalms is not adequate as a manual of praise for the new covenant church is an assumption that completely ignores the rich content of the Psalter (this fact will be considered further in a moment).

Once we understand that the Psalter is sufficient and adequate as a manual of praise for the new covenant church, any idea that we need a new uninspired book of praise, or additions to the Psalter to make it adequate, is at once overthrown. When approaching a thrice-holy God, infinite in perfections, should we not use only the very best worship songs available? Since the

⁴³ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 11.

Psalms are written by the Spirit of God and are infallible, theologically perfect and totally sufficient, why would anyone want to supplement them, or replace them with uninspired fallible compositions? Bushell writes, “That man who prefers a humanly composed song to one written by the Spirit of God, when the latter fully suits his purposes, is, to say the least, lacking in spiritual discernment. And that man who would mix together in one book the inspired songs of God with the uninspired songs of sinful men (as if the latter were in any way comparable with the former in majesty, holiness, and authority) is, whether he knows it or not, guilty of sacrilege, of bringing the things of God down to the level of sinful men. The only way to avoid this charge is to claim that the Psalms are in a very real sense outdated, so much so that even frail and sinful men may presume to improve upon them.”⁴⁴

The Psalter reveals such a clear portrait of Christ and His work that any suggestion that they are inadequate in their exposition of Christ’s work shows a lack of understanding regarding their content. The Psalms teach Christ’s divinity (Ps. 45:6; 110:1), His eternal sonship (Ps. 2:7), His incarnation (Ps. 8:5; 40:7-9), His mediatorial offices as Prophet (Ps. 40:9-10), Priest (Ps. 110:4), and King (Ps. 2:7-12; 22:28; 45:6; 72; 110:1). The Psalms give us Spirit-inspired details regarding Christ’s betrayal (Ps. 41:9), His agony in the garden (Ps. 22:2); His trial (Ps. 35:11), His rejection (Ps. 22:6; 118:22), His crucifixion (Ps. 22; 69), His burial and resurrection (Ps. 16:9-11), His ascension (Ps. 24:7-10; 47:5; 68:18), and His second coming and judgment (Ps. 50:3-4; 98:6-9). They also tell us of the victory of Christ’s kingdom (Ps. 2:6-12; 45:6 ff.). Some Psalms reveal so much vital information regarding Christ’s person and work that they are called messianic Psalms (Ps. 2, 8, 16, 22, 40, 45, 69, 72, 110).⁴⁵

The Psalms are a treasure house of biblical doctrine. One can learn more about God from the Psalter than a hundred hymnals. The Psalms tell us about: God’s self-existence (Ps. 94:8; cf. 33:11; 115:3), His absolute perfection (Ps. 145:3), His immutability (Ps. 102:26-28), His eternity (Ps. 90:3; 102:12), His omnipresence (Ps. 139:7-10), His omniscience (Ps. 94:9; cf. 1:6; 37:18; 119:168; 81:14, 15; 139:1-4), His omnipotence (Ps. 115:3), His veracity (Ps. 25:10; 31:6), His sovereignty (Ps. 22:28; 47:2, 3, 7, 8; 50:10-12; 95:3-5; 115:3; 135:5-6; 145:11-73), His wisdom (Ps. 19:1-7; 33:10, 11; 104:1-34), His goodness (Ps. 36:6, 9; 104:21; 145:9, 15, 16), His mercy (Ps. 136; 86:5; 145:9), His longsuffering nature (Ps. 86:15), His holiness (Ps. 22:3; 33:21; 51:11; 71:22; 78:41; 89:18-19; 98:1; 99:3, 5, 9; 103:1; 105:3; 106:47; 111:9, etc.), His righteousness (Ps. 119:137, etc.), His remunerative justice (Ps. 58:12). The Psalms teach that God is the creator (Ps. 89:47; 90:2; 96:5; 102:25; 104), and the Savior (Ps. 19:14; 28:35; 106:21). They teach His providence (Ps. 22:28; 104:14; 104), His hatred of sin (Ps. 5:4; 11:5), His punishment of the wicked (Ps. 7:12, 13; 11:6), and His chastening of His people (Ps. 6:1; 94:12; 118:18, etc.).

The Psalms contain a theological balance and fullness that is astounding. From the Psalter we learn of general and special revelation (Ps. 19:1-2; 103:7), original sin (Ps. 51:5), total depravity and the universality of sin (Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3), justification by faith and the free

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

remission of sins (Ps. 32:1 ff.; 51:1-5; 103:1-13; 106; 130:4; 143:2), repentance (Ps. 51:1-4; 39), kingdom victory (Ps. 2, 45, 46:7-11, 47, 72), and the judgment of the wicked and the blessing of the righteous (Ps. 9:16; 37:28; 59:13; 73:26-27). The Psalter informs us that the gospel will go to all nations (Ps. 67:1-7; 72:6-17; 87:4-6; 98:1-9; 106:5; 148:11). Bushell writes, “The Psalter recognizes the reality of sanctification, on the one hand, but never loses sight, on the other, of man’s inherent depravity. Side by side with emphatic assertions of personal integrity (e.g., 7:3 ff, 17:1 ff, 18:20 ff; 26:1 ff; cf. Acts 20:26 ff; 23:1; etc.) one finds ‘the fullest recognition of personal sinfulness (51:5; 69:5), of man’s inability to justify himself before God (130:3ff; 143:2), of his need of pardon and cleansing and renewal (32:1; 65:3), of his dependence on God for preservation from sin (19:12 ff.), of the barrier which sin erects between him and God (66:18; 50:16); as well as the strongest expressions of absolute self-surrender and dependence on God and entire trust in Him.’”⁴⁶

A common objection to the sufficiency of the Psalter is that the new covenant church should not rely solely upon a book of praise that uses types, symbols, and prophecies to describe the work of Christ. When we consider that we now have a completed canon in which the types, symbols, and prophecies are interpreted and fully understood, this objection has no merit. It is absurd to suggest that at the precise moment when the Psalter can be fully understood and be even more edifying for the people of God that it is no longer sufficient. The Psalms are much more useful with the New Testament than without it. “Our belief in the sufficiency of the psalter for New Testament worship is in large part a consequence of our understanding of the organic connection that exists between the two Testaments. They proclaim the same Gospel, exalt the same Christ, and confirm the same covenant (Gal. 3:6-18; Rom. 4:9-25), and it is in no wise inconceivable that they should enjoin the use of the same psalter in worship.”⁴⁷

Another objection to the sufficiency of the Psalter is the idea that the imprecatory Psalms are inappropriate for worship in the new dispensation. The imprecatory Psalms are songs in which the psalmist petitions God (often in a strong manner) to pour out His wrath upon his (the psalmist’s) and/or the covenant people’s enemies.⁴⁸ Isaac Watts (who did more to destroy exclusive Psalmody among Reformed believers than any other person) wrote, “While we are kindling into divine love by the Meditations of the Loving Kindness of God and the Multitude of His Tender Mercies, within a few Verses some dreadful Curse against Men is propos’d to our lips.”⁴⁹

The idea that the imprecatory Psalms are inappropriate for Christians to sing is totally unbiblical for a number of reasons. First, the Psalms were written by the Holy Spirit; therefore, the idea that these imprecatory petitions are barbaric or unethical is totally wicked. Second, one can only regard the imprecatory Psalms as improper for new covenant believers if one holds to a dispensational or modernistic hermeneutic. Both of these theological perspectives are

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁴⁸ The Psalms usually considered imprecatory are 55, 59, 69, 109, and 137.

⁴⁹ Isaac Watts, Preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1707), p. iv-vi; quoted in Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 201.

unscriptural and outside the pale of the Reformed faith.⁵⁰ Third, the imprecatory Psalms are frequently quoted in the New Testament (e.g., Ps. 69 and 109). “Psalm 69, which bears more of the imprecatory character than any other Psalm except 109, is quoted in five separate places and referred to in several others. No other psalms are more frequently quoted in New Testament than the imprecatory psalms, except the Messianic psalms.”⁵¹ Jesus even applies Psalm 69 as a prophecy regarding His own situation (cf. Jn. 15:25).

Many believers have argued that the imprecatory Psalms are an excellent reason why the church must have kinder, gentler hymns to supplement the Psalter. This type of thinking is unbiblical. It ignores both Scripture and history. One must always keep in mind that the Psalter was written and organized by the Holy Spirit. It therefore contains a balance and proper emphasis on the attributes of God and His dealings with men that is *exactly* what God desires. The attributes of God, such as His wrath, are not ignored or downplayed, but given proper emphasis. God’s hatred of the wicked and His awful judgments against them are an important part of the Psalter. “God is both sovereign and righteous; he possesses the unquestionable right to destroy all evil in his universe; if it is right for God to plan and effect this destruction, then it is right also for the saints to pray for the same.”⁵²

Anyone who is familiar with the shift from exclusive Psalmody toward Psalm imitations and uninspired hymns in Reformed and Presbyterian churches knows as a fact of history that the proper balance of the Psalter was immediately lost when manmade compositions were permitted. Hymn writers avoid the judicial aspect of God’s character in favor of love and heavenly bliss, etc. The history of human hymnology is a history of declension. It is only a matter of course for sinful human beings to neglect unpopular doctrines in their hymnals. Even if a humanly-produced hymnal contained no unorthodox doctrines, it still could be grossly unbalanced theologically by emphasizing popular doctrines while ignoring the less popular teachings.

The God-centered Psalter has increasingly been replaced with man-centered worship. “Historically, churches have only used both Psalms and hymns together in near-equal numbers for one generation. Beyond the first generation, hymns dominate. Why should this be so? We can’t be sure, but we can surmise that hymns demand less of the worshipper than do Psalms. The Psalms teach us as we sing them in a way that hymns do not. Since the hymns of an age fit better with the preconceptions and preferences of that age than do the Psalms, imperfect saints resist the difficult teachings of the Psalms and embrace the easier, often half-complete picture of God and the Christian life drawn by their hymns.”⁵³ In other words, the imperfect man-made hymns

⁵⁰ Any argument that wars against the divine inspiration of the Psalms that we are considering wars against the whole Book of Psalms. They stand or fall together. The believer in inspiration will not therefore be guilty of irreverence and profanity of flouting these Psalms; for that which is said and done against them is said and done against the Holy Spirit; and who will dare to risk having such a charge lodged against him? (J. H. Webster, “The Imprecatory Psalms,” in Ed. John McNaugher, *The Psalms in Worship*, p. 312).

⁵¹ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 39.

⁵² J. G. Vos, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms” in *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. IV, No. 2 (May 1942), p. 135 as quoted in Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 38.

⁵³ Bill and John Edgar, *Ten Brief Arguments for Exclusive Psalmody* (Broomall, PA: Tract, n. d.).

eventually drive out the perfect, balanced, God-breathed Psalms. Thus far, that has been a tragic fact of history.

As the twentieth century draws to a close, worship has degenerated to the point that in many “Reformed and Presbyterian” denominations the churches are imitating the slap-happy, campfire, Las Vegas-style worship invented by Arminian and charismatic heretics. Such worship is often called “celebrative” worship. The abandonment of the regulative principle and the Psalter has led to an overhead projector with the word *ichabod* written all over it. The sober majesty of the Psalter has been replaced with youth camp emotionalism. Many older more conservative believers are attempting to stem the tide against this new form of worship. They recognize that it is worship light; that it is theological pabulum. They want to return to Hart, Toplady, or Newton. They want to get rid of the guitars and drums and return to the piano and organ. But as long as they are unwilling to obey the regulative principle of worship and return to exclusive Psalmody they will be steamrolled by the new worship gimmicks that appeal to the flesh.

It is time for Reformed and Presbyterian churches to submit themselves to the regulative principle of worship and to recognize the sufficiency, superiority, balance, and theological perfection of the Psalter. “The psalter is inspired by God; it is a unique collection never to be equaled, much less surpassed, in quality or reverence by similar productions of uninspired men; it is a sufficient manual of praise; it requires neither supplementation nor abridgment.”⁵⁴ God has written the Psalms, placed them in the middle of our Bibles, and commanded us to sing them. To set aside the hymnbook that God has given us, or to greatly abridge it and mix it with human compositions (e.g., the Trinity Hymnal), is foolish, arrogant, and sinful.

2. *Singing Is Not a Separate Element of Worship*

The most common attack against exclusive Psalmody today is based on the idea that singing is not a separate element of worship, but is merely a circumstance of worship. Greg Bahnsen writes, “Is singing a separate ‘element’ of worship or a ‘circumstance’ of worship? If the latter, it does not require Biblical warrant according to the regulative principle. I have argued that singing is simply a means to (one circumstance through which to) pray, praise, exhort, or teach—rather than an element of worship itself.”⁵⁵ What Bahnsen is saying is that the general command to praise God is an element of worship, but how this command to praise is carried out is a mere circumstance of worship. Thus, a person could praise God through singing, or silent meditation, or speaking, or even through drama or dance, for the circumstances of worship are not strictly regulated by God’s word. The whole reason that Bahnsen and others⁵⁶ attempt to

⁵⁴ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 32.

⁵⁵ Greg Bahnsen, *Exclusive Psalmody, Antithesis I*, no. 2 (March-April, 1990), p. 51.

⁵⁶ The argument that singing is not a separate element of worship was popularized by Vern S. Poythress, a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary and a Presbyterian Church in America minister. In 1974 he wrote, “We regard teaching-by-singing and teaching-in-the-narrow-sense as simply two forms of teaching, each particularly effective in meeting certain needs and expressing certain aspects of Christian doctrine. Each has its advantages and limitations,

place worship song outside the category of the elements of worship is to place the content of worship song in the same category as prayer or preaching. The reason for this subterfuge is simple. If worship song is only one means or circumstance in which to “pray, praise, exhort, or teach,” as Bahnsen alleges, then men are permitted to make up their own uninspired praise songs. The Bible clearly permits believers to make up the content of prayer and preaching; thus, men can also make up the content of their singing (as long as the content of each is biblical).

Although it is true that singing, teaching, prayer, and preaching can have certain aspects in common (e.g., some Psalms contain prayer, prayer can contain praise, sermons can contain praise and supplication, etc.), the idea that singing praise is not a separate element of worship must be rejected for the following reasons. First the idea that singing praise is not a distinct element of worship is clearly contradicted by Scripture. When the Scriptures command a religious act and regulate that act as to content and manner of performance, that act cannot be considered a mere circumstance of worship, but immediately becomes an element of worship. The Scriptures contain many commands to praise God by singing (Ex. 15:21; 1 Ch. 16:9, 23; Ps. 9:11; 30:4; 33:2, 3; 47:6, 7; 66:2; 68:4, 32; 81:1; 95:1; 96:1, 2; 98:1, 4, 5; 105:2; 135:3; 147:7; 149:1, 3, etc.). God has placed a hymn book, a book of inspired worship songs in the middle of our Bibles, but he has not given a book of prayers. Singing praise was an important and necessary aspect of worship throughout the covenant people’s inscripturated history. Furthermore, Scripture emphasizes that divine inspiration was necessary to write worship songs. This fact immediately places the content of praise outside the circumstances of worship. To assert that the specific command of God to sing praise can be fulfilled by teaching Sunday school, or preaching a sermon, or even leading the congregation in prayer is absurd.

Second, the idea that singing praise is not a distinct element of worship, would if consistently held lead to liturgical chaos. In other words, some pastors in their zeal to refute exclusive Psalmody have invented an idea that if pushed to its logical conclusion leads to absurdity. For example, if praising God by singing is only a circumstance of worship (i.e., it is merely one possible way of praising God among many), then worshipping God by singing unto Him is optional. Remember, the circumstances of worship are those things which are not commanded and strictly regulated by God’s word. If a church decided to throw their Psalters in the dumpster and stop singing altogether, then according to Greg Bahnsen, Vern Poythress, and others, that church could not be disciplined by the Presbytery. If singing praise is only a circumstance of worship, then disciplining a church which refuses to sing praise would be like disciplining a church for using padded chairs instead of wooden pews. Furthermore, if singing and teaching are not separate parts or elements of the worship service, then women are forbidden by Scripture to sing in church, because women are explicitly forbidden to teach or preach in

due to the nature of the medium of expression. We challenge the exclusive psalmist position to prove from Scripture, rather than assume, that teaching-by-singing and proclaiming are ‘two separate elements of worship.’ To us they appear little more ‘separate’ than preaching to a visible audience versus preaching over the radio” (Ezra 3, “Union With Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody” in *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 1-2 [1974-75], pp. 225-226). Poythress’s position clearly contradicts Scripture, three hundred and fifty years of Presbyterian church history, and the Westminster Standards (see *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXI:3-XXI:5). His anti-Confessional view doesn’t seem to bother either Westminster Seminary or the Presbyterian Church in America.

public worship (1 Tim. 2:12; 1 Cor. 14:34-35). The attempt to place singing under the general category of teaching in order to make up uninspired lyrics in praise leads to insurmountable difficulties. If singing, preaching, and prayer are not distinct elements or parts of religious worship, then one lawfully could have a church service in which everything (including the sermon) could be sung or nothing at all could be sung. Those authors who attempt to blur the biblical distinction between distinct elements or parts of worship cannot even construct a worship service without denying their own position. When they conduct worship they make “rigid distinctions between prayer, the preaching of the Word, the reading of the Scriptures, and the singing of psalms or hymns.”⁵⁷ If they did not make distinctions between the elements or parts of worship, they would be out of a job and they know it.

Third, the whole argument that singing praise is a circumstance of worship is based on a perversion of the meaning of circumstance. When the Puritan and Presbyterian theologians of the past as well as the Westminster divines discussed a circumstance of worship, they made it very clear that they were only discussing things in worship which hold no religious significance. The Confession of Faith says,

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.⁵⁸

When the confession discusses circumstances common to human actions and societies, it is referring to non-religious activities and matters such as a place to meet, chairs, lighting, a time to meet, the length of the service, etc. Is singing praise to Jehovah common to human actions and societies? What about preaching the word or prayer? It is obvious that matters that are dependent upon instructions from God’s word, such as prayer, preaching, singing praise, and so on, cannot be circumstances of worship. That is, they cannot be determined solely by the light of nature. Therefore, the regulative principle applies to worship itself or all worship ordinances (prayer, reading the Scriptures, preaching, the sacraments, singing praise); but, the circumstances, incidentals, or conditions under which worship is conducted is not under the regulative principle, but the light of nature and Christian prudence or common sense. Therefore, Scripture strictly regulates the whole content of worship (i.e., men are not permitted to add, detract, or alter what God has commanded).

This distinction between the circumstances and parts (or elements) of religious worship was the Reformed position of the seventeenth century. The definition given in the Westminster

⁵⁷ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p. 49.

⁵⁸ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, I:IV.

Confession is clearly reflected in the writings of the greatest theologians of that time. George Gillespie (1613-1648) wrote,

Beside all this, there is nothing which any way pertaineth to the worship of God left to determination of human laws, besides the mere circumstances, which neither have any holiness in them, forasmuch as they have no other use and praise in sacred than they have in civil things, nor yet were part-determinable in Scripture, because they are infinite; but sacred significant ceremonies, such as cross, kneeling, surplice, holidays, bishopping, etc., which have no use and praise except in religion only, and which, also, were most easily determinable (yet not determined) within those bounds which the wisdom of God did set to his written word, are such things as God never left to the determination of any human law.⁵⁹

Samuel Rutherford (c. 1600-1661) penned, “In actions or religious means of worship, or circumstances physical, not moral, not religious, as whether the pulpit be of stone or of timber, the bell of this or this metal, the house of worship stand thus or thus in situation.”⁶⁰ William Ames (1576-1633) wrote, “The outward circumstances are those which pertain to order and decency. 1 Corinthians 14:40. Let all things be done decently and in order. But the general rule of these is that they be ordered in that manner which maketh most for edification. 1 Corinthians 14:26. Of this nature are the circumstances of place, time, and the like, which are common adjuncts to religious and civil acts. Therefore although such like circumstances are wont to be called of some rites, and religious or ecclesiastical ceremonies, yet they have nothing in their nature which is proper to religion, and therefore religious worship doth not properly consist in them.”⁶¹ Likewise, John Owen (1616-1683) wrote,

It is said men may add nothing to the substance of the worship of God, but they may order, dispose, and appoint the things that belong to the manner and circumstances of it, this is all that is done in the prescription of liturgies. Of circumstances in and about the worship of God we have spoken before, and removed that pretense. Nor is it safe distinguishing in the things of God where himself hath not distinguished. Indeed, there is nothing in its whole nature, as it belongs to the general being of things, so circumstantial, but that if it be appointed by God in his worship, it becomes a part of the substance of it; nor can anything that is so appointed ever by any be made a circumstance of his worship.⁶²

⁵⁹ George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded Upon the Church of England*, Ed. Christopher Coldwell, Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, [1637, 60] 1993, p. xli. For a much more thorough examination of the Puritan/Presbyterian view of the Regulative Principle read Sherman Isbell's, *The Singing of Psalms* and Dr. William Young's, *The Puritan Principle of Worship* (Vienna, VA: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Reformed Church, n.d.).

⁶⁰ Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church-Government and Excommunication* (London: John Field for Christopher Meredith, 1646), p. 109.

⁶¹ William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* (London: Edward Griffin for Henry Overton, 1642), p. 318.

⁶² John Owen, *A Discourse Concerning Liturgies and Their Imposition*, in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1850-53] 1965), Vol. 15, p. 40.

When the eminent Presbyterians and Puritans of the past carefully delineated the differences between the circumstances of worship and the parts or elements of worship, they usually were refuting the unscriptural notions regarding worship espoused by Episcopalian theologians. Given the fact that the arguments used by Gillespie, Rutherford, Ames, and Owen also refute the teachings of Bahnsen, Poythress, Coppes, Gentry, Jordan, Crampton, Frame, and the authors of the OPC majority report (1947), etc., one can honestly assert that the majority of conservative Presbyterians in our day have abandoned the teaching of the *Confession* (1:4) and have unwittingly embraced an Episcopal or Lutheran conception of worship. If you think this is an exaggeration, name the churches in the PCA or OPC that do not celebrate extra-biblical holy days (e.g., Christmas and Easter), and that do *not* use instruments or uninspired hymns in public worship.

When these men argue that only the general categories of teaching and praise are elements of worship while all the various detailed worship ordinances⁶³ are only circumstances of worship, they have for all intents and purposes destroyed the regulative principle. If the general goal of the worship service is teaching, yet the various methods of achieving this goal are circumstances that are only determined by the light of nature, then virtually every innovation under the sun can be introduced in public worship as long as it serves the purpose of teaching (e.g., drama groups, movies, comedy skits, musical groups, art exhibitions, plays, and so on). “If the church judges that additional sacraments would be beneficial for teaching or praise, why may not men institute such?”⁶⁴ Therefore, these men (whether they have intended it or not) have opened the flood gates to virtually anything that men can place under the general category of praise: liturgical dance, incense, candles, the church calendar, holy days, etc. When men arbitrarily redefine the regulative principle in order to introduce unauthorized human compositions in worship, they introduce the leaven of Romanism and/or the Charismatics into their denominations. Declension is inevitable.

Fourth, the idea that Scripture only regulates the general function of worship, such as praise or teaching, is contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Confession does not just set forth a general category, such as praise or teaching as elements of worship; it instead describes each particular worship ordinance that all serve as the ordinary parts of religious worship. The Confession names “prayer with thanksgiving,”⁶⁵ “[t]he reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the

⁶³ “The first idea contained in them [worship ordinances], is that they are religious duties, prescribed by God, as an instituted method in which he will be worshiped by his creatures. Now, the ordinances, as thus described, must be engaged in according to a divine appointment. No creature has a warrant to enjoin any modes of worship, pretending that these will be acceptable or well-pleasing to God; since God alone, who is the object of worship, has a right to prescribe the way in which he will be worshiped. For a creature to institute modes of worship would be an instance of profaneness and bold presumption; and the worship performed would be ‘in vain’; as our Saviour says concerning that which has no higher sanction than the commandments of men” (Thomas Ridgeley, *A Body of Divinity* [New York: 1855], 2:433).

⁶⁴ Sherman Isbell, *The Singing of Psalms*, Part I.

⁶⁵ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, XXI, iii.

due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings, upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in a holy and religious manner.”⁶⁶ The authors of the Confession clearly believed that scriptural authorization or proof was required for each separate part of worship. That is why each distinct element of worship is proof-texted by the Confession. Isbell writes, “Several worship ordinances serve a teaching function. Among them are the reading of the Scriptures, the preaching of the Word, the singing of Psalms, baptism and the Lord’s supper. Inasmuch as Scripture institutes each of these parts of worship, the regulative principle descends to the level of these actions, requiring the use of them specifically, and excluding any others from the church’s worship.”⁶⁷

The attempt to broaden the definition of the circumstances of worship and blur the distinctions between the separate elements of worship is anti-Confessional and unscriptural. When it comes to worship, the Word of God is very specific. The Bible tells us *what* the distinct elements of worship are: preaching from the Bible (Mt. 26:13; Mk. 16:15; Ac. 9:20; 17:10; 20:8; 1 Cor. 14:28; 2 Tim. 4:2), reading the word of God (Mk. 4:16-20; Ac. 1:13; 13:15; 16:13; 1 Cor. 11:20; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:13), prayer to God (Dt. 22:5; Mt. 6:9; 1 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Th. 5:17; Phil. 4:6; Heb. 13:18; Jas. 1:5), the singing of Psalms (1 Chr. 16:9; Ps. 95:1-2; 105:2; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). It tells us *who* is permitted to participate or conduct each part: both men and women are to be baptized (Ac. 8:12), both men and women are to pray (Ac. 1:13-14, 1 Cor. 11:5) and sing praise (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Jas. 1:5), but only men are permitted to preach and teach (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14).

The Bible also tells us the proper *content* of each element. Scripture reading requires reading from the Bible alone. Reading from the *Apocrypha* or Shakespeare or uninspired theology books does not qualify as Scripture reading. The singing of praise requires the singing of inspired songs, and the writing of worship songs for public worship requires divine inspiration, as noted above. Preaching, which is a separate element of worship, involves reasoning from the Scriptures (cf. Ac. 17:2-3; 18:4, 19; 24:25); it involves explaining or expounding God’s Word (cf. Mk. 4:34; Lk. 24:27; Ac. 2:14-40; 17:3; 18:36; 28:23). New-covenant teachers did not speak by divine inspiration, but interpreted divinely inspired Scripture. This practice was the same in the Old Testament; Levitical teachers explained and interpreted the inscripturated law to the covenant people (cf. Neh. 8:7-8; Lev. 10:8-11; Dt. 17:8-13; 24:8; 31:9-13; 33:8; 2 Chr. 15:3; 17:7-9; 19:8-10; 30:22; 35:3; Ezra 7:1-11; Ezek. 44:15; 23-24; Hos. 4:6; Mal. 2:1, 5-8). Another element of worship is prayer. The Bible authorizes the use of our own words in prayer as long as we follow the pattern or model given to us by Christ (cf. Mt. 6:9). God promises His people that the Holy Spirit will assist them when they form their prayers (cf. Zech. 12:10; Rom. 8:26-27).

The fact that God authorizes the use of uninspired speaking when a Christian preaches, teaches, or prays does not mean that God also authorizes the use of uninspired materials for the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, XXI, v.

⁶⁷ Sherman Isbell, *The Singing of Psalms*, Part I.

Scripture reading and the singing of Psalms. Why? Because, as noted above, Scripture (and the *Confession of Faith*) treats each of these aspects of the worship service as different parts or elements of worship, and also sets forth different rules for each of these elements. Once a person attempts to place the different elements, or parts of religious worship, under general categories so that the rules that apply to one element can be applied to another, then one has circumvented apostolic worship. Using these general categories (set forth by Bahnsen and Poythress), one could argue that since women are permitted to pray and to sing praise, they also are permitted to preach. The immediate objection to this assertion is: “But Paul clearly forbids women to preach and teach in the church.” That statement is true. However, it is an unwitting admission that the New Testament does have *different parts* of worship that are under *different rules*. Bushell writes,

Clearly, if preaching and singing and teaching all require separate warrants as to who may perform these acts in worship, then they also require separate warrants as to their verbal content. Similar observations can be made about the often-mentioned parallel between prayer and singing. It is argued that since our prayers contain non-canonical words, so may our songs. But no one would argue that because we pray in worship we do not need to sing in worship (taking these words here as usually understood), or that because we have a ‘song book’ for use in worship, it would therefore be permissible to have a ‘prayer book.’ The parallel simply cannot be maintained consistently. The problem with this whole line of reasoning is that it abstracts the terms ‘prayer,’ ‘teaching,’ ‘preaching,’ and ‘singing’ from their scriptural context and deals with them as nothing more than linguistic phenomena, rather than as living aspects of biblical worship. Such a procedure is not valid and cannot help but lead to erroneous conclusions. ‘Singing,’ ‘preaching,’ and ‘teaching’ all assume a content and a context. Justice cannot be done to these concepts without keeping their context in mind.⁶⁸

As Reformed believers, we must not abandon the scriptural attainments regarding worship achieved by our spiritual forefathers. To abandon the regulative principle or to redefine it to render it meaningless is to abandon biblical worship and our Confession. Those who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind. Those who pervert Scripture to have Watts, Toplady, and Newton will end up with Rome, Canterbury, or Vegas.

3. God Doesn't Command the Singing of Psalms

Another objection to the exclusive Psalm singing position is based on a misunderstanding of how exclusive Psalm singers apply the regulative principle. A pamphlet by an Orthodox Presbyterian pastor sets forth the idea that the exclusive Psalm singing position depends upon proving that only the Psalms are commanded to be used in worship in the Bible. Psalm singers have always acknowledged that other divinely inspired songs besides the Psalms were used for worship before the close of the canon. However, Psalm singers do not sing the inscripturated

⁶⁸ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, pp. 49-50.

inspired songs found outside the Psalter because they believe that only the Psalms were intended by God for *perpetual* use in the church.

The Holy Spirit is the one who organized the book of Psalms. He did not include every inspired song in the Bible within the Psalter. The fact that God did not place every inspired song within God's hymnbook probably indicates that some inspired songs were only used on a specific occasion or for a limited period of time. Keddie writes, "It is contended that other inspired utterances such as the songs of Moses (Ex. 15:1-19; Dt. 32:1-43) and Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10) in the Old Testament, and of Mary (Luke 1:46-55) and Simeon (Luke 2:29-32) in the New Testament, were exceptional effusions of praise, of an inspired nature, in connection with particular (and even absolutely unique, as with the *Magnificat*) 'acts of God' and not necessarily for perpetual use in the Church's song...the *whole* book of Psalms...is to be considered as the final[ised] hymnbook of the Church. It satisfies the demands of divine provision, and is the only collection of songs of praise as such which can lay claim to primary and verbal inspiration."⁶⁹ One may disagree with this argument. One may consider it a weak deduction. But, since there is not a shred of biblical evidence that uninspired songs were ever used for the praise of Jehovah, if there is going to be a debate among Reformed believers it ought to be between exclusive Psalm singers and those Christians who want to include the handful of other inspired worship songs which are found outside of the Psalter.⁷⁰

Stephen Pribble, in a desire to remove the regulative principle of worship as a foundation of Psalmody, overstates his case and thus asserts something which is totally unbiblical, that the singing of the Psalms is not clearly prescribed in Scripture. He writes, "But is it true that 'the Psalms are clearly prescribed for worship in the Scripture?' As surprising as it might seem, the answer is no.... It is highly significant that nowhere in Scripture are we specifically commanded to sing *mizmor*, the technical term for Psalm.... While there are general commands to sing praise to God, there is no command to sing the Psalms specifically, and an analysis of worship song in Scripture reveals that other materials besides the Psalms are sung in worship."⁷¹ Pribble argues that one must find a specific command in Scripture to sing *mizmor* in order to have a legitimate claim that the Bible commands us to sing Psalms. He then argues that the Hebrew words translated *psalm* (e.g., NKJV) used by Psalm singers as divine prescriptions to sing Psalms are only general terms which mean "sing" or "sing praise" (*zammerv*), or "sing songs" (*zemirot, zimrah*).⁷² Pribble also points out (correctly) that the expression "sing praise" is used of songs of

⁶⁹ J. W. Keddie, *Why Psalms Only?*, p. 12.

⁷⁰ The debate would then be between say Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans on the one side and the Dutch Reformed on the other. The latter have since the Synod of Dordt included a few "*gezangen*" (i.e. songs) at the end of their Psalters. These have included the *Magnificat*, the angels' chorus to the shepherds of Bethlehem, Simeon's Song of Praise, etc., as well as versifications of the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, etc. It is interesting to note, however, that as the *Herformde Kerk* (the Dutch State Church) became more liberal these "*gezangen*" were expanded to include more and more uninspired material. (See *Het Boek Der Psalmen*, etc. [1773 Edition], Eerdmans-Sevensma Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1919 and *Psalmen* [1933 Edition of the GKN] n.v. Uitgevers Maatshappij Gebr. Zomer & Keuning, Wageningen).

⁷¹ Stephen Pribble, *The Regulative Principle and Singing in Worship*, p. 3.

⁷² *Ibid*, pp. 4-5.

praise outside the biblical Psalter.⁷³

Regarding Pribble's argument, the first question that we must answer is, "do we need to find a divine imperative connected with the word *mizmor* to conclude that the singing of Psalms is commanded by God?" There are a number of sound exegetical reasons why Pribble's argument must emphatically be rejected. First, when we repeatedly read in the book of Psalms that God commands His people to sing praise, how shall we identify the content of this praise? What did God have in mind when He said "sing praise"? Given the fact that the command to "sing praise" and "sing songs" is found throughout the Psalms (9:11; 18:49; 27:6; 30:4, 12; 47:7; 59:17; 75:9; 95:2; 98:5; 101:1; 104:33; 105:2; 119:54; 135:3; 146:2), it is an absurd notion to argue that the command to "sing praise" or "sing songs" does not apply to the Psalter. When a divinely inspired prophet writes a worship song and the worship song contains the command "sing praise" anyone using simple logic would conclude that the command at least minimally applies to the song in which it is given.⁷⁴ If Shakespeare handed a book of essays to a friend and said "read essays" the person would immediately conclude that Shakespeare wanted him to read the essays connected with the exhortation.

Second, Pribble's attempt to limit a command to sing Psalms to a command to sing *mizmor* does not fit with the scriptural data regarding praise. The Hebrew word *tehillah* meaning "praise" and translated "song of praise" (RSV) or "psalm of praise" (KJV) is used in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 22:25; 33:1; 34:1, etc.), as a Psalm title (Ps. 145), and in its plural form for the whole Psalter. The verb is used as a call to praise Jehovah—"You that fear the Lord, praise Him" (Ps. 22:23). Also, it is used of praise in the congregation (Ps. 22:22). (Note, the translators of the Septuagint render the Hebrew word for congregation as *ekklesia*.) Although this term (*tehillah*) is applied to songs outside of the Psalter there can be no question that the command to praise Jehovah includes the Psalter. James Limburg writes,

The noun *tehillim*, 'praises', is derived from the Hebrew root *hll*, 'praise'. That root also appears in 'hallelujah' ('praise Yah', or 'Yahweh'), found only in the Psalter, always at the beginning or ending of psalms (104:35; 106:1, 48; 113:1, 9; 146-50, beginning and end of each, etc.). The noun 'praise' occurs often in the psalms: 'He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise (*tehillah*) to our God' (40:3; also 2:25; 33:1; 34:1; 48:10, etc.). Psalm 145 is the only psalm to be designated as *tehillah* in the title, translated 'Song of Praise'. Of the 206 occurrences of *hll*, 'praise' in the Old Testament (146 verbal, 60 nominal), about two-thirds are in the psalms or in phrases taken from the psalms (THAT, 493). Because the collection of psalms contains so many expressions of praise to God, it became known as 'praises' or *Tehillim*.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid, p. 9.

⁷⁴ This logic lies behind the fact that many English translations translate four different Hebrew words (all nouns meaning praise, song, or psalm) as psalm because the context indicates that this was the intent of the author. The translators of the Septuagint render the general term *zemirot* (songs) in Psalm 95:2 as *psalmois* (psalms).

⁷⁵ James Limburg, editor-in-chief David N. Freedman, *Book of Psalms* in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol. 5, p. 523.

Can Psalm singers claim a clear prescription in Scripture to sing the Psalms in worship? Absolutely! Are we supposed to believe that the term ‘hallelujah’ which means “praise Yahweh”; which *only* occurs in the Psalter is a general term which does not refer to the Psalms? Such a thought is ludicrous.⁷⁶

Third, (as noted earlier in this study) every historical example in Scripture of saints writing songs for praise involved divine inspiration (e.g., Exodus 15:20-21; 2 Samuel 23: 1, 2; 1 Chronicles 6:39; 15:17; 16:5ff.; 25:1-7; 2 Chronicles 5:12; 29:25-30; 34:30; 35:15; 2 Kings 23:2; Psalms 39, 62, 77 [titles]; Matthew 22:43-44; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16-17; 2:29-31; 4:24-25). David, Heman, Asaph, and Jeduthun are all called prophets or seers. Also, every historical example in the Bible of God’s people singing praise involved only divinely inspired songs (e.g., Exodus 15:1; 2 Samuel 1:18; 1 Chronicles 16; 2 Chr. 5:13; 20:21; 23:13; etc.). Given the biblical record, there is no divine warrant whatsoever for defining “singing praise” in a manner that involves uninspired songs. Since divine revelation ceased with the death of the apostles and the close of the canon, the most that Pribble could argue for would be to include the handful of other divinely inspired songs of praise that did not make it into the biblical Psalter. If one follows the standard biblical procedures of interpreting the Scripture (i.e., a grammatical-historical-theological hermeneutic) and simple principles of logic, Pribble’s argument must be rejected. Context (both broad and narrow) determines the meaning of a word, not our own preconceptions.

4. Psalm Singers Can’t Sing the Name of Jesus

One of the most popular arguments against exclusive psalmody is that “if we only sing the Psalms then we deny the church the opportunity to praise our Savior using His name as the divine-human mediator (Jesus).” Although many people consider this to be the strongest argument against exclusive psalmody, it in reality is nothing more than an appeal to sentimentality with no scriptural foundation. There are a number of reasons such an argument is fallacious.

First, nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to sing the name “Jesus”. If God preferred the name Jesus over other biblical designations for our Lord (e.g., Immanuel, Yahweh, Lord, Savior, *Jehovah Tzidkenu* [cf. Jer. 23:5-6], the Prince of Peace, Messiah, the Lamb of God, the Son of God, the Son of Man, etc.), then He would have revealed His will concerning this matter to us in the Bible.

Second, it is not the word “Jesus” that we are to serve, exalt, worship and glorify, but what or whom the name points to or represents. There is nothing *intrinsically* sacred, mystical or

⁷⁶ Pribble acknowledges that Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 “probably refers to the Old Testament Psalter” (p. 8). However, he argues that neither “text specifically refers to the public worship of God” (p. 8). Even if one accepts the interpretation that these passages do not refer to public worship (which is debatable) there can be no question as to their application to private worship and informal gatherings. In any event these passages provide a clear prescription for the use of Psalms in worship. Once again note that Pribble’s assertion that the singing of Psalms is not clearly prescribed for worship is false. In private conversation, Pribble does agree that Psalm singing is taught by biblical historical example. Furthermore, the church that he pastors does sing some Psalms alongside man-made uninspired compositions.

holy regarding the word “Jesus.” We respect the word and do not use it in an irreverent manner because of the *Person* behind the name. Bible scholars recognize that even the biblical expression in the name refers to a recognition or acknowledgment of the person who is named. When Paul says, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow” (Phil.2:10), he refers to a recognition of the power, authority and majesty of Jesus. Matthew Henry writes, “At the name of Jesus; not at the sound of the word, but the authority of Jesus; all should pay a solemn homage. And that *every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*—every nation and language should publicly own the universal empire of the exalted Redeemer, and that *all power in heaven and earth is given to him*, Matthew 28:18.”⁷⁷ John Calvin concurs,

...Paul speaks of Christ’s whole dignity, to restrict his meaning to two syllables, as if any one were to examine attentively the letters of the word *Alexander*, in order to find in them the greatness of the name that Alexander acquired for himself. Their subtlety, therefore, is not solid, and the contrivance is foreign to Paul’s intention. But worse than ridiculous is the conduct of the Sorbonnic sophists, who infer from the passage before us that we ought to bow the knee whenever the name of Jesus is pronounced, as though it were a magic word which had all virtue included in the sound of it. Paul, on the other hand, speaks of the honour that is to be rendered to the Son of God—not to mere syllables.⁷⁸

John Gill makes this important observation,

That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, &c.] Which is to be understood, not of the outward act of bowing the knee upon hearing the name, and the syllables of the mere name Jesus pronounced; for in the bare name there can be nothing which can command such a peculiar respect; it was a name common with the Jews: Joshua is so called in Heb. iv. 8 and the name of Elymas the sorcerer was *Bar-Jesus*; that is, the son of Jesus, Acts xiii. 6. Now, how monstrously ridiculous and stupid would it be, for a man, upon hearing these passages, and upon the pronouncing of this word, to bow the knee? Moreover, the words ought not to be

⁷⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:733. Interestingly, the majority of commentators point to the title “Lord” as the name which is above all other names. Calvin writes, “The meaning therefore is, that supreme power was given to Christ, and that he was placed in the highest rank of honour, so that there is no dignity found either in heaven or in earth that is equal to his. Hence it follows that it is a Divine name” (Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians, [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], pp. 60-61). Peter T. O’Brien writes, “The name (*to onoma* is definite) greater than any other God conferred on Jesus as a gracious gift (*ekarisato*) is his own name, *kurios* (‘Lord’), in its most sublime sense, that designation used in the LXX to represent the personal name of the God of Israel, that is, *Yahweh*” (*Commentary on Philippians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], p.238). J. Hugh Michael writes, “The Name of Jesus stands for ‘Jesus as bearing the new Name of Lord conferred on him by the Father’” (*The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928], p. 96). Richard R. Melick, Jr. writes, “Most agree that the ‘name that is above every name’ is the title ‘Lord’. Further most agree that the title refers to Jesus’ character, as well as to his function” (*Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991] p. 107). Since Jesus Christ is repeatedly called Lord in the Psalms, the idea that the Psalms are deficient in their exaltation of Christ is erroneous.

⁷⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Philippians*, p. 61.

rendered at, but in the name of Jesus; that is, in and by reason of the power, authority, and dignity of Jesus, as exalted at God's right hand, every creature is to be subject to him.⁷⁹

Since the Psalms eloquently and thoroughly recognize the power, authority and majesty of Christ as well as define His character and ministry, they exalt His glorious name because they exalt His person. To ignore this point and demand the use of the word "Jesus" in singing praise is superstitious and irrational.

Third, the idea that synonyms for the word "Jesus" are biblically inadequate for praise is disproved by the fact that God Himself did not consider a providential preservation of His own covenant name to be important. God's covenant name (*YHWH*) is the triune God's most frequent designation in Scripture occurring 5,321 times. This name was personally given to Moses when he asked God to reveal His name to the children of Israel (Exodus 5:13). God responds by revealing His covenant name—the Hebrew tetragrammaton (i.e., four consonants) *YHWH* translated as "Lord" (KJV, NKJV, RSV, NIV, NASB, *A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text*), "Jehovah" (ASV), or "Yahweh" (*Jerusalem Bible*). When God spoke this name to Moses, Moses heard the proper pronunciation (i.e., he knew what the proper vowels were) and relayed the correct pronunciation to the covenant people. Over time, however, the proper pronunciation of the word was lost forever because the Jews out of fear of violating the third commandment never pronounced God's covenant name. Instead when they came to *YHWH* they would say "Adonai" or "Lord," another name for God. As a result all the modern transliterations of *YHWH* (e.g., Jehovah, Yahweh) are at best educated guesses. Therefore, various cults that regard Protestant Bibles as corrupt because they use the word LORD instead of Jehovah or Yahweh are ignorant of history.

The whole point of this discussion regarding God's covenant name is that God did not consider a providential preservation of His own covenant name to be important. When we sing the Psalms or read our Bibles (no matter what the translation) we are not reading or singing God's covenant name. We are, however, reading or singing a synonym which seems to be just fine as far as God is concerned.

Fourth, Jesus Christ himself regarded biblical synonyms as perfectly acceptable for public worship. Note the baptismal formula from our Lord's own lips: "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The only people that this author is aware of that require saying the word "Jesus" during baptism are anti-Trinitarian "Jesus only" Pentecostals. Christ teaches us that we do not need to say the word "Jesus" for a biblical baptism. A reference to the second person of the trinity is sufficient. Therefore, following our Lord's own reasoning, the Psalter's abundant references to the person and work of Christ are perfectly acceptable as New Testament praise.

Fifth, the New Testament authors writing under divine inspiration substituted the Greek word *kurios* (Lord) for the Hebrew word signifying God's covenant name (Yahweh or Jehovah)

⁷⁹ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1089]), pp. 135-136.

when quoting Old Testament passages (e.g., Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3; Acts 2:20 21; Joel 2:31,32; Mark 1:3; Isaiah 40:3; Acts 2:25; Psalm 16:8; Acts 2:34; Psalm 68:18, etc.). In doing so they were usually following the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the LXX) commonly used by Greek speaking Jews of their own day. If there were something special or unique about the word Jehovah itself rather than the truth or meaning behind the word, then such a substitution would have been unbiblical. If we know that the word Lord in the Psalter refers to Jesus Christ, then to sing that word is every bit as honoring as pronouncing the word “Jesus” itself.

Sixth, those who appeal to the idea that we must sing Jesus’ name are inconsistent. The divine-human mediator was never called Jesus. His name was Yehoshua, not Jesus. We know of no uninspired hymns which speak of Yehoshua (with the exception of the Messianic Jewish movement). One may object by saying, “Yes, but *Jesus* is a transliteration of the Greek word *Iesous* which is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *Yehoshua*. Therefore the English word Jesus represents Yehoshua.” That point is true. However, it does not prove that the word Jesus “is more important to have on one’s lips than other names by which God makes Himself known.”⁸⁰ When psalm singers praise the Redeemer by singing the inspired songs of Scripture they are worshiping Jesus Christ in the way that He has commanded. This is what pleases God. There is no evidence that God prefers the name of Jesus over other designations. The Jesus name argument is an assumption without evidence.

Seventh, the name Jesus or *Yehoshua* means “Jehovah is salvation.” The name was given by an angel to Mary to indicate the mission of the child. “You shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The purpose of the name is to teach us about Christ’s role as the redeemer of God’s elect. Do the Psalms teach us about Christ’s role as the Savior? Yes, they do so abundantly (e.g., Psalms 2:7-12; 8:5; 16:9-11; 22; 24:17-10; 35:11; 40:7-9; 41:9; 45:6ff.; 47:5; 50:3-4; 68:18; 69; 72; 110; etc.). Given the fact that the Psalter gives us a clear picture of Christ and His redemptive work, the idea that we must sing Jesus’ name to worship Him properly is simply not true. Once again it must be emphasized that it is what the name represents or points to that is what is important. Once one understands the doctrinal riches contained in the Psalter he will understand that the Jesus name argument is really just an excuse to depart from the all sufficient manual of praise that God has given us—the Psalms.

5. Metrical Psalms Are Unfaithful Translations

A rather common argument against exclusive psalmody is based on the assumption that metrical versions of the Psalms for singing (i.e., the Psalms are translated in a manner so they can be set to music and thus are made to rhyme, etc.) are really not translations of the Psalms but are at best gross paraphrases of the original Hebrew. Thus, it is argued that the singing of metrical Psalms is little or no different than singing uninspired hymns which are based on Scripture or which teach redemptive history. In other words, both are human compositions and if one is permissible then so is the other.

⁸⁰ Richard Bacon, *Review of Psalmody* (Rowlett, TX: FPCR, 1996), Internet article.

While this argument is common, it is refuted in a number of ways. First, note that the whole argument is based on an unbiblical, immoral analogy. The argument assumes that if a group of people distort the original meaning of the Psalms with a bad or faulty translation this somehow permits other people to use man-made hymns. In other words, if group A does something wrong, group B can also do something wrong. If it is indeed true that some Reformed believers are using sloppy, poorly translated metrical versions of the psalms, then our response as Christians should never be “Let us do likewise” or even worse “Let us go a step further by ignoring the inspired psalms altogether.” Rather it must be, “Brother, repent! There are excellent, faithful Psalters available. You do not need to use a defective translation!” To those brothers who use this argument we ask one simple question, “Does the fact that some churches use terrible paraphrases of the Bible for the Scripture reading in public worship justify the use of non-inspired Christian writings instead of the Scripture?” No, of course not! Then, poor translations of the Psalms do not justify man-made hymns.

Second, many who use the metrical Psalm argument assume that metrical versions of the Psalms (by virtue of the fact that they must be phrased to rhyme and fit music) are of necessity bad translations. In other words, it is impossible to be faithful to Scripture while using a metrical Psalter. This argument must be rejected because it is based on a false assumption. Metrical Psalms can and have been faithfully and accurately translated from the original tongue. Further, even if it were true it would not justify the use of man-made hymns. If a Reformed believer holds that metrical Psalms are inherently defective and thus unfaithful to the scriptural command to sing Psalms in worship, then instead of turning to uninspired compositions he should chant the Psalms in their original phrasing (i.e., out of one of the more literal translations of the Bible) during worship.

Third, the metrical Psalms argument, in order to be consistent, would ultimately require the Scripture reading in public worship to be done in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek). Anyone familiar with Bible translation understands that a strictly word for word, *absolutely* literal translation of the Hebrew and Greek text is impossible. Even the best, most literal translations in use today (e.g., KJV, NKJV, ASV, NASB) must at times resort to a phrase or multiple words to accurately convey the meaning of a single Hebrew or Greek word. Further, it is important that a translation pursue as best as possible the majesty of style and elegance of the original language. God commands His people to read the Scriptures and to sing the Psalms. This requires translation. In the case of singing this may at times require a metrical translation. What is important is that Christ’s church be as faithful as possible to the original language as it translates God’s word. Once again, if a translation of the Bible or the Psalms is inaccurate, defective or sloppy in any manner the solution is not to discard the Holy Scriptures but rather to do a better, more faithful job of translation.⁸¹ Accuracy is not an option, but a requirement. While

⁸¹ As the Confession puts it, “The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old) and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations)...But because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God who have a right unto and interest in the Scriptures and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be

we commend our brothers for pointing to the need for accurate translations of the Psalms, we must reject their attempt to circumvent God's requirement of the singing of *inspired* songs in public worship.

Conclusion

After examining the most popular arguments against exclusive psalmody in use today, we can only come to one conclusion. The arguments against exclusive psalmody are not based on a sound exegesis of Scripture. Rather, they are vain attempts at justifying human traditions that have no divine warrant. We ask our brothers who advocate the use of uninspired hymns in worship to produce even one biblical command or historical example that supports their position. There are none. Since we cannot find a shred of biblical evidence for the use of uninspired songs in new covenant public worship, we will remain faithful to Scripture and the reformation attainments of our spiritual forefathers. Let us return to the simple, unadorned worship of the apostolic church and the Westminster Standards. (cf. *Confession of Faith*, 21:5).

Appendix: The Westminster Confession and Psalmody

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

translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner" (1:8).

minister who is to preach...It is the duty of Christians to praise God publicly, 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.⁸²

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.⁸³

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."⁸⁴

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

⁸² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, pp. 376, 393.

⁸³ 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.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

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.

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, 284.⁸⁵

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, 1646.⁸⁶ 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.⁸⁷ 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.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 221-222.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 221.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 298.

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 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 145:1.⁸⁸

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.).

⁸⁸ 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).

(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 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.⁸⁹

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

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[HOME PAGE](#)

⁸⁹ 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, Saunderstown, RI 02874).