

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

October 1992

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Exclusive Psalmody

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Chapter XXI of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, "Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day," describes how we are to worship God: "[T]he acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that 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 the Holy Scripture." This rule of worship is called the regulative principle. It has always been the principle governing public worship within Reformed churches.

What are the parts of worship, according to the Westminster Assembly, commanded and approved by God? In section 5 of Chapter XXI they conclude that along with prayer (which is mentioned in sections 3, 4, and 6): "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: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner."

For the purpose of our study, we shall focus on the phrase "singing of psalms with grace in the heart." Did the Westminster Assembly restrict the church to the exclusive use of *Psalms* in public worship? Are those churches which practice the singing of hymns and spiritual songs with melody (or grace) in their hearts (*Ephesians* 5:19; *Colossians* 3:16), whether of the inspired or uninspired (e.g., *Amazing Grace, Holy, Holy, Holy*) varieties, along with the *Psalms*, violating either the Confession or the Scriptures? That is the question before us.

Exclusive Psalmody

The exclusive Psalmodyists reply in the affirmative. For example, G. I. Williamson, after admitting that "It cannot be argued that the exclusive use of the *Psalms*, in worship, was ever entirely universal in the Reformed churches. Some, including Calvin's church in Geneva, sang at least a few other songs," goes on to say: "This is a subject [exclusive Psalmody] that I began to study many years ago, and from my research two things have greatly impressed me: (1) I have never seen any exegetical proof that God wants us to produce our own hymns in order to sing them in worship instead of the inspired *Psalms* He has provided...; (2) In the second place it is simply an historical fact that the great change, in substituting uninspired hymns for the inspired *Psalms*, was not the result of new discoveries in the content of Scripture. It was not a reluctant change compelled by careful exegesis (at

least this is true in the several instances of this innovation in the history of the Reformed churches known to the writer). No, the change came, rather, by way of giving in to increasing popular demand – it was a change made to please the people."

Another exclusive Psalmist, Raymond P. Joseph, says: "I hope that the church soon will reawaken to what her Lord gave her in His *Psalms*; to the realization that He gave them to be the very center of her practical theology, so that regular congregational Psalm singing would be a weekly (and daily) review and reminder of how great our Lord is in His majesty and glory and holiness of judgment.... We can safely entrust our souls to God's infallible Word, a Word free from the shackles of man's subjective preferences and limited vision. Let us sing man's writings in other places. But let us worship our God with His *Psalms*."

Rowland Ward, speaking with regard to the English Puritans, such as those who wrote the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, says, "all Puritans...favoured the metrical use of *Psalms* [in public worship].... In this they had a fair measure of agreement with many Anglicans. "

The Reply

How should we reply to such comments as these? First, it should be stated that even if the majority of the Westminster Assembly were exclusive Psalmists, it does not follow that one is non-confessional if he is not an exclusive Psalmist. Chapter XXI of the *Confession* does not denounce the use of inspired or uninspired hymns and songs; it merely refers to the "singing of psalms."

Gordon Clark points out that the word "psalm" originally referred to a tune played on a harp. Thus, when the word is used, it need not be considered as only referring to the inspired *Psalms* of Scripture. Stephen Pribble agrees. In his *A Defense of Hymn-Singing in Worship*, he says that *Westminster* claims that religious worship should include the "singing of psalms," not "the *Psalms*." *Westminster* here uses the term "psalms" in the general sense of the word, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*,

means "any sacred song...sung in religious worship." Perhaps this is why A. A. Hodge, in commenting on this section of the *Confession*, suggests that we can summarize the statement "singing of psalms," with the phrase "singing of praise."

A Little Church History

There is little question that through centuries of church history exclusive Psalmody has been endorsed by a number of scholars within the Reformed community, but it has not been uniformly so. For example, R. G. Rayburn writes that the most basic form of worship in the early church included, not only the reading and exposition of Holy Scripture, prayers, and the proper administration of the sacraments, but also the use the *Psalms* for singing, as well as singing both inspired and uninspired hymns.

H. M. Best and D. Huttar aver that the early church did not in any way restrict itself to the singing of the *Psalms*, even though the Christian community was very careful as to how it conducted itself in public worship. Paul's admonition to the Ephesians (5:19) and Colossians (3:16) to sing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" was understood to mean that the church should worship the Triune God by means of both inspired and uninspired songs of praise. These two passages were not intended to restrict the church to "exclusive Psalmody."

Church historian C. Gregg Singer further confirms this. In his "Lectures on Church History," Singer maintains that exclusive Psalmody was never the majority report within Christendom until the time of the Puritans, *i.e.*, the 17th century. In the post-Apostolic church, the Psalter was used in public worship, along with other "hymns and spiritual songs."

The Canons of Laodicea (A.D. 360, canon 59) forbade the singing of uninspired hymns in the worship service, but did not enjoin the exclusive use of *Psalms*. The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) followed suit, as did the Second Council of Braga (c. A.D. 563, canon 12). None of these outlawed the singing of inspired hymns and spiritual songs in addition to the *Psalms*.

The Second Council of Tours (A.D. 567, canon 23), and the Fourth Council of Toledo (A.D. 633) defended the use of non-canonical hymns. The early church had such fourth century hymn writers as Ephraem, Gregory Nazianzen, and Ambrose, who wrote in Syriac, Greek, and Latin, respectively; and the seventh century boasted the hymn writer Caedmon.

Some of the Reformers held to the view that the only proper songs to be used in formal worship are those found within Scripture, but they did not adopt exclusive Psalmody. John Calvin preferred the congregational singing of the *Psalms*, without musical accompaniment, yet he also used a metrical version of the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer in public worship, along with the recitation of the Apostles' Creed.

The Westminster Assembly sponsored a metrical translation of the 150 *Psalms*. The American Puritans also prepared a metrical version of the Psalter to be used in public worship. Leland Ryken agrees with Singer that the majority report among the Puritan theologians was that of exclusive Psalmody. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that the Apostles' Creed was frequently recited in Puritan worship services, an act that most exclusive Psalmodyists consider a violation of the regulative principle. Yet Puritan writers such as John Bunyan did compose hymns which may have occasionally been used in public worship.

With the coming of the eighteenth century, the church in general returned to the use of inspired and uninspired hymns along with the Psalter. Hymn writers such as Benjamin Keach, Isaac Watts, John Newton, and William Cowper were instrumental in this movement. Since that time, except for a part of the Scottish church (the Free Church of Scotland), the majority of Reformed churches have followed suit.

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards is an example of an eighteenth century Puritan who, although he roundly endorsed the use of the Psalter, did not restrict himself to it in public worship. In *Some Thoughts Concerning the*

Present Review of Religion in New England, he wrote:

"I am far from thinking that the book of *Psalms* should be thrown by in our public worship, but that it should always be used in the Christian church until the end of the world: but I know of no obligation we are under to confine ourselves to it. I can find no command or rule of God's Word, that does any more confine us to the words of Scripture in our singing, than it does in our praying; we speak to God in both. And I can see no words, that we find in the Bible, in speaking to Him by way of praise, in metre, and with music than when we speak to Him in prose, by way of prayer and supplication. And it is really needful that we should have some other songs besides the *Psalms* of David. It is unreasonable to suppose that the Christian church should forever and even in times of her greatest light, in her praises of God and the Lamb, be confined only to the words of the Old Testament, wherein all the greatest and most glorious things of the gospel, that are infinitely the greatest subjects of her praise, are spoken of under a veil, and not so much as the name of our glorious Redeemer ever mentioned, but in some dark figure, or as hid under the name of some type. And as to our making use of the words of others, and not those that are conceived by ourselves, it is no more than we do in all our public prayers; the whole worshipping assembly, excepting one only, makes use of the words that are conceived by him who speaks for the rest."

The Witness of Scripture

The witness of church history, of course, is not our standard for determining such matters. Scripture alone is to be our standard. It is here that the present writer finds no support for the exclusive use of the *Psalms* in public worship.

Leonard Coppes, in his unpublished essay, "Exclusive Psalmody and Progressive Revelation –

A Response," argues that the numerous songs that existed in Old Testament Israel prior to the formation of the Psalter militate against exclusive Psalmody. He contends that other songs were obviously used in the Jews' worship of God. For example, in *Exodus* 15 we have the song of Moses (verses 1-18), which is repeated in Heavenly worship (compare *Revelation* 15:3), and the song of Miriam (verses 20, 21). In *Judges* 5, we have the song of Deborah (see also *Numbers* 10:35, 36; 21:17, 18). Even the inspired Psalmist (*Psalms* 119:54) speaks of the Mosaic statutes, and not simply the Psalter, as being his songs.

Dr. Coppes maintains that the songs found in the book of *Revelation* (e.g., chapters 4, 5, 7, 11) support the use of more than the 150 *Psalms* in formal worship. After all, we in the New Testament church have, through our Mediator Jesus Christ, already entered into Heavenly worship (*Hebrews* 2:12, 13; 9:24; 10:19-22; 12:22). He writes, "the Biblical standard for song in worship is faithfulness to what has been revealed and not inspiration.... Wherefore, the regulative principle does not obviate the use of uninspired songs in worship whether private or public." As long as an uninspired hymn is Biblically correct and appropriate for worship, it should be allowed in the public worship of God.

There are several more Biblical obstacles that exclusive Psalmody must overcome. First, it would seem that the various uses of the New Testament "hymns," such as *Colossians* 1:15-18 and *Philippians* 2:6-11, would give us reason to use such songs in the public worship of God.

Second, in the *Philippians* 2:6-11 hymn, the first century church has properly taken the most sacred name of Jesus and incorporated it into a "spiritual song" (verses 9-11). It is a hymn of praise to the Lord Jesus, who, as the divine *Kyrios*, is the fulfillment of the Yahweh enthronement *Psalms* (93, 97, 99). The church gladly confesses in song that "Jesus Christ is Lord (*Kyrios*)." As Jonathan Edwards pointed out, an exclusive Psalmist can never take the Savior's name upon his lips in public singing, for the name "Jesus" is not found in the Psalter.

Some exclusive Psalmists maintain that they take the name Jesus upon their lips when they sing the name Jehovah (found some 13 times in the Scottish Psalter). But this is fallacious reasoning. To sing the name *Jehovah* is obviously not the same as singing the name *Jesus*. The name *Iesous* (Jesus) is a transliteration of the Hebrew *Yehoshua* (Joshua), which means "Jehovah is salvation." So if one says the name *Jesus*, it is plausible to argue that one means *Jehovah* by implication. But *Jehovah* means neither *Joshua* nor *Jesus*. The Psalmists' argument is backward. For their argument even to seem plausible, *Jehovah* would have to mean *Jesus* or *Joshua*. It means neither. The name Joshua (*Iesous* in the Septuagint) is found nowhere in the Psalter.

Furthermore, exclusive Psalmists cannot appeal to meanings and implications. When they advocate exclusive Psalmody and object to the use of uninspired hymns, even though they be theologically correct (let us assume), they have limited themselves to the exact words in the *Psalms*. If meanings were acceptable, they could not consistently object to Biblically sound but uninspired hymns.

Further, Jehovah is not the name of only the Second Person of the Godhead; it is also the name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. All three Persons are properly worshipped when the name Jehovah is sung. But according to the New Testament, it is the incarnate Son alone who bears the name Jesus. It is he "who saves his people from their sins" (*Matthew* 1:21). It is he whose name we take upon our lips when we sing of our Savior. It is he alone who purchased his people with his blood. The exclusive use of the *Psalms* would prevent us from singing the praise of Jesus Christ in worship.

Third, for their argument to be valid, the exclusive Psalmists must distinguish between teaching, preaching, singing, and reciting Biblical truth. In *Ephesians* 5:19 we are told to "speak" (*laleo*) to one another, and in *Colossians* 3: 16 to "teach" (*didasko*) one another, "by means of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." Yet, Paul also instructed Timothy to "teach" (*didasko*) (1 *Timothy* 4:11; 6:2) and to "preach" (*kerusso*) (2 *Timothy* 4:2) to his

congregation in public worship. Now is it rational to suppose that it is Biblically proper to preach the truths found in the Apostles' Creed and not be able to sing or recite the same truths because they are nowhere found in the *Psalms*? This is far from likely; indeed, it is nonsensical. The church has every Biblical warrant to formulate Scripturally based uninspired hymns, songs, creedal statements, and so forth, and incorporate them into the public worship of God as a means of praising him and teaching one another.

Fourth, another question that must be posed to the exclusive Psalmists is this: "What constitutes a metrical Psalm?" How faithful must the Psalms sung be to the Scriptures? Some of the metrical psalms are at best rough paraphrases of the Hebrew text. Exclusive Psalmists would not tolerate such looseness in their Bibles. Singing these psalms is far from singing "inspired Scripture." Does the exclusive Psalmist violate the regulative principle when he does not sing the *Psalms* in the exact language of the Hebrew?

Fifth, *Ephesians* 5:19 and *Colossians* 3:16 strongly support, not only the use of *Psalms*, but also the use of other Biblically based hymns and songs in public, as well as in private, worship. Exclusive Psalmists contend that these verses refer exclusively to the Psalter. That is, they correctly note that the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), uses these three words as titles in its version of the Psalter. The word psalm (*psalmos*) is found 67 times, hymn (*humnos*) occurs 13 times, and song (*ode*) is found 36 times. In the superscription of *Psalm* 76, all three occur. As Gordon Clark points out, however, "these three titles seem to be insertions in the Septuagint without Hebrew evidence." But even if Clark's contention were not true, to maintain that because these three terms are used in the Greek version of the Psalter Paul is thereby restricting the church to exclusive Psalmody in public worship is as clear a case of question-begging as one could ask for.

Furthermore, the Septuagint also uses these three words in places other than the *Psalms*. The word *ode*, for example, is found in numerous Old

Testament passages (e.g., *Exodus* 15:1; *Deuteronomy* 31:19, 21, 22; 32:44; *Judges* 5:12; 2 *Samuel* 22:1; *Habakkuk* 3:1, 19). Isaiah exhorts the saints to sing a new hymn (*humnos*) (42:10). And in the New Testament we read of odes being sung in *Revelation* 5:9; 14:3; and 15:3. Clark is correct when he maintains that this argument from titles "is very flimsy support for exclusive Psalmody."

William Hendriksen, in his *New Testament Commentary: Galatians and Ephesians*, commenting on *Ephesians* 5:19, writes: "The term psalms in all probability has reference, at least mainly, to the Old Testament Psalter; hymns, mainly to New Testament songs of praise to God and to Christ...and finally, spiritual songs, mainly to sacred lyrics dwelling on themes other than direct praise to God and Christ. There may, however, be some overlapping in the meaning of these three terms as used here by Paul." Hendriksen finds not even a hint that Paul is speaking solely of the use of the Psalter.

F. F. Bruce, in his *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and the Ephesians*, says, regarding the Pauline usage of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in *Colossians* 3:16: "It is unlikely that any sharply demarcated division is intended, although the 'psalms' might be drawn from the OT Psalter (which has supplied a chief [N.B.; not "the only," – WGC] vehicle for praise from primitive times), the "hymns" might be Christian canticles some of which are reproduced, in whole or in part, in the NT text, and the 'spiritual songs' might be unpremeditated words sung 'in the Spirit,' voicing holy aspirations." Further, in a footnote concerning *Colossians* 3:16, Bruce claims that, "it is unlikely that the *psalmoi* [psalms] and *humnoi* [hymns] and *odai pneumatikai* [spiritual songs] should be confined to three types of composition specified in the Hebrew titles to the OT Psalter."

Finally, John Calvin, the prince of exegetes, says: "They [the three words under study] are commonly distinguished in this way – that a psalm is that, in the singing of which some musical instrument besides the tongue is made use of; a hymn is properly a song of praise, whether it be sung simply

with the voice or otherwise; while an ode contains not merely praises, but exhortations and other matters. He [Paul] would have the songs of Christians, however, to be spiritual, not made up of frivolities and worthless trifles." Again, there is no indication that Paul is even alluding to exclusive Psalmody. Calvin's last sentence seems to indicate an acceptance of uninspired songs, so long as they are theologically sound.

Some exclusive Psalmists argue that the three nouns found in *Ephesians* 5:19 – psalms, hymns, and songs – are in "the same grammatical category," united by the conjunction "and" (*kai*). Thus, say these exegetes, "hymns" and "songs" are to be considered as equal to the "psalms." Therefore, if the psalms are Scripture, so also are the hymns and songs. Similar usages of *kai* can be found in *Matthew* 28:19 and *2 Corinthians* 13:14, where the three persons of the Trinity are spoken of in "the same grammatical category."

This, of course, is one possible interpretation. However, just because *kai* is used in this manner in *Matthew* 28:19 and *2 Corinthians* 13:14 does not mean that this is the Pauline usage in *Ephesians* 5:19. In fact, in *Colossians* 3:16, the only other New Testament verse where Paul uses these three nouns together, the conjunction *kai* is not used at all with regard to psalms, hymns, and songs. Hendriksen, Bruce, and Calvin see no such "categorizing." Furthermore, this argument may equally well lead to the conclusion that Paul does not mean inspired *Psalms*. That also would keep the terms equal.

Some of the same exegetes claim that the adjective "spiritual" (*pneumatikais*), as used in *Ephesians* 5:19, modifies all three of the nouns. The verse would then read, "in psalms and hymns and songs spiritual." Not only, they say, are the psalms "Spirit-breathed," so also are the hymns and songs; they are all equally Scripture. (Actually, since *pneumatikais* is feminine, it modifies *odai*, which is also feminine; *psalmois* and *hymnois* are both masculine.) If one follows this theory of the exclusive Psalmists, the syntax of the verse would require the Psalms and hymns to be specific kinds of "spiritual odes." This is highly unlikely. New Testament scholars such as Hendriksen, Bruce,

Calvin, and Lenski maintain (with the translators of the *KJV*, *NKJV*, *NASV*, *NIV*, and *RSV*) that the most natural reading of the verse is that "spiritual" modifies only the noun songs (*odais*). The burden of proof here is on those adopting exclusive Psalmody; they must conclusively show that in Paul's use of these three terms he limits the church to the use of the Psalter in formal worship. If this cannot be accomplished, then *Ephesians* 5:19 and *Colossians* 3:16 stand as refutations of exclusive Psalmody. I suggest that their exegetical burden is too great to bear. The evidence, at best, is "flimsy."

Conclusion

The present writer is very much in favor of the singing of the metrical psalms, in public (as well as private) worship. The church needs to return to this practice, as a part of the regulative principle. It is a rich privilege, yielding spiritual blessings, to be able to sing the inspired songs of Zion as found in the Psalter. If we wish to learn how to sing – and how to pray – well, we need to study the *Psalms*. Gordon Clark is correct when he says that "a hymn book without a good proportion of *Psalms* is not fit for a church service." Yet, there seems to be no Biblical warrant for us to eliminate altogether the use of other hymns and songs, as long as they are theologically sound. Neither is it non-confessional to do so. The witness of church history is far from convincing us of exclusive Psalmody, and the Biblical evidence overwhelming supports the use of "hymns and spiritual songs," both inspired and otherwise, along with the singing of *Psalms*.