

The Biblical Doctrine of Psalmody

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by

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With additional annotations.

“The Book of Psalms, which are of divine inspiration, is well adapted to the state of the Church, and of every member, in all ages and circumstances; and these psalms, to the exclusion of all *imitations*, and uninspired compositions, are to be used in social worship.”—Reformed Presbyterian *Testimony*, Chap. XXIV, Sec. 8.

I.

That Which Is Not Commanded in the Worship of God Is Forbidden.

This proposition is fundamental to all discussions as to how God is to be worshiped. (This is) proved by :

1. Didactic statements of Scripture.
2. Striking Scripture examples.
3. The teachings of the Reformed Churches.
4. The Westminster Standards.

Those churches holding to the Westminster Standards which have departed from this rule, seek to justify themselves by the Confession of Faith, Chap. I, Sec. 6, which contains this language:

“There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the Church common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”

In opposition (to their interpretation of this statement) let it be observed:

1. This (statement) does not speak of the worship of God, but of “some circumstances concerning” that worship;
2. That it does not speak of all the circumstances, but only such as are “common to human actions and societies,” which hymn-singing certainly is not;
3. Such an interpretation contradicts the explicit language of the Confession of Faith where it treats specifically of religious worship, Chap. XXI, Sec. 1.

The constant effort to use this paragraph of the Confession of Faith to justify the introduction of human inventions into the worship of God shows a surprising paucity of arguments. Truly, “The bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it; and the covering narrower than that a man can wrap himself in it.”

II.

The Psalms Were Given by Inspiration, and Were Appointed to Be Used in the Worship of God in ALL Ages.

This proposition is not new, and never has been denied by any branch of the Christian Church. The psalms have been thrust aside practically and denied a place in many church hymnals, and when included in a collection are seldom used in worship; yet the divine warrant for their use has not been called in question by devout and intelligent Christians.

1. The psalms were given by inspiration.

This is distinctly affirmed in Scripture. **2 Sam.** xxiii, 1, 2:

“David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, **The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue.**”

This claim is confirmed by the inspired writers of the New Testament:

Acts i, 16: “Men and brethren, this Scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus.” **Acts** iv, 25: “Lord, Thou art God, . . . who by the mouth of Thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things?” **Heb.** iii, 7: The writer quotes from **Ps.** xcv, 7, and ascribes the words to the Holy Ghost, “Wherefore, Today, if ye will hear His voice.” When, therefore, men speak against the psalms as being cruel, vindictive, and unfit for Christian worship, they are speaking against the Holy Ghost, and are perilously

near to the commission of that sin “which hath no forgiveness, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.”

2. Objections to the doctrine that the psalms are inspired.

(i) The psalms were not all written by David. How, then, do we know that the other writers were inspired?

Answer:

A. The psalms were collected into a **book**, those of other writers intermingled with the psalms of David.

B. This **Book** of Psalms is quoted as of divine authority.

Luke xx, 42: “And David himself saith in the **Book** of Psalms.” This is Christ’s endorsement. Acts i, 20: “It is written in the **Book** of Psalms.” This is Peter’s endorsement. Acts xiii, 33: “As it is also written in the second psalm.” This is Paul’s endorsement.

C. This **Book** of Psalms is recognized by the whole Christian Church as an inspired book.

It *always* has held its place in the canon of Scripture.

(ii) It is objected that the *metrical* version is not inspired.

Answer:

A. The metrical version is inspired in the same sense that the *prose translation* is inspired.

The enemies of an inspired psalmody, in their eagerness to cast odium on the psalm-book, frequently refer to it as “Old Rouse,” Dr. John W. Bain, in a little volume entitled *God’s Songs and the Singer*, says:

“It is often said that we contend for the exclusive use of Rouse’s version. It is perhaps scarcely worth while to deny this assertion. No amount of denial or any other evidence seems to make any impression on those who assert it. If anyone will take the trouble to examine the History of the Westminster Assembly, issued by the Presbyterian Board of Publication, which should be good authority on this subject, he will find that the version we use was in the hands of a committee of that assembly for two years and much pains taken in revising it. It was then sent to Parliament and then over to the Scottish General Assembly. It was nearly five years in the hands of two able committees of that assembly, and the Presbyteries of that Church, undergoing a most searching examination and revision; and was, in 1649, adopt-

ed as the assembly's version, translated and diligently compared with the original text, and former translations, more plain, smooth, and agreeable to the text than any heretofore."

Those who speak in contempt of this as "Old Rouse," reveal their ignorance of its history and their disposition to be unpleasant at the same time. On the other hand, it is folly for the advocates of the exclusive use of an inspired psalmody to treat the matter of a change of versions of the psalms as though it involved the question of the use of uninspired songs in worship. What our Church contends for, is the exclusive use of the psalms of the Bible in the best version obtainable. When she has that, she has an inspired psalmody.

3. These psalms were appointed by God to be used in His worship.

2 Chron. xxix, 30: "Moreover, Hezekiah the king, and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer." **1 Chron. xvi, 9:** "Sing unto Him: sing psalms unto Him." **Ps. xcv, 2:** "Make a joyful noise unto Him with psalms" **James v, 13:** "Is any merry? let him sing psalms" **Eph. v, 19:** "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." **Col. iii, 16:** "Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Whatever differences of view there may be as to the "hymns and spiritual songs" spoken of in the last two passages, all agree that the word "psalms" means the psalms of the Bible. So that we have the divine warrant and command both in the Old Testament and in the New for the use of the inspired psalms in praise to God; and just as explicitly in the New Testament as in the Old.

III.

The Scriptures Contain No Warrant for the Introduction of Uninspired Compositions in the Worship of God.

So far as the Old Testament is concerned this seems to be universally conceded. But there are passages in the New Testament which have been confidently relied upon as containing such authority, (in that they speak of "hymns" or "songs").

(1). **Matt. xxvi, 30.** "And when they had sung an hymn they went out into the Mount of Olives."— This "hymn" which Christ and the apostles sang at the last supper consisted of psalms, because:

- (i) The margin reads, *Psalm*. "When they had sung a psalm."

- (ii) The following Biblical authorities generally agree that this was the Great Hallel, composed of Psalms 113-118.
- A. *Albert Barnes*, after referring to the Jewish custom of using these psalms on such occasions, adds: "There can be no doubt that our Saviour and the apostles used the same psalms in the observance of the passion."
 - B. *Adam Clarke* says: "As to the hymn itself, we know from the universal consent of Jewish antiquity that it was composed of Psalms 113-118."
 - C. *Lange* translates it: "And when they had sung the hymn of praise," and adds, "the second part of the Hallel, Psalms 115-118."
 - D. *Bengel* says: "They either sang, or recited, Psalms 113, 114, 115, 118, 136, in which the mystery of redemption is nobly expressed."

You will find the same view in Lightfoot, Alford, Meyer, Jacobus, Gill, and a multitude of others. Whoever appeals to this passage as supplying a warrant for modern hymn-singing evinces complete vacuity of the subject.

This is the only instance in which we have account of our Saviour singing; and in this case He set the seal of His approval upon the songs which He Himself had provided for His people, by inspiration of His Spirit. If we wish to follow closely in the footsteps of our Lord, we must sing psalms exclusively. Jesus did.

- (2). The passages, **Colossians iii, 16**, and **Ephesians v, 19**, which speak of "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs", contain no warrant for the use of uninspired songs.

Colossians iii, 16: "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." This is the crucial text on this subject. Those who favor the use of hymns interpret this passage as including in the matter of praise uninspired compositions. I believe that it contains a distinct command for the continued use of the Old Testament Psalter in the New Testament Church. Note that:

- (i) **All authorities agree that the Scripture psalms are included.**

This is a very important concession, because it shows that those who have excluded the psalms have done so in the face of repeated commands in the New Testament to continue their use. It also sweeps away at one stroke the oft repeated objection that the psalms are not suitable for use in the Christian dispensation.

- (ii) **The three names, "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,"** are all found in the titles to the psalms, in the Hebrew Old Testament and in the Greek Septuagint (LXX) translation of approx. 260 - 160 BC.

The **Hebrew** words (used to entitle and within individual Hebrew Psalms) are:

מִזְמוֹר *Mizmor* used 57 times means: **Religious song** sung with a stringed instrument.

שִׁיר *Shir* used 39 times means: Religious or secular **song**

מַשְׁכִּיל *Maschil* used 13 times can mean: meditative, didactic, or skilful *Mizmor*.

מִכְתָּם *Michtam* used 6 times meaning is not clearly known to us

שְׁגִיּוֹן *Shiggayon* used once (Psalm 7) meaning is not clearly known to us

תְּפִלָּה *Tephillah* used 5 times means: **“prayer”**

תְּהִלָּה *Tehillah* used 7 times means **“praise”**.

The **Greek** words used in the LXX psalms are:

Ψαλμός *Psalmos* used 79 times means “song of praise” with stringed instrument

ὕμνος *Hymnos* used 13 times means “hymn or song of praise”

ὕδῃ *Ode* used 45 times means “a song”.

It will be seen that there is not a definite distinction of meaning between the two latter Greek terms, but that they have semantic fields that flow into and merge with one another. The feature in *Psalmos* concerning the “stringed instrument” appears to be the major differentiation, according with the Hebrew *Mizmor*.

The **English** words used in translation to cover all these terms are:

Psalm, Hymn, Song.

However, in some Psalms in English Bibles the Hebrew words *maschil* and *michtam* are emplaced in the English merely transliterated, without any attempt to indicate the meaning, because the terms are not yet fully understood.

Whereas correlation between the English and Greek terms is obvious and easy, it requires more investigation to see the correlation between the Greek LXX terms *Psalmos*; *Hymnos*; *ode*; and the Hebrew terms, there being seven of the latter that generally match with just three in the Greek. It is necessary to examine this correlation:

First: The Hebrew מִזְמוֹר *Mizmôr*. The root of this word means “to pluck” and appears to refer to the “plucking” of the strings of a musical instrument. The word is used 57 times in the Psalter in the superscriptions of verse 1 in each case, and is translated by the Greek LXX as ψαλμος *Psalmos* on 56 of those occasions. The odd one occasion it is translated by the Greek ὕδῃ *ode*, which translates into English as “song” or “ode”. Notable in this connection is the fact that the Greek LXX gives on 13 occasions the translation ψαλμος ὕδῃς *psalmos odeis* or some such combination of *psalmos* and *ode* meaning “a psalm, (or) song”. The Greek is in such instances translating a Hebrew combination containing *Mizmor* and *Shir*. Also notable are such superscriptions as the following:

Psalm 6 : 1 ΕΙΣ ΤΟ ΤΕΛΟΣ ΕΝ ΥΜΝΟΙΣ.....ψαλμος
 eis to telos en humnois.....psalmos
in English: to the director of hymns.....a psalm

Psalm 67 : 1 gives the same structure, as does Psalm 76 : 1 but with the added feature of *ode* appearing in the title as well. Hence Psalm 76 appears to be ascribed for the “director of hymns”, and is described as a psalm and as a song.

Secondly, the Hebrew word שִׁיר *Shir* meaning a “song” occurs some 39 times in the Psalms, and is translated by the LXX as ὠδη *ode* some 34 of those times. On 3 of the remaining five occurrences the Greek LXX translates *Shir* by a synonym for “song”, namely the Greek word ᾠσμα *asma*, and on one occasion translates by the Greek word *psalmos*. Out of these 34 occurrences of the word, 29 of them are in superscriptions or titles to the Psalms.

Thirdly, the remaining Hebrew terms are translated variously, and it is best to check out the Greek LXX term ὕμνος *Humnos* or, as we know it “hymn”. *Humnos* occurs in the LXX Psalms just 12 times, of which just six are in the superscriptions. On four occasions it translates the Hebrew תְּהִלָּה *Tehillah*, which means “praise”. And in Psalm 40 : 3 David describes the new song which God has put in his mouth as a “*Tehillah*” to our God, which term the Greek LXX translates as a *Humnon*.

With the fact before us that these three Greek words are all found in the titles to the psalms; and that they occur many times; and that they were found in the Septuagint (LXX) in use among the Greek-speaking Christians to whom Paul wrote these two Epistles, Ephesians and Colossians; and that all are agreed that *Psalmois* refers to the psalms of the Bible, is it not most **un**reasonable to insist that the other two words *Humnois* and *Odais* mean **un**inspired songs?

That the “songs” are the songs of inspiration is placed beyond all doubt by the qualifying word, “**spiritual**”; and grammatically it applies to the psalms and hymns as well as to the songs, i. e., psalms, hymns, and songs, spiritual.

Thayer, in his Greek lexicon of the New Testament, referring to this passage and the similar one, Eph. v, 19, defines the Greek word πνευματικαῖς *pneumatikais* used for “**spiritual**” as “divinely inspired and so redolent of the Holy Spirit.”

Albert Barnes, in his commentary on 1 Cor. x, 3: “And did all eat the same spiritual meat,” says: “The word *spiritual* is evidently used to denote that which is given by the Spirit of God; that which was the result of His miraculous gift; that which was **not** produced in the ordinary way.” Again, “The word *spiritual* must

be used in the sense of supernatural, or that which is immediately given by God." Hence, "**spiritual songs**" are songs produced in a supernatural manner, those given immediately by the Spirit of God.

This view is sustained by many of the ablest and most scholarly divines the Church has produced, including Owen, Calvin, Beza, McKnight, Bloomfield, Home, Durham, Bengel.

(iii) **The psalms are, in a pre-eminent sense, "the Word of Christ."**

"Let the Word of Christ dwell in you in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another." This is the condition of being able to "teach and admonish."

A. Christ by His Spirit is the author of them.

This was proved above, see section II, 1, previously. (Pages 16-17 herein).

B. In many of the psalms Christ is the speaker.

Ps. ii, 7: "I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto Me, Thou art My Son; this day have I begotten Thee." **Ps. xl, 7:** "Then said I, lo, I come; in the volume of the book it is written of Me." **Ps. xxii, 1:** "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Such psalms as these are the word of Christ in as real a sense as the sermon on the mount is His word.

C. Christ is the subject of many of them.

a. The inspired writers frequently quote from the psalms and apply the language to Christ.

E.g., **Acts iv, 25, 26; Eph. iv, 8, 9, 10, Heb. i, 5-12.**

b. **Christ quotes from the psalms and applies them to Himself.**

E.g., **Matt. xxi, 42; Matt. xxii, 43, 44; Luke xxiv, 44,** "In the psalms concerning Me."

(iv) **No other book in the Bible reveals Christ with more fullness than does the Book of Psalms.**

Note just some of the particulars:

1. His Divinity

Ps. xlv, 6: "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever." Compare with **Heb. i, 8.**

Ps. cx, 1: "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at My right hand." Compare with **Matt. xxii, 42-45.**

2. His eternal Sonship.

Ps. ii, 7: "I will declare the decree." Compare with **Heb.** i, 5.

3. His incarnation.

Ps. viii, 5. Compare with **Heb.** ii, 9. **Ps.** xl, 6-7, compare with **Heb.** x, 5-7.

4. His mediatorial offices.

a. Prophetical.

Ps. xl, 9, 10, and xxii, 22. Compare with **Heb.** ii 12.

b. Priesthood.

Ps. cx, 4. Compare with **Heb.** vii, 17.

c. Kingly office.

Ps. xlv, 6. Compare with **Heb.** i, 8. **Ps.** cx, 1 Compare with **Matt.** xxii, 42-45; and **Heb.** i, 13, particularly. See also: **Ps.** xxii, 28; **Ps.** lxxii, throughout.

5. His betrayal.

Ps. xli, 9. Compare with **John** xiii, 18.

6. His agony in the garden.

Ps. xxii, 1. Compare with **Heb.** v, 7.

7. His trial.

Ps. xxxv, 11. Compare with **Matt.** xxvi, 59, 60.

8. His rejection.

Ps. xxii, 6, Compare with **Matt.** xxvii 21-23; **Luke** xxiii, 18-23.

Ps. cxviii, 22. Compare with **Matt.** xxi, 42; **Acts** iv, 11, 12.

9. His crucifixion.

Ps. xxii; **Ps.** lxix. Compare with Gospel accounts.

10. His burial and resurrection.

Ps. xvi, 8-11. Compare with **Acts** ii, 25-31.

11. His ascension.

Ps. xlvii, 5. Compare with **Acts** i, ii, and **1 Thess.** iv, 16. **Ps.** lxviii, 18; Compare with **Eph.** iv, 8-10. **Ps.** xxiv, 7-10; Compare with **Rev.** v, 6-14.

12. His second coming.

Ps. L, 3, and xcvi, 6-9. Compare with **Matt.** xxiv, 31; **1 Cor.** xv, 52.

This is sufficient to show that these psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, are replete with Christ, and it could well be said of them, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly."

(v) Uninspired songs could not be placed on a level with the psalms of inspiration as a rule for teaching and admonishing.

A. It is agreed that the psalm *are inspired*.

B. If the "hymns" and "spiritual songs" (as per Eph. v, 19 and Col. 3, 16) are **uninspired**, then Paul would be placing the writings of men on a level with the Word of God as a rule for the "teaching and admonishing" he mentions therewith.

This would be wholly incredible ! ! !

(vi) The inspired psalms alone are adapted to be the vehicles of grace to the heart, and of praise to the Lord. "Singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

A. Because of their outward form and style.

Speaking of the Hebrew poetry, Dr. Albert Barnes says: "Their poetry of a religious kind, also, is all of a high order. There is none that can be placed on the same level with much that is found in the hymn books of most denominations of Christians: very good, very pious, very sentimental, very much adapted to such use as is supposed to excite feelings of devotion: but withal so flat, so weak, so unpoetic, that it would not in a volume of mere poetry be admitted to a third or fourth rank, if indeed it would find a place at all."—Preface to *Barnes' Commentary on Psalms*.

John Milton says: "Not in the argument alone, but in the very critical art of composition, they may easily be made to appear, over all kinds of lyric poetry, incomparable."

Edward Irving, in his *Introduction to Horne on the Psalms*, says: "If we consider the manner or style of the book, and draw it into comparison with the lyrical productions of cultivated and classical nations, it may well be said that, as the heavens are high above the earth, so are the Songs of Zion above the noblest strains which have been sung in our land." And after drawing contrasts between these and the songs of other nations, he concludes thus: "We challenge anything to be produced from the literature of all ages and countries worthy to be compared with what we find in the English version of the Book of Psalms."

B. Because of their eminently devotional character: "To the Lord."

Out of a great mass of testimony to the preeminence of the psalms as a book of devotion, I select just one of recent date, that of the Hon. Wm. E. Gladstone. After describing the separation of the Jewish people from the other nations of the world,

he proceeds: "In the inner sanctuary that provided for the most capable human souls was reared the strong spiritual life which appears to have developed itself pre-eminently in the depth, richness, tenderness, and comprehensiveness of the psalms.

"To the work they have accomplished there is no parallel upon earth. For the present I will put aside all details and am content to stand on this fact, that a compilation which began at the latest with a shepherd of Palestine, three thousand years ago, has been the prime and paramount manual of devotion from that day to this: first for the Hebrew race, both in its isolation and after it was brought, by the translation of its sacred books, into relations with the Gentile world; and then for all the Christian races in all their diversities of character and circumstance.

"Further, that there is now, if possible, less chance than ever of the displacement of those marvelous compositions from their supremacy in the worship of the Christian Church. And beyond all doubt it may be said that their function has not been one of ritual pomp and outward power alone. They have dwelt in the Christian heart, and at the very center of that heart, and wherever the pursuits of the inner life have been largely concerned and cultivated, there, in the same proportion, the psalms have towered over every other vehicle of devotion."

There is a fitness in such a tribute to the psalms from such a man as Gladstone. If you cannot feel it, you cannot be taught to do so. But if you can, by any stretch of your powers, imagine a man of any depth uttering such an appreciation of any collection of hymns, then you ought to thank God for your powers of imagination.

C. Because they are *objective*, rather than *subjective*: "To the Lord."

The grace is *subjective*; "in your hearts." The praise is *objective*: "to the Lord." This is one of the marked characteristics by which the psalms are distinguished from the hymns. The hymns are self-centered, the psalms are God-centered. Professor Taylor Lewis of the Union Theological Seminary writes clearly on this point in an article entitled, *The Old Scotch Psalmody*:

"Another feature is its clear *objectiveness*, or the striking contrast it presents to that extreme *subjectiveness* which makes much of our most modern hymnology so feeble because so vague. The former has ever some glorious outward object or idea, drawing the soul to itself. The other is characterized by a wholly subjective rapture, or by a continual moaning, or a continual self-questioning about inward frames and feelings. Take for a few examples the hymns beginning, 'I love to steal away'; 'Far from the world, O Lord, I flee'; 'I am weary of straying, O fain would I rest'; 'There is an hour of calm repose.' Very sweet and soothing are such hymns, at times. They may be channels, too, of grace; but how different from those more churchly strains which the Scriptures give us: How different, too, from any conception we can form of the hymns that Paul and Silas most probably sang at midnight in the jail at Philippi."—*The Bible Psalmody*, pp. 20-23.

I conclude, therefore, from the above reasoning, that this passage which has

always been relied on by the advocates of hymn-singing as containing a warrant for these practices, has no such meaning.

The titles, "psalms, and hymns, and songs," belong to the inspired psalter; and, as qualified by the word "spiritual," are not true of any other: I conclude that the psalms are "the Word of Christ," and uninspired songs are not His word: that the psalms are a true standard for "teaching and admonishing" and the uninspired songs are not such a standard, and therefore could not be placed on a level with the psalms by the apostle; and that the psalms are adapted to be the vehicles of grace to the heart and of praise to the Lord, as uninspired songs are not. The passage furnishes no warrant for the use of uninspired songs in worship, but is an explicit apostolic injunction that, in the praise service of the New Testament Church, the divinely authorized psalmody should be continued.

Making melody in your hearts: Some of you will live to speak inspiring words on this text. All of you will sing the psalms in the spirit of praise and by God's grace will lead a flock of His people to make a loud noise joyfully every Sabbath day. But you will do it only as you feel yourselves grounded in the biblical truths that demand a pure praise service.

The Churches which during the Dark Ages remained separate from Romanism, continued to use the inspired psalms exclusively.

It is a disputed question whether the Waldenses owe their origin to Peter Waldo in the twelfth century, or whether they are to be identified with the Vaudois, who can be traced almost if not altogether to the apostolic age. Dr. C. H. Strong argues the probability that the latter is true, and that if Paul took the "journey into Spain" of which he speaks in Rom. xv, 24, his voice may actually have been heard among their secluded valleys. It is a well established fact that through the Dark Ages these people maintained a consistent testimony against the corruptions of Rome. The argument to prove that through all their history they were (exclusive) psalm singers is found in:

History of the Waldenses by Dr. C.H.Strong p. 58 ff.