

Book Reviews

Two Important new Productions concerning
Psalmody and the Regulative Principle
Reviewed by Dr. Stephen Westcott.

"The Worship of God"

by Rev. Malcolm Watts. Minister of Emmanuel Church, Salisbury, England, and Rev. David Silversides, Minister of Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church. Northern Ireland.

Marpet Press, Edinburgh. 72pps.

(Available from James A. Dickson Books, Edinburgh price £3:75).

Reviewed by **Dr. Stephen Westcott.**

Most readers of BRJ will be sympathetic to exclusive psalmody in worship, and aware of the Biblical 'regulative principle' that lies behind the practice, but another new booklet reminding us of the solid reasons for this form of worship cannot go amiss, especially when it is a new production (not a reprint from earlier phases of the debate) and even more so when (wonder of wonders) one of the co-authors ministers, not in Scotland, but in the south of England!

"The Worship of God" stems from the 1997 'Salisbury Conference' hosted by Pastor Malcolm Watts at his Church, Emmanuel Church in the ancient city of Salisbury and the three major sections of the book reflect the three papers presented at that conference; *'The Importance of Purity of Worship'* by Malcolm Watts himself, and *'The Westminster Directory of Public Worship'*, and *'How should our Churches Worship Today?'* by Pastor David Silversides of Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church, Northern Ireland.

It is understood that the Salisbury conference is to be an annual event, and the fact that the series 'kicked off' directly with the subject of Psalmody and purity of worship is a very heartening and encouraging fact

indeed. One suspects that the Conference itself may have done more to publicise the issues surrounding the regulative principle and Psalmody for a south of England audience than the published booklet will, as (sadly) such productions will always tend to be purchased by those already 'converted', and by-passed by the evangelical and even semi-reformed Christian readership in the South. Getting a more wide-ranging and publicised debate on this issue is still a desideratum, and there is a sense that moves are afoot (see below) to pre-empt any revival of Psalmody in English evangelical and reformed circles. Possibly giving or loaning copies of this booklet to enquirers or waverers might be of some help, although at £3:75 it might be thought a bit expensive for those purposes, whilst at 72 pages still a little 'lightweight' to put on one's own shelves as a reference manual on the subject. This, of course, is a handicap that all Conference reports labour under, unless sufficient of them are built up before publication to make a heftier tome.

The 'Introduction' tells us that the intention was to provide 'a concise treatment of Scriptural and reformed worship' and pastors Watts and Silversides have succeeded excellently in doing just that, within the time and space limitations imposed on them by the Conference format.

In his contribution on *"The Importance of Purity of Worship"* Malcolm Watts opens with a wide-ranging consideration of the term 'worship', then homes in on the essence of divine worship, considering *'The Nature of Pure Worship'* in light of:

- a) The Divine glory,
- b) Obligations of the moral law,
- c) God's revelation,
- d) Man's response,

- e) Body and soul,
 - f) Bringing an offering,
 - g) Only the very best, and
 - h) God is in the midst.
- Next we pass on to "*The Standard of Pure Worship*" when we are invited to consider:

- a) God's absolute sovereignty,
- b) God's assertion of right,
- c) A faithful ministry,
- d) Specific instructions,
- e) Too strict?
- f) Binding in both Testaments.
- g) A great temptation,
- h) Inevitable judgement,
- i) Reformation, leading to
- j) A summary on the importance of pure worship.

This reviewer was particularly impressed with Pastor Watts' high view of divine worship as an offering- "the sacrifice of our lips"- to an Almighty and All-holy God. How different is this concept to the current English evangelical 'norm' where man is central (getting the congregation in the right mood, or putting emotional pressure on the unconverted) and no real worship (see Malcolm Watts' careful definition) takes place at all! Again one is reminded how naturally hymns and choruses fit in with a man-centred and Arminian theology, and how the Biblical psalms complement our God-centred and God-is-sovereign and all-sufficient Reformation faith. On page 23 we have a solemn warning that "it is Satan's great aim to deny God his honour by corrupting the Biblical ordinances" and at once we think of i) worship practices, and ii) Bible 'versions', and see that the warning cannot be made too often or stressed too strongly today. Pastor Watts concludes with some very appropriate verses from Psalm 102 (Scottish metrical Psalter) and a list of 14 references for further study.

The first of Pastor Silversides' contributions is "*The Westminster Directory of Public Worship*" sub-titled "A Puritan View" (i.e. of worship). After a brief historical

resume on the Westminster Assembly attention is focused on the Westminster "*Directory for the public worship of God*", which is taken as a 'representative of the Puritan approach to worship'. Sub headings lead us through:

- a) An awesome view of God and our utter dependence upon Him,
- b) The place of truth-led emotion,
- c) a strong view of order,
- d) Uniformity of worship,
- e) The regulative principle is essential,
- f) Approved parts of worship, and finally,
- g) Festival days.

Here indeed is '*multum in parvo*', much rich and helpful material in a small space, as each of these themes within the Westminster Directory is stated, and then commented on with an eye to relevance in our current situation, leading up to the inescapable conclusion, in light of all this: "Is anything less than utter submission to God's Word appropriate? We must seek the honour of Him of whom it is written, "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion" (Psalm 2:6). Everything we do in our worship should be in the acknowledgement that Christ is king in Zion. Let us seek to acknowledge His kingship in all our worship, in our hearts and in our outward forms." (p.46) **Amen** to that!

Ten references are supplied for further study.

The final paper brings all of this home in the consideration of "*How Should our Churches Worship Today?*" "It is good," says Pastor Silversides. "to look at the past, but not as an escape from the present. Certainly we need to consider what the Puritans did, but we need also to consider what we should be doing" (p.48). And what should we be doing today? Making worship 'relevant' to modern society? Something that will hold the attention and attract the young? The answer is: consider the Scriptures, to understand what we should be doing (and one might add, why we are doing it, if we already are)! Now Biblical worship requires that all present join in worship (that is, the whole Church, or the whole family, or the believer

alone, in private worship) and none be excluded or relegated to the role of 'audience'. It involves a vocalised confession of man's sinfulness and inability, and of God's majesty and sovereignty, indeed the line between prayer and praise is necessarily blurred when sinners come into the presence of Almighty God.

These Biblical concepts of the real sinner-Saviour-Sovereign God relationship on the one hand, and 'entertainment' on the other could not be further apart! On this foundation we are led to consider: **a)** Instrumental music in the worship of God, **b)** The abrogation of the use of Old Testament instruments, **c)** Hymns and Spiritual songs, **d)** What does 'spiritual' mean? (ever considered that songs could only be called 'Spiritual' if they were indited by the Holy Spirit? That is inspired. Only the Psalms fit that criterion!), **e)** Other parts of Scripture (i.e. may they be sung in worship?), **f)** Uninspired hymns, **g)** The sufficiency of the Psalter, **h)** The use of spiritual gifts, and finally, **i)** Is Psalm singing divisive? Again a helpful list of references, in this case a 'select list of recommended books', concludes the paper.

It would be unfair to criticise any production for what it does not contain, and what was never part of the authors' intention, but one feels that important and practical questions are still to be considered (and I know of no current publication that deals with this), especially the issue of just *which* are the metrical Psalms? It is nowhere stated in the book, but it appears that Malcolm Watts takes the view that the Scottish Psalter and traditional Scottish psalm tunes are more or less mandatory to his position (I have the advantage of a tape of the Psalmody sung at the Salisbury conference!). Others will prefer either that Psalter with more up-to-date tunes, or one of the more modern Psalter versions such as "*The Book of Psalms for Singing*" of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). The danger is that we can have almost as many Psalm books as we now have Bible 'versions', and like them they shade from literal

and strict, through loose to downright paraphrase 'imitation' and slang. And how do we maintain that vital ground of singing what is inspired and part of the Bible, as against what is man-made and imperfect, when some Psalm versions are so far from the original as to really qualify as 'hymns' after all? Here lies the great danger to our 'regulative principle' position, and the counter must be to insist that nothing counts as real 'Psalmody' unless it is as literal and accurate a translation, as would be acceptable in a good prose Bible version. (Indeed, we might suggest that a 'metrical' version within the Bible, would be nearer to the original than our current prose translation, and might be simply turned to and sung, without the need for any additional 'book' at all.★)

Does 'strict adherence' to the Westminster Standards mandate the use of the Psalter then in use, and none other (as some would have us believe)? And the same few sixteenth and seventeenth-century tunes? And what of the Puritan practice of 'lining out' the Psalm (yes, there are extreme factions who would have us employ lining-out again, even though it was intended as a help in days when illiteracy was still common). May not even the Psalms be sung carelessly and badly, and should not a seriously 'regulative principle' reformed Church make efforts to practice and improve its psalmody (along with other 'mid-week' activities)? I would just suggest that issues such as these need to be faced and discussed, before the Reformed can offer a united front to the hymn advocates, and checkmate the progressive 'blurring' between Biblical and non-Biblical offerings in worship.

But to return to the subject of this 'review': The presentation and format of the book(let)

★ "Josephus asserts, and most of the ancient writers maintain, that the Psalms were composed in various meters. They have undoubtedly a peculiar conformation of sentences, and a measured distribution of parts. Though the regulations of Hebrew Prosody are now lost there can be no doubt, from the harmonious modulation of the Psalms, that they were written in some kind of metrical order, and must have been composed in accommodation to the measure in which they were set. The Masoretic writers have marked them in a manner different from the other sacred writings." Robert Grey, 'A Key to the Bible', 1825.

is excellent, and the paper of high quality - in fact so much so in fact that the pages are so 'shiny' that they tend to reflect too much light (especially when read under artificial lighting), but it is hard to criticise a production for being of too high a quality! Get this one, read it, make its arguments your own, be sure you know why you sing Psalms alone (if you do) and why your Church should (if it doesn't), and pray for a return to 'uniformity of worship', according to God's own regulative principle, in our day and age.

PRAISE!

Book Preview: "Praise! Psalms, Hymns and Songs for Christian Worship",
Distributed by the Evangelical Press,
Darlington, England.
(Words edition £6:99, Music edition £29:99,
publication 'Autumn 1999')
Reviewed by: **Dr. Stephen Westcott.**

In view of the above review and comments it may be timely to 'preview' a forthcoming production that is fairly inevitably set to sweep the 'evangelical' scene in England later this year, for certainly this new effort will be bidding to get the widest possible acceptance across all stripes of the evangelical spectrum, from semi-reformed to charismatic. And you can be sure that it will receive the widest possible publicity, and enthusiastic promotion.

So what is so new, or so sinister or so alarming about yet another new evangelical 'hymnbook'? Well,

- a) it is coming from what is generally thought of as a broadly 'Reformed' source (Evangelical Press) and
- b) it *claims* to be a **Psalter** (Psalm book) as well as a hymn book.

This production, we are told, meets "A clear need for a new and comprehensive book of psalms, hymns and songs for Christian worship....this book combines all three, to provide a single song book which is sufficient for all occasions, reflects the language of today, and is faithful to Scripture."

So here, at once, is that blurring of inspired and non-inspired. The very sub-title of this work (echoing the "Psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs" of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16) twists Scripture to suggest the modernistic view that man-made 'hymns' are advocated in the Epistles (where all sound commentators understand the titles and divisions of the Biblical Psalter). Do we then, at least, have a book with an inspired first-part, then two man-made sections? Indeed we are informed that "At least one version of every Old Testament psalm is provided", and some very complementary things are added about the Psalms. But again let us be careful to note the 'code' language: OLD TESTAMENT PSALMS. The claim that is as old as the early Gnostics, that was revived by Benjamin Keach in the C17 and Isaac Watts in the C18 and echoed by Joseph Irons in the C19, "the psalms are part of the Old Testament worship, we need new 'psalms' for the New Testament" ("and, as the Holy Ghost has not seen fit to inspire any for us, we are at liberty to write our own!") Such teaching completely fails to grasp the eternal spiritual nature of the Psalms, the use of typology and symbolism, and above all the complete and final all-sufficiency of the Bible.

But allow this production to be your Psalter and you will do so at the price of being told that this is the 'Old Testament' part of worship (and we all know that the O.T. is fulfilled in the New). And as we are Christians and not Jews (but, pardon me, *we are* the Spiritual Israel and *we* dwell in "the tents of Shem", the root bears us and not us the root) so we pass on to the New Testament praise section of the Book: 'updated' old favourite hymns, and new hymns and songs. How invidious it all is!

And then why, one wonders, include those 150 Psalms to sing at all? Can it be that the faithful remnant have been making an impact after all, and the issue just will not go away? Let us return to what is claimed to be "at least one version of every Old Testament psalm". If that statement were to be made about any other Bible Book, Old or New Testament, we would expect a faithful attempt to reproduce the original Hebrew or Greek in English. That

is, after all, being "faithful to Scripture", and that is what this book claims. With growing amazement we read: "The psalm versions range from those that stay close to the text of the original psalm and cover every verse, to the hymns that are more loosely based on the broader theme of the psalm. Psalms which make clear reference to Christ or his church have frequently been interpreted in the light of the New Testament." How about a version of the rest of God's Holy Word, "loosely based" on what is decided to be the "broader theme" of each passage, and then the whole re-worked in light of the translator's theological view of how it should be understood "in light of the New Testament"! I guess that would out-paraphrase even the sloppiest and slangiest paraphrase God is insulted with already! And yet this is openly done, with the largest single block of literature in God's inspired word!

And note, very carefully indeed, that here we do not have a song-book in three parts (Psalms, Hymns, Songs) as all the advance literature would have us believe. We have some Psalms (close literal renderings), some paraphrased psalms, some re-written hymns based loosely on the psalms, then closely Bible imitating hymns, looser hymns, shading out to the innovative new songs. By this gradation the vital difference is eroded, blurred, destroyed!

No-one, in the Psalms section, can be sure whether he or she is offering inspired or man-made worship! And you can rest assured that our isolated Reformed faithful, urging Biblical psalms (or begging for at least an admixture of Psalms so that they can, in good conscience, vocally worship God) in their churches and fellowships across the nation will soon be confronted with this new production, given an occasional selection from 'part 1: psalms' and made to feel very self-righteous and Pharisaic indeed if they demur (however extreme the paraphrase may be). We rightly rejected and continue to reject Bibles with the 'Apocrypha', because what God has written cannot be confounded with what is man-made. Here (in this new song-book)

the 'apocrypha' far outweighs the Biblical. Let all those who would genuinely seek to be Biblically reformed have nothing to do with this forthcoming production! Are there, then, lessons to be learned from this? Indeed there are. We may claim the regulative principle and make our boast of adherence to the Psalms in worship. Fine.

But the Presbyterian churches have allowed a plethora of Psalm versions and renderings to build up, many of which themselves shade away from accuracy for the sake of 'tune' and 'popularity'. The reformed who genuinely believe in the regulative principle in worship can only defend that position if they have a clear antithesis from, and not common ground with, evangelical hymn-singers. Our rock, fortress and citadel is that what we offer in sung worship is inspired, a God-provided part of the Bible. If the Hebrew psalms were indeed metrical, then the metrical English version (or whatever language version you care to name) must be provably at least as textually and verbally accurate as our common 'prose' version. This does not necessarily mean exactly the old Puritan versions. But it does mean that we must take seriously the task of developing our Psalmody (and then tunes, and after that singing abilities) if we are not to be marginalised and swamped, and if (far more vitally) our Sovereign God is to receive worship well-pleasing to Him.

(And, by the by, if you believe that the regulative principle excludes 'instrumental music' in worship here is what "Praise!" offers; "Guitar chords are given throughout". Yes, that includes all the Psalms, genuine, adulterated or spurious!)

Stephen Westcott. Bristol 1999.

Let us come before His
presence with thanksgiving
and make a joyful noise
unto Him with
Psalms.

Psalm 95 : 2.