

What Should We Sing?

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The Question.

Should we sing Psalms only? ‘Exclusive Psalmody’ is the teaching that, in the worship of the church, we should sing all, and only, the 150 Psalms found in the biblical Book of Psalms. We are not allowed to sing hymns. Hymn singing is sinning against God.

There is no unity on this question among the reformed churches. On one hand, for example, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America states, ‘The Book of Psalms, consisting of inspired psalms, hymns and songs, is the divinely authorized manual of praise. The use of other songs in worship is not authorized in the Scriptures’ (*Constitution*, A-63). On the other hand, the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in 1947, considered a report by John Murray and William Young advocating exclusive psalmody, and rejected it. The OPC sings hymns and psalms. Notice that the difference is not over whether we sing Psalms: we all do. It is over whether we sing Psalms *only*.

The issue is important for at least three reasons. First, it concerns the worship of God. What can be more important? God has called us and saved us in order that we might offer spiritual sacrifices and tell out his praise (1 Peter 2:5,9). We do not want to offer that which is unacceptable in his sight. Second, those who sing hymns stand accused of sin. Bushell has written, ‘Entire churches, even entire groups of churches, can and have fallen into sinful practices.’ ‘The man who prefers a humanly composed song to one written by the Spirit of God... is, to say the least, lacking in spiritual discernment. And the man who would mix together in one book the inspired songs of God with the uninspired songs of sinful men... is, whether he knows it or not, guilty of sacrilege.’¹ These serious charges must be tested. Third, the issue divides believers.

The Case for Exclusive Psalmody

The starting point is the Regulative Principle of Worship, which states that we ought to offer only what God has commanded. We must have biblical warrant for what we do. The Westminster Confession of Faith says, ‘the 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’ (21.1). There is no disagreement over this among the reformed churches.

Applying the Regulative Principle, what may we sing? Exclusive Psalmody answers, Only what is (1) *inspired* and (2) *authorized*. First, we have warrant to sing *only what is inspired*. Uninspired hymns are devised by man’s imagination. Second, it is not enough that a song be inspired: we must actually have a command to sing it. There are inspired songs outside the Psalter; for example, Deuteronomy 32; Habakkuk 3; Luke 1:46-55, 67-79; Revelation 4:8,11; 5:9-10, 12-13. But these may not be sung because the only portion authorized for use is the Psalter.

Consequently, we may *not* sing,

*Holy, holy, holy,
Lord, God Almighty,*

Who was and is and is to come! (Rev 4:8)

And we may *not* sing,

*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and riches and wisdom,*

and strength and honour and glory and blessing! (Rev 5:12)

Saints and angels sing these words in heaven but we on earth have no authority to sing them – even though heaven is the pattern for earthly worship. We are strictly limited to the Book of Psalms.

We *ought* to sing of the sorrows of the exile, Psalm 137: ²

*By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, yea, we wept,
When we remembered Zion,*

.....

*O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed,
Happy the one who repays you as you have served us!
Happy the one who takes and dashes
Your little ones against the rock!*

We may *not* sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb in communion with those who stand upon the sea of glass:

*Great and marvellous are your works,
Lord God Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the saints. (Rev 15:3)*

John Keddie writes: ‘In principle, there can be no objection to the use of inspired songs found in Scripture outside the Psalter. Our concern is to use only what has divine sanction and approval. There is certainly sanction for the Book of Psalms. Such sanction is not clear in connection with other songs found in Scripture’.³ In summary, God has appointed all and only the 150 Psalms for the church to sing.

The Crucial Question

It is one thing to *assert* repeatedly that God has appointed the Psalter and that alone: it is another thing to *demonstrate* this assertion from Scripture. Iain Murray puts the question: ‘Where is the proof in Scripture that God appointed the one-hundred-and-fifty Psalms of David for the public worship of the Old Testament church?’⁴

Keddie offers four arguments: (1) the evidence of the Psalm titles; (2) the poetic form of the Psalms; (3) direct statements in the Psalms, and also elsewhere in Scripture; and (4) New Testament theology, i.e., ‘the book of Psalms is frequently cited in the New Testament’ and ‘To a significant extent, New Testament theology and experience are derived from the Psalms’ (pages 22-23).

The Arguments Examined

1. Psalm titles. These contain musical directions. ‘The fact that no fewer than 55 Psalms are addressed “to the Chief Musician” points eloquently to the purpose of the Psalms.’

This reasoning faces three difficulties. First, not all Psalms have titles, and not all titles are musical, so that this does not establish that *all* psalms were intended for singing. Second, some doubt whether the titles are part of the original Hebrew text. Allan Harman represents this caution: ‘These titles may not have originally been part of the psalms, but they are certainly very early’.⁵ Keddie admits that the titles are simply ‘of considerable antiquity’, yet he adds ‘and perfectly authentic’. What can this last phrase mean? Are they part of the original text or not? We are left in doubt. Third, if the titles are original, and if we accept that they are equivalent to a command to sing, then what shall we say about the Prayer of Habakkuk which has the same kind of instruction: ‘To the Chief Musician, With My Stringed Instruments’ (Hab. 3:19)? Here is a dilemma: either musical titles do

not constitute warrant to sing, in which case we must dismiss this first argument, or we have warrant to sing material outside the Book of Psalms and we are no longer able to advocate exclusive psalm singing.

2. Poetic Form. The Psalms have a ‘rhythmical structure’ which was ‘no doubt designed to be consistent with an underlying musical form’.

It is true that the Psalms are poetry and, in Hebrew, they have a special system of accents which are ‘musically significant’ (*Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §15d). However, other books are also in poetic form – Song of Songs, Lamentations, most of the Prophets – and two share the special system of accents (Proverbs and Job). If this proves that we should sing the Psalms, then we have warrant to sing much more Scripture. But it does not prove warrant to sing.

3. Direct Commands of Scripture. We are commanded to sing psalms.

*Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving;
let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms (Psalm 95:2).
Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him;
talk of all His wondrous works! (Psalm 105:2).*

But what does this mean? Which psalms? Not all and only the 150! First of all, when these words were penned, some Psalms had not been written and the Book of Psalms had not been compiled. Bushell admits this (page 14). Second, the Hebrew word ‘psalm’, *mizmôr* (in 57 titles), is not the term used here. In Psalm 95:2, we have *zamôr*, ‘song’ and in Psalm 105:2, the verb *zimmôr*, ‘sing, make music, play an instrument’. In these verses, we are encouraged to speak about all the LORD’s wonderful deeds *in songs, with music*.

Psalm 105 does exactly that, it rehearses God’s dealings with his covenant people: his covenant with the patriarchs, how he brought Israel into Egypt through Joseph, and afterwards delivered them and brought them into Canaan, their inheritance. The plagues are rehearsed in detail in verses 27-36. Since Israel settled in Canaan, much history has passed. Today do we not have more wonderful works of God to sing about? Jeremiah looked forward to a deliverance that would eclipse the exodus (Jeremiah 23:7,8). Indeed, we no longer keep the Passover: Christ is our Passover.

Sing of ALL God’s wonderful works! Moses did at the Red Sea (Exod. 15); David did when the LORD delivered him (e.g., Psalm 18); the redeemed in heaven extol the Lamb (Rev 5:9). Should not the songs of the church be filled with the deliverance accomplished by Christ Jesus at Calvary?

The New Testament commands the church to sing ‘psalms and hymns and spiritual songs’ (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). What did Paul mean? Keddie acknowledges that there is ‘no general agreement about the meaning of this threefold description’ (page 28). He suggests that ‘It seems perfectly reasonable’ to take them ‘as referring to the Psalter’ (page 29). This is subjective and less than certain. Since it is admittedly doubtful, Keddie’s conclusion, that ‘these texts provide not one shred of warrant for the adoption of non-inspired materials of praise in worship’ (page 30) begs the question. This triad of terms – psalms, hymns, and songs – could refer to the Psalms, but each of these terms also denotes sacred songs outside the Psalter. (The Corinthians seem to have composed their own psalms, 1 Cor 14:26, which Keddie accepts.) If anyone wants to insist that Paul here restricts us to the Psalter, he must demonstrate it from the text.

It is claimed that the proof is in the word ‘spiritual’. We are told that ‘spiritual’ means ‘a measure of inspiration’ (page 30). What can such an expression possibly mean – 50% inspired? Roland Ward is similarly vague: ‘It appears that the term “spiritual” points beyond mere sacred song to inspired songs’ (*Psalms in Christian Worship*, page 16). How unsatisfactory! The two terms *pneumatikos* ‘spiritual’ and *theopneustos* ‘inspired’ are not identical. A spiritual man is indwelt and led by the Holy Spirit but not inspired in his

speech (1 Cor. 2:14-15). Careful semantics will not permit us to slide imperceptibly from one to the other.

Why did Paul not simply refer to ‘the Book of Psalms’ as in Luke 20:42 and Acts 1:20? Why not say ‘inspired’, as in 2 Timothy 3:16? He chose general language similar to Psalms 95:2 and 105:2.

The demand that we sing only inspired words leads to a further difficulty. Reformed doctrine defines inspiration as plenary and verbal. The *very words* of the original Hebrew were inspired. Putting the text into English metrical form necessitates *adding words*. This is true whichever Psalter is used. Strictly speaking, metrical psalms are not inspired but are an approximation with some paraphrasing.

In *Sing Psalms*, the new version of the Psalms produced by the Free Church of Scotland, ‘Psalm 23’ begins as follows:

*The LORD is my shepherd; no want shall I know;
He makes me lie down where the green pastures grow;
He leads me to rest where the calm waters flow.*

Beautiful! But the words ‘know’, ‘grow’, ‘flow’, and ‘to rest’ do not appear in the inspired text. In the *Scottish Psalter*, Psalm 100’s opening line, ‘Shout to the LORD all the earth,’ becomes ‘All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.’ ‘People’, ‘do dwell’, and ‘cheerful voice’, are added by the uninspired composer.

4. New Testament Theology. The argument is that New Testament revelation is fully represented in the 150 Psalms so that we do not need to supplement it. ‘To a significant degree, New Testament theology and experience are derived from the Psalms’ (Keddie, page 23). Bushell rests his case on ‘the sufficiency of the Psalter’ (page 10). He quotes Dr George, that ‘no book in the Bible reveals Christ with such fullness as is done in the Book of Psalms, not excepting the Gospel according to John or the Epistle to the Hebrews’ (page 22).

True, the Psalms speak of Christ. Does this prove exclusive psalmody? It encourages us to sing Psalms but it is hardly an argument against Christian hymns.

What about Bushell’s claim that the Psalms surpass the New Testament revelation of Christ? How can we reconcile that with the Bible’s testimony about itself? The mystery of Christ ‘in other ages was not made known, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets’ (Eph. 3:3-5; see Heb. 1:1,2; 2 Tim. 1:10). We have more than David had. We know about Jesus, incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended, and Pentecost. We have the new covenant in his blood, Paul’s theology, John’s celestial visions and so on. John Calvin plainly declares the advantage of the community of the New Testament: Christ, although he was known to the Jews under the Law, was at length clearly revealed only in the Gospel (*Institutes*, 2.9.1). Robert Letham makes a similar observation about the Trinity, quoting Gregory Nazianzen: ‘The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son... it was necessary that, increasing little by little... the full splendor of the Trinity should gradually shine forth’.⁶

The OT, including Psalms, anticipates Christ in promises, prophecy, and types, in a shadowy way. Those shadows have been taken away: for example, the altar is removed (Ps 51: 19; 20:6; 118:27 etc.).

Conclusion

We are indebted to such as John Keddie for the reminder of the great value of the Psalms. If the church grasps the Christological depth of the Psalms, it will derive great blessing from singing them. We are indebted to the Free Church for producing *Sing Psalms* and to the Reformed Presbyterians for *The Psalms for Singing, A 21st Century*

Edition. Let the Psalms never fall into disuse. But the arguments presented, to prove that we must sing all the psalms and nothing else, have not stood the test.

We are not persuaded of the *strictly exclusive* psalmody doctrine. And we fear that reformed churches that sing hymns have been falsely accused.

Those who hold to exclusive psalmody believe that they stand in the purest reformed tradition. This is doubtful. The Free Church of Scotland, for example, did not adopt exclusive Psalmody until 1910 and in recent General Assemblies questions have been asked about the practice. Geneva's Psalter, 1543, contained 49 psalms, the *Nunc Dimittis*, *Ave Maria*, musical versions of the Ten Commandments, Apostles' Creed and Lord's Prayer, and two graces. A fuller account is given by Nick Needham in *The Westminster Confession, into the 21st Century*, Volume 2, Mentor, 2004, page 256. Calvin probably composed the hymn, 'I greet Thee who my sure Redeemer art'. Thomas Manton, a leading Presbyterian at the Westminster Assembly, wrote: 'we do not forbid other songs; if grave and pious, after good advice, they may be received into the church. Tertullian, in his *Apology*, sheweth that in the primitive times, they used this liberty.' (Tertullian, AD 160-225, was writing about the beginnings of the church.)

Do we have a mandate to compose and sing hymns? Yes, we do. It is found in Psalms 95:2, 105:2, Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Thus, '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). The Word of Christ should richly fill our singing. If heaven resounds to the new song, how can we deny the church on earth the joy and privilege of praising God and adoring the Lamb who was slain? How can we sing without ever naming the name of Jesus? How can we speak of the mighty victory of Christ incarnate in shadows and not plainly, richly and fully? If our hymns faithfully reflect the doctrine of the New Testament, and richly express the glory of God and the work of Christ, we believe that we are doing what is acceptable to the Lord.

Psalm 105 praises God. Yet, as we sing it, we find ourselves singing at length about the waters turning to blood, and dead fish, abundant frogs, swarms of flies, lice in all their territories, hail for rain, stricken vines, locusts etc. (Psalm 105: 29-35). Shall we sing about the plagues in Egypt and not also sing about the Good News?

'Glory be to God the Father, glory be to God the Son, glory be to God the Spirit.' 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.' 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice' (Luke 1:46-55). 'Let us of Christ, our Lord and Saviour sing, For, though God's equal, though eternal King, He did not to His rightful glory cling. Hallelujah, hallelujah!' (Philippians 2:5-11). Blessed be God, our God, who gave for us his well-beloved Son....' 'When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died....' 'Christ is risen! Hallelujah! Risen our victorious head! Sing His praises! Hallelujah! Christ is risen from the dead! 'Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne...' Done is the work that saves, once and for ever done.... Then to the Lamb once slain, be glory, praise and power, who died and lives again, who liveth evermore, who loved and washed us in His blood, who makes us kings and priests to God.' 'A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing.' 'The God of Abraham praise, who reigns enthroned above, Ancient of everlasting days, and God of love.' This is our confession and this is our song. The Holy Spirit has taught us these things in and through the Scriptures. We rejoice in this. God is glorified.

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Notes

1. Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion. A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody*, 3rd ed., Crown and Covenant Publications, Pittsburgh, 1999, pages 4 and 11.
2. Rowland Ward, *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, 1992, pages 44-50.
3. John Keddie, *Sing the Lord's Song*, The Knox Press, Edinburgh, 1994, page 11.
4. Iain H Murray, *The Psalter – the Only Hymnal?* Banner of Truth, 2001, page 7
5. Allan Harman, *Commentary on the Psalms*, Christian Focus, 1998, page 14.
6. Robert Letham, *The Trinity*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg NJ, page 33.