

WHY WE SING THE PSALMS

*A SCRIPTURAL CASE FOR
EXCLUSIVE PSALMODY*

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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, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 5:18-20

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.

Colossians 3:16

Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.1b

But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped 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.¹

Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.5

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience to God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart;² 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.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 50

Q. What is required in the second commandment? A. The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his Word.³

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 51

Q. What is forbidden in the second commandment? A. The second commandment forbiddeth the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his Word.⁴

¹ Deut. 12:32; Matt. 15:9; Acts 17:25; Matt. 4:9-10; Deut. 4:15-20; Ex. 20:4-6; Col. 2:23

² Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19; Jm. 5:13

³ Deut. 12:32; Matt. 28:20

⁴ Deut. 4:15-19; Rm. 1:22-23; Lev. 10:1-2; Jer. 19:4-5; Col. 2:18-23

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, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 5:18-20

THE ONE GREAT NEED OF THE HOUR

At this very moment, our world lies in a state of utter chaos. The moral and religious fabric of western civilization is, at best, hanging by a thread. The institution of the family is crumbling; unscrupulous tyrants threaten our most basic civil and religious liberties; meanwhile the church languishes in a sorry state of confusion, cowardice, and compromise.

At a time like this, the last thing we can afford to cultivate is a spirit of disunity among Reformed believers. The last thing we need is yet another contentious debate over peripherals. Sadly, this is precisely what so many Reformed Christians are doing at this very hour. Rather than joining forces in unified opposition to the kingdom of darkness, they prefer to “spend and be spent” in endless, heated, hairsplitting debates with their brethren on various forms of social media.

Tragically, our church courts are often no better. Rather than uniting to advance the cause of Christ in a lost and dying world, we can so easily fall into gnat-straining, camel-swallowing disputes, battling our brethren on the feisty fringes of intramural Presbyterian polemics. Meanwhile, we ignore what is most vital to the spiritual wellbeing and witness of our local flocks. As a result, the world of sin and unbelief continues to cast its ever-widening death-shadow over our rapidly decaying culture.

1. Five Crucial Words

Ephesians 5:18 contains five crucial words that we simply cannot afford to ignore at a time like this. I do not hesitate to assert that no five words in all the Bible are more vital or

more relevant for the Church of Jesus Christ in our day than these: “Be filled with the Spirit!”

This magnificent imperative was, of course, directed by the Apostle Paul to the Church at Ephesus in the first century. At that time, Ephesus was a prominent and wealthy city. It was also filled to the brim with drunkenness, idolatry, immorality, and perversion. As Paul indicates, it was characterized by utter “dissipation”, which literally refers to something that is wasting away, unsaved, or unsalvageable. In other words, Ephesus boasted a culture very similar to our own. These Ephesian believers likely faced many of the same intimidating challenges that our congregations are facing at the present time. And yet, in the midst of it all, the Apostle does not lose hope. He is confident that their public witness can mightily prevail even in this hostile environment, if only they would “be filled with the Spirit.” But how exactly are we to understand these words?

Paul is evidently building here upon his well-known prayer for the Ephesian Church just two chapters earlier (3:14-21). There he had humbly “bowed his knees before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” earnestly pleading that He would “strengthen” them “with might by his Spirit in the inner man” and “that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith.” He prayed that they, “being rooted and grounded in love,” might “comprehend with all the saints” the infinite dimensions of “the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge,” and be “filled with all the fullness of God.” If this prayer could be reduced to a single brief petition, it would undoubtedly be this: *that the Ephesians would “be filled with the Spirit.”*

Now, of course, Paul is *not* praying for their regeneration. Generally speaking, these Ephesians are born-again believers, fully indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). They have no need of regeneration. What they need is to experience *greater degrees of the Spirit’s influence*. In fact, the phrase “Be filled with the Spirit” is probably best translated as “Go on being *increasingly* filled with the Spirit.”

For the Ephesians, such an exhortation would have brought to mind Paul's first visit to Ephesus (Acts 19). On that occasion, he had met twelve disciples who were unfamiliar with anything beyond the message and baptism of John. Upon hearing and believing the full-fledged Christian gospel, these disciples were immediately baptized with water and filled with the Holy Spirit. Afterward, Paul preached in the synagogue for three months, then taught in the school of Tyrannus for about two years. Gradually, the witness of this tiny, Spirit-filled congregation gained significant momentum, such that "the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (Acts 19:20). The Holy Spirit proceeded to convert a great multitude of sinners in Ephesus, delivering them from their previous life of dissipation, and bringing them into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. At one point, a large group of new converts piled up all their magic books and idolatrous items into a great heap and burned them publicly. That heap of demonic rubbish was worth about 50,000 pieces of silver!

The number of Ephesian converts was so staggeringly high that the local Chamber of Commerce soon began to panic. Ephesus was home to the great Temple of Diana and had built its economy largely upon the marketing of idolatrous goods and services. Due to the saving work of the Holy Spirit, sales plummeted and local businesses started to suffer. This led to a riot in the streets and attempts by influential vendors to spark anti-Christian persecution by the local authorities. Despite this opposition, the church continued to grow.

Paul's readers, therefore, were not at all unfamiliar with what it meant to "be filled with the Spirit." Many of them had experienced it firsthand in the past. Nevertheless, in order to be effective witnesses for Christ in Ephesus, they needed to "Go on being *increasingly* filled with the Spirit!"

This is undoubtedly an exhortation that we need to hear today in the 21st century western church. We need to be reminded that our dissipating, seemingly unsalvageable culture is no match for the saving power of the Holy Spirit. The church may be in a remarkably low condition, but all

hope is not lost. The Holy Spirit of God can powerfully revive us and enable us to turn this hostile world upside down. He has done it before and He can do it again. We can point to many glorious revivals in past centuries on both sides of the Atlantic, but such nostalgia is not enough. We ourselves must *go on being increasingly filled with the Holy Spirit!*

Whoever you are, and whatever church or denomination you represent, if you are a true Christian, then I am absolutely confident that we are in total agreement upon this one point: *Our churches desperately need to “go on being increasingly filled with the Holy Spirit!”*

2. *The Importance of Congregational Singing*

All of this serves to raise a very important question: *How can we be increasingly filled with the Holy Spirit?* In other words, *How might our local congregations and communities be transformed by the same power that transformed Ephesus?* Thankfully, Paul helps to answer this question by what immediately follows in verse 19. “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.” According to the Apostle, we are increasingly filled with the Spirit in connection with our worship of God, and, in particular, our congregational singing.

Of course, we must not imagine that congregational singing is the *only* means (or even the *primary* means) by which believers “drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). God has established a variety of channels by which He freely communicates spiritual grace to His people. These include prayer, the sacraments, the reading of Scripture, and especially the faithful preaching and hearing of His word. By God’s grace, we can be increasingly filled with the Holy Spirit in a number of different settings, including private, family, and corporate worship. It would be a great mistake, therefore, to overemphasize the role of congregational singing, as if it *alone* held the key to unlock widespread spiritual revival.

It would be equally erroneous to disregard Paul's emphasis altogether. Quite clearly, he is drawing our attention to congregational singing as an aspect of the Christian life that is absolutely vital to our spiritual wellbeing and witness. In Colossians 3:16, he prefaces a similar command regarding the singing of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" with an exhortation to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." For Paul, the singing of praise is integrally connected not only with our being increasingly filled with the Spirit, but also with our being increasingly indwelt by the living and active word of Christ.

All of this stems from the nature of praise itself. When we sing praise to God, we join together to honor, adore, and thank Him for who He is and what He has done. True praise stirs up our minds to a greater knowledge *of* God, our wills to a greater love *for* God, and our emotions to a greater delight *in* God. In other words, it serves to revive us spiritually. Praising God is one of the "first works" which helps to rekindle our "first love" (Rev. 2:4-5), thereby rekindling our collective witness. God has established His church in this fallen world as a "spiritual house" of worship and a "holy priesthood", "to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" and to "proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Surely the need for such praise could not be more pressing than at this present hour.

3. The Content of Congregational Singing

Paul's robust emphasis on congregational singing raises two additional questions: (1) *What* is he calling us to sing? And (2) *How* is he calling us to sing?

Many today emphasize the importance of *how* we should sing, and rightly so. Singing the right songs in the wrong way is not a partial victory, but a total disaster. Paul exhorts his readers to "make melody in your heart to the Lord" by "singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). When we draw near to the Lord merely with our lips

and not with our hearts, we invite His just wrath and fatherly displeasure (Isa. 29:6, 13). This is because we are neglecting an essential element of true worship, which is always to be “in spirit” (Jn. 4:24). Undoubtedly, much of what tends to limit the vitality and effectiveness of Reformed churches today stems from the chronic neglect of this very issue.

At the same time, the importance of *how* we should sing should in no way diminish the importance of *what* we should sing. This too is a vital question, and one that will receive the lion’s share of our attention throughout the remainder of this booklet. Our Lord not only requires our worship to be “in spirit” but also “in truth” (Jn. 4:24). He is greatly concerned not only with the *manner* of our praise, but also with its *content*. Indeed, what could be more calculated to impact our *manner* of praise (for better or for worse) than the very *words* that we are singing to God?

This brings us back to the issue of lyrical content. What songs is the Apostle exhorting us to sing in Ephesians 5:19? He refers to “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”, but how exactly are we to understand this phrase? In seeking to answer this question, it is best to start with the basics. Whatever else Paul may be saying here, one thing is for certain: *he is calling us to sing what God wants us to sing*. Now, you may say “That’s too simplistic!” and perhaps it is. But the fact remains that whatever Paul is calling us to sing in this verse, it is unquestionably what God *wants* us to sing, and what God has *commanded* us to sing. Allow me to explain what I mean by this.

4. *Worship as Service*

Scripturally speaking, *worship* is an act of *service*. In fact, one of the Greek words frequently used in the New Testament to describe *worship* is commonly translated as “service”. For instance, in Philippians 3:3, Paul states that “we are the circumcision, who worship God in the spirit.” Yet in certain other places (e.g. Rom. 1:9, 25; 2 Tim. 1:3), this same word is rendered “service”. When Hebrews 12:29 exhorts us to “serve

God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (Heb. 12:28 NKJV), the English Standard Version accurately translates the word “serve” as “worship”. In both Testaments, “worship” and “service” are often interchangeable. To *serve* idols is to *worship* idols (Ex. 20:5; 1 Thes. 1:9). To *serve* God is to *worship* God (Josh. 24:15; Matt. 4:10). Even in our own day, many churches commonly refer to their stated worship assemblies as worship *services*.

If our worship truly is an act of *service* to God, then it is incumbent upon us to give Him precisely what He has *ordered*. To illustrate this point, we turn briefly to the world of food service. Let’s say that I walk up to the window at Pat’s Cheesesteaks in Philadelphia. After taking a moment to consider the menu, I promptly order a “pizza steak” with meat and provolone, topped with onions, cheese whiz, and marinara sauce, minus the peppers. Now, what would happen if the server came back several minutes later and handed me a cheesesteak that not only included everything that I had requested, but, in addition, was covered with chocolate syrup, rainbow sprinkles, and a handful of jet-puffed mini marshmallows? At this point, I would have a legitimate complaint, would I not? The basis for my complaint would be that the server’s duty was to give me *exactly what I asked for* with no additions or subtractions.

Now, let’s say that I approach the restaurant manager to inquire, “Why were these extra toppings added to my order?” And let’s say she responds by saying,

Look, you don’t understand our situation here. We have a chef back in the kitchen and he finds great pleasure in putting all of this extra stuff on people’s cheesesteaks. He really gets a kick out of it; plus it allows him to use his creative gifts and to express his personal individuality in all sorts of fresh, relevant, and meaningful ways. In fact, our policy of permitting chefs to add spontaneous toppings to people’s cheesesteaks has made this a popular place to work. It’s so much easier now to hire and retain employees back in the kitchen. And it’s so much

more fun to work here than it was in the past, when we just gave the customers exactly what they ordered.

You wouldn't put up with this kind of service at a restaurant, would you? In the arena of food service, customers rightly expect to receive exactly what they have ordered: nothing more, nothing less. It is irrelevant whether or not the server finds his task to be fun or entertaining. A server's job is to fulfill the customer's order, period.

Once again, imagine that you are seated at a table inside an Italian restaurant, having just ordered the chicken Alfredo. Before too long, the server returns with your plate of food and you begin to eat. Almost immediately, however, you realize that something is just not right with your meal. Upon closer inspection, you discover that the "chicken" in your chicken Alfredo isn't chicken at all; it's a tofu substitute! You promptly call the server over to your table for an explanation, at which point she replies, "Look, I hear your concern, but you don't understand the chef back in the kitchen. He objects to serving chicken on moral grounds. I mean, they're actually killing these chickens by the thousands and he considers the whole process to be inhumane. So he gave you the tofu instead, because it's milder and gentler, more in keeping with today's progressive values, and better suited to his personality."

Sound ridiculous? It should. The problem is that a similar mindset has gained widespread acceptance among churches with respect to their worship services, and God is not pleased. He has given us an order of worship in His word, and expects us to give him exactly what he has ordered: *no more, no less.*

5. *The Regulative Principle of Worship*

In Deuteronomy 12:32, the Lord declares, "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it." In Reformed circles, this is commonly called the Regulative Principle of Worship. It teaches that whatever is not commanded by God in His Word must be excluded from our worship. Applied to congregational

singing, this means that we should only sing the worship songs which God has commanded us to sing, with no additions or subtractions. Evidently, this was the outlook of the Apostle Paul (Col. 2:22-23) and of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 15:1-9) concerning matters of worship, and it will be our guiding principle throughout the remainder of this study.

By this point, I hope we can all agree that in congregational worship we should only be singing what God has commanded us to sing. As important as this truth is, however, it merely serves to raise several other important questions, such as: *What exactly has God commanded us to sing? Has he commanded us to sing certain inspired songs from the Bible or uninspired songs composed by godly people in church history? Or, perhaps, has He commanded us to sing a combination of both?*

To answer these questions, we must search the Scriptures for various forms of Biblical warrant. There are three main forms of Biblical warrant by which we may conclude that God has authorized a particular worship practice. *First*, we are to look for explicit commands, such as our Lord's command to "baptize" in Matthew 28:19. *Second*, we are to look for approved historical examples, such as the apostolic pattern of meeting for corporate worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). *Third*, we are to draw good and necessary logical inferences from the explicit teaching of Scripture, such as the deduction that credibly professing Christian women (as well as men) may partake of the Lord's Supper.¹

If, after a careful examination of the Scriptures, the lyrical content of our congregational singing is found to lack at least one form of conclusive Biblical warrant, it must be abandoned in favor of lyrics which do possess conclusive Biblical warrant.

¹ While the New Testament contains no explicit command or approved historical example of women partaking of the Lord's Supper, such may be deduced by way of logical inference from a variety of relevant texts (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:26-28; Gal. 3:28).

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING IN SCRIPTURE

As noted above, our goal in surveying the Scriptures is to identify any explicit commands, approved historical examples, or conclusive logical inferences which might shed light upon the divinely authorized lyrical content of our congregational singing. We begin with a consideration of the Old Testament.

1. *Old Testament — From Adam to Moses*

For our purposes, the first era of redemptive history takes place between the fall of Adam and the birth of Moses. During this space of time, there are no recorded examples of congregational singing in the Bible. This does not necessarily mean that God's people never sang praises to Him in corporate worship during this period. It simply means that the Bible is silent regarding it.

2. *Old Testament — From Moses to David*

The next period of redemptive history extends from the birth of Moses until the period of the Judges, or just before King Saul and King David arrive on the scene. During this period, there are several instances of congregational singing, including three songs attributed to Moses.

First, there is the *Song of the Sea* (Ex. 15:1-21), which was written by Moses, possibly with the help of his sister Miriam the prophetess, who eventually led the Israelite women in the singing of this song. *Second*, there is the *Song of Moses* (Deut. 32:1-43), by which Moses instructed Israel concerning God's covenant faithfulness and their duty to obey Him in the promised land. Moses and Joshua, we are told, "spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people" after which Moses urged them to "set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today." *Third*, there is Psalm 90, which is described as "a prayer of Moses, the man of God" and provides a contemplative meditation upon God's kindness and severity toward the generation of Israelites which died in the

wilderness.² In addition to these three songs of Moses, the fifth chapter of Judges records the *Song of Deborah*, by which the brave prophetess commemorated God's deliverance of His people from the hands of Jabin, king of the Canaanites, and his commanding general, Sisera.

Much more could be said regarding these magnificent songs, but for our purposes, we need only highlight one simple fact: *all four of them were written by prophets (or prophetesses) under divine inspiration*. Were all of them sung on an ongoing basis in Israel's corporate worship? Not necessarily. The only one that we are certain was intended for ongoing congregational singing is Psalm 90, which was included among the 150 inspired compositions contained in the Book of Psalms. In any case, all of them were inspired.

3. Old Testament — From David to the Babylonian Exile

The next period in redemptive history takes place between the birth of King David and the Babylonian Exile. During this era, God raised up David to write many of Israel's worship

² Advocates of uninspired hymnody will sometimes point to the fact that Psalm 90 is called a "prayer" as evidence that Biblical *praise* should be regulated analogously to Biblical *prayer*. The argument goes something like this: "Some praise songs within the Book of Psalms are called prayers. Therefore, if we allow uninspired prayers, we must also allow uninspired praise songs." This attempt to pivot from one element of worship to another is, however, not without its drawbacks. Logically speaking, it could be made to justify the introduction of all sorts of unbiblical worship practices, such as female preachers and uninspired Scripture readings. For instance, one could employ this same line of reasoning to argue that "Some reading portions within the Bible are called prayers. Therefore, if we allow uninspired prayers, we must also allow uninspired readings." In similar fashion, one could argue, "The singing of praise is sometimes called 'teaching and admonishing' (Col. 3:16). Therefore, if we allow women to sing praise within the congregation, we must also allow them to 'teach and admonish' the congregation." When applying the Regulative Principle of Worship, it is always best and safest to let the Bible define each element of worship distinctly rather than to mix and match the various elements, as if all were to be regulated identically.

songs and to establish a more organized, centralized pattern of worship in Jerusalem, culminating with the construction of the temple by his son Solomon. Second Samuel 23:1-2 records David's final words, wherein he describes his authorship of most of the 150 Psalms.

Now these are the last words of David. Thus says David the son of Jesse; thus says the man raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel: the Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue.

David here reflects on the fact that God had anointed Him, not only with ceremonial oil to be Israel's king, but also with the Holy Spirit to be the "sweet psalmist of Israel" who would compose Israel's worship songs. Since David was an inspired prophet of God (Acts 2:30), he could declare, concerning the lyrics that he wrote, that "the Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue."

In addition to writing the inspired lyrics for Israel's praise, David appointed a number of Levitical prophets — many of them descended from Korah by way of Samuel (1 Chron. 6:31-34; 15:16-17) — to write and sing congregational worship songs. In 1 Chronicles 25:1-3, we read,

Moreover David and the captains of the army separated for the service some of the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals. And the number of the skilled men performing their service was: Of the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah, and Asharelah; the sons of Asaph were under the direction of Asaph, who prophesied according to the order of the king. Of Jeduthun, the sons of Jeduthun: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiiah, Shimei, Hashabiah, and Mattithiah, six, under the direction of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with a harp to give thanks and to praise the LORD.

Notice that the Bible here equates the *authoring of worship lyrics* with *prophesying*. Those set apart to compose the lyrics for Israel's congregational singing are, in effect, inspired prophets of God. This was absolutely necessary because, so far as we can tell from Scripture, the *only* lyrics which God authorized for congregational singing were *inspired* lyrics.

Unfortunately, as the decades rolled by, Israel's worship practices frequently veered off course into the realm of idolatry and human innovation. Thankfully, these dark periods of declension were often followed by seasons of fresh spiritual revival and reformation. One such revival took place in the southern kingdom of Judah during the reign of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chron. 29-32).

During the reign of Hezekiah's father Ahaz, the worship of God at the temple had been corrupted by idols and largely replaced by unauthorized worship at the "high places". Writing several decades later, the prophet Amos rebuked those who were "at ease in Zion" because they would "sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for themselves musical instruments like David" (Amos 6:1, 5). In other words, "not content with old ones, such as were used in former times, they invented new instruments and new tunes, and new songs to sing to them."³ While we cannot be certain that these uninspired songs were sung in corporate worship, it is clear that the Biblical pattern of congregational singing, led by the Levites at the temple, had fallen on hard times. The temple itself had been ravaged by idolatry, such that its courts were filled with rubbish, its doors closed, its gates in need of repair, and its ministers — the priests and Levites — thoroughly unsanctified and unprepared to lead public worship (2 Chron. 29:1-19).

Under Hezekiah's leadership, God's people returned to the old paths of Biblical worship, as established by Moses, David, and Solomon. On the very first day of his reign, "he opened the doors of the house of the LORD", "brought in the priests

³ John Gill's commentary on Amos 6:5.

and the Levites”, and urged them to “sanctify yourselves, sanctify the house of the LORD God of your fathers, and carry out the rubbish from the holy place” (2 Chron. 29:1-5, 17). Then he convened a worship service at the temple, in which the priests offered up sacrifices on God’s altar “to make an atonement for Israel” (2 Chron. 29:20-24).

He also reinstated Israel’s corporate praise according to the inspired “commandment of David, of Gad the king’s seer, and of Nathan the prophet” in keeping with “the commandment of the LORD by his prophets” (2 Chron. 29:25). Therefore, “King Hezekiah and the leaders commanded the Levites to sing praise to the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer” (2 Chron. 29:30).⁴

⁴ Isaiah 38:9 records for us “the writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick and had recovered from his sickness.” In this poetic declaration, the king goes on to exclaim (v. 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.” Some have attempted to use this statement as a justification for the use of uninspired songs in congregational praise. They reason that because Hezekiah’s songs were sung in God’s house, and because we are not explicitly told that they were inspired, that this constitutes an approved historical example of uninspired song lyrics in Israel’s public worship. There are, however, several problems with this line of reasoning. *First*, the burden of proof remains upon the advocate of uninspired hymnody to bring forth *conclusive* evidence that God ever commanded or approved of this practice in His public worship. Since we are nowhere told that Hezekiah’s songs were uninspired, we must regard this evidence as *inconclusive*. *Second*, it is not entirely clear whether Isaiah 38:20 is referring to song lyrics. It could refer instead to a collection of musical instruments and/or a specific tune or melody. As such, the phrase “sing my songs with stringed instruments” (NKJV) is elsewhere translated “play my music on stringed instruments” (ESV). Perhaps Hezekiah is referring to the divinely prescribed musical instruments which he had personally restored to temple worship (2 Chron. 29:25-27) or to a Psalm tune which he himself had composed. *Third*, even if Hezekiah is referring to songs designated for congregational singing in the temple, it is more than likely that such songs would have been inspired, along the same lines as the inspired prophetic Prayer-Song of Habakkuk (3:1-19). Elsewhere, the Holy Spirit appears to have anointed Hezekiah to oversee

Notice that Hezekiah did not merely command the Levites to sing praise to the Lord. He specifically commanded them to sing the inspired, prophetic lyrics written by David and Asaph. In his mind, it was absolutely essential to this element of worship that the lyrics used in Israel's corporate praise be those which God Himself provided by way of special revelation. Hence, the reformation of Israel's worship under Hezekiah brought God's people back to the Psalms.

4. *Old Testament — From the Babylonian Exile to the Closing of the OT Canon*

The next major era in redemptive history takes place between the Babylonian Exile and the closing of the Old Testament canon, probably sometime during the late fifth century BC. During this period, the Lord eventually brings His people back to the land of promise. Under the leadership of Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, and others, He charges them to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, to rebuild God's holy temple on Mount Zion, and to reinstitute the divinely prescribed elements of public worship. Not surprisingly, this great period of revival and reformation featured a return to congregational Psalm-singing, as recorded in Nehemiah 12:45-46:

Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son. For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Eventually (probably under Ezra's inspired supervision), the Old Testament canon was closed. That is, the inspired books

the process of codifying certain portions of the inspired Book of Proverbs (Prov. 25:1). Moreover, this outburst of joy recorded in Isaiah 38:9-20 (in which he refers to "my music") *itself* has all the marks of inspiration. This passage is perhaps one of several inspired songs of joy, which he commanded to be sung during his supernaturally-extended lifetime. In any case, Isaiah 38:20 provides no conclusive evidence of a departure from the normative pattern of inspired congregational praise.

of the Old Testament took their final form and no further books or revelations were added. With this closing of the canon, the Book of Psalms (or Canonical Psalter) was finalized according to its permanent structure of five major divisions, containing 150 inspired songs for Israel's corporate praise.

It is noteworthy that the Canonical Psalter contains some inspired songs which appear elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example, the greater part of Psalm 18 appears in 2 Samuel 22. Meanwhile, not every inspired song recorded in the Hebrew Bible made it into the Canonical Psalter. Neither the *Songs of Moses* (Ex. 15; Deut. 32) nor the *Prayer-Song of Habakkuk* (3:1-19) were included among the 150 Psalms designated for Israel's ongoing public praise. This strongly suggests an element of inspired selectivity during the process of canonization. Not every inspired song was intended for perpetual use in Israel's corporate praise. In the same way that the Old Testament canon does not include every inspired revelation ever given by God (1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29; 12:15), so the Book of Psalms does not contain every inspired worship song ever sung by the Israelites. Rather, it includes those songs which God wisely chose to preserve as His people's inspired hymnal for generations to come.

5. *Old Testament — From the Closing of the OT Canon to the Birth of John*

During the 400 years between the closing of the Old Testament canon and the birth of John the Baptist, there was a period of revelatory *silence*. As such, there were no new prophets and, therefore, no new worship songs. The lyrical content of Israel's public praise was drawn entirely from the Book of Psalms. For over four centuries, God's people were content to sing from the inspired hymnal which God's special care and providence had placed inside their Hebrew Bible.

6. *Old Testament — From John's Birth to Christ's Death*

The next phase in redemptive history occurred between the Birth of John the Baptist and the death of our Savior. This

crucial era marks the last phase of the Old Testament, the all-important transition to the New, and a long-awaited end to the 400-year period of revelatory silence. With the celebrated births of John and Jesus, the floodgates of divine revelation seemed to burst forth like never before. This sudden outpouring of revelation brought with it a sudden reemergence of inspired songs, such as the *Song of Mary* (Luke 1:46-56), the *Song of Zachariah* (Luke 1:67-80), the *Song of Simeon* (Luke 2:29-35).

How exactly do these new songs fit into our survey of congregational singing in redemptive history? *First*, we must note that each of them is *inspired* by the Holy Spirit. *Second*, these songs were uttered by *individuals*. There is no indication that they were ever used for congregational singing by the apostolic church. At face value, they appear to be one-time utterances of certain individuals under prophetic inspiration. *Third*, Luke never once refers to these utterances as *songs*, nor records that they were actually *sung*. He simply records the words that were *spoken*. While it is true that the church has historically referred to these utterances as *songs*, this likely relates more to their poetic flavor than to any notion that they were literally sung to a specific tune or melody.

Perhaps the only clear-cut example of congregational praise during our Lord's earthly ministry occurs in Matthew 26:30, which states, "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." Here we find our Lord in the upper room with His apostles on the night in which He was betrayed. He has just celebrated His final Passover and instituted the Lord's Supper as a sacrament of the New Testament. Now, at this crucial moment, in connection with these two great acts of corporate worship, He leads the Eleven in congregational singing to the praise and glory of God.

At this point, an inevitable question arises out of the text: *What hymn did Jesus and His apostles sing?* Believe it or not, virtually all the commentators that I've consulted — including many who advocate the use of uninspired songs in worship — regard this *hymn* as a reference to the inspired Psalms. In

particular, they regard it as a reference to Egyptian Hallel (Psalm 113-118), the specific group of Psalms which the Jews customarily sang in connection with the Passover. The phrase “sang a hymn” literally means that they “hymned”. That is, it highlights *that* they sang, not *what* they sang. Very likely, they would have sung portions of the Egyptian Hallel throughout the meal and then concluded by singing Psalm 118, which speaks of Christ as “the stone which the builders rejected” who “has become the chief cornerstone” along with various other references to His victorious work of redemption. It is noteworthy that our Lord, who sang the Psalms exclusively throughout his entire religious life as a Jew, turns once again to Israel’s inspired hymnbook in preparation for the cross.

7. *New Testament — The Institution of the Lord’s Supper*

It would be a mistake for us to regard our Lord’s example in Matthew 26:30 as merely confirming the established pattern of Old Testament worship. It certainly does that; but its significance reaches far beyond that. We must never forget that this sacred assembly in the upper room not only featured the Passover; it also included the New Testament sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. By leading His disciples in the singing of praise from the Book of Psalms, our Lord is not only confirming the established pattern of Old Testament congregational singing; He is undoubtedly setting a precedent for New Testament congregational singing as well.

In Reformed circles, we tend to regard this original institution of the Lord’s Supper as normative for our practice today. When we see our Savior taking the cup “which is the new covenant”, breaking the bread, and giving thanks, we rightly regard these elements and actions as forming a Biblical pattern for New Testament worship. Unfortunately, we often stop there, forgetting that Jesus, in the upper room, provided us with a clear Biblical pattern for New Testament congregational singing. That is, He concluded the first-ever communion service by leading His disciples in the singing of inspired songs from the Book of Psalms.

In one sense, our Lord's actions here in the upper room may come as a bit of a surprise to us. We might be inclined to regard this as the perfect opportunity for Him to supply His New Testament Church with additional "gospel songs" for corporate worship. Indeed, if He *was* planning to supplement the Biblical Psalter with distinctively New Testament material, surely *now* would be the time!

Can you picture the scene? The Savior stands in the upper room, having just been betrayed, setting His face like flint toward the untold agonies of Gethsemane, Gabbatha, and Golgotha. Here He stands, on the very cusp of completing His cosmic work of redemption, looking ahead by faith to the everlasting joy set before Him. If ever there was a time for David's Greater Son to reach into the back pocket of His tunic and pull out a heart-melting song of gospel deliverance, surely this was it!

Imagine how wondrous it would be for us today if we could get our hands on just such a song (or collection of songs) composed by Christ Himself in commemoration of His redemptive work. Would anything be more precious in our eyes? As much as we cherish the Treasury of David, how much *more* would we prize a Treasury of Jesus! After all, "no man ever spoke like this Man"; not even the Son of Jesse!

What an unspeakable joy if we could sing songs written by Jesus Himself, describing His person and work as our Mediator, His inner life of communion with the Father, and His patient endurance of sorrow and suffering as our Savior and example. If only we had these words of Christ, revealing to us the anatomy of all the parts of our souls, according to His all-seeing eye! If only we had these Songs of Jesus, recounting His agonizing crucifixion from an intimate first-person perspective, enabling us to sing the very words which came forth from His dying lips! If only we could sing of His triumphant resurrection and ascension, His universal dominion, and His glorious return at the last day to judge the world in righteousness — all in words of *His own* choosing!

Just imagine how Christian publishers would salivate over such a collection of songs! Would not the first printing be sold out within mere hours? Would not every Christian hunger and thirst to study and sing these beautiful Songs of Jesus? Would not every local church immediately begin the task of setting them to music for congregational singing?

Sad to say, I have my doubts. In fact, I wonder if the church today would even take the time to *read* through such songs, much less actually *sing* them. I fear that far too many would glance over them for a few moments, let out a casual yawn, set them back on the shelf, and move on to something more entertaining. Why do I say this? I say this because we already have the Songs of Jesus. The Book of Psalms is not only the Treasury of David; it is, first and foremost, the Treasury of Jesus Christ. It was written *by* Him; it speaks *of* Him; and, all along, it has been sitting right there in the middle of our Bibles. It has even been translated into countless metrical Psalm-books for singing in private, family, and public worship. Yet, tragically, for most Christians today, it remains in utter obscurity.

The question before us, therefore, is not what we *would* do with a collection of praise songs written by Jesus, but what we *are* doing with them at the present time; because, at the end of the day, the Psalms of David and the Songs of Jesus are one and the same. God forbid that our familiarity with the Psalms should breed contempt for this priceless jewel of Christian faith and piety. God forbid that we should ever lose sight of our great privilege in singing the glorious words of Christ, even the very words that were upon His lips as He bore the infinite wrath of God on our behalf (Ps. 22, 31, 69, etc).

8. *New Testament — Revelatory Songs in Corinth*

Following our Lord's ascension, we find that the Scriptural pattern of using inspired lyrics for public praise continues within the apostolic church. This includes the singing of inspired, "charismatic" (that is, *revelatory*) songs in Corinth.

In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul reminds his readers that “Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation.” It is entirely possible that this reference to “a psalm” *could* refer to a chosen selection from the inspired Book of Psalms which was sung by the entire congregation. However, in this context, such an interpretation is unlikely. Paul is here seeking to regulate various forms of special revelation conveyed by those with revelatory gifts during public worship in the apostolic age.

Previously in the chapter (14:1-25), the Apostle had warned the Corinthians not to exercise the gift of tongues (i.e. speaking inspired truth miraculously in an unknown language) without an interpreter, since neither the congregation nor its unconverted visitors would be able to understand the words. “For if I pray in a tongue,” he says, “my spirit prays but my understanding is unfruitful”; therefore, “I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding” (14:14-15a). Paul’s policy was never to pray publicly in an unknown language without interpretation, but only in such a manner as would be understood by the assembly. He then adds, “I will *sing* with the spirit, and I will also *sing* with the understanding” (14:15b). Just as he has resolved never to *pray* publicly in an unknown tongue without interpretation, even so he has resolved never to *sing* publicly in an unknown tongue without interpretation.

If the “psalm” of 14:26 were merely a selection from the Book of Psalms (translated into Greek), it is difficult to imagine how anyone in the local congregation would struggle to “understand” it. The whole force of Paul’s argument suggests that he is addressing revelatory prayers, prophecies, and songs in public worship. Therefore, it is likely that the “psalm” in 14:26 refers to an extraordinary prophetic revelation, which was limited to the apostolic era, prior to the closing of the Biblical canon.

It is also likely that this “psalm” was sung by an individual rather than by the entire congregation. Hence, Paul writes, “I

will sing” rather than “we will sing” (14:15). In reference to those exercising this gift, he states that “each *one* has a psalm” (14:26). It is unwarranted, therefore, to apply this passage directly to the issue of congregational singing, except to observe that the public worship songs which it describes were most certainly inspired by God.

9. *New Testament — Paul and Silas in Philippi*

In Acts 16:9, Luke informs us that Paul received a vision from God calling him to preach the gospel in Macedonia. Not long afterward, Paul and Silas arrived in “Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia” (16:12). Within a short time, the Lord began to build His church in Philippi, converting a Jewish woman named Lydia and delivering a demon possessed slave girl who had “brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling” (16:16). Angered at their sudden decline in revenue, these cruel masters stirred up the civil authorities against Paul and Silas, who were mercilessly beaten with rods and thrown into prison.

Later that same night, we read that “Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.” In the original Greek, the phrase “singing hymns to God” literally means “hymning to God”. As in the case of Christ and His apostles in the upper room, this verb indicates *that* these men were singing without telling us *what* they were singing.

It is fairly certain both Paul and Silas grew up singing the Psalms exclusively in the Jewish synagogue. Under the circumstances, therefore, it is not at all unlikely that these men would be singing selections which they had memorized from the Book of Psalms. Indeed, if ever there was a hymnal perfectly suited to the unique circumstances of these two persecuted preachers, it was the Book of Psalms which they had learned as children.⁵ In any case, there is no positive

⁵ Wounded, bleeding, and fastened with chains in that dark prison cell at midnight, perhaps Paul and Silas sang the lyrics of Psalm 107:14, “He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their

warrant in this passage for the singing of uninspired hymns, since we are not told precisely *what* songs these men sang, nor whether those songs were *inspired* or *uninspired*.

According to some scholars, the early church possessed a growing collection of uninspired *Christ-hymns* which were employed in corporate worship around this time. They point to certain highly elevated selections from Paul's writings (e.g. Phil. 2:1-11; Col. 1:15-20), which they regard as excerpts from this lyrical anthology. Such a theory, however, is entirely speculative. There is not one shred of conclusive evidence for the existence of uninspired Christ-hymns anywhere in the New Testament or in early church history.⁶ Under divine inspiration, Paul was an eloquent writer, fully capable of

chains in pieces"; or those of Psalm 105:18-19 (describing Joseph's imprisonment in Egypt), "They hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons. Until the time that his word came to pass, the word of the Lord tested him." Or perhaps, using the words of Psalm 18:6-7, they called upon God to send the mighty earthquake which eventually followed afterward: "In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, and my cry came before Him, even to His ears. Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of the hills also quaked and were shaken, because He was angry."

⁶ Advocates of this view sometimes point to a quotation from Pliny the Younger, writing to Emperor Trajan in 112 AD, in which he states that Christians "were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god." However, the most natural reference here would be to the Book of Psalms. No book is more frequently quoted in the New Testament than the Psalms, and this is especially true in relation to the person and work of Christ. In the first chapter of his Epistle to the Hebrews, the author directly cites seven Old Testament texts in support of Christ's ultimate supremacy and divinity. No less than six of these texts are taken from the Book of Psalms. The Old Testament verse most frequently quoted in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1, which is precisely the verse Jesus used to prove His divinity to the scribes and Pharisees (Mark 12:35-37). The more familiar one becomes with the New Testament and its account of apostolic preaching and doctrine, the more apparent it becomes that when the early Christians were said to "sing a hymn to Christ as to a god," they were more than likely singing from the inspired Book of Psalms. [Pliny's letter is available online here: <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>]

waxing poetic in His descriptions of the blessed Savior for whom he suffered so severely. The notion that we cannot explain these elevated portions of his inspired writings without appealing to an uninspired collection of Christ-hymns is as groundless as it is unpersuasive.

10. *New Testament — Psalms, Hymns, & Spiritual Songs*

In Ephesians 5:18-20, Paul exhorts his readers to “be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody your heart to the Lord.” As noted in our introduction, this command is repeated in Colossians 3:16, which reads, “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 raises the obvious question: *What exactly are these “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”?* Given the trajectory of our survey thus far, we might also ask a related question: *Is Paul referring to inspired worship songs or uninspired?*

For many Christians, the fact that Paul speaks of “hymns” is virtually decisive in the matter. This is because, in modern parlance, we use this term to describe a certain class of uninspired worship songs. The reference to “psalms”, they admit, does seem to refer to the Book of Psalms. However, what about these “hymns”? “Surely,” they reason, “Paul must be using this second term to describe uninspired songs which emphasize certain key aspects of Christian doctrine.”

At this point, a word of caution is in order. When interpreting our English Bibles, we must never assume that a Biblical author (translated from Greek or Hebrew) is using a particular word in precisely the same way that English-speakers use it today. The question is not what we mean by “hymns”, but what *Paul* meant by this term.

In Hebrews 11:34 (NKJV), the author informs us that, by faith, the Old Testament saints “turned to flight the armies of the aliens.” Now, just imagine what would happen if we interpreted a text like this in light of our modern way of

speaking! Likely, we would begin to picture the Israelites defeating an army of extra-terrestrials, who are eventually “turned to flight” at warp speed in their intergalactic spaceship! The point is that we need to interpret the words and phrases of Scripture according to their proper context rather than imposing upon them an *alien* construction of our own. The fact that Paul uses a word that we tend to associate with the uninspired songs of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley does not necessarily mean that this is what *Paul* is envisioning. In order to gain an accurate understanding of the phrase “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” we will need to examine the context and structure of the passage itself.

First, there is the cultural context. Church historians generally admit that the early church used the Book of Psalms in corporate worship for the first few centuries of its existence. The Greek-speaking churches in Corinth, Ephesus, and Colossae, for instance, would sing various portions of the Psalms in Greek. That is, they would sing Psalms out of the commonly received Greek Version of the Old Testament, which we call the Septuagint. The Septuagint functioned as both the Bible and the hymnbook of the early church. Therefore, most scholars tend to agree that when Paul exhorts his readers to sing “psalms”, he is speaking of the Book of Psalms translated into Greek. This is how the term “psalms” is most often used in the New Testament and this would make the most sense, given the general practice of the early church.

The fact that these early Christians sang Psalms from the Septuagint is more significant than we might imagine at first glance. When we examine this Greek version of the Psalter, we find it to be replete with self-references to each of the three terms employed by Paul in Ephesians 5:19 (psalms, hymns, and songs). It refers to “psalms” 78 times, “hymns” 13 times, and “songs” 36 times. A vast majority of these references appear in the introductory titles of certain Psalms, serving to describe or identify those particular Psalms. For instance, in the Septuagint version of Psalm 76, the title reads as follows: “Among the hymns, a psalm for Asaph, a song for

the Assyrian.” Thus, the Greek Psalter constantly refers to its very own inspired selections as “hymns” and “songs”. This makes it extremely likely that Paul’s original audience would have understood his exhortation as a call to sing “psalms and hymns and songs” from the Book of Psalms as it appears in the Septuagint.

Second, there is the immediate context. As we noted earlier, Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians 5:19 to sing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” is preceded by a command to “be filled with the Spirit.” In Colossians 3:16, his parallel exhortation is preceded by a command to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you, richly.” In both instances, his immediately preceding command features language (“Spirit-filled”, “word of Christ”) that is strongly suggestive of inspired revelation in general, and of the Book of Psalms in particular.

We know that the Psalms are *Spirit-filled spiritual* songs. “The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me,” writes David, “and His word was on my tongue” (2 Sam. 23:2). Moreover, is there any collection of “hymns” or “songs” better suited to “Let the word of Christ dwell in us richly” than the Psalms, which so frequently speak of Christ (Luke 24:44) and even more frequently record His very own thoughts, words, and experiences (Matt. 27:46; Luke 23:46; Rom. 15:3)?

Third, there is the linguistic structure. There are some Christians in our day who ridicule the idea that all three of these terms (“psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”) could possibly refer to the inspired Book of Psalms. “If your position were true,” they say with a smile, “why didn’t Paul simply tell them to sing ‘psalms and psalms and psalms’?”

The answer to this question lies in the grammatical structure of the text. Notice the way in which these three closely related terms are joined together in the phrase “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” This linguistic structure has all the marks of what Bible scholars refer to as a *hendiatrix*. That is, it uses three similar terms to convey one basic idea.

There are many relevant examples of hendiatrix in Scripture. In Genesis 26:5, the Lord informs us that “Abraham

obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." In Exodus 34:7, the Lord reveals His glory to Moses, placing him in the cleft of the rock, and passing by to proclaim His great name: "The LORD, the LORD God. . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." In Acts 2:22, Peter speaks to the crowds on the Day of Pentecost concerning "Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst."

Now, there very well may be certain minor nuances of difference between a commandment a statute, and a law, or between an iniquity, a transgression, and a sin, or even between a miracle, a wonder, and a sign. Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that commandments and statutes are both laws; that iniquities and transgressions are both sins; and that wonders and signs are both miracles. In other words, these texts are simply telling us that Abraham was obedient to all sorts of commands; that God pardons all sorts of sins; and that Jesus performed all sorts of miracles. In the same way, Paul's exhortation to sing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" is just another way of urging his readers to *sing all sorts of psalms*. Such are the implications of this literary structure, and we would be foolish to spend our time splitting hairs over the differences between these virtually synonymous terms. We would be equally foolish to ask why the text doesn't simply say "laws, laws, and laws," "sins, sins, and sins," "miracles, miracles, and miracles," or "psalms, psalms, and psalms." Clearly, the Holy Spirit chose to employ a *hendiatriis* in each of these instances, using three closely related terms to highlight one main concept.

In summary, when Paul exhorts his readers to sing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs", he is not urging them to sing three very different classes of worship song. He is not directing them to go hunting for lyrical compositions from three vastly different sources. Rather, he is pointing them to the inspired Book of Psalms, with its unique blend of unity

and diversity, as reflected in its various introductory titles, readily available and familiar to his Greek-speaking audience.

Fourth, there is the grammatical structure. In most of our English translations, the word “spiritual” is rendered as an adjective solely intended to modify the noun “songs”, as in “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”. This is not necessarily accurate. In the original Greek, it literally reads more like this: “psalms and hymns and songs of the Spirit”. According to some commentators (many of whom do not advocate exclusive psalmody), the prepositional phrase “of the spirit” should be regarded as modifying all three terms, not merely “songs”. They argue that Paul is exhorting his readers to sing psalms, hymns, and songs, *all three of which* are to be “spiritual” or “of the Spirit”.

By way of analogy, if I refer to *the books and the sermons and the letters of John Calvin*, it would generally be understood that I am not only attributing the letters to Calvin, but the books and the sermons as well. This is what many scholars believe Paul is doing here with the phrase “of the Spirit”. Moreover, the Greek word behind this phrase is by no means an insignificant one. Every other time it is used in the New Testament (with just one exception), it refers to something which has been *produced* by the Holy Spirit.⁷ Therefore, if this word applies to all three terms, then Paul would appear to be urging his readers to sing “psalms and hymns and songs, *all three of which* must be produced by the Holy Spirit”.

From a strictly grammatical standpoint, however, this observation is not entirely conclusive. Therefore, it must not

⁷ Rom. 1:11; 7:14; 1 Cor. 2:13, 15; 3:1; 9:11; 10:3-4; 12:1; 14:1, 37; 15:44, 46; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 1:3; 5:19; 6:12; Col. 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:5. The lone exception occurs in Ephesians 6:12, where Paul refers to the demons as “spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places”. No doubt, he regards the demons as the *source* of the spiritual wickedness in question, which can only serve to confirm our interpretation. Moreover, without exception, whenever this term is used in reference to the Holy Spirit, it always refers to that which the Spirit produces.

be *the* decisive factor in our interpretation of the passage. Yet even if the phrase “of the Spirit” exclusively modifies the word “songs”, this lends additional support to the thesis that Paul is referring to inspired praise. After all, if Paul is exhorting his readers to sing “psalms” from the inspired Book of Psalms and “songs” which are “produced by the Spirit”, then it would seem quite unnatural and out of place for the “hymns” in this text to refer to the uninspired compositions of men.

Ultimately, the burden of proof rests upon the advocates of uninspired hymnody to bring forth conclusive Biblical warrant for their position according to the Regulative Principle of Worship. Based upon what we have observed thus far, Paul’s command to sing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” in Ephesians 5:18-20 and Colossians 3:16 does not provide such warrant. Nothing in these passages conclusively demonstrates that Paul is exhorting his readers to employ uninspired lyrics in their congregational singing. To the contrary, there are many compelling reasons to regard the phrase “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” as simply referring us back to the inspired Book of Psalms.

11. New Testament: Heavenly Songs in Revelation

In the Book of Revelation, we find references to a number of songs which appear to be sung by the glorified saints in heaven.⁸ These include the *New Song* (5:9-10; 14:3), the *Song of Moses* (15:3-4), and the *Song of the Lamb* (15:3-4). While reference is made to these songs being sung, we have only about four verses of lyrics *combined* between the three of them. The latter two are mentioned in such close proximity as to suggest that they may in fact be one and the same. It is also

⁸ Some older expositors, including advocates of Exclusive Psalmody, held the saints in (at least some of) these visions to depict the church on earth during various phases of church history. Such a view is not entirely incompatible with the arguments presented in this section, in that such songs would still be classified as inspired, albeit confined to that realm of *descriptive* apocalyptic symbolism, which cannot be regarded a reliable source of *prescriptive* instruction for New Testament worship.

possible that the *Song of Moses* refers back either to Exodus 15 or Deuteronomy 32; yet this too is unclear.

Inevitably, some Christians will tend to look at these heavenly songs and immediately exclaim, “Well, you see, there you have it! Surely this breaks the pattern and provides clear Biblical warrant for singing songs outside the Book of Psalms in our congregational worship! After all, if the sinless saints in heaven can do it, why can’t we?” Such reasoning may appear persuasive at first glance, especially for those earnestly desiring to find Biblical warrant for uninspired congregational singing. Upon closer examination, however, it is found to be highly problematic on several grounds.

First, we cannot stress enough that these heavenly songs are inspired, inerrant, and infallible. The glorified saints singing these lyrics have been made perfect in holiness and are fully indwelt in every possible sense by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, whatever they are speaking in praise to God must be regarded as the inspired, infallible, and inerrant word of God. Also, given the fact that they are now sinless, we can say with certainty that, in accord with the Second Commandment (Ex. 20:6; Deut. 12:32), they are singing these worship songs in response to God’s revealed will. The same cannot be said for the use of uninspired worship songs by the church on earth. Such lyrics are neither inspired, nor infallible, nor inerrant, and God has nowhere authorized them in His word.

Second, we should not be so quick to assume that every description of the heavenly church in the Book of Revelation is intended as a pattern for the church on earth. If this were the case, we would need to add quite a few new features to our public worship services, such as: (1) incense, Rev. 8:3-4; (2) a golden altar, Rev. 9:13; (3) a temple, Rev. 4:17-18; (4) ceremonial white robes and fine linen garments, Rev. 7:9, 13-15; 19:8; (5) the waving of palm branches, Rev. 7:9; (6) musical instruments, Rev. 5:8; and, of course, my personal favorite: (7) enthroned elders wearing crowns, Rev. 4:10; 11:16.

Third, we should not be so quick to equate the standards or principles governing the heavenly church with those

governing the church on earth. For instance, the church on earth is bound by the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, with Scripture alone as its only infallible rule in matters of doctrine, worship, discipline, and government. This is by no means the case for the church in heaven, where “the spirits of just men made perfect” enjoy direct special revelation from God in a variety of ways that go beyond the content of His written word. To equate our earthly standard with this heavenly standard would undermine the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, and open the door to a myriad of doctrinal errors.

Fourth, as Calvin once said, the Biblical Psalter is an “anatomy of all parts of the soul.” In saying this, he was clearly referring to the soul in its present condition on earth, not in its glorified, heavenly perfection. By contrast, the heavenly songs in the Book of Revelation were written for a heavenly context, in which there is no more weeping, no more pain and suffering, no more injustice and heartache, and no more violent conflicts with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

What a glorious day that will be when we can all join together in heavenly worship, singing whatever heavenly songs the Lord places upon our lips at that time. However, we are not in heaven yet! At present, we reside in a fallen world of sin and misery. Therefore, the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, has given us an inspired hymnbook that is uniquely suited to the grueling, gritty, organic struggles of our present Christian lives on earth. It is a hymnbook that leads us “through death’s dark vale” and “makes the vale of tears a spring” (Ps. 23:4; 84:6). It is a hymnbook that fills us with joy and courage as we press on “advancing still from strength to strength” till we finally “awake in His likeness” and “dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Ps. 84:7; 17:15; 23:6). It is a hymnbook featuring the very same lyrics which sustained our great Forerunner, the Lord Jesus Christ, during *His* earthly life and pilgrimage; and, by the grace of God, it is sure to sustain *us* as well.

Of course, we cannot deny the fact that we, as believers, do occasionally enjoy sublime foretastes of the glory to come. Without a doubt, this is one of the most encouraging aspects

of the Christian life. However, this does not give us a license to disregard God's revealed will for the church on earth in this present age. The saints in the Old Testament were given many glorious foretastes of the coming of Christ and of the New Testament era. However, this did not give them the right to say, "Look, the Messiah will eventually come and put an end to all of these sacrifices, ceremonies, and dietary restrictions; therefore, we need not observe them at this present time!" Had they done this, it would have amounted to flagrant disobedience. We must always live according to the laws and ordinances God has given us for the period and context in which we live. We are presently members of the church on earth during the New Testament age and, for this reason, must not seek to worship according to practices we may observe in the heavenly church or in the age to come.

12. New Testament — From the Closing of the Canon to Christ's Return

Having surveyed the practice of congregational singing from Genesis to Revelation, we can see quite clearly that a distinct pattern has emerged. Throughout history, God has called His people to sing divinely inspired lyrics in their corporate worship. He has not only provided them with these songs, but has superintended the selective process by which the canonical Book of Psalms has been edited, finalized, and placed right in the middle of our Bibles as a Christ-centered hymnbook for the New Testament church.

To this general pattern, the Bible itself reveals no clear or definitive exception. In all the pages of Holy Scripture, there are no explicit divine commands to compose or utilize uninspired worship lyrics. At no point do we encounter even one conclusive historical example of the apostolic church engaging in uninspired congregational singing. We are, likewise, unaware of any Scriptural statement or teaching which necessarily implies (by way of sound logical inference) that God has positively commanded or commended the use of uninspired songs in our corporate worship.

Today we live in an age of revelatory silence. As Reformed Christians, we believe that the Lord has permanently closed the canon of Scripture and caused the revelatory gifts to cease (1 Cor. 13:8-10; Heb. 1:1-2; Rev. 22:18-19). There are no inspired apostles or prophets among us and we do not anticipate their reappearance prior to our Lord's return at the last day. We are as capable of supplementing or restructuring the Book of Psalms as we are of revising the canon of Scripture itself. Our inspired canonical hymnbook has been finalized in its present form, and we lack the gift of inspiration by which it might be amended, either with new compositions or with additional "Scripture songs" from other parts of the Bible.

During the 400 years of revelatory silence preceding our Lord's *first* coming, the Old Testament saints were content to sing exclusively from their inspired, canonical hymnal. As New Testament saints, we should be more than content to sing the Songs of Jesus until His *second* coming in glory.

After all, that 400-year period of revelatory silence was by no means silent in every respect. Day by day in family worship, and Sabbath by Sabbath in the sacred assembly, God's people were pleased to "Make a joyful shout to the LORD" such that "the voice of rejoicing and salvation" was heard "in the tents of the righteous" as they joined together to "sing the LORD's songs" (Ps. 100:1; 118:15; 137:3-4). What a great blessing it would be, in our modern climate of chaos and dissipation, if the Spirit-filled voice of Zion's children might resound once again, "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in their heart to the Lord!" (Eph. 5:19)

ANSWERING COMMON OBJECTIONS

Not surprisingly, the Scriptural conclusion we have thus far drawn is not without its critics. There are, in fact, a wide variety of objections raised in opposition to the practice of employing *only* the inspired Psalms in our congregational singing. To attempt to catalogue and refute every last one of these objections would go far beyond the limited scope of our present study.⁹ Nevertheless, there are at least five common objections which deserve our serious consideration. They are as follows.

1. *“How can Old Testament songs be sufficient for New Testament praise?”*

There is no objection more common today than this first one. After all, we are living in the exalted era of the New Testament. Our Savior has fulfilled His great work of redemption at the cross. The curtain has been torn from top to bottom and “It is finished!” He has gloriously arisen and ascended to God’s right hand, where He reigns as King over all creation, and from whence He will return to judge the world in righteousness. How then can we possibly expect to find adequate expressions of praise for these New Covenant realities in a collection of songs written literally hundreds of years before our Lord’s incarnation?

Regrettably, this objection fails to appreciate the fundamental unity of God’s written revelation in history. The Bible is one book with one story and one message, written ultimately by one Author. As Reformed Christians, we would never say that the Ten Commandments are an inadequate or insufficient summary of Biblical morality, simply because they were revealed in the Old Testament. Indeed, each of the Two Great Commandments spoken by our Lord (Matt. 22:37-40) were taken verbatim from the Old Testament (Deut. 6:5; Lev.

⁹ A more thorough treatment of common objections to Exclusive Psalmody is available online at reformed.com/psalms.

19:18). Would we regard these two commandments as an inadequate summary of God's will for believers today? Perish the thought! Why then should we regard the Book of Psalms as inadequate? If Old Testament *morality* is fully adequate and sufficient for us today, why not Old Testament *praise*?

The Old Testament depicts the grand realities of the New Testament vividly and frequently. In fact, the phrase "New Testament" (or "New Covenant") is *itself* drawn from an *Old* Testament prophecy (Jer. 31:31). The Old Testament features remarkably graphic descriptions of our Lord's suffering and death, including Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22. These prophetic passages are arguably more detailed and captivating than anything recorded in the pages of the New Testament. As we have seen above, the same could be said of our Lord's burial, resurrection, ascension, and return in glory, all of which combine to form the central theme of the Book of Psalms.

As our Lord Himself warned, we must not be "slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken", nor to disregard "all things... which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me" (Lk. 24:25, 44). Prior to the writing of the New Testament, what portions of Scripture do we imagine that the Apostles expounded in their regular preaching ministries? Without a doubt, they boldly proclaimed the *New* Testament realities of Christ from the *Old* Testament (Acts 17:2-3), quoting more frequently in their writings from the Book of Psalms than from any other inspired book.

The most pressing question, therefore, is not how the Book of Psalms could be sufficient for *New* Testament saints. The real head-scratcher is how it could have been sufficient for the *Old* Testament saints. Today, we have the advantage of singing the Psalms in light of all that has been revealed to us in the pages of the New Testament. For this reason, we are able to see our Savior far more clearly in the Psalms than they ever could. When the Israelites sang Psalm 22 hundreds of years before the torturous practice of crucifixion was invented by the Romans, how much of the phrase "they pierced my

hands and my feet” (v. 16) were they truly able to grasp? When they sang the prophecy of Messiah’s enemies “dividing his garments” and “casting lots for his clothing” (v. 18) — two seemingly contradictory actions — how many of them could discern the precise manner of its literal fulfillment (Jn. 19:23-24)? Similar examples could be multiplied. The point is that, if anything, we should be asking how the Book of Psalms could have been adequate during the Old Testament period.

Now that Christ has finally come to reveal the greater light of New Testament revelation, the Book of Psalms is actually *more* relevant, *more* accessible, and (if we can put it this way) *more sufficient* than ever before! Hence, the suggestion that the church should abandon or supplement the Book of Psalms in worship *precisely at the point of its greatest clarity and insight* cannot but serve to refute itself.

The fact is that the Psalms *are* sufficient. They are exceedingly abundantly sufficient beyond all that we could ask or imagine. They were sufficient in the Old Testament and they are all the more sufficient today, not only as an anatomy of the redeemed soul, but as a rich treasury containing the very “word of Christ”.

2. “But the Psalms contain so many unsettling descriptions of God’s wrath!”

When I hear someone make a statement like this, I am tempted to ask whether he or she has ever actually read the New Testament! You see, when you read the New Testament, you cannot help but run across countless references to God’s wrath. The subject, though perhaps unpleasant to the modern reader, is utterly unavoidable.

In the Gospel of Matthew, our Lord makes reference to God’s wrath on nearly every page. In all the Bible, no one speaks more of Hell and judgment than He does. As a whole, the New Testament is constantly emphasizing God’s wrath, urging its readers time and time again to flee from eternal misery into the loving arms of the Savior (Heb. 10:26-31).

The New Testament also emphasizes the reality of God's providential judgments, by which His wrath is poured out *temporally* upon individuals, churches, and nations on the earth. Think of the tragic deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), Paul's cursing and blinding of Elymas the Sorcerer (Acts 13:6-12), the Corinthians who perished for communing unworthily (1 Cor. 11:27-32), our Lord's deadly threat against Jezebel and her children (Rev. 2:20-23), the angelic execution of King Herod (Acts 12:20-23), and the giving over of rebellious nations to spiritual darkness and perversion (Rom. 1:18-32). At one point, the Apostle Paul even calls down a solemn curse upon all who do not love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity (1 Cor. 16:22).

If we are at odds with imprecatory statements like this, or with the wrath of God as a doctrinal emphasis, then we are ultimately at odds with Jesus Christ, His apostles, and the message of the New Testament. At that point, our problem is not so much with the Psalms, as with the infinitely holy and righteous character of God Himself, before whom we will stand to give an account at the last great day.

3. “*But the Psalms do not include the name of ‘Jesus’!*”

Some object that if we limit our congregational singing to the inspired Book of Psalms, we will no longer be able to sing the name “Jesus” in church. This is, of course, absolutely true. Not one of the 150 Psalms refers to our Savior by his earthly name, “Jesus”. At the same time, let us never forget that it was Jesus Himself, as the Second Person of the blessed Trinity, who originally composed the Book of Psalms. He is the One ultimately responsible for leaving the name “Jesus” out of the Bible's inspired hymnal. Therefore, if we have a complaint regarding this (or any other) editorial decision, we must be prepared to take it up with Him! At the end of the day, we are either going to trust that Jesus knows best or we are going to lean upon our own understanding. If He wanted us to sing the name “Jesus”, or regarded this as essential to our spiritual growth, surely He would have included it in the church's

inspired hymnbook. Nevertheless, in His infinite wisdom, He has chosen to leave it out.

At the same time, in the Book of Psalms, our Lord Jesus has provided us with a magnificent array of names and titles by which we may joyfully worship Him in spirit and in truth. These include Lord, Christ, The Son, God, King, Savior, Redeemer, and Holy One. Ultimately, He alone knows best and has informed us in no uncertain terms that the Psalms do, in fact, speak of Him (Luke 24:44). They speak of Him in a way that even the New Testament Gospels do not. As some have wisely observed, the Gospels serve as our Lord's *biography*, whereas the Psalms contain His *autobiography*.

God forbid that we should replace these rare jewels of intimate Christological self-revelation merely on account of a personal desire to sing the name 'Jesus!' Such a tragic exchange would not only divest the church of a most priceless spiritual treasury; it would also run contrary to the very will and design of Him who alone bears that matchless name.

4. ***“But I’ve been so richly blessed by uninspired hymns!”***

From a personal standpoint, I love the old hymns. Over the years, God has used quite a few of them to bless my soul and draw me ever closer to Himself. Few things are more spiritually edifying than to sit and meditate upon the Christ-centered lyrics of the great hymns of the faith. Not every hymn is a great hymn, but so many are doctrinally sound, deeply rooted in Scripture, and tailor-made to enhance my communion with Christ. I love these hymns. In my study at home, I have a copy of the words-only hymnal used by Charles Spurgeon in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, along with various other little books of hymns and poems written by great men and women of God. I would dare to say that if you're not meditating on these hymns, then you're missing out on a dynamic source of spiritual edification.

But as much as I love the old *hymns*, I love *Him* more. And when it comes to corporate worship, I am far more concerned to please *Him* than I am to sing *hymns*. In reality, there are

many things that I enjoy for personal spiritual edification that God has chosen not to include among the elements of corporate worship. I absolutely love reading uninspired Christian books, such as Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. If you tried to take any of these things away from me (including my old hymn books), you would literally have to pry them from my cold dead hands! Nevertheless, God has not commanded any of these things to be included in corporate worship. The fact that I may enjoy them for personal spiritual edification is beside the point. According to the revealed will of God, they do not belong in the corporate worship service.

If, at this juncture, we find our own personal desires and preferences coming into conflict with God's revealed will for congregational singing, there is really only one solution: "Father... not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Our Savior calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him in a life of heartfelt obedience, worshiping our Triune God in *His* prescribed way, according to *His* commandments.

5. "So what you're really saying is that Psalm-singing churches are superior to everyone else!"

As Reformed Christians, we often imbibe the wrong kind of knowledge: the kind that "puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1) rather than the kind that "accords with godliness" (Tit. 1:1). No sooner have we learned something new from the Bible, than we become arrogant, contentious, imbalanced, and perhaps even a bit obnoxious. We foolishly impute to ourselves the honor and glory of the transcendent God whose truth we have come to believe and profess. Sadly, this mindset is not only a problem for individuals; it can infect entire denominations with a sense of superiority and exaggerated self-importance, as if "we are the people and wisdom dies with us" (Job 12:2).

If we are honest with ourselves, we will have to confess that this has been a stumbling block at times for us within the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). And, if that is the case, then I think I speak for all of us in

stating that we desire to humble ourselves, repent of this sin, and permanently leave it behind in our rearview mirror.

The principle and practice of exclusive psalmody is very important, but it is not the “be all, end all” of Christianity. It is not an essential mark of a true church, and it certainly does not cover a multitude of sins. It is one of many important Biblical teachings that we would all do well to take seriously: not so that we can be superior, but so that we can “go on being increasingly filled with the Spirit” with “the word of Christ dwelling in us richly”!

By God’s design, and with His blessing, Psalm-singing is a source of humility and an antidote to pride. If we are singing the Psalms with grace in the heart, we cannot help but grow in a Christ-like spirit of meekness. Whatever our church affiliation may be, our attitudes toward God and toward one another will become a sweet symphony of grace and love as we “make melody to the Lord with our hearts”.

Surely *this* is what the Apostle Paul envisioned in his great prayer for the Ephesians (3:14-21) and in His exhortation to “be filled with the Spirit” (5:19): not a bunch of pugilistic, polemical Presbyterians duking it out on social media, but a humble, obedient, God-centered people, boldly lifting up their voices together in the midst of a hostile world and crying out from the depth of their being,

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,
Because of Your steadfast love.