

THE PSALMS IN THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH

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by Synod's Study Committee on Worship.

In response to Paper 99-2, Synod 2003 adopted "The Worship of the Church, A Reformed Theology of Worship," as a position paper. This paper establishes the distinction between the public worship of God and other parts of the Christian life. When the church meets on the Lord's Day to worship God, its meeting is a covenant assembly. The elements and ordinances of the worship, including singing, make up a single remembrance and renewal of the worshipers' part in God's Covenant of Grace. Included in the same paper was a restatement and defense of the Regulative Principle of Worship, expressed, for example, in Heidelberg Catechism Q. 96 "What doth God require in the second commandment?" A. 96 "That we in no wise represent God by images, nor worship him in any other way than he has commanded in his word."

Paper 99-2 proposed a specific change in the worship of the RPCNA in respect to singing.

"The central contention is that the validity of the Testimony's stated restriction for congregational singing (i.e., Psalms only, unaccompanied) depends upon a false "religious worship" distinction. Thus non-sacramental aspects of public worship have been given an unbiblical, semi-sacramental status. Such a view is inadvertently ritualistic, and it is insupportable." (Paper 99-2)

The proposed change would replace, "The Psalms are to be sung..." (Testimony 21.6) with "In their meetings, believers will...sing..." (Minutes of Synod, 1999, p. 136, proposed new Testimony paragraph 21.4). In response, we will show that God has given the Psalter to his

Church for its hymnal. We will demonstrate its suitability and adequacy for the Church's praise, show that God has commanded his Church to use the Psalter, and indicate how the Psalms are superior to uninspired hymns for use in Christian worship. We will also respond to several common arguments against Psalm singing and against exclusive Psalm singing.

The Suitability of the Psalms for the Worship of the Church

The Psalms are suitable for New Testament worship because they show forth Jesus Christ as God and man, they are directly messianic, they are Trinitarian, they proclaim the missionary task of the Church, they teach a rich biblical eschatology, and their deep spirituality powerfully helps the saints in their sanctification. In short, the Psalms belong to the Church and express its faith.

The Psalms speak clearly of Christ, God and man in two distinct natures and yet one person. Before Jesus was born, Hebrew reverence for the name of God led the translators of the LXX to refer to the Divine name יהוה (YHWH) by the Greek κύριος (kyrios), "Lord." The New Testament (NT) applies this title "Lord" to Jesus, God come in the flesh (Hebrews 1:8-12; see John 8:58). When Christians sing praise to the Lord in the Psalms, they sing to Christ, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us and is now "Lord," ...*God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ* (Acts 2:36). Jesus is also fully man, the Son of David according to the flesh (Romans 1:3, cf., Matthew 1:1, 21:9, Luke 1:32, John 7:42, Revelation 22:16). The Psalms which David wrote find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Christians sing the Psalms about and to Christ. He is the Lord who is God, and he is the Son of David, God and man. In the Psalter, therefore, we sing of Christ in a theologically profound way, inescapably affirming the Council of Chalcedon's teaching concerning Christ, who "being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person forever" (see *WSC*, Q. 21). When Christians sing the Psalms, they sing of Jesus as he is in truth: God and man. They cannot overlook one or the other. Jesus is God the Lord, and he is the Son of David.

Second, the Psalms speak directly of the Messiah. The development of the concept of the anointed one, the Messiah and King, has deep roots in Israel's identity. By the words "messiah" or "anointed one", the Old Testament means a publicly ordained king or person. In the Psalms we see that the Messiah is a king: he is King David, who wrote many of the Psalms, yet clearly, this King is also an eschatological figure. He is present, and yet he is to come.

An example of the messianic king is found in Psalm 110. *The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool'* (Psalm 110:1). The "lord" superior to his father David is the divine Messiah. (See Mark 12:35-37 and Hebrews 1:13). The Messianic title in the Old Testament did not simply stand as a metaphor for the people of Israel. It completed the prophetic picture of the conquering Messiah, who is to come at the end of the age to judge the nations: *Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity'* (Psalm 96:10, cf. Acts 17:31).

Jesus taught that the Psalms speak of him. *These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were spoken in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me* (Luke 24:53). The New Testament quotes frequently from the Book of Psalms when it quotes Scripture to show that Jesus is the Messiah. According to the UBS *Greek New Testament* Index of Quotations, 58 verses from 40 of the 150 Psalms are quoted in the NT, some several times. The Psalms describe Jesus' life and work in detail. For example:

Psalm 8 praises Christ as the Man to whom God has given dominion (Hebrews 2:6-9, 1Corinthians 15:27).

Psalms 2 and 110 speak of Christ's Messianic reign (Acts 4:25-28, Hebrews 1:5, Matthew 22:44, Acts 2:34-35, Hebrews 1:13).

Psalm 118 prophesies Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and God's choice of Jesus as the foundation stone (Matthew 21:42, 1 Peter 2:7-8, Matthew 21:9).

Psalm 41 relates Judas' betrayal of Christ (John 13:18).

Psalm 22 describes his crucifixion and coming glory (Matthew 27:43, 46, Hebrews 2:12).

Psalm 16 foretells his Resurrection. (Acts 2:23-24).

Psalm 24 exalts the “King of Glory.” It is not imaginable that David is singing about himself here. This Psalm and Psalm 98 can only be the description of the resurrected Jesus Christ and the anticipation of his Coming.

Any Christian who understands the Bible in the same way as did the apostles will find Christ’s life, death, resurrection, present reign and second coming portrayed in the Psalms. The Psalms are therefore eminently suitable for Christian worship.

The Psalter is also Trinitarian. Many of the messianic passages cited above speak about the relationship between the Father and the Son (Psalms 2:7; 110, etc.). When the book of Hebrews builds its case for the divinity of Christ as the Son of God, it cites the Psalms (Hebrews 1:1-13). While not as explicit as the New Testament regarding the Trinity, or the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the Psalter is Trinitarian in that it also reveals an advanced Pneumatology (Doctrine of the Holy Spirit). The Spirit’s omnipresence is affirmed (Psalm 139:7), his procession and his part in the work of creation is taught (Psalms 33:6; 104:30). His role in the renewal of fallen saints and, by extension, regeneration, is beautifully portrayed (Psalm 51:10-12). And the perseverance and progressive sanctification of believers is attributed to the “Good Spirit” of the Lord (Psalm 143:10). The outpouring of the Spirit upon the Church awaited Pentecost, in fulfillment of the prophesied New Covenant (John 7:39; Acts 1:4-8; 2 ff...; Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26-27). Therefore the Psalms do not transcend their Old Covenant matrix here as fully as they do in terms of Christology. The unique personality of the Holy Spirit is in the Psalter, but does not boldly stand forth. Yet the Psalms themselves were the result of the Spirit’s special operation (2Samuel 23:2-3), and so they give a Pneumatology which continually goes beyond the five explicit references to the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is thus often spoken of as the Law of God within the heart of the Church and God's saints (Psalms 40:8; 119:11, 32, 70, 97-104, 111, etc.). This is the New Covenant promise of the indwelling Spirit (Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 36). Singing the Psalms full of the Pentecostal Spirit, believers sing of his person and work both explicitly and implicitly. Just as they sing of Jesus the Messiah and the Father, the Psalms sing of the Spirit by the words of the Spirit and so build up the believers as they “pray in the Holy

Spirit” through these God-breathed words (Jude 20). These are songs which harmonize with the groanings of the Spirit who employs the Psalter to give utterance beyond mere human expression (cf. Romans 8:23-27).

Besides revealing Christ as both God and man and prophesying Messiah’s life and work, and revealing the work of the Holy Spirit, the Psalms have an eschatology that makes them particularly suitable for New Testament worship. Israel, as God’s redeemed people, had an understanding of God’s coming judgment of the world at the end of time, when all things would be made new. There is a connection between God’s giving Canaan to Israel and His eternal rule in the new heavens and new earth. Entering the promised land brought rest to Israel, but in such a way that a rest still remained for them to enter (Hebrews 4 interpreting Psalm 95).

The eschatology of the Psalms is found not only in individual Psalms but in the very design of the book of Psalms. There is a movement from the first three books of the Psalter, which speak of the anointed ruler mainly in terms of the historical King David, to the final two books which look toward the eschatological David, the Messiah. But even in the first three books there is a recognition of someone greater than David who will come, as, for example, in Psalm 2 (see Acts 4:25-29). In the Psalter Jesus stands not only at the center of history when he died and rose again (Psalm 22, Psalm 16) and at the end of history when God brings all things to its preordained conclusion (Psalm 98), but Jesus stands also at the beginning of history. He is the Man to whom God gave full dominion; Adam in his dominion was only a type of Christ (Psalm 8, Hebrews 2:6-9; 1Corinthians 15:27; Ephesians 1: 22).

Psalter eschatology is furthermore not only Christocentric, it is theocentric (Vos 1986 [1930]). It is “kingdom eschatology” with God as King. For example, there are what could be termed “kingdom” Psalms which begin by praising the great reigning King. Psalm 93 begins, *The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.* The theme is continued at Psalm 96:10. Another example would be found in Psalm 97:1, *The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice.* It is repeated

again in Psalm 99:1. *The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake.* These Psalms reveal that the full dominion given to Christ in the end is both universal and eternal.

The Psalter's eschatology also contains what is now the present calling of the Church, to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. All the nations of the earth, all of her people, all of her tribes and tongues should and will come to God in praise and worship. Psalm 57:9 states, *I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations.* The theme continues with Psalm 67:2-5, *That your way may be known on the earth, your salvation among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you.* The missiological thrust resounds again in Psalm 96:3,10: *Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!...Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity'* (see also Psalms 100:1-3; Psalm 108:3). The Psalter is a "preformation" of New Testament realities, both in terms of the Church's present missionary task and in terms of the Church's living hope of Christ's coming at the Last Day.

Today, the Christian Church sings the Psalms with an understanding superior to what the Jewish Church had. Only after the coming of Christ could God's people sing the Psalms with a clarity about the King, his kingdom, and the eschatological victory which will be sealed for his Church by his coming. God meant the Psalms for his Church in this age: whatever things were written before were written for our learning and admonition, upon whom the end of the ages have come (Romans 15:4, 1Corinthians 10:11). And God meant the Psalms to edify and bless his people.

When New Testament believers look back upon the true Israel of old, the men of faith like the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the pre-figurement of Christ in the person of Moses, they identify them with true saving faith. Add to that honored list all of the great prophets of God, and there is no question that they stand in essential theological harmony with New Testament believers. This harmony was demonstrated at the mount of transfiguration, when

Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah. It is demonstrated again through the examples of the faithful in Hebrews 11. Thus, the church of the Old Testament and the church of Jesus Christ today, are in many ways one. They are obviously not one chronologically, but they are one in their spiritual qualities.

The Psalms involve us in their deep spirituality. Certainly, they reflect the dispensation of types and shadows. They speak of sacrifices (but so do, e.g., Ephesians 5:2; Philippians 2:17; Hebrews 13:15); they include Israel's history, which has become our history (but so does 1 Corinthians 10:1-22). Yet from the shadows of the old dispensation, the Psalms reveal the glory of Christ and shine light on the inner life of the Savior, which, through them, becomes part of the spiritual experience of the saints of every age.

Singing the Psalms stirs believers to make the truth of God's Word penetrate their own souls so that they grow in holiness (Vos 1994 [1922]). The Psalter's deep spirituality derives from the "heavenly mindedness" of the Psalms, which nurtures a heightened interest between the issues of doctrine and piety. Some wrongly propose a great discontinuity between the Psalter's "earthly" focus on physical Israel and its land, and the Christian's looking toward God beyond this world which is passing away. But the Psalms, in fact, always direct the believer to God. Just as the New Testament commands, *Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth*, (Colossians 3:2), so the Psalms continually remind us that God rules in the heavens, asking, *Whom have I in heaven but you?* (Psalm 73:25). It has been observed that Psalms 42 and 73,

mark not only the highest point to which the aspiration of the pious heart has attained under the Old Testament, but, the highest point to which it can ever attain in the form of pure, disinterested spiritual love." [G. Vos, "The Scriptural doctrine of the love of God, in (Gaffin 1980, 438)].

Truly, the Christian's citizenship is in heaven. When we worship, we join the joyous assembly of heaven. Voicing the Psalms, with their messianic, missiological, and eschatological perspectives, will nourish the heavenly-mindedness of New Testament believers.

Long ago, Athanasius, writing to a friend to explain how the Christian uses the Psalter, observed:

...the Book of Psalms is like a garden of all these kinds, and it sets them to music....in addition to the other things in which it enjoys an affinity and fellowship with the other books [of the Bible], it possesses, beyond that, this marvel of its own— namely, that it contains even the emotions of each soul (Athanasius 1980, 102, 108).

The Psalms, he wrote, become like a mirror to the one singing them, “so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul.” He warned:

Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with the persuasive phrases of the profane, and do not let him attempt to recast or completely change the words...For as much better as the life of the saints is than that of other people, by so much also are their expressions superior to those we construct and, if one were to speak the truth, more powerful as well [because] the Spirit who speaks in the saints, seeing words inspired by him in them, might render assistance to us” (Athanasius 1980, 127).

The Psalms, like the rest of Scripture, contain hard sayings which force Christians humbly to ask the Spirit’s help to comprehend them. Some Psalms, especially the Psalms of innocence and the Psalms of imprecation, cannot be sung simply as our own. We sing them as the word of Christ himself; we in him beseech God for justice. Just as Psalm 22:1, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* is Christ’s cry of desolation, and Psalm 31:5, *Into your hand I commit my spirit* expresses his faith, so all the Psalms belong to Christ. In the Psalms, Christ confesses a sinfulness which is ours, and we confess an innocence which is his (2Corinthians 5:21). Especially in those Psalms that we cannot sing as our own, we recognize that it must be someone else praying, none other than Jesus Christ himself. When Christians sing the Psalms, they sing with Christ.

The Book of Psalms: God’s Rule for Singing in the Church

Development of the Canon of Praise

The Book of Psalms came into being not only through the divine inspiration of each Psalm, but also through the Spirit’s guidance in putting together this specific collection. It was the same with proverbs. Solomon spoke 3000 proverbs and composed 1,005 songs (1Kings 4:32), but the Spirit directed the collection of only some of them in the Book of Proverbs and in the Psalter. Some Psalms were originally composed as personal praise, others were always intended for

temple worship, but all of them over time were collected and recognized as the holy covenantal praise of Israel, serving the God-King in his temple.

Though the “Book of Praises” was gathered during the OT era and used in the Temple’s worship, its full intent as a canon of praise could not be fully grasped until Christ came. Its intent was to reveal and praise the Savior-King who would fulfill all the promises of God’s covenant with Israel. Jesus Christ must therefore be understood as the Sovereign of the Psalter, but also as the source of and the purpose for the development of the canon of the Psalter.

Jesus Christ confirmed this Psalter collection by referring to it specifically as a discrete entity:

Now David himself said in the Book of Psalms: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool’ (Luke 20:41-42).

Later, the apostle Peter, addressing the disciples in the Upper Room, said:

For it is written in the Book of Psalms: ‘Let his dwelling be desolate, and let no one live in it’ (Acts 1:20).

A few years later still, the apostle Paul quoted a well-known Psalm by its recognized number:

God has fulfilled this for us His children, in that He raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second psalm: ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten You.’ (Acts 13:33).

Jesus Christ and the apostles clearly recognized the Book of Psalms as a divinely settled collection.

The Psalm titles name many authors. Moses (Psalm 90) is the most ancient author. David is the most prolific author (Psalms 2-41, 51-72, and scattered others), and all of the Psalms are sometimes conventionally ascribed to David (cf. *The Treasury of David*). Asaph the Levite wrote many Psalms, and the later sections of the Psalter contain many anonymous Psalms. But the Holy Spirit spoke through all of them (2Samuel 23:1-2, 2Peter 1:21).

The Psalms almost certainly gained power and effect by being gathered into a collection of songs that were used regularly in the praise of the temple. The accumulated weight of their great themes, especially the Lord’s Kingship and his Covenant, repeated continually, shaped the

hope of Israel. With longing, Israel looked to the coming King and the fulfillment of the Covenant promises. The anticipatory energy awaiting the appearing of the One portrayed in the types and shadows of earthly priests and kings fills the Psalms. When Christ came, the Psalms' full meaning appeared: they could be sung by God's people to praise Messiah, fulfiller of the Covenant promises.

It is therefore no accident that the Psalms, as we argued earlier, are suitable for Christian worship. When Christ appeared, the great truths of the Psalms shone forth, and their power as songs of praise was multiplied. The intrinsic design of the Book of Psalms to be the Church's book of praise, inspired and collected under the direction of the Holy Spirit over many centuries, became plain and the Church could sing these praises with full understanding. When the Church sings the Psalms, she hears the Word that reveals Christ and she responds to his grace by harmonizing her heart to that song of his heavenly voice. The Psalms of the Bible possess manifest warrant for singing in the worship of God. The Psalter is God's canon of praise, each Psalm inspired by God and the entire Book of Psalms collected under the Spirit's direction for use by the Church.

Some Christians happily sing the Psalms for reasons other than commitment to the Regulative Principle of Worship. However, the question for churches that hold to that principle of worship is, "What songs has God commanded His people to sing in worship?" Biblical warrant for the Church's singing requires positive evidence. It cannot be inferred from silence. David teaches that God commissioned him to write Psalms for the Church. *Now these are the last words of David. 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 was on my tongue"* (2 Samuel 23:1-2). The Spirit inspired David, "the psalmist of Israel." David arranged the Levitical singing at God's worship (1Chronicles 16). At Hezekiah's reform, Israel returned to God's appointed music in the Church, *according to the commandment of David, of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet: for thus was the commandment of the LORD by his prophets...And when the burnt offering began, the song of the LORD also began...So all the assembly worshipped,*

the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded...(2Chronicles 29:25-28). What they sang were *the words of David and of Asaph the seer* (2Chronicles 29:30), probably already collected in the first several books of the Psalter (see Psalm 72:20). God commanded Israel, not only through David, but also through the prophets Gad and Nathan, to worship Him with the Psalms of the Bible. Jesus used the same Psalms of David and Asaph, singing what commentators agree was a Psalm on the night he was betrayed (Matthew 26:30). Christ fulfilled the sacrifices of the temple by his death, so that they are now ended. His entire existence fulfills the meaning of the Psalms, so that the Church now sings them with full understanding until his return.

Just as the Bible contains a small number of proverbs scattered in other places besides the Book of Proverbs, so the Bible also contains a few songs written in other places, such as the Song of Deborah and Barak, and the Magnificat. The Church has used some of these songs in its worship, just as it learns from other proverbs besides those in the Book of Proverbs. However, we may question whether a song included in a historical narrative has warrant to be sung in the Church's worship. For example, the Holy Spirit has included Hannah's prayer song in 1Samuel 2 in the narrative of the birth and calling of Samuel, but the Spirit has nowhere identified it for singing in God's worship. By contrast, David's song in 2Samuel 22, composed in thankfulness for his deliverance from Saul and from all David's enemies, has been identified by the Holy Spirit as a song to be sung by the Church in God's praise by being included (as Psalm 18) in the canonical Book of Praises. The canonical Book of Psalms has a clear mandate to be used in the worship of the Church.

We next argue that the New Testament also affirms the Psalms to have warrant to be sung in the Church. In two passages in Ephesians and Colossians, the New Testament deals explicitly with what the Church sings.

New Testament Warrant to Sing the Psalms

Two texts in the Greek New Testament deal directly with the issue of Psalmody:

Colossians 3:14-17 ¹⁴ *But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.* ¹⁵ *And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.* ¹⁶ *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.* ¹⁷ *And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

3:16 Ο λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νοουθετοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς, ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν [τῇ] χάριτι ᾄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ·

Ephesians 5:17-21 ¹⁷ *Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* ¹⁸ *And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,* ¹⁹ *speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,* ²⁰ *giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,* ²¹ *submitting to one another in the fear of God.*

5:18-19 καὶ μὴ μεθύσκεσθε οἴνω, ἐν ᾧ ἐστὶν ἀσωτία, ἀλλὰ πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι, λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [ἐν] ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς, ᾄδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ,

Both passages begin with a call to remember the nature of the Church to which Christians belong. The Ephesians context begins in chapter 4. In Colossians 3:15 the reference to the Church in the expression “one body” is brief but clear. The apostle’s interest in these sections of his epistles is to instruct the Church in its life as one body. Instructions for family life come next in both Ephesians and Colossians (Ephesians 5:22 ff.; Colossians 3:18 ff.).

In Ephesians 5, we read that the Holy Spirit directs the communion of the saints (*be filled with the Spirit...*). He gives his word to direct our speaking to one another, he gives us songs to sing to the Lord, he stirs in us thanksgiving to the Father in the name of Christ, he teaches us to submit to one another. Peter O’Brien comments:

In 5:18 it is ‘by the Spirit’ that God’s people are filled. At the same time believers, both individually and corporately, are to be wholly and utterly involved in this process of infilling. All are actively engaged in building Christ’s body so that it reaches mature manhood, that is, his fullness (4:12-13). All are urged to be imitators of God (O’Brien 1999, 393)...

Both passages are given in the context of apostolic admonitions to walk in obedience to the Lord.

Colossians 3:12 “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on...”
Ephesians 5:1-2 “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. 2 And walk in love... (5:15) “See then that you walk circumspectly...”

The commandments to sing are paralleled with speaking to one another for edification. This parallel is evident in Colossians (*teaching and admonishing one another*), but speaking for edification is clearly commanded in Ephesians as well. Thomas Neufeld remarks that there is a particular sense to this speaking:

λαλέω [‘speak’] bears great weight in the Pauline writings. With few exceptions it refers to communicating profound truth, often divine revelation. Paul frequently uses [this verb] in relation to his apostolic witness (e.g., 1Corinthians 2:6-7; 2Corinthians 17; 12:19; 13:3; 1Thessalonians 2:2,4). It is also the verb of choice for communicating divine truth in the congregation. [1Corinthians 14, cf. Ephesians 4:25]. It is thus a fitting alternative to the verbs in Colossians 3:16, [‘teach, admonish.’]” (Neufeld 2002, 241)

O’Brien points out that,

Given the frequent repetition of keywords, cognate terms, and synonymous expressions in Ephesians, the parallelism of this verse suggests that the two halves should be taken closely together (O’Brien 1999, 394).

Indeed, verse 19 of Ephesians 5 presents a chiasmic parallelism in the style of Hebrew poetry:

speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and songs spiritual
singing and psalming in your heart to the Lord

λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [εν] ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς,
ᾄδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ.

Notice:

psalms...psalming; ψαλμοῖς... ψάλλοντες
songs...singing; ᾠδαῖς...ᾄδοντες (from αειδῶ)
to one another...to the Lord

Similarly, in Colossians 3:16 “teaching and admonishing” is paralleled by “singing.” Both clauses are introduced by a qualifying prepositional phrase functioning adverbially (“in all wisdom...,” “in grace”). In both passages, the singing and speaking are not separate and individual activities: they are simultaneous and collective.

[εν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ] διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες ἑαυτοῦς, ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς
πνευματικαῖς
[εν [τῇ] χάριτι] ᾄδοντες εν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ.

in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

The acts of speaking are addressed to “one another” and the singing, “to God.” As we sing to the Lord, we are teaching and admonishing one another. We praise God and edify one another with his praises at the same time. In this way we are building up the body of Christ. Nearly all commentators agree that this speaking and singing takes place when the church is assembled for worship or for prayer. Some commentators suggest that the singing in the church (*to one another*) was antiphonal (Bruce 1988), but there is little in our texts to support this idea. The context, then, is life in the church, most particularly in ecclesiastical fellowship and worship.

To further understand these verses accurately, we must make an effort to understand what the words “psalms, hymns, songs” meant to the apostle and to his hearers. Most scholars today agree that it is difficult to draw distinctions between the three Greek terms ψαλμός, ὕμνος, and ᾠδή (*psalmos, hymnos, ode*). Some older commentators look to the etymology of the words to identify three classes of song, but this has proven fruitless. Modern lexicography considers them to be nearly synonymous, drawn from a single semantic field of ‘religious song.’ All commentators note the frequency of occurrence of these three words in the LXX, and especially in the book of Psalms.

The title of the Book of Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures is “The Book of Praises,” which in Hebrew is *sefer tehillim*. The word “praises” in the title, ‘tehillim’ [תְּהִלִּים], is a plural noun with masculine form derived from the feminine noun ‘tehillah’ [תְּהִלָּה], ‘song, praise.’ It is not used in the masculine except in this title. The book of Psalms is unique even in its title. In its feminine form, this Hebrew word is commonly used in the Hebrew Psalter, for example:

Psalms 22:3 But You *are* holy, Enthroned in the praises of Israel.
 וְאַתָּה קָדוֹשׁ יוֹשֵׁב תְּהִלֹּת יִשְׂרָאֵל

The usage data in koiné Greek for “psalms, hymn, songs” suggest that Paul is effectively piling up synonyms, all of which are drawn from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The terms together most logically refer to the Hebrew “praises” (*tehillim*) of the book of Psalms, which are of

various sorts. “Psalms, hymns, songs” are three of the most common descriptions of the types of “praises” in the LXX titles.

Some examples will show why we believe these words used in the Colossians and Ephesian passages refer to the Praises of the Hebrew Bible. For each example we provide the English, the Greek of the LXX, and the Hebrew.

“Psalm” is very frequent in the Psalter, occurring a total of 72 times, for example:

Psalm 3:1 A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son.

ψαλμὸς τῷ Δαυὶδ קְזַמֹּר לְדָוִד

Outside the Psalter, it occurs only seven times in the OT Scriptures. In the NT the Greek word ψαλμὸς (‘psalmos’) is found in Luke 20:42; 24:44 and Acts 1:20; 13:33; 1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19 & Colossians 3:16. In the Lucan examples it unmistakably refers to the Book of Psalms.

“Hymn” is mostly translated “praise” in our English versions, but the Hebrew to which it corresponds means a song of praise. For example, in Psalm 119:171, the word translates the Hebrew תְּהִלָּה *tehillah* “song”; also in Psalms 40:3; 65:2; 148:14.

Psalm 119:171 My lips shall utter praise. For You teach me Your statutes.

תְּהִלָּה ὕμνον

Also in Psalm 100, we are commanded to enter “with songs of praise.”

Psalm 100:4 Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, *And* into His courts with praise.

תְּהִלָּה בְּ עֲבוּדָה εν ὕμνοις

One remarkable example which shows that the compositions of the Book of Psalms are understood to be both praises and prayers, is reflected in Psalm 72:20, where the Hebrew has “prayers” and the LXX “hymns:”

Psalm 72:20 The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.

תְּפִלֹת דָּוִד οἱ ὕμνοι Δαυὶδ

However, *hymnos* (ὕμνος) is used mostly in an instrumental sense in the titles of the Psalms, where the Hebrew is often translated into English as “with stringed instruments.” For example,

Psalm 67:1 To the Chief Musician. On stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song.

עַל יְהוָה בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ψαλμὸς ὠδῆς בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מְזֻמָּר בְּיָד יָדָיִם

Psalm 76:1 To the Chief Musician. On stringed instruments. A Psalm of Asaph. A Song.

ἐν ψαλμοῖς ψαλμὸς τῷ Ασαφ ὠδὴ **מְזִמֹּר לְאֶסָפִי שִׁיר**

‘Hymn’ occurs thirteen times in the Psalter and only three times elsewhere in the OT, always in reference to the songs of the Lord (2Chronicles 7:6; Nehemiah 12:46) and the “new song” in Isaiah 42:10. The only occurrences of this word (hymn) in the NT are found in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16.

In koiné Greek, “song,” ὄδῃ, is the most general of the three terms. It can refer to secular songs, whereas psalm and hymn were generally religious songs. In the OT it also has the widest distribution.

Psalms 120-133 A Song of Ascents. **שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלֹת** ὠδὴ τῶν ἀναβαθμῶν

Psalm 45:1 To the Chief Musician. Set to "The Lillies." A Contemplation of the sons of Korah. A Song of Love.

מִשְׁכִּיל שִׁיר יְדִידָת ὠδὴ ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ

In the LXX, the word occurs 44 times in the Psalter and 27 times elsewhere in the OT Scriptures. Of these 27 occurrences, 10 refer to non-Psalter songs: the songs of Moses and of God (Exodus 15:1; Deuteronomy 31:19, 21, 22, 30; 32:44), Deborah’s song (Judges 5:12), the 1005 songs of Solomon (1Kings 4:32 [Heb, LXX 5:12]), and Habakkuk’s prayer (Habakkuk 3:1; 19). The rest all have reference to David’s psalms or the temple singing of the Levites (2Samuel 22:1; 1Chronicles 15:16, 22, 27; 1Chronicles 16:42; 2Chronicles 5:13; 7:6; 23:18; 34:12; Ezra 3:12; Nehemiah 12:27, 36; Amos 5:23; Amos 8:10). These data show that for the Chronicler, ὄδῃ, “song,” seems to have become a specialized word referring to the praises collected in the Psalter and sung at the temple. In the NT the only occurrences of this word are in Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16 and Revelation 5:9, 14:3, 15:3. In the Apocalypse they occur as “New song” and “Song of Moses and of the Lamb,” (see below).

The frequent occurrence of each of these words “psalms, hymns, songs,” in the Psalter, together with the many references to the Psalms in the Chronicles, does not prove that they must

point to the Psalter in Colossians and Ephesians. However, when we consider as well that these words also occur in various combinations in the LXX Psalter, it becomes clearer that Paul's compounding of these three terms evokes reference to the Psalter. Consider the following examples of "psalm-song" found in the titles of the Psalms in the LXX:

Psalm 30:1 A Psalm. A Song at the dedication of the house of David.
 ψαλμὸς ᾠδῆς לְדָוִד הַבְּיַת הַנֶּחֱנָכֶת שִׁיר־רִנְנָה מְזֻמֹּר

Psalm 48:1 A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah.
 שִׁיר מְזֻמֹּר ψαλμὸς ᾠδῆς

Psalm 65:1 To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David. A Song.
 שִׁיר לְדָוִד מְזֻמֹּר ψαλμὸς τῷ Δαυיד ᾠδή

Psalm 92:1 A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath day.
 שִׁיר מְזֻמֹּר ψαλμὸς ᾠדῆς

Psalm 67:1 To the Chief Musician. On stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song.
 שִׁיר מְזֻמֹּר εἰς τὸ τέλος ἐν ὕμνοις ψαλμὸς ᾠδῆς

Psalm 83:1 A Song. A Psalm of Asaph. (also Psalm 108:1)

We also find this example of "hymn-song:"

Psalm 137:3 For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song. And those who plundered us *requested* mirth, *Saying*, "*Sing us one of the songs of Zion!*"

שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן ὕμνον ᾠσατε ἡμῖν ἐκ τῶν ᾠδῶν Σιων (LXX lit. a hymn sing us from the songs of Zion)

The frequency of occurrence of "psalms, hymns, songs" in the LXX Psalter, together with their occurrence in combinations, clearly supports a reference to the Book of Psalms in the Colossians and Ephesians where the three terms are joined together. Most emphatically it must be stated that the presence of the word "hymn" in Ephesians and Colossians provides no basis for the use of uninspired hymns in the public worship of the Church.

There is yet one more piece of evidence concerning the use of these words that suggests that Paul is piling up synonymous references to the Psalter. The Hebrew expression שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ *shir chadash* "new song" is translated variously into the Greek of the LXX, demonstrating the synonymy of these Greek terms which refer to songs used in worship. The most frequently used Greek word in this expression is αἶσμα, 'aisma', found in Psalms 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1.

Psalm 96:1 Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
ασμα καινόν ~~ψα~~σατε τῷ κυρίῳ πάσα ἡ γῆ קָדְשׁוֹ לַיהוָה שִׁיר שִׁיר שִׁיר

Note that in the title in the LXX this “new song” is also referred to as an ὠδή τῷ Δαυίδ “an ὀδῆ of David.” Neither this noun, ‘aisma’, nor its related verb occur in the NT. A second Greek word that translates “song” in the Hebrew expression “new song” (*shir chadash*) is ὠδή ‘ōdē’.

Psalm 144:9 I will sing a new song to You, O God;
 ο θεός ὠδην καινήν ~~ψο~~σομαι σοι שִׁיר שִׁיר

A third Greek word that refers to the “new song is ὕμνος ‘hymn.’”

Psalm 40:3 He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.
 LXX καὶ ἐνέβαλεν εἰς τὸ στόμα μου ασμα καινόν ὑμνον τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν
 שִׁיר שִׁיר לְאֱלֹהֵינוּ

An even clearer example is found in **Isaiah 42:10** ὑμνήσατε τῷ κυρίῳ ὑμνον καινόν... Sing to the LORD a new song,...

We conclude that Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 use synonymous Greek terms which grouped together refer most naturally to the praises of the Psalter. This is the most reasonable conclusion about what these terms meant in the language spoken by both Paul and his hearers and readers. Paul is directing the Church to use the Praises of the Bible to edify one another and to praise the Lord. This use of “psalms, hymns, and songs” to refer to the collected Book of Praises thus echoes the OT summary for the Law of Moses, “commandments, testimonies, and statutes” (1Chronicles 29:19), or Jesus’ summary of the Bible, “the Law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:44).

In both the Ephesian and Colossian passages, Paul uses the adjective “spiritual” (πνευματικαῖς). The adjective agrees directly with the last noun, “songs” (ὠδαῖς dative, feminine plural). However, since the entire set of nouns is governed by the dative case, the adjective in fact governs the whole set of nouns making up the dative phrase. This is further evidence that the three terms should be taken as a collective. Many modern commentators agree that the adjective governs all three nouns. Those who do not often point out that in Greek usage the first two terms (psalm, hymn) were unmistakably religious songs, while the third, ὀδῆ (ὠδή), could be a secular

song. Under this hypothesis, the apostle then added the adjective to this noun in order to make clear that he was not referring to secular songs, but to songs appropriate for Christian praise. But it is more likely that the adjective (“spiritual”) governs all three nouns. Under this hypothesis, when we consider that this phrase, “spiritual,” is itself set in a context which explicates “the word of Christ” (Colossians 3:16) or being “filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), it is clear that the apostle is referring to divinely inspired praises. David said of himself: *The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue* (2Samuel 23:1,2).

"Being filled with the Spirit..." also evoked for Paul's audience a contrast between pagan and Christian worship. Public meetings at which religious texts were read, offerings made, and eating and drinking took place were a common feature of Greek and Roman religious life. Such celebrations could incite overindulgence leading to drunkenness (cf. 1Cor 11:21) and to debauchery. The apostle Peter probably has these celebrations in mind when he writes: *For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles -- when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries* (1Peter 4:3). The Christian worship assembly stands in sharp contrast to pagan fellowship with its idolatry. Rather than being filled with wine, Christians are filled with the Spirit. In the place of riotous eating and drinking, Christians share the bread and cup of the Lord. Instead of singing drinking songs and hymns to idols, Christians sing to the Lord with the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs given by the Holy Spirit.

Both these NT texts include the commandment to sing praise to God from the heart. Colossians 3:16 directs us to be “singing in your hearts to God,” and Ephesians 5:18 says to be “singing and ‘psalming’ in your heart to the Lord.” The heart is the one instrument that the Lord is concerned to see properly tuned in his Church. It is the one instrument with which all believers can make music to the Lord, even the deaf or mute. The music that the Lord desires is that praise which comes from thankful hearts.

The participle “psalming,” translated “making melody” is used only here and in three other verses (Romans 15:9 [quoting Psalm 18], 1 Corinthians 14:15, James 5:13). As we noted, both our texts include speaking and singing: the speaking is to the church, the singing is to God; the chiasmic structure of the texts shows this dual purpose of singing in the Church. In both texts “singing” is a participle governed by a higher verb. In Colossians this verb is “let dwell” (the word of Christ in you) and in Ephesians it is “be filled” (with the Spirit). The singing of the Church is thus one consequence of being indwelt by the Lord. He dwells in us by his word and his Spirit. The word of the Lord together with the Spirit of the Lord stir in our hearts the religious affections that result in singing to him. These texts provide a clear commandment for heart-generated Biblical praise for God by the Church.

Given the messianic, covenantal, eschatological, spiritual and canonical nature of the book of Psalms, it is theologically consistent for the apostle to direct the Church to sing God’s own praises in worship. The Spirit in us directs the church upward in Christ (Ephesians 1:17-19). When we sing the praises of the Psalter, he teaches us by means of his word dwelling richly in us to reflect on our lives from the point of view of Christ enthroned. Athanasius, (c. 295-373 AD) wrote:

...the entire Holy Scripture is a teacher of virtues and of the truths of faith, while the Book of Psalms possesses somehow the perfect image for the soul’s course of life (Athanasius 1980, 112).

When we reflect on our lives with God’s praises, we edify one another and we show gratitude to God our Father by being obedient children eager to learn from him. We look upward even in reflecting on our lives here below.

Christ himself provides the chief example of what it means to speak to one another in the context of the worship of God:

Psalm 40:9-10 *I have proclaimed the good news of righteousness In the great assembly; Indeed, I do not restrain my lips, O LORD, You Yourself know. I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have declared Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth From the great assembly.*

Psalm 22:22 *I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will praise You.*

So also our Shepherd has given us rich and holy words for singing thanks to the Lord:

Psalm 107:32 *Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, And praise Him in the company of the elders.*

Psalm 79:13 *So we, Your people and sheep of Your pasture, Will give You thanks forever; We will show forth Your praise to all generations.*

Psalm 106:47 *Save us, O LORD our God, And gather us from among the Gentiles, To give thanks to Your holy name, To triumph in Your praise.*

Psalm 140:13 *Surely the righteous shall give thanks to Your name; The upright shall dwell in Your presence.*

And so, beloved brethren, we are called to be: *giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...*

We noted above that in the NT the word “song” ᾠδὴ ‘ōdē,’ is also found in Revelation 5:9, 14:3, 15:3. In the Apocalypse this word occurs as “new song” and “song of Moses and of the Lamb.” It can be shown that these heavenly songs are the eschatological fulfillment of the praises of the Psalter.

The phrase, “a new song” appears six times in the book of Psalms and once in Isaiah 42:10. The “new song” which is sung in the Psalms must be interpreted together with the “new things” found in the prophetic literature, especially the “new things” of Isaiah. In Isaiah 42:9-13, God proclaims that former things have passed away and the mouths of men and women everywhere will shout for joy. The reason is that God has conquered all his enemies. Furthermore, in Isaiah 65 and 66, the prophecy of the “new things” is also connected to the promises of a “new” heavens and earth. The vision connected with the “new song” in the Revelation sounds much like what we read at Ezekiel 1:24 and 43:2, 15. In Ezekiel 43 the vision centers on the “new temple.”

Thus, the word “new” in its eschatological usage in the Old Testament, and specifically in the Psalms, has a particular sense: it indicates the time of eschatological fulfillment. Such an interpretation of the concepts “new song”, “new things”, and “new day”, continued from the Old

into the New Testament. The concept was expanded to include the notion of new name, the new creature, and finally the New Jerusalem. Therefore, the “new song,” that is sung in the book of Revelation is not actually “new” in terms of its contents. Rather, it should be comprehended as the dawn of the great day of the Lord in complete triumph.

The first “new” song (Revelation 5:9) is sung to the victorious Christ. His obedience has given him the right to open the scroll. The voices of the heavenly assembly elaborate the nature of the state of those redeemed. At Revelation 5:10 we read, *“You have made them [the purchased from all the nations] to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”* The statement is more than a completion of prophecy. It celebrates the present status of the saints in union with Christ, which Paul describes in Ephesians 2:5-6. It also describes the heavenly saints’ activity as they too await the resurrection. We serve the Lord together as priests. In the Old Testament, the priests served God in the Temple, mentioned for example at Psalm 132:7-10.

The description of the heavenly scene continues at Revelation 5:11, *“Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.”* This vision of heaven was seen by the Psalmist too, as demonstrated at Psalm 148:2 *Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts!*

A second stanza of the heavenly new song begins at Revelation 5:12, *“In a loud voice they sang: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’”* The content of Revelation 5:12-13 is similar to David’s prayer of praise before the entire assembly at 1Chronicles 29:10-19. Certainly King David knew about God’s great strength, and he sang about it at Psalm 21:1-5,13 *Be exalted, O LORD, in Your own strength! We will sing and praise Your power.* The Psalmist, at Psalm 63:2, has seen what appears to be the same heavenly vision observed by John: *So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.*

Connected to the “new song” is the “song of Moses” and “song of the Lamb”. The text of the song is found at Revelation 15:3 & 4. There is a “song of Moses” found at Exodus 15:1ff.

Evangelical commentators say, however, that the “song of Moses” found in Revelation 15 is a collage of Psalm texts and other Old Testament passages, typically citing Psalm 111, 139, 86, 144, 98 and also Jeremiah 10, Deuteronomy 32.

At Revelation 15:3 we read, *and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages.”* When we carefully examine the words of that song, it is clear that they are taken from Psalm 86:10, as well as from Psalm 10:16. Also, it can be demonstrated that in the closing words of that verse, “Fear the Lord and glorify his name”, we hear the theological thrust of the whole of Psalm 2, as well as the words of Psalm 19:9. Furthermore, there is a connection to the words and themes of Psalm 111: 2, and Psalm 139:14. In the following verse, Revelation 15:4, the song continues: *Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.* This is no different from the song of God’s people found at Psalm 22:3, or Psalm 86:9. The redeemed host in heaven sings a “new song” of praise using predominantly the praise concepts of the OT Psalms. These examples of worship in heaven provide no warrant for the Church to write its own uninspired hymns, even were such to be carefully put together from the OT Psalms, since such arranging of words would not be the work of the Spirit, but of man.

These examples of worship show that the singing of Psalms is both commanded to the Church and exemplified by the Church in glory. We conclude that God instructed the church in the OT to use the Psalms of David in its worship. The NT reiterates that instruction in Ephesians and Colossians. Even what the Church in glory sings is drawn mainly from the Book of Psalms. The canonical Book of Psalms is God's rule for his Church when it sings his praises.

Summary of Biblical Warrant

We have shown so far that the canon of the Psalter is God’s design for the worship of his people. The Psalter is fully realized in its intent with the coming of Christ. Jesus confirmed the

Psalter, and the apostle commands the Church to sing the Psalms. The Psalter possesses manifest warrant for singing in the worship of God through all generations and in all lands. It is God's canon of praise.

We also noted that, in keeping with the Regulative Principle of Worship, biblical warrant for what to sing in worship requires positive evidence. We have established that positive warrant for the singing of the Psalms is clear. However, positive warrant for the singing of other Scripture songs in worship is subject to question. Consequently, we do not discern clear warrant for singing in public worship any but the compositions in the canonical Book of Psalms.

The Superiority of the Psalms for Christian Worship

It is no surprise that since the Psalms speak profoundly of Christ's work and nature, since they contain all of the doctrines taught in the Bible, and since they powerfully aid Christians in their quest for holiness, the ancient Church found the Psalms a suitable hymnal. For its first four centuries, the Church used the Psalms in its worship. The Book of Psalms was so well established in the ancient Church that when the Gnostic Bardasanes wanted to spread his heresy, he composed his own book of 150 psalms. While there are hints that some Christians used songs not included in the Bible in their worship, as for example in the warning of Athanasius already noted, the united consensus of historians is that the Psalter was the hymnal of the Church. Extant accounts of persecutors' destruction of Christian writings mention Bibles and Psalters, but not hymnals. It seems unlikely that, if the Church in the first century was singing new hymns, it would later have lost them. Poetry lasts; songs endure. The claim that the New Testament church wrote its own hymns based on certain hymn-like passages in the Bible rests on evidence so speculative as not to be a worthy guide.

Regrettably, as the years passed, the Church succumbed to a variety of corruptions in its worship and doctrine. Extra-biblical songs posed a danger which the Council of Laodicea responded to in AD 381. In its Canon 59 it ordered:

No psalms composed by private individuals nor any uncanonical books may be read in the church, but only the Canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. [Canons of Laodicea, Canon 59, quoted by (Bushell 1993, 159)]

A variety of Church councils over the next three centuries, including the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), reiterated this rule, indicating both the continuing impulse to introduce uninspired songs in worship and the Church's effort to combat their use.

When the Reformation in Europe began, a major objective of its leaders was to purify the worship of God from the accretions of centuries and return to the biblical practices of the apostolic Church. Those churches which followed in the Reformed line adopted the ancient practice of singing the Psalms, sometimes including also a few texts found elsewhere in the Bible, such as Mary's praise in Luke 1 and the Decalogue. The Genevan Psalter swept France. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* listed "singing of psalms with grace in the heart" as one part of public worship (*WCF*, 21:5). After the Reformation, Presbyterian churches and others in the English speaking world and some Reformed churches on the continent of Europe again returned to the Psalter as their hymnal. However, the Reformed churches of the continent of Europe did use some biblical songs of praise alongside the Psalter in their worship of God.

Since the middle 1700's, however, there has been a progressive abandonment of the Psalter by Reformed churches. First, there were Isaac Watt's imitations of the Psalms (e.g. "Joy to the World" paraphrasing Psalm 98), and then newly composed uninspired hymns. Churches concluded that the Psalms were insufficient for Christian worship and that uninspired hymns were superior to Psalms for their worship. In this judgment, they erred. As we have shown, the messianic, missiological, eschatological and spiritual nature of the Psalter makes Psalm singing a feast of God-centered praise for the New Testament Church. In addition, as we have shown, the New Testament contains an actual command to Christians to sing the Psalms. There is always wisdom in God's commands. Consider some ways in which the Psalms are superior to uninspired hymns for the Church's worship of God.

The Psalms are covenantal in nature and thus best suited to covenantal worship. In its worship, God speaks to his Church and his saints respond to him in faith and love, at the same time speaking in love to one another. The Psalms not only declare truth about God, but in them, God speaks directly to us and we to one another. Consider these examples:

God speaks to his Son (Psalms 110, 89)

God speaks to the wicked (Psalm 50:16-23, 2:6-9)

God speaks to kings (Psalm 2:10-12) and to nations (Psalm 2).

God says, "I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (Psalm 46:10).

God commands, "Gather my saints together, those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice" (Psalm 50:5).

In the Psalms God's people respond to God and his providential acts in language given by God himself: *be merciful; help; hear me; save me; I have sinned; Lord, I believe in you*. The Psalms teach us how to respond to the triumphs and trials of life in a godly fashion. Often in the Psalms the two voices of God speaking and ourselves replying are closely joined. *When you did say, 'Seek ye my face,' my heart said to you, 'Your face, Lord, I will seek'* (Psalm 27:8). In the Psalms, the saints also address others: workers of evil (Psalm 6:8-9), the mighty (Psalm 29:1-2), children (Psalm 34), judges (Psalm 82:2-4), God-fearers (Psalm 66:16). With the Psalms, God's people have something to say to nearly everyone about God and his will. In some places the conversation between God, his Son, and his people becomes so involved that it is hard to determine who is saying what to whom, (e.g., Psalm 91:9-16). The Psalms, and they alone, involve the church in all of the intimate communion that takes place in worship between God and his Son, between God and his people, and among God's people. And all of this is mediated by the Holy Spirit himself, who gave these glorious words to the Church. Uninspired hymnody can imitate some of the didactic Psalms in teaching the truth; they dare not and cannot replace the covenantal dialogue taking place in the Psalms. Athanasius wrote:

...after the prophecies about the Savior and the nations, he who recites the Psalms is uttering the rest as his own words, and each sings them as if they were written concerning him, and he accepts them and recites them not as if another were speaking, nor as if speaking about someone else. But he handles them as if he is speaking about himself. And the things spoken are such that he lifts them up to God as himself acting and speaking

them for himself (Athanasius 1980, 11).

The Psalter is simply superior for covenant worship to any hymnody that uninspired man can produce. Replacing the Psalter with a modern hymnal is like exchanging gold for bronze (see 1Kings 14:26-27). It is a bad bargain.

In addition to being covenantal in nature and thus best suited to covenantal worship, the Psalms are superior to uninspired hymns in a second way. The singing of the word of God weekly counteracts any betrayal of the word of God elsewhere in the service. True worship requires harmony and agreement between all parts of the worship service. A congregation will not for long tolerate falsehood from the pulpit while it sings the truth of the Psalms from the heart in worship. It will either change what it sings, or it will change what it hears. For example, many Christians would like the Gospel to include the promise that in Christ the troubles in their lives in the here and now will all be gone. Some preachers do preach a message to claim the good things of this life by faith, with a guarantee of a life without sickness or poverty to the one of strong faith. They choose hymns that support such a teaching. But a congregation that sings the Psalms will repeatedly sing of the troubles of the psalmist, of illness and distress, of abandonment and sorrow, of enemies and persecution. They will reject the unfounded promises of the health and wealth Gospel.

Psalms are also superior to hymns because they do not reflect the spirit of any one age or the idiosyncratic tendencies of any particular church or of any single nation or culture. For example, in an age which dislikes remembering the judgment to come and is embarrassed by the Bible's teaching on creation, the Psalter makes it impossible for Christians to escape God's word about these things. Indeed, the place of the Psalms in the Bible and their catholicity of experience make them the only possible ecumenical hymnal for the Church in all ages and in all nations. They can be sung with the same meaning in any language.

Besides being covenantal in nature, a deterrent to heresy, and truly catholic, the Psalms are superior to hymns in that they have a depth and a breadth which makes them always new,

always relevant. In any three or four Psalms sung on the Lord's Day, the Church is likely to remember God's creation and redemption, confess its sins, plead for help, and give thanks for God's mercies. Whatever doctrine the Scripture reading and sermon teach on any given day, the selected Psalms may teach also, while adding to the worship of the church the rainbow of truth contained in God's word. Thus in singing the Psalms, the church ministers to the needs of everyone present: the penitent, the lonely, the ignorant, the joyful, and the downtrodden. Uninspired hymns lack that quality. They usually follow a single theme, perhaps truly, but they do not resonate with the whole of Scripture truth. A Psalm can at the same time describe our personal experience, the life of Christ, and all the experience of the whole Church.

We conclude, therefore, that the Psalms are perfectly suited and much superior to hymns for the honoring of God and the edifying of the saints. The ancient Church practice of Psalmody, warranted by Scripture and by the practice of the Reformed churches for centuries, is theologically and experientially shown to be the correct practice of the Church. Only compelling reasons from Scripture should ever lead the Church away from Psalmody.

Some Christians do challenge this claim of superiority for the Psalter. They assert that the Psalter is both inadequate and inferior in some important ways to contemporary hymns in meeting the Church's present need. New deeds of God, they say, call for new songs to celebrate those deeds. They claim that in the Old Testament, whenever God did something new, such as the Exodus, or establishing Davidic rule, or bringing Israel back from Exile, new songs were written to commemorate God's new acts.

Whether major advances in God's plan of salvation, or signal deliverances of His People, were always celebrated in new Psalms is a doubtful inference. But if it were a principle of God's dealings with His People that new divine deeds are recounted in newly written songs, then the New Testament should contain a collection of new songs. It does not. God did not inspire His saints to write a collection of new songs to add to or replace the book of Psalms in the Church's praise, nor did he tell the Church to write uninspired songs to sing. The Psalms written to

commemorate God's deeds were Spirit given. The Word came not by the mere will of man. The deliverance brought by Christ and the mission task of His Church are, in fact, already present in the Psalter, which proclaims God's great work of redemption to the end of the age, as we have shown.

Other Christians oppose the exclusive singing of the Psalms in worship because they do not contain the name "Jesus." Obviously, they do not mention the Lord's New Testament name. But the Psalms speak profoundly of the person and work of Jesus, and refer to him through many of his titles. Consider that Jesus was named for a purpose: *you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21). His name means "Savior," and the Savior is certainly very present in the Psalms. Just a few examples:

Psalm 7:10 *My shield is with God, who saves the upright in heart. (Tanach: the deliverer of the upright.)* Hebrew: **יְשׁוּעָה**, Greek: **τοῦ σωζοντος...**

Psalm 17:7 *Wondrously show your steadfast love, O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.*

Psalm 18:2 *The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

Psalm 25:5 *Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.*

Psalm 28:9 *Oh, save your people and bless your heritage! Be their shepherd and carry them forever.*

Psalm 31:16 *Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!*

The Japanese Psalter of the RPCNA notes in its preface:

When the Psalms praise the name of "the Lord" (Yahweh), the term includes not only the Father, but also more broadly the Son and the Holy Spirit. Also, the Psalms include prophecies of Christ in many places such as the messianic Psalms, where Christ is praised as "King" and "Messiah." Therefore, in singing the Psalms, when we praise the Lord Jesus as "Lord," "King," or "Messiah," we are by that praise confessing that Jesus is Lord (Yahweh) and Messiah (Christ). (See Index of Psalms quoted in the New Testament) Indeed, Christ's crown and covenant are at the heart of the Psalms."

Thus, when Christians sing Psalm 23, *The Lord is my shepherd...* they remember Jesus who is Lord and who described himself as the Good Shepherd. When they sing about the Lord coming in

judgment, they know that Jesus will come with the clouds of heaven to judge the living and the dead. It is a misguided sentimentality which abandons singing the Psalms because the name “Jesus” does not appear in them, when the Psalms speak so plainly of him. Though the Psalms do not contain the name “Jesus,” his person and titles are seated in the Psalms as on a glorious throne. *Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel...*(Psalm 22:3).

The Psalms are superior to hymns because, like our worship, they alone are covenantal in nature; because they deter the introduction of heresy either by omission or commission in a way that hymns cannot; because they are truly catholic in content and expression; and because they contain a depth and breadth of teaching and emotion unavailable in uninspired hymnody. God has given his Church a Psalter which is suitable for his worship and which is superior to what uninspired saints can ever write. But their ultimate superiority is that they are the Holy Spirit’s own compositions, carefully collected into a canon of praises which are commanded by God to be sung by his Church.

Some churches which accept the Westminster standards in which the singing of Psalms is named as part of the regular worship of God (*WCF* 21.5) nevertheless argue that what the Church sings is a “circumstance” of worship, not a separate element of worship itself. The Confession teaches that there “are some circumstances concerning the worship of God...which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word...” (*WCF* 1.6). However, what the Church sings is not a “circumstance” of worship. [We addressed this issue in “The Worship of the Church.”] “Circumstance” in the Westminster standards refers to matters such as a place for worship, time to assemble, length of Scripture to be read, what tune to sing, and so on. It does not refer to the actual content of the truth being taught. Since all songs teach by their words, the songs cannot be a mere circumstance of worship.

Consider also that the Scriptures contain clear instructions concerning what is to be sung: the *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* of the Book of Psalms. Jesus sang these Psalms. Clearly, he did not sing them just because, circumstantially, they happened to please him. Therefore, what is

sung cannot be a mere circumstance left to be decided according to the light of nature and Christian prudence.

An interpretation of "circumstance" in the *WCF* that makes it include the words sung in worship puts the Confession at odds with itself, when it lists "singing of psalms with grace in the heart" alongside prayer, Bible reading, preaching and the sacraments as "ordinary religious worship of God" (*WCF*, 21.4). The claim that what is sung is only a "circumstance" of worship is contrary to the *Confession of Faith*.

Another argument raised against the exclusive singing of the Psalms in the worship of the Church is that the Church does not restrict itself in its worship to the Bible and nothing else. An elder preaches, explaining the word and applying it to his listeners. Paul told Timothy to do exactly that: *Preach the word... rightly dividing the word of truth.* (2Timothy 4:2 & 2:15). Our prayers likewise don't just repeat prayers found in the Bible: *Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority...*(1Timothy 2:1-2). They follow the general instructions and examples concerning prayer found in the Bible, but the actual words used are from the mind and heart of man. From these examples of preaching and prayer, the conclusion drawn by analogy is that the Church must likewise be free to compose its own songs for worship.

However, singing is a separate part of worship with its own character. At the temple, the Levites sang the Psalms according to the commandment of God. This was not something that they decided to do on their own, according to the light of nature. Nor were they free to write their own songs. They sang the words of David and of Asaph the Seer (2Chronicles 29:30), a reference to the Psalms. We, likewise, are told to use the psalms, hymns and spiritual songs of the Psalter.

Songs operate in the life of the Church more like Scripture than like prayers or preaching in one crucial respect. Prayers and preaching are not repeated verbatim week after week or memorized by the congregation. They are suited to the needs of the Church each week. Songs,

however, are used as the Bible is: the same form of words is repeated over and over again until they are memorized. Also, while the Bible contains instructions for preaching and praying, it contains no instructions nor guidance about writing new songs, only about singing the songs already given by the Spirit. Finally, note that all preaching is subordinate to the Scriptures, and praying must be in accord with God's revealed will. Preaching and prayer apply Scripture in the life of the Church. But noncanonical songs replace Scripture because they replace the Psalms. Even in churches which sing both the Psalms and man-composed hymns, using a hymn means not using a Psalm, and therefore replacing the word of God with something else. We thus disagree that because in its preaching and praying the Church does not restrict itself to Scripture, it is likewise free to do so with its singing. The Church's singing is different than its praying and preaching and must be done according to God's instructions for singing.

Claims that modern hymnody is superior to the Psalter for the Church's worship because they use the name "Jesus" or because they celebrate God's salvation in Christ after it was accomplished do not stand up to close examination. Neither do claims that what the Church chooses to sing is only a "circumstance" of worship. The Psalms, in fact, are superior to man-made hymns for the worship of the Church because of their superior Christology, their deep spirituality, their universal appeal, their covenantal nature, and their being the very Word of God itself.

Conclusions

The Holy Spirit inspired the Psalms and oversaw their collection in the Book of Praises to be a canon of praise for the Church. The psalms, hymns, and songs of the Psalter speak of Christ; David's prayers are Christ's prayers. The Psalms plumb the depths of the souls of all who sing in faith, while they turn our thoughts towards God and Christ's Coming. God's victory over evil, the calling of the nations to serve Him, and the covenant relationships we have in Christ resound throughout the Psalms. God never commanded the Church to write its own songs to replace the

Psalms. Replacement hymns are at best inferior imitations only. The Westminster standards thus name the Psalms alone as suitable for singing in the public worship of God. We conclude: the Church should use the Psalms in God's worship and not uninspired hymns. The Psalms have God's warrant for singing. Uninspired songs do not, and warrant is unclear for singing other songs in Scripture.

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