



Psalm 107:43

THEOLOG

THE JOURNAL OF THE LOG COLLEGE & SEMINARY

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SOLA PSALMIS: AN OFTEN OVERLOOKED APPLICATION OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

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Abraham Kuyper writes that in 1807 many young pastors, just out of seminary, began introducing hymnody to their congregations. He continued:

Here we come to the issue of psalms versus hymns. Our fathers ruled that, with a few exceptions, only the singing of psalms was permitted in the assembly of believers. When hymns were introduced in 1807 (by unlawful ecclesiastical might), many people refused to sing them when announced from the pulpit. At the time of the restoration of the church in the Secession and *Doleantie*², the position was reaffirmed that only psalms were to be sung.³

The “Fathers” so mentioned is a reference to those fathers at the Great Synod of Dordrecht held in 1618 and 1619. Most commonly, people think of the Canons of Dordt in the context of its rebuttal of the Remonstrance, the position of the Arminians. Yet, when assembled, the delegates to Dordt were also put to the work of producing a new translation of the Bible into Dutch, complete with commentary and notes, and they were called upon to standardize a book of church order for use in the Dutch churches. Upon completion, these documents became the standard exposition of Scripture and ecclesiastical practice for Dutch Reformed theology.⁴ Article 69 of the Book of Church Order of Dordt reads:

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2 *Doleantie* is Latin for “the Sorrowing,” a term given to the split in the Dutch Reformed church led by Kuyper in 1886, responding to the liberalizing trends taking place within the larger body.

3 Abraham Kuyper. *Our Worship*. Trans. Harry Boonstra (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 37.

4 It should also be noted that in 1645, the Westminster Assembly would adopt the Canons of Dordt and the Belgic Confession as providing a confessional standard by which orthodoxy was to be judged. Further, they elected to adopt the Dordrecht Bible Commentary as the standard exposition of Scripture for the Assembly.

In the Churches, only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith⁵, the Song of Mary, that of Zacharias, and that of Simeon shall be sung. It is left to the individual Churches whether or not to use the hymn, "Oh God! who art our Father."⁶ All other hymns are to be excluded from the Churches, and in those places where some have already been introduced, they are to be removed by the most suitable means.⁷

Thus, with very few exceptions, the Dutch Fathers insisted that the Psalms were the only proper form of music to be sung during the worship of God. Given the influence of Dordt upon the Assembly at Westminster in 1646, it should be no surprise that when the Divines wrote on the acceptable elements of worship, they spoke only of the "singing of psalms with grace in the heart."⁸ Furthermore, when the Assembly drafted *The Directory for Public Worship*, they wrote:

It is the duty of Christians to praise God publicly, by the singing of psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family. In singing of psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord. That the whole congregation may join herein, everyone that can read is to have a psalm book; and all others, not disabled by age or otherwise, are to be exhorted to learn to read. But for the present, where many in the congregation cannot read, it is convenient that the minister, or some other fit person appointed by him and the other ruling officers, do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.⁹

Here we see the Assembly eliminating the remnants of hymnody from within the worship of God's people. They were so committed to the principle of psalm-singing that they would officially sanction the Psalter of Francis Rous

5 A reference to the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed, which are, in essence, derived directly from Scripture.

6 Degier explains that this is a short hymn by J. Utenhoven which was customarily sung before the sermon.

7 K. Degier. *Explanation of the Church Order of Dordt: In Questions and Answers*. Trans. John J. Van Hassent. (Netherlands: Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, 1974), 99-100.

8 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXI, V.

9 *Westminster Assembly Directory for Public Worship: Of Singing of Psalms*.

(1579-1659).¹⁰ While many of the German churches would embrace hymnody, the English-speaking churches would follow their French brethren¹¹ and remain committed to psalmody until the rise of Isaac Watts' influence a century later.¹² This can be seen even in the Americas with the publication of the Bay Psalter, the first book printed in North America.¹³

While the transition from psalmody to hymnody is as well-documented in the Patristic church as it is in the Reformational church, the question that is often overlooked is that of why the Reformed Confessions of Dordt and Westminster put such emphasis on exclusive or near-exclusive use of psalmody in their synodical documents. This author's position is that the primary reason for the commitment of the 17th-Century delegates to psalmody is that they saw it as the natural outworking of the principle of Sola Scriptura. If the Scriptures are indeed the "whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life,"¹⁴ that they provide "regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith,"¹⁵ and that "from these Scriptures are to be taken true wisdom and godliness, the reformation and government of churches...and instruction in all duties of piety,"¹⁶ then why would one look elsewhere, rather than to the Scriptures to govern every aspect of our public and private worship?¹⁷ Indeed, the Westminster Divines insisted that "the acceptable way of worshipping

10 Hughes Oliphant Old. *Worship: Guides to the Reformed Tradition*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 54.

11 The practice of psalmody is a given amongst the Heuguenot churches, but it should also be noted that due to the influence of the poetry of Clement Marot (1497-1544), metrical psalms were also a favorite of the French Catholic court. See Hamilton Macdougall, *Early New England Psalmody: An Historical Appreciation (1620-1820)*. (Brattleboro: Stephen Daye Press, 1940), 4-5.

12 Ibid, 54-55. Bernard Manning argues that while it was Charles Wesley that made hymnody synonymous with the sung worship of the church, it was Watts that opened the door for hymnody with his loose paraphrases of the psalms. See Bernard Manning. *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts: Five Papers*. (London: Epworth Press, 1942).

13 Ibid, 54.

14 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter I, VI.

15 *Belgic Confession*, Article 5.

16 *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter 1, Heading 3.

17 *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 96; Belgic Confession, Article 32.

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.”¹⁸ The principle of Sola Scriptura then provides us with a rule that governs not only the points of theology we are to believe but also provides for us a rule that regulates faith and life.¹⁹ One of the marks of true faith is that a person “hold[s] for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word.”²⁰ In the words of A.A. Hodge, “Whatever God teaches or commands is of sovereign authority. Whatever conveys to us an infallible knowledge of His teachings and commands is an infallible rule.”²¹

It is on the basis that the Scriptures contain God’s sovereign commands for our individual and corporate lives that the Regulative Principle of Worship was established amongst the Reformed churches.²² In the words of the Westminster confession, worship is to be “limited by His [God’s] own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or in any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”²³ The principle is worded even more simply by the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism: “That we are in no way to represent God by images, nor worship Him in any way than He has commanded in His Word.”²⁴ How does Westminster flesh out this principle? Worship must be Trinitarian with Christ as the only Mediator²⁵; it must contain prayer with thanksgiving in the

18 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXI, I.

19 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter I, VI.

20 *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 21.

21 A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*. (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1878), 82.

22 The Regulative Principle establishes that worship is governed by God and the only acceptable elements of worship are those that He established in Scripture. This is in contrast to the Normative Principle of Worship held by most protestant bodies outside of the Reformed faith, suggesting that anything that God does not expressly forbid is permissible.

23 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XXI, I.

24 *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 96.

25 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, Heading 2.

name of the Son and with the help of the Holy Spirit²⁶, and that it is to contain the elements of the reading of Scripture, the sound preaching of the word with “conscionable hearing” in obedience to God, singing of psalms with grace in the heart, the administration of the Sacraments, as well as those things, like vows, oaths, and fasting that are to be done on special occasions.²⁷ Westminster goes as far as to assert that it is the Christian obligation to oppose “all false worship” and to remove such where possible.²⁸ Indeed, one of the marks of the True Church is to manage all things “according to the pure Word of God” and to reject all things that are “contrary thereunto.”²⁹

And so, if the Scriptures do form the infallible rule in the life of the church and govern our corporate worship as well as our private lives, does it not seem odd that one of the more common “exceptions” to the Confession that pastors and congregations hold is to the phrase, “singing psalms with grace in the heart”? Reformed pastors are often vigilant about ensuring that the “Whole Counsel of God” is preached, but why is “the whole Psalter of God” not sung in many circles? Is not the singing of psalms in worship a “good and necessary consequence” of the Scriptural teachings if not a formal command?³⁰ Is not the singing of inspired songs better than the singing of uninspired songs? And if it is better, why do so many insist on singing the lesser?

The early church was faced with a similar struggle as many uninspired hymns were being introduced to the church by heretics such as Paul of Samosata, Bardesanes, and the Apollinaris.³¹ As early as the Fourth Century, the church met in the city of Laodicea to resolve this matter. The conclusion of the delegates to the Council of Laodicea can be found in Canon 59: “No psalms composed by private individuals or uncanonical books may be read in church, but only the

26 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, Heading 3.

27 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, Heading 5.

28 *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 108.

29 *Belgic Confession*, Article 29.

30 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, Heading 6.

31 Charles Joseph Hefele. *A History of the Councils of the Church*. Vol 2. Trans. William Clark. (Edmond, OK: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2014). P 377.

canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.”³² As noted above, the debate over the use of psalms verses uninspired hymns in worship is not a debate unique to Reformed circles, but it is one that has been had throughout the history of the Christian church.³³

This author’s purpose is not to sit upon a hilltop and condemn but to pose a question and issue a challenge for the betterment of Christ’s church. This author recognizes that some hymns and contemporary songs are theologically sound, yet they are still not inspired writ. This article asks the question: “If we are truly committed to the Regulative Principle of Worship and our Confessions, ought we not take care to sing the words God Himself has given us to sing?” Or, to pose the question in another way, “Is not *Sola Psalmis* the natural outworking of *Sola Scriptura*?”

A Practical Benefit

Christians are called “to test every spirit” to determine whether they are from God or otherwise because many false prophets have gone out into the world.³⁴ Paul wrote that we are to test everything and hold to what is good.³⁵ The wolves are in the world and often wear sheep’s clothing³⁶, serving themselves and not the Lord Jesus Christ.³⁷ Thus, when presented with the words of men to sing, how many people carefully examine the words set before them?³⁸ And, does not that act of discernment distract from singing in worship? Instead, if one sings from the divine writings, what need is there to filter what is being sung? Indeed,

32 Ibid. It should also be noted that Canon 17 makes it clear that the singing of psalms in church worship was the normative practice in the church at this time. Ibid, 363.

33 Thus, as the Reformers sought to return to a faith and practice that was consistent with what was practiced within the early Apostolic church, it should be of no surprise that the Reformers were of one mind that psalm-singing must be preserved within Christ’s body.

34 1 John 4:1

35 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

36 Matthew 7:15.

37 Romans 16:18.

38 This is often much the same with the choice of songs to sing, for very often songs are chosen because of their singability rather than because of their reliability.

there is great freedom when one can sing without the slightest fear of singing a falsehood before God.

In addition, how much of the uninspired hymnody is written by women? Many Reformed churches would not dream of having a woman instruct them from the pulpit³⁹, yet they will allow a woman to instruct them in song. Or what of the songs written by those who are heretics? Most of these churches would never endorse a hymn by Arius or contemporary praise by Hillsong, but what of other heretics like Horatio Spafford? Shall we sing orthodox-sounding hymns written by people who are thoroughly unorthodox or shall we sing psalms that have been inspired by God himself?

Additionally, the Scriptures command us to store up God's Word in our hearts so that we might not sin against Him.⁴⁰ The emphasis on learning the Word of God and then teaching God's word to a new generation runs throughout the Scriptures.⁴¹ Even Eliphaz, Job's pagan "counselor," understood that it was good and proper to receive instruction from God's mouth and lay up His words in your heart.⁴² And as such, singing has always been understood as one of the easiest ways to memorize things.⁴³ Shall we not use this tool when it comes to memorizing Scripture?

Furthermore, singing psalms teaches the church far more than words. The psalms contain history⁴⁴, practical⁴⁵ and systematic theology⁴⁶, the Gospel⁴⁷,

39 1 Timothy 2:12.

40 Psalm 119:11.

41 E.g. Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:6; 11:18; Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2; Colossians 3:16, and many more places.

42 Job 22:22.

43 How many children are taught their alphabet, the books of the Bible, and other ideas through song?

44 E.g. Psalms 78 & 132.

45 E.g. Psalms 73 & 133.

46 E.g. Psalms 19 & 104.

47 E.g. Psalms 25 & 51.

prayer⁴⁸, and faith.⁴⁹ They even command Christians to worship as they sing a psalm with understanding.⁵⁰ Thus, the use of the psalms is not merely a matter of worship but also a form of divine instruction.⁵¹ Shall the saints be deprived of the benefit of the psalms because we might prefer to sing other? Shall we strengthen or weaken the body?

Objections

While there was a time when the Reformed church spoke almost univocally regarding the use of the Psalter in worship, today, the notion of Sola Psalmis is rare. In the majority of Reformed and non-Reformed churches, hymnody and contemporary praise music have risen in its place. This author has few expectations that many congregations will abandon their practice of singing uninspired songs and return to using psalmody. Still, it is worth addressing some significant objections to using psalms in Christian worship.

Objection 1: Perhaps the most common objection to the idea of exclusively singing psalms in worship is drawn from an interpretation of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, where Paul instructs the church to come together singing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual odes.” Does not this text undermine the principle that only inspired singing is meant to be in the church?

While discussing this objection, even if a modern interpretation is taken,

48 As the Psalms are all prayers that are sung, the language of the entire Psalter ought to inform every aspect of the Christian's prayer life.

49 E.g. Psalms 40 & 103.

50 Taken from the LXX Psalm 46:8 (Psalm 47:7 in English translations), the phrase $\psi\acute{\alpha}\lambda\alpha\tau\epsilon\ \sigma\upsilon\upsilon\nu\epsilon\tau\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ translating the Hebrew phrase $\text{וְקָרוּ מִשְׁכִּיל}$.

51 It should be noted that this author spent five years serving as a chaplain for a Christian school in Florida. Amongst his duties was that of the counselor of the male students on campus. His approach to counseling was always to look to a psalm that was relevant to what the young man was going through and using that psalm to help direct the young man's personal and spiritual life. It became the conviction of this author that many, if not the majority, of our emotional disorders can be traced back to dysfunctional worship.

that ψαλμός, ὕμνος, and ᾠδή refer to three different kinds of sung music⁵², the church remains in error if it neglects psalmody altogether from its worship.⁵³ Yet, the historic Reformed position on this question is that these three terms designate three categories of music which are all contained within the book of Psalms. Addressing this question, the Commentary of the Synod of Dordrecht reads:

These three sorts of spiritual singing serve for one end, namely to recreate the spirit, and are in this way distinguished: psalms are all kinds of spiritual songs which are exercised not only with the voice but also with stringed instruments, of music; hymns are thanksgiving to God and metrical celebration of God's grace toward us; spiritual songs are such as contain all manner of spiritual doctrines. And these several names seem to be taken from the several inscriptions of the Psalms of David.⁵⁴

The point is that here is a Council of the Christian Church⁵⁵ teaching that Paul is speaking about three divisions within the Psalter: Psalms, Hymns, and Odes. The Westminster Assembly incorporated this idea into their description of the Regulative Principle of Worship.⁵⁶ As G.I. Williamson states:

[An] element of true worship is ‘the singing of psalms with grace in the heart.’ It will be observed that the Confession does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the use of modern hymns in the worship of God, but rather only the psalms of the Old Testament. It is not generally realized today that Presbyterian and Reformed Churches originally used only the inspired psalms, hymns and songs of the Biblical Psalter in divine worship, but such is the case. The Westminster Assembly not only expressed the conviction that only the psalms should be sung in divine worship, but implemented it by preparing a metrical version of the Psalter for use in the Churches.

How are these “three types” of psalms distinguished within the Psalter? One must remember that much of Paul’s audience used the Septuagint as their

52 Often understood as psalms, hymns, and contemporary praise music.

53 For at the very least, the Apostle is commanding that psalms be included in the worship of God’s people.

54 *The Dordrecht Bible Commentary*, Volume VI. (Clearwater, MN: North Star Ministry Press, 2020), Ephesians 5:19, 174.

55 The Synod of Dordrecht.

56 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, Heading 5.

primary source for understanding the Old Testament. It was the only Greek translation available in a world where Hebrew was limited to the Jewish culture and select academics. Greek, though, was the common tongue of community life and commerce in the first century. Even the New Testament authors chose to quote from the Septuagint, rather than from the Hebrew text, on a number of occasions. In many cases, even Jews in the Greek-speaking diaspora often used the Septuagint because the language was more accessible. Thus, after their conversion to Christianity, the Septuagint would provide a very natural transition into churches often dominated by gentiles.

Unlike the Masoretic Text, nearly every psalm in the Septuagint was assigned a superscription by their respective translators. Of these superscriptions, sixty-six are listed as psalms, thirty-six are listed as odes, and six are listed as hymns.⁵⁷ In addition, at the close of the second book of Psalms⁵⁸, it is written that the ὕμνος of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.⁵⁹ This confirms not only that the Scriptures designate all of the first seventy-one psalms as hymns, but also that hymnody is simply a category within the Psalter as the delegates to the Synod of Dordrecht defined it.

It should also be noted that the Psalter does not shy away from categorizing a single psalm as covering more than one genre. For instance, Psalm 4 is referred to as a psalm and an ode, while Psalm 6 is referred to as a psalm and a hymn. Two psalms, Psalm 66 and Psalm 75⁶⁰ are referred to by all three designations, a psalm, a hymn, and an ode, suggesting that this was the same shorthand that Paul was using in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. It should also be noted that when

57 The designations are as follows (note that the numbering in this section is based on the numbering of the psalms in the Septuagint as we are dealing with superscripts within this Greek text, which varies slightly from that of the Masoretic Text or of our English Bibles):

- ψαλμός: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 37, 39, 40, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 72, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 86, 87, 91, 93, 97, 98, 99, 100, 107, 108, 109, 138, 139, 140, 142.
- ὕμνος: 6, 53, 54, 60, 66, 75.
- ᾠδή: 4, 17, 29, 38, 44, 47, 64, 65, 66, 67, 74, 75, 82, 86, 87, 90, 91, 92, 94, 95, 107, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133.

58 Noting that the book of Psalms is broken into five smaller books.

59 Psalm 71:20 (LXX numbering)/Psalm 72:20 (English Bibles).

60 Psalms 67 and 76 in English Bibles.

Paul addresses the church in Corinth about the nature of orderly worship for the building up of God's people, he abbreviates the language he uses in Ephesians and Colossians to simply that they are to bring a psalm.⁶¹

It is clear, then, that ψαλμός, ὕμνος, and ᾠδή refer to three categories within the Psalter, but, what about those with superscripts falling outside of these three categories? Appealing to superscripts alone, that leaves fifty-six psalms as not having a superscript within the category of a psalm, hymn, or ode.⁶²

In the Hebrew text and the LXX, neither Psalm 1 nor Psalm 2 contain a superscript. Yet, remembering that Hebrew superscriptions are part of the inspired text, an argument can be made that the first two psalms of the Psalter form a kind of superscription that applies to the Psalter as a whole, just as the last psalms in the Psalter form a sort of final doxology. Furthermore, as the first seventy-one psalms are referred to as ὕμνος⁶³, it is clear that these two psalms fall within the category of a hymn.

Psalms 16, 85, 89, and 101 are referred to as προσευχή, or prayers. Yet the Hebrew behind προσευχή, תְּפִלָּה, according to Mowinckel, is a technical term referring to psalms of lamentation.⁶⁴ Thus, we find these prayers to be little more than a species within the larger genus of the psalms. A similar argument can be made for Psalms 25-27; 32-36; 68; 70-71; 96; 102-103; 136-137; and 143, which have no “label” contained in their superscript at all but are referred to as being “of David” or “of Solomon.” They are clearly intended to be sub-categories of the psalms by their inclusion within the Psalter and Psalm 70:22 speaks of giving thanks with a psalm, again identifying these as a subgroup of the ψαλμός. Similarly, the nineteen psalms that constitute the “Hallelujah Psalms” can be

61 1 Corinthians 14:26. The English Standard Version and the New International Version make the unfortunate decision to follow a later MSS which reads ὕμνος, while the majority of the best MSS favor ψαλμός here.

62 Note that a cogent argument can be made that places all of these exceptions into the category of a ψαλμός simply by virtue of their presence within the psalms.

63 Psalm 71:20.

64 S. Mowinckel. *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 1-2, Oxford 1962. Citation found in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner. Translated and edited under the supervision of M.E.J. Richardson. Koninklijke Brill NV: Leiden, The Netherlands, 2000. Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc.

understood as a species within the genus of the psalms.⁶⁵

Eight psalms are referred to as σύνεσις, often translated as “of understanding.”⁶⁶ Of these, Psalm 54 is also referred to as an ὠδή, again demonstrating that the σύνεσις is a sub-category within the larger category of odes or songs. Six psalms are referred to as στηλογραφία, or inscriptions.⁶⁷ All six of these psalms fall within the category of “hymns” as set by Psalm 71:20. Further, McFall⁶⁸ observes that Psalm 57:7-11 is cited again in Psalm 108:1-5. The former psalm is referred to as a στηλογραφία while the latter is referred to as a ψαλμός, thus strengthening the argument as to sub-categories. Similarly, Psalm 59:5-12 is cited in Psalm 107:6-13, again providing an illustration of genus and species.

Finally, Psalm 69 is referred to as a “Remembrance” and Psalm 144 as a “Praise.” Following the pattern established above, it is clear that these two psalms should be understood as subcategories, not as primary categories in the Psalter.

In short, while on a cursory examination, some psalms do seem to be an exception to the principle of “psalms, hymns, and odes,” by good and necessary consequence, it can be deduced that these are simply sub-categories of the aforementioned division of the Psalter. Further, given that the Scriptures often abbreviate ideas that are well-understood by the audience⁶⁹, it might simply be stated that “psalms, hymns, and odes”⁷⁰ was an abbreviation for the body of music within the Psalter that would have been familiar to the Ephesian and Colossian churches.⁷¹ To imply that these two texts justify the use of non-inspired hymnody

65 Note that Psalm 116:10 and 147:12 refer to this group as “hallelujah psalms.” In addition, Psalm 146:1 instructs the singer to “sing a psalm” to God, implying that what is about to be sung is a psalm.

66 Psalms 31, 41, 51, 52, 54, 73, 88, 141.

67 Psalms 15, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59.

68 Leslie McFall. “The Evidence for a Logical Arrangement of the Psalter.” *Westminster Theological Journal*. Volume 62; Issue 2; Fall 2000.

69 Note that in Luke 24:44, the “Psalms” are used to refer to the entirety of the third section of the Hebrew Scriptures, known as קְהִלֵּי דָוִד.

70 Designations found in Psalms 3-9, the first seven psalms that contain superscriptions.

71 This also seems the logical conclusion when harmonizing Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 with 1 Corinthians 14:26.

be used in Christ's worship is exegetically unnecessary and deviates from the Analogy of Scripture that governs Reformed hermeneutics. It also deviates from the understanding of these passages held by the delegates of the Synod of Dordrecht as well as of the Westminster Assembly. In addition, it is a position inconsistent with the understanding of the ancient Councils of the Christian church.⁷²

Objection 2: The psalms were designed for the worship of God's people prior to the advent of Christ. Thus, they are more anticipatory; with the realization of Christ's first advent, we should be singing "a new song" that is focused on Jesus.

This objection is a fairly common one. It presumes that if one sings nothing more than the psalms, worship will somehow be unbalanced, anticipatory, and not fulfilled in nature. This is one of the primary objections that led Issac Watts to insert the name of Jesus into many of his paraphrases of the psalms. More simply, people state that they want to sing about and in the name of Jesus.

The first thrust of the argument can be met when it is recognized that many of the Psalms are blatantly Messianic. For instance, Psalms 2, 6, 16, 22, 31, 34, 41, 45, 68, 69, 78, 88, 91, 110, 118, and 132 are quoted in the New Testament as being explicitly about Jesus. Further, there are psalms like Psalm 24 and 93, amongst many others, that are steeped boldly in Messianic themes.

This objection is also met when one realizes that throughout the Gospels, when Jesus' disciples spoke to Him, they referred to Him as Lord with very few exceptions.⁷³ Given that the term "Lord" shows up 704 times in the English translation of the Psalms, one cannot argue that the Psalter does not point us clearly to Jesus.

72 The Council of Laodicea in AD 343 and the Council of Trullo (also known as the Quinisext Council) of AD 692 both prescribed the use of the Psalter and chastized churches that sought to use uninspired hymnody. The rulings of both of these Councils were also affirmed by later Ecumenical Councils of the Church.

73 Terms like "Rabboni" and "Son of David" are used with other terms of respect and reverence. His disciples are not recorded as addressing Him by his given name. If there is a historical reference in the narrative, then the name of Jesus is used; sometimes the Demons refer to Him by his first name, but the faithful did not.

Objection 3: Nine verses in the Bible speak of “singing a new song.”⁷⁴ Does this not constitute justification for creating new music of praise to God in every generation?

Those who present this argument do so on the basis that the words *שִׁיר חָדָשׁ* and its equivalent, *καινός*, refer to something that is new and typically has not existed before. For example, in Exodus 1:8, we are told that a *מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ-לְמִצְרָיִם* had risen to power in Egypt who did not know Joseph. This was not an old king being restored to his throne, nor was this a king with a renewed sense of Egyptian purpose. This was a brand new man who took the throne. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 24:5, when a man takes on a “new wife,” he is not required to serve in the military for a year. Again, like the “new king,” this is a brand new marriage that is being spoken of, not a matter of renewing vows. In turn, those who raise this objection argue that the references to a “new song” are just that – a brand new song being written.

In answering this objection, one must begin by looking at the context of the phrase: *שִׁיר חָדָשׁ לַיהוָה*. The first use of this phrase in the Psalter is found in Psalm 33:3, a song of praise to God for His majesty. In verse 3, we are told to sing a new song to Him. To some, that might be a conclusive statement. Nevertheless, if we look at the preceding verse, we will find that the psalmist is commanding the people to *וְלִי-וְהַמְזִמָּה*. While many modern translators render this as “make melody,” the verb shares the same root word as *וְהַמְזִמָּה*, “to make psalms.” Thus, Matthew Henry translates verse two as: “Praise the Lord with harp; sing unto Him with the psaltry and an instrument of ten strings.”⁷⁵ Thus, the newness in question has not to do with the words, for the words of praise are drawn from the Psalter. Instead, the newness has to do with the instrumentation or the manner in which this praise is made. Henry further elaborates on verse 3: “*Sing unto him a new song*: the best you have, not that which by frequent use is worn threadbare, but that which, being new, is most likely to move the affections, a new song for new mercies and upon every new occasion, for those compassions which are ‘new every morning.’”⁷⁶

74 Psalm 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isaiah 42:10; Revelation 5:9; 14:3.

75 Matthew Henry. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*. 6 vols. (Iowa Falls: Riverside Book and Bible House). 3:351.

76 Ibid.

Psalm 40:3 illustrates this principle as well but in a different context. The psalmist has been delivered from the “pit of the wasteland” and the “mud of the mire.”⁷⁷ God has changed his suffering into joy and, in turn, put a רִישׁ רִשְׁוֹ into his mouth. This language does not necessitate the creation of new words, but instead, it reflects a renewed spirit and a sense of purpose. What is new has more to do with the life of the psalmist than it has to do with the words he is using. As Matthew Poole writes: “through the Scriptures generally, a new song signifies a song which praiseth God for some new benefits received from Him.”⁷⁸ Indeed, we are told that this new song is a תְּהִלָּה, the plural of which being the title that is given to the entirety of the Hebrew book of Psalms.⁷⁹

Scripture refers to the psalms as the proper means by which God’s people are to praise God.⁸⁰ There are numerous commands in the psalms to honor God with psalms of praise. As noted above, this was also the model in the New Testament church.⁸¹ Matthew Henry echoes this language in his comments on Psalm 9:

God expects suitable returns of praise from those for whom he has done marvelous works. If we would praise God acceptably, we must praise him in sincerity, with our hearts, and not only with our lips, and be lively and fervent in the duty, with our whole heart... Joy and praise are properly expressed by singing psalms.⁸²

As to the above references in Revelation, this language only applies to those

77 Psalm 40:2.

78 Matthew Poole. *Commentary on the Holy Bible*. 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979). 3:987.

79 תְּהִלָּה.

80 James 5:13. Note that many modern translators render the text: “sing praise.” Yet, the Greek word that James uses is ψάλλω: to “sing psalms.”

81 Jesus sang psalms with his disciples at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26); Paul instructs the church to come together with a psalm (1 Corinthians 14:26 – though many modern translations do not render it so, the Greek word Paul uses here is ψαλμός), James commands us to sing psalms when we are joyful (James 5:13), and it is likely that Paul and Silas were singing psalms while in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25 – though ὕμνῳ is used here; see the notes above on ὕμνος above).

82 Matthew Henry. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*. 6 vols. (Iowa Falls: Riverside Book and Bible House). 3:269.

in the heavenly realms. If God so orders a new hymn to be written in the heavenly spaces or the new creation, it is in His purview to do so. Nevertheless, we do not have the right to do anything outside of the constraints of His Word.

Objection 4: In Matthew 26:30 and its parallel in Mark 14:26, we are told that Jesus sang a hymn with his disciples after the Last Supper.

The word that the evangelists use in this reference is ὑμνέω. As previously noted, to sing a hymn was to sing a particular kind of psalm. Furthermore, Jesus and his disciples were Jewish, celebrating a Jewish holy day. While Passover is commonly closed with uninspired hymnody today, in ancient times, it was a common practice to sing the Hallel Psalms⁸³ in the context of the supper. There is no reason to presume that Jesus would have deviated from this and every reason to suppose that if Jesus had celebrated in an uncommon manner, it would have been explained (just as the meaning Jesus gives to the broken bread and cup of wine are explained). With no explanation given, it should be presumed that they sang a psalm or psalms.⁸⁴

Objection 5: If God expects the church to sing the scriptures (i.e., the psalms), why doesn't the church also limit their prayers to the prayers found in the scriptures?

To begin with, there is nothing wrong with praying the prayers found in the Scriptures as part of public worship. The church has been doing this, for instance, with the Lord's Prayer since the earliest days of the Christian church. Before them, the Jewish church has used the Shema⁸⁵ as part of their prayer life since their wilderness wanderings. Nevertheless, there are no commands in Scripture to pray Scriptural prayers as there are with the psalms. Furthermore, we are called

83 Psalm 113-118. Note that the author of Hebrews connects Hallel psalms to hymns when he cites Psalm 22:22 in Hebrews 2:12. He writes: "In the midst of the church I will sing hymns [ὑμνεω] to you." The Hebrew of the psalmist reads: "In the midst of the assembly I will sing praises [הלל] to you."

84 One should remember that by Jesus' day, not only had the psalms been fully codified, but they had been ordered as we have them ordered today (see Acts 13:33).

85 Deuteronomy 6:4.

to “lay every care on God”⁸⁶ The unique nature of the cares of every congregation and each Christian has led believers to pray extemporaneously. Yet, no one would argue on behalf of extemporaneous singing; that would lead to chaos.

A similar argument is that preaching in a worship service sets the uninspired words of a pastor before the congregation. While preaching is composed of the words of the pastor, preaching must also be the words of the pastor as he expounds upon Scripture. It should also be noted that God has “given a permanent office of ministry to the church, pastors, who are to explain the sense of Scripture, ‘rightly dividing the Word of Truth.’”⁸⁷⁸⁸ Furthermore, sermons are meant to reprove, rebuke, and exhort⁸⁹ so that they can equip the believer for every good work.⁹⁰ To accomplish this, sermons must be addressed toward a specific context. As every person is different and every church is different, specific needs for the sermon to address will be different. To quote one old preacher, “You must exegete your audience as well as the text.”⁹¹ Simply reading sermons from the Scriptures is not an effective way of fulfilling this task.

Objection 6: There are psalms and songs that exist outside of the Book of Psalms. The Song of Moses and Miriam after crossing the Red Sea⁹², the song of Habakkuk⁹³, and Mary’s praise⁹⁴ are three examples of such songs. Why not sing them, as well as other passages of the Scriptures?

To begin with, while there are commands for God’s people to sing psalms

86 1 Peter 5:7.

87 2 Timothy 2:15.

88 “A Concise Case for Exclusive Psalmody.” Purely Presbyterian Perspectives Blog. <http://purelypresbyterian.com/2017/09/19/a-concise-case-for-exclusive-psalmody>.

89 2 Timothy 4:2.

90 2 Timothy 3:17.

91 The name of the specific preacher in question is unknown, though it encapsulates a principle that is as old as rhetoric itself.

92 Exodus 15:1-18; 21.

93 Habakkuk 3:17-19.

94 Luke 1:46-55.

(as noted above), there are no commands to sing these other songs. Secondly, many of these songs are context-specific. For instance, none of us were present at the Red Sea deliverance, and none of us are carrying the Christ child in our wombs. While it was appropriate for Mary to sing in this manner, as guided by the Holy Spirit, her singing in this way does not establish precedence for us to sing similarly. Furthermore, we are told that Solomon wrote 1,005 songs⁹⁵. Still, only two are preserved for the singing of God's people⁹⁶, a reminder that not all Biblical or otherwise songs were preserved by the Holy Spirit for congregational singing.

Yet, there is more to the answer than that. The songs found outside the book of Psalms are often preserved in part within the Psalter itself. For instance, major themes from Moses' song of deliverance at the Red Sea⁹⁷ can be found in Psalms 66:5-7; 78:11-16; 106:6-12, and 136:10-16, to name just a few. Miriam's song that follows⁹⁸ is alluded to in Psalm 76:6. Allusions to the song of Deborah can be found in Psalm 68:8-10 and 77:16-18. Habbakuk⁹⁹ draws upon the language of Psalms 9:2-14 and 27:1-3. Psalm 113 quotes verses from Hannah's song¹⁰⁰ verbatim. In the New Testament, the song of Mary draws heavily on the language of Psalms 34 and 86. In other words, when it comes to these very personal psalms which are drawn out of contexts to which we cannot relate experientially, the psalms provide us with a means by which God's people can enter into the spirit of the psalm in a manner in which the body can be edified.¹⁰¹

Objection 7: If one limits singing to the psalms alone, then one robs the pastor of the opportunity to teach on specific doctrines found in the New Testament.

95 1 Kings 4:32.

96 Psalms 72 & 127.

97 Exodus 15:1-18.

98 Exodus 15:21.

99 Habakkuk 3:17-19.

100 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

101 It is also worth noting that Hebrews 1, arguably one of the most worship-centered chapters in the New Testament, quotes from the Psalms seven times.

Two aspects must be addressed within this objection: sufficiency and purpose. The first is the most prominent aspect, which is the doubt that New Testament doctrines can be found within the psalms. In response to the objection, this author would challenge someone to find a New Testament doctrine that is not found in the psalms, at least in its seed form. Even the doctrine of justification by faith alone is addressed in the psalms.¹⁰² As to purpose, the role of the psalms is not just that of teaching, though there are undoubtedly many things that the psalms teach. The psalms are also given to give the believer a language by which they can put their every emotion and experience into language that praises God. While there are many hymns of joy and praise, few would dare express imprecations, as does the Psalter. Matthew Henry writes of Psalm 49:

This psalm is a sermon, and so is the next. In most of the psalms we have the penman praying or praising; in these we have him preaching; and it is our duty, in singing psalms, to teach and admonish ourselves and one another. The scope and design of this discourse is to convince the men of this world of their sin and folly in setting their hearts upon the things of this world, and so to persuade them to seek the things of a better world; as also to comfort the people of God, in reference to their own troubles and the grief that arises from the prosperity of the wicked.¹⁰³

In other words, the purpose of the psalm is didactic and exhortative, teaching with an aim to change the heart in the context of worship. Few non-inspired hymns are designed to do both.

A concluding exhortation:

One of the themes found in Scripture is that of God's people drifting away from worship and the practice of their faith. The Bible is filled with God's commands to worship precisely as he had commanded and to preserve his laws, statutes, and precepts from one generation to the next. Yet the people preferred to do what was right in their own eyes, a practice that brought the nation's collapse as well as that of the Temple, all by the hand of God.

When Nehemiah was sent to rebuild the walls, it is noted that he rebuilt

102 E.g. Psalm 25:16-18; 61:1-2; 103:2-5.

103 Matthew Henry. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*. 6 vols. (Iowa Falls: Riverside Book and Bible House). 3:418.

with the ancient stones of the city's old wall.¹⁰⁴ God blessed that rebuilding and renewed worship was reinstated at the temple. This worship included singing psalms as had been done in David's time.¹⁰⁵ It was also met by careful attention to teaching the people the Word of God.¹⁰⁶ This is the kind of reformation that pleases God. Yet, the people once again fell into sin.

By the time of Jesus, Greek and Roman practice had become intermixed with the worship of the faithful. Once again, God sent messengers to correct the errors of the people and to direct them toward a life of holiness. He sent the prophet John, He sent His Son, he sent the Apostles, and He sent other teachers in the church. The message was the same: repent. In turn, the Apostles and James again point the Church to worship with the psalms with an attention to obedience to the Word of God.¹⁰⁷

By the time of the Reformation, the church had once again fallen into error. God raised up men like Zwingli and Calvin to call the people to repentance. Like those who went before them, both these men, and those who would follow the early Reformers, emphasized Biblical faith and practice. Part of this was a directive that the church once again commits herself to sing psalms in worship. And, once again, God blessed this reformation.

Today the church has again fallen into great apostasy and error, with every pastor and denomination doing what is right in their own eyes. Many call for reformation and pray for revival, but reformation must begin with the church.¹⁰⁸ If we are going to see a reformation that God will bless, it must begin once again with a commitment to the word and the faithful practice of worship, worship that includes the singing of psalms. If the church is to regulate her life and worship by the Scriptures, there can be no other conclusion than that *Sola Scriptura* calls us to *Sola Psalmis*.

104 Nehemiah 4:2-3. Building with "ancient stones" is an apt metaphor for the act of reforming Christ's church. Innovation in worship has no place, but we are called to be faithful to the practice of worship as instituted by Christ and the Apostles.

105 Nehemiah 12:45-46.

106 Nehemiah 8:1-8.

107 Matthew 28:20.

108 1 Peter 4:17.

What is there now to do? It is to have songs not only honest but also holy, which will be like spurs to incite us to pray to and praise God and to meditate upon his works in order to love, fear, honor, and glorify him. Moreover, that which St. Augustine has said is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from him. Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly and searched here and there, we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him. And moreover, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory. Wherefore Chrysostom exhorts, as well as the men, the women, and the little children to accustom themselves to singing them in order that this may be a sort of meditation to associate themselves with the company of the angels.¹⁰⁹

109 . John Calvin. "Preface to the Genevan Psalter." *Ecclectic Ethreal Encyclopedia*. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ccel/eee/files/calvinps.htm>.