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What should the Church sing?

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. Col 3:16

It is insisted by some that the only legitimate and acceptable way for the Christian Church to worship God in song is by the exclusive use of the Psalms of David in metrical form. While no Christian should quarrel with the requirement to sing Psalms, to outlaw the use of Scriptural hymns and paraphrases from other parts of Holy Writ is indefensible from the word of God.

For the child of God the question must be, What has God stated in His word about what His church should sing? Has God given specific direction to His church on their song? Undoubtedly He has and the words of Col 3:16 are as clear a direction on the subject as we could wish. While the commentary of godly men and the historic confessions of faith embraced by the Church of Christ have a place in the discussion, their role must be subservient to the Scriptures themselves. The word of God must be the final arbiter of faith and practice in the Christian Church.

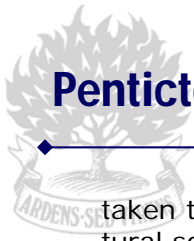
THE CHRISTIAN HAS A DUTY TO SING.

The child of God is one who has been given a song to sing: *he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God* (Ps 40:3). It is an evidence of God's saving grace that there is a new song in the heart and on the lips. The joy of the Lord experienced by the redeemed sinner is real and legitimately finds natural expression in song. Paul's words in Col 3:16 make praise the subject of a Divine command, incumbent upon every child of God. The context of his statement in Eph 5:19 is the Spirit-filled life, indicating that where the Holy Ghost is at work there will be a song! Praise rendered in song to the Lord is a constituent component of the Biblical worship that is part of our first duty as God's creatures — *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.* (Mt 22:37-38)

The role of Psalms in Christian praise.

It is perfectly clear from Paul's inspired words that Psalms are to play a role in the Christian's praise. In Paul's words, first place is given to the use of Psalms indicating, no doubt, the primary role that Psalms are to have in our song. Paul's reference to the Psalms raises two important issues:

1. By the use of the word *Psalms* Paul is not necessarily confining believers to the single Old Testament book by that name. The Lord Jesus spoke of *the Psalms* in Luke 24:44 — *all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.* Here he refers to the three-fold division of the Hebrew Old Testament. The section called *the Psalms* contains no less than 12 other books in addition to the book of Psalms itself. Paul's words here may legitimately be



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taken to include these other books as well and therefore to endorse paraphrased Scriptural songs from these other books as well. [From a strict linguistic perspective it is not to be automatically assumed that Paul is actually referring to the Psalms of David at all, though it is most likely he is because of other uses of the term in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 13:33). The Greek word *psalmos* simply refers to a song accompanied by music. See Trench's synonyms of the NT, sect 78.]

2. For the vast majority of the New Testament Church it is impossible to make use of the Psalms, as originally sung by the Old Testament saints in their praise. Being Gentiles, the majority of New Testament believers are unable to access the Hebrew text of the original Psalms. A further difficulty exists in the fact that the Psalms — whether those of David, or the whole section of 13 books — as originally written do not conform to any metrical or musical system that would render them easily sung. It is a common mistake to think that the inspired Psalms of David are written in a poetic style. They are not, in fact they are written in prose, without metre or rhyme. The Jews used the inspired text directly and unamended, but their use of the Psalms was more like a chant that added tonal emphasis to certain words or parts of words rather than a structured song with a poetic rhythm or melody.

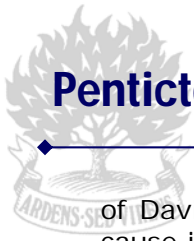
It becomes clear that when Paul commands the use of *Psalms* here in song he is either actually advocating the use of a paraphrased, melodic version of the inspired writings; or he is urging these believers to chant the words of their Greek Old Testament. Either way, this of course meant that they would not be singing the Psalms as originally sung, and they would not do so at the command of God! The fact is that in order to obey God's command here and actually sing Psalms of the Old Testament, the New Testament believer is completely reliant upon translated paraphrases of Scripture of human composition.

For most who wish to use Psalms in their worship the obvious choice is a metrical Psalter containing metrical versions of the Psalms of David. This must be recognized as a paraphrase of human composition and as being of much more limited scope than that section of the Old Testament called *the Psalms* (Luke 24:44). It is entirely wrong to regard the metrical version of the Psalms of David as a formally equivalent translation of Scripture (i.e. a translation like the Authorized Version which conveys the very expressions of Scripture and not just its general thought) or as having been produced by Divine warrant. Every metrical Psalter is the product of a deliberate human process of paraphrasing the Scriptures to produce a rhymed composition that can be easily sung. The addition of music, also of human composition, only further serves to distance the metrical version of the Psalms of David from their inspired counterparts in Scripture. It should also be noted that the word *Psalms* used here by Paul indicates that this singing was to be accompanied by music. The etymology of the word indicates this to be so. The use of instrumental praise in the worship of God is therefore sanctioned even by Paul's use of this term.

THE DUTY TO PRAISE GOD IS NOT LIMITED EXCLUSIVELY TO THE USE OF THE PSALMS OF DAVID.

Scripture makes it abundantly clear that no such restriction existed in the past.

- a) **Before David.** The saints of God in the times previous to the compiling of the Psalms



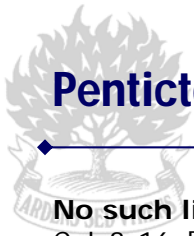
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of David could also identify with Ps 40:3. That they sang there can be no doubt because instances of their praise is to be found — Exodus 15:1-18, 20-21, Deut 32:1-43, Judges 5:1-31 etc. The songs sung by these saints are not to be found in the Psalms of David. It is unthinkable that these are the only songs that believers previous to David used. It is also clear that there were no additional inspired songs given or they too would have been preserved. Part of what the Saviour meant when He said that *the scripture cannot be broken* (John 10:35) was that no inspired truth can be lost. For the saints of God to praise their God in times previous to David's day they would have had to have recourse to uninspired songs of worship.

- b) **After David.** The Scripture records the praises of those who even though they had access to the Psalms of David praised God with other songs. Solomon was evidently a prolific song writer, I Kings 4:32. Something of the character of these songs may be deduced from the fact that his only inspired song, The Song of Solomon, is evidently included among this number. The balance were uninspired yet were evidently of such a spiritual nature as to warrant being lumped together with his one inspired song. The additional examples of Habakkuk, Mary, Zechariah could be cited. These were Holy Ghost filled saints and yet they used songs other than the Psalms of David in their praise of God. If the Spirit of God did not restrict these saints' songs to the Psalms, how is it that exclusive Psalmists feel the liberty to bring this bondage on the Church today? If such a restriction were legitimate it is exactly at this point—when the saints give expression to joy in the power of the Holy Ghost—that such a restriction would be expected to be visible and enforced by the Spirit. In the view of the exclusive Psalmist these saints were led into sinful singing of songs other than the Psalms of David and led into that sin by the Holy Ghost!!!
- c) **Hymns cited.** There is some Scriptural evidence of the fact that the Apostolic Church used uninspired songs in their worship. Some commentators find traces of these hymns even in the Scriptures themselves—See Eph 5:14, I Tim 3:16, II Tim 2:11-14. Apparently traces of poetic metre are to be traced in the Greek text and it is also to be observed that Paul is quoting from material supposed familiar and yet clearly not directly taken from Scripture. It is hardly surprising that he should quote from such hymns seeing as he even used the writing of heathen poets when it served his purpose, Acts 17:28. Archbishop Trench writes: "That the Church, brought when St. Paul wrote into a new and marvellous world of heavenly realities, would be rich in these ["uninspired hymns"] we might be sure, even if no evidence existed to this effect. Of such evidence, however, there is abundance, more than one fragment of a hymn probably being embedded in St. Paul's own epistles (Eph 5:14, I Tim 3:16, II Tim 2:11-14).

The saints in the future will not be restricted to singing Psalms only.

It is plain that the songs of the redeemed in Heaven that are referred to in Scripture do not make use of the Psalms of David. This singing will also be with musical accompaniment. Rev 5:9-14. It is striking to observe that the word for song Paul uses in Col 3:16 occurs here. There is *a new song* sung in the very presence of God by the perfected saints of God, engaging in perfect worship and their song is not drawn from the Psalter. It is obvious that perfected saints in the sinlessly holy environment of the immediate presence of God sing songs that are not drawn from the Psalms of David.



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No such limitation is in place now.

Col 3:16 [See also Eph 5:19 where the same terms are used] indicates that uninspired songs of human composition are to be included in the worship of the New Testament Church. There is no textual basis in Scripture, nor any legitimate hermeneutical principle, to insist that this statement refers only to exclusive Psalmody. Some will insist, however, that what Paul intended here is 'psalms, psalms and more psalms'. This is to add to the actual text of Scripture. The inspired Psalms of David are not divided into these three sections, nor can any trace be found of such divisions anywhere in Scripture.

ARGUMENTS FOR THE USE OF UNINSPIRED PRAISE BY THE CHURCH.

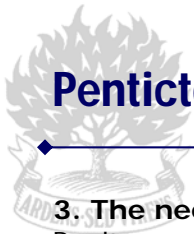
1. Paul uses terms that indicate there are different kinds of Christian praise.

Paul in speaking of legitimate Christian praise includes, in addition to Psalms, *hymns and spiritual songs*. The Greek word for *songs* here gives us the English term 'ode'. The 'odes' that Paul is referring to are distinguished from all other 'odes' of the day, not so much by their form as by their *spiritual* character only. The fact that Paul adds the qualifying adjective *spiritual* indicates that in some sense the 'odes' sung by the Church will resemble secular 'odes', i.e. perhaps as to their form, composition and poetic style. What sets them apart is a *spiritual* character relating to content, style and musical accompaniment etc. Had he been referring exclusively to the inspired writings of David or other Psalmists he would scarcely have needed to add the word *spiritual* to define what he meant.

The simple fact that God uses three distinct terms for the kind of praises His people are to use indicates that each term, though similar, refers to something distinct from the other terms. Archbishop Trench makes the following comment: "How, it may be asked, are we to distinguish these 'spiritual songs' from the 'psalms' and 'hymns' with which they are associated by St. Paul? If the 'psalms' represent the heritage of sacred song which the Christian church derived from the Jewish, the 'hymns' and 'spiritual songs' will between them cover what further in the same kind it produced out of its bosom; but with a difference. What the hymns were we have already seen ["direct addresses of praise to God"]; but Christian thought and feeling will soon have expanded into a wider range of poetic utterances that those in which there is a direct address to the deity." That is, Trench defines *spiritual songs* as those dealing with any element of sacred truth but not being a direct address to God.

2. The spring of all Christian praise.

The Psalms, hymns and spiritual odes referred to here are the product of *the word of Christ* dwelling richly in the heart. The hymns and spiritual songs are a form of praise distinct from the Psalms, being of human composition but regulated in every detail by *the word of Christ* dwelling in the heart. This is a vital point. The hymns used by the church must be thoroughly Scriptural in every detail, not least in content. *The word of Christ* here will obviously include all that inspired men have ever written (I Peter 1:11); yet, surely there is a special emphasis that New Testament revelation is to guide the song of the believer! The word of Christ is to affect the heart, permanently rooted and laid up there in abundance. Only then can the Christian truly praise his God.



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3. The need for additional hymns and songs.

Paul's words here, while giving a primacy to the use of the psalms, recognize the need for the addition of other songs and hymns to the Christian's praise. The plain fact of the matter is that the Psalms are part of Old testament revelation. This is not to demean their inspired status in any way, but it is to recognize the Scriptural doctrine of progressive revelation and the reality that it is only in the New Testament Scriptures that the fulness of Divine revelation to men has been given. The Psalms need to be supplemented with New Testament revelation. This is true in preaching and in praise. In order for the Christian's song repertoire to be complete he is mandated by Paul's words to include hymns and odes that are Scriptural in content and spiritual in nature. The revelation of Christ and the gospel in the Psalms is complemented and filled out by the revelation of the New Testament Scriptures and this additional revelation of Christ and His saving work may legitimately be incorporated into the songs of the church. The unavoidable fact is that if the New testament Church is to use the personal name of Jesus her Saviour in song; make any reference to the incidents of His life; give expression to the fulness of gospel revelation in song; or sing in any informed way of Heaven, then additional hymns and spiritual songs are necessary.

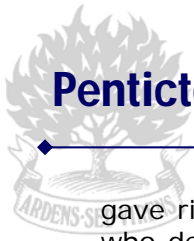
4. The teaching role of praise.

The role that praise is to play in the Christian life argues against the exclusive use of just one section of Scripture. The *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* here are to have a role in *teaching and admonishing* believers. Such instruction cannot be limited to just one part of Divine revelation but argues for the inclusion of the whole counsel of God. Certainly, it was Paul's view (II Tim 3:15-16) that *all Scripture*, even every letter of Scripture—*holy scriptures* = 'holy letters' in the original—was essential for the perfection or complete spiritual education of a mature Christian. Since it is unthinkable that in preaching admonition and instruction would be confined to an Old Testament perspective—in fact, it would be heresy to do so—it must be equally unthinkable to limit the instructive benefits of Christian praise in this way by restricting praise exclusively to the Psalms of the Old Testament.

SOME OBJECTIONS THAT ARE RAISED AGAINST THE INTRODUCTION OF HYMNS AND SONGS OF HUMAN COMPOSITION INTO THE WORSHIP OF GOD.

In addition to the objections already dealt with, the following may be raised.

1. **Superiority.** It may be objected that the Psalms of David are superior to any human composition no matter how Scriptural it may be. Such an objection may be legitimately made concerning the inspired Psalms as they are recorded in Scripture. It does not stand when made in relation a metrical Psalter. That after all is just a paraphrase of human production and may *per se* be set on a par with any other hymn of human composition that is a paraphrase of Scripture teaching.
2. **Error.** It is objected that since many hymns contain theological error it is much better not to sing any. It is true that many hymns do contain such error. The presence of error is simply an argument not to sing that hymn or at least to edit the error out. It cannot be made a reason to reject the command of God to use hymns and spiritual songs.
3. **Confessional.** It is objected that the reformers and the reformed confessions they



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gave rise to teach exclusive Psalmody. This is indeed a weighty argument for anyone who desires to be faithful to the legacy of reformed truth that respected men of God have left the Church. The fact remains however:

- a) The teachings of the best of men and the best of Confessional statements are secondary to the plain teaching of the word of God. The Scripture clearly sanctions, both by precept and precedent (regulative principle), the use of praises other than those included in the Psalms of David.
 - b) The Westminster Confession of Faith, for example, does NOT take an exclusive Psalmody position. It does refer to “singing of psalms with grace in the heart” (Chap 21:5) as part of Scriptural worship, but it does not say that nothing else is to be sung.
 - c) The history of the compilation of the Metrical Psalter indicates that those men, like John Calvin, who were instrumental in its creation did not recognize the metrical Psalms of David to be the exclusive song book of the church, nor regard their metrical psalter as carrying a special Divine warrant since they felt free to edit and change it. In 1538, Calvin published a small book of psalms, “rhymed” (this is the term that Calvin himself uses) by Clement Marot and himself, along with the Song of Simeon, the Ten Commandments (never intended by God to be regarded as a song) and the Apostles’ Creed (an uninspired document never originally intended to be a song). The words of the hymn, “I greet Thee who my sure Redeemer art”, are also credited to Calvin. Though many will claim Calvin as a supporter of exclusive psalmody, the evidence indicates that he was happy to use, and advocate the use of, paraphrased portions of Scripture apart from the Psalms.
4. **Music.** Some exclusive Psalmists object to the use of musical accompaniment in the Church’s praise because musical accompaniment was only for the church’s infancy, i.e. in the Old Testament administration. There is no reference in Scripture to such a dispensational difference! This objection is answered by an understanding of the etymology of the word *psalm* which indicates it to be linked with musical accompaniment. The word *Psaltery*, for example, is from the same Hebrew root.

INCONSISTENCIES IN THE ARGUMENTS FOR EXCLUSIVE PSALMODY.

1. **Uninspired words are permitted in other areas of worship.** Words of human composition are forbidden in the Christian’s expression of joy in song but such human composition is acknowledged to be absolutely necessary in the other components of true worship — in prayer and in preaching. It is not consistent to state that God accepts and blesses the uninspired prayers and preaching of His servants (regulated by Scripture of course) but refuses as an abhorrent thing their own words of praise. It might be argued that preaching and prayer are the more significant parts of worship since both aim at eliciting a response of Divine power — preaching aims at the salvation of the sinner and the edification of the saint by the Holy Ghost; prayer aims at a Divine answer. To accept that God is pleased to make the uninspired words of preaching and prayer the vehicle of an exhibition of His omnipotence, while refusing the uninspired words of praise is inconsistent. This inconsistency comes into clear focus when it is understood that exclusive Psalmists make no argument against the quoting of a theologically sound hymn in preaching, or in prayer, yet somehow those words acceptable in prayer and preach-



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- ing become evil when they are sung!
2. **A self-defeating argument.** Their argument for the absence of a Divine warrant for the human composition of hymns and songs defeats their own case for the use of a metrical Psalter. The Psalter they advocate is itself the product of an uninspired, human effort to rhyme Scripture, and incorporates musical accompaniment of human composition and thus is in fact outlawed by their own expressed dogma. The house is divided against itself and cannot stand!
 3. **Going beyond Scripture.** Not all of the Psalms of David were given to be used as congregational praise. Some are obviously prayers, Ps 17, 90; others are Divinely intended chiefly for instruction, e.g. Ps 32, 42 (14 'maschil'/instruction Psalms in all) To insist on the exclusive use of all the 150 Psalms of David as the song book of the believer is in fact to go beyond the original intent of their Divine author.
 4. **No Scriptural evidence.** While the exclusive Psalmist will wish to give the impression of a strict conformity to Scripture and disparage others for a perceived failure on this point, the reality is that there is NOT A SHRED OF SOLID AND UNEQUIVOCAL SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT for the view that the exclusive use of a rhymed paraphrase of Scripture accompanied by tunes of human composition is the only kind of praise that God accepts.
 5. **More than the Psalms of David.** As already indicated, the section of the Old Testament which is titled Psalms includes much more than the single book by that name. When the Saviour refers to *the Psalms* (Luke 24:44) He is referring to that section of the Old Testament that includes: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles. To claim to sing the Psalms and yet, in the name of exclusive Psalmody, to exclude even hymns or spiritual songs that present Scriptural teaching from these other parts of the Psalms is inconsistent.
 6. **Musical accompaniment.** Where musical accompaniment is prohibited by exclusive Psalmists there is the added inconsistency of banning the instrument and yet using the melody accompanying the words they sing.

CONCLUSION

In the light of Scripture, the insistence that the Church of Christ limit itself to the singing of metrical paraphrases of the Psalms of David is seen to be without Biblical foundation or Divine warrant. While the individual believer is free to so limit himself, should he desire to do so, he cannot with scriptural authority insist that it is a stricture God has placed on His church. The exclusive Psalmist has no mandate from God either to restrict himself or anyone else to the use of the Psalms only in praise. In many instances the exclusive Psalmody position has more to do with an enforcement of the traditions of the elders than with any desire to be faithful to Scripture. The tradition of some may be to sing Psalms exclusively but the clear teaching of the inspired Apostle is to sing *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs*.