

# The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God

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*The worship of God in song is found in the inspired book of Psalms, and should be used to the exclusion of the uninspired compositions of men.*

The purpose of this booklet is to present the evidence in support of the following proposition; namely, that in the worship of God the inspired book of Psalms should be used to the exclusion of the uninspired compositions of men. It will be observed that the use of uninspired songs at other times and circumstances than that of divine worship is not under consideration. It is in no way suggested that the uninspired writings of men are without value or usefulness. In fact we believe that there is a proper place for uninspired songs in human affairs. But here we are considering a very special activity in which men engage (than which there can be no higher)—the worship of God. It is our hope that frankly stating the purpose of this article at the beginning will not incline the reader to disregard the evidence before it has been examined.

## 1. The Regulative Principle of Worship

What is the proper way to worship God? This is an age-old question, and historically there have been two divergent answers. (1) One of these is that of the Roman Catholic Church (followed in principle by Greek Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican Churches) namely, that it is proper to worship God as we will so long as there is no direct statement in the Bible forbidding us. (2) The other is that of the Reformed Churches, which is, that it is proper to worship God only as He wills, and this means only in ways that He has commanded, instituted or prescribed in His Word. The contrast is plain: the one says, what is not forbidden is permitted; the other says, what is not commanded is forbidden.

That the latter is the position maintained by our Reformed Confessions and Catechisms is undeniable, as the following quotations will show. Let us hear first the testimony of the Belgic Confession:

We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God. . . the whole manner of worship God requires of us is written in them. . . Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God. since the truth is above all. (Article 7)

Again, in distinguishing the true Church from the false this Confession says that “all things are managed according to the pure Word of God” in a true Church, whereas the false Church “adds to and takes from” the things “appointed by Christ in His Word . . . as it thinks proper”. (Article 29) And in another article we read that “those who are rulers of the Church. . . ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject human inventions . . . which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever”. (Article 32)

To the same effect precisely the Westminster Confession of Faith says that,

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture. (21.1)

And again we read:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. (20.2)

The Catechisms of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches teach this same principle. The Heidelberg Catechism says, “That we [may] in no wise make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded in His Word”. (Q. 96.) The teaching of the Westminster Catechisms (Larger and Shorter) is the same. “The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counselling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself” as also

the “corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other presence whatsoever.” (Larger Catechism 109.) “The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word.” (Shorter Catechism 51.)

Zacharias Ursinus, one of the two authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, gives us a clear indication of what is meant by Question 96. “Those who worship God otherwise than He will be worshipped, imagine another God, one differently affected from what the true God is; and in this way they do not worship God, but a figment of their own brain, which they persuade themselves is affected in this manner.” And again, “to imagine a different worship of God from that which He has prescribed, is to imagine another will of God”. On the other hand when we do only what God has commanded, Ursinus says; “Obedience to these commandments is, and is called the worship of God, because they are not human, but divine precepts”. As John Calvin, the great reformer, said, “Persons who introduce newly invented methods of worshipping God, really worship and adore the creature of their distempered imaginations, for they would never have dared to trifle in such a manner with God, if they had not first feigned a god conformable to their own false and foolish notions”. (Institutes 1.4)

It is sometimes said that this is an *extreme* position. Some are of the opinion that in taking this position our Reformed Fathers were over-reacting against the abuses of Roman Catholicism. It will be our concern to show that in taking this position our Reformed Fathers were not over-reacting to the errors of Rome, but only acting properly upon the clear teaching of Scripture. Let Scripture speak for itself!

In Deuteronomy 12:32 we read: “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.” The history of the Bible confirms the fact that—so far as God is concerned—this is the regulative principle of all true worship. When Cain brought an offering to the Lord other than “the firstling of the flock and of the fat thereof” God did not accept it. “Unto Cain and to his offering He had not respect.” (Gen. 4:5.) Cain decided to worship God according to his own will, rather than the will of God. But God would not be worshipped except as He commanded. Again, in Leviticus 10:1-2, we read: “And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.” The words “which he commanded

them not” mean that God had not commanded them to do what they did. They were supposed to worship God as He commanded, not as they wished. By this rule God rejected their worship.

When the Lord condemned the corrupt worship of erring Israel, He asked (by the prophet Isaiah) “When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand?” (Isa. 1:12.) They worshipped as they pleased, not as God required. How could God accept the worship given? “They did not listen, nor bow their ear, but walked in the plans and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward.” (Jer. 7:24.) Thus the Lord declared (by Jeremiah) “This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who walk in the imagination of their heart. . . shall even be like this girdle which is good for nothing.” (13:10) And again, the reason given for this strong condemnation is that they offered worship “which I never commanded nor spoke,” no, “neither did it come into my mind.” (19:5.) Israel’s apostasy from true worship can be summed up in these words: “which I did not command them”. Because they were not satisfied to do what God commanded, and only what God had commanded, they were condemned.

It is sometimes said that the New Testament Church is not bound by this same strict principle. It is admitted that God formerly required His Church to worship Him strictly as He commanded. But now, it is said, this is no longer the case. God is not as strict as He used to be say some. A brief survey of New Testament teaching will show that this is a very mistaken view.

Jesus said, “Go ye. . . and teach all nations, baptizing them. . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19-20.) Is not this solemn requirement that the Church teach all things that Christ has commanded, at the same time a solemn prohibition against teaching anything that He has not commanded? If, in the worship of God, we observe all that Christ has commanded, ought we not also to scrupulously avoid anything and everything that He has not commanded? Jesus said that the Pharisees worshipped God *in vain*. (Mark. 7:7.) And why was their worship rejected of God? Because “laying aside the commandment of God” they preferred “their own traditions”. (Mark. 7:7-8.) They worshipped God in vain because they worshipped God as they wished, rather than as He required. In the same way, the Apostle Paul warned the Colossians: “Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping. . .” (Col. 2:18.) By “voluntary. . . worshipping” the Apostle simply refers to worship offered voluntarily (that is, because men wished to offer it) rather than because God commanded it. (Col. 2:22-23.) These “things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility” He said, but “they are of no

value". Will worship is worship offered because men will, rather than because God commands. But as far as God is concerned when men worship as they will, they do not worship Him, but rather worship their own will.

No doubt Jesus was rude—by modern standard—when he said to the woman at the well, "Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews". (John 4:22.) But Jesus was only being truthful. "For God is a Spirit," He said, "and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth". (v. 24.) True worship was impossible for the Samaritans as long as they worshipped God as they wished. They would have to worship God as He commanded, or they could not find acceptance with Him. "For the Father seeketh such to worship Him," said Jesus. (v. 23.) "The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth." But when people persist in worshipping God as they will, rather than as God wills they are not "true worshippers".

In Romans 1:21-25 the Apostle Paul condemns every false kind of worship that has been invented by men. He also reveals the source of such false worship. Men become "vain in their imagination," he says. They invent what they vainly imagine to be "good ways" to worship. They worship as they will, not as God commands. But when they do this, they really "worship and serve the creature more than the Creator," says Paul, and for this reason "they are without excuse". They are without excuse because there is no excuse for departing from the rule which says "we must not worship God in any other way than He has commanded in His Word".

In the Old Testament we have the matter stated in an unforgettable way. "If thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone; for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it." (Ex. 20:25.) If the ancient Israelite would think that he could improve upon the worship commanded of God by carving a more beautiful altar, He was to know that even one mark added by the hand of man to that which was commanded by God was a complete contamination as far as God was concerned. When men try to improve the worship of God as commanded by Him (even one little addition) they ruin that worship, rather than improve it. When our Reforming Fathers refused to "worship Him in any other way than He has commanded in His Word" they were only doing that which Scripture so plainly taught them to do.

As has been truly stated,

God who is a most pure Spirit and absolute Sovereign is the sole object of worship. Nothing that has not come from Him as its source is fit to be returned to Him as its end. Autonomous

human reason and will, sense, emotion and imagination are not competent to originate acts or methods of worship. God as the supreme Law-giver claims for Himself the prerogative of appointing the ordinances of His worship. How then can it be anything other than presumption in a subject of this absolute Sovereign to offer as worship anything which He has not prescribed? That God allows worship that He has not prescribed is contrary to the Scripture. (Orthodox Presbyterian Min. 13, p. 106.)

Out of due regard for the principle that true worship is only that which God has commanded, Reformed and Presbyterian Churches originally used the psalms as the praise book for divine worship. The Westminster Assembly declared “the singing of psalms” one of the “parts of the ordinary worship of God”, (WCF 21.5), and supervised the preparation of a psalter version for this purpose. The Synod of Dordt had also virtually excluded uninspired compositions of men from divine worship. And this was not only the original practice of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, but as Dr. George W. Robinson says, “the singing of Psalms continued to be the general practice of the Reformed Churches until well on into the eighteenth century, when the hymns began to be introduced, and, in time, practically superseded them in most of these Churches”. (The Psalms in Worship, p. 511.)

The question then is this was the original position of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches correct? Or is the present day practice better, that is, more scriptural, than that of former days? It has been recognized that “the (Westminster) Confession does not provide for the use of any materials of song other than ‘psalms’ in the worship of God”. (O. P. Min. 13, P. 105.) Does the scripture require revision of our historic Confession at this point?

## 2. The Commandment of God

If true worship is worship commanded by God (as our Confessions and Catechisms maintain), the crux of the matter becomes this; is there a command in the New Testament that, in addition to the inspired psalms, the Church should make and use uninspired psalms, or hymns, or songs, for the worship of God ? Does the New Testament provide us with clear and certain proof that God requires or commands the production and use of uninspired compositions, as it certainly does provide us with proof that God requires the use of the inspired psalms ?

We say that God “certainly does provide us with proof for the use of inspired psalms in divine worship”, for so far as we know this is not denied

by orthodox Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. Even such Churches as have introduced the use of uninspired hymns acknowledge this requirement. For example, the Christian Reformed Church, when introducing many uninspired hymns for the first time, admitted that during the previous “77 years of its existence (it had) sung practically nothing but Psalms in public worship”. (Psalter Hymnal, 1934, p. 3) And in revising Article 69 of the Church order to allow for this new introduction of uninspired hymns, it still acknowledged that “the singing of the psalms in divine worship is a requirement”. Similarly, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in adopting the Committee recommendation to use uninspired hymns, yet admitted that “the psalms were divinely inspired for the very purpose of praise”. (O. P. Min. I4, P. S8.) It would appear, therefore, that there is no dispute that when James the Apostle said, *sing psalms* (5:13), he meant the psalms of the Bible. By *psalms* James meant what the Bible itself denotes by that term. This much is clear. But when we consider texts in which *hymns* and *songs* are mentioned (i.e. Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19) the difficulty begins. For there are those who argue that these texts not only require the use of inspired psalms, but also allow the production and use of uninspired songs and hymns in divine worship. To this matter we now give our attention.

When Paul the Apostle went forth to preach the gospel to the Gentiles he did not find the way unprepared. In the providence of God synagogues could be found everywhere. In them the scriptures were read and expounded each Sabbath. And it was Paul’s custom to seek out these synagogues first, wherever he went. “Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three Sabbath days, reasoned with them out of the scriptures.” (Acts 17:2, Cf. 13:14, etc.) The translation of the Old Testament which Paul found ready for his use in these synagogues was called the Septuagint. (Abbreviated: LXX.) This Greek version had been in circulation for nearly three hundred years. (Almost as long as the King James version has been known in the English speaking world.) It was this Greek Bible which the Berean Jews searched daily with all readiness of mind as they tested the teaching of Paul. (Acts 17:10ff.) And we may be sure that Paul’s teaching was agreeable with this version of the Old Testament. Paul’s enemies accused him of departing from the Old Testament, but he said, “This I confess...that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets”. (Acts 24:14.)

But this indicates something very important. As Or. B. B. Warfield has said, “The writers of the New Testament...all had in their hand the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, and...derived their Greek religious terminology from it”. (The Person and Work of Christ, p. 443.) Paul used

the words known to his listeners from the Greek version of the Bible. He used the language of familiar scripture with a meaning determined by that scripture. Therefore the precise point of our inquiry comes to this: what did the Apostle Paul mean when he instructed the Churches to sing “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” in the worship of God? What do these terms mean in the language of scripture itself?

The texts in question are as follows:

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. (Eph. 5:18-19.)

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

The proper interpretation of scripture terms requires that we discover, not what we mean by these terms when we use them today, but what the inspired writer meant when he used them. And it is one of the oddities of biblical interpretation that this rule is commonly observed with reference to the term *psalms*, and commonly disregarded with respect to the terms *hymns* and *songs*. For the fact is that all three of these terms are used in the Bible to designate various selections contained in the Old Testament psalter. In the Greek version of the Old Testament familiar to the Ephesians and Colossians the entire psalter is entitled *Psalms*. In sixty-seven of the titles within the book the word *psalm* is used. However, in six titles the word *hymn* is used, rather than *psalm*, and in thirty-five the word *song* appears. Even more important twelve titles use both *psalm* and *song*, and two have *psalm* and *hymn*. Psalm seventy-six is designated *psalm, hymn and song*. And at the end of the first seventy two psalms we read that “the hymns of David the son of Jesse are ended”. (Ps. 72:20.) In other words, there is no more reason to think that the Apostle referred to psalms when he said *psalms*, than when he said *hymns* and *songs*, for the simple reason that all three were biblical terms for psalms in the book of psalms itself. We are in the habit of using the terms *hymns* and *songs* for those compositions that are not psalms. But Paul and the Christians at Ephesus and Colossae used these terms as the Bible itself uses them, namely, as titles for the various psalms in the Old Testament Psalter. To us it may seem strange, or even unnecessary, that the Holy Spirit would use a variety of titles to describe



His inspired compositions. But the fact is that He did so. Just as the Holy Spirit speaks of His “commandments and his statutes and his judgments” (Deut. 30:16, etc.), and of “miracles and wonders and signs” (Acts 2:22), so He speaks of His “psalms, hymns and songs”. As commandments, statutes and judgments are all divine laws in the language of scripture; as miracles and wonders and signs are all supernatural works of God in the language of scripture; so psalms, hymns and songs are the inspired compositions of the Psalter, in the language of scripture itself.

The New Testament evidence sustains this conclusion. On the night of the Last Supper Jesus and His disciples sang *an hymn*. (Matt. 26:30.) Bible expositors admit that this was “the second part of the Hallel Psalms (115-118)” which was always sung at the Passover. (New Bible Commentary, p. 835.) Matthew called this psalm a *hymn* because a psalm is a hymn in the terminology of the Bible. To the same effect is the Old Testament quotation in Hebrews 2:12, in which the Greek word *hymn* is quoted from Psalm 22:22. In this quotation from an Old Testament psalm, the word *hymn* is used to denote the singing of psalms because the Old Testament makes no distinction between the two. But if Scripture itself says that psalms are hymns, and that hymns are psalms, why should we make any distinction between them? If we grant that the Apostle used biblical language in a biblical sense there is no more reason to think that he spoke of uninspired hymns in these texts (Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:19) than to think that he spoke of uninspired psalms, because hymns are inspired psalms in the holy scriptures.

But let us also consider the context in which these words appear. (1) We are commanded to be “filled with the Spirit”, or to “let the Word of Christ dwell” in us “richly in all wisdom”. The one statement evidently interprets the other. To be filled with the Spirit requires the indwelling of the Word of Christ. One cannot be filled with the one unless he is filled with the other. If the words with which we are filled are not those of the Holy Spirit, how can they be the means by which we are filled with the Holy Spirit? And how can the Spirit fill us with other than His own words? (2) Note that we are told how we must effect this filling with the Spirit and Word of Christ. We are to effect this by “speaking to” ourselves, or by “teaching and admonishing one another”. It will be observed that this is something very different from self-expression. When we make compositions we express our own sentiments and convictions. But here we are told to teach and admonish one another by speaking to ourselves the Word of Christ. Self-instruction is very different from self-expression. To express what is in us is the very opposite of being instructed and admonished. And (3) observe, finally, the instrumentality by which we are to effect this, namely, “psalms, hymns, and

spiritual songs”. We are to teach and admonish one another with “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” in order that we might be filled with Christ’s Spirit and Word. It certainly follows that these must be the psalms, hymns and songs of the Bible, for only these can properly be called the spiritual or inspired word of Christ. Only inspired words are appropriate for teaching and admonishing the Church of God. To receive instruction or admonition from uninspired words is wrong. “We ought to obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29.) It is sometimes said that we do not sing in order to be taught and admonished, but rather to express our own feelings in response to God’s Word. But God does not command us to express our own feelings in response to His Word, rather He commands us to instruct and admonish ourselves by means of His words. Thus the context, as well as the precise terms themselves (i.e. psalms, hymns and songs) leads to the conclusion that only the inspired words of the biblical psalms are qualified and authorized for the singing of God’s praise in divine worship.

Let it not be thought that we have overstated the case. Even those who advocate the use of uninspired songs in worship admit our basic argument. For example, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church—even though it decided to use uninspired hymns—acknowledged the fact that in the scriptures *psalms*, *hymns* and *songs* are synonymous terms. “It is possible that each of these terms may refer to such psalms, since each is used in the LXX (Septuagint) in the titles of the psalms.” (O. P. Min. 1947, p. 54.) Or again, “in the language of Scripture the word *psalm* and *hymn* may be used synonymously.” (Ibid.) In other words, even those who have advocated the use of uninspired hymns have been quite unable to prove that God has commanded such anywhere in His Word. They have been unable to prove that Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 sanction anything more than the “psalms hymns and songs” inspired by the Holy Ghost and contained in the book of Psalms.

Even if we follow the usual careless interpretation of these scripture titles for psalms, however, the conclusion is virtually the same. Even if we were arbitrarily to say that the *psalms* refer to the selections of the psalter, but the other terms refer to something else, we would still be commanded to use only the inspired songs of scripture. The Apostle carefully states that we are to sing only *spiritual songs*. And there is no doubt that the term *spiritual* means *inspired*. As Dr. B. B. Warfield of Princeton said (The Presbyterian Review, July 1880): “Of the twenty-five instances in which the word (*spiritual*) occurs in the New Testament, in no single case does it sink even as low in its reference as the human spirit; and in twenty-four of them it is derived from *spirit* (pneuma), the Holy Ghost. In this sense of belonging to, or determined by, the Holy Spirit, the New Testament

usage is uniform.” “The appropriate translation for it in each case is *Spirit-given*, or *Spirit-led*, or *Spirit-determined*.” No doubt this term, appearing as it does with the three-fold designation for compositions of the psalter, qualifies all three, thus: spiritual psalms, hymns and songs. But even if we overlook this, we still must recognize that the songs sung in Christian worship are to be only such as are divinely inspired. And if the psalms are to be inspired (as this view admits) and the songs must also be inspired (as this qualifying term demands) it would be necessary to assume that the hymns also are to be inspired. It would make sense if the Apostle were to distinguish between inspired psalms and uninspired hymns and songs. But it would be absurd to think that Paul would insist that psalms and songs be inspired and the hymns not. We can conceive of a distinction between psalms and other compositions whereby the one would be inspired and the other not. But we cannot conceive of a principle of discrimination which would require psalms and songs to be inspired but hymns not. To Paul and the Colossian and Ephesian Christians, then, the word ‘hymns’ must have had a meaning qualitatively the same as the psalms and inspired songs with which it is classed. The word *hymn* like the word *psalm* must have been recognized without qualification as designating the same kind of inspired compositions as the others with which it is mentioned.

Let us summarize the assured teaching of these verses:

- We are commanded to fill ourselves with Christ’s Spirit and Word.
- We are to effect this by mutual instruction and admonition in song.
- The rule for this instruction and admonition is the psalter, because it contains inspired psalms, hymns and songs.

Or to put the matter in the negative:

- We are not commanded to compose our own songs, nor to fill ourselves with the words or spirit of men.
- We are not commanded to express our own thoughts or feelings, nor to be instructed or admonished by the thoughts or feelings originating from others.
- We are not commanded to receive teaching and instruction by any other rule or instrumentality than that provided by the Holy Spirit in the book of inspired psalms, hymns and songs called the psalter.

### 3. The Testimony of History

Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. As the Westminster Confession says:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. (1.6)

The testimony of ancient history and tradition cannot be the source of doctrine or practice in a true Church, for doctrine and practice must be determined by scripture alone. However, the testimony of history is not without value. And this is especially true with respect to early Church history. For the fact is that the testimony of history confirms the view that God commanded only the psalms to be sung in divine worship. The evidence is as follows:

(1) First, it is a noteworthy fact that there are no psalms, hymns or songs (other than those of the Bible) preserved from the Apostolic and Post-Apostolic period of Church history. Nor is there any evidence whatever that such were at that time in use. As Professor Schaff says, "We have no religious songs remaining from the period of persecution (i.e. the first three centuries) except the song of Clement of Alexandria to the divine Logos, which, however, cannot be called a hymn, and probably never was intended for public use". (The Psalms in Worship, p. 111.) More recently, Professor K. S. Latourette admits, that "from a very early date, perhaps from the beginning, Christians employed in their services the psalms found in the Jewish Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. Since the first Christians were predominantly Greek-speaking, these psalms were in a Greek translation". (A History of Christianity, p. 206.) And "until near the end of the fourth century", he continues, "only the Old Testament Psalms and the hymns or canticles" were sung, "the other hymns were for personal, family, or private use". (Ibid. p. 207.) If Paul had commanded, or authorized the use of uninspired hymns or songs, it would certainly seem strange that none were known in the ancient Church. But if the Apostle had commanded that inspired psalms, hymns and songs be sung in the worship of God, there is nothing strange in the fact that uninspired songs were not used until the fourth century. It was not for some time that the Church began to worship God as it pleased rather than as God had commanded.

(2) The second noteworthy fact is that when uninspired hymns first made their appearance, it was not among the orthodox Churches but rather the heretical groups. Professor Latourette says that “Bardaisan (Bardesanes), suspected of heresy late in (the second) century, had a collection of one hundred and fifty hymns” of his own. (Ibid. p. 207.) It was Arius, the greatest heretic of ancient times, who said, “Let me make a people’s songs and I care not who makes their laws”. Arius spread his evil doctrine by writing hymns which appealed to the people of his day. And this seems to have been standard practice among the heretical movements. Augustine, as late as 430 A.D. testifies, “The Donatists make it a matter of reproach against us, that, in the Church, we sing with sobriety the divine songs. . . whereas they inflame the intoxication of their minds by singing psalms of human composition”. (Confessions 9.4) If the Church from the beginning had received authority from the Apostles to make and use uninspired hymns, it would be expected that it would have done so. But it did not. Rather, it was among those who departed from the faith that they first appeared. The Church which held steadfast to the faith also held steadfast to the singing of the psalms of the Bible. Surely we cannot believe that this was accidental.

(3) In the third place, it is a fact that even when the uninspired hymns of men did at last begin to find acceptance among orthodox Christians, there was strong and persistent opposition to their introduction into divine worship. The Synod of Laodicea (A.D. 343) forbade “the singing of uninspired hymns in Church” as it also forbade “the reading of the uncanonical books of Scripture”. (Canon 59.) And as late as the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) this opposition to the introduction of uninspired hymns was reaffirmed. If the Apostle had encouraged the composition and use of uninspired hymns from the beginning, it would be difficult to explain how these early Synods could have opposed such as a new and dangerous innovation. But if the Apostle had authorized and commanded only the singing of the inspired psalms, there is no mystery at all in this event.

To summarize: (i) there is no evidence that uninspired songs, hymns or psalms were ever used in the worship of the Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Church. Even historians unsympathetic to the singing of psalms admit that this is true. (ii) They also admit that the first uninspired hymns were introduced by errorists, and for the purpose of leading God’s people astray. (Because of the popular appeal of their compositions, they were often very successful.) (iii) In spite of gradual weakening, there was persistent opposition in the orthodox Church to the introduction of uninspired psalms, hymns and songs in divine worship.

Now we ask: how can these facts be explained, unless the Apostolic

Church originally used only the psalms in divine worship? Why did the Apostolic Church produce no uninspired hymns preserved to us? (Indeed, why did they not produce inspired ones, if the Old Testament psalms were not sufficient?) Why did heretics lead the way in the composition and use of uninspired songs? And why did the Church so long resist the temptation to imitate the heretics by producing uninspired songs of its own? Why, except that “from the beginning it was not so?” The one reasonable explanation is that Paul had commanded only the singing of inspired psalms, hymns and songs, and that God for a long time granted His Church strength to resist the temptation to worship Him “in any other way not commanded in His word”.

#### **4. Objections to the Psalms**

It is of no small importance that textual proof has never been demonstrated for the use of uninspired songs in worship. No one has yet found even a single scripture text to prove that God commands His Church to sing other than the psalms of the Bible in worship. And it is not because men have not searched diligently! A few years ago a Committee of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church made such a search. This Committee had a majority in favour of the use of uninspired hymns in worship. And yet, after an exhaustive search through scripture requiring a number of years to complete, such proof could not be found. The Committee Chairman admitted that it is “impossible to prove that uninspired songs are authorized in scripture”. He even said that “to demand such proof before one can in good conscience sing uninspired songs is to demand the impossible!” (The Presbyterian Guardian, Vol. 17, p. 73.) This is a grave admission. But it is no more than the facts require. For the bare truth is that no one has found so much as a single text of scripture commanding the use of uninspired songs in divine worship. And remember, we are not to worship God “in any other way not commanded in His Word”.

This is the reason that arguments for the singing of uninspired hymns in worship have really been only arguments against the singing of the psalms. This important fact is constantly overlooked. It is well to be aware of this as we proceed to examine some of the arguments advanced by those who advocate the use of uninspired songs in divine worship.

(1) One of the most common arguments advanced by those who favour the use of uninspired songs in divine worship, is that “under the New Testament we have a greater measure of liberty as regards the content of worship

than was true under the Old Testament". Such a statement sounds innocent enough. But is such a statement true? Is it not rather that under the New Testament, as under the Old, God may not be worshipped "in any other way than He has commanded in His Word"? The Confession of Faith indeed says that "the liberty of Christians is . . . enlarged" over that of the Old Testament believers "in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected, and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of". (20.1) But it is not a part of this greater liberty that New Testament believers may worship God as they please. Yet this is the real intent of this argument. The Church may now decide for itself what it will sing in the worship of God!

It may seem strange to say it, but far from being liberty, this is really tyranny. And it is tyranny of the worst sort. True liberty, as the Confession says, is to confess that "God alone is Lord of the conscience," and that He has left it "free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to His word, or beside it, if matters of faith or worship". (20.2) Who decides which uninspired hymns shall be sung in the Church? Men decide: usually a small committee of men, on behalf of a Synod or Assembly. When these men have made their choice the Synod or Assembly imposes this choice upon the Church. The members of the Church are thus subject to the authority of a purely human decision as to what shall be sung in the worship of God. Yet even so, there is no unanimity. The uninspired hymns imposed upon the people of God by one Synod are unacceptable to another Synod. The song book of one Reformed Church differs from that of another. That which is approved at one time, and in one place, is rejected or even condemned at another time and in another place. The ever-changing content of the hymnbooks proves only too clearly that Synods can, and often do, err! And all this is supposed to be "liberty granted by God!" As if God would grant His Church liberty to proceed by "trial and error" from one hymnbook to another, in an endless succession.

This is not liberty. It is tyranny. There is liberty only when the Church does what God has commanded. When the Church imposes upon its members that which God has not commanded, but only what men have decided, it is guilty of tyranny. Let us illustrate. When the Church sings only the psalms, hymns and songs of the Bible, commanded by God, no member of the Church can say that his conscience has been offended. But when the congregations are told to sing uninspired songs against which even a few object, there is a violation of conscience. No man should be directed to worship God in a way that violates his conscience unless it can be proved that God

commands it. When God commands the conscience we have liberty. When men impose what God has not commanded we have tyranny.

(2) Another argument for the singing of uninspired songs in worship, is that which is called “the analogy of prayer.” This argument too, be it observed, is negative. It does not offer proof that God has commanded the singing of uninspired hymns, but merely seeks to prove that God does not command us how we are to pray. The argument, briefly, is that since God has not commanded us to use the prayers of the Bible as our prayers, neither should we feel bound to use the songs of the Bible as our songs.

This argument has the appearance of weight, without the reality thereof. For the truth is not “that God has not commanded” how we are to pray, but rather “that God has commanded us to pray prayers composed with the immediate help of the Holy Spirit”. It is not true that God has not commanded us to pray in a particular way so that we need not sing in a particular way either. For God has commanded us to pray in a particular way. “For we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God.” (Rom. 8:26-27.) God has provided us with a book of psalms so that we can sing according to His will. He has provided us with a specific promise of the direct assistance of the Holy Spirit in order that we may pray according to His will. God’s provision for prayer is different from His provision for song. But he has provided that which will enable both to be done according to His will. There is thus as much law, and a much liberty, in the one element of worship as in the other. In both, God provides that which will enable us to do His will and not our own.

The so-called “analogy of prayer” is a false principle because prayer and the singing of praise are not really analogues. (a) In public prayer one speaks for all and so no prayer-book is needed, since the Holy Spirit is promised to enable prayer to be made according to God’s will. But in public praise all must sing together, and an inspired book of praise is needed so that we may all sing those words of God which are according to His will. (b) In prayer we speak of our varying needs. But in praise we exalt the unchanging God. Each prayer must be different, but the appropriate songs of praise are the same from age to age. Our needs change, but God who is to be praised changes not. (c) If prayer and praise were really analogous, it would be as reasonable to argue that only the prayers of the Bible should be used (because only the psalms of the Bible are commanded to be sung), as to argue from the reverse side of the matter. But the argument from analogy is not justified. And to



avoid such confusion God has plainly commanded that which is proper for each element of worship. And for each element of worship the same principle applies: what God has not commanded is therefore forbidden.

(3) A third argument for the singing of uninspired hymns is that “there is really no difference between uninspired hymns and the psalm versions that are generally in use”. Again, be it observed, the argument is negative. It is not said that God has not commanded us to sing the psalms. And no proof is given to show that God has commanded us to sing uninspired songs. It is only argued that there really are no inspired songs even if God has commanded that such be sung. The psalm versions, it is said, are not really inspired.

It is of course true that nothing is inspired by God except the original text of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. As the Westminster Confession states, “the Old Testament in Hebrew. . . and the New Testament in Greek” are “immediately inspired of God” and “in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal to them”. (1.8.) But the Confession also says that since “these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto and interest in the scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar (i.e. common) language of every nation unto which they come, that the word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner”. (1.8.) In other words, while the original Hebrew and Greek text alone is inspired and infallible, yet since God Himself commands that all men everywhere read and obey them, it is necessary that they be translated. This is true even though the translations are not immediately inspired by God, nor absolutely infallible by comparison with the Hebrew and Greek. Versions which are not absolutely infallible are absolutely necessary because of commandments expressed in the Hebrew and Greek text which is absolutely infallible.

It could be argued that since no version of the Bible is perfect, neither is any version of the Bible necessary. It could also be argued that since no version of the Bible is perfect, neither is there any difference between a translation of the Bible and the uninspired writings of men. But the argument would be false for this reason: a translation of the Word of God is in a real sense the Word of God. It is the Word of God in translation. Even in translation it does not cease to be the Word of God. And the same may be said of the psalms. When the psalms are translated from Hebrew poetry into English poetry, they do not cease to be the inspired songs of God. They do not become the uninspired songs of men merely because they are translated into English versions. There is such a thing as a faithful translation of the

psalms.

Those who object to the singing of psalms argue that it is not necessary to sing only the inspired psalms commanded by God because no version of the psalms is perfect. But this is the same as saying that we do not need to do what God has commanded because we cannot do it perfectly. This argument is false. Duty is not determined by ability. God commands us to be perfect. (Matt. 5:48.) We know that we cannot be perfect in this life. (1 John 1:8.) But this does not in any way cancel our duty to be perfect. Indeed, the mark of true discipleship is to strive to be perfect, or, in other words, to try earnestly to do what God requires. Similarly, God has commanded us to sing inspired songs. We cannot do this perfectly. But this is no excuse for not trying. If anyone should argue that we need better versions of the psalms, we would agree. But if anyone should argue that since our psalm versions are imperfect we are therefore justified in using that which is uninspired, we cannot agree. Our psalm versions are far from perfect. But the remedy is not to add to the sin of doing what God commands in a slovenly manner, also the doing of that which God has not commanded at all. It is, rather, to seek afresh to do what God has commanded in a more perfect way. And it is to be remembered that those who still sing only the psalms, hymns and songs of an imperfect psalter version, can at least say that they are trying to do what God has commanded. Others can only say that they have decided that something else is better than that which God commands.

(4) A fourth argument for the use of uninspired songs in divine worship may be called “the dispensational argument”. Be it observed again: this is a negative argument. It insists that the old Testament psalms are unsuited to the worship of the New Testament Church. It is argued that these psalms belong to an imperfect dispensation, and that they do not reflect the light of God’s complete revelation. It is said that the New Testament revelation provides new truth which should be expressed in praise, and so new (albeit uninspired) songs are needed. But there is no proof offered to show that God commands us to make and use uninspired hymns. This argument merely seeks to condemn the inspired psalms which God has commanded us to sing. And the ground of this condemnation is that the psalms were written before Christ came to the world.

This argument contains one very dangerous assumption. It is the assumption that the Old Testament is inferior to the New Testament. It assumes that what was earlier was lower and what was later was higher. But the Bible teaches no such doctrine. It teaches, rather, that the whole scripture is equally high. The revelation of God is progressive. But it is progress from partial to complete, rather than from lower to higher. As Augustine said,

“The New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed”. The Modernist notion that the religion of the New Testament is an evolution from a more primitive religion in the Old Testament is in error. The religion that God began to reveal in Genesis, is the same as that which He finished revealing in Revelation. Moreover, it is a part of this false assumption to imagine that what was written in the Old Testament, was written primarily for Old Testament times. This is categorically denied by Peter, who, speaking of the Old Testament prophets declares that “the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel”. (1 Peter, 1:11-12.) The Spirit who inspired Old Testament scripture was the spirit of Christ. And He testified, not some lower truths, but just the sufferings of Christ and the glory to follow. Those who argue against the psalms insist that the Old Testament does not fully reveal the sufferings of Christ. But Peter says that they testify of this very thing, and that they wrote these things—not for themselves—nor for those who were living in their day—but for us. If the Old Testament writers wrote of His sufferings and the glory to follow, and if they wrote these things expressly for us, then it is evident that we do not need uninspired hymn writers to do this work over.

It is sometimes said that in the singing of the psalms one is denied the privilege of singing of the Saviour who has now come. In other words, it is commonly alleged that there is not enough of Christ in the book of psalms. This is a really astonishing thing. For Christ Himself said that the book of psalms was written about Him. (Luke 24:44.) His own dying words were quoted from Psalm 22. The last fellowship with His disciples was in singing the great Hallel (Psalms 115-118) at the Last Supper. And then by the mouth of His servant Paul, He commanded the Churches to keep on singing the psalms. And why not? He Himself, by the Holy Spirit, was the author of them. And the truth is that there is more of Christ in every psalm written by Him before He came to the world, than in any hymn written by mere men after He came.

Along the lines of this argument, it is said that there is, in the experience of the Christian believer, a response to New Testament revelation which brings forth thoughts and meditations inadequately expressed in the psalms. But it is interesting to note that mighty men of God have testified to exactly the opposite opinion. Athanasius, the champion of Christ’s deity in the fourth century, said, “I believe that a man can find nothing more glorious than these Psalms; for they embrace the whole life of man, the affections

of his mind, and the emotions of his soul. To praise and glorify God, he can select a Psalm suited to every occasion, and thus will find that they were written for him". (Treatise on the Psalms.) Basil of Caesarea said, "The book of Psalms is a compendium of all divinity; a common store of medicine for the soul, a universal magazine of good doctrines, profitable to everyone in all conditions". Augustine asked, "What is there that may not be learned in the Psalter?" He called it "an epitome of the whole Scriptures". Luther called the Psalms "my little Bible". While John Calvin said, "not without good grounds am I wont to call this book an anatomy of all parts of the soul, since no one can experience emotions whose portrait he could not behold reflected in its mirror". Are these men mistaken? Is there something lacking in the psalms? Or is it perhaps something lacking in us, rather than in the inspired psalms, that makes us prefer the uninspired songs of men?

(5) A fifth argument advanced for the singing of uninspired hymns is "that God *inspires* men today to write compositions suitable for use in divine worship". Let it be once more observed: this is a negative argument. It does not offer proof that God has commanded us to sing uninspired songs. It merely alleges that the psalms of the Bible are not the only songs inspired by the Holy Spirit.

It is often said that Shakespeare was *inspired*, in much the same sense. But if we are to use the word *inspired* to describe the natural poetic-flight of the spirit of man, we must then find another word to describe the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit by which He enabled certain men to write the Scriptures. "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." (2 Peter 1:21.) The inspiration by which David wrote the psalms was a miracle. Like the term *miracle*, the term *inspiration* means something supernatural when considered in the biblical sense. Dead people are no longer raised from the grave (and will not again be, till the last day), nor is water any longer changed to wine, nor water walked on by foot of man. Miracles in this sense have ceased. And so it is with inspiration, which is a miracle in the biblical sense. God's revelation is now complete. God does not inspire men today to write infallible words. God has promised His curse to anyone who attempts it. (Rev. 22:18.) But, if anyone really were *inspired* in the original biblical sense, he could add to the Bible. This is exactly what the inspired Apostles actually did. And we may be sure that if there were any psalms, hymns, or songs needed besides those that are given, God would have inspired His Apostles to write them, and would have placed them in the Bible. We cannot state the matter better than in the words of the Westminster confession: "all things necessary for . . . man's salvation, faith and life . . . (are) set down in

Scripture. . . unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (1.6).

(6) A sixth argument for the use of uninspired songs in divine worship is the argument from inference. This argument is to the effect that “there are some things proper in the worship of God which cannot be proved from direct and explicit statements of Scripture, but which can reasonably be deduced from Scripture”. Examples which are often cited, are, the baptism of infants, and the admission of women to the Lord’s Supper. It is argued that neither of these is commanded in the New Testament, but that they can be justified from good and necessary inferences. If these are proper in divine worship, it is argued, then so is the singing of uninspired hymns and songs.

This argument also is negative. What it really says is, that we cannot prove by infallible statements of Scripture that children should be baptized, or that women should receive the Lord’s Supper, and that we therefore need not prove by infallible statements of Scripture that uninspired compositions may be sung in divine worship. If worship without explicit proof is acceptable in the one instance, it is not to be condemned in the other. So the argument goes.

But the truth is that we can prove by infallible and explicit testimony of Scripture that children are to be baptized, and that women are to receive the Lord’s Supper. And the proof is no less compelling because it is Old Testament teaching. In Genesis 17:10, God expressly commanded that children receive the sacrament of circumcision. This commandment has never been revoked. When Paul says that we are circumcised by being baptized (Col. 2:11), he simply extends the Old Testament ordinance. But there is no need for a new commandment that children receive this, because there is already a clear commandment of God in effect. Because there is need to broaden the Old Testament ordinance (i.e. in applying this sacrament to females), the Lord does not leave us to change it, but gives us His own command. Thus we are told (in Acts 16:15) that Lydia was baptized. Where an express commandment already exists, the Apostles give none because none is needed. Where an express commandment is needed, and does not exist, it is given. It is given because we may not worship God except as He has commanded. Similarly, it is unnecessary to seek a New Testament commandment admitting women to the Lord’s Supper. The reason is that the Old Testament already says, “All the congregation of Israel shall keep it”. (Ex. 12:47.) The Apostles do not command women to partake of “Christ our passover” (1 Cor. 5:7) because the Old Testament already contains the needed commandment.

This argument, so appealing at first sight, upon closer examination actually proves the very opposite of what is sought by those who advance it. For

it is one thing to say that certain things are not expressly commanded in the New Testament, but are proper to divine worship because they are already expressly in the Old Testament. It is quite another thing to say, that certain things are not expressly commanded in either the Old or New Testaments, and yet are proper to the worship of God. The baptism of infants and the admission of women to the Lord's Supper do not prove that uninspired hymns may be sung in divine worship without express commandment, but rather, that the express commandments of the Old Testament are sufficient without repetition in the New Testament. But this is precisely what we do not have. We do not have, in this matter, an Old Testament command that is lacking in the New Testament. The one thing that is proved by infant baptism and admission of women to the Lord's Table, is that nothing is proper in the worship of God without express command of God. Infants are baptized and women admitted to the Lord's Supper precisely and only because this is what God commands. This very fact requires that psalms alone be sung in divine worship, because this alone is what God has commanded.

(7) A seventh argument for the singing of uninspired songs in divine worship is what might be called the argument of *progress*. Thus it is said that throughout the history of redemption new situations, new developments, and new revelation brought forth new materials for worship. And this is true enough. The elaborate worship of the Tabernacle included many things unknown to Abraham. The yet more elaborate Temple of Solomon included many things not found in the Tabernacle. And certainly the worship of the New Testament Church marks an advance over that of the Temple of Solomon.

But there is one thing that this type of argument completely ignores. It ignores the clear teaching of scripture to the effect that in each of these "advances" in the complexity and form of divine worship every last detail was instituted by the express command of God. Thus when the Tabernacle worship was instituted, God said to Moses, "And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount". (Ex. 25:40.) "According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it." (Ex. 25:9.) Even the men employed by God in the making of the instruments and decorations were inspired by the Holy Spirit, in order that they might do this work. (Ex. 28:3, 31:6, etc.) Nothing was devised by the men themselves, but only by the Holy Spirit. (Ex. 35:30-35.) And contrary to common opinion, the same thing is true of the Temple of Solomon. "Then David gave to Solomon his son the pattern of the porch, and of the houses thereof, and of the treasuries thereof, and of the upper chambers thereof, and of the

inner parlours thereof, and of the place of the mercy seat. And the pattern of all that he had by the Spirit . . . all this, said David, the Lord made me understand in writing by his hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern.” (1 Chr. 28:11-12,19.) Not one single thing was originated by David. Absolutely all was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. Every new thing was introduced by God’s express command.

In the same way, the worship of the New Testament Church was commanded by God. As Paul said, “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord”. (1 Cor. 14:37.) Nothing is to be done in the New Testament Church without the commandment of Christ. The new revelation which came through the incarnation of Christ did bring many changes. The ceremonial law was abolished, by divine command. (Acts 10:9-18.) True worship was no longer confined to the Temple in Jerusalem. (John 4:21.) Circumcision and the Passover were transformed into Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But nowhere did Christ furnish new inspired songs, nor did He give any command that men make and use uninspired songs in worship. Rather He did command, by the Apostle Paul, that we use the inspired psalms, hymns and songs that were already provided.

It is often said that new songs are mentioned in the Book of Revelation. And so they are. (Rev. 5:9, 14:3.) But this is to be expected. When we get to heaven we will need new songs. For then we shall indeed have new revelation. But let us not forget that these new songs will not be the uninspired compositions of men. They will be new songs written by the Holy Spirit. For we read that no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. (Rev. 14:3.) To learn a new song taught by the Lord, is very different from writing a new song of our own. Certainly we ought to long for the day in which we will learn such new songs. But in the meantime we should be content to sing the songs that the same Holy Spirit has written for us to learn on earth. And whatever may be the wonder of those new songs that we will learn in heaven, they will not be more perfect than those that are already contained in the book of psalms. As the Psalmist himself truly said: “O Lord, how great are thy works! and thy thoughts are very deep”. (Ps. 92:5.) “How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” “The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding to the simple.” “Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever.” (Ps. 119:103,130,160.)

By what means shall a young man learn his way to purify?

If he according to thy word thereto attentive be.  
Unfeignedly thee have I sought with all my soul and heart:  
O let me not from the right path of thy commands de-  
part.

(Metrical Psalm, 119:9-10)