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"Exclusive Psalmody" — is it commanded of God?

The substance of a submission by Rev. Ivan Foster in his debate with Rev. Angus Stewart of Covenant Protestant Reformed Fellowship, Ballymena, on 14th January 2005.

I believe in the singing of the Psalms. However, I do not believe in the exclusive singing of the psalms that is advocated by those who claim that God has instructed His people to sing only the 150 psalms of David, as they are commonly called. I believe that, in accordance with the Regulative Principle, embodied in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the singing of paraphrases and hymns, the words and doctrines of which are based upon the Word of God, along with the psalms of David is God's rule for His people today.

A lie

I wish to show that the case for exclusive psalmody has not the support of the Reformers that it claims to have. Further, when exponents of exclusive psalmody state that what they are advocating is in keeping with the teaching of the most prominent reformers, they are propounding a lie! It will be readily understood that any cause which has a falsehood as one of its main foundations is not a safe structure and most certainly is not of God. "No lie is of the truth," 1 John 2:21. Furthermore, if a lie is part of the case for "exclusive psalmody" then it brings into question everything else that is advanced.

If I am correct in saying that the likes of John Calvin did not adopt a "psalms only" stance, then the case for exclusive psalmody is deeply flawed, to say the least. Some might even say that its case is lost. What I believe concerning the nature and content of the praise that we should offer to God is based upon the words of Paul in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Those verses read: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord," Ephesians 5:19. "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," Colossians 3:16.

It is contended by those who believe in "exclusive Psalmody" that the phrase "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," is a reference to the book of Psalms. They say that it is but a three-fold title for the Psalms. If that is so, then the case for exclusive psalmody would be most difficult, if not impossible to refute. If it can be proved that this is a reference to the book of Psalms and only to the book of Psalms, I for one would not wish to refute it. I would readily comply with it and submit to its teaching.

However, I believe that those who make this claim about these words are mistaken. I understand these words to be a reference, not to a three-fold title for the Book of Psalms or a three-fold description of the character of the psalms, but to the three forms of praise that are acceptable to God.



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The **first** word employed, psalms (psal-mos) is a title for any item of praise and the word is derived from a word that means "a song of praise on an instrument." I am more than happy complying with this word and sing psalms to musical accompaniment. I just wonder how many in the "exclusive psalmody" camp would be happy to follow the teaching of the word?

The **second** word is hymns (humnos). It means a sacred song of praise either accompanied by music or with the voice only.

The **third** description is spiritual songs. I believe that this is a reference to songs which consist not just of praise to God but also of exhortations to fellow believers. After all, we are urged in Ephesians 5:19 to engage in "speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," and in Colossians 3:16 we are exhorted to "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."

The word *spiritual* in both Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 is vital to a right understanding of these verses. Much is made of the use of the three terms psalms, hymns and songs as they appear in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament which came into being about 250 years before Christ and was widely used by the scattered Jews. What is more important I believe, is the use of the word *spiritual*. It is contended by the "psalms only" lobby that this adjective belongs to all three terms. Thus we get spiritual psalms, spiritual hymns and spiritual songs. The word spiritual denotes the character of the psalm, hymn or song.

Of course, the praises we sing are not to be of the earth or carnal and worldly but, in contrast, spiritual. One of the first places in the New Testament this word appears is in Romans 7:14. Its usage will help us understand its meaning. "For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin," Romans 7:14. This meaning is further illustrated in Romans 15:27, 1 Corinthians 3:1; 9:11; 15:44, 46; Galatians 6:1. Thus when Paul employs this adjective, *spiritual* it tells us something very important. If Paul was referring to the 150 Psalms of David under these three titles, then he would not have required the use of this word spiritual since there are no unspiritual psalms! He must have been speaking of that which required the use of this distinguishing adjective in order that his readers do not take up psalms, hymns or songs which were not spiritual but worldly and of this earth.

Different

This view of the meaning of these verses is fundamentally different from that adopted by the advocates of "exclusive psalmody."

What support is there for their view or for mine in the teaching of the Reformers? According to those who claim we should sing only Psalms, the leading Reformers all agreed with their view. But is that correct?

Reformers

Consider first of all John Calvin's comments on Ephesians 5:19. "Psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs. These are truly pleasant and delightful fruits. The Spirit means 'joy in the



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Holy Ghost' (Romans 14:17) and the exhortation, be ye filled (verse 18) alludes to deep drinking, with which it is indirectly contrasted. Speaking to themselves, is speaking among themselves. Nor does he enjoin them to sing inwardly or alone; for he immediately adds, singing in your hearts; as if he had said, 'Let your praises be not merely on the tongue, as hypocrites do, but from the heart.'

What may be the exact difference between psalms and hymns, or between hymns and songs, it is not easy to determine, though a few remarks on this subject shall be offered on a future occasion. The appellation spiritual, given to these songs, is strikingly appropriate; for the songs most frequently used are almost always on trifling subjects, and very far from being chaste."

Now it is to be noted that John Calvin does not here explain these words to mean a three-fold reference to the Psalms of David. That is important to note.

Simple

The matter is not as simple as the "exclusive psalmody" advocates would have us believe. However, John Calvin did give his view on the meaning of these words in his comments on Colossians 3:16. "Psalms, hymns. He (Paul) does not restrict the word of Christ to these particular departments, but rather intimates that all our communications should be adapted to edification, that even those which tend to hilarity may have no empty savour. "Leave to unbelievers that foolish delight which they take from ludicrous and frivolous jests and witticisms; and let your communications, not merely those that are grave, but those also that are joyful and exhilarating, contain something profitable. In place of their obscene, or at least barely modest and decent, songs, it becomes you to make use of hymns and songs that sound forth God's praise. Further, under these three terms he includes all kinds of songs. They are commonly distinguished in this way that a psalm is that, in the singing of which some musical instrument besides the tongue is made use of: a hymn is properly a song of praise, whether it be sung simply with the voice or otherwise; while an ode (spiritual song) contains not merely praises, but exhortations and other matters. He would have the songs of Christians, however, to be spiritual, not made up of frivolities and worthless trifles. For this has a connection with his argument. Singing in your hearts. This relates to disposition; for as we ought to stir up others, so we ought also to sing from the heart, that there may not be merely an external sound with the mouth. At the same time, we must not understand it as though he would have every one sing inwardly to himself, but he would have both conjoined, provided the heart goes before the tongue."

If we look at how Calvin interpreted Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19, he certainly did not expound them in an exclusive psalmodist manner. He simply distinguished the "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" into:

(a) psalms - songs sung to instrumental accompaniment;

(b) hymns - any and all songs of praise;

(c) songs or "odes" - songs containing both praise and other matter, e.g. exhortation. He also understood the qualifying term "spiritual" in "spiritual songs" as a reference to the Christian content of the songs, rather than to the Holy Spirit as the inspiring Author.



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This strikes at a main plank in the case for "exclusive psalmody" since those who advocate such say that Paul used the word spiritual in the sense of inspired by the Holy Spirit. John Calvin says the word *spiritual* describes the character of our praise rather than that it is must be inspired by the Holy Ghost. Thus I learn from John Calvin and accept his exegesis of this verse.

I, and not those proclaiming the doctrine of "psalms only" here tonight, am in step with the great reformer.

Practice

Furthermore, what John Calvin says here, he demonstrated for us in practice.

In 1542 there was printed at Geneva that which became the standard Geneva Psalter, containing thirty psalms, the Lord's Prayer, and the creed, and five Psalms with the Song of Simeon and the Ten Commandments by John Calvin himself.

In the Geneva Psalter of 1543, Calvin's poetical versions no longer appear.

The edition of 1551 included thirty-four compositions of Beza and forty-seven new melodies.

After a number of editions with minor variations, the work appeared in final form at Geneva and Paris in 1562. This contained the whole Psalter with 150 melodies, the Decalogue, the Song of Simeon, two forms of grace, the Lord's Prayer, and the creed.

Calvin's position, then, as demonstrated by his practice, was an acceptance of all suitable Scriptural passages as vehicles of sung praise including the song of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32), the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer, and even the Apostles' Creed, but within this framework to sanction David's psalms as the jewel in the liturgical crown.

Is this hymnal in keeping with a "Psalms only" position? Surely not!

But what of others such as John Knox? Did he differ with John Calvin on this matter? We have comments on Colossians 3:16, which if John Knox did not author, he certainly agreed with, in the notes in the Geneva Bible. Here is what one admirer of the Geneva Bible wrote: "The greatest distinction of the Geneva Bible . . . is the extensive collection of marginal notes that it contains. Prominent Reformation leaders such as John Calvin, John Knox, Miles Coverdale, William Whittingham, Theodore Beza, and Anthony Gilby wrote the majority of these notes in order to explain and interpret the scriptures. The notes comprise nearly 300,000 words, or nearly one-third the length of the Bible itself, and they are justifiably considered the most complete source of Protestant religious thought available. Here is what the Geneva Bible Notes say on Colossians 3:16.

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

*By "psalms" he means all godly songs which were written upon various occasions, and by "hymns", all such as contain the praise of God, and by "spiritual songs", other more special and artful songs which were also in praise of God, but they were made fuller of music."

I ask you, would John Knox have allowed his name to be associated with such comments



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if he were an advocate of "exclusive psalmody"? I think not.

He was in his prime in 1564-65 and in the very midst of the battle for truth in Scotland. It was then that the Church of Scotland adopted the "Book of Geneva" as its Psalter. It contained 32 doxologies, one of which may be sung at the conclusion of a psalm. Were John Knox an exclusive singer of psalms he would not have had such compositions of men added to the psalter.

Agreement

I can say that I am in agreement with the great French reformer and the great Scots reformer. I am not the one who differs from their clear position on this matter of what a Christian should sing when worshipping God.

Westminster divines

Let me come to the Westminster divines. A greater collection of godly and learned men was never assembled since the times of the apostles. Their view on the cardinal doctrines of the gospel is not to be dismissed lightly. The impression given by the advocates of "psalms only", undoubtedly, is that they have the full support of these great men for their views.

But is that true?

Thomas Manton stood head and shoulder above those giants. He was chosen to represent the assembly of divines who authored the Westminster Confession of Faith, when he was asked to write the epistle to the reader, placed at the very gateway to this historic document. I believe that we can consider him to be the embodiment of the views held by at least the majority of the divines who co-produced the Westminster Confession of Faith. What was his view on this matter? It is found in his comments on the verse "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms," James 5:13, and is very clear.

"Others question whether we may sing scripture psalms, the psalms of David, which to me seemeth to look like the cavil of a profane spirit. But to clear this also. I confess we do not forbid other songs; if grave and pious, after good advice they may be received into the church. Tertullian, in his Apology, showeth that in the primitive times they used this liberty, either to sing scripture psalms or such as were of a private composure."

Two things are clear from this statement. In advancing his case for the singing of psalms:

- [1] Thomas Manton did not forbid the singing of spiritual songs other than the psalms;
- [2] He considered the singing of hymns of "private composure" to have been the practice of the early church and refers to Tertullian as his source for believing that.

Question

I am entitled to ask the question that if Thomas Manton were here expressing something quite contradictory to the Regulative Principle and to the mind of the Assembly divines on the important matter of the public worship of God, would he have been permitted to represent the divines by writing the epistle to the reader at the front of their great work, the Westminster Confession of Faith? I am very confident that the answer would be "No".



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Thomas Manton's views on this subject were representative of the thinking of the Westminster divines and we therefore conclude that the Westminster divines were no advocates of "exclusive Psalmody."

Other testimonies

Testimonies may be presented to you from the writings of men such as great Scottish leaders like David Dickson and Ralph Erskine who wrote hymns which were widely sung in family worship throughout Scotland. How could such a thing be tolerated if it were deemed contrary to the teaching of the Word of God and the testimony of the Scottish church? How could such men be considered honoured servants of Christ and retain the regard and respect of their brethren, while defying the witness of the church and violating their ordination vows, by engaging in and promoting the use of songs other than the psalms in the worship of God?

Standing

In truth they could not. Therefore, the standing such men retained in the eyes of their contemporaries clearly argues that their views were not seen as unscriptural nor in contradiction of the stated position of the Scottish church.

Dr. John Kennedy of Dingwall

The great advocate of "exclusive Psalmody", Dr. John Kennedy of Dingwall, when speaking in a debate on this issue in the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland in 1872, said, and I quote, "Some desire them (that is, hymns) because of an experience of enjoyment in using them, in private or in social Christian conference, to express their feeling of sorrow, hope, or gladness. **Let these continue so to use them; I will yield to none in my desire to have them as a vehicle of any strong spiritual feeling that stirs my heart;** but to use them in the worship of God in the sanctuary is quite another thing." (Record of debates on the issue of psalm singing in the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland in 1872.)

When Dr. Kennedy concedes that the singing of hymns and paraphrases is acceptable to God when He is worshipped in the home by Scottish Presbyterians, he destroys his case against the singing of hymns and paraphrases in the house of God. Wherein are the grounds for such a distinction in the worship offered to God in the home and that offered in a church building? This is an unbiblical and unpresbyterian demarcation. It is unsustainable.

The Westminster Confession of faith states the matter so: "Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable to, any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed: but God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself, so more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or wilfully to be neglected or forsaken, when God, by his Word or providence, calleth thereunto." (Chapter 21, paragraph 6).

Please note those words. For they are particularly pertinent regarding this matter.



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What saith the Scriptures?

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God," 1 Corinthians 10:31. "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him," Colossians 3:17.

"And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men," Colossians 3:23.

Popish

It is popish to suggest that there is one level of worship for the home and a higher level for the church building. Just what level of worship would a Covenanting Conventicle be expected to engage in, when meeting in a glen or on a mountainside during those years of trial? In truth there is only one level of worship acceptable to God and it is that which the Saviour indicated to the woman of Samaria. "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth," John 4:24. If hymns and paraphrases are acceptable when worshipping the Lord in the home then they are acceptable when offered in praise within the assembly of the saints.

History

History indicates that Calvin, Knox and their contemporaries were not exclusive psalm singers in the worship of God and that it is neither honest nor ethical to claim that they were. Any cause that must falsify history in order to gain support is acknowledging a fundamental weakness in its case. By falsely claiming the support of the men we have mentioned, proponents of exclusive psalmody undermine their whole case.

Mr. Stewart's church

Those who do not subscribe to the position of "psalms only" are deemed to be guilty of offering unto God praise that is unscriptural and tainted by the flesh. Such worship is considered as altogether inferior. Indeed, it is deemed to be in violation of the second commandment. That being so, it is difficult to understand the position adopted by Rev. Angus Stewart and his fellowship, since they are allied to a denomination that rejects "exclusive psalmody" and believes in musical accompaniment of their singing.

On the site of the Protestant Reformed Churches, we are told that "Covenant Protestant Reformed Fellowship" of Ballymena is a "mission station" of the Protestant Reformed Churches. On the same internet site, we are given "Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches." It lists 86 Articles which set down the order that is to be observed in their congregations. Article 69 reads : "In the Churches only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith, the Songs of Mary, Zacharias and Simeon, the Morning and Evening Hymns, and the Hymn of Prayer before the sermon shall be sung."

In addition to this, it is the practice of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America that a doxology be sung after each psalm.

It may be seen that this is not the "psalms only" position espoused by Rev. Angus Stewart.

Since I, and the likes of me, are deemed to be in sin, in violation of the second commandment for not singing exclusively the 150 Psalms of David, does he say that the Protestant



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Reformed Churches in America are likewise in sin or does he make an exception for them? If he does make an exception, we are at liberty to ask why? Has it got anything to do with the financial support the Covenant Protestant Reformed Fellowship of Ballymena receives from Protestant Reformed Churches?

Final word

My final word to this audience is this.

The anomaly of the thesis for "exclusive Psalmody" may be seen chiefly by noting that according to its exponents, it is forbidden of God for Christians in this age to take the name of Jesus upon their lips in a song of praise. The English form of our Saviour's precious name is not to be found in the English Metrical version of the Psalms and therefore cannot be uttered when singing praises to God.

That name which encapsulated the gospel message preached to the Ethiopian eunuch by Philip ("Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus," Acts 8:35) the eunuch could not utter in song as "he went on his way rejoicing" Acts 8:39!

That name by which our Saviour introduced Himself to Paul in Acts 9:5 ("And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest") Paul was never allowed to utter in song!

That name in which Paul preached the gospel boldly in Damascus (Acts 9:27), he never used in song.

That name which God, Who has highly exalted Christ, has given him is "above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11), if that name is sung it is not to God's glory but it is a sin.

That name by which alone we may enter God's holy presence in prayer, is an offence to God if we sing it.

This is the logic of "exclusive psalmody" and I reject it.

If for no other reason, the forbidding of the use of the name of JESUS in sung praise by those who promote "exclusive psalmody", is cause enough to say, "Brethren you are wrong!"

Alarm

Are those who say, "You must not utter this name in song," not alarmed that there is little difference between that statement and the evil command of the Jewish leaders to the apostles! "And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the



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name of Jesus," Acts 4:18.

I rest my case.

Rev Ivan Foster.
February 2005.

(Further corrected and updated, July 2012.)