



A Critique of the Doctrine of Exclusive Psalmody

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This document contains outline notes from the sermon.

To hear the full sermon, visit <http://www.grbc.net/exclusive-psalms>

1) What the proponents of Exclusive Psalmody say:

- Quotes from "The testimony of the United Presbyterian Church in America in 1858".
- Quotes from G.I. Williamson – "The signing of Psalms in the Worship of God"
- What support is offered?
 - The Regulative Principle of Worship
 - Scripture:
 - Ephesians 5:19
 - Colossians 3:16-17
 - James 5:13
 - Matthew 26:30

2) A response to the doctrine as a whole

- the Psalms ARE important to New Covenant worship
- It is necessarily implied by Exclusive Psalmody that the Psalms of David were the only hymns sung by the people of God in the Old and New Testament. If this is the only hymnbook, and if God requires all corporate musical worship come from the Book of Psalms, that would necessarily imply that the Old Testament and New Testament saints only sang from the Book of Psalms, or what they sang (if the singers lived before the Book of Psalms) would have been collected and deposited in the Book of Psalms.
- But that is not the case. Both the Old Testament and New Testament present evidence of songs outside of and in addition to the Book of Psalms.

- Ex. 15 – Moses/Miriam's songs of deliverance, sung by the congregation. Would God have been offended if a later group of Hebrew had sung those psalms in worship, since they weren't in the Book of Psalms?
 - Num. 21:17-18 – Israel sings of God's provision of water. Was it never to be sung again in praise to God?
 - Deut. 31,32 – Mosaic Song of Witness. 31:19 – “Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel.” Not in the Book of Psalms.
 - Is. 26,27 – A Song of Triumph that will be sung by Israel after they are delivered from captivity. Not in the Book of Psalms.
 - Hab. 3 – Habakkuk’s prayer, intended to be sung (v19). Not in the Book of Psalms.
 - Phil. 2:5-11, Col. 1:15-20, 2 Tim. 3:16 – portions of scripture that were very likely sung by the first-century church
 - Rev. 5:9-10 – a song being sung right now by the saints in heaven. Would God be offended if we on earth took that song and sung it now in corporate worship? Advocates of Exclusive Psalmody say "Yes".
 - Rev. 19 – Advocates of Exclusive Psalmody say we cannot sing the Hallelujah chorus in worship either. (Handel's version or any other)
- How can we conclude that the book of Psalms comprise the only acceptable hymnbook when other hymns are recorded in Scripture with the expectation that they too will be sung by the people of God?
 - The Book of Psalms is to direct us in not only in our singing, but also in praying and meditation. It is unwarranted to insist that entirety of our singing should be restricted to the Psalms any more than the whole of our praying should use only the words of the Psalms.

3) A response to the arguments used

a) The Regulative Principle of Worship

- It is not inconsistent that we hold to the Regulative Principle and yet sing hymns in worship.

- We believe that the Book of Psalms should be normative (that is, the standard) with respect to church music. We view the Book of Psalms as our pattern of clear, solid argument and robust doctrinal content to which hymns should conform.
- We also believe we should employ multiple musical instruments, as demonstrated in Psalms (e.g. Ps 81:1-3)
 - On a side note, Exclusive Psalmody often goes hand-in-hand with the belief that no musical instruments are to be used in corporate worship. But how can those advocates of Exclusive Psalmody argue that we must sing Psalms and only Psalms, but at the same time also insist that we should not sing Psalms the way the Psalms tell us to sing them? (i.e. with musical instruments). How can you have it both ways?
- The Book of Psalms cannot be the exclusive content of our singing. Why? Because they are Old Covenant, and we are God's New Covenant people, and our worship must be distinctively, definitively New Covenantal. We learn the pattern for singing from the Book of Psalms. The content of our songs, however, comes from the Psalms and the Old Covenant but supremely from the Gospel and the New Covenant.
- We agree that Scripture ought to regulate how we sing, but we don't agree with advocates of Exclusive Psalmody that Scripture regulates music in the same way that it regulates (for example) the reading of Scripture in worship.
 - Our Scripture reading is never from the 1689 Baptist Confession, or Calvin's Institutes – those are the just the words of men. Exclusive Psalmody argues that singing ought to be just like that – nothing but the Word of God sung back to God. (although even they would have to admit that their Psalters are paraphrases of what is written in the Book of Psalms).
- Instead, we believe the Bible regulates our singing in the same way it regulates our corporate praying and our preaching. Prayers should be Scriptural, shaped and informed by the word of God, sometimes incorporating the very words of Scripture... but they do not come exclusively from the text of Scripture. Preaching should also be thoroughly Biblical... but sermons do not consist entirely and exclusively of the words of Scripture. So too with corporate singing.
- When we look at prayers in Scripture, we see God's people opening their hearts to God, expressing their own personal faith, love, confessing personal sins, speaking personal desires. The songs of Scripture indicate the same thing – singing what they believe doctrinally, rejoicing for what God has done for them in their generation, singing about their needs, and what God has done for them.

- Each intervention of God in the lives of his people has given rise to new songs – the Exodus, miraculous supplies in the wilderness, the arrival of the Ark in Jerusalem, the building of the temple, anticipation of delivery from exile, the news of Christ's birth to Mary, the death/resurrection of Christ, the entrance into heaven, the anticipated return of Christ.
- God wants our singing to be an expression of what He is doing in the church in our generation.
- In the same way that every generation has preachers to apply the word of God to that generation, every generation should have hymn writers so that God's people can sing of his works in their generation.
- We believe the word of God does not regulate New Covenant worship in the SAME WAY that it regulated old covenant worship. It regulates, but in a different way. (no New Covenant book of Leviticus, for example).

b) Scriptural texts

- Jam. 5:13 – G.I. Williamson argues that "psalms" are "the Psalms of the Bible", but that is not clear. The word "psalms" does not appear in the Greek text of this verse. The original is simply "Whoever is happy, sing praise". Matthew Henry confirms that Christians of the 1st century sang hymns in worship. In fact, James 5 isn't even talking about public worship.
- Eph 5:19 – Paul is speaking, not about worship in the gathered church, but the day-to-day lives of Christians. In fact there is no text in the Bible that speaks explicitly about music for the gathered church in the New Covenant. It is impossible to say, then that the New Testament church is commanded to sing Psalms and only Psalms in worship.
- We are directed to be filled with the Spirit, with that spilling over into music.
- Singing is to have a dual purpose: edification (“speaking to one another”) and worship (“making melody to the Lord”) (v19)
- What about the phrase "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs"? Advocates of Exclusive Psalmody assert that all 3 terms refer to the book of Psalms, used three times to reinforce the statement. But that is not necessarily so.
 - "psalms": the word does not necessarily mean Old Testament Psalms. Thayer's Lexicon calls it "a striking, a twanging (chords of a musical instrument) – a pious song, or a psalm". Key verse: 1 Cor. 14:26 – brethren bring "psalms" they had written to the worship of God.

- Had the Spirit intended us to use only the Book of Psalms here, we would expect him to move Paul to write with the same unmistakable clarity that Luke wrote in Luke 20:42 (where he clearly specifies the Book of Psalms). Instead, Paul uses a very generic word.
 - "hymn": hymnos (Thayer): "a song in praise of gods, heroes, conquerors. In Scripture, a sacred song, a hymn."
 - spiritual songs: (Thayer): "a song, an ode, in praise of God or Christ." Is "spiritual" the controlling word to make this refer to songs inspired by the Holy Spirit (the Book of Psalms)? No – "spiritual" has a broad range of meaning. In Eph 6, it even refers to the devil. Better to interpret it as songs that conform to the doctrine taught by the Spirit.
- The point of reference is v.20 – "give thanks...in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ". Everything we do in worship is to be explicitly **Christian**, marked by worship of God in the name of Jesus Christ – just like our Prayers are offered in the name of Christ. We don't just THINK the name of Jesus – we are to speak it.
- What would we say if someone told us not to use the name of Jesus in our prayer? What if you were told "you can think it, but you are not to speak it"? Exclusive Psalmody practically has that effect. The name of Jesus is not found in the Psalms, because they did not know exactly who the Messiah would be. If we limit our singing to Book of Psalms, we will never sing in the name of Jesus Christ.
- Col 3:16-17 – adds "Let the word of Christ dwell in you", instead of "Be filled with the Spirit". These are companion passages – both should control us all the time. When that happens, we will be able to teach and admonish each other even in singing.
 - v.17 – again, all is to be done in the name of the Lord Jesus.
- The Psalms of David are implicitly Christian, but **ONLY IF** you are well taught in the New Testament. If you know the New Testament, you can read the Book of Psalms and see Jesus Christ. But the Book of Psalms is only implicitly Christian, not explicitly, because they do not identify Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, nor do they speak of his death on the cross as the propitiation of our sins. They do not foresee his resurrection and triumph over death, the pouring out of his spirit, or our adoption through him into the family of God, or his sending the Spirit as the internal witness that we are children of God, or that we are justified by the righteousness of Christ received by faith. These are the themes that are to dominate our worship.

- Heb 13:12-13 – "outside the camp" is calling us to go beyond the Old Covenant.
 - v.15 – "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name."
- According to Hebrews, it's not enough to be implicitly Christian. Worship must be explicitly and expressly Christian.
- Quoting John Frame:

"Certainly we cannot criticize their [advocates of Exclusive Psalmody] theology, since [the Psalms] are divinely inspired. And the Psalms do testify of Christ, as the New Testament shows in its use of the Psalter. But the Psalms present Christ in the "shadows" (Col. 2:17), in terms of the incomplete revelation of the Old Testament period (Heb. 1:1-3). Indeed, to limit one's praise to the Psalms is to praise God without the name of Jesus on one's lips. But the completeness of redemption in Christ requires a whole new language of praise: about Jesus the God-man, his once-for-all finished atonement, his resurrection for our justification, and our union with him by faith as the new people of God. Doubtless there are anticipations of these doctrines in the Psalter, but Christian worship demands more than the language of anticipation. It demands the language of fulfillment and completeness, for that is what is distinctive about New Testament faith.
- **We do not believe that the Bible grants the New Covenant church the liberty to make any part of its worship exclusively Old Covenant – the liberty to never sing the name of Jesus.**
- Exclusive Psalmody does not meet the criteria of the Regulative Principle. In no place does the Bible explicitly or implicitly command the church to restrict its praise of God in song to the Book of Psalms. Rather we believe the Bible commands us to sing and write songs of praise which celebrate Jesus as the Christ, and the fullness of grace and truth residing in him by reason of his death and resurrection. We are to sing who Jesus is and what he has done.
- Exclusive Psalmody forbids us to sing the name of our precious Lord Jesus Christ, whose name we must confess with our mouths if we are to be saved.
 - In the course of public worship, how many opportunities does the congregation have to confess Jesus with our mouth? Unless someone leads in prayer, the only means is by singing. How will the congregation confess His name with their mouths if they cannot sing His name?