

The Singing of Psalms and Hymns¹

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The issue at stake

In recent months there have been articles or letters in *Clarion* dealing with the singing of Psalms and hymns in congregational worship. Dr. J. De Jong wrote about our sister churches in the Netherlands who are investigating the adoption of more hymns. He concluded his article by saying, “We need to see it as our task to incorporate some positive elements of the rich hymnody of the entire Christian tradition, and especially the Reformed tradition, into our own book, so that we are more consciously united with those who preceded us, and more equipped to share our heritage with those around us” (Volume 48, No. 7). Brother Rick Duker responded to this by writing, “Dr. De Jong seems to be of the opinion that it is our task carefully to incorporate more hymns. But what is the scriptural basis for doing this? The church must have clear biblical grounds for singing uninspired (unspiritual) songs in the worship service. It is imperative that we be absolutely certain of God’s approval for this practice (Deut 12:8, 32)” (Volume 48, No. 11). More recently, brother Henry Sikkema wrote, “Scripture authorizes the 150 Psalms of the Old Testament, and no other songs are authorized. What then, is Dr. J. De Jong’s standard?” He concludes, “We need to question our worship practices. Now, as always, we need divine warrant to add to or subtract from the perfection of Scripture and in song that is the Psalter” (Volume 48, No. 18).

Let me state from the outset that I have deep appreciation for hearing the brothers Duker and Sikkema promote the singing of Psalms in our worship services. We live in a time where so many churches are moving towards liturgical embellishments which often ignore the Psalms. Often Arminian and

man-centred hymns are being adopted and sung. It is like a breath of fresh air to hear from two brothers that they love and promote the singing of the Psalms in our churches. A congregation is richly blessed when it sings the Psalms. Prof. J. Geertsema wrote in an editorial some time ago that the Psalms are still rich and applicable for us today because they proclaim the coming and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ (Volume 47, No. 24).

However, is it correct to state that only the 150 Psalms may be sung in congregational worship? Is it wrong to sing hymns? Is Dr. De Jong way off track when he suggests that it would be good to incorporate some more hymns – provided they are good, scriptural hymns? Is it not possible that it is right and even beneficial for the church of Jesus Christ to sing scriptural hymns? The reason for this article is to address these questions.

Regulative Principle of Worship

The belief that only the 150 Psalms may be sung in the churches is not something new. It is rooted in what is known as the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW). None of the articles mentioned above speak of the RPW, although brother Sikkema did entitle his letter, “Scriptural Law of Worship.” However the line of reasoning by both brother Duker and brother Sikkema is the same as the proponents of the RPW. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, we will use this expression. It is described in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, Paragraph 6 as follows:

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. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

This may be summarized somewhat, as it frequently is. John Murray writes in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, “that the acceptable way of worshipping God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by his revealed will that He may not be worshipped in any other way than that prescribed in the Holy Scripture, that what is not commanded is forbidden.” G.I. Williamson writes in *The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God*, “What is the proper way to worship God? . . . 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 . . . what is not commanded is forbidden.” This is the Regulative Principle of Worship. Plain and simple it says: any aspect of worship must clearly come from the Scripture or else it is forbidden. From this, G. I. Williamson concludes that since Scripture does not mandate the use of hymns in worship, it is forbidden that the church of Jesus Christ use them in the worship service. Only Psalms are to be sung.

Not everyone who holds to the Westminster Standards understands the RPW in the same way. For instance, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is known to use hymns in worship. The Free Church of Scotland, on the other hand, allows neither hymns nor musical instruments in worship. Both churches are faithful adherents of the Westminster Confession of Faith and

they are admired for their strict confessional stance, but they apply the RPW differently. The Free Church of Scotland has a more rigid application of the RPW.

To understand both the Westminster Confession and the RPW, it is important to look at some historical background. The Westminster Confession was written during the 1640s and its contents were heavily shaped by English Puritanism. The Puritans were quite rigid in their principle of worship: they said all aspects of worship must have biblical warrant. We should have appreciation for what they were doing because this was in reaction to the liturgical excesses of the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church. In the face of relics, Mariology, adoration of saints, indulgences, elaborate ceremonies and rituals, fancy clothing, burning of candles, proliferation of artwork, musical instruments and singing which came at the expense of the pure preaching of the gospel, it was like a breath of fresh air to do away with all these trappings and return to the heart of true worship, namely, hearing the Word of God. The background to the Westminster Confession and the regulative principle of the Puritans was to bring the Bible back into the centre of worship. But in their application of the RPW, the Puritans made some far-reaching conclusions. Since nothing was to be done in the worship service unless it had biblical warrant, there were to be no singing of hymns or use of musical instruments in worship service, no Christmas or Easter services, and many other things as well. It is striking, however, that there is evidence that the Puritans did allow such special days of worship as "Public Solemn Fasting" and "Public Thanksgiving." This does demonstrate a certain inconsistency. In fact, this demonstrates a problem with the RPW: just how far is it to be carried? Some refused to use creeds in worship. Some demanded head coverings for women and the lack of any kind of ornamentation or hair styling whatsoever. Some have wrestled with questions such as: is it correct to sing the Apostles' Creed? May the Heidelberg Catechism be used in the preaching? Is it correct to sing

Psalms which are not a literal transliteration of the original Hebrew? Such questions and disputes among those who hold to the RPW show that a rigid application of this principle will always lead to difficulties and often untenable positions.

The Puritans regarded John Calvin as one of their mentors. The Puritans believed that John Calvin was the champion of the RPW. Calvin was not only a reformer of theology but also a reformer of worship. Calvin was disgusted with the excesses and unbiblical practices within Roman Catholic worship. He sought a reformation in worship by holding to the principle that Scripture mandates how God's people are to worship. Worship should not be self-willed but it is willed by God. It is clear from Calvin's commentary on the Book of Psalms that he believed that Psalms should primarily be sung in the worship services. But it would be wrong to conclude that Calvin taught a regulative principle of worship along the lines held by the Puritans and assimilated into the Westminster Confession. It is clear that when it came to doctrine, Calvin would not budge an inch. But when it came to liturgical practices, although he had his definite opinions, he was tolerant of different practices. We see his liturgical tolerance in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I. x. 14:

Shall no ceremonies then (you will ask) be given to the ignorant to help them in their inexperience? I do not say that. For I feel that this kind of help is very useful to them. I only contend that the means used ought to show Christ, not to hide him. Therefore, God has given us a few ceremonies, not at all irksome, to show Christ present. To the Jews more were given as images of Christ absent. He was absent, I say, not in power, but in the means by which He might be made known. Accordingly, to keep that means, it is necessary to keep fewness in number, ease in observation, dignity in representation, which also includes clarity.

While it is clear that Calvin is not speaking here of the matter of singing Psalms and hymns, he shows that he is not a proponent of a rigid principle of

worship which says: unless it is prescribed in Scripture, it is forbidden. In fact, Calvin leaned towards a position of exclusive Psalmody, but he himself included the singing of the Song of Simeon, the ten commandments and the Apostles' Creed. Calvin permitted things which are not prescribed in Scripture. It would therefore be unfair to say today that Calvin taught a rigid view of the RPW much like the Puritans did. There is a marked difference. In the next article we will look more closely at whether it is legitimate to use the RPW to deny the singing of hymns in worship. In the third and final article, we will look at the positive evidence in Scripture for the singing of hymns.

The Second Commandment

In the first article, we were dealing with the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW) which essentially teaches: what is not commanded in Scripture is forbidden. Some proponents of the RPW insist: since hymns are not commanded in Scripture, they are forbidden. They try to claim that John Calvin strictly applied this principle of worship, but as we saw, this is not the case.

The upholders of the RPW also refer to the second commandment for proof that what is not commanded in Scripture is forbidden. The Heidelberg Catechism's summary in Q & A 96 is often referred to: "We are not to make an image of God in any way, nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in his Word." Since Zacharius Ursinus was one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, his commentary is also brought into the discussion to prove that this confession taught a strict view of the RPW. Ursinus wrote the following on Lord's Day 35:

The other species of idolatry is more subtle and refined, as when the true God is supposed to be worshipped, whilst the kind of worship which is paid unto Him is false, which is the case when anyone imagines that he is worshipping or honouring God by the performance of any work not prescribed by the divine law. This species of idolatry is more properly condemned in the second

commandment, and is termed superstition, because it adds to the commandments of God the inventions of men. Those are called superstitious who corrupt the worship of God by their own inventions. This will-worship or superstition is condemned in every part of the word of God. "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoreth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." "Let no man judge you in meat or in drink, &c., which all are to perish with the using, after the commandments and doctrines of men; which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honor to the satisfying of the flesh." (Matt 15:8, 9. Col 2:16, 22, 23.)

From this, those who advocate a strict RPW conclude that Ursinus and the Heidelberg Catechism teach that the singing of hymns in worship is a form of self-willed worship and an idolatry forbidden by God. However it is clear that Ursinus is talking here about hypocritical worship, the doctrines of men, the philosophy and traditions of men and the show of wisdom in will-worship. We appreciate Ursinus' comments deeply. To suggest that Ursinus is condemning something like the singing of hymns which is not expressly commanded in the Scriptures is forcing Ursinus to say something he does not mean with his commentary. Moreover, it goes against the point of the second word of the covenant. The second word forbids self-willed worship of God which attempts to control and manipulate God. We see an attempt of such idolatrous control in 1 Samuel 4 where Israel was in battle with the Philistines. Israel believed that by bringing out the ark of the covenant, the enemy would automatically be defeated. This was a form of self-willed worship and the manipulation of God for man's own purposes. The second

word of the covenant forbids such an attempt to control and manipulate God which minimizes the true way of knowing and praising God and which thus leads to a covenantal automatism. To take this commandment and apply it to the singing of hymns in the worship service is simply pressing the commandment too far.

Highly recommended is a reading of J. Douma's commentary on the second word of the covenant in *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*. He not only outlines beautifully and powerfully the meaning of the second word, but he also has a warning against those who are more concerned about the issue of singing hymns than the true intent of the second word. This is not to suggest that the brothers who wrote to *Clarion* on the matter of singing Psalms and hymns misunderstand the true intent of the second word. I refer to Douma only to show how to be careful with the understanding and application of the second word (page 67):

Take for example, the liturgy, which can be of such a quality as to resemble image worship. We are dealing here with extremes. Because they oppose the central place given to preaching in the liturgy, people go in search of new liturgical forms and practices designed to facilitate contact with God. The image has disappeared, but rituals and ceremonies return in order to awaken new life in an otherwise dead church. But even in a church where, in good Reformed style, people want preaching to occupy centre stage, things can go awry. Only the King James Version, and no other; only Genevan tunes; no hymns; a particular style of preaching – these too can bind our concourse with God to habits that can become rigid forms. No longer are the living preaching of the Word and the corresponding faith the decisive elements of worship, but the old, habitual forms and sounds that make people feel secure. The image fixates more than the word, but that does not mean that the word and the sermon will necessarily avoid degenerating into something automatic.

The point of the second word of the covenant is recognizing and holding in high esteem the Word of God which reveals the one, true God who has revealed Himself as the One who comes to us in Jesus Christ and calls us for a living faith in Jesus Christ. We are reminded here of what we said earlier about John Calvin: he had tolerance for differences in liturgy as long as the centrality of the Word of Jesus Christ was not compromised.

Scriptural warrants

It is time to look a little more closely at the statement that a biblical warrant is required for each and every aspect of worship. This sounds very good: to be Reformed is to abide with the Scripture. However there is an essential flaw in demanding a biblical warrant for all aspects of congregational worship. The fact is, Scripture is not specific and precise about how a worship service is to be conducted. How much do we really know about worship in the early Christian congregations? Apparently they were patterned to a certain extent or even a large extent on synagogue worship services. How much of synagogue worship is outlined in the Bible? The synagogue is not even prescribed in the Old Testament. Somehow it came into being before the time of Christ. The Bible simply does not give an exhaustive or detailed description of the worship service for the New Testament church. We know that there was congregational singing: "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Cor 14:26). But do we know what the congregation sang, how much they sang, and whether every congregation sang in every worship service? Here is another point of discussion: those who hold to a rigid view of the RPW say that Scripture mandates only the singing of the 150 Psalms. Where is it explicitly stated in Scripture that the 150 Psalms are to be sung in worship? Does it say that only the 150 Psalms are to be sung and that all of them are to be sung? We know that the Psalms are designed for singing

and we infer from a passage such as 2 Chronicles 29:30 that they were sung. However the strict application of the RPW appears to undo itself when it says only the 150 Psalms are to be sung in worship because there is no clear and express command to do so. This is not to suggest that the 150 should not be sung. But we should see that in both the Old Testament and the New Testament there is not a detailed description of exactly how the church is to worship.

Proponents of the RPW bring forth certain Scripture passages to demonstrate the principle that whatever is not commanded is forbidden. One such passage is found in Deuteronomy 12:32: “See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.” But look at the context. In Deuteronomy 12 the Lord is commanding Israel not to worship Him in the way that the pagans worship their gods – some even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods. In this chapter the Lord teaches his people how to make proper sacrifices before Him. In the final line of this chapter there is the conclusion, “See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.” To conclude from this passage within this context that the Lord is laying down a general, regulative principle of worship which says about each and every aspect of liturgical worship, including the matter of singing, only do what is expressly commanded, is simply poor exegesis. This is a passage which deals with a specific aspect of worship: no one may add to or take away from what the Lord says about worship in this passage. The defenders of the RPW also adduce many other Scripture passages as examples of what God does to his people when they worship Him wrongly. However, it is both offensive and unfair to take passages from the Scriptures, such as Leviticus 10 where Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized fire before the LORD which led to their horrible deaths, and conclude: see how God condemns every form of worship not prescribed in Scripture, including the singing of hymns.

We believe that there are principles of worship in the Scriptures. This is seen in our Heidelberg Catechism,

Lord’s Day 38. But the teaching of the Regulative Principle of Worship that there must be biblical warrant for all aspects of the liturgy cannot be maintained. Even the Old Testament does not elaborate on all the details of worship. One only needs to ask: where is the biblical warrant for the synagogues of Jesus Christ’s day? Thus to reject and condemn summarily the singing of hymns in worship on the basis of no explicit command is a shaky proposition. In our next and final article, we will look at the positive reinforcement in Scripture for the singing of both Psalms and hymns.

Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs

In the previous article it was demonstrated that a strict application of the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW) is untenable. The teaching that the church may worship only in a way that is clearly prescribed in Scripture runs into a problem when one sees that Scripture does not give a detailed description of the worship service. Certain principles are laid out. For instance, the centrality of God’s Word in worship is inviolable. But as Calvin himself made clear, there is to be toleration for some different practices in the liturgy. This raises the question: is the singing of hymns one of those things which should be tolerated even though there appears to be no basis for it in Scripture? This is not the case, as we are about to see.

Let us quote here two passages from the New Testament: “Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 5:18-20). “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16). The proponents of the RPW say that “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” all refer to Psalms – the 150 Psalms. In order to prove this, they refer to the headings of the Book of Psalms as they are found in the

Septuagint or Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. There is some ground for this line of reasoning, although there are capable critics who point out that this is quite a stretch of logic to say that “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” all refer to Psalms. It is also possible to deduce from these texts in Ephesians and Colossians that Paul is speaking about songs in addition to the Psalms. For those who hold to the RPW to insist that there is no biblical warrant for the singing of hymns, it rests upon them to prove without doubt that Paul is only referring to the Psalms in these two passages. Otherwise, they may find themselves in conflict with their own principle.

There are fine exegetes and biblical scholars who say that Paul is referring to more than the 150 Psalms in the two passages mentioned above. Take for example a recent commentary on Ephesians by Dr. L. Floor (found in the series of the *Commentaar Op Het Nieuwe Testament*) in which he comes to the conclusion that one cannot restrict these three words only to the 150 Psalms. He also refers to Colossians 3:16. Paul is exhorting the readers to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly also when singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Of course the Psalms speak of Christ. However in his letter to the Ephesians and Colossians, Paul expands on the tremendous riches and blessings of what God has given us in his Son Jesus Christ. What he writes is the inspired or God-breathed Word of God about Jesus Christ. That must be reflected in the hymns and spiritual songs to be sung by the New Testament church. The word and the work of Jesus Christ as it has been fulfilled needs to be expressed in the singing of Christ’s bride. Hence, Paul is referring in these passages not just to the Old Testament Psalms but also to hymns based on the inspired Word of God about Christ’s work.

I understand that the final word has not been written on the expression, “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” Nevertheless, it should be clear that those who hold to the RPW and deny that Paul is speaking of hymns other than the 150 Psalms cannot prove their claim. There is strong and good reason

to interpret these passages as an exhortation to sing both the Psalms and scriptural hymns.

Sing a new song

Any doubts about whether the church may sing hymns should be dispelled by our consideration of a well known Biblical expression, “sing a new song.” This is found a number of times in the Book of Psalms. It comes up in times of trouble and anguish. The ability to sing a new song means that the Lord has brought deliverance so that the Psalmist can change his song of cry and lament to a new song of praise and joy which speaks about God’s deliverance. Take as an example Psalm 144. In verses 5-8 David cries out for the Lord to deliver him from the enemy. Then he says in verses 9 and 10: “I will sing a new song to you, O God; on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you, to the One who gives victory to kings, who delivers his servant David from the deadly sword.” Strikingly, the Book of Revelation uses the expression “new song” in the same way as the Book of Psalms. We see in Revelation 5 that there is weeping because no one was found worthy to break the seals and open the scroll. The weeping stops and the tune changes when the Lamb comes forward: he is victorious and he is worthy to open the scroll. This is an occasion for a new song as we read in verses 9-14:

And they sang a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.” Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Then I heard every creature in

heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

It is clear that as redemptive history unfolds and the grace of God in Jesus Christ is manifested in richer detail, there is occasion and even a need to sing a new song which reflects praise and glory for God. When Israel was liberated from Egypt and was led through the Red Sea, then there was occasion to sing a new song. This is the song of Moses in Exodus 15. Israel sang this song with him. It was a new song to reflect the new and glorious things that God has done. We see the same thing happening in Deuteronomy 32 in connection with the conquest of Canaan. Moses sings a new song. Israel was instructed to learn it and, we may assume, sing it. God does new things in his unfolding of redemption and they are then put into a new song. The 150 Psalms themselves are wonderful examples of new songs which speak of the works of God and his peoples’ praise for Him.

The question is this: may we say that only the 150 Psalms are to be sung? What about the songs of Moses? What about the new songs that are to be sung about the coming, death, resurrection, ascension, government and return of Jesus Christ? What about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Seeing that new songs have been composed at different stages in the history of redemption and speak of the wonder of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, it becomes difficult if not impossible to come to the conclusion that the church is forbidden to sing anything but the 150 Psalms. We have every reason to see that the church is encouraged and instructed to sing both the Psalms and scriptural hymns.

Conclusion

In the Canadian Reformed Churches, we have the practice of singing both Psalms and hymns. We abide by our Church Order, article 55:

“In the worship services the Psalms will be sung in the rhyming adopted by general synod and the Hymns approved by general synod.” We may have deep appreciation for those who advocate the singing of the Psalms. How important it is that we do not go in the direction of churches who have abandoned the Psalms and are experimenting with embellished liturgies. History has shown that in times of liberalism, churches adopt hymns which are filled with Arminian teachings and empty sentimentalism. These are exactly the excesses and dangerous developments which Calvin, the Puritans, Hendrik De Cock and others fought against. At the same time this does not deny the legitimacy of singing biblical hymns in our worship of God. Hymns which are firmly based on Scripture and are to God’s glory will be a blessing to the church. Through the singing of Psalms and hymns, based on the Old Testament and the New Testament, the singing of the church will speak of the work of God in Jesus Christ from both the aspect of expectation and fulfilment. As in the preaching, the fullness of God’s work in Jesus Christ will be reflected in the singing. This is what Scripture demands of us: all praise and glory to God.