

Such a triplet of terms to describe essentially the one thing is not unique in Scripture (see e.g. Exod. 34:7; Deut. 30:12; Acts 2:22). We must also ask, What would this language have meant to those early Christians, mainly from a Jewish background, to whom Paul wrote? By the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, they would have recognised these terms as referring to existing compositions, namely the Psalter. In our English Bible, each of Psalms 120-134 is titled “A **Song** of degrees; Psalms 115-118, sung at the Passover, are called a **hymn** (Matt. 26:30). There is no record of Jesus or His apostles singing anything but psalms.

The psalms, hymns and songs are all said to be “spiritual” or “Spirit-given.” Which of our hymn-writers would claim that for his writings? We are sure though that the Psalms are the very words of the Spirit and therefore the perfect vehicle to serve the main purpose of singing in worship with regard to ourselves, which is, not the outpouring of our feelings, but the discipling of our souls.

RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING:

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXI.i.v.
Larger Catechism, Q.’s 107-110.

Alexander Blaikie, A Catechism on Praise, James Begg Society.
Michael Bushell, The Songs of Zion, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.

John Keddie, Sing the Lord’s Song!, Knox Press.

John Murray & William Young, Minority Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God, Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

M.C. Ramsay, Purity of Worship, Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia.

G.I. Williamson, The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God, Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

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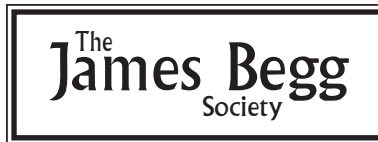
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Distributed by:

Why Sing Psalms Only?

by **Rev. David Blunt**

North Uist and Grimsay Free Church of Scotland (Continuing)

THE subject of congregational worship tends to generate strong passions among professing Christians. This is natural because, on the one hand, nothing so identifies and characterises a church as its public acts of worship and, on the other, nothing is so intensely personal and precious to the believing soul as communion with God. Churches have been rent asunder, particularly in recent times with the rise of the “charismatic” phenomenon, over differences concerning the content and conduct of services.

SENTIMENT

Many of the arguments which are advanced in connection with the church’s form of worship proceed so obviously from sentiment alone that they are (or should be!) quickly dismissed as of no merit. We have in mind such commendations of particular elements and practices in worship as: “we like it;” and, “it’s nice”. Many doubtless “like” the mass and find it “nice” – even though it is a blasphemous affront to Christ and His “one sacrifice for sins for ever” (Heb. 10:12)!

PROSCRIBED

Protestant defenders of many of the innovations in praise are quick to counter the suggestion that they are

in any way akin to Rome in their doctrine of worship. “The mass is idolatrous and is therefore condemned by commandment of Scripture,” they say. “We make use only of that which is not forbidden in the Bible.”

This reasoning, which historically has been the position of Lutheranism and Anglicanism, sounds plausible on first hearing: to employ that which is not proscribed or written against. A little thought however will reveal how indefinite the church’s pattern of praise then is, and how defenceless she becomes against the clamour for novelty and change. The mass may be kept out, but what of drama, dance, crosses and candles?

PRESCRIBED

The Reformed view accentuates the positive: it looks for a specific warrant in Scripture for every aspect of the service of praise; only what is prescribed or legislated for is to be allowed. This is known as the “regulative principle,” and is taught equally in both Testaments (Deut. 12:32; Matt. 28:18-20). It may easily be seen that the application of this rule would rid the church of a great deal of her modern practices.

AUTHORITY

Essentially the disputes about worship may be reduced to one fundamental question: Do we have divine AUTHORITY for what we do? All other arguments are subordinate to this. Rather than being some dread form of bondage, the principle of divine appointment is the guarantee of true spiritual liberty for God’s children. It is but the application of the second commandment: “The second commandment requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such

religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his Word/The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his Word” (Shorter Catechism, Q.’s 50/51). We intend to show that this law forbids the use of any songs other than the 150 psalms of David.

1). WHY SING?

We must begin then by asking, Why sing in worship? A desire to show one’s gratitude to God, or to express other emotions and feelings, is not a sufficient ground for singing in church! We need a greater authority than that to allow song of any sort.

The first and last records of singing in Scripture (Exod. 15:1; Rev. 15:3) have a link: redemption is the common theme – the church praising her deliverer, her Saviour. But more than example, we have command to sing: “Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing” (Psa. 100:2).

2). WHY SING PSALMS?

If we are to sing praise to God, then the immediate question which arises is, What are we to sing? As regards the Psalms there can be no doubt about their appointment for singing: “O come, let us sing unto the LORD...Let us...make a joyful noise unto him with psalms” (Psa. 95:1,2). The New Testament contains similar exhortations, especially those couched in the two controversial verses (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) which we consider below. Churches which today effectively

practise an “exclusive hymnody” should at the very least be asking themselves why God’s hymnbook has NO place in their singing.

3). WHY SING PSALMS ONLY?

The key texts here are:

“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).

Surely, say many, here is the warrant we need! “Hymns,” such as the compositions of Toplady, Watts or Wesley, and “spiritual songs,” of which the modern chorus is a type, are permitted, nay commanded! Looking more closely at these passages however and bringing together their teaching, we find the following:

A). Believers are commanded to become filled with Christ’s Spirit by the indwelling of His word.

B). This is to be accomplished by mutual instruction through singing.

C). Therefore the phrase “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” denotes the Psalms of David, because they alone satisfy both of these conditions, i.e. they are the word of Christ and they are designed for singing.