

## The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God

"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 unto the Lord."—Col. iii, 16.

When there are differences of view among Christians on any subject, it is always helpful to inquire how far they agree, and thus ascertain the exact point at which opinions begin to diverge. In regard to the songs to be employed in the praise of God there are several points of general agreement.

1. **It is agreed that the Psalms were given by Divine inspiration, and are the very Word of God.** "David the Son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue." (2 Sam. xxiii, 1, 2). "Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus." (Acts i, 16. See also Acts iv. 25; Heb. iii. 7, ET AL). Men should be careful how they speak against the Book of Psalms. The Holy Ghost is its author. This is the **first** point of agreement.

2. **It is agreed that these inspired Psalms were appointed by God to be used in His worship.** "Sing unto Him, sing psalms unto Him." (1 Chron. xvi. 9). "Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer." (2 Chron. xxix. 30). "Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto Him with psalms." (Ps. xcv. 2). Bible expositors and Church historians alike agree that the inspired psalms were exclusively used in the worship of the Old Testament. God appointed them to be so used, and no one but God could change the appointment. This is the **second** point of agreement.

3. **It is agreed that so far as the record goes, our Lord Jesus Christ used the Psalms exclusively in Worship.** Only on one occasion is our Lord referred to as singing. This was in connection with the observance of the passover. It is said, "And when they had sung a hymn they went out into the mount of Olives." (Matt. xxvi. 30; Mark xiv. 26). Biblical scholars are not misled by the use of the word "hymn" in our translation of this verse. The original simply states the fact that they sang praises to God. In the margin it reads, "When they had sung a psalm." It is a well-known fact that the Jews were accustomed to sing at the passover the great Hallel, which consisted of Psalms 113th to 118th inclusive. Certainly our Lord and His apostles did not depart from this usage. Strange indeed it would have been if the Lord Jesus, Who always exalted and honoured the Holy Spirit, had put aside the sacred songs which He indited for this very purpose. But he did not. Those who would follow closely in the footsteps of Jesus should sing psalms. This is the **third** point of agreement.

4. **It is agreed that we have express authority for the use of the Old Testament Psalms in the New Testament Church.** "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 unto the Lord." (Col. iii. 16). Whatever differences of view there may be as to the "hymns and spiritual songs," all agree that the psalms here spoken of are the inspired Psalms of Scripture. The passage therefore contains an express warrant for the continued use of the Psalter in the New Testament Church. This is not denied by any one. This is the **fourth** point of agreement.

It is not affirmed that there are no opinions contrary to one or another of these four points, held by individuals, but that there is a **general agreement** among all classes of evangelical Christians on these points.

We have now reached the exact point of divergence. While all agree that the "psalms" referred to in Col. iii. 16 are the Bible Psalms, there are many who main-

tain that the "hymns and spiritual songs" are mere human compositions; and that the New Testament Church is hereby authorised and instructed to add to her book of praises the writings of uninspired men. This is the **crucial text** on this subject. If this text contains a clear warrant for the use of uninspired hymns, other passages may lend it support; but if that warrant is not found here it is not found anywhere. The advocates of hymn singing will admit the truth of this statement. It is now undertaken to show that not only does this passage **not authorise the use of uninspired songs in worship, but that it enjoins the exclusive use of the Psalms of the Bible.**

**I. No warrant can be found for the use of uninspired songs, in the words "hymns and spiritual songs."** At first view these words seem to be conclusive in favour of the advocates of hymn-singing. In the Greek text it is "psalmois humnois, odais, pneumatikais"—i.e., "**psalms, hymns, songs, spiritual.**" Now these three Greek names are all found in the titles to the Psalms in the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was in use among the people to whom Paul wrote this epistle. They occur many times in the titles to the various Psalms. The word "psalmois" about sixty-three times; the word "humnois" six times, and another word, "alleluia," which has precisely the same import, about twenty times; and the word "odais" (mostly in the singular form) thirty-four times. With the fact before us that these three words are all actually found many times in the titles to the inspired Psalms—and when we all agree that the word "psalmois" does refer to inspired songs—is it not most unreasonable to insist that "humnois and odais" mean uninspired songs? As if to remove all possible doubt the word "spiritual" is used to qualify the words. Thayer, in his Lexicon of the New Testament, referring to this passage and the similar one—Eph. v. 19)—defines the word "spiritual" as "divinely inspired and so redolent of the Holy Spirit."

Dr. Albert Barnes in his commentary on 1 Cor. x. 3, "And did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink"; says, "The word 'spiritual' is evidently used to denote that which is given by the Spirit, by God; that which was the result of His miraculous gift; that which was not produced in the ordinary way." Again, "The word 'spiritual' must be used in the sense of supernatural, or that which is immediately given by God." Hence "spiritual songs" are songs produced in a **supernatural** manner, those given **immediately by the Spirit of God.** It is just as if it read, "Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and songs, given by the Holy Spirit." What songs are these? The sweet psalmist of Israel answers, "The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue." These very names, therefore, which have been relied upon as furnishing a warrant for the use of uninspired songs, we find to be **well-known titles for the Psalms of the Bible,** and that as qualified by the word "spiritual" they cannot be used to designate uninspired songs, but **furnish a warrant for the exclusive use of the songs of the Spirit.**

**II. The Psalms are in an eminent sense "the word of Christ."** "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." This is the condition of being able to teach and admonish.

How are the Psalms "the word of Christ?"

1. **Christ by His Spirit is the author of them.** This has been fully shown above.

2. **Christ is the speaker in many of them.** For instance, "I will declare the decree: the Lord said unto Me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten Thee." (Ps. ii. 7). "Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of Me." (Ps. xl. 6). "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Ps. xxii. 1). Such Psalms as these are "the word of Christ" in the same sense that the Sermon on the Mount is His word. He and no one else is the speaker in them.

3. **Christ alone is the subject of many of them.** The most ignorant and senseless objection ever made to the Psalms is the charge that they are "Christless." The truth is that no book in the Bible reveals Christ with such fullness as is done in "the book of Psalms," not excepting the Gospel according to John or the Epistle to the Hebrews.

What may we learn of Christ in this wonderful book?

1. **His Divinity.** Ps. xlv. 6, "Thy Throne, O God, is for ever and ever." (Compared with Heb. i. 8). Ps. cx. 1, "The Lord said unto my Lord, sit Thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." (Compared with Matt. xxii. 42-45).

2. **His Eternal Sonship.** Ps. ii. 7, "I will declare the decree; the Lord said unto Me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten Thee." (Compared with Heb. i. 5).

3. **His Incarnation.** Ps. viii. 5, "For thou hast made Him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned Him with glory and honour." (Compared with Heb. ii. 9). Ps. xl. 7, "Then said I, Lo, I come; in the volume of the book it is written of me." (Compared with Heb. x. 5-7).

4. **His Mediatorial Offices.** (a) His prophetic office. Ps. xi. 9, 10, "I have preached righteousness in the great congregation," etc. Ps. xxii. 22, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren." (Compared with Heb. ii. 12). (b) His priestly office. Ps. cx. 4, "The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent; Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedec." (Compared with Heb. vii. 17). (c) His Kingly office. Ps. xlv. 6, "Thy throne, O God is for ever and ever; the sceptre of thy kingdom is a right sceptre." (Compared with Heb. i. 8). Ps. cx. 1, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool." (Compared with Matt. xxii. 42-45; Heb. i. 13). See also Ps. xxii. 28, and Ps. lxxii. throughout.

5. **His Betrayal.** Ps. xli. 9, "Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against Me." (Compared with John xiii. 18).

6. **His Agony in the Garden.** Ps. xxii. 2, "O my God, I cry in the daytime, but Thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent." (Compared with Heb. v. 7).

7. **His Trial.** Ps. xxxv. 11, "False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not." (Compared with Matt. xxvi. 59, 60).

8. **His Rejection.** Ps. xxii. 6, "But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people." (Compared with Matt. xxvii. 21-23; Luke xxiii. 18-23). Ps. cxviii. 22, "The stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of the corner." (Compared with Matt. xxi. 42; Acts iv. 11, 12).

9. **His Crucifixion.** Ps. xxii. throughout, also Ps. lxxix (Compared with the Gospels). The scenes attending the crucifixion are described to the minutest particulars. The mockery, the shaking the head, the parting the garments, the casting lots on the vesture, the thirst, the vinegar and the gall, the pierced hands and feet, the cry of the forsaken, the committing of His Spirit to God, and the "It is finished," as many read the last verse of Ps. xxii.

10. **His Burial and Resurrection.** Ps. xvi. 9-11, "For Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt Thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou wilt show Me the path of life," etc. (Compared with Acts ii. 25-31).

11. **His Ascension.** Ps. xlvii. 5, "God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of the trumpet." (Compared with Acts i. 11, and 1 Thess. iv. 16). Ps. lxxviii. 18, "Thou hast ascended on high, Thou hast led captivity captive: Thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord God might dwell among them." (Compared with Eph. iv. 8-10). Ps. xxiv. 7-10, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in," etc. (Compared with Rev. v. 6-14).

12. **His Second Coming** Ps. L, 3, 4, "Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence." "He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people." Ps. xcvi. 6-9, "With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King." "Before the Lord; for He cometh to judge the earth; with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity." (Compared with Matt. xxiv. 31; 1 Cor. xv. 52). Well, said Jesus, "It is written in the Psalms, concerning Me." "The sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow," are here unfolded, and these "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" are replete with Christ. If anyone will examine and compare these passages, he will readily believe that when Paul wrote "let the word of Christ, dwell in you richly in all wisdom," it was as if he had said, "Memorise the Psalms."

III. **Uninspired songs could not be placed on a level with the songs of inspiration as the rule for "teaching and admonishing."** All agree that the "psalms" of the text are the inspired psalms, the very word of God. "Teaching" refers to **Doctrine**—what we are to believe. "Admonishing" refers to **Practice**—how we are to live. It is not conceivable that Paul would place the writings of uninspired men on a level with the Psalms of the Bible as a standard of doctrine and practice. "The holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience."—Westminster Larger Catechism.



**Uninspired hymns abound in errors.** Dr. H. Cooke, of Belfast, said he never had found a compilation of hymns that he "could pronounce free from serious doctrinal errors." In 1838, the old school Presbyterian General Assembly (U.S.) appointed a committee to revise their hymn-book. In their report they say, "on a critical examination we found many hymns deficient in literary merit, some incorrect in doctrine, and many altogether unsuitable for the sanctuary." What an indictment to bring against the book which their own Church had substituted for God's book of praises! Does anyone suppose that Paul referred to such "hymns and spiritual songs" as these, and placed them on a level with the Psalms of the Bible for "teaching and admonishing?"

Can the Christian reader believe that Paul pointed to these as standards of doctrine and practice of equal authority with the Psalms for "teaching and admonishing?" No, no. Paul never played fast and loose with the doctrines of the gospel. He says, "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." (Gal. i. 8). If there was no other argument to show that the "hymns and spiritual songs" in which Christians are to teach and admonish one another are not mere human compositions, this would be conclusive. Paul was not advising the **propagation of error.**

**IV. The inspired Psalms alone are adapted to be vehicles of grace to the heart, and of praise to the Lord.** "Singing with grace in your hearts unto the Lord." Here we have the end to be reached. It is twofold: (1) **Awakening of gracious affections in the heart,** and (2) **the uplifting of the soul to God.** Two characteristics of the inspired Psalms mark their adaptation to this twofold purpose, viz., (a) their **objective nature,** and then (b) **their devotional spirit.** Hymns are **subjective.** Men sing about themselves, their states and experiences, their high resolves. Hymns are introspective. They are self-centred.

The Psalms are **objective.** They are God-centred. The soul looks outward and upward. They lead the soul reverently to adore God "in the beauty of holiness," as the object of praise, and devoutly to bow before Him on His throne, as the hearer of prayer. This is **true devotion.** "Worship God."

The **devotional** character of the book is manifest to all. This is in a pre-eminent sense the devotional book of the Bible. It is sometimes asserted that the Psalms are not adapted to be the vehicles of grace to the heart, and, therefore, they cannot be successfully employed in religious revivals! Such a view is utterly mistaken.

Think for a moment of the contents of the book: Its views of God; its views of man; its views of law; its views of sin; its views of Christ; its views of repentance; its views of pardon; its views of Covenant-relationship; its views of the new life; its views of judgment; its views of heaven; its views of hell. What is there that is needed for revival that it does not contain? And what book is more likely to be honoured by the Holy Spirit than **His Own Book?** As Dr J. W. Bain has said, the Psalms "will be found suitable for any revival that **comes down;** those revivals that are 'gotten up' may need something less divine."

The fact is that the **greatest revivals** of religion the world has ever seen have been connected with the **exclusive use** of the Psalms. They were used exclusively in the great revivals in the days of Hezekiah, Josiah, Ezra, Nehemiah. The same was true in the revival at Pentecost when 3000 were converted in one day. The period of the Reformation was a grand revival period, and it was a glorious revival of Psalm-singing. The Calvinistic Reformers used the Psalms exclusively. All France was thrilled with their music in the days of the Huguenots. They alone were used in the Scottish Church on that wonderful day at the kirk of Shotts when under Livingston 500 were converted by one sermon. In the times of Robert McCheyne, when the disciples of Christ continued their meetings until near midnight, they made the seasons of the night glad singing the Songs of Zion.

President Edwards bears testimony as to their use in the great Northampton revival in New England in his days, "One of the most observable features of the work was the singular delight which all the awakened appeared to take in singing Psalms. In houses, in the fields, in the woods, alone and together, they spake forth the praises of their King; and even little children and aged persons who had never before learned to sing, came to sing praises with solemnity and sweetness." It thus appears that the Psalms of the Bible are **eminently adapted to be the vehicles of grace to the heart and of praise to the Lord.** "Singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

We conclude, therefore, that this passage, which has always been relied upon by the advocates of hymn-singing as containing a warrant for their practices, has no such meaning. The titles, "Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs", belong to the inspired Psalms, and as qualified by the word "spiritual" are not true of any other. The Psalms are the word of Christ; uninspired songs are not His word; the Psalms are a true standard for "teaching and admonishing"; uninspired songs are not; the Psalms are adapted to be the vehicles of grace to the heart and of praise to the Lord; uninspired songs are not.

The passage furnishes no warrant for the use of uninspired songs in worship, but is an explicit apostolic injunction that in the praise service of the New Testament Church the divinely authorised Psalmody should be continued.

We cannot close without an earnest appeal to the Christian heart in behalf of two things.

1. **The restoration of God's own Psalter to a place in the hymnals of all the Churches.** The present movement in this direction should have the hearty co-operation of every Christian. Its rejection has been in disregard of the divine appointment, and of the example of our blessed Lord, and of the apostolic authority contained in this passage. It should be restored to its place by the united voice of all Christendom and the joyous acclaim of all Christians. It would be the bringing back of the ark of God.

2. **When the Psalter is restored to its place in the hymnals of the Churches it should be used EXCLUSIVELY in the worship of God.** A place may be found for the use of uninspired songs, but not in worship. God **must be served with His own.** "But cursed be the deceiver, which hath in his flock a male, and voweth and sacrificeth unto the Lord a corrupt thing; for I am a great King, saith the Lord of hosts, and my name is dreadful among the heathen." (Mal. i. 14).

Rev. W. D. Ralston, in "Talks on Psalmody," relates the following story: "As I trudged homewards, I stopped at an uncle's, and spent the night there. In the evening I brought out my hymn-book and had some singing with my cousins. After I laid it down, my uncle took it up, put on his glasses, and spent some time in looking through it. He was a firm believer in the exclusive use of the Psalms, and my book was the hymn-book of another denomination. It gave the hymns, and the music, with the names of the composers of each as far as known. Uncle read a hymn, and, naming the author, said, 'I know nothing of him'. He read another, and said, 'I have read about the author of this one. He was a Roman Catholic Priest'. He read another, and said, 'I have often read of this author. He was a good man and an earnest Christian minister'. He then said, 'Now John, if I were going to use one of these hymns in the worship of God tonight, which do you think I had best choose, the one about whose author I know nothing, the one by the Roman Catholic Priest, or the one by the earnest Christian minister?' I replied, 'The one by the minister.' 'True,' said he, 'we should select the one written by the best man; and I see by looking through your book that it contains many hymns written by good men; but if I should find in it one composed by God himself, would it not be better to sing that than one composed by any good man?' I replied, 'It surely would'. After a little he said, 'I have now carefully looked through your book, and I do not find one hymn in it marked—**Composed by God**; but I have here a little hymn-book, and God by His Holy Spirit composed every hymn in it; for Peter says—**Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost**'. As he spoke, he handed me one of our Psalm-books, and the manner in which he presented his argument made an impression upon my mind that I never forgot."

How conclusive the argument is. We ought to serve God with the **best**. God's **own book** is the best. When Ingersol said that he "could write a better book than the Bible," Christians were shocked, and denounced him as an "infidel blasphemer." How, then, can we say that we can write a better book of praises than God's Psalter? If it be true that hymn-books are better than the Psalm-book it marks the highest achievement of the race; for then man has transcended God in his own field! If it be not true, then the displacing of the God-made Psalter by the man-made hymn-books in God's worship is an act of most daring presumption.

At a meeting of ministers of various denominations in an eastern city, a paper had been read on church-hymnology. General discussion followed the reading. An advocate of the exclusive use of the inspired Psalms employed the following illustration with great effect: "If I had an important message to send to one living in the upper district of the city, I might summon a messenger boy and say to him: 'Can you

carry this message for me to such a person, living in such a part of the city?' And the boy would answer doubtfully: 'I think I can. It is true, I have never been in that part of the city. I was born near here. I have heard of the person to whom you wish to send the message, but I am not acquainted with him; but I think I can find him. I am willing to try.' My message is a very important one, and while satisfied of the good intentions of this boy, I am not quite assured of his ability to fulfil the trust. So I call up another boy, and ask him the same question. At once his face glows with intelligence as he answers, 'O yes, I can carry your message directly to his home. I know all about that part of the city. I was born there. I came from there here. In fact, your friend sent me down here to find you and bear up any message you might desire to send him.' It would not be difficult to decide which of these messengers I should employ. This is an allegory. If I had a message of praise to send to God, and I employed a hymn to carry it, I would feel uncertain about it; it might reach Him, and it might not. But if I employed a Psalm to carry it, I know that it would ascend to heaven. The Psalm was born there. It came from God to me; and indeed God sent it to me to bear any message of praise I might wish to send up to Him."

—Rev. R. J. George, D.D., Allegheny, Pa., U.S.A.

"I want a name for that man who should pretend that he could make better hymns than the Holy Ghost. His collection is large enough; it wants no addition. It is as perfect as its Author, and not capable of any improvement. Why, in such a case, would any man in the world take it into his head to sit down and write hymns for the use of the Church? It is just the same as if he were to write a new Bible, not only better than the old, but so much better that the old may be thrown aside. What a blasphemous attempt! And yet our hymn-mongers, inadvertently I hope, have come very near to this blasphemy; for they shut out the Psalms, to introduce their own verses into the Church, sing them with great delight, and, as they fancy with great profit; although the practice be in direct opposition to the command of God, and, therefore, cannot possibly be accompanied with the divine blessing."

—William Romaine.

Q2: What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him?

A: The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy Him. (Proof text: 2 Tim. III, 16).—Westminster Shorter Catechism.

