

The Argument over ‘Psalms Only’

Introduction

I have great respect for those Reformed (mostly restricted to a few Presbyterians these days) who ardently champion the use of Psalms only in Christian worship. Their intention is to ensure that only inspired words are sung in praise and that godly songs with a long history of use are the only source of material for church singing. It is certainly good to ensure that no songs are sung that were written by heretics, ungodly men or that contain deceptive ideas.

However, it is my view that that this is limiting and, in fact, does not serve God well at all. While choice Psalms are excellent material for songs in church worship, Biblical theology demands much more than this.

Arguments

The change brought in by the New Covenant

The ‘Psalm’s only’ positions fails to take into proper account the change that occurred with the introduction of the New Covenant. Paul describes this as being ‘all things are new’ and tells us that we are ‘new creatures’, while John shows that saints sing ‘a new song’ (2 Cor 5:17; Rev 5:9, 14:3). How could we sing a new song if we only ever sing Old Covenant songs? There are songs that are proper to the Old Covenant and songs that are proper to the New Covenant. We can adapt songs from the Old Covenant, adding the revelation gained from the NT, as well as composing new songs arising from our new experience of the Spirit.

The Psalms were for Israel and set in that particular dispensation; thus many aspects are not at all suitable for us – such as dashing childrens’ heads against a stone. The New Covenant changed many things, not only in liturgical terms (no more vestments, sacrifices, temples etc.) but also in ethical terms (love enemies, non-violence). Thus the NT believer cannot really sing and experience some of the aspects found in the Psalms that are only pertinent to that dispensation. Here are some:

O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, Happy the one who repays you as you have served us! Happy the one who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock! Ps 137:8-9

This Babylon referred to is now gone, we cannot truthfully sing of its future destruction. Neither can we spiritualise this because that is not what the psalmist spoke off. All the historical references in this Psalm can’t be truly sung by modern believers because they are not true; we did not weep by the Euphrates, we were not exiled to Babylon, we were not asked to sing Jerusalem’s songs by Chaldean tormentors. Neither can we wish happiness on anyone killing infants, let alone using this as the basis of divine praise.

Let his days be few ... Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg; Let them seek *their bread* also from their desolate places. Let the creditor seize all that he has, and let strangers plunder his labour. Let there be none to extend mercy to him, nor let there be any to favour his fatherless children. Let his posterity be cut off ... As he clothed himself with cursing as with his garment, so let it enter his body like water, and like oil into his bones. Ps 109:7-19

This is a prayer for judgment on those who oppress and accuse the Lord’s people; but this is not the sort of prayer that a New Covenant believer should pray. A Christian must not

repay evil with evil but only with good (Rm 12:17, 21). The believer must love his enemies, bless those who curse him and do good to them (Matt 5:44).

Break the arm of the wicked and the evil *man*; seek out his wickedness *until* you find none. Ps 10:15

Clearly this prayer is inappropriate under the New Covenant.

The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all His judgments *were* before me, and I did not put away His statutes from me. I was also blameless before Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity. Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness. Ps 18:20-24

This aptly illustrates the sharp change from the Old to the New Covenant. Though established by faith in the coming Messiah, the Old Covenant believer was sustained not by the indwelling Spirit but by faithfulness and obedience, especially in offering sacrifices. Blessings are promised for the obedient and cursing for the disobedient. The NT believer is told that he cannot say that he is sinless (1 Jn 1:8), nor can he keep himself from iniquity (Rm 7:19); he constantly sins. It is grace that keeps us as a result of the internalising of the law in the heart and the blood of Christ cleansing us, keeping us in fellowship with God (1 Jn 1:7). We are not righteous because of our good works but because of God's grace.

He teaches my hands to make war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. Ps 18:34

I have pursued my enemies and overtaken them; neither did I turn back again till they were destroyed. I have wounded them, so that they could not rise; they have fallen under my feet. For you have armed me with strength for the battle; you have subdued under me those who rose up against me. You have also given me the necks of my enemies, so that I destroyed those who hated me. They cried out, but *there was* none to save; then I beat them as fine as the dust before the wind; I cast them out like dirt in the streets. Ps 18:37-42

Break their teeth in their mouth, O God! ... The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. Ps 58: 6, 10

Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate you? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. Ps 139:21-22

Again, a clear contrast from the New Covenant. These sentiments could not be espoused by the Christian, let alone sung in worship. The Christian is commanded to love his enemies, to bless and not retaliate and to do good to them that harm him.

Ps 22 – This Messianic psalm so clearly speaks about Christ in a subjective manner that it would be impossible, and indecent, for a believer to sing it in the first person. It is not right for us to sing that God has forsaken us, or that there is none to help or that my bones are all out of joint or that they divide my garments and cast lots for them. This can only be spoken by Christ himself. As a Psalm it is a wonderful prophecy; but it is not suitable to sing in corporate worship as from ourselves.

For my loins are full of inflammation, and *there is* no soundness in my flesh. ... My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague, and my relatives stand afar off. Ps 38:7, 11

These things cannot be spiritualised away, they are statement of particular pain. Unless we actually experienced these same things, we could not sing them as they would be lying.

But you have cast *us* off and put us to shame ... You have given us up like sheep *intended* for food, and have scattered us among the nations. Ps 44:9, 11

O God, why have you cast *us* off forever? *Why* does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? Ps 74:1

These words are specific to Israel and cannot be sung by modern believers. God does not cast off his people joined in union to Christ by the Spirit (Jn 10:28; Heb 13:5).

Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call on your name. Ps 79:6

The modern believer is called to reach out to the nations with the Gospel in the authority of Christ, not to call down wrath (Matt 28:19).

We could continue giving scores more examples such as these, including all the 'Imprecatory Psalms' (e.g. 35, 69, 109). Thus it can be easily proved that many verses in the Psalms are entirely unsuitable for use in church worship today. The 'Psalms only' advocates utterly fail to give this point due consideration.

Many other OT songs

The Psalms are not the only source of Biblical praise songs, why stop there? There are many songs of praise to God written before and after the composition of the Psalms in the OT. Who dares to say that the church can sing Psalms but not these inspired words? Note these:

Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the LORD. Ex 15:1

Then Israel sang this song. Num 21:17

Then Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying... Jug 5:1

The song of songs, which *is* Solomon's. Song 1:1

Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard. Isa 5:1

In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: 'We have a strong city; *God* will appoint salvation *for* walls and bulwarks.' Isa 26:1

Hezekiah's songs were also used in temple worship (Isa 38:10-20). To say that we can only sing from the book of Psalms is folly and depreciative of other Biblical songs.

How can New Covenant believers be less than Old Covenant ones

If OT saints were blessed by composing hymns to celebrate an act of God and they did not have the indwelling Spirit, how can New Covenant saints not have the same privilege when they do have the indwelling Spirit. The fact that the Bible is complete does not stop God inspiring men to compose a spiritual song that is not added to the Bible in order to edify his people. It is not the same as Scriptural inspiration, but it is a gift from God like many other gifts in the church.

It is good for the church to remember the deliverances and great acts of God in history; thus the Psalms are full of references to the Exodus, the wanderings, the defeat of the

Canaanites and so on. But the greatest act of God in history is the cross; this is the supreme intervention of God in the affairs of mankind and is the pinnacle of the divine decree. How can it be acceptable to never specifically sing about this in praise? To say that some Psalms anticipate this in typological or prophetic form is grossly insufficient. We should sing about the cross with clarity, explaining the theology of the atonement.

Since the Lord's Supper is the centre of the church meeting every week, what great folly is it that songs could never be sung that commemorate what it symbolises? There must be songs every week celebrating the cross and the wonderful sacrifice of the Son of God on our behalf, explaining redemption in clear theological words, not symbol or type. This is not only common sense, it is modelled for us in the worship of heaven pictured in the book of Revelation.

The Psalms do not name Jesus

The psalms do not mention the Lord Jesus except in typology. Can you imagine a church at worship and not mentioning the Lord by his name? The incarnation was not only the most amazing appearance of the person of God in history but was the fulfilment of very many OT prophecies; indeed the whole OT revelation culminated in the birth of Jesus Christ – the long promised Messiah. How can it be possible that the culmination of everything which all the OT prophets pointed forward to, that all the elect hoped for, could be ignored in songs of praise?

I would go so far as to say that it would be a sin to continually gather for worship and never mention the name of Jesus in song. If we only sing Psalms, although we can sing about Christ, we cannot ever name him. This cannot be right. The Son is the constant object of heaven's praise and is the name we will sing constantly in the glory. Surely we should start doing that while we have breath?

Singing is comparable to praying

Prayer is an equal part of worship with singing but we don't pray the prayers of OT saints, we pray our own uninspired prayers. Likewise we sing our own uninspired songs. What God wants is worship from the heart.

Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs

Paul tells us to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) but they do not all mean the same thing (as claimed by 'Psalms only' enthusiasts). He mentioned three things specifically to affirm this. When Paul quotes from a Psalm he calls it a Psalm (Acts 13:33), as does Jesus (Lk 20:42) and Luke (Acts 1:20). In instructing the Ephesian and Colossian churches Paul is speaking chiefly to Greeks with little knowledge of Jewish background. Why would he use a complicated Hebraic triple form when writing to Gentiles and a simple one to Jews (Acts 13:26)? Luke, writing to Gentiles, only uses 'Psalm' and remember he was Paul's close companion and co-worker. Furthermore, 'hymn' only appears in the LXX, not in the Hebrew OT, and then mostly in the apocrypha where 'ode' is also frequently used. It seems much more likely that Paul simply means what he says, Christians should sing from the book of Psalms, but also sing spiritual songs ('odes' or an expression of deep feelings in song) and hymns (songs of praise to God).

The Psalms were written in Hebrew and in a Jewish style of verse foreign to us; in fact we do not know how they were sung. Therefore, Bible translations are not sufficient to enable westerners to sing them, so further work is required forcing various men to produce books of metrical Psalms for western churches (of which there are many versions). So, the Psalms sung by Presbyterians are not literal translations because such are not singable. Here our friends' cherished case about literal translation falls apart, one rule for reading the Bible,

another for singing songs to worship. Worse, some actually claim canonical authority for these metrical psalms – which is plain heresy.

Many Christian works and activities, done in the power of God, are called spiritual. Indeed, our whole lives are to be a sacrifice of our own strength and will so that we serve God in his strength and the result is spiritual service (Rm 12:1).¹ The adjective does not always refer to inspired writings. Apostolic, human ministry was spiritual (1 Cor 9:11); gifts used in the church were spiritual (1 Cor 12:1, 14:1); godly disciples are spiritual (Gal 6:1). So something produced by the Spirit of God in man, as a manifestation of the life of Christ, is ‘spiritual’. If a godly person writes a song to God’s glory, it seems eminently reasonable to call this a spiritual song, just as a godly leader’s sermon is a spiritual service, often called ‘prophesying’ by the Reformers. This also explains how Paul could call uninspired writings ‘spiritual’ songs. Is not this the most normal way of reading Paul’s words in these texts? They are references to contemporary worship songs.

The NT sung in church

The early church sung portions of the NT in worship. For instance: the ‘Gloria in Excelsis’, the ‘Magnificat’, and the ‘Nunc Dimittis’. This is recorded by historians like Schaff.² The next section will develop this further.

NT hymns

There is clear evidence of NT hymns in the NT text; to say nothing of the new songs that are recorded as being sung in heaven subsequent to the cross. This alone proves that the idea of ‘Psalms alone’ is insufficient. The noun ‘hymn’ has reference to Greek tunes in distinction from Jewish psalms. In a Greek prison Paul and Silas sang hymns, not Psalms. (Acts 16:25). There are heavenly hymns sung by the discarnate church (Rev c. 4-5). These hymns focus upon Christ, his glories, his atonement wrought at the cross and the benefits to men. If anything, the last book of the NT is encouraging us to sing new songs which focus upon the name of Christ and celebrate his person and work and give thanks for that work in us.

Though this is debated by Presbyterians, the majority of evangelical teachers accept that parts of the NT are portions of contemporary hymns. For example, Rm 11:33-36; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20; 1 Tim 3:16 (and possibly 2 Tim 2:11-13). At the very least they are in verse format. The argument that they are merely poetry is not really sustainable, but if it were it proves that poems were used in church worship, which also damages the case against ‘Psalms only’. If the apostles quoted from popular hymns around at the time, it proves that Christians were writing worship songs, they were in common use, they were well known and the apostles approved of them and quoted from them in presenting didactic truth.

The argument from history supports the fact that there were new hymns in the early church. Early Fathers (like Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and Justyn Martyr) mention early Christian hymns. Clement (150-220) actually composed hymns himself as did Athenagoras (177 AD) whose last hymn was used by Christians for centuries. Tertullian (150-225) tells us that at the Agape love-feasts, brethren were invited to sing scripture or songs they had composed.³ Ambrose (337-397) wrote many hymns. Eusebius (260-340)

¹ Although the word ‘spiritual’ is not used in this verse, it is clearly what is being referred to. A few verses later Paul explains that such a life results in expressing gifts, the same gifts are elsewhere described as spiritual gifts (e.g. prophecy).

² P. Schaff, *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol 1, p247, note 14.

³ Tertullian, *Apology*, 39.

tells of congregations joining in the last verses of hymns begun by someone.⁴ The Odes of Solomon (42 early Christian hymns) cannot easily be dismissed as Gnostic (a mystical heresy).⁵

As well as the hymns already mentioned (Magnificat etc.), in the first six centuries the church also used: the 'Morning Song' and the 'Evening Song' in the Apostolic Constitutions, the 'Te Deum', the 'Ter Sanctus' and several ancient liturgical poetic prayers (see end notes).⁶ After the Edict of Milan in 313 and the protection of Christianity under Constantine, uninspired songs began to appear more widely. Due to the nature of persecution before then it is not unsurprising that hymnbooks have not survived. What is absolutely certain is that portions of the NT were also used in worship, as well as the Psalms, within a few decades of the death of the apostles.

The universal command to sing a new song

The psalms themselves call for a new song to be sung to the Lord (Ps 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1), as do the prophets (Isa 42:10). Each generation should bring new compositions of praise. In Israel songs began with the Song of Moses and continued through to the Psalms and then new songs were written by the prophets. There was a continual bringing of new songs in each generation to praise God. This must continue under the New Covenant. Are we to assume that God's command to sing new songs stopped during the dispensation of shadows so that the glorious revelation of God's only Son was not to be remembered in song by those who witnessed his glory?

The corollary to the Old Testament instruction to sing a new song is when the New Testament states that a new song is being sung (Rev 5:9, 14:3). This new song is the glorifying of the revealed Messiah, unknown to the psalmists except by faith in God's provision. We sing of a saviour revealed. It is entirely godly to sing a type of new psalm after seeing a revelation of God, as did Mary, Zacharias and Simeon. [Zacharias composed a 'Benedictus' (starting with 'Blessed') under the direction of the Holy Spirit which incorporated texts from the Psalms (Lk 1:68-79), Simeon said the *Nunc Dimittis* (Lk 2:29-32), while Mary uttered the *Magnificat* ('Magnify', Lk 1:46-55).] All these were spontaneous, original compositions in the light of divine activity. Though recorded as Scripture, it does not alter the fact that these flowed from an immediate experience of God.

Conclusion

The OT church occasionally sang songs in worship which were inspired but which are not included in the Book of Psalms (such as the Song of Moses or the songs of Hezekiah). The early church sang various portions of the NT, and quite likely sang songs written by believers as well as Psalms. The end-time church is said to sing the song of Moses, which is not a Psalm (Rev 15:3) and the Lord's people in heaven sing a new song, not a Psalm (Rev 5:9, 14:3). There is a very strong case for singing good translations of any scripture, but especially Psalms and NT portions, and a reasonable but less-strong case for writing valid, 'spiritual' new songs which major on truth and glorify God.

The 'Psalms only' concept cannot stand up. It is a position that means well and strives to be Biblical, but in the end actually becomes unbiblical. It fails to see the fulness of the changes effected by the New Covenant (a typical problem with Covenant Theology) and does not take seriously the command to sing a new song in every generation. By taking an objective, restrictive, legalistic view of what is acceptable in sung worship, it actually results in failing

⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*.

⁵ David E Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (1991), p296.

⁶ P. Schaff, *The Greek and Latin Hymnology*, British and Foreign Evangelical Review, (1866) p680.

to use the name of Jesus in praise or sing a clear theological exposition of the atonement. For this reason alone the 'Psalms only' position is to be rejected.

Notes

- Some portions of this paper contain adapted excerpts from my booklet, *'Worship – Getting It Biblical'*.
- 'Imprecatory psalms' are those which contain curses or prayers of condemnation for enemies. ['To imprecate' means to curse.] At least, the following Psalms invoke evil on enemies: 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137.
- The *Te Deum* (also known as *Te Deum Laudamus*, or the *Ambrosian Hymn*) is an early Christian hymn. Tradition affirms its composition by Ambrose and Augustine in AD 387 (on Augustine's baptism). The petitions at the end are from the Psalms, appended subsequently to the original hymn; the rest of the *Te Deum* follows the Apostles' Creed. It is effectively a sung creed and is found in the Book of Common Prayer.
- *Ter sanctus* = 'Thrice Holy'. This is the term describing Rev 4:8, 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty; Who was and is and is to come', used as a liturgical song.
- The *'Apostolic Constitutions'* is a late 4th century collection of treatises on Christian discipline, worship, and doctrine, intended to serve as a manual for the clergy. It claims to be the record of an earlier oral tradition given by the apostles, compiled by Clement of Rome. Their value, authorship and credibility is widely debated.

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