

# Exclusive Psalmody or New Covenant Hymnody?

*By Lee Irons*

One of the most important aspects of Reformed worship is its insistence that whatever God has not commanded to be done in worship is forbidden. This is known as the regulative principle of worship, a principle that is warranted by the second commandment.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, the second commandment seems only to forbid the use of images to worship God, yet the Reformed have correctly seen that it also contains a broader principle: God is the one who must dictate how he wishes to be worshipped. Worship is primarily the sacrificial offering of praise unto God (Heb. 13:15). But if worship is ascribing glory and honor unto our Creator and Redeemer (Ps. 29:1-2; Rev. 4:11; 5:12-13), then it is unthinkable that we would want to bring him any other sacrifice than that which he has revealed is pleasing to him. To take any other approach is to deny the fundamental nature of what it is that we are doing in worship. Therefore, the regulative principle correctly lays down the first rule of worship: we have no right to worship God in any other way than he has commanded in Scripture. Practices which may have "an appearance of wisdom" but which are not in fact prescribed by God must be rejected as "will-worship," for they are based on the commandments of men and are not based upon Christ (Col. 2:8, 22-23).

## **The Plausibility of Exclusive Psalmody**

But does the regulative principle of worship demand that we sing only those hymns which God has authored and recorded for us in Scripture (viz., the Psalter)? It might seem that it does. If God has taken the care to preserve for us 150 inspired songs and collected them into a single book, which in the Hebrew Bible is called "Songs of Praise,"<sup>2</sup> would it not seem reasonable that *these* are the hymns God wants us to use in his worship and none other? Given this fact, why would we want to sing hymns authored by mere men, when we have ready-made a hymn book authored entirely by God himself?

I feel the force of this argument. It is an argument that we must not dismiss too quickly. Those who dismiss this argument out of hand do so usually for one of two reasons. First, it is dismissed by those whose dispensational hermeneutic has ingrained within their consciousness a deep-seated distrust of any appeal to the OT to find moral standards governing the NT believer. Since the Psalter belongs to the OT canon, it is assumed without argument that it cannot be binding on the NT church.

Second, others dismiss the argument for exclusive psalmody because they have little or no appreciation for the regulative principle we have briefly defined above. If there is nothing blatantly immoral or unorthodox in any given worship practice — whether it be the use of skits in worship or uninspired hymns - then any argument that these practices must be rejected will

often be viewed as a personal attack by such people. The cry is that we have liberty and freedom to do anything that seems right to us, or that meets our particular felt-needs as a congregation, or that will help to make the service more effective for reaching the lost. To limit ourselves so precisely only to practices positively commanded in Scripture is too narrow and legalistic — "nit-picky" is the word often heard in such discussions.

Both of these attitudes ought to be totally alien to the Reformed mind. Our immediate impulse upon hearing the argument for exclusive psalmody for the first time ought to be, "This makes sense; it's worth investigating." Reformed folk have a high regard for the fundamental continuity between the OT and NT: many of our practices are defended by appealing to the context of the OT and assuming a high degree of continuity in the New (e.g., infant baptism, the Sabbath, and presbyterian church government). So the suggestion that the church should only sing the Psalms would sound plausible to us rather than outrageous.

Furthermore, the regulative principle is not a limiting, "nit-picky" practice but a glorious protection of our freedom from human traditions imposed upon the church. It is a direct inference from one of the Reformation's most important achievements, namely, the recovery of *sola Scriptura*. It was through much struggle and, in many cases, martyrdom that the sixteenth-century reformers bequeathed to us the principle that only Scripture can bind the conscience, not the traditions of men, no matter how ancient or how well-intentioned they may be. We would not consider fighting for the regulative principle to be legalistic or limiting, but a most necessary battle in order to make sure that the church is not only Reformed but constantly being reformed according to Scripture (*reformata et semper reformanda*).

So, since we are not dispensationalists with a knee-jerk revulsion to any appeal to the OT for grounding our New Covenant practice, and since we eagerly desire to constantly evaluate our current forms of worship against the touchstone of *sola Scriptura*, and are always willing to throw out anything not able to stand that test, we Reformed people should take the argument for exclusive psalmody seriously and not dismiss it out of hand.

### **Where the Debate Really Lies**

Plausible though exclusive psalmody may be, I remain unconvinced. Before I explain my reasons, however, we need to make sure we understand where the debate really lies. Often in the literature defending exclusive psalmody one will find a distressingly common theme: only those who hold to exclusive psalmody really believe in the regulative principle, and the only way you can reject exclusive psalmody is by abandoning the regulative principle in the process.

I want to object vigorously to this line of reasoning. The issue is not whether the regulative principle is true. Both sides agree that it is. The issue is *how* Scripture regulates song in worship. Does it regulate song in the same way that it regulates the reading of Scripture - that is, are we limited to singing only canonical, inspired texts? Certainly the public reading of Scripture in worship is limited in this way. Even Biblically-sound and orthodox writings are excluded from this element of worship (e.g., we can't replace the Scripture reading with a selection from Calvin's *Institutes*). On the other hand, might it not be possible that the Scripture regulates song more like it regulates preaching? That is, are we limited to hymns that are Biblically sound and

orthodox in their content but not necessarily inspired in their very words? If God does not require preachers to recite the canonical text, but gives them freedom to use their own words and sentences, as long as the content is an accurate and faithful exposition of Scripture, maybe the same goes for our hymns.

This point must be underscored. Both sides demand that anything not warranted by Scripture is excluded. They simply disagree on what kind of warrant is demanded for the element of song. The question is, What is the nature of song as an element of worship? Is it more like the reading of Scripture, or is it more like preaching and prayer? The fact that both positions are within the bounds of the regulative principle is indicated by the fact that even exclusive psalmodists agree that content of preaching and prayer must be Biblical but need not necessarily be the mere reading of canonical texts. To determine this question we cannot simply appeal to the regulative principle, because both sides agree that *some* elements of worship may be regulated by Scripture in a manner that allows uninspired language to be used in worship.

So if the real issue is not who holds to the regulative principle most consistently, but which position most faithfully reflects the Biblical teaching regarding the nature of song in worship, then we must examine that Biblical teaching. Scripture is not silent about this issue. It gives us infallible instructions about the nature of song as an element of worship and authoritatively dictates what the content of our songs of praise should be if they are to be acceptable to God. The question is, What are those instructions regarding the content of song?

I do not believe that those instructions include the limitation that we may only sing the 150 Psalms. My reasons are three-fold:

### **(1) The Presence of Other Hymns in the Canon**

My first argument is that the presence of other hymns in Scripture, besides the Psalter, indicates that the church has never been restricted to the Psalter alone. Those in the exclusive psalmody camp place a great deal of weight on the existence of a "Book of Praises" in the canon. They argue, "There it is: the hymn book God has given to the church. If you don't stick exclusively to the 150 hymns in the inspired hymn book, then you are violating the regulative principle."

But the existence of the book of Psalms is not as significant as the exclusive psalmody position seems to think, because there are many other hymns included in the canon of Scripture that, for whatever reason, were not added to the book of Psalms. It is profitable to make this clear by giving some examples:

- The Song of Moses and Miriam (Exod. 15)
- Spring up, O well! (Num. 21:17-18)
- The Mosaic Song of Witness (Deut. 31:19-32:44)
- The Song of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5)
- The statutes of the Law were sung (Ps. 119:54)<sup>3</sup>
- The Song of the Vineyard (Isa. 5:1-7)
- An Eschatological Song (Isa. 26-27)
- The Prayer of Habakkuk "on shigionoth" (Hab. 3)

These hymns scattered throughout the OT are just as inspired and just as suitable for public worship as those in the Psalter. Would it have been wrong, for example, for the synagogue in the days of the exile to sing other canonical hymns not found in the Psalter (e.g., the Song of Moses)? To answer Yes seems absurd and arbitrary, especially since we have evidence that the Song of Moses was sung in the Temple.<sup>4</sup> And it certainly would not have been wrong for the people of God to sing the Mosaic Song of Witness, since Moses explicitly commands Israel to memorize it and sing it (Deut. 31:19, 22). Yet it is not included in the Psalter. Likewise with Isaiah's Eschatological Song, which the prophet says will be sung in the future by God's renewed and reconstituted Israel in the post-exilic period, and ultimately in the New Covenant era (Isa. 26:1).

And what about the inspired hymns recorded in the NT? Although we cannot be sure, it seems reasonable to assume that the presence of these hymns in the NT canon indicates that they were sung in the worship services of the apostolic church. Again, it will be useful simply to list some of these hymns:

Mary's *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55)  
The Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79)  
The Angelic Doxology (Luke 2:14)  
Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:28-32)  
A Pauline Christological hymn (Col. 1:15-20)  
The *Carmen Christi* (Phil. 2:5-11)  
A New Song (Rev. 5:9-10; 14:3)  
The Song of Moses and of the Lamb (Rev. 15:3-4)  
The Hallelujah chorus (Rev. 19:5-7)  
Charismatic hymnody (1 Cor. 14:15, 26)<sup>5</sup>

Exclusive psalmody assumes that the Book of Praises is *the* God-ordained hymnal for use by the covenant community in worship.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the very existence of the Psalter is interpreted as an *implicit command* by God to sing only those hymns found therein. For God's people to go outside that hymnal — even if they restrict themselves to canonical texts beyond the Psalter — is to reject God's implicit command. But this assumption cannot be correct if God commanded his people to sing other hymns (e.g., Deut. 32), and if the apostolic church did as a matter of fact sing other hymns besides the 150 Psalms, as 1 Cor. 14:26 indicates that they did, and as the presence of new songs in the NT suggests.

## **(2) Paul's Command in Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19**

Next, I want to argue that, according to Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19, the church is commanded to compose hymns as it is led by the Spirit into a fuller understanding of the wealth that is treasured up in Christ (Col. 2:2).

Some have attempted to make the exact opposite conclusion, for they assert that these verses contain a command to sing only the OT Psalms. But the arguments are weak:

Comparison with the Septuagint shows that the three terms *psalms*, *hymns*, and *songs* (or *odes*) are used in the superscriptions of many Psalms in the Psalter. However, this only proves that Paul *may* be referring to the Psalms, but it does not prove that he is. In 1 Cor. 14:26 the term *psalm* is used to refer to hymns other than those of the Psalter, and is accordingly translated *hymn* in some translations.<sup>7</sup> This example shows that it would be unwarranted to assume without further argument that the *psalms* in Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19 must be the 150 Psalms of the Hebrew Bible. If Paul had wanted to make clear that he was referring to the canonical book of Psalms, he could have done so very easily by referring to "the book of Psalms" (*biblion psalmon* cp. Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20).<sup>8</sup>

It has also been suggested that *spiritual songs* means songs inspired by the Spirit. But this is unlikely for two reasons. First, the usage of *spiritual* in Col. 1:9 (which is a parallel text to Col. 3:16) does not mean inspired, since it modifies *wisdom*, a virtue that all believers should have, not just those in the apostolic age who happened to be blessed with revelatory charismata.<sup>9</sup> Second, the immediately preceding context of Eph. 5:19 shows that Paul isn't commanding the prophets to become inspired but he is exhorting all believers in general to be filled with the Spirit (v. 18) so they can produce songs that may be described as *spiritual*.

If there is no decisive proof that Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19 restrict the church to singing the Psalter, I would argue that in both passages Paul is commanding us to use our own Spirit-led wisdom to write non-canonical songs for worship.

### **Consider the following points:**

Why would Paul say that we must "teach and admonish one another *with all wisdom* in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," if he simply wanted to urge us to sing the canonical Psalms? Do we need "all wisdom" to select say, Psalm 100 this Sunday, but Psalm 72 the following Sunday? That doesn't seem to be what Paul has in view. It seems more likely that "all wisdom" is needed *to choose the proper words* for teaching and admonishing one another in song.<sup>10</sup>

This interpretation is further supported by the topic sentence of the entire verse: "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach, etc." The Word of Christ is the mystery Paul has been proclaiming in the epistle up to that point: the good news that we have been made complete in Christ by virtue of being united with him in his death/circumcision and resurrection. The book of Colossians as a whole focuses on the believers' need to be built up in this mystery and to grow into the fullness of life in Christ. Now, it is true that the Psalms speak of Christ (Luke 24:44). But surely Paul does not mean, "Let the Psalms' message about Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another by singing the Psalms." Rather, Paul is exhorting the Colossians to let the mystery, *which has been kept hidden from previous generations but is now disclosed to the saints* (Col. 1:26), dwell in them richly so that, through the songs that result from such reflection, they may teach and admonish one another in all the implications of that mystery. If that is Paul's intent, then the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs of Col. 3:16 *cannot* refer to the canonical Psalms.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Col. 3:16 commands us to let that Word of Christ dwell in us richly, so that as we meditate upon its message, we may be able, with all wisdom, to teach and admonish one another by composing New Covenant psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.<sup>12</sup>

Another important point picks up with an earlier issue we discussed above. Is the element of song in worship to be regulated the way the reading of Scripture is regulated (only the canonical text may be used)? Or is it more like preaching, where a certain amount of freedom is given with respect to the words, as long as the thoughts are Biblical?

We may make some progress toward answering this question by comparing Col. 3:16 with 1:28 ("and we proclaim him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ"). Notice that we have the exact same terminology in both cases ("admonishing ... teaching ... with all wisdom"). In Col. 1:28 Paul is describing his formal preaching ministry as an apostle and herald of the gospel; whereas in 3:16 Paul exhorting the Colossians to "preach" to one another in the general office of all believers. Thus, there appears to be an *analogy* between Paul's preaching and the exhortation that believers are to give one another as they sing in worship (it is a corporate setting, as the phrase *one another* indicates). This would suggest that song is more like preaching than the reading of Scripture.<sup>13</sup>

But we can take this a step further. Elsewhere Paul describes how edification occurred in the churches through songs and hymns: inspired hymns were constantly being produced by New Covenant prophets and prophetesses to edify the body of Christ in its formal assembly (1 Cor. 14:26). Spiritual songs were produced by spiritually-discerning men and women who, filled with all wisdom, had let the Word of Christ dwell in them richly so as to admonish and edify the church through hymns they had composed.

Now how does this apply to us in the post-apostolic age, after the revelatory gifts have ceased?<sup>14</sup> I would argue that even though the extraordinary charismata have been withdrawn from the life of the church with the close of the apostolic age, we should still continue the early church's practice of developing New Covenant hymnody. The church still has the Spirit, not to inspire new songs, but to fill us with all wisdom and insight into the mystery of Christ. Col. 3:16 applies to the church of all ages, not just the apostolic age. Many have argued that a non-inspired gift of prophecy continues in the church today in the form of preaching.<sup>15</sup> Although the special office of prophet itself is defunct, now that the foundation of the apostles and prophets has been laid (Eph. 2:20), yet ordained ministers of the Word have a prophetic office in the sense that they are given the task of teaching and edifying the body of Christ through Spirit-filled sermons (Eph. 4:11ff).

Our key text, Col. 3:16, when taken in conjunction with Col. 1:28, clearly implies that the production of hymnody is a sung form of the exposition of Scripture. "Hymnody is essentially meditation on God's Word. While a particular hymn is not always derived from a particular text of Scripture, the hymn's primary function is to reflect on what Scripture as a whole teaches. Hymnody ... has a canonical orientation."<sup>16</sup> Thus, if we acknowledge the existence of an analogy between inspired prophecy and uninspired preaching, we should also acknowledge one between inspired and uninspired hymn-writing.<sup>17</sup>

If hymnody is essentially meditation on God's Word as Col. 3:16 states, *Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly* then it is not necessary to restrict ourselves to hymns that are inspired or canonical. In fact, we are being told to go beyond the text itself in a meditative and reflective way, just like the preacher goes beyond the literal text he is expounding and brings out its full implications for the edification, instruction, and admonition of the church. Of course, even this meditative "going beyond" is itself governed by Scripture and must be discerningly evaluated according to Scripture (just as with preaching/prophecy 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Jn. 4:1).

### **(3) The Progression of Redemptive History**

My final argument is that every major epoch of redemptive history is marked by an outpouring of new songs, as well as the updating of old songs, to celebrate God's most recent mighty acts of redemption and deliverance for his people. Would we not expect the climactic epoch of redemptive history to which all the preceding ones had been leading to be similarly marked by new songs?

"In Scripture, new acts of God call for 'new songs' (Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10; Rev. 5:9; 14:3). God delivers his people from Egypt, and they sing a new song (Ex. 15). He gives them water in the wilderness, and they sing (Num. 21:17). He renews the covenant and commits it to their memory with the song of Deuteronomy 32. Christ is conceived by the Spirit, and Mary responds with her Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55; compare 1:67-79; 2:14, 29-32). The picture is not one of a static hymnal given by God for all time; rather, it is the dynamic picture of God continually doing wonderful deeds and his people responding to them with shouts of praise. Just as God's deliverances elicit new prayers of thanksgiving and new subject matter for preaching, so they elicit new songs. In this regard, is it even remotely possible that the greatest divine deliverance of all, the redemptive work of Christ, should not evoke new songs?"<sup>18</sup>

Impossible! And as a matter of fact the historical record of the NT is clear: such "new songs" did flow from the lips of the New Israel of God in thankful praise for the New Exodus accomplished in Christ (Rev. 7:1-17). Paul reports that songs and hymns were composed by inspired New Covenant prophets to celebrate the dawn of the eschatological age of the Spirit in the person and work of Christ (1 Cor. 14:15, 26).

Now are we to argue that these "new songs" given by special, extraordinary revelation are no longer to be sung merely because the charismatic gifts have ceased after the close of the apostolic age? Is the New Israel forced to revert back to singing the hymns of the Old Israel exclusively? This would make no sense at all. It is utterly inconceivable that this New Covenant hymnody was meant only for use by the church during the age of the apostles, but that in the post-apostolic age we are forbidden by the regulative principle from taking the name of Jesus upon our lips in song! "Let no one keep defrauding you of the prize" by limiting the church to the hymns of the Old Covenant (Col. 2:16-18).

Furthermore, the New Covenant church is in a different redemptive-historical context than the Old Covenant church. The people of God are no longer slaves in their minority, for now that the fullness of time has come, we have been adopted as God's sons (Gal. 4:1-7). Thus to insist on singing only the Psalms of the OT is to risk forgetting which covenant we are in.

"Certainly we cannot criticize their 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. It is precisely the accomplishment of God's mighty works that evokes praise in Scripture."<sup>19</sup>

In addition to their pre-Christian stance of anticipation, the Psalms frequently reflect the struggle of faith that the OT saints had due to the seeming conflict between the promises of God and the reality of his providence. On the one hand, God had promised the nation that they would have a king and a land. Yet in reality, they often had ungodly kings and at one point were removed from the inheritance during the exile. Thus the Psalms are full of the cry, "O Lord, how long?"<sup>20</sup> And the cry largely goes unanswered. To sing only the Psalms without updating them with the Christological solution is to say that we are still living under Old Covenant conditions.

"Our post-Resurrection position in history also makes our worship emotionally different from that of the Psalms. The longings, the laments, the questions, and the prayers for judgment in the Psalms find answers in Christ. Of course, we continue to long for the final end of sin and suffering. But the great fact of New Testament worship is the resurrection of Jesus, in which the last days have begun. We celebrate that great event ... which the psalmists could only anticipate in the future. Surely there is rightly a greater dimension of joy in post-Resurrection worship, and a lesser emphasis on lament, complaint, and the delay of God's purposes."<sup>21</sup>

If we sing the OT Psalms alone, are we not putting a veil over the glory of the New Covenant rather than enjoying the liberty and boldness that is our birthright as those on *this* side of the resurrection (2 Cor. 3:12, 17)?<sup>22</sup>

In addition, consider the general pattern of redemptive-historical transformation that occurs in the transition from Old to New Covenant worship. Although there is fundamental continuity between the worship of the two testaments, there is also change — change that reflects the newness of the New Covenant. For example, although the fourth commandment is an abiding element of the moral law and continues in the New Covenant, there is a change as well: we no longer worship on the seventh day but on the first day, to commemorate the resurrection of Christ. Note the pattern: there is both continuity *and* redemptive-historical transformation. The same applies to virtually all other aspects of worship. The passover has been transformed and fulfilled by the Lord's Supper (Mark 14:12-25; 1 Cor. 5:1-8); circumcision, by baptism (Col. 2:11-13). In view of this repeated pattern, would it not be odd if Israel's songs were brought over into the New Covenant without any redemptive-historical transformation? Nothing is taken from the Old Covenant and applied directly to the church without first being passed through a Christocentric hermeneutical prism. Just as light when passed through a prism is changed from a monochromatic flatness into all the dazzling spectra of the rainbow, so the Old Covenant forms

of worship, when sent through the prism of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, are "transformed from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). This is exactly what we are doing when, in obedience to the command of Col. 3:16, we let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly so as to create a New Covenant hymnody reflective of the richness of that indwelling, Incarnate Word.

Exclusive psalmody does not sufficiently take these factors into account. It fails to reckon with (1) the presence of other hymns in the canon, (2) Paul's command in Col. 3:16 and Eph. 5:19, and (3) the progression of redemptive history. For these reasons, then, I do not consider exclusive psalmody to be a Biblically-mandated implication of the regulative principle.

### **The Positive Value of the Canonical Hymns**

To wrap up my argument, I want to conclude by affirming the positive value of the canonical hymns something many of my fellow hymnodists do not always insist on. Although I am opposed to the position that *only* canonical hymns may be sung in worship if worship is to be acceptable to God, I believe the inspired hymns found in both the OT and NT must serve an important (and essential!) function in the life of the church today.

First of all, the inspired hymnody of Scripture ought to be sung in worship. This may seem like an obvious point, but it needs to be stressed — especially today, when our tastes in the area of song in worship seem to be dictated more by popular culture and tradition than by conformity to Scripture. We need to sing the Psalms more often in worship, just to get used to the language of the Psalter, to acclimate ourselves to the flavor and spirit of songs that we *know* God delights in. Only when we are steeped in the hymnody of Scripture will we be in any position to begin writing new hymns that breathe the spirit of Biblical hymnody in terms of their poetic form, emotional impact, thematic patterning, and redemptive symbolism. So, let's sing the Psalms and other canonical hymns!

But we need to maintain a balance between canonical and non-canonical hymns. The church errs when it swings like a pendulum from one extreme to the other in reaction against a previous practice. In the earliest centuries of the church there is evidence that the church maintained this balance. The Psalter of course was used in corporate worship, as the example of Acts 4:24-31 demonstrates. (Whether the early church is simply praying in unison using the words of Psalm 2 or whether it was being sung, we do not know for certain.) That other non-canonical hymns were also used in conjunction with the Psalter is evident from 1 Cor. 14:26, the songs of Revelation, and so on. We see a balanced use of both Old Covenant psalms and New Covenant hymns in the apostolic church.

This balance continues into the post-apostolic age. For example, in the Septuagint there is a collection of 42 hymns added to the Psalter called the *Odes of Solomon*, which scholars regard as the beginnings of a New Covenant psalter. The language of the *Odes* is heavily reminiscent of the canonical Psalms, but they are primarily a meditation on the fulfillment of the Old Covenant through the advent of the long-awaited Messiah.<sup>23</sup>

Later in church history we find Isaac Watts continuing the tradition of the *Odes*. As he meditates on the Psalter from the perspective of its fulfillment in Christ, he produces New Covenant hymns

which are psalm-like and psalm-based but which go beyond the original text of the Hebrew Psalter in their explicitly Christological reflection. "The hymnody springs from the psalmody; it is inspired by the psalmody. Watts' hymnody comments on, interprets, and continues the psalmody."<sup>24</sup> For example, Watts takes Psalm 72, filters it through a Christocentric hermeneutic, and ends up with a classic New Covenant hymn:

***Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journies run;  
His Kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.***

But interestingly, the full impact of this hymn cannot be assessed unless the church already knows Psalm 72. It is only when we hear the echo of the Psalter in these hymns that their New Covenant hermeneutic can come home to us in its full force.

"One has to have the canonical text in mind when one hears the Christian interpretation. The beauty of this form is that in the movement from the text to the interpretation one catches sight of the movement from promise to fulfillment, which is of the essence of prayer. To glimpse this is an exciting experience ... It is for this reason that psalmody should be balanced with hymnody and hymnody with psalmody. There is an important dynamic between the two ... There is a sense in which Christian hymnody is the fulfillment of psalmody."<sup>25</sup>

For this reason we should not go to either extreme. We should not exclusively sing the canonical Psalms, without complementing them with hymns that reflect the fullness of praise that flows from the climactic accomplishment of redemptive history in the person and work of Christ. But neither should we only sing New Covenant hymns, lest by such neglect we forget the original text of the Psalter that these new hymns are meant to be a Christological commentary upon. We will impoverish our own understanding and enjoyment of our hymns if we abandon the Psalms altogether.

What I have said above naturally leads me to the *second* vital function of the canonical hymns for the church today. The inspired psalmody preserved in Scripture (OT and NT) ought to serve as our model for the writing of hymns. The few examples of NT hymns all contain echoes of the language and style of the OT prayers, hymns and psalms (the Magnificat, the Song of Zechariah, the hymns of Revelation).<sup>26</sup> This provides us with a helpful clue: even though the hymnody of the New Covenant contains a clearer and fuller reflection upon the mighty acts of God displayed through the person and work of Christ "in these last days", and even though they contain greater insight and assurance due to progressive revelation, the poetic style still retains the stamp and flavor of the praise of the Old Covenant. I am convinced that new hymns written by non-inspired authors should seek to approximate this stamp and flavor.

As you can see, if we were to implement the standard that all hymns should be psalm-like in their character, we would probably be much more selective in our choice of hymns for use in formal worship. Many otherwise unobjectionable hymns from the standpoint of orthodox content would be unsuitable for formal, corporate worship. For example, "Dare to be a Daniel!" doesn't seem to be modeled on any Scriptural hymn that I am aware of! The Old Trinity Hymnal seems

to recognize a distinction between hymns that are more suited for formal worship and those that should normally be used for other occasions. Hymns # 610 through # 662 are under the heading "Occasional Hymns" and include children's favorites. Hymns # 663 through the end are under the heading "Hymns for Informal Occasions" and include hymns that have a sort of revivalistic, "summer camp" flavor. Thus, the assumption is that Hymns # 1 through at least # 609 (and possibly even through # 662 in the editors' minds) may be used in formal worship. I am not sure I would agree with the editors' judgment in each case. However, it is valid to make some kind of distinction between hymns for formal worship (which should be psalm-based and psalm-like) and other hymns for informal gatherings such as fellowships, mid-week Bible studies, etc.

My suggestion that uninspired hymns should be psalm-like probably seems somewhat strange to a true Psalm-singer. From the perspective of an exclusive psalmodist, it seems bizarre to want to have uninspired "imitation" psalms, when you could just use "the real thing." If we are going to go to the extent of trying to write new hymns that are modeled on the canonical hymns, why even bother writing new ones. Besides, the degree of similarity or likeness to the Psalter will inevitably vary with each author's subjective tastes and opinions. One uninspired hymn-writer will approximate the Psalms more closely than another who feels free to take more liberties.

The objection would be valid if it weren't for the fact that the NT *commands* us to produce our own New Covenant hymnody (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). And that command is not without reason: the hymns of the church must "teach and admonish one another" in the fullness of the mystery of Christ a job that the OT psalms cannot adequately fulfill, since, as an integral part of the Old Covenant, the OT psalms speak of the mystery of Christ only in a veiled form (2 Cor. 3:5-18). To be sure, they testify of the coming Christ (Luke 24:44), but by their very nature they cannot celebrate the fact that Christ *has come*. For this reason the early Church was blessed with inspired prophets and prophetesses who produced new hymns to reflect the fullness of the New Covenant (1 Cor. 14:26). And Col. 3:16 commands the church of all ages, even after the cessation of the extraordinary gifts, to continue that practice for its edification as it strives to attain to the fullness of the stature of Christ (Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:13).

Undoubtedly, this position is somewhat less satisfying than the exclusive psalmody position. No subjective calls or debates need arise on that view. If it's not one of the 150, then it's not acceptable. End of story. The New Covenant hymnody position espoused here, on the other hand, allows for a lot more discussion, disagreement, and even potential abuse. Once we open the field to uninspired hymns, then we putting ourselves in a position of having to offend certain people — I'm sure there's someone out there that likes "Dare to be a Daniel!" But we must be careful not to be wiser than God. If God has commanded us to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly so that we will be able to teach and admonish one another in hymns that the Spirit has prompted, then we must trust God's judgment that the church will be edified rather than injured in the process.

That doesn't mean we can't be discerning and have high Biblical and theological standards for all uninspired hymns. On the contrary, we must always "test everything, and retain that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). The Lord has given the church the fullness of the Spirit — the anointing (1 Jn. 2:20, 27) which allows us to discern what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:2). The spiritual man discerns all things because he has the mind of Christ (1 Cor.

2:15-16). Exclusive psalmody would be the easy way out. No discernment is necessary, just obedience. But with Paul our prayer should be that we "may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best" (Phil. 1:9-10). This path is certainly more difficult, but I believe it is the one commanded by God in his Word.