

BIBLICAL AND CONFSSIONAL WORSHIP

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Among the many articles written in the Westminster Confession of Faith is a segment devoted to worship in the Church. The twenty-first chapter lays down guidelines for religious worship and Christian Sabbath day observance. These paragraphs contain many sound propositions that stimulate a solid and spiritual worship, both in the assembly of saints and in private devotions. The forethought given by the Westminster divines is quite evident. Their chief concern was that the worship of God should remain biblical and pure, and that the man-made superstitions that permeated Roman Catholicism be rejected conclusively.

However, this section of the confession has not been received without its share of disputations. Controversies have swirled around the ramifications of the Sabbath commandment propounded in paragraphs 7 and 8, and the small phrase in paragraph 5 (“singing of psalms with grace in the heart”), which some take to mean exclusive psalm singing (*WCF* 21:5, 7-8).

This article will not delve into the reasons why Christians should observe the Sunday Sabbath day, but it will examine the idea of exclusive psalmody and worship in the Church overall. Should the book of Psalms be the Church’s only hymnal? Is it wrong, or even sinful to use another portion of the Bible in worship, or are most of our churches in error because we sing such non-canonical hymns as “A Mighty Fortress” or “The Church’s One Foundation?” In answer to these questions I believe that to use the whole Bible, and even many non-canonical hymns, is both biblical and in agreement with the Confession of Faith. Our churches are not in error by incorporating these things into worship.

Before defending the above proposition, we must acknowledge that the book of Psalms has been the inspired hymnal of the Church for 3,000 years. The liturgies of ancient Israel, the Apostolic Church, and the visible Church down through the centuries, have all used the Psalter. By no means should the modern Church ever feel that an improvement over the Psalms could be possible. On the other hand, many other books of the Bible contain songs and hymns that were sung by the ancient Church. These inspired verses need to be used as readily as the Psalter in our worship services.

As mentioned above, the proponents of exclusive psalmody base their argument on the small phrase in chapter 21 “...singing of Psalms with grace in the heart (paragraph 5).” The problem with this approach is that they are using a sound, but uninspired confession as their proof-text. The Westminster Confession of Faith was never intended to be the criterion for worship, theology, or practice. The Westminster divines gave the Standards to the Church as a framework, and to point the way back to the only criterion for worship, the Holy Scriptures. The very first entry in the chapter under discussion states,

“But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and

devices of man, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures (*WCF* 21:1).”

The Shorter Catechism is also in agreement with this proposition,

Q: “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 (*WSC* 2).

These two excerpts from the Confession show where the Westminster divines wanted their emphasis to be. The articles produced at Westminster Abbey were never to usurp authority over the Bible. They were to point the way back to the Sacred text for further study.

The proposition from *WCF* 21:5 is taken from scripture, but the whole verse is not given. Both Ephesians and Colossians give the full blown picture of what the Apostle Paul intended to say, “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. 5:19).” In this verse, as well as the similar text in Colossians 3:16, Paul does not give the New Testament order of worship *per se*, but rather manifests to the Church what it really means to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The five participles in the Ephesians text--speaking, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and submitting (in verses 19-21)--are all used with an adverbial idea in mind, modifying the commandment, “But be filled with the Spirit.” In Colossians participles are also used to show how the Word of Christ is to dwell in us richly.

Although the worship service of the Early Church is not the main thrust of these two passages, Paul evidently envisioned these actions taking place when the churches assembled together, whether it was in an informal gathering or on the Lord’s Day. If this is true, what does the Apostle mean by psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs? Those who hold to exclusive psalm singing believe that these three types of songs refer exclusively to the Psalter. They arrive at this conclusion because the three Greek words that are used in Ephesians and Colossians are found in the Greek translation of the Book of Psalms. This, however, is a weak argument; one can find the same words in the Greek translation of Isaiah.¹

Without belaboring the definitions of these words too much, there is a distinction in meaning among the three. The word *psalmos* (psalms) refers to songs being sung with musical accompaniment, and probably denotes the psalms in the Old Testament. *Humnoi* (hymns) were songs of praise to deities or public heroes, while Christian *humnoi* exalted the living Christ. *Odai pneumatikai* (spiritual songs) could be either spontaneous singing in the Spirit, or songs of a spiritual nature contrasted with their secular counterparts. It is obvious as one studies the New Testament that saints in the Church wrote and sang spiritual songs to praise their Savior. The Greek meanings behind these English words seem to indicate that the early Church used more than the Book of Psalms when it met together in worship.

¹ See Rev. Ed Crawford’s paper on, “The Music of the Church” -(pg.4 para. 2.)

Probably the most compelling argument against the early Church's exclusive use of the Psalter is the many psalms and hymns that appear in other books of the Bible, including the New Testament. There are songs in Exodus, 1 Samuel, Song of Solomon, Isaiah, Lamentations, Habakkuk, and Revelation, to name just a few. At the beginning of Luke's gospel are three early Christian hymns: *the Magnificat* (Mary's song - Lk 1:46-56), *Benedictus* (Zechariah's song - Lk 1:67-80), and *Nunc Dimittis* (Simeon's song - Lk 2:29-32). These were probably used in worship to celebrate the birth of Christ. It seemed important to the Holy Spirit and to the Evangelist that the Church should recognize these hymns and sing them in worship services.

Even in the fifth chapter of Ephesians the Apostle Paul quotes what seems to be part of an early Christian hymn, "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light (Eph. 5:14b)." Paul was probably quoting a spiritual song or hymn known to the Church in Ephesus. It is interesting to notice how Paul placed this portion of song in the same chapter that supposedly refers to exclusive psalmody.

Once again, those who dogmatically hold to this position, not only take the phrase in the Westminster Confession, "singing of psalms with grace in the heart," out of context, but they try to squeeze their proposition into the context of Holy Scripture. Not only does the Bible as a whole reject this methodology, but the context in Ephesians will not allow it either. It is against all rules of exegesis and interpretation to trim down the biblical text so that it will agree with what we believe. True exegesis allows the sacred page to speak for itself, to which the Westminster divines bear adequate witness, "But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will (*WCF* 21:1)." The Bible is the final authority on worship, faith, and practice.

Clearly the Early Church incorporated much more than the book of Psalms into worship. A study of all the psalms and hymns in the Bible would fill many volumes. It must have been a joy to be part of worship in the Apostolic Church. Thanks be to God that He has given us a book of such diversity that every portion of it may be used for teaching, admonishing, and singing of praises.

Those who hold to exclusive psalm singing may concede to the proposition delineated above. With all the biblical evidence, and even the support of the Confession, it is easy to see that the Early Church used more than the book of Psalms in worship. But what about non-canonical hymns? How can we reckon their usage in worship? Is there biblical or even confessional warrant for incorporating this type of music in our Lord's Day services? Once again, it is the thesis of this article that our churches are not erring, either from the Word of God or the Confession of Faith, when we sing hymns that are not part of the canon of Scripture. At this statement many would disagree, claiming that it is contrary to the Westminster Standards. They would cite the proposition in chapter 21,

"But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginings and devices of men... (*WCF* 21:1)."

This passage in the Standards at first seems to indicate that the Confession is not in favor of anything introduced into worship unless it is specifically commanded in the Bible. However, in determining what the Confession of Faith really teaches in this area, it is important to review another chapter of the same document. In chapter 1 we find propositions concerning the Holy Scriptures, in which paragraph 4 sheds additional light on the subject at hand,

“The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture... and there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed (*WCF* 1:4).”

This lengthy quotation exhibits some important truths found in Scripture. First of all, every doctrine we hold is not expressly set down in the Word, and yet may be deduced from the overall context of the Bible. A perfect example of this is the practice of the Christian Church to meet on Sunday instead of Saturday. Those in Reformed circles call Sunday “the Christian Sabbath,” and yet nowhere in the Bible does it say that God changed the Sabbath day from Saturday to Sunday. Most base this position on various passages in the New Testament that indicate that the Early Church, after some time, began to meet exclusively on the first day of the week.

The paragraph quoted above reveals another important truth. Certain circumstances in worship can be ordered by the general rules of the Word. As far as worship is concerned, there seem to be five general rules to follow: 1] The worship must not be contrary to the Word of God (Deut. 12:32), 2] everything must be done for God’s glory and honor (Col. 3:17), 3] worship must be in Spirit and in Truth (Jn. 4:24-25), 4] it must be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:12), and 5] it must bring edification to the Church (1 Cor. 14:12). Under these general rules, non-canonical hymns can find a biblical foundation.

There are many examples found in scripture where people added to the worship of God, and yet remained within the general rules listed above. No one commanded the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh to erect a duplicate tabernacle by the Jordan river, and yet zealous Phinehas and the rest of Israel did not condemn their reasoning. In fact the Bible says that the nine-and-a-half tribes were pleased (Jos. 22).

The innovations made by King David are also very significant: he established the Levitical courses, he changed the age limit that was prescribed in the Law of Moses for the Levites from 30 to 20 years old because he needed more workers, he brought musical instruments into the Old Testament Church (something he was not commanded to do), he organized the Levitical choirs and produced much of the liturgical worship of ancient Israel (in fact many of the Psalms were to be sung by different choirs using different instruments and hymn tunes - 1 Chron. 23-26). David’s son Solomon erected the temple according to the command of God, but the design was not given to him as it was to Moses. Solomon was the architect of the first temple, not God; and yet after Solomon’s prayer the *Shekinah* glory filled

the man-made shrine (2 Chron. 2-7).

Did God institute or command the synagogue system? No! It was established out of necessity in Babylon, because the people needed to worship God and yet were nowhere near the forsaken temple in Jerusalem. This is an interesting point, because the synagogue service that began in the Babylonian captivity was used by Jesus and the Apostles as they preached the Gospel. The Early Church also followed it as the model.

What about the Jewish feasts celebrated by Jesus? In John's Gospel the Evangelist mentions that Jesus was walking in the temple during the time of the feast of dedication (Hanukkah - Jn. 10). Judas Maccabaeus started this commemoration of God's faithfulness to his people and our Lord Jesus himself celebrated it. Christ also partook of the Passover meal with his disciples. Luke's Gospel presents in detail Jesus' use of the ancient Seder liturgy, something that was developed over time, and was not prescribed in the Law of Moses.

There are other examples that could be used. Those we have looked at, however, are sufficient to show that many things were practiced that were not commanded in Scripture *per se*, but still followed the scriptural criteria listed above. In just the same way the use of hymns is not contrary to the Word of God or the Confession of Faith. As long as the hymns selected follow the general rules listed in the Bible, they will be for the glory of God and the edification of the Church.

One final note on the use of uninspired hymns in worship is needed. What are these hymns really? Are they Scripture? No! They are prayers and testimonials that have been given by God's people down through the centuries. They demonstrate that the same song of salvation that was given to David (Ps. 40), was also given to them, and has now been given to us. If we can't sing these musical prayers in our worship services because they are uninspired, we better not pray out loud from our hearts during worship, either.

Many other examples could be used to prove that this type of worship valid, spiritual, and confessional. These things, however should be sufficient to stimulate in us mature thought, charitable conversation, and a true and spiritual worship.