In church history singing has been central to church worship. From the earliest congregational singing to the chanting of ministers to the singing of choirs, the forms changed during the centuries after Christ. It was the Reformation that restored congregational singing to a prominent place in worship. It was said that Martin Luther won more converts through his hymns than he did through his sermons.

In our days we desire to worship God in singing in the way commanded in Scripture. There are several places where we are commanded to sing unto the Lord. Since the church is one through the various dispensations, we would expect that God, who was pleased with the Psalms being sung in Israel, would be pleased with praises in music today. Such indeed proves to be the case.

**Biblical Singing**

Throughout the Old Testament the people of God worshiped with music and singing. Moses and his sister sang to celebrate the Red Sea crossing. The prophets that met King Saul were singing and playing on lyres, tambourines, flutes, and harps (1 Sam. 10:5). David played the harp and sang for Saul. But the most important music was that of the tabernacle and temple worship, consisting of the Psalms. These were written and performed for centuries in the center of Israel’s worship. The “singers” were an important part of the population when the Jews returned to Jerusalem from captivity and the second temple was built.1

The tradition of sacred singing continued through the intertestamental period. The Jews continued to sing many songs taken from the OT, including Moses’ and Miriam’s songs of victory over Pharaoh, Moses’ prayer in Deuteronomy 32, the song of Hannah, the song in Habakkuk 3, Isaiah’s song in chapter 26, the prayer of Johan from the fish’s belly, and the prayer of Azariah and the song of the three Hebrew young men in the apocryphal additions to Daniel 3. In the synagogues Psalms and other portions were chanted, without musical instruments.2

Music in worship continued into the New Testament. After the Last Supper, before Jesus led his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, we read that they sang a hymn, probably a Psalm (from Pss. 113 to 118). In the New Testament times the Christians gathered and sang praises to Jesus Christ as the Lord, the Son of God. Of course, they continued to sing praises to God as well.

Actually, several passages in the NT itself probably are early Christian hymns. This appears from the metrical lines of the Greek, the important theological summations provided by the passages, and the sometimes their different style from the context. Most scholars believe that the following passages appear to be early Christian hymns sung as part of the church’s worship:
Acts 4:24-30; Ephesians 5:14; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16; and the several songs in Revelation.3

Christians in the early church sang selections from the NT also, especially the Magnificat of Mary (Lk. 1:46-55), the Benedictus of Zechariah (Lk. 1:67-79), the Gloria in excelsis Deo of the angels (Lk. 2:13-14), and the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon (Lk. 2:28-32).4 In an especially interesting exchange of correspondence, dated AD 112, Pliny the Younger, the pagan imperial legate in Bithynia in northern Turkey wrote to the Roman emperor Trajan, reporting to him what the Christians in his province were doing and what he was doing to suppress them. Christianity had an early beginning there, having started while Peter still lived (1 Pet. 1:1). Pliny mentioned that the Christians he observed “were wont to assemble before daybreak and sing by turns a hymn to Christ as God.”5 This hymn would be either a NT portion of Scripture set to music, or a Christian composition based on scriptural truth.

Two important passages that regulated singing to the Lord in the New Testament churches were written by Paul during his first Roman imprisonment:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (Colossians 3:16)

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:18-20)

Both these letters were written at the same time to churches in Asia Minor, to the church in Colossae, and to the circuit of churches starting in Ephesus and ending in Laodicea near Colossae. We can assume that similar instructions would have been given to all the churches.

The Reformed belief in the regulative principle is based on the second commandment. We are to worship God only in the way he has ordered in his word. Therefore, it is important for us to see how our singing is to be regulated by Scripture, especially in these two passages. Of course, for a complete study, it would be necessary to examine much more from Scripture, including the use of music in both testaments. Only then could a final conclusion be sustained. However, we will find that these two passages contain much that is found elsewhere in the Bible, and can provide a good place to begin studying this subject.

Types of Music

These passages list three terms for the music we should sing to one another and to God. They are psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. It appears from biblical usage that these three terms overlap in their meanings. So a psalm could also be classified as a hymn, or as a spiritual song. However, the reverse is not necessarily the case.6 There could be a hymn or a spiritual
song that is not a psalm, for example. Each term has a range of uses that distinguishes it from the others.\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{Psalms}

The first word used is \textit{psalm}, from the Greek \textit{psalmos}. As we would expect, this term is most frequently used for the Psalms of the Old Testament. Very frequently the term \textit{psalms} is used in the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament (LXX) in the titles of the Psalms. David is described as the one who wrote Israel’s psalms (2 Sam. 23:1). Using a form of that word, David is described as a skilful player of musical instruments (1 Sam. 16:18). Amos 5:23 in the LXX refers even to the \textit{psalms} of the musical instruments. It is obvious from the abundant use of this word in the Greek OT that it refers to songs of praise accompanied by musical instruments.

In the NT the term is often used referring to the OT Psalms.\textsuperscript{8} Also, the word in its various forms is used for singing praise to God in general. Those who are merry are to sing psalms (Ja. 5:13); the collected Christians are to encourage each other with, among other things, psalms (1 Cor. 14:26); the saved Gentiles will sing psalms to God (Rom. 15:9, quoting Ps. 18:49; obviously not being sung in the temple!); and the Christians were to pray and sing psalms to the Lord with the Spirit and with their minds (1 Cor. 14:15).

From the total biblical usage, it appears that the early church was to continue praising God in song, using musical instruments.\textsuperscript{9} They were to sing the old Psalms of David, and other songs that the Holy Spirit would lead them to sing, using the added revelation of the New Testament.

\textit{Hymns}

The second word is \textit{hymn}, in Greek \textit{humnos}. In the LXX this Greek word and its related words are used to indicate any song of praise. It can refer to the Psalms of David (as in 2 Chron. 29:30). Yet even the pastures and flocks can “sing hymns” to God (Ps. 65:13; in the LXX 64:14). Usually it refers to praise to God, but it can be used for other objects, like Dagon, god of the Philistines (Jud. 16:24). The two terms \textit{hymn} and \textit{sing a psalm} are put together in the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees 1:30, which the New Jerusalem Bible translates as “The priests then chanted hymns accompanied by the harp.”

Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn when they finished the Lord’s Supper, before they went to the Mount of Olives (Mt. 26:30 = Mk. 14:26). At midnight in the prison, after having been beaten and placed in severe stocks, Paul and Silas sang hymns so loud the other prisoners could hear them (Acts 16:25). The Lord Jesus in prophecy is spoken of as singing hymns to God in the midst of the church (Heb. 2:12, quoting Ps. 22:22).
We learn in these and other passages that we are to sing songs to God that praise him—his attributes and his works. Whether these are taken directly from Scripture or are expressing scriptural truths in other words, God should be the center and subject of our hymns.

**Spiritual songs**

Here Paul combines two words. *Song* in these passages is the Greek word ὀδή ὀδή, “a song,” related to the verb ἀσῳ ἀσῳ, “to sing.” A song could be of various types, secular or religious. The word occurs several times in Revelation, as the new song sung by the angels in heaven (5:9), the new song sung by the 144,000 in heaven (14:3), and the song of Moses sung in heaven by the redeemed saints, which song is then quoted (15:3-4).

But since songs can be secular as well as sacred, wicked as well as pious, Paul specifies what kind of songs the Christians should sing to God and each other. They are to be *spiritual*, in Greek πνευματικός pneumatikos. This word, of course, is related to the Holy Spirit, and to spiritual truth in general—that is, truth concerning God and the world of spirits.

Spiritual things in general can be those truths that are in agreement with God’s word (Rom. 7:14; 15:27; 1 Cor. 2:13-14; 9:11; Col. 1:9). Sometimes they are things that are non-physical in nature (as in 1 Cor. 9:11). A spiritual person is one who is controlled by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:15; 3:1; 14:37; Gal. 6:1), and spiritual gifts and blessings are bestowed by the Spirit (Rom. 1:11; 1 Cor. 12:1; 14:1; Eph. 1:3). A spiritual being is one who belongs to the spirit world, and thus spiritual beings can be righteous or wicked (Eph. 6:12). Sometimes physical items are spoken of in a figurative sense, with a spiritual significance (1 Cor. 10:3-4; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 11:8). Finally, spiritual things can be things that are enlivened or empowered by the Holy Spirit, as the “spiritual body” we will have in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:44, 46).

Putting all these uses together, we can see that spiritual songs are songs which are agreeable to the word of God, and which thus are empowered by the Holy Spirit to praise God and edify the church. It is only by the Holy Spirit that we can sing to Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

Thus the Christians were to sing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” not indicating three names for the same thing (that is, three types of OT psalms), or three strictly divided categories of sacred songs, but rather, sacred songs whose definitions overlap. “The ‘psalms’ might be drawn from the OT Psalter, the ‘hymns’ might be Christian canticles (some of which are reproduced, in whole or in part, in the NT text), and the ‘spiritual songs’ might be unpremeditated words sung ‘in the Spirit,’ voicing holy aspirations.” The key is that these songs must agree with Scripture, exalt God, and edify believers.

**Why Sing?**

Paul begins the paragraph in Ephesians 5 with a practical goal for the Christians: be imitators of God and live a life of the love of Christ. Our lives are not to be imitating the sinful
world, but are rather to be full of light, pleasing the Lord. Christians are not to be taking in by the darkness and fall into its errors and sins, but rather are to walk in the light of Scriptural truth. To do this, we must “understand what the will of our Lord is” (v. 17). The contrast continues; not to be filled with foolishness, to be drunk with wine. Instead, we are to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Verses 19-20 tell us how to do this. We must continually be thinking and meditating on the word of God. It is the Wisdom literature of the OT that abounds with this practical knowledge, and this knowledge is encapsulated in the hymnody of Israel and the early church. Singing is one way to bring what we learn before our minds in impressive ways. It implants in our memory and consciousness the truths of God’s wisdom. This is why we sing not only ourselves, “in our hearts,” but also “unto one another.” This singing also glorifies God, as it shows our “giving thanks” unto him for all his blessings.

The Colossians 3 passage bears a similar burden. Verse 1 begins with the truth that we are now risen with Christ, and therefore have a new interest and direction to our thoughts and lives. Verses 5-9 tell us what we must get rid of and discard—the old habits and sins common to the world. These thoughts and ways must be replaced with the godly beliefs of the gospel, the love of the brothers, and living together in Christian unity that pictures the new man in Christ. By the time that Paul gets to verse 16, he comes back to the same point as he did in Ephesians: we must be filled with the wisdom of Christ in order to think in this new way. And how are we to be filled with this wisdom? We do this by singing to one another psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. We thus bless each other and glorify God by being thankful. Here Paul mentions two positive results—we teach each other and admonish each other. There can be no Christian life apart from accurate Christian doctrine; and our singing of God’s wisdom fills our minds with his truth. As a result we are able to live out the Christian life (v. 17, and the “household rules” that follow).

Thus we believe that singing in the church is a vital part of the worship of God. It glorifies him by giving him thanks and ascribing to him those attributes and works by which he is described in the Bible. It strengthens those who sing, as they are reminded of God’s truths and the duties he has set before us. It binds us in unity as we sing the same thing together, showing our common faith and purpose. And scriptural singing edifies those who hear, reminding them of their faith and duty. Though the centuries God has blessed his church through its singing. Let us obey God in worship, and sing to him and one another agreeably to Scripture, from the heart, and with joy and thanksgiving.

3 Cf. Walter Lock, The Epistle to the Ephesians (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1929), p. 60; F. F. Bruce, The Epistles of the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, NICNT, p. 159, n. 156
5 Pliny the Younger, Letter to Trajan, in Letters 10:96 (Trajan’s reply in Letters 10:97); this translation in Lock, Ephesians, p. 60; Charles Hodge discusses this Latin sentence, stating that “Whether the passage refers to the responsive method of singing or not, which is somewhat doubtful from the parallel passage in Colossians (where Paul speaks of their teaching one another), it at least proves that singing was from the beginning a part of Christian worship and that not only psalms but hymns also were employed,” A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians (1856; reprinted, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), p. 303.
“The early usage . . . appears to have been as loose as that of the corresponding English terms, *psalm*, *hymn*, *song*, is with us. A psalm was a hymn, and a hymn a song. Still there was a distinction between them as there is still.”

To find biblical Greek usage the *BibleWorks4* computer program was used. Much of the information in the following paragraphs, especially relating to non-biblical usage is available in the thorough articles of Heinrich Schlier, “ἀςω, ἀςῃ,” and Gerhard Delling, “ὑμνος, ὑμνέω, ψάλῳ, ψάλμος,” in Volumes 1 and 8 of *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (1964, 1972). Delling’s article, especially, contains massive amounts of helpful material.

As in Lk. 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33.

The question as to whether musical instruments should be used in churches in the New Testament period is a debated one in the history of the Reformed churches. While Luther retained many worship practices from the Roman church, as long as they did not contradict Scripture, Calvin upheld the regulative principle that only those practices commanded in Scripture should be allowed in the churches. He believed there should be no musical instruments used in worship, and had them removed from his churches. He also restricted singing to the OT Psalms. This practice has continued in some Reformed churches, for example, in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. Many polemic works have been produced from that perspective, including James Glasgow, *Heart and Voice: Instrumental Music in Christian Worship Not Divinely Authorised* (Belfast: C. Aitchison & J. Cleeland, n.d.), John McNaugher, *The Psalms in Worship* (Pittsburgh: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1907), and *The True Psalmody; or The Bible Psalms, the Church’s Only Manual of Praise*, by ministers from the Reformed Presbyterian and the United Presbyterian Churches (1859; portions reprinted, Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1991). Some time ago the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, before embarking on its own project of publishing the *Trinity Hymnal*, appointed a study commission on this topic. In 1947 this committee reported to the 14th General Assembly of the OPC. The committee was divided: the majority report was brought by Robert S. Marsden (chm.), R. G. Kuiper, Arthur W. Kuschke, John H. Skilton, Edward J. Young; the minority report was brought by John Murray and William Young. Both sides are skillfully argued with much supporting evidence. These reports provide an excellent summary of the argument on both sides. The OPC did not officially approve either report, but shortly thereafter published the *Trinity Hymnal*, which incorporates both biblical Psalm and other hymns.

For this reason, some scholars believe this phrase refers to charismatic songs (see, for example, F. F. Bruce’s quotation referred to in the following note; Bruce may have this idea in mind, though he is not specific); however, it could just as well mean songs that are agreeable to the Holy Spirit and concerned with spiritual matters.

F. F. Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 159; see notes 155-157 for his more detailed argumentation and references.