

V. 'Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs'

The content of our songs is simply stated: 'Psalms and Hymns and spiritual Songs.' Before examining the meaning of this phrase, one inference is clear: the content of our singing is not a circumstance, but an element of worship, and is therefore to be regulated by the Word of God. These three terms should be understood to refer singularly to the whole Psalter (similar to how phrases such as 'commandments, testimonies and statutes' or 'miracles, wonders and signs' are used, *cf.* 1 Chronicles 29:19, Acts 2:22). Psalms and Hymns and spiritual Songs are common titles found in the superscripts of individual Psalms. Similar language is found elsewhere in the New Testament referring to the singing of Psalms (Mark 14:26, Acts 16:25, 1 Corinthians 14:15, Ephesians 5:19, James 5:13). This phrase refers, then, not to three distinct genres of songs, but one source of songs: that is, the Spirit-inspired ('spiritual') Psalter, which is the only prescribed (and therefore, fitting) hymnal given by God for singing His praise.

VI. 'Singing'

The act commanded in this text cannot be overlooked: Christian worship is to include 'singing.' Any level of discomfort or embarrassment experienced by the individual regarding singing praise must be considered temptation from which one should flee rather than a mere personal preference. All Christians are commanded to sing praise. And what do we sing? Songs - and God has provided for us according to His grace such songs. One of the simplest evidences of the biblical practice of exclusive psalmody is the existence of the Psalter within the inspired canon that is

Scripture. Indeed, it is in the Psalms we are commanded: 'Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day' (Psalm 96:2).

VII. 'With Grace'

Finally, Christian singing is to be carried out 'with grace in your hearts to Lord.' That is, (1) the content of our songs are to be a reminder to us of the grace of God, and (2) the singing of the Psalms is an ordinary means of grace - being related to both the categories of the Word and prayer. It is in the Psalms that the Church is clearly shown the grace of the triune God in both His attributes and His works, and particularly in the humiliation and exaltation of God the Son. Singing the Psalms is also an ordinary means of grace - meaning that in the singing, Christians are encouraged and persevered in faith and godliness by will of the Father, the leadership of the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit. Singing the Psalms is related to the ministry of the Word in that by singing the Word of God, believers mutually teach and admonish one another; and it is related to the ministry of prayer in that by singing Psalms, the individual Christian, covenant household and whole congregation praise and petition the Lord for His glory and their good.

Conclusion

In concluding these reflections, it must be noted that the singing of Psalms exclusively in worship - though neither a matter of preference nor Christian liberty as it is commanded by God - is indeed a great blessing and privilege of the Church. May Christians, covenant families and congregations grow in their delight and zeal for singing these wonderful songs of Zion.



Psalms and Hymns and Spiritual Songs: Seven Reflections on Exclusive Psalmody from Colossians 3:16

A Pamphlet to Encourage
Believers & Covenant Families
in Biblical Christian Worship

*'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly
in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing
one another in psalms and hymns and
spiritual songs, singing with grace in your
hearts to the Lord.'*

Introduction

In Colossians 3:16, the Church is instructed in a blessed means of grace: *'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.'* Let us consider seven reflections from this text which demonstrate that the Church is to sing exclusively the Psalms in her worship of the triune God.

I. 'The Word of Christ'

The Church is first commanded that, in our singing, 'the word of Christ' is to be the content of our praise. Two inferences follow. (1) Our singing as an element of worship is limited to the Scriptures, which may be understood to be the whole word of Christ - as He is the true Prophet and Lawgiver. (2) Further, our singing should be exclusively from the Psalms; for it is in the Psalms we are shown the voice of Christ, particularly as it relates to both His humiliation and exaltation. Hebrews 2:12 specifically demonstrates that Christ leads His Church in the singing of His praise from His Word in the Psalms (c.f. Psalm 22:22).

II. 'Dwell in You Richly'

This word of Christ which we sing is to 'dwell in you richly.' The words of man are not to be that which dwell in us, but the word of Christ. This is confirmed by the phrase in the end of the verse, 'in your hearts.' 'Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee' (Psalm 119:11). Such cannot be said about human-composed hymns. Christians are both commanded and privileged to sing in worship only those songs which God has provided for

His Church to sing. And this word is to dwell in us richly: that is, bountifully or plenteously. The words of man are limited and will wane in their value and use, but the word of God is both precious and preserved. Scripture is precious in that it can not be diminished in its value: 'O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day' (Psalm 119:97). The word of God is also preserved providentially by God - for the Scriptures will always be of use to His Church: 'The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times' (Psalm 12:6). Consider these three benefits of singing exclusively the Psalms, apart from obedience to God which is the chiefest. (1) When the Psalms dwell in us richly, we are strengthened to flee sin and pursue holiness. (2) When this word of Christ dwells richly in our hearts, we will recall them throughout the day, in every situation and with every emotion. (3) When the Psalms dwell in us richly, we shall remember them to our dying days, even when all other memories have faded away.

III. 'In All Wisdom'

As the Church sings her praise to the triune God, the words of our praise (which are to be the word of Christ) are to dwell in us 'in all wisdom.' It is true that the Lord gifts men with wisdom and understanding, but what is the means by which He bestows such wisdom? It is by His Word: 'The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple' (Psalm 19:7). Human-composed songs cannot compare in wisdom to those written by God for His Church for three primary reasons. (1) God is in Himself all-wise; so that even, as it were, 'The foolishness

of God is wiser than men' (1 Corinthians 1:25). The words of men therefore may neither be compared to nor placed alongside the words of God. (2) God is the giver of wisdom, since 'Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' (James 1:17). How then could man prefer the clay to the Potter? (3) Even the best of human-composed hymns are fallible and subject to error; but the Scripture is God's Word of truth by which He sanctifies those who love Him (John 17:17). God gave the Church the inspired hymnal - the Psalms - which instruct her in all wisdom: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever' (Psalm 111:10).

IV. 'Teaching and Admonishing'

The Christians' singing (whether it be in public or family worship) is described to be an act of corporate 'teaching and admonishing.' This, too, points to the what the content of our singing is to be. Teaching and admonishing in the context of worship is to be from the Word of God. As much is clear (1) by the Church's example: Ezra 'read in the book the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading' (Nehemiah 8:8). This is also clear (2) by the Lord's command to His Church: 'Preach the word' (2 Timothy 4:2). Just as the word is to be read and faithfully expounded to the people regarding both life and doctrine (the Law and the Gospel), the Psalms are to be sung by (and explained to) the congregation so that they may encourage one another to live ('admonishing') and believe ('teaching') rightly.