

A Response to Exclusive Psalmody

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Introduction

I didn't know much about Exclusive Psalmody before I met a member in our congregation who held to this belief. This young man was very respectful and was not divisive in his conviction. There was a marked difference in him, though. During the worship service, he would stand silently holding the hymnal open before him while the congregation sang its praises. He would not participate with his own voice. I remember speaking to him about this after the worship service on several occasions. It was then that I found out that he not only didn't believe in singing hymns, but he also didn't believe instruments were to be used in worship either. He explained a comprehensive defense for these strongly held convictions. I was familiar with the subject and had heard broad discussion of it through the years, but it was only after my encounters with this Exclusive Psalmody member that I quickly realized that I didn't know enough about the subject to give an adequate response. I had never put much time and effort into understanding the Exclusive Psalmist position. For that matter, I had never put the time into understanding why our own denomination, the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS), did not hold this position. We believe that Psalms and hymns should be sung in a worship service, and that instruments may be used along with these hymns, but I didn't know why from a

theological perspective. My research has yielded a ready defense of our worship practice in the RCUS, and one that I will detail here.

Their Argument

What exactly is Exclusive Psalmody? In summary, those who hold this position believe that the only songs that were ever expressly commanded to be sung are the 150 Psalms. Based on the Regulative Principle, we can only have elements of worship that are commanded by God; therefore, only the 150 Psalms are allowed in a worship service, and all other songs are unacceptable in the eyes of God.

Dr. Sam Waldron quoted the great Reformed Theologian, Dr. John Murray, who gave seven reasons for this position:

1. There is no warrant in Scripture for the use of uninspired human compositions in the singing of God's praise in the public worship.
2. There is explicit authority for the use of inspired songs.
3. The songs of divine worship must therefore be limited to the songs of Scripture, for they alone are inspired.
4. The Book of Psalms does provide us with the kind of compositions for which we have the authority of Scripture.
5. We are therefore certain of divine sanction and approval in the singing of the Psalms.
6. We are not certain that other inspired songs were intended to be sung in the worship of God, even though the use of other inspired songs does not violate the fundamental principle on which Scripture authorization is explicit, namely, the use of inspired songs.
7. In view of uncertainty with respect to the use of other inspired songs, we should confine ourselves to the Book of Psalms. (2014)

In order to answer these well thought out arguments, we need to start with the Regulative Principle itself. Much of the disagreement is centered on the definition of this principle and how we apply it in Reformed churches.

The Regulative Principle

In my view, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) gives us the best definition of the regulative principle. The WCF defines the Regulative Principle this way:

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, unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men (Westminster Confession of Faith, I, VI).

There are two aspects of this definition that are incredibly important to understand. First, the definition states that there are doctrines that are expressly set forth in Scripture. Second, there are doctrines that are not expressly set forth because "by good and necessary consequence" we must "deduce" them from the scriptures. Both aspects of this principle apply to all the doctrines we believe, and this definitely includes our worship practices.

During the Reformation, this principle was derived from scripture to combat the many abuses of the apostate Roman Catholic Church. Dr. Robert Morey explains its development:

At the time of the Reformation, the Reformers established the basic principle that *so far as the public worship of God is concerned, whatever is not commanded by Scripture is forbidden*. This principle was necessary in order to give a clear reason for the exclusion of the mass, prayers for the dead, prayers to the saints, rosary services, etc. The Reformers wanted to re-establish the pure worship of the apostolic church. The regulative principle was their main instrument by which they sought to do this. (n.d.)

The RCUS continues to stand in the biblical tradition of the Protestant Reformation. Look at the following excerpt from the RCUS Directory of Worship:

Since the Word of God itself restricts God's people only to such practices in worship which his Word specifically sanctions (Deut. 12:30-32; John 4:23-24),

the principles of the public worship of God must not be derived from any other source than the Bible, nor may they depart from its teaching...The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His Church a large measure of liberty in using the elements of worship sanctioned by Scripture. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God's Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is (1.1, Nature of Public Worship).

So, The Directory of Worship is very clear that we hold to the regulative principle, only adopting practices in worship that are specifically sanctioned by scripture.

But what do we mean by the word "sanction?" This means we can look for express commands, express statements, and historical examples in the Bible. Dr. Joe Morecraft explains:

So, that which may be derived by good and necessary consequence from the express statements of Scripture is no less binding than an express command itself. Approved example has equal validity with a direct command, and even where approved example and express command may both be lacking or uncertain, as the baptism of infants, necessary inference from the doctrine and commandments plainly set forth in Scripture may sufficiently warrant a practice of worship (Morecraft, 2004, 68).

The doctrine of baptizing the children of believers is a good example of deducing a doctrine "by good and necessary consequence." There isn't any explicit command to baptize our children in the New Testament. But we do so because the principle of the covenant family was established in the Old Covenant and never abrogated in the New Covenant; therefore, we continue to place the sign and seal of that Covenant upon them.

The practice of deducing by good and necessary consequence also includes historical examples that were never explicitly commanded by God. Morecraft expounds on this further:

One example of this way of interpreting Scripture is concerning the change of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have no express command to that effect, but we do have the example of

Jesus Christ, who rested from His redemptive labors with His resurrection on the first day of the week, just as God rested from His creative labors on the seventh day of the week (Heb. 4:9-10). We also have the examples of the Apostles in the church in the book of Acts. The point is that divine example and Spirit-inspired apostolic example are as authoritative a guide as an express divine command (Morecraft 2004, 70).

As we strive to honor the Lord with our worship, we see that the church can use express commands, express statements, and historical examples to find elements in worship that are approved by God. And this leads to the debate over the songs we sing.

What Songs Should Be Sung?

Using the regulative principle as our governor, looking for commands, statements, and examples, we can figure out what songs are acceptable in worship. But before we begin, an important question needs to be answered. Does God prohibit the singing of any song beyond the Psalms? Dr. Greg Bahnsen readily answers this question:

Nevertheless, to prohibit congregational singing of anything but the Old Testament Psalms is an unwarranted addition to the word of God (cf. Deut.4:2) and - ironically - a violation of the regulative principle of worship thereby. The crucial question is this: *Where in Scripture does God restrict His people to singing only the songs in the book of Psalms?* No such restriction can be demonstrated. Those who try to infer it end up relying on fallacious arguments. Those who insist that we must positively demonstrate that anything we sing has the explicit warrant of Scripture have misunderstood and misapplied the "regulative principle" - on a par with somebody who would hold that the very words of our prayers and sermons must have the explicit warrant of Scripture. (1990)

This is the crucial point that needs to be understood. You can't command something where a command doesn't exist. That is the definition of legalism. God never commanded the church to sing only the Psalms. In fact, by historical examples, we can see that God never restricted the church to only the 150 Psalms. Bahnsen demonstrates this when he explains that the 150 Psalms

were not the only inspired songs in the Bible. On the contrary, there are other instances where we read of worship songs being used before the Lord including the Song of Moses, the Magnificat of Mary, and the songs sung by the Levites which were clearly written after the time of the Psalter. David writes in that Psalter that God's people are to sing His "statutes" and "all of His wondrous deeds." These two descriptions alone call for a broader hymnody than is found alone in the Psalms (1990). The historical examples in the bible show the practical outworking of this principle. Paul Engle expands on this point:

God's revelation of himself through his actions in history is also a basis for our worship. The Old Testament is filled with the record of God's great deeds. God's act of redeeming Israel from Egypt motivated Moses to write a hymn of praise (Exodus 15:1-18). Moses wrote another worship song at the end of his life (Deuteronomy 31:30-32:43). It was a praise filled recital of God's mighty acts with Israel. Likewise, Deborah and Barak sang a rehearsal of the righteous acts of the Lord (Judges 5:1-11) (1991).

Think about what we see in the examples that Bahnsen and Engle cited. They show us an historical practice that is clearly approved by God. Men and women are composing songs in order to praise God for His mighty acts in history. They were never commanded to write these songs in the first place, but God approved of this practice; therefore, the practice of writing songs in the church should be allowed. In fact, Dr. Morey makes a very interesting argument:

How did David come to write the Psalms? There was *no* divine command for him to write the Psalms for worship services. Many of the Psalms were written for David's personal edification when he was yet a shepherd boy. He had musical gifts and he had the freedom to exercise them in the public worship of God. If a sole psalmist would have been present when David introduced a few of his original songs into the worship service, he would have rejected David's songs because Moses's Psalm (Ps.90) was the only Psalm which could have been sung. (n.d.)

Morey goes on to describe the practice of writing songs which didn't stop after David. The prophets composed songs to celebrate God's mighty acts in Isaiah and Lamentations. In fact, as we often see throughout scripture, the recounting of these wondrous deeds is passed down from generation to generation through the singing of old songs and hymns. This pattern continues through the New Testament as well, as Morey proves in these examples:

1. The angels open up the age of the New Covenant with *new* songs, not old Psalms (Luke 2:13-14). These new songs celebrate the incarnation and the redemptive work of God the Son. It is apparent from the very beginning that the New Covenant will generate new songs of praise.
2. Mary celebrated God's work within her by composing a glorious song of faith and confidence (Luke 1:46-55). Thus we begin the New Testament with original songs composed to celebrate the new acts of God in Christ Jesus.
3. Did not the crowds compose a new song to celebrate the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (Luke 19:37-38)?
4. Do we not find portions of several hymns recorded in the New Testament which show us that the early Christians composed new songs to celebrate the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ?
5. Did not the Corinthian Christians compose their own distinctively Christian songs when they shared with their fellow saints in public worship? (1 Cor. 14:26)
6. As the New Testament begins with angelic songs, so it closes with heavenly songs. It is important to ask, are they singing only the Psalms? No! They sing new songs to God (Rev. 4:11; 5:9-14, etc.). The New Testament people had the freedom to compose new songs to celebrate the covenantal acts of God in their own generation.
7. Are we told in the New Testament to restrict ourselves to singing the Psalms in church services? No. There is not a single verse in the New Testament where we are told to sing the Psalms, and only the Psalms, in the public worship of the gathered church. (n.d.)

Two passages that are often brought up in this debate include Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Ephesians 5:19 states, "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." Colossians 3:16 says,

“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.” Exclusive Psalmists contend that these two passages refer only to the 150 Psalms. Dr. Bahnsen’s article also answers this argument:

The exegesis of exclusive-psalm-singers is not acceptable at Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19. If these verses are referring to more than the songs of the book of Psalms, then it is acceptable for Christians to sing more than the songs from Psalms. Exclusive-psalm-singers must argue, then, that the words "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" in these verses all apply to the Psalms *and can be applied to nothing but the Psalms*. That is clearly mistaken, however. 2 Samuel 22 is not part of the book of Psalms, but it is called a "psalm" in verse 1; the new revelation of 1 Cor. 14:26 is obviously not from Psalms, but it is called a "psalm." Or take the word "hymn." Can this word (in itself) apply to compositions other than those from the book of Psalms? Obviously, yes. Well then, is there anything about this word in the context of Col. 3 or Eph. 5 to restrict its referent to the book of Psalms? Not at all. Finally, exclusive-psalm-singers must argue that "spiritual song" must mean "inspired song" (thus being restricted to the words of Scripture for us). But the word "spiritual" does not mean the same thing as "inspired," as is clear from its use in 1 Cor. 2:15; 3:1; and Eph. 6:12. So then, "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" does indeed apply to the Psalms, but it is mistaken to argue that such words can apply *only* to the Psalms. (Likewise, the fact that "apostolic letters" can apply to the epistles of Paul does not prove that the expression applies *only* to Paul's letters!) (1990).

Restricting our worship songs to the 150 Psalms also makes our worship “theologically deficient” according to Bahnsen. Though Christ and his redemptive work are found in the Psalms, there can be no debate that they do not contain the fullest, clearest, most explicit teachings about our salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord. His incarnation, His ministry, and His work on the cross are all absent in the Old Testament which was a foreshadowing of the New Covenant. Just as we teach our children that helpful adage, “The New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed; the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed,” so we understand

that we have a fuller Christology and soteriology than is found in the Psalms. Yet to the Exclusive Psalmist we are in no way to express the wonders of the fullness of Christ's redemptive work, as it has been revealed to us throughout the New Testament, in our worship singing.

On the Contrary, we must understand that we are to think God's thoughts after His thoughts. This includes our worship. In the worship service, there is a dialogue that is taking place between God and His people. We confess our faith, sing praises to God, and God speaks back to us through His Word. The content of our faith is formed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit illuminating our minds to understand and confess the thoughts of God. In the New Covenant, the advent of Jesus Christ is also the fullest revealing of God's mind to us; therefore, we are to think through Jesus' words in the New Testament, interpret them in light of their application to our lives, and sing them back to Him.

Another argument that the Exclusive Psalmist wages is that uninspired words cannot be included in our worship songs. Dr. Bahnsen's article also answers this argument by clearly demonstrating that both the words of Holy Scripture themselves and the principles formed by those words are inspired; therefore, as long as we are faithful to the principles taught in scripture, we can sing and teach using uninspired words in our Worship.

It makes little sense to say that the words of our songs must come directly from the Bible (or psalms), when one does not likewise restrict the words of our *sermons* to what is directly found in the Bible! Both are forms of teaching and admonition. What reason could there be for holding that teaching-in-plain-voice may use words outside the Bible, but teaching-in-song may not use words outside the Bible? (E.g., I can say "A mighty fortress is our God" in a sermon, but we cannot add melody and sing the very same words!) Teaching is not identical with reading from Scripture (I Tim. 4:13) - whether in song or not." (1990)

The earliest Reformers (and later the Puritans) not only developed and fought for the regulative principle of worship, they also wrote many hymns. Since these uninspired hymns are found in the Geneva Psalter by Calvin as well as in the English, Dutch, and Scottish psalters, it must follow that these men were not Exclusive Psalmists and did not intend that the church should set this limitation on its worship. (Morey)

Musical Instruments

Those who hold to exclusive psalmody usually also believe that instruments are not allowed in a worship service either. Exclusive Psalmists contend that instruments were a part of the ceremonial law in the Old Testament; therefore, they don't belong in the New Covenant. Joe Morecraft explains this position in detail:

They argue that because musical instruments were part of the temple worship of the Old Testament with all its symbolic rites and sacrifices of the Levitical ceremonial system, when that whole system reached its designed termination point in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the symbolic rites and sacrifices, along with the temple with its musical instruments, were all abrogated and therefore, are no longer to be used in Christian worship. These were "shadows." Now the "substance," which is Christ, has come and there is no further need for observance of the shadows. Therefore, just as we no longer sacrifice animals in our worship services, nor go to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship, neither do we use the temple's musical instruments in Christian worship (143).

In order to answer this point adequately, we need to start with Psalm 150:

Praise the LORD! Praise God in His sanctuary; Praise Him in His mighty firmament! Praise Him for His mighty acts; Praise Him according to His excellent greatness! Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; Praise Him with the lute and harp! Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!

In this Psalm, God commands us to praise Him with musical instruments. This Psalm is from the Old Testament time period but we also see this in the New Covenant, in the book of Revelation. The following three passages demonstrate this very well:

Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song (Revelation 5:8-9).

And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred *and* forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth (Revelation 14:2b-3).

And I saw *something* like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark *and* over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God. They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb (Revelation 15:2-3a).

Much of what we see depicted in Revelation is taking place in heaven right now!

Jesus is receiving the scroll in Revelation 5, and the next couple of chapters show the breaking of the seals. Like most of the visions of Revelation, these scenes take place over the course of the entire Millennium, the age of the Gentiles. This means harps are being used in heaven right now. This is the spiritual reality that is depicted in Revelation. If our citizenship resides in heaven now, we must be able to worship after the pattern we see in Revelation 5.

But let's examine this issue further in the Old Testament. Under the direction of King David, certain Levitical priests were trained with musical instruments for worship. "Then David spoke to the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brethren *to be* the singers accompanied by instruments of music, stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals, by raising the voice with resounding joy" (1 Chronicles 15:16). The temple had not been built yet. Morecraft explains

that the purpose of these instruments mentioned in I Chronicles was to, “heighten the sound, both of the song and of the instrumental music, to the expression of festive joy in the Lord and His works” (142).

Music has a powerful effect on people because God made us to be musical creatures. David understood this and set up singers and instruments to aid worship. But what about the idea that these musical instruments were a part of the ceremonial law? Morecraft refutes that argument:

In the temple worship of the Old Testament, there were not only ceremonial elements, but also non-ceremonial elements that should always be included in the worship of God, such as prayer and praise. Just because one aspect of Old Testament worship has ceased to be applicable should we conclude that every aspect of OT worship is inapplicable? (144).

Since there were ceremonial and non-ceremonial elements in the temple worship, the Exclusive Psalmist must prove that the musical instruments were ceremonial in nature. Their use in the temple isn’t enough to establish this. Morecraft takes this refutation further:

In what way were choirs and musical instruments in the temple ceremonial foreshadows and prophetic types of Christ and His accomplishment of redemption? Israel used instruments in celebrating the saving mercy of God in their behalf before God gave Moses the blueprints of the tabernacle and the ceremonial system. **“Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances”** (Exodus 15:20). Although this did not take place in a worship service, the point is that Israel was accustomed to using musical instruments in their singing of God’s praises long before tabernacle worship was established (144).

So, long before the ceremonial law, the tabernacle, and the temple were established (which foreshadowed the advent of Christ), the use of instruments were already being used by God’s people. The gathering of families was the gathering of the church in that time period. In fact, it

is never said that instruments are ceremonial when the ceremonial law was established. As Morecraft observes:

...the great choirs and multitude of musical instruments were instituted for the public worship of God five hundred years after Moses, during the reigns of David and Solomon. These were not a part of the Mosaic ceremonial system (144).

God commands us to worship him with instruments. Scripture never says that instruments are ceremonial in nature. Instruments are used in the Old and New Covenants. These facts establish that using instruments in worship is perfectly acceptable. Morecraft sums up his point in this way:

...God commands us in Psalm 150 to use every suitable musical instrument available to us, along with gifted musicians, in congregational worship. And they are to be played well by those who are trained in them...When God issues a command, we are to obey that command until He says it is no longer in effect. God has nowhere in Scripture annulled the command of Psalm 150. In fact, the command is illustrated and enforced in the pictures of the church's consummated worship in the presence of God (145).

Since the church is the temple of God in the New Covenant, every believer who has been given the talent to write and play music may use those gifts in a worship service because all believers exercise the offices of prophet, priest, and king in submission to Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The Regulative Principle is an integral part of the Christian's faith. How we define and apply this principle must conform to all of God's Word. Reformed believers must approach this issue of Exclusive Psalmody in our worship with serious study and earnest resolve to engage in lively debate in humble reliance on God's Word.

After my own study here, I believe that the RCUS has the right position on this issue as is stated in the Directory of Worship:

Since the metrical versions of the Psalms are based upon the Word of God, they ought to be used frequently in public worship. Great care must be taken to insure that all the materials of song are in complete accord with the teaching of Holy Scripture. The tunes as well as the words should be dignified and elevated. The stately rhythm of the chorales is especially appropriate for public worship. No person shall take a special part in the musical service unless he is a Christian and adorns his profession with a godly walk (RCUS Directory of Worship 1.2, Scriptural Elements of Worship).

So, both biblically sound hymns and the Psalms must be sung regularly in the church with instruments accompanying them.

How we apply the regulative principle matters. In the unfolding history of redemption, we saw new songs and hymns being composed by God's people, after God showed His greatness in major events in the Old and New Testaments. This is a practice that is clearly set forth in scripture; therefore, God's people have the freedom to write new songs to praise God. What more fitting example could be found than Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying:

“Blessed *is* the King who comes in the name of the LORD!
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.” But He answered and said to them, “I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out” (Luke 19: 37-40).

Christ indeed did not rebuke his people for praising him in worship and song—song that was not exclusively a Psalm. In fact, these disciples combined both a line from Psalm 118, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” and a repetition of what had clearly been passed down through the years from the shepherds first who heard the angels

sing, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” to God’s elect as they awaited the ministry of their Redeemer King.

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen *Him*, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child (Luke 2:15-17).

As God’s people regularly meet before His holy face in corporate worship, how can we not combine the old praises with the new? If we should keep silent, the stones would cry out.

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