

**In Spirit and Truth: Worship as God Requires
(Understanding and Applying the Regulative Principle of
Worship)**

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1. Introduction

Recently the congregation of an Evangelical church was “treated to one of its regular features. A handsome young woman, attractively dressed, stood before the congregation with an eight-inch microphone, the head of which she held gently to her lips while she writhed and cooed a song in which she, with closed eyes and beckoning gestures, begged Jesus, as she worked her way toward its climax, to come fill her emptiness. The crowd liked it. Her song had a different effect on me than I suspect she thought it would. It did, perhaps, bring me closer to Jesus, but by bringing me closer to the sinfulness of my own heart, the kind of heart that would be excited to lust ...”¹

Many Evangelical Protestants, and probably most Presbyterian and Reformed Christians, reading about that particular performance will feel a degree of uneasiness. They may question the appropriateness of the performance and wonder about its suitability in, or as, worship. What in particular causes the uneasiness? Is it the sensuality of the performance? Why is the sensuality of this performance different from that found in the Song of Solomon? If the singer had been ugly, dressed in burlap, and had stood in an erect posture, would that have made a difference? Would it then have been suitable for inclusion in a congregation’s worship? Was the singing performance by this woman worship? Was it true worship? Was it worship of God or man? Was it pleasing to God? On what basis are we to answer these questions?

The questions raised by this performance shows that the topic of correct worship clearly needs to be considered by Evangelical Protestants. When I told a friend I was writing a book on worship, her response was, “Why? Worship is whatever we want to offer to God.” For her, and most people, in the modern Church, worship is subjective rather than objective—it is what I want to do in a God-ward direction, it is what ever I think is right or proper. Yet, when we consider the performance described above, most of us must feel, at least a little, that something is missing when we base our standard for worship on subjective opinion. There must be some things that others feel are valid as worship, which are not really valid. We must begin to wonder if there just might be an *objective* definition of true worship.

During the Reformation, the Reformers stumbled into this question. The original impetus for the Reformation was not to reform or change worship. At least from Luther’s perspective, the original motivation for change began with matters related to the doctrine of salvation. He was first concerned about the application of earned merit to salvation (e.g., purchasing indulgences), and the question of the role of good works in salvation. As he began to grapple with the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, he couldn’t avoid challenging other aspects of the Church’s beliefs and practices.

What Luther started in Germany, and Zwingli in Switzerland, turned very quickly into a reformation of worship. D. G. Hart and John R. Muether have said that the, “connection between theology and worship is so vital that it is impossible to change the form (worship practice) without altering the content (theological conviction).”² For the Reformers (particularly those in Switzerland), the connection between worship and theology was so vital that it was impossible for them to change the basis of their theology without also changing the practice of worship.

During the following one hundred years, the Protestant Reformers worked through many of the complex issues related to worship. From Calvin to the Westminster Assembly (c 1645) the Reformers, and then the Puritans, became increasingly convinced that it was primarily in the area of worship that the Church needed purification. The name ‘puritan’ comes from the Puritan’s conviction that worship had to be pure—only what God allowed and required. The Reformers and Puritans desired to remove from the worship of the Church any practices that they believed had been introduced by the will of men during the Middle Ages, and for which they could not find a warrant in the Bible.

Within a generation after the Puritans, the Protestant Church began drifting back toward the worship practices of the Roman Catholic Church of the late Middle Ages. Today, that return is almost complete. We once again see Protestants following liturgies and ecclesiastical calendars that are similar, if not identical to, those followed by the Roman Catholic Church. In many respects, there is no essential difference

¹ Posted by Marvin Olasky on *World* magazine’s *blog*. From an article written by S. M. Hutchens in *Touchstone*, posted at: CST 08:12 am, 2004-05-02; <http://www.worldmagblog.com/archives/003812.html>.

² D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p. 16.

between the worship practices of Protestants and Roman Catholics. Since this is the case, some see little reason to remain separate and are concluding that a return to the fold of the Roman Catholic Church, or the Orthodox Church, makes sense. We can only be left with doubts. What was the purpose of the Reformation? Was it a waste of time? Were the Reformers fooled? Should Protestants apologize for the mistakes of their forefathers, shake hands with the Roman Catholic Church, and return to their roots?

Alternatively, we could try to determine why the question of worship was so important to the Reformers that they considered their lives worthy of forfeiture rather than to participate in worship practices that they equated with paganism. As one writer has said, ‘Men like John Knox thundered forth and risked their lives over things like *not* kneeling before the sacrament. When they could find no scriptural warrant for a practice, they would not permit it—even if it “made sense” to men. What strikes me is that this worship permanently changed the world. But with our worship, we “chirp and mutter” over overhead projections, films, music directors, dramas, parking lot sizes and conversational/counselling sermons—and we change nothing!’³ This is the reason for this present book. It is, once again, to ask the question: what is it that God asks of us in worship? What is true worship, by God’s standard?

Undoubtedly someone will ask, “Hasn’t the topic been addressed before?” Yes, it has been, many times before. While I was writing this introduction, I did a search on Amazon.com and found that there were 50,159 books with worship in their titles. Of course, not all will deal with Christian worship. Even so, the number of ‘hits’ is indicative of the amount of material that has been written on the topic of worship. It is hard to imagine that another book could contribute anything but add noise to the cacophony. It is necessary therefore, that I provide some reasons for producing another book on the subject.

Worship is an important topic. There probably isn’t a *more* important topic from God’s perspective than worship. From our perspective, after receiving salvation, there should be nothing more important than how we worship God. Even though worship is such an important topic, it is clear that the Church has not yet learned how to worship correctly or there would not be so many opinions and disagreements about what is proper worship. “Across the spectrum—liberal and conservative, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal—there seems to be a general vagueness about the God we worship and the purpose of worship in the first place.”⁴

Not only is there much confusion in the broader Church about worship, but also we find the same confusion in belief and practice among those who are Presbyterian and Reformed, and claim to accept the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the Regulative Principle of Worship taught in the *Confession*. This confusion is illustrated by events that made it necessary to raise the matter of Biblical worship at a recent General Assembly of my denomination. John L. Mackay, one of the professors at the Free Church College, presented an overture on behalf of one of the presbyteries: “To appoint a Committee on Worship to examine in the light of Scripture the Church’s testimony on the purity of public worship and uniformity of the same, setting out the Scriptural parameters which should guide and inform the Church’s practice, with powers to consult, as they think fit, with Presbyteries both as to difficulties which may already exist and as to recommendations which it is proposed to bring to the General Assembly.” With respect to this overture, Professor Mackay said, ‘that some may be asking “What is it all about?” It seems to be rehashing the past and seems to be dealing with matter that are secondary. However, there is no more solemn duty than leading others in the worship of God.’⁵

Presbyterian and Reformed worship used to stand apart from the rest of Christendom. A key Reformation distinctive was in the practice of worship. Reformed worship was markedly different from Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran worship because it was founded exclusively on the Bible. Today, the worship practices of Presbyterian and Reformed congregations are essentially indistinguishable from those of a typical Evangelical congregation. What has changed? Is it that the Church as a whole has moved in the direction of the Reformed worship of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or is it that the Reformed Church has abandoned its heritage and moved in the direction of the twenty-first century Evangelical Church? It is clear that most people today who claim the heritage of the Swiss and Scottish Reformers have drifted from their historic roots. A fundamental question that must be asked is,

³ R. E. Knodel Jr., ‘The Current “Liturgy” Crisis,’ *Journey*, Jan-Mar 1991; p. 9.

⁴ Michael Horton, *A Better Way—Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), p. 10.

⁵ “Overtures on Worship,” *The Monthly Record* (The Magazine of the Free Church of Scotland), June/July 2004, p. 25.

were the Reformers wrong? Calvin speaks to our generation, as much as he did to his generation that was coming out of Medieval Roman Catholicism:

For men pay no regard to what God has commanded, or to what he approves, in order that they may serve him in a becoming manner, but assume to themselves a license of devising modes of worship, and afterwards, obtruding them upon him as a substitute for obedience. ...God rejects, condemns, abominates all fictitious worship, and employs his Word as a bridle to keep us in unqualified obedience. When shaking off this yoke, we wander after our own fictions, and offer to him a worship, the work of human rashness, how much soever it may delight ourselves, in his sight it is vain trifling, nay, vileness and pollution. The advocates of human traditions paint them in fair and gaudy colours; and Paul certainly admits that they carry with them a show of wisdom; but as God values obedience more than all sacrifices, it ought to be sufficient for the rejection of any mode of worship, that it is not sanctioned by the command of God.⁶

Many who are familiar with the debates about the Regulative Principle of Worship and its application may feel that enough has already been written from all sides, and that the topic is exhausted and exhausting. However, when one reads the arguments of the opponents of the Regulative Principle of Worship or the arguments of the neo-Reformed, it appears that there is considerable misunderstanding about what worship is, what it means for God to regulate worship, and what constitutes true worship. There are many reasons for this misunderstanding. One reason is that those who defend the historic Reformed position have often presented their arguments in such a way that their opponents can drive a proverbial truck through the inconsistencies. For example, the common argument that the Regulative Principle of Worship applies only to public formal worship and not to private or informal worship is full of problems. The regulations for worship are not, as many in the Presbyterian and Reformed context have suggested, based on time and place. True worship is timeless and placeless as Jesus teaches in John 4 .21-24. This has a bearing on debates over the applicability of Synagogue worship vs Temple worship in the NT economy. Simply, these debates are not of the essence for understanding the nature of true worship.

In other cases, the opponents of the Regulative Principle of worship have created, and attacked, a caricature of the classic Reformed position. They refer to comments such as the following by Calvin, and contend in rebuttal, that there are many aspects of worship that God does not prescribe:

Moreover, the rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunction of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe. Therefore, if we would have Him to approve our worship, this rule, which He everywhere enforces with the utmost strictness, must be carefully observed.⁷

From this we gather that a part of the reverence that is paid to him consists simply in worshiping him as he commands, mingling no inventions of our own. ... I say further: although in some contrived worship impiety does not openly appear, it is still severely condemned by the Spirit, since it is a departure from God's precept."⁸

In this book, I begin with a definition of worship and attempt to build up a logical and consistent statement of how God regulates worship. Although I hold to the presupposition that God regulates worship, I attempt to prove this rather than assuming it. Many of my arguments will be familiar to those who are aware of the debates about worship, but I believe that I present a more consistent and cohesive defence of what constitutes true worship than has been presented by most writers. My desire is to close the 'loop-holes' that are common in most defences of the Regulative Principle of Worship, by developing a systematic theology of worship.

⁶ Jean Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (Audubon, N.J. Old Paths Publications, 1994), p. 11-12. Cited in: T. David Gordon, "Review Article: The Westminster Assembly's Unworkable and Unscriptural View of Worship?" *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65, Fall 2003, pp. 345-56.

⁷ Same as above.

⁸ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John t. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian classics*, Vol. XXI (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960) 4.10.24; p. 1203.

Readers, who have never heard of the Regulative Principle of Worship but feel that ‘something is rotten in state of Denmark,’ and have questioned whether some particular practice may be proper in worship, will find that the argument of this book, if nothing else, will cause them to think through their beliefs about worship. A reader is not required to know anything of the history of the debates that have continued since about the middle of the seventeenth century. For example, they don’t have to know what John Frame or Steve Schissel have written recently about the Regulative Principle of Worship. This book is not a polemic against a particular author’s view; rather it is an attempt to demonstrate what God requires from us as worship, and to respond to various generic counter arguments. Anyone who takes God’s word seriously will find much to think about as he or she considers the Biblical model of how God regulates worship.

How we worship is a reflection of our theology. “[W]orship, contrary to much public opinion, is not a matter of taste. It is a matter of theological conviction.”⁹ Although theology and worship are correlated, it is not entirely clear which is the cause and which is the effect. Compare, for example, the following two statements that are attributable, at least partially, to one author.

[G]ood theology must produce good worship, corporate acts of praise and devotion that fit the sound theology of the Reformed tradition. On the other hand, defective theology yields inferior or inappropriate worship. The Protestant Reformers understood this. The confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were all aimed at reforming the worship of the church.¹⁰

One reason is that I think it makes no sense to separate theology from worship. Having grown up a fundamentalist, I have a pretty good sense of worship in low church evangelical settings. And it has amazed me that Reformed and Presbyterians are increasingly doing in worship what I experienced in worship before I knew anything about the sovereignty of God, the headship of Christ or the five points of Calvinism. If Arminian and dispensationalist theology are wrong by Reformed lights, then why wouldn’t worship that comes from those theological sources also be wrong? Of course, the answer of late is, as advocates of contemporary worship have tried to argue, that there is no connection between evangelical theology and evangelical worship. I don’t think that’s right. And I also think that in older Reformed patterns of worship you see directly the implications of Reformed theology for worship—theocentric, word-centered, simple, reverent and accessible to all generations. But the bottom line is what pleases God. And on the basis of what he has revealed in Scripture, my sense is that older Reformed worship honors him and that much contemporary worship does not. The latter is simply undignified and does not recognize the gulf separating us from God. I know that sounds reactionary, as if I won’t recognize the good intentions behind many modern practices. But—again, not to sound overly spiritual—aren’t God’s intentions more important than ours? That was certainly the question that haunted the Reformers.¹¹

In the first instance, D. G. Hart, with John R. Muether, suggests that theology leads, and worship follows—good theology produces good worship. In the second instance, he suggests that bad theology produces wrong worship practices. However, there is a subtlety, which should not be missed, in what he says in the second instance. Reformed churches, that supposedly have good theology, are adopting worship practices that developed from Arminian and dispensationalist theology. The implication is that worship practices are leading. Instead of accepting the Bible and a systematic theology of worship derived from the Bible, as the normative source for worship practices, the Presbyterian and Reformed churches are increasingly adopting the worship practices of adherents of false theologies that are explicitly man-centered. With a change in worship practice will inevitably come a change in theology—as goes the worship practices so follows the theology.

“Reformed worship must be explicitly theocentric.”¹² For worship to be fully theocentric it must be three things:

⁹ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, cited above, p. 167.

¹⁰ Same as above, p. 13.

¹¹ D. G. Hart, “Interview with D. G. Hart conducted by Anthony T. Selvaggio,” *Semper Reformanda*, Vol 13: Issue 1, Spring, 2004, p. 33.

¹² D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, cited above, p. 14.

- 1) *For God's Glory.* Man's primary purpose is to glorify God. Worship is, ultimately, the creature's bowing before the creator of the universe, acknowledging that he alone is worthy to receive glory and honour (Rev 4.11). "The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might."¹³
- 2) *God's ministry to man.* Man's secondary purpose is to enjoy God forever. Worship is also for man's benefit and enjoyment [but not his glory!]. In worship, we receive rebuke, instruction, comfort and encouragement from the Word and sacraments. God uses the elements of worship as means of grace to strengthen and enliven Christians in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, and to prepare them for their mission in the world. If the elements of worship are not theocentric, but human-centric, they lose their power, God is not acting, and they become not means of grace, but entertainment.
- 3) *Defined by God alone.* God is the only one who can define what true worship is, since he alone knows what will bring Glory to him and provide for our needs. Any definition of what true worship is, must be derived from God. To be theocentric, worship must not come from man's will, desires, or passions. Therefore, worship must be only what God has defined it to be. "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 men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture."¹⁴

If worship in any way draws attention to man and his gifts, it can only detract from God's glory, and cannot be true worship. If the content and form of worship is defined, in any way by man, it cannot be God's means of dispensing grace. If the definition of true worship is not derived entirely from God, it detracts from his authority over worship, and cannot be true worship. If these three propositions are not true then there are really no standards for worship and everyone can do what is right in his own eyes. If God does *not* care about who receives glory from worship; if it doesn't matter how worship works for the good of God's saved creatures (Rom 8.28); and, if God doesn't define the proper content of worship, then it is a waste of paper and ink to publish this book and it is a misuse of valuable resources for anyone to spend time reading it. If God does not regulate worship and does not care about how it is offered, then close this book now!

There will likely be many responses to this book. Based on discussions I have had with Christians about worship over the years, and on the responses and questions that have been raised when I have taught on the subject, I anticipate at least the following responses:

- 1) *Worship isn't an important subject* – Christians have more important things to do than get involved in debates about the form and content of worship. What I say in this book is a waste of time.
- 2) *Worship isn't regulated by God* – Even though worship may have been regulated in the OT, we are free under the NT to worship God however we like, as long as what we do doesn't go against obvious prohibitions (e.g., worshipping idols). What I say in this book is very wrong and should be banned as false.
- 3) *Worship isn't regulated formally by God* – God regulates worship, but my boundaries are too strict. What I say in this book presents weak arguments that were dismissed long ago and the arguments in this book should be viewed as misleading.
- 4) *Worship may be regulated formally by God, but I don't care to change* – The logic of this book's argument is valid and the Scriptural evidence convincing but the reader likes his liturgy, music, hymns, etc. and doesn't want to change. What I say in this book is formally right but not sufficiently convincing to require a change of behaviour.
- 5) *Worship is regulated by God, I need to change my beliefs and practices* – The ideas and concepts are either entirely new and the reader has never thought them through before, or they are presented in a more convincing way. What I say in this book will result in a change of heart.

¹³ "Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day," *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, para. 1.

¹⁴ Same as above.

- 6) *Worship is regulated by God, the fundamental conclusions are what I have believed all along* – The arguments presented strengthen the conviction that the historic form of worship practiced by the Swiss and French Reformers, the Puritans, and most Presbyterians through about the mid-nineteenth century is the right way to worship God. What I say in this book will encourage the reader and strengthen him to persevere in the face of many challenges.

In every one of these responses, the reader's heart (intellect, will, beliefs, convictions, etc.) plays a significant part. It is my desire and prayer that, if you are not already convinced, you will be convinced that how we worship God is an important matter.

As much as we can debate the topic of worship, the real issue is the state of our hearts. Do we really want to do what God wants? Do we really want to do what will please him? Or, is it our own desires and egos that need to be satisfied? In the final analysis, the debates related to the topic of worship are not how we interpret Ephesians 5.19 or Deuteronomy 4.15-19, but whether we really desire to walk with God and how he wants us to walk. If we do not *want* to be convinced that worship is important to God and only worship that he authorizes pleases him, we won't be. As Calvin said, 'I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, "Obedience is better than sacrifice." "In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men," (1 Sam. 15:22; Matt. 15:9). Every addition to His word, especially in this matter, is a lie. Mere "will worship" (*ethelothreskia*) is vanity. This is the decision, and when once the judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate.'¹⁵

How we worship is an important matter to God. Four of the Ten Commandments deal with matters relating to correct worship. How we worship God directly influences our theology. Worship is the most important Christian duty during our time spent on earth. Worship will be our primary engagement in eternity. We need to place any discussion of worship into this eternal context for in worship the "church displays her otherworldliness."¹⁶

¹⁵ Jean Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church* (Protestant Heritage Press, 1995), http://www.swrb.ab.ca/newslett/actualnls/nrc_ch00.htm).

¹⁶ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, cited above, p. 25.

2. God's Concern for Proper Worship

Does it matter how we worship God? Does God care about what we offer to him as worship? Most people in the Church today appear to give little thought to these questions. They have a sense that their hearts and attitudes must be right before God, or there will be something wrong with their worship. However, most Christians rarely, if ever, consider the question of what constitutes valid worship. On the rare occasions that they consider these questions they seem to answer them using three criteria: 1) what *feels* right, 2) what is the *tradition* of their denomination, or 3) the *example* of what they have seen others doing in another church.

It seems that the only people today who ask serious questions about what is proper worship are those in denominations descended from the French-Scottish-Dutch Reformation. Even when people in these Presbyterian and Reformed churches ask questions about what constitutes proper worship, they arrive at widely divergent conclusions. In practice, there is little difference between the worship formats in most churches that claim adherence to a regulating principle and those that make no such claim. Today there is a broad range of worship styles, ranging from formal liturgy, to 'traditional', and contemporary. These styles appear to be found in about the same proportion in most Presbyterian and Reformed denominations as in the Church as a whole.

Does the question of what constitutes proper worship need to be answered? Most people will argue that there are far more important issues facing the Church than the question of what liturgy we follow. Instead of worrying about whether to use guitars, organs, or pianos or no instruments at all; what hymns to include in the hymnal or choruses in the stapled song book; or whether or not we recite the Creed; we should address ourselves to the *real* issues facing the Church. What are the issues that are more important than how we worship God? Are lobbying against homosexual marriages and counselling in a crisis pregnancy centre, *more* important than the proper worship of God? Is preaching salvation by grace alone *more* important than the doctrine that is contained in the songs we sing as worship? Is caring for the poor, who Jesus says will always be with us, *more* important than bringing spiritual sacrifices to God?

If God really does care about how we worship him, then it is not right for us to consider worship as an unimportant matter. Asking the question of what constitutes true worship is not a 'little matter' if God does not view it to be trivial. If God has standards for worship, it is not unwarranted to suggest that some (many) aspects of what is offered to God today as worship are false.

What we offer to God as worship and how we worship him really are important matters. In fact, how we worship may be the second most important question we could ask. The most important question is surely, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" Once we have answered that question, there is no more important question to ask than, "Now that we know God truly, how should he be worshiped?" What evidence do I have for such an astounding assertion?

God is to be Worshiped Only as He Requires

The first evidence that shows that it does matter to God how we worship, is found in the Ten Commandments. The commandments summarize how we are to live lives that please God. The Ten Commandments open with commands relating to worship. They tell us that God alone is to be worshiped and that false worship is unacceptable. They tell us that God's name is to be revered (i.e., worshiped), and that a day is set aside for consideration of spiritual matters (i.e., worship of God). We have been so influenced by our culture that we have bought into the myth that it is more important how we treat our neighbours (e.g., not hurting them or stealing from them) than how we treat God. God does not see it that way. He tells us first to worship him correctly, and then how to show neighbourly concern. God considers worship to be so important that he used more than half of the text of the Ten Commandments to reinforce its importance.

The second evidence that God cares greatly about how we worship him, is shown by what he says about worship. There are hundreds of passages in the Bible (possibly more than on any other topic) where God speaks about the importance of offering him true worship and avoiding false worship. We will consider a number of references to worship as our analysis proceeds, so here I offer only a few examples to show that proper worship is a serious concern to God:

- The Ten Commandments (Ex 20.1-17) open with commandments dealing with worship. The first deals with the proper object of worship—God, and the second deals with the proper approach to

God. “[T]here are two ways of offering false worship. First, if one worships a false God, this is a violation of the first commandment. Second, if one worships the true God in a false way, this is a violation of the second commandment.”¹

- In Deuteronomy Moses instructs the people with these words: “Be careful to obey all these regulations I am giving you ... be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods. You must not worship the LORD your God in their way. See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.” (Deut 12.28-32)
- Isaiah presents God’s words to Israel: “All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations—a people who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick; who sit among the graves and spend their nights keeping secret vigil; who eat the flesh of pigs, and whose pots hold broth of unclean meat; who say, ‘Keep away; don’t come near me, for I am too sacred for you!’ Such people are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that keeps burning all day. See, it stands written before me: I will not keep silent but will pay back in full; I will pay it back into their laps—both your sins and the sins of your fathers,” says the LORD.’ (Is 65.2-7)
- Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their false worship when he said: ‘You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.”’ (Mark 7.7-13)
- Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well: “Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” (John 4.23-24)
- The writer of Hebrews tells the Church: ‘Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our “God is a consuming fire.”’ (Heb 12.28, 29)

The third evidence that worship is important to God is shown by his punishing those who offered him improper worship. In the Bible, we find many examples of God displaying righteous anger against those who worshiped him in ways other than what he had authorized. He provides representative examples of punishment for false worship as a warning to us and, in some instances, he even put people to death for improper worship. Consider the following examples:

- When Cain and Abel brought offerings to the LORD, we are told: “The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.” (Gen 4.4-5) One offering was acceptable and the other was not. God told Cain that he had not done what was right (v 7).
- “Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.” (Lev 10.1-2) It does not appear that they had a bad attitude. They wanted to worship God, but the offering they chose was wrong. They used fire, but not the fire from the right source. As a result, they were burned up with fire from God. ‘They presumed to serve God in the way that they found “worshipful,” but they were unwilling to regard God’s commanded worship as sufficient. They thought this was the sort of business about which God might not care very much, at least as long as the worshiper’s heart was in the right place.’²
- Saul, the king of Israel, became impatient waiting for Samuel, and decided to offer sacrifices on his own. Just as he had completed the offering Samuel arrived and said, “You acted foolishly, ... You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure ... because you have not kept the LORD’s command.” (1 Sam 13.13-14) Saul lost his kingdom because he did not do what was proper as worship.

¹ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p. 78.

² Michael Horton, *A Better Way—Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), p. 144.

- When David was bringing the ark on a cart into Jerusalem, Uzzah reached out his hand to keep the box from slipping off the cart. God struck him down for touching the sacred object that was part of the old covenant ceremonial worship system. (1 Ch 13.9, 10)
- ‘[A]fter Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. ... They confronted him and said, “It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the LORD God.”’ As a result God caused leprosy to break out on his forehead, and “King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house—leprosy, and excluded from the temple of the LORD.” (2 Ch 26.16-21)
- Ananias and Sapphira claimed to be worshipping God with an offering of the proceeds from the sale of their land. Their offering was false worship because it was steeped in lies. They lost their lives because of false worship. (Acts 5.1-11)
- Paul informs the Corinthians that some of their number had become sick or died because they had abused the observance of the Lord’s Supper. (1 Cor 11.29, 30)

Today we don’t hear about people being struck dead for introducing new forms of worship. This may lead some people to think that God no longer punishes false worship. This is not correct thinking. We must not assume that God always deals with the introduction of false worship in the same way. Paul tells us that God gave us examples in the past to warn us of the dangers of disobedience (1 Cor 10.9). We do not know how or when God will deal with false worship in the Church, but he will. Others may conclude that since God appears to be blessing their congregation, their worship must be acceptable to God. This is also false reasoning. God often blesses us in spite of our sin—consider the examples of Jacob and David. This is grace.

The fourth evidence that worship is important to God is derived from the overall context of the examples above. During the inaugural period of each *major* form of worship, God punished breaches of the new worship ceremonies. Consider the following:

Punishment of False Worship During the Inauguration of a New Form of Worship		
Major Covenantal Administration	Primary Worship Form	Punishment of False Worship
Creation (Adam): Commencement (Gen 1.26-2.17)	Initial form not stated Animal Sacrifices (Gen 4.4; 8.20)	Expulsion from the Garden (Gen 3.23-24) Cain rebuked (Gen 4.4-5)
New World (Noah): Preservation (Gen 8.20-9.17)	No change	--
National (Abraham): Promise of Seed and Land (Gen 15, 17)	No major change Fellowship Meal of Bread and Wine added (Gen 14.18)	--
Sinaitic (Moses): Law (Ex 24)	Ceremonial System (Ex, Lev, Deut)	Nadab and Abihu consumed with fire (Lev 10.1, 2) Golden calf plague (Ex 32.35)
Royal (David): Kingdom (2 Sam 7.5-16)	Psalms and Musical instruments (1 Ch 23.5)	Uzzah struck down (1 Ch 13.9, 10)
New (Christ): Consummation (Jer 31.31-34; Lk 22.7-21; Heb 8, 9)	Spiritual Equivalents, bloodless sacrifices (Heb 13.15)	Ananias and Sapphira struck down (Acts 5.1-11) Corinthians sick and dying (1 Cor 11.29, 30)

These examples show that God’s concern that he be worshiped correctly did not apply only to the OT economy. At the inauguration of the NT form of worship God reminded the Church that it was important that they worship correctly. The requirement to worship God in a correct manner and with a proper attitude has not changed since the time of the Apostles.

The Importance of Worshiping God as He Requires

At various times during the history of the NT Church, there have been people who believed that the Bible was to be their standard for guiding every area of life. These people have been particularly concerned about ensuring that they worshiped God correctly—in accordance with what he has instructed in his Word.

In the first few centuries of the NT Church, until the time of Constantine, many Christians gave their lives because they would not compromise the true worship of God with pagan practices. They refused to worship the emperor or to accept the introduction of idol worship.

During the Middle Ages there were disputes over a number of aspects of worship, such as the use of icons. However, as the belief that the Bible alone is the standard for regulating all of life was compromised, a concern for proper worship faded. The Church introduced into the worship of God practices that would not have been accepted during the Apostolic era: the mass along with incense and candles; worship through saints; the veneration of Mary; the observance of seasons and days such as Lent, Easter, Advent, Ascension, Christmas, etc.; the use of musical instruments and hymns that were not God-breathed.

At the time of the Reformation those in the Reformed Churches began to review the elements of worship and purge out those that were not consistent with the instructions and principles they found in the Bible. The Bible again became the final source for guiding all areas of life—from government and laws to economics and business practices, from family and private life to worship. The desire of the Reformers was to follow the practices of the Apostles. Many of those who wished to purge the false elements from the worship of God paid the price of their lives. Many were put to death in Germany, France, Spain, England, Scotland, and elsewhere, because they refused to adhere to the practices of the Roman Catholic Church.

“The Reformation was, above all, a return to God in genuine worship. Out of this came the zeal that sustained the Elders in their arduous task—and the work of catechetical teaching. I’m not ashamed, then, to speak out for what many regard as a concern of another era. I refer to a holy worship of God that conforms to Scriptural standards. I’ve been reading, of late, from the selected works of that eminent reformer John Calvin. And it has struck me again how zealous he was— along with the other reformers—to get back again to a worship of God that is worthy of our God and Savior.”³

During the seventeenth century the persecution of Protestants who refused to allow the worship of God to be polluted with the additions of men continued. In England and Scotland, thousands of Puritans and Presbyterians were killed because they would not follow the dictates of the Bishops who attempted to regulate worship through books of common order. Similarly, in France, the Huguenots continued to face persecution because they refused to worship in the way of the Roman Catholics. Many Puritans, Presbyterians, and Huguenots fled to the Americas to set up new communities where they would be able to worship God in a right manner.

At the peak of the Second Reformation, Protestants temporarily gained control of the parliaments in Scotland and England. It was during this short period, in the middle of the seventeenth century, that the proponents of the Reformation produced the finest systematizing of the Bible’s teaching. The summary documents that they produced are the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*, and *The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*. These documents were the product of men who held seriously that the word of God is normative for all of life and that, in particular, God is to be worshiped only as he provides direction or example in Scripture.

Shortly after the production of these documents, the Puritans and Presbyterian Covenanters again faced cruel persecutions because of their adherence to Biblical standards for worship. From 1660 to 1688, many thousands were killed because they refused to worship in a way that they believed God did not permit.

Regardless of what people today may think of the Puritans and the Presbyterian Covenanters of the seventeenth century, no group in the history of the NT Church has been more clearly concerned for obedience to God in every area of life than they were. Their driving motivation in life was the true glory of God. They believed, without equivocation, that God alone set the standards for worship and that any worship not authorized by him by precept or principle was not to be tolerated. We need to consider seriously why such godly and thoughtful men and women considered defending the correct worship of God something worth giving their lives for.

³ G. I. Williamson, “Renewal of Scriptural Worship,” from *Journey*, January-February 1987; <http://members.aol.com/RSICHURCH/renewal.html>.

Since that time, the Church has allowed the principles that the Puritans and Presbyterian Covenanters stood for to be compromised. There has been a waning of the belief that God does have standards for worship and that he cares about how he is worshiped. As this belief has weakened, belief in the Bible as the standard for all of life has also diminished. Whether one is the cause of the other is not clear. What is clear however, is that very few in the Church today view the Bible as the standard for worship as well as the standard for guiding scientific and historical disciplines; determining morality; governing civil institutions and laws; directing economic, educational, and social-welfare practices; ruling family life; and dictating personal holiness. The belief that the Bible alone is the standard for determining how we are to worship God has been overshadowed by man's personal preferences, just as the Bible as a standard has been pushed from all other areas of life.

God does care about correct worship. It is an important matter to him. We are not dealing with a single proof-text. The pages of Scripture proclaim loudly that God must be worshiped in spirit and in truth. We are not dealing with a trivial matter. We are dealing with one of the most important matters that we can imagine. How we worship God stands and falls with how we respect God and his Law in all areas of life. The closer we come to the correct worship of God, the more likely it is that we will be close to his standards in all other areas of life. The Bible, and only the Bible, must be our standard for determining how God is to be worshiped.

3. Defining True Worship

What is worship? Throughout the preceding chapter, I used the word ‘worship’ but did not define it. It is possible to establish the importance of worship using a general notion of what worship is. However, we cannot continue this consideration of worship, without a precise definition of worship since we will have to consider what falls within the definition and what does not.

If you asked a typical person the question, he or she would probably respond by giving examples, rather than giving a formal definition. For example: “Prayer is worship.” or “Singing praise is worship.” These definitions are probably not far from being accurate. However, we won’t canvas the opinions of the average Evangelical church to define worship. Our definition of worship must be consistent with how God defines it. So, we will use the Bible as our source for the definition.

Before we determine how God defines worship in the Bible, we need to address one definition of worship that is usually raised whenever the question of God’s regulation of worship is discussed with those who don’t agree with the position held by the fifteenth and sixteenth century Presbyterian and Puritan reformers. This definition says that all of life is worship¹. This definition is usually presented when someone attempts to put a boundary around what constitutes worship. For example, if someone said that we should not allow a drama production in the church service because it isn’t permitted as NT worship, you can be sure that someone else will challenge the statement with the claim that all things that a Christian does (if they are not sinful) are worship. The logic when applied to worship goes something like this: 1) all of life is worship, 2) there are many legitimate things that we do (for example, riding in a subway car) that are not regulated by explicit positive commands in Scripture, 3) therefore worship cannot be strictly regulated either.

It is true that all of our lives are to be lived in homage to God (Rom 14.7-8; 1 Cor 10.31; Col 3.17, 23). In addition, it is true that a few passages of Scripture refer to worship as how we live before God (e.g., Rom 12.1). However, even if there is a general sense in which the Christian’s life is worship, this is not the prevailing sense in which the word ‘worship’ is used in the Bible. Even though all of life may occasionally be referred to as worship, this does not mean, necessarily, that all actions are *worship*. We are to live before God with a subjective reverence for him at all times, and in all that we do, but the objective acts or elements of worship are precisely defined by God, and separated from daily acts of life.

There are a number of passages in Scripture that show that the acts of worship are separate from other activities of life. One example is Matthew 28.16-17. The eleven disciples went to Galilee as Jesus had commanded them. When they saw him there, they worshiped him. It is clear from this example, that whatever they were doing before they worshiped, wasn’t worship—they went from a state of non-worship to one of worship. They were obedient to his command (v 16) and honoured God through their obedience. Yet, their travelling from Jerusalem to Galilee wasn’t considered by Matthew to be worship. It was only when they performed a particular action that they worshiped Jesus. We are not told specifically what they did—falling on their faces, praying, singing a Psalm, etc.—but whatever they did, it was an act of worship.

If all of life is worship, then why does Paul make a distinction between how one should eat in the assembly at the Lord’s table and at one’s own table at home (1 Cor 11.20, 33, 34), or require silence of women in the churches but not at home (1 Cor 14.33-35)? Also, it appears that there are different guidelines for behaviour when Christians are assembled in, what is called, *public worship* than at home.

Other passages that show that worship is a particular act, or special acts, performed in particular places; and that worship is distinct from all of life, include the following: Gen 24.26, 48; 47.31; Ex 4.31; 12.27; 33.10; 34.8; Lev 23.3; 1 Sam 1.19; Ps 22.22, 25; 87.2; Mt 2.11; 14.33; Heb 10.24, 25.

Advocates of contemporary worship often challenge the idea that worship is a particular set of holy activities. They do not like the idea of making a distinction between what we do as worship and what we do at other times, because such a distinction requires that we account for God’s definition of what acts

¹ For example: “Our Heavenly Father wills that the whole life of believers should be worship.” Gary A. Parrett C. “9.5 Theses on Worship: A disposition on the role of music,” *Christianity Today*, February, 2005, pp. 38-42. In this article the author says, ‘Any discussion of worship, then, must begin with the biblical concern for worship as lifestyle not merely a formal gathering that features specifically “religious” actions.’ He sets out an invalid dilemma which suggests that either all of life is worship or worship is a formal gathering (i.e., public worship). He ignores the possibility that specific actions, performed in public worship or at other times, may constitute worship.

properly constitute worship. What makes a particular act holy (i.e., ‘worship’) is not that we do it on Sunday and not on other days of the week but that God has set it apart as a holy act. This distinction is similar to the regulation God made concerning the clean and unclean animals (Lev 11.26). Some animals were clean (holy) and others were not. Some acts are holy and some are not. All animals are devoted to God and are for his glory (Ps 50.10; Rev 4.11), but only some animals could legitimately be offered as worship and others could not be. In the same way, all of life is to be devoted to God and for his glory (1 Cor 10.31; Rom 11.36), but only some acts are valid as worship and others are not.

When we look at the use of the words ‘worship(s)’, ‘worshipped’, ‘worshiping’, and ‘worshippers’ in the Bible we find that all of life can be divided into three classes of activities: true worship, false worship, and non-worship.

Before we look at the Biblical definition of worship, we can consider other suggested definitions of worship that on consideration don’t appear to be complete or valid:

- *Worship is a matter of the heart and not specific actions.* This definition claims that any particular action may be, or may not be, worship. What makes it worship is the attitude of the heart of the worshiper, not the action *per se*. There can be no doubt that our attitude must be right or our worship is false (Ps 51.6; Mt 6.1-18; Mk 12.33). An act of worship can be false or true worship, depending on the state of the person’s heart (Prov 15.8). However, just because a person performs a legitimate action with a pure heart does not mean that the action becomes worship. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well that those who worship correctly must worship in “spirit and truth” (Jn 4.23). True worship consists of proper acts and the right heart.
- *Worship is what is done in Church.* One person has said that worship is “the calling of saints to assemble together to meet and renew covenant with God.”² If worship can occur only in the Covenant Assembly then what did the two Marys do when they fell at Jesus’ feet (Mt 28.9)? What did Gideon do in the field (Judges 7.15)? And what did the man who was cured of his blindness do when he fell before Jesus (Jn 9.38)? Confining worship to a particular place or time or setting (e.g., the Temple, the Synagogue, or a church building on Sunday morning) does not fit with the spirit of Scripture. We find individuals and groups of people worshiping God in formal liturgical services, informal family settings, or in spontaneous acts of adoration; in buildings specifically designed for worship, in upper rooms in homes (in Jerusalem or Ephesus), or even outdoors (e.g., beside a river in Macedonia).

We have eliminated the following as definitions of worship: all of life, any morally right action that is performed with the right attitude, and only actions that are performed in church. In excluding these supposed definitions, we have narrowed the boundary of what constitutes worship, but we haven’t yet formulated a positive definition of worship. Some of the positive definitions that appear to be heading in the right direction include the following:

- “There is no finer definition of worship than *Te Deum* (Latin for “You are God”). It is a prayer that dates from the fourth century and represents a high point in the development of the theology of worship. ... *Te Deum* is a prayer, and this fact calls attention to the forgotten reality that worship is primarily prayer.”³
- “Exactly what is worship? I like King David’s definition. “Oh magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together” (Ps. 34:3 NASB). Worship is the act of magnifying God. Enlarging our vision of him.”⁴
- “[W]orship, put simply, is nothing more and nothing less than glorifying and enjoying God.”⁵
- “Worship is a noble word. The term comes into our modern speech from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe*. This later developed into *worthship*, and then into *worship*. It means, ‘to attribute worth’ to an object. ... It is the excellent worthiness of God, therefore, which makes our worship

² T. David Gordon, “Review Article: The Westminster Assembly’s Unworkable and Unscriptural View of Worship?” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65, Fall 2003, pp. 353.

³ Robert E. Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 36.

⁴ Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group [a division of Thomas Nelson], 1998), p. 74.

⁵ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p. 51.

- possible; and when we offer Him our devotion, praise and prayer, this is to be the thought which is uppermost in our minds: He alone is worship-ful.”⁶
- “What is worship? It is essentially doxology, a giving of glory, praise, honour, and homage to God. In the broadest sense of the word, all true piety is worship. ... Usually, however the Puritans used the word in its narrower and more common sense, to signify simply all our direct communion with God: invocation, adoration, meditation, faith, praise, prayer and the receiving of instruction from his word, both in public and in private.”⁷
 - “Worship is the work of acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord.”⁸
 - “Worship is the activity of the new life of a believer in which, recognizing the fullness of the Godhead as it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and His mighty redemptive acts, he seeks by the power of the Holy Spirit to render to the living God the glory, honor, and submission which are his due.”⁹
 - ‘Worship is a subversive and countercultural act of an alien people who, forsaking the world, listen to the voice of her master saying, “follow me.”’¹⁰
 - ‘Central to a biblical understanding of worship is the notion of *covenant*. ... It is in this context that we talk about the “covenant renewal ceremony.” ... worship is a covenant renewal ceremony. ... [T]he covenant renewal ceremony that God enacts not once but each Lord’s Day.’¹¹

Many of these definitions are from individuals who would not agree with the Puritan’s exclusive approach to worship, but they all state that worship consists of some form of specific action that is different from what we do most of the time in our every day lives, and that is directed toward God. It is interesting that of the definitions quoted above, only Max Lucado attempted to ground his definition on a Scriptural reference. So, it is to Scripture that we will now turn to see if we can derive a more precise definition of worship.

A Biblical Definition of True Worship

In the OT and NT various words are translated into the English word ‘worship’. A study of all the underlying words that are translated into the English word ‘worship’—in its noun and verbal forms—would not only be exhaustive but also exhausting. Instead, we will look only at usage of the word ‘worship’ in the NT. This will provide us with a reasonable understanding of how the Bible defines true worship. Adding the plural and verbal forms of the word ‘worship’ and the OT occurrences would provide essentially the same mix of usages as we will find with the singular noun form in the NT.

We will use the NIV as the basis for this consideration. The translations vary somewhat in how they translate the underlying Greek words into English. The word ‘worship’, in the NT, occurs forty-seven times in the NIV, forty-four times in the NKJV and NASV, etc. However, in general, it doesn’t make a lot of difference which translation we use. The variation among the translations does not change the basic concepts underlying the word ‘worship’

What do we find when we look at the use of the word worship? The following are the primary Greek words that are translated into the English word ‘worship’:

- *proskuneo* (~60 occurrences)
 - Translated as: worship, kneel, fall down, reverence, pay homage.
 - Example: “We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” (Mt 2.2)
 - Other occurrences: Mt 2.8; 4.9, 10; Lk 4.7, 8; Jn 4.20-24; 12.20; Acts 7.43; 8.27; 24.11; 1 Cor 14.25; Heb 1.6; Rev 4.10; 13.8, 12, 15; 14.7, 11; 15.4; 19.10 (twice); 22.8, 9.

⁶ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), p.10.

⁷ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: the Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 249.

⁸ John M. Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1996), p. 1.

⁹ Robert G. Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship: Corporate Worship in the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), pp. 20-21.

¹⁰ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, cited above, p. 34.

¹¹ Michael Horton, *A Better Way—Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), pp. 19, 24, 26, 27. For a similar definition, see: Ralph Smith, *The Eternal Covenant—How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2004), p. 92.

- *latruo* (21) *latria* (5)
 - Translated as: serve, worship, minister.
 - Example: “they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.” (Acts 7.7)
 - Other occurrences: Acts 7.42; 24.14; Rom 9.4; 12.1; Phil 3.3; Heb 9.1; 12.28.
- *sebomai* (10)
 - Translated as: worship, God-fearing, devout.
 - Example: “They worship me in vain.” (Mt 15.9)
 - Other occurrences: Mk 7.7; Acts 17.23 (first occurrence); 18.13; 1 Tim 2.10.
- *phobeomai* (95)
 - Translated as: afraid, fear, alarmed, terror, reverence, worship.
 - Example: “Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God.” (Acts 13.16)
- *eusebo* (2)
 - Translated as: godliness, godly, devout.
 - Example: “Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.” (Acts 17.23; second occurrence)
- *threeskeia* (4)
 - Translated as: religion, worship.
 - Example: “anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels.” (Col 2.18)

What conclusions can we draw from this analysis of the words that are translated into the English word ‘worship’? Worship is an activity that is distinct from other activities of life. Worship is an *act* of reverence such as kneeling before God, paying homage to him, offering a prayer to him, or serving him. Worship also includes the state of mind, or *attitude*, of the worshiper—the acts are to be performed reverently with awe and respect (fear). Worship is not just a state of mind or an attitude. Worship consists of specific *actions* that are performed for, and directed toward, God. Worship is specific actions performed with the right attitude—it is *attitude in action*.

The Bible does not give a precise definition of worship. It uses the word ‘worship’ usually without providing a precise indication of what the specific actions are that the worshiper is performing. We do not find examples in the Bible where it says that a specific action is worship. For example, we don’t find an explicit statement that says: ‘prayer is worship’ or ‘singing Psalms is worship’.

There are only a few instances in the NT where we can infer from the context that specific actions fall within the definition of worship. These are the following:

- Offerings (Acts 7.42; see also Josh 22.27; 1 Ch 16.29; Is 19.21).
- Sacrifices (Heb 10.1; see also 2 Ki 17.36).
- Ordinances of the Tabernacle/Temple (John 4.19-24; 12.20; Heb 9.1)
- Prayer (Rev 7.11-12; 11.16-17).

Adding OT examples, we can expand the list of actions that are included in the definition of worship:

- Singing (Ps 100.2).
- Singing accompanied by musical instruments; possibly prayer (2 Ch 29:28-30).
- Offering incense (Ex 30.8).

In addition, we can further refine our definition of true worship by noting that worship consists of the following:

- Reverential acts offered in a right spirit (Jn 4.23, 24).
- Actions not offered to false Gods (Dt 12.1-4; 31).
- Actions not invented by men. The human heart, even in its regenerated form, cannot be trusted to provide valid acts of worship of God (Is 29.13; Mt 6.1; Mk 7.6-13; Col 2.18-23).
- Actions that are not performed to please men but God (Mt 6.2, 5, 16).
- Actions performed by God’s people. Acts performed by unbelievers and even believers with an improper attitude are not true worship (Prov 15.8, 29; Jn 4.24).

Using this additional information we can formulate a fuller definition of worship:

True worship consists of reverential acts authorized by God, that are directed to him and that are performed to honour him or his name (Ps 96.9).

Just because someone calls a particular action by a name does not mean that that action is in fact what it is called. For example, when hundreds of homosexuals in San Francisco decided to break the laws of California and get 'married' on a Valentine's Day weekend, that does not mean that they were in fact married. Marriage is what God defines it to be—a covenant of one flesh between a man and a woman (Gen 2.24; Mal 2.14, 15; Mt 19.5, 6). In the same way, if an individual or congregation decides to introduce a new ritual or action and call it 'worship' that does not make it worship. Even performing this action on Sunday morning at the 11:00 service of worship does not make the action magically become worship.

What are the specific actions that God accepts as worship? We will answer that question; however, it is necessary first that we determine how God regulates worship. Since he does regulate it, only actions that he has allowed can be included in the definition of true worship.

4. How God Regulates Worship

We have determined that God is not pleased with false worship. This implies that there are some acts that men call ‘worship’ that are not in fact *true* worship. We have also defined worship, from the Bible, as performing one or more actions (authorized by God) to honour God that are offered in the right spirit or attitude. We now need to determine what specific actions are acceptable and pleasing to God as worship and what types of actions are not acceptable. Otherwise, we won’t know what is true worship and what is false worship. Those actions that Scripture shows to be proper actions of worship we will call the ‘elements’ of worship. Before we can identify these elements, however, we have to answer the question: How does God regulate worship? Answering this question is necessary because there are different ways in which it can be answered. The way it is answered will, largely, determine what are the proper elements of worship.

During the Reformation, Reformed Protestants (i.e., mainly the Swiss, French, Dutch and Scottish churches) took the position that innovations in worship introduced during the Middle Ages were not legitimate worship and worked for their removal from the practice of the Church. They developed a set of principles for determining what the elements of worship should be. This set of principles has been called The Regulative Principle of Worship. Presbyterian and Reformed documents from the fifteenth century Reformation and the sixteenth century Second Reformation (i.e., the Puritans and Presbyterian Covenanters) such as the *Westminster Confession of Faith* present this position.

The Regulative Principle of Worship was the position held to be normative within Presbyterian and Reformed churches until about the middle of the nineteenth century. For example, William Cunningham said: “First, that the written word of God is the only rule by which the whole administration of the affairs of the church and the execution of the functions of its office-bearers must be regulated; secondly, That the worship and government of the church are settled and laid down in Scripture, and that it is unwarranted and unlawful to introduce any new thing in worship and government which does not rest upon scriptural authority, in other words, with respect to which God has not positively intimated to us in His word His will that it should form part of the ordinary administration of the affairs of His Church; thirdly, That no laws or regulations should be made except those which it is necessary to make [i.e., not to bind the consciences of men]”¹

The Regulative Principle of Worship has largely been removed from the working principles of the Church. It can no longer be assumed that it forms the basis of a common operating principle that guides the practice of worship in Protestant churches. Even among Presbyterian and Reformed churches, where a denomination, congregation, pastor, or professor claims to accept and adhere to this principle, there is considerable variation in how it is understood and applied. Today, we need to devote careful consideration to what the Bible teaches about how God regulates worship in order to define and defend the Regulative Principle of Worship properly.

In the following scenario, I lay out the most significant possibilities for defining a regulating principle for worship. I believe that a logical progression leads to a conclusion that answers the question: How does God regulate worship?

There are only two initial possibilities. Either God does not, or he does, regulate worship. An analysis of these two possibilities is provided in the tables below.

Position 1: God does not regulate worship
Relevant Scripture (selected):
Gen 4.3-7; Is 29.13; Mark 7.6-13; Acts 17.25; Rom 1.21-25; 1 Cor 14.40; Col 2.18-23
Explanation of the position:

¹ William Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1863), Chapter 9, pp. 248-56.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This position holds that anything is permissible as, or in, worship. • It is based on the assumption that the OT church was bound but that the NT church is free to do as it pleases. • “It appears that man has a tendency, surely born of his fallen nature, to imagine that he is perfectly qualified to adorn the worship of God with his inventions and additions. What folly!”² • The associated references demonstrate that man-made worship is unacceptable to God. • This position (i.e., that God does not regulate worship) is not supportable from Scripture.
Implications of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permits anything that men define as worship, including such things as horse riding demonstrations and juggling or tearing apart a leg of lamb during the Lord’s Supper instead of breaking bread. • Man (through tradition or practice) sets the ‘standard’ for what is ‘valid’ worship. • Results in chaos.

Position 2: God regulates worship
Relevant Scripture (selected):
Ex 20.25, 26; Mal 1.6-10; Jn 4.23, 24; 1 Cor 11 & 14
Explanation of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God controls in some form what he finds acceptable as worship. • At the highest level, this is the over-riding definition of the ‘Regulative Principle of Worship’.
Implications of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates boundaries of some kind around what can be considered the legitimate elements of worship. • The Bible serves as the basis for determining what is legitimate worship.

The only Biblically correct position is that God regulates worship. Some people are willing to concede that God regulated worship in the OT economy (e.g., in the Tabernacle and Temple) but that he has lifted the regulations under the NT economy. They claim that since Christ has abolished the Ceremonial law³ in his death, worship is now unregulated under the NT economy. The Apostle Paul, writing after the regulative principle was supposedly abolished, states a regulative principle. He explicitly condemns man-made doctrines, commandments, and human will-based worship (Col 2.20-23). He also laid out specific guidelines for worship in 1 Corinthians, chapters 11 and 14. Everyone draws a boundary of some form around worship in the NT era. The question is whether it will be God’s boundary or man’s. God not only regulated worship in the OT economy but also continues to regulate worship in the NT economy.

Accepting that God regulates worship in the NT economy, as our starting position, there are only two possible basic positions that can be proposed as to how he regulates worship. He either regulates it by proscribing the elements of worship (i.e., negatively) or by prescribing the elements (i.e., positively). Either God tells us what is not acceptable as worship and leaves the specifics to our determination or he tells us what elements are acceptable (e.g., offering sacrifices of unblemished clean animals, or prayer), and everything else is excluded by default.

We find in Scripture that God tells us what are the acceptable forms of worship. This should exclude all other forms and elements, by default. However, because of our tendency to introduce false worship, God also includes specific instructions about what are unacceptable ways of worshiping him (e.g., through idols). So, the two options that need to be compared are a pure proscriptive form of regulation, and a hybrid position that includes both proscriptions (negative exclusions) and prescriptions (positive inclusions).

Position 2.1: God regulates worship by proscription (negative exclusions only)
Relevant Scripture (selected):
Ex 20.4-6; Dt 4.15-19

² John W. Keddie, “Whatsoever I Have Commanded You,” *The Gospel Magazine*, Nov-Dec 1980, pp. 262-267.

³ We will consider the claim that the Ceremonial law has been abolished, in chapter 8.

Explanation of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God excludes particular elements (acts, forms, objects, ceremonies, etc.) from worship. • Anything that he has not excluded is permitted. • The associated references demonstrate that God does not allow worship elements for which he has not given positive warrant. • This position (i.e., that God regulates worship only by exclusions) is not supportable from Scripture because (as seen below in 2.2), he regulates worship prescriptively (positively) as well as proscriptively (negatively).
Implications of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not permit idols (and, by application, images and statues of saints or 'Jesus') or bloody sacrifices in NT worship. • Permits in NT worship: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Singing human compositions (hymns); ○ Instrumental music; ○ Incense; ○ The celebration of Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ascension; ○ Dedication of children; and ○ Liturgical dancing, etc.

Position 2.2: God regulates worship by prescription (positive inclusions) and proscription (negative exclusions per 2.1)
Relevant Scripture (selected):
Ex 40.16; Lev 10.1, 2; Dt 4.2, 5, 6; Dt 12.28-32; 1 Sam 13.13, 14; 2 Ch 26.16-21; Mic 6.6-8
Explanation of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are to worship God only as he directs prescriptively and proscriptively. • “The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. 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 men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.”⁴
Implications of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limits worship to what God has stated or shown by example should be included in NT worship. • Excludes by default anything not included in the prescription. • Augmented by specific proscriptions.

The idea that God regulates worship by proscription is the popular view that is held by most people in the Church today, even though they may not argue explicitly that if God hasn't prohibited a particular act, then it is permissible. A practical problem with this view is that God would have to give us a very long list of exclusions to provide a clear indication of what is unacceptable in worship. It is clear, however, through an objective analysis of Scripture, that God does not need to provide a lengthy list of exclusions. He provides a general list of representative exclusions and a specific list of only those items that he permits as acceptable forms of worship. This is, probably, the most important division in all of the debates about worship. If God permits anything not excluded, then his regulation of worship is very limited and essentially 'anything' goes. However, if God defines what are the acceptable elements of worship, then we are not to offer any other form of worship than what he has permitted.

If you don't agree with the second position—that God regulates prescriptively as well as proscriptively—you should examine prayerfully the verses listed in the table above, and the verses offered in the subsequent analysis. They provide a representative overview of the Bible's teaching, which is that God is displeased with any form of worship that he has not specifically required.

⁴ “Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day,” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, para. 1.

Accepting the position that God regulates worship prescriptively and proscriptively, we can now take the analysis to the next step. We need to ask the question, is NT worship regulated only by the NT or by both the NT and the OT? Stating the question differently, are we to look for our prescription (and proscription) only in the NT? An analysis of the two positions is offered in the following two tables.

Position 2.2.1: God regulates worship only by NT warrant
Relevant Scripture (selected):
Mt 23.23
Explanation of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without direct warrant (by command or Apostolic example), no OT element of worship should be included in NT worship. • This position (i.e., valid worship includes only elements given warrant in the NT) is not supportable from Scripture. • The associated references (here and in the table below) demonstrate that we are to base our understanding and definition of worship on the positive warrant of the entire Bible.
Implications of the position:
<p>Does not permit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Baptism of children; ○ Singing human compositions (hymns); ○ Use of instrumental music; ○ Congregational singing; ○ Women to take communion; ○ Teaching that tithing is required; ○ Altar calls; ○ Pronouncement of benedictions/blessings in a worship service; and ○ Celebration of Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ascension, etc.

Position 2.2.2: God regulates worship by NT <i>and</i> OT warrant
Relevant Scripture (selected):
Mt 5.17-19; 2 Tim 3.16, 17
Explanation of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elements of worship given warrant in the OT can be included in NT worship, if there is not a command or principle directing their exclusion.
Implications of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permits elements of worship such as singing Psalms and pronouncements of benedictions/blessings along with prayer and preaching, etc.

We can see from the analysis above that if we limit our warrant to the NT, we will have to remove immediately many of the practices of the modern church. We find no explicit warrant for them in the NT. Although many of the worship practices of the modern Church likely should be eliminated because they find no warrant in Scripture (NT or OT), there are worship practices that are valid only if we derive them by principle, instruction, or example from the OT. For example, we find no explicit instruction in the NT to baptize children. Presbyterians, of course, baptize children because they believe that as the sign of the Covenant it replaces circumcision, which was applied to infants. Baptists reject this argument and demand an explicit warrant from the NT for the baptism of children. Baptists are, however, inconsistent in that they do not demand a similar warrant for many of their other practices in worship. I am not aware of any Baptists who refuse women access to the Lord's Supper because there is no explicit warrant for including them in the NT.

Limiting the warrant for worship practices to the NT is contrary to both the teachings of Jesus and Paul, who indicate that all of Scripture is to serve as the basis for righteous living. We conclude that all of Scripture provides the basis for deriving our warrant for what constitutes worship under the NT economy.

We now come to the final dimension of our analysis. We can ask, do we need an explicit command for every practice in worship, or can the positive warrant be derived by example and logical inference from principles?

Position 2.2.2.1: God regulates worship by direct Scriptural precept only
Relevant Scripture (selected):
Mt 28.19, 20; Jn 14.26; 1 Cor 11.23-26
Explanation of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only elements for which God gives a direct command (OT/NT) are to be included in NT worship. • “All worshipping, honouring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without his own express commandment is idolatry.”⁵ • This position (i.e., requiring direct precept for the actions of worship) holds that we are to follow only the instructions of Jesus and, by extension, the Apostles. However, this position is not supportable from Scripture and does not leave room for principled inference from the actions of Jesus, Apostolic example, or OT prototypes.
Implications of the position:
<p>Does not permit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Baptism of children; ○ Dedication of children; ○ Singing human compositions (hymns); ○ Congregational singing; ○ Women to take communion; ○ Teaching that tithing is required; ○ Altar calls; and ○ Celebration of Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ascension; etc.

Position 2.2.2.2: God regulates worship by Scriptural precept, example, and logical inference from principles
Relevant Scripture (selected):
1 Cor 11.1; Eph 2.19-22; Phil 3.17
Explanation of the position:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only selected elements or acts are to be given to God as, or in, worship, i.e., only those warranted by positive commands of Scripture or the examples of Jesus or the Apostles, which may be derived through the application of valid interpretive principles from either the OT or NT. • “The Principle that God is to be worshipped only in ways prescribed in Holy Scripture and that the Holy Scripture prescribes the whole content of worship ... By this is meant that all elements or parts of worship are prescribed by God Himself in his Word. This principle has universal reference to worship performed by men since the fall. In other words it has equal application to the Old and New Testament. It is also universal in that it is regulative of all types of worship, whether public, family or private.”⁶ • “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.”⁷
Implications of the position:

⁵ John Knox, *True and False Worship: A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry* (1550) (Dallas TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1988) p. 2; from *The Works of John Knox* (Ed. David Lang; Edinburgh: James Thin, 1885, Vol 111, pp.29-70).

⁶ Dr. William Young, “The Second Commandment,” *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, Vol. 27, No. 2, April-June, 1972, pp. 49-54.

⁷ “Of The Holy Scripture,” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, para. 6.

- Requires careful Biblical interpretation.
- Utilizes principles such as:
 - Completion of revelation in the Bible and closure of the Prophetic office;
 - Unity of the Old and New Testaments;
 - The unity of God's Law;
 - Replacement of the form of ceremonial worship, but not the substance;
 - Application of the laws of holiness and separation;
 - God does not have to repeat himself in the NT;
 - Maintaining a balance between covenantal continuity and discontinuity; and
 - Distinction between elements vs circumstances of worship.

If we limit the warrant for worship to direct precept or command, we are confronted with some of the same problems we faced if we limited the warrant to direct NT precept. For example, we don't find a command to baptize children anywhere in the Bible and we don't find a command to allow women to take the Lord's Supper. We reject the position that direct precept is required for every act of worship—not because it is impractical or because it doesn't allow us to continue worshipping according to our own traditions or desires. Rather, we reject it because we are told in Scripture to follow the example of the Apostles and because we base our interpretation of scripture on a set of hermeneutic principles that apply the comprehensive teachings of Scripture as a whole, to every area of life, including worship.

Some critics provide a 'straw man' caricature of the Regulative Principle of Worship and claim that proponents of the Regulative Principle of Worship require direct precept for every act or element of worship. I admit that some who have written about the Regulative Principle of Worship simplify their presentation and give the impression that the Regulative Principle of Worship is based on direct precept only. For example, some say, 'if it isn't commanded, it is forbidden'. This popular line among supporters of the Regulative Principle of Worship leads to a misunderstanding. In practice, for example, even those who make the simplistic statement would not exclude women from the Lord's Supper. It is clear that they are basing their application on the principle outlined in Position 2.2.2.2 above.

How does God regulate Worship? We can summarize our analysis as follows:

God regulates worship by proscription (negative exclusions) and prescription (positive inclusions) through commands and examples, which may be derived from the OT and NT by inference from principles.

This definition of the Regulative Principle of Worship is in essence the same as that which is stated, in different words, by many who have defended the Regulative Principle of Worship. I include a few examples to show that other defenders of the Regulative Principle of Worship are clearly in agreement with the essence of the position presented here:

- John Owen quoting Samuel Parker says that the "foundation of all Puritanism" is: "That nothing ought to be established in the worship of God but what is authorized by some precept or example in the Word of God, which is the complete and adequate rule of worship."⁸
- John L. Girardeau writes: "A divine warrant is necessary for every element of doctrine, government and worship in the church; that is, whatsoever in these spheres is not commanded in the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements, *is forbidden*."⁹
- James H. Thornwell writes: "We have not been able to lay our hands upon a single Puritan Confession of Faith which does not explicitly teach that necessary inferences from Scripture are of equal authority with its express statements: nor have we found a single Puritan writer, having occasion to allude to the subject, who has not explicitly taught the same thing. The *principle of*

⁸ Samuel Parker, by John Owen, "The Word of God the Sole Rule of Worship" in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967 [1644]), 13:462.

⁹ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, 1980 [1888]), p. 9.

- inference* they have unanimously affirmed. Our own Confession of Faith—and surely that is a Puritan document—does it, in a passage already cited.”¹⁰
- Michael Bushell writes: “When we say that each element of worship requires a divine warrant, we do not mean that an explicit command in a single text is required in every instance. Commandment in the narrow sense of the term is not necessary to establish divine prescription. Approved example or inference from relevant scriptural data is sufficient to determine the proper manner of worship. The *Confession of Faith* clearly operates on the assumption that principles derived from the Word by “good and necessary consequence” are every bit as binding upon us as those “expressly set down in Scripture.” It is remarkable that there is so much confusion in Reformed circles concerning the validity of this essential principle.... The assumed validity and binding character of argument by inference from Scripture is an essential part of the life of every Christian and lies at the base of every statement of doctrine or belief that goes beyond the express words of Scripture. Certainly we may want from time to time to question the validity of inferences which some people draw, but that is a different question altogether from that of whether or not the church may bind the conscience of a believer on the basis of an inference from Scripture.”¹¹

We must not think that the regulation of worship by God binds us in a straightjacket that hinders creativity and human expression. The regulation of worship by God is liberating and freeing because it allows us to know exactly what pleases God and prevents human inventions and traditions from becoming an imposed burden. For example, if the Elders called the congregation to assemble and led in a service of worship and introduced an act that is not consistent with God’s requirements, they would place a burden on the conscience of any person who does not believe that the particular act is worship. The person would feel obligated to obey the Elders (Heb 13.17) and yet believe that to do so would be sin. By limiting the acts of worship only to those acts that the Bible requires, we can guarantee that what Elders command is consistent with God’s will and can be required of the people of God. Worship that is acceptable to God must put aside all imaginations and inventions of men.

¹⁰ James H. Thornwell, “Boards and Presbyterianism,” in *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974 [1875]), 4:255.

¹¹ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant, 1993 [1980]), pp. 122-123.

5. The Elements of Worship

We have developed a Biblical definition of true worship—reverential acts, authorized by God, that are directed to him and that are performed to honour him or his name. We have also concluded that God regulates worship by proscription (negative exclusions) and prescription (positive inclusions) through OT and NT commands and examples, both of which may be derived by inference from principles.

We now have to apply these conclusions to determine what specific acts constitute true worship, since they are explicitly commanded or can be derived through valid application of interpretive principles applied to all of Scripture. The question we will now answer is: What are the valid elements of worship? In answering this question, we will establish what are the true, or legitimate, acts that can be offered to God as worship.

Biblical Elements of Worship

In the following table, I have listed the acts that can be offered to God as worship by the NT Church. I provide Scripture reference to support the conclusion that these are valid acts of worship under the NT economy, either by command or example. I have also provided examples of the OT Ceremonial forms of worship that have been retained or replaced by the elements that are approved by God for Christians under the NT economy.

The Multidimensional Elements of Worship		
Element	Representative Scriptures	OT Ceremonial Counterparts
Primary Dimension¹: Downward		
1. Reading Scripture	Neh 8.5, 6 Acts 13.15; 15.21 Col 4.16 1 Thes 5.27 1 Tim 4.13 Rev 1.3	Reading Scripture
2. Preaching/Teaching	Neh 8.8 Mt 11.1 Mt 13.54 Mk 3.14 Mk 16.15 Acts 8:31 Acts 9.20 Acts 13.14-16ff Acts 17.17 Rom 10.14 Eph 4.11-13 2 Tim 4.2	Levitical teaching
3. Benediction/Blessing	Num 6.23-26 Mt 19.13, 15 Heb 13.20, 21	Benediction/Blessing
Primary Dimension: Upward		
4. Psalm Singing	Ps 47.7 Ps 105.2 Eph 5.19 Col 3.16 Heb 13.15	Animal sacrifices Musical instruments Levitical choirs Psalm singing

¹ The Elements of worship may fall under multiple Dimensions. For example, Psalm singing is instructional (e.g., Col 3.16) as well as God-directed in praise.

The Multidimensional Elements of Worship		
Element	Representative Scriptures	OT Ceremonial Counterparts
	James 5.13	
5. Prayer	Ps 141.2 Mt 6.5-15 1 Thes 5.17 Rev 5.8	Incense Prayer
6. Lawful/Religious Oaths and Vows	Dt 6.13 Neh 10.29 Ps 116.14-18 Is 19.21 2 Cor 1.23 Heb 6.16, 17	Covenantal oaths and vows
Primary Dimension: Outward		
7. Tithes and Offerings	Mal 3.6-12 Mt 6.1-4 1 Cor 16.1-2 2 Cor 9.12 Heb 13.16	Tithes and offerings
Primary Dimension: Inward		
8. Lord's Supper	Matt. 26:26-29 Acts 2.42 1 Cor 11.17-34	Passover
9. Fasting	Joel 2:12 Mt 6.16-18	Fasting
10. Baptism	Mt 28.19 Acts 2.38, 41	Circumcision Sprinkling of blood with hyssop

Most Protestant Evangelicals would probably agree that the elements included on the list in the table above, *may* be included as elements during public worship. Most of these elements, or ones very similar to them, are found in the worship of most Evangelical congregations at any given Sunday morning service. In fact, the elements are found in most churches, whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, or Presbyterian.

Some people will question the way I have worded a few of the elements. For example, they might wonder why element 4 is called 'Psalm Singing' and not 'Hymn Singing' or 'Offering Praise', and they might question the inclusion of 'Lawful/Religious Oaths and Vows' and wonder about the word 'Tithing' as distinct from 'Offerings'. They might also give a passing thought to elements that they include in their worship, but don't appear on the list, such as instrumental music performances, offerings of song by a soloist, or lighting candles. In general, however, most people would shrug their shoulders and conclude that I just missed them, or that I am making a precise distinction where none is required.

I will make the point below that this list constitutes the only valid elements of worship for the post-Apostolic Church. However, first we will consider briefly each of the elements in the table to defend as necessary the conclusion that they are *the* acts of worship. For all of the elements but one—Psalm Singing—the brief discussion below will be the full extent of our consideration. Do not conclude, however, that any of these elements is less important than Psalm Singing. They are all important acts of worship.

1 Reading Scripture

This element is probably one of the few in the list over which there would be little debate. All Christians would agree that reading the Bible is a form of worship, or belongs *in* the time of worship. Yet, this element of worship is rapidly disappearing from many churches. I have attended worship services where there was no designated time of Scripture reading and the only reading would occur as the preacher gave his (short) text for the sermon. In contrast, the Puritans who composed the *Westminster Confession of*

Faith and Directory for Publick Worship, taught that a chapter from the OT and NT should be read systematically each week from the pulpit so that the entire Bible was read through regularly. This practice is seen rarely in the Church today.

2 Preaching/Teaching

There is little debate about the inclusion of preaching or teaching as an element of worship. Preaching is Covenantal communication. The hearer is accepting and agreeing to the Covenant obligations. As such, this is an act of worship. Hearing God's ambassadors preach is to participate in a relationship with God. Much has been written about how preaching should be performed—from notes or extemporaneously, topically or exegetically, with visual aids or not, whether women should do it, and so on. However, the principle that preaching/teaching must present Christ as saviour and apply Scripture to our lives, is so integral to the life and worship of the Church that the principle is rarely questioned. We won't address the topic further.

3 Benediction/Blessing

The only time a question is raised about giving a Benediction/Blessing is when someone who disagrees with the Regulative Principle of Worship wants to use it as an example of an element of worship for which there is no explicit command given in the NT. We of course, do not hold the position that an explicit command is required to perform a specific act as worship. We derive our warrant from Apostolic example which was consistent with the instruction given to Aaron (Num 6.23). Regardless, no one I am aware of would question the inclusion of a Benediction/Blessing at the end of a service of worship.

Although I believe that a Benediction/Blessing is a distinct element of worship, it may however be a mode² of prayer.

4 Psalm Singing

Exclusive Psalmody is the 'lighting rod' of the debate about worship. Chapter 9 is devoted to this topic.

5 Prayer

No one questions the propriety of prayer as worship. There have been debates about whether or not prayers should be written and read or extemporaneous. There are also debates about how to interpret Paul's instruction about women remaining silent in the Church (1 Cor 14.34) and whether that instruction applies today, and if it does, whether it applies to prayer as well as to preaching/teaching. These are hotly debated questions and beyond the scope of this book.

6 Lawful/Religious Oaths and Vows

There will be some who disagree with the inclusion of oaths and vows as an element of worship. They will usually belong to denominations of the Protestant church that have concluded, from a (mis-) interpretation of Jesus' words in Matthew 5.33-37, that it is wrong for a Christian to take oaths or make vows.

In the Bible, the words 'oath' and 'vow' can be used interchangeably (Num 30.10; Ps 132.2). An oath is primarily a solemn promise to keep or confirm a covenant (Dt 4.31; 29.12, 14; 2 Kings 11.4). Oaths can also be taken to devote one's self to God (Nu 6.2); dedicate a child to God (1 Sa 1.11), devote property to God (Gen 28.22) or to accompany the offering of sacrifices (Lev 7.16).

Scripture gives principles for oath taking:

- We are not to take a false oath (Zec 8.17) or swear one rashly (Lev 5.4).
- Oaths can be voluntary (De 23.21, 22), but are still binding (Num 30.2; Ps 76.11).
- We are forbidden from taking an oath in the name of idols (Josh 23.7) or any created thing (Mt 5.34-36). For example we should not say: "I give you my word as an Englishman ..." or "I swear as a knight of the realm ..." or "I swear on my mother's grave ..." etc.

² See the next chapter for the distinction between elements and modes of worship.

- We are to use God’s name alone when taking oaths (De 6.13; 10.20).

How then do we reconcile these instructions with the teaching of Jesus in the *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt 5.33-37)? Was oath-taking permissible in the OT, but not permissible for NT believers? Jesus did not denounce using God’s name in a serious oath (Mt 26.63, 64). In fact, it was only when he was charged under oath that he provided an answer to his inquisitors. Paul used oaths many times (Rom 9.1; 2 Cor 1.23; Gal 1.20; 1 Th 2.5; 1 Th 5.27). We are told that God himself took an oath in his own name (Heb 6.16, 17). By these examples, Jesus and the writers of the NT justify oath-taking.

In the *Sermon on the Mount* Jesus speaks in hyperbolic form about oath-taking, as he does elsewhere (e.g., plucking out an eye, cutting off an arm; Mt 5.29-30), to emphasize his point. People had (have) trivialised oath-taking, and Jesus was pointing out the need for oaths to be taken only in a serious context. When men trivialise oath taking they take the name of God in vain. Jesus also points out that people who take oaths commit perjury when they rationalize their oaths by drawing a supposed distinction between types of oaths. Jesus appears to be teaching in the *Sermon on the Mount* that: 1) we are not to use the name of God or take oaths in casual conversation, and 2) it is wrong to use God’s creation as a substitute for God’s name when swearing an oath.

Oaths are a serious matter for a serious time. The act of taking an oath before God is reverential, it is an act authorized by him, directed to him, and performed in his name. Therefore, taking a lawful oath is an act of worship. Reaching the same conclusion, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states: “A lawful oath is part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calls God to witness what he asserts or promises ... The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence: therefore to swear vainly or rashly by that glorious and dreadful name, or to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred (Mt 5. 34, 37). ... [i]t is a sin to refuse an oath touching any thing that is good and just, being imposed by lawful authority.”³

It is becoming fashionable to separate the name of God from oath taking. Consider the following news item:

‘So Help Me God’ Stricken from Police Oath – Police recruits in Honolulu will no longer say, “So help me God,” when they take the oath required of all new police officers. Wire reports say the group Hawaii Citizens for the Separation of State and Church pressured the police department to omit the word “God” on constitutional grounds—the “separation of church and state” argument. In fact, the U.S. Constitution says nothing about the separation of church and state. It just says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Some have interpreted the sentence as a blanket ban on uttering the word God on government property.⁴

What is the implication of this ban on taking an oath in God’s name? Something has to be substituted for God’s name. It is either a created object or nothing. If it is nothing, it is equivalent to saying that the oath is based on the person’s own veracity. If it is based on his own veracity, then this is equivalent to setting himself in the place of God. Not taking an oath in God’s name is equivalent to taking it in our own name—this is idolatry. Christians who think they are being pious by not taking oaths, but rather ‘affirming’ something, set themselves in the place of God—and make idols of themselves.

7 Tithes and Offerings

Many will say that tithes are not *required* of New Testament believers because they belonged to the Mosaic Law. Regardless, everyone agrees that some form of offering is required to support the work of the Church. Giving offerings to God is a reverential act, authorized by him and performed to honour him—and is therefore worship. However, God continues to require a tithe (i.e., a tenth) in the NT economy, beyond any freewill offering we might wish to bring to him.

Let’s consider briefly the requirement to tithe as separate from giving freewill offerings. Abraham (a non-Jew) paid tithes to Melchizedek a non-Aaronic priest (Gen 14.20; Heb 7.4-10). This shows that tithing is not included only in the Mosaic Law. Shouldn’t we pay tithes to the one who is greater than

³ “Of Lawful Oaths and Vows, “ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 22, paragraphs 1-3.

⁴ CNSNews.com; 2002-09-25.

Melchizedek—that is, Christ? Abraham’s grandson also promised to give a tenth portion of the increase of his wealth to God (Gen 28.20-22) long before Moses came on the scene to deliver a specific law about tithing (Lev 27.30).

In addition, the NT endorses the requirement to return an explicit tithe to the LORD. Jesus instructed the Pharisees that it is correct (and necessary) to continue tithing (Luke 11.42; Mt 5.20). Of course, as he states, tithing alone is not representative of true holiness! Paul reinforces the requirement to tithe. He indicates that our giving is to be:

- An act of worship – “on the first day of the week” (1 Cor 16.2)
- Regular – “on the first day of the week” (1 Cor 16.2)
- Proportionate to the increase of our possessions – “in keeping with his income” (1 Cor 16.2)
- Administered by persons appointed in the church (Deacons?) (1 Cor 16.3)
- Generous (at least a tithe?) (2 Cor 9.6-9)
- For the support of those who preach the gospel (1 Cor 9.14)
- For the benefit of needy in the Church (2 Cor 9.12).

Beside the claim that tithing is ‘Mosaic’, the other popular claim is that it is ‘legalistic’ to impose a specific amount on Christians. The contention is that giving offerings should be left to an individual’s discretion. Why is the requirement to pay a tithe considered to be a form of legalism when the requirement not to murder is not? What is the real reason for questioning the requirement for a tithe? Is it to protect the gospel from legalism, or is it to rationalize being cheap? The requirement to give an explicit portion (a tithe) does not apply only to OT believers. The requirement to give a tithe is still binding under the NT because it has not stopped being a serious sin to rob God of his required portion of our possessions (Mal 3.8-10). No one who is against the tithing principle can give evidence to show that the requirement has been abolished for NT believers.

One other consideration about tithing is worth noting. If God truly left the specific amount to be given to him to man’s discretion, this would not provide freedom but result in chaos and doubt. For a believer in Jesus Christ, saved from the guilt and curse sin, the law does more than reveal sin; it brings freedom (James 2.12, 13). It does this by teaching us how we may please and love God and love our neighbour. Without the Law, we could only guess at what pleases God and would never be certain of the right way to please him. Without God’s requirement of a tithe, we would be continually at the mercy of an unguided conscious wondering if we had given the right amount to God—we would be at the mercy of guilt manipulators.

Freewill offerings go beyond the tithe, and are truly voluntary. There are many examples in the OT. In the NT we find the following examples of representative freewill offerings: Mk 12.41-44; Acts 5.4 (Peter said that Ananias was free to do what he wanted with the land); 2 Cor 8.1-9.15 (esp. 8.3, 8, 12; 9.5, 7, 13); Phil 4.15, 18 (notice especially that Paul says that the offering is an acceptable sacrifice that pleases God).

8 Lord’s Supper

I know of no one who would question the observance of the Lord’s Supper as an act of worship. There are, however, incorrect ways of observing the Lord’s Supper (e.g., viewing it as a sacrifice of the body of Christ) that invalidate the observance as true worship.

9 Fasting

Fasting has largely disappeared from Protestant, Evangelical worship. It is probably because our forefathers overreacted to the abuses of fasting, such as those associated with Lent and abstaining from meat on Fridays.

Jesus provides guidelines about the proper way to fast as an act of worship. But it is almost irrelevant for us to consider *how* to fast if we don’t practice fasting. Therefore, we should first consider the purpose of fasting before we address the method.

OT law required a fast once per year. The only prescribed fast is the one on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16.29; 23.27; Nm 29.7). The Jews appear to have added other annual fasts later (Zech 8.19). In addition, special times of fasting were called during national emergencies (Judges 20.26; Joel 1.14), and individuals fasted at times of personal distress (2 Sam 12.22; Nehemiah 1.4). Typically, the Pharisees went beyond the requirements of Scripture and required fasting twice per week (Lk 18.12). They changed the observance of

fasting from a time of intense worship associated with the confession of sin or a special call for God's help into a hollow ritual of sanctimonious outward display.

There is no specific command in the New Testament that states that we must practice fasting. We could conclude that since Jesus says he will never leave us (Jn 14.15-21) there is no need for us to fast (Mt 28.20; Mk 2.19). However, Jesus assumes that his disciples will fast (Mt 6.16, 17), and he says that there will be a time for fasting (Mk 2.20). Also, we are provided with examples of fasting in the NT (Acts 13.3; 14.23) that indicate that it was an accepted practice among the Apostles. Their practice in worship is to be a standard for us.

Fasting pleases God when it is offered as a special offering of private worship. We should consider fasting when we are in any of the following circumstances:

- To facilitate grieving over sin and (personal or corporate) confession (Jud 20.26; Neh 9.1, 2; Ps 69.5-12)
- To obtain guidance and help from God (Ezra 8.21-23; Neh 1.4; Est 4.16)
- To heighten our appeal to God, for example, asking him to save a friend; when we are setting out to do something new and extraordinary (Ps 35.13; Mt 17.21; Acts 13.2, 3; 14.23)
- To remind us that man does not live only on natural bread (inference, Mt 4.1-4)
- To curb the desires of the sinful nature (inference, Tit 2.2).

Fasting it is not to be performed as a duty for its own sake but as an inward (silent, personal, and private) form of worship that advances our outward, corporate worship and our visible walk of obedience before God. It is a humbling of the soul that makes us desire to obey God and follow the example of Jesus (Is 58.6-14).

In most instances in the Bible, fasting appears to consist of complete abstinence from food and drink (other than water) for an entire day. But sometimes a fast may have consisted of taking only a small amount of bread and water (Dan 10.3) so as to abstain from legitimate physical pleasures for a time. The fast that God delights in is the one that raises our souls to heaven, not one that causes physical pain (e.g., a headache) and makes us irritable (Is 58.4, 5).

Fasting is an inner act of worship that is not to be performed for others to see (Mt 6.17-18). It is a private matter between a Christian and God. In general, we should not know if another person is fasting. Therefore, we must never judge the apparent behaviour of others when it comes to the matter of fasting. Nor can we assume that if there are no signs of fasting our fellow Christians lack sincerity or commitment to Christ. Our own views about the frequency or 'proper' manner of fasting are not God's standard. What others do about fasting is simply not our concern.

Nor should we ever feel that we are more righteous than other Christians if we do fast regularly. The false righteousness of the Pharisees is shown by the irony of their denial of the flesh so that they could glory in the act of fasting by drawing attention to themselves.

Fasting is a neglected aspect of worship in our hedonistic age. I suspect that many of us need to think seriously about how we should apply the teaching of Jesus in our lives and how we can worship God through fasting.

10 Baptism

Baptism is a contentious element of worship. But the contention is not usually over its being an act of worship, but rather over matters such as the meaning (e.g., a sign of conversion or of membership in the covenant community), the proper mode, the valid recipients, and the manner in which grace is conferred through the act. Because there is probably no one who would debate the inclusion of baptism as an act of worship, we won't pursue the other matters at this time.

The Elements of Worship in the Apostolic Church

In the NT we find examples of worship as it was practiced or commanded by Jesus and the Apostolic Church. It is interesting to observe which of the worship elements we have identified are found in explicit Apostolic practice and which are not explicitly identified.

The Elements of NT Worship Endorsed by Jesus and the Apostolic Church				
Element	Jesus	The Jerusalem Church	The Corinthian Church	Other NT Churches/Synagogues
1. Reading Scripture	Lk 4.16-19			Acts 13.15; 15.21
2. Preaching/Teaching	Mt 10.7; Jn 13.7-16.31	Acts 2.40, 42; 4.33	Acts 18.5, 11; 1 Cor 14.26	Acts 13.13-15; 19.8
3. Benediction/Blessing	Lk 24.50	Acts 6.5, 6		Acts 15.33
4. Psalm Singing	Mt 26.30 ⁵		1 Cor 14.26 ⁶	Eph 5.19
5. Prayer	Jn 17	Acts 1.14	1 Cor 11.13; 14.14, 15	Acts 14.23
6. Lawful/Religious Oaths and Vows	Mt 26.63, 64			
7. Tithes and Offerings	Mt 23.23	Acts 4.34-37	1 Cor 16.1-2	Acts 11.29, 30; 2 Cor 8.2-4
8. Lord's Supper	Lk 22.17-22	Acts 2.42	1 Cor 11.17-34	Acts 20.7, 11
9. Fasting	Mt 6.16-18			Acts 13.2; 14.23
10. Baptism	Mt 28.19, 20	Acts 2.41	Acts 18.8	Acts 19.5

We should note that there are actions which appear to be elements of worship that are performed in the Apostolic Church which I have not included in the list of worship elements above. For example, speaking in tongues (Acts 2.4; 1 Cor 14.27; Acts 19.6) and prophecy (1 Cor 14.26; Acts 19.6) occurred in more than one Apostolic church. Although Pentecostals would not accept my conclusion, those in a Presbyterian and Reformed context usually interpret these actions as being temporary signs of the Apostolic age that ended once the Apostles died and the NT canon of Scripture was complete. It is also possible that both tongues and prophecy are alternate, although temporary, modes of the preaching/teaching element of worship. We won't consider these two actions further as it is not my intention here to demonstrate that tongues and prophecy were temporary. A reader who wishes to explore this matter further could refer to a book such as *Perspectives on Pentecost*.⁷

It is interesting that there are no examples in the Apostolic Church of the use of oaths or vows in a gathered assembly. This does not mean that taking an oath or vow is not an act of worship. To include it among the acts of worship requires another line of reasoning—as we gave above. Paul took a religious oath in the context of the ceremonial system that was being replaced (e.g., Acts 18.18), but we don't have any examples of a similar oath or a covenant renewal (like we find in Nehemiah 9 and 10) in the Apostolic Church. We do observe another possible act of worship that may have some bearing on the taking of an oath/vow: ordination or commissioning is performed in the Apostolic Church (Acts 1.26; 6.5, 6; 13.2, 3) and may be a distinct act, and element of worship. There would likely have been an oath and a benediction/blessing associated with the ordination or commissioning, as there is in congregational ordinations today.

Confessional Endorsement

The Authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* identify the elements of worship:

“Prayer with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men; and that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of his Holy Spirit,

⁵ It is generally agreed by commentators that the hymn they sang was one or more of the Psalms from the Hallel portion of the Psalter (Psalms 113-118).

⁶ The Greek is 'psalm'.

⁷ Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Phillipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979).

according to his will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance; and, if vocal, in a known tongue.

“The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as, also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: besides religious oaths, and vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasion; which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.”⁸

These sections quoted from the *Confession* include all the elements listed in the table above except that they do not specifically mention Tithes and Offerings and Benedictions/Blessings (although Benedictions/Blessings) may be, in their view, included under the element of prayer.

The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, also from the Westminster Assembly, includes the same elements of worship, as can be seen from its sections. The *Directory* also deals with other matters that often involve or include some of the elements of worship (e.g., marriage ceremonies, funerals and stated days of public thanksgiving):

- Of the Assembling of the Congregation.
- Of Publick Reading of the Holy Scriptures.
- Of Publick Prayer before the Sermon.
- Of Preaching of the Word.
- Of Prayer after Sermon.
- Of the Sacrament of Baptism.
- Of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.
- Of the Sanctification of the Lord’s Day.
- Of the Solemnization of Marriage.
- Of the Visitation of the Sick.
- Of the Burial of the Dead.
- Of Publick Solemn Fasting.
- Of the Observation of Days of Publick Thanksgiving.
- Of Singing of Psalms.
- An Appendix touching Days and Places of Publick Worship.

The *Directory* specifically mentions Benedictions/Blessings in the chapter *Of Prayer after Sermon*, where it says: “. . . let the minister dismiss the congregation with a solemn blessing.” In addition, the *Directory* makes reference to Tithes and Offerings using the term ‘collection for the poor’ in two sections:

- Of the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper: “The collection for the poor is so to be ordered, that no part of the publick worship be thereby hindered.”
- Of the Observation of Days of Publick Thanksgiving: “At one or both of the publick meetings that day, a collection is to be made for the poor, (and in the like manner upon the day of publick humiliation) that their loins may bless us, and rejoice the more with us.”

The requirement for congregations to sing Psalms is explicitly stated in the *Directory* in more than one place. The implication is that only Psalms are to be sung to the exclusion of human compositions (hymns), as can be seen from the following: “It is the duty of Christians to praise God publickly, by singing of psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family. In singing of psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord. That the whole congregation may join herein, every one that can read is to have a psalm book; and all others, not disabled by age or otherwise, are to be exhorted to learn to read. But for the present, where many in the congregation cannot read, it is convenient that the minister, or some

⁸ “Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath-day,” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, paragraphs 3 and 5.

other fit person appointed by him and the other ruling officers, do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.”⁹

It is entirely spurious reasoning to claim that the authors of the *Confession* are only endorsing Psalm singing and not explicitly excluding the singing of mere human compositions. I deal with the position of the authors of the *Confession* at length in chapter 12.

Charles Hodge noted that the elements of worship identified by the *Confession's* authors are in fact the means by which God dispenses grace to his people: the word (read, preached, heard, and sung), the sacraments, and prayer.¹⁰ These are for the edification of the Christian (1 Cor 14.26) as well as for the glory of God.

An Exclusive List

The ten elements listed in the table above are *the* Biblically endorsed elements of worship for the post-Apostolic Church. God has prescribed them as acceptable worship. As a result, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* recognizes these as the acts of worship that are to be performed in the NT Church. They are the *only* acts of worship that God accepts. Unless another distinct action (e.g., ordination or commissioning) can be demonstrated to be a distinct reverential act that is authorized by God and is directed to him and performed to honour him or his name, no act of worship can be added to this list.

Anything else that we do in our lives, whether routine or extraordinary, even if the action is intrinsically good and done with a God-honouring motive, is not an act of worship. Anything offered as worship to God that consists of something other than the elements identified above, and in their precise form, is not true worship.

Other acts may be offered to God as worship, but because the Bible does not prescribe and endorse them (either by positive command or example, explicitly or by inference from principles) they are not accepted by God as worship. These other actions may be *perceived* to be worship, but just because they are called ‘worship’ does not make them true worship. This means that the following actions, along with many others, are not acts of worship under the NT economy: playing musical instruments, singing songs of mere human composition (i.e., not God-breathed), liturgical dancing, conducting drama performances, burning incense, lighting candles, carrying a cross in a processional, washing hands (Mt 15.1-3), foot washing, ablutions other than baptism, gestures such as making the motion of a cross, anointing Jesus with perfumed oil,¹¹ placing palm fronds before an image of Jesus, celebrating festivals such as Christmas and Easter, etc.

Until I list the exclusions (i.e., specify acts that are *not* worship), most people find the whole discussion of the Regulative Principle of Worship purely an academic exercise and dismiss it. However, the list of exclusions hits ‘below the belt’. Their view and belief of what constitutes worship is challenged since my exclusive list *excludes* forms and acts that they are familiar with. Their shrug suddenly turns into a strong challenge and sometimes even anger. People respond with passion, and make statements like: “What do you mean, we can’t sing *Amazing Grace*?” Or, “Are you telling me I can’t use guitars, a piano, or an organ during the Sunday service? Or, “You’ve got to be kidding when you say that a trained choir singing Handel’s *Messiah* isn’t pleasing to God?” Or, “What is wrong with a Christmas pageant?” No one who destroys sacred cows is popular.

We have reached the crux of the debate about the Regulative Principle of Worship. Its application seems always to come down to three key concepts:

1. *A Complete List of Elements of Worship* – The list of elements is complete. Only the acts identified in the list are worship, anything else is not worship.
2. *Exclusive Psalm Singing* – Only the Psalms from the OT Psalter are to be sung as worship.
3. *Without Instruments* – The Psalms when sung as worship to God are to be sung without instrumental accompaniment.

⁹ “Of Singing of Psalms,” *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*.

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 3.466.

¹¹ The anointing of Jesus with perfumed oil (Mt 26.6-13; Lk 7.38, 38) was an extra-ordinary act of worship offered while Jesus was physically present on earth, and in anticipation of his death and resurrection. This action could not be performed today (except in spiritual form such as offering prayer as incense) without resorting to some form of substitute for Jesus—this would be idolatry.

Debates in the modern Evangelical Church over such things as liturgical dancing, drama productions, the role of choirs, etc., are relatively easy to resolve if conclusions have been reached and accepted on these key points—i.e., the ten elements and exclusive Psalm singing without instrumental accompaniment.

Before we proceed to a deeper consideration of these three points, it is worth pausing for a moment. Everyone in the Evangelical Church agrees that there is some kind of boundary around worship. They will agree that some good actions that men perform are simply not worship—for example, replacing the piston rings in a car engine or singing a song about love between a man and his wife. At some point everyone draws a line and says, “this is worship and this is not.”

Everyone in the Evangelical Church agrees that some songs that are sung as ‘worship’ are just not acceptable as worship—for example, to praise Mary as a perpetual virgin or to espouse some form of pantheism. A theological criterion is applied for selecting the worship songs. Regardless, a line is drawn, and some songs are excluded and others permitted.¹² The same thing happens with music. It may be that particular instruments or genres of music are permitted and others excluded.

The fact that some form of line is drawn around the elements and forms of worship demonstrates that the real issue is not that a line is drawn, but *where* it is drawn. Most people who react to the exclusive list of worship elements given above are not reacting to the concept of a line (although some might claim that ‘anything goes’ in worship). What they are reacting to is where the Bible draws the line. The real issue is whether men and women are willing to accept God’s line or create their own. This places us back in the Garden—we are once again confronted with the question: “Did God really say ...?”

Of course, someone will say, “But your list isn’t the *Bible’s* boundary, it is your own narrow interpretation and definition!” This is the same claim that is raised on just about any topic you can name. There is a Biblical position on marriage, pre-marital sex, homosexuality, divorce, abortion, just wars, grace and works, God’s law, the mode and recipients of Baptism, women preachers, election and predestination, eschatology, etc. The fact that there are debates throughout the Church on these topics does not mean that the Bible isn’t clear. It just means that someone isn’t willing to accept God’s position. On all these topics, it is necessary for the parties both to defend positively their view and constructively critique the alternate views.

I will defend the position that God has defined an exclusive list of worship elements; and it includes singing Psalms and no other compositions and excludes the use of musical instruments. I will also deal with the objections to this position. It is not enough for the person who disagrees with my position to: 1) dismiss it out of hand—the weight of the evidence should be considered, or 2) respond with only negative arguments. A constructive response to my position must also provide a positive argument for why mere human compositions are acceptable to God as worship and that God *requires* them, and that the use of musical instruments in worship is not only permitted but also *required*. The response must demonstrate that God has *prescribed* the use of mere human compositions and musical instruments in the NT Church.

¹² See for example Packer’s desire to retain the older hymns vs ‘praise songs’: J. I. Packer, “The Challenge of the Third Millennium [sic],” *RTS Reformed Quarterly*, 19:2 (Summer 1999), <http://www.rts.edu/quarterly/summer99/qa.html>.

6. Elements, Modes and Circumstances of Worship

Does God regulate every aspect of worship? According to the principle that we developed above, the answer must be ‘Yes’. God regulates every aspect of worship by proscription and prescription, through commands and examples, which may be derived from Scripture by inference from principles.

Someone may respond and say that God doesn’t regulate *some* aspects of worship—at least not under the NT. For example, in the OT the garments of the priests were described in detail, but nothing is said about how NT Elders should dress. The OT prescribed morning and evening sacrifices every day, but the NT doesn’t mention the times of worship that the Church met on the Lord’s Day. The Temple was laid out according to the precise instructions from God, but NT congregations assemble in school gymnasiums, hotel meeting rooms, living rooms, auditorium-style sanctuaries, and cathedrals. If God regulates all aspects of worship, how is it that we are not provided direction for the times and places of worship?

We are, in fact, provided with direction for *every* aspect of worship. However, not all directions are as explicit as others. As we have noted, some direction is given by example, and some direction is derived from Scripture by inference from principles. We can think of commands, examples and principles as being directions on a continuum. At the one end (command), there is a high degree of certainty about what God requires. At the other end (principle), we have less explicit direction from God—it is still direction but our means of deriving the direction is inferential from principles such as the application of the holiness and separation laws, covenantal continuity/discontinuity, and the completion of revelation and closure of the Prophetic office. Between these extremes are examples of how Christ and the Apostles worshiped.

Command Element	Example Mode	Principle Circumstance
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In the same way, there is a continuum between those aspects of worship that are specific elements that God requires of us and those aspects that are derived from Biblical principles by Christian’s applying guided common sense (circumstances). Between the elements of worship and the circumstances, are modes. Modes of worship may be derived from command, example or principle. God regulates the entire continuum. There is no aspect of worship that is not under his authority. While every aspect of worship is regulated by God, not everything connected with worship is an act (element) of worship.

That there is a distinction among element, mode, and circumstance is clear to most people, in practice if not in principle. They would agree that prayer is an element of worship. They would also agree that whether one stands, kneels, or sits to pray is a distinction of mode—although they might not be able to explain the reason for the distinction between element and mode. They would also agree that whether a prayer service is held at 10:00 or 11:00 on Sunday morning is a circumstance—again, even if they could not explain the taxonomy defined here.

Some authors, like John Frame, however, argue that there cannot be circumstances to worship, because all of life is under the Regulative Principle of Worship.¹ Frame contends that since all of life is regulated, circumstances don’t really exist, and therefore the distinction is artificial. His conclusion, therefore, is that we can do just about anything in worship, as long as it is consistent with Biblical principles. He states, “I therefore reaffirm the regulative principle in the form of RP1 [i.e., “whatever is not commanded is forbidden”], while denying that this principle for worship is any different from the principle by which God governs other areas of life. To do this, I must reiterate the confession’s qualifications upon RP1 (and the third qualification, which comes from Reformed practice); for those qualifications entail areas of freedom analogous to those we enjoy as we apply the word to other areas of life.”²

Frame is correct when he says that, “all human actions are ruled by divine commandments. There is no neutral area where God permits us to be our own lawgivers.”³ The mistake Frame appears to make is to deny that in both “all human actions” and in worship, God lays out some aspects of his commands more explicitly and some aspects less fully. For example, God has laid out detailed instructions about

¹ John M. Frame, “Some Questions About the Regulative Principle,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 54, Fall 1992, pp. 357-66.

² Same as above, p. 366.

³ Same as above, p. 362.

consanguineous relationships (Lev 18.6-18), has given less specific details about using weights and measures in commerce (Lev 19.35, 36), and has only given general guidance about how the office of the civil magistrate is to be organized and to function (e.g., Rom 13.4). In the same way, some aspects of God's law were temporary, relating to a particular time and place (e.g., the cities of refuge) but teaching universal principles such as due process.

In the domain of worship, we find the same thing. For some aspects, God gives explicit commands. He specifically lays out the elements that constitute worship—for example, prayer is an act of worship but performing a juggling act or brain surgery are not acts of worship. God also gives general guidance, through example of the modes by which the elements may be properly performed—for example, the valid modes of Baptism are immersion, pouring, and sprinkling. He leaves us to work out the fine details of the circumstances (e.g., how often the Church will meet for communal prayer) from principles such as balancing the requirement to work six days and rest on one day. God also provided specific instructions that were temporary for some aspects of worship. For example, he gave specific instructions about how the Tabernacle was to be laid out as a symbol of earth's relationship to heaven, and which kinds of animals were to be used for the sacrifices.

Some have misunderstood the distinction between elements and circumstances and suggested that the elements are regulated but the circumstances are not. This is not correct. The distinction is not that some aspects of worship are regulated and others are not. Rather, since all aspects of worship are regulated, the distinction is with respect to the *type* of regulation. This is the position of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* that makes a distinction between the elements and circumstances as follows:

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. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word; and that *there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the 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.* [Emphasis added.]⁴

We should note that the *Confession* does not say that the circumstances are unregulated, but rather that they are to be regulated “according to the general rules [i.e., principles] of the Word, which are always to be observed.”

William Ames (1576-1633), who died before the Westminster Assembly met, presented a view similar to the *Confession's* when he wrote: “The outward circumstances are those which pertain to order and decency. 1 Corinthians 14:40. Let all things be done decently and in order. But the general rule of these is that they be ordered in that manner which maketh most for edification. 1 Corinthians 14:26. Of this nature are the circumstances of place, time, and the like, which are common adjuncts to religious and civil acts. Therefore although such like circumstances are wont to be called of some rites, and religious or ecclesiastical ceremonies, yet they have nothing in their nature which is proper to religion, and therefore religious worship doth not properly consist in them.”⁵

William Young correctly understood the position of the *Confession*, and the Bible—i.e., that all aspects of worship are under God's regulation—when he wrote: “Neither may we say that God's Word provides us with general principles of worship, but leaves the particulars of practice to the discretion of the Church. The whole content of worship includes the specific acts of worship as well as the broad principle basis of these acts. ... The qualification with respect to circumstances far from weakening the force of the regulative principle of worship rather sets in the sharpest focus the position that everything properly belonging to the content of worship must be the matter of divine commandment, not of human devising.”⁶

⁴ “Of The Holy Scripture, “ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, para. 6.

⁵ William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* (London: Edward Griffin for Henry Overton, 1642), p. 318.

⁶ Dr. William Young, “The Second Commandment, “ *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, Vol. 27, No. 2, April-June, 1972; pp. 49-54.

George Gillespie⁷ and Samuel Rutherford,⁸ who were members of the Westminster Assembly, give guidelines for differentiating the elements of worship from the circumstances. I have adapted their ideas to provide a definition of the circumstances of worship. Circumstances:

- Are not a substantial (i.e., commanded) part of worship, and are therefore not essential to worship. Christians must perform the elements of worship; they are not required to perform a specific circumstance. For example, we must all sing Psalms, but the particular tune we use is not of the essence of singing the Psalms.
- Do not have sacred significance or typical association. For example, preachers may wear ties or turtleneck sweaters; they are not required to wear linen ephods, because the garments in the OT economy represented the spiritual holiness that all believers are to wear in Christ.
- Are of natural or physical import, not spiritual or moral import. For example, the place where the Church meets (generally) does not have spiritual or moral import. In the OT economy the Temple had special significance, but in the NT economy the assembled saints are the Temple of God (1 Cor 3.16, 17; Eph 2.20-22; 1 Pet 2.4, 5).
- Are not directly determinable from Scripture because the “*individua are infinita*” (i.e., the specifics are infinitely variable). Circumstances are not spelled out explicitly in the Word of God, and cannot be learned directly from it. They can only be derived from broad principles. For example, the Church assembles for public worship on the Lord’s Day—the Christian Sabbath, but the time of that assembly must be determined by Christian prudence.

The circumstances of worship are to be governed by principles found in Scripture, including the following:

- They are to be introduced with a legitimate justification that can be made obvious to the worshiping saints (1 Cor 10.31; 14.40).
- They are not to be imposed at the whim of the Elders or to appease some faction within a congregation (Phil 2.3; 1 Tim 5.21; 1 Pet 5.2, 3).
- They are to be consistent with love for the brothers/sisters in the congregation (1 Pet 1.22; 3.8).
- They are not to put obstacles (stumbling blocks) in the way of weaker brothers (Rom 14.19-23).
- They are to encourage unity, peace and harmony (Rom 12.18).

The distinction between modes and circumstances is, at times, more difficult to define. There may be overlap between them. In general, we can consider the elements (acts) of worship to be the *what* of worship—i.e., what we are to do. The modes (which some call rubrics⁹) of worship are the different ways that the particular acts of worship can be performed, as shown by Scriptural example—i.e., the *how* of worship. Thus, the modes of worship are legitimate, reverential, and edifying ways of performing the elements. For example, a person can pray in various reverential postures—kneeling or prostrate (Mt 26.39; Lk 5.12; 22.41), reclining (Lk 22.14, 17); sitting (2 Sam 7.18; Mt 14.19; Mk 14.32, 37, 38); and can use various forms of prayer—including the exact words given by the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6.9-13). The circumstances provide for, in general, the *when* and *where* of worship. Of course, these distinctions are not absolute. We believe that worship has a special place on the Sabbath day. This means that, to some extent, the *when* of worship is not a mere circumstance.

As there are legitimate ways of performing the elements of worship, there are also illegitimate ways of performing them. For example, it would not be appropriate to sing a Psalm to the tune for *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall* or to say a prayer in the style of suburban ghetto-rap.

The following table provides examples of possible modes and circumstances for each of the elements of worship. While the elements are invariant, in that no additional elements can be added under the NT economy and none can be subtracted, the modes and circumstances allow for variety suitable to the specific situation in which the elements are performed—as long as the guiding examples and principles regulating them are observed.

⁷ George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies Obtruded Upon the Church of Scotland*, Ed. Christopher Coldwell (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, [1637, 60] 1993), pp. 112, 114.

⁸ Samuel Rutherford, *Divine Right of Church-Government and Excommunication* (Pauls Church Yard, London: John Field, 1644), p. 4.

⁹ T. David Gordon, “Review Article: The Westminster Assembly’s Unworkable and Unscriptural View of Worship?” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65, Fall 2003, pp. 348-349.

Possible Modes and Circumstances for the Elements of Worship		
Element	Possible Modes	Possible Circumstances
1. Reading Scripture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standing or sitting (Neh 8.5; Lk 4.20) • Version of translation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portion of Scripture chosen
2. Preaching/ Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sitting (Lk 4.20, 21; 5.3; Jn 8.2; Acts 13.16; 16.3; 17.22) • Children's message (Dt 11.19; Is 54.13) • Style: exegetical, topical, parabolic, historical-redemptive, etc.¹⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length of sermon
3. Benediction/ Blessing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised hands (1 Tim 2.8) • Hands laid on head (Mk 10.16) • Various forms (Num 6.24-26; Rom 4.7, 8; 16.25-27; 1 Thes 5.23, 28; Heb 13.20, 21; Jude 24, 25) 	
4. Psalm Singing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Style: chanting, four part harmony, etc. • Translation and metre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tune • Number sung • Portion or all of a Psalm
5. Prayer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posture: standing, sitting, kneeling, prostrate (2 Sam 7.18; Mt 14.19; 26.39; Mk 11.25; 14.32, 37, 38; Lk 5.12; 22. 14-19, 41) • Raised hands (1 Tim 2.8) • Form of words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Length of prayer • Number of prayers
6. Lawful/Religious Oaths and Vows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised right hand (Gen 14.22) • Form of oath (Gen 31.53; Judges 8.19; 2 Sam 19.7; Jer 44.26; 2 Co 1.23; Gal 1.20; 1 Thes 2.5; 5.27) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Left hand on Bible
7. Tithes and Offerings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collection or basket at door (Mk 12.41, 42; 1 Cor 16.1) 	
8. Lord's Supper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leavened/Unleavened Bread¹¹ • Common cup 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency (1 Cor 11.26) • Grape juice instead of wine
9. Fasting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstention from all food or just bread and water (Dan 10.3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency
10. Baptism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immersion, pouring, sprinkling • Subjects: infants and adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place (e.g., in a sanctuary or beside a river)
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning and evening worship (1 Ch 16.39) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place of worship (Lk 22.11, 12; Acts 1.13; 16.13; 17.10) • Type of building • Layout and type of seating • Time of worship (Mk 1.35) • Length of worship session

Among those who claim to believe that God regulates worship in some manner, there is debate about where to draw the line between elements, modes and circumstances. Regardless of where the line is drawn,

¹⁰ Derived from examples of Jesus' teaching and Paul's and Peter's preaching.

¹¹ Refer to Douglas Wilson, *Mother Kirk – Essays and Forays in Practical Ecclesiology* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press), pp. 104-106, for a discussion of the symbols associated with each.

everyone (except for a few, like John Frame) believes that there *is* a line. Everyone agrees that there are certain aspects of worship that are elements and others that are modes or circumstances. However, when we come to consider specific aspects of worship and place them in one of the categories, it is then that there are heated debates about worship among those who are Evangelical Protestants—particularly when we consider the use of hymns and the use of musical instruments to accompany singing. For example, some people argue that the Word is the element of worship and that ‘praise in song’ is a mode or circumstance of worship. However, “[i]f praising God by singing is only a circumstance of worship (i.e., it is merely one possible way of praising God among many), then worshipping God by singing unto Him is optional.”¹² Others claim that ‘praise’ is an element of worship and that Psalms or non-Biblical hymns are both legitimate modes of praise. Others argue that the use of musical instruments is merely an aid to worship, and therefore only a circumstance.

In chapter 9, I will defend the position that since Psalm singing is explicitly commanded by God, it is an element of worship. The circumstances associated with Psalm singing are such things as what metre (if any) or tunes are used. Singing non-Biblical hymns is not a *mode* of praise; it is, I contend, an unwarranted intrusion of a human element into the worship of God.

In chapter 10, I will present the argument that the use of musical instruments is not a circumstance of worship. In the OT economy, the use of musical instruments in worship was explicitly regulated by God’s command and was an essential part of the Tabernacle (i.e., the trumpet) and Temple (i.e., various instruments) sacrificial liturgies. Being of the essence of the worship which God mandated, the use of musical instruments cannot be considered a mere circumstance that falls under the general guidelines of Scripture regulating the common actions of men and societies, any more than is introducing an element such as dance or drama into worship.¹³

The challenge, obviously, is to determine what the Bible teaches about the elements *vs.* the modes and circumstances. In meeting this challenge, we must guard against a number of mistaken tendencies:

- Ignoring the importance of having a Biblical warrant, through explicit command or clear Apostolic example, for each religiously significant ordinance (element) of worship.
- Taking essential (i.e., explicitly commanded) aspects of worship from one covenantal economy (e.g., the use of various musical instruments introduced by David to accompany the sacrifices), and treating them as mere circumstances under another covenantal economy, without Scriptural warrant.
- Minimizing the proper distinction between those elements of worship that are regulated by direct command or Apostolic example and those that are regulated by general Biblical principles.
- Allowing anything into the worship of God as a mode or circumstance of performing the acts (elements) of worship that is not consistent with the Word of God.
- Permitting traditions and entrenched attitudes to determine what are considered to be acceptable practices in worship, rather than following Scripture.

It is a significant irony that today differences in the modes and circumstances of worship can cause great conflicts among Christians, yet few in the Church really seem to care whether the elements are what God requires.

¹² Brian Schwertley, “A Brief Examination of Exclusive Psalmody,” <http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/psalms.htm#f2>

¹³ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p. 153.

7. Prophets and Covenants

Who is permitted to introduce new elements of worship, or change the elements? Who is allowed to change the way the Church worships God?

In Nehemiah 8, we find the following statements:¹

“... one section responding to the other, as prescribed by David the man of God” (Neh 12.24).

“... with musical instruments prescribed by David the man of God” (Neh 12.36).

What are we to make of these statements? What do they teach us? We find that the worship that Ezra and Nehemiah reintroduced was regulated by the prescription of David the *man of God*. This prescription refers to the form of worship of the Temple that introduced and utilized Psalms and various musical instruments of praise.

In the passages in Nehemiah, David is called ‘the man of God’ (see also 2 Ch 8.14). This appellation seems to be significant because it places him in a class with a select few: Moses (Dt 33.1), unnamed prophets (Judges 13.6, 8; 1 Sam 2.27; 9.6-10; 2 Ch 25.7), the prophet Shemaiah (1 Kings 12.22), the prophet from Judah (1 Kings 13), Elijah (1 Kings 17.18; etc.), Elisha (2 Kings 4.9; 5.8; 7.2; etc.), Hanan son of Igdaliah (Jer 35.4).²

All of these OT uses of the expression ‘man of God’ refer to a person in the prophetic office. The heading of Psalm 90 refers to Moses as the ‘man of God’ in the context of the prophetic utterance of the Psalm. We can conclude that when David is called ‘man of God’ in Nehemiah, he is being referred to as a prophet.

Other Biblical evidence shows that David was included among those in the prophetic office:

- He is called a prophet (Acts 2.29-31)
- He is referred to as a prophet, indirectly, as speaking oracles (2 Sam 23.1, 2; Acts 1.16)
- He wrote many of the Psalms, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, that are part of Scripture (Mk 12.36).

One of the reasons that David had a right to prescribe worship practices was because he was acting in the capacity of a prophet. It was not in his capacity as a king that he instituted worship. David’s actions do not give warrant to other civil magistrates (emperors, kings, presidents, prime ministers, etc.) to introduce changes in worship. Constantine, Charlemagne, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I all claimed rights over the order of worship of the Church, because of their kingly office. But they were mistaken. David’s authority over worship was attributed to his prophetic office, and was not derived from his office of king. Unless these monarchs could have demonstrated that they filled the office of prophet (which they could not), they were not qualified to introduce changes in worship.

God delivered every change in the order, or form, of worship recorded in Scripture, through the *prophetic* office. New forms of worship were delivered to and through Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Christ through the Apostles. The introduction of new forms of worship appear to accompany most of the covenantal administrations (enacted with representatives of the prophetic office), just as each new covenant administration appears to have had new signs associated with it.

Changes in the Form of Worship at Major Covenantal Administrations		
Covenantal Administration	Sign/Symbol	Primary Worship Form
1. Creation (Adam): Commencement (Gen 1.26-2.17)	Sabbath (Gen 2.2, 3)	Not stated
1a. New World (Noah): Preservation (Gen 8.20-9.17)	Rainbow (Gen 9.13-16)	Animal Sacrifices (Gen 4.4; 8.20)

¹ The same concept is found in Joshua 8.30, 31 and 2 Chronicles 8.12, 13.

² There are also two NT uses of the phrase “man of God” in 1 Tim 6.11 and 2 Tim 3.17. These are referring to Timothy (and others) in the role of ‘minister of the Word’ the NT replacement for the OT prophets.

Changes in the Form of Worship at Major Covenantal Administrations		
Covenantal Administration	Sign/Symbol	Primary Worship Form
2. National (Abraham): Promise of Seed and Land (Gen 15, 17)	Circumcision (Gen 17.11)	Fellowship Meal of Bread and Wine (Gen 14.18)
3. Sinaitic (Moses): Law (Ex 24)	Passover [although before the actual giving of the Law] and sacrifices (2 Ki 23.21; Ps 50.5)	Ceremonial System (Ex, Lev, Deut)
3a. Priestly (Phinehas): Holiness (Num 25.10-13)	Urim and Thummim (?)	Holiness and Separation Laws
4. Royal (David): Kingdom (2 Sam 7.5-16)	Scepter (Gen 49.10; Num 24.17; Ps 45.6; 108.8; 110.2; Heb 1.8); Salt (2 Ch 13.5)	Psalms and Musical Instruments (1 Ch 23.5)
5. New (Christ): Consummation (Jer 31.31-34; Lk 22.7-20; Heb 8, 9)	Bloodless Sacraments: Baptism and Lord's Supper (Col 2.11, 12; Lk 22.20)	Spiritual Equivalents (Heb 13.15)

We are not told whether, or how, Adam worshiped God in the Garden of Eden. However, since perfect angels and redeemed humans worship God in heaven (Rev 7.11), we can safely assume that he worshiped God in some form in the Garden. On the evening of the day he was created, he began a day of worship—the first Sabbath. The first instance of a specific act of true worship recorded in the Bible is the sacrifice of animals from the flock, brought by Abel. The first recorded act of false worship also occurred, at the same time, when Cain brought unacceptable sacrifices. Since the fall of man into sin, man has always had a desire to bring his own forms of worship before God. The sacrifices were not directly associated with the Covenant of Creation as that covenant administration did not require substitutionary atonement. The re-enactment of the Covenant in its new form, with Noah, included the sacrificing of animals.

The Sabbath and sacrifices remained as ordinances of worship at the time God made a covenant with Abraham. Through Abraham, God introduced new elements and forms of worship including circumcision and the fellowship meal of bread and wine that pointed to the future introduction of the fellowship meal that the eternal priest-king—Jesus Christ—would introduce.

At the time of Moses, the form of the fellowship meal may have been changed into the Passover, which is also a type for the fellowship meal that Jesus would introduce. Through Moses, the Tabernacle was introduced along with the ceremonial ritual associated with the sacrifices and the holiness and separation laws for the priests.

David prepared the plans for the Temple. In many ways, the Temple was similar to the Tabernacle. It was essentially a permanent form of the tabernacle—it established the fact that the Israelites were no longer a wandering people. The form of the sacrificial system did not change dramatically as it moved from the Tabernacle to the Temple. The areas where David's changes were most significant are in the introduction of two new elements of worship to accompany the sacrifices:

- *Psalmody* – There was no singing in Tabernacle worship. Moses is credited with a Psalm (90). We don't know how it was used, if at all as *sung* worship, until it was incorporated into the Davidic corpus of songs. Very few, if any, of the other Psalms in the Psalter were written before the time of David. Most of the Psalms were written by David or his contemporaries (e.g., Asaph). The rest were written between David's time and the return from the Captivity. As far as we know, no Psalms were written after the time of Ezra. Jewish tradition holds that Ezra assembled the Psalter into its final form.
- *Musical Instruments* – Other than the trumpet, which was used in the tabernacle to announce the sacrifice to the assembled worshippers (Lev 23.24, 25; Num 10.10), David introduced all the other musical instruments that formed an orchestra that performed at the time the sacrifice was being offered (2 Ch 29.27, 28).

David introduced singing and various musical instruments into worship. His introduction of these elements of worship indicates at least the following:

- Singing Psalms and the use of musical instruments to accompany singing were added as new elements of the sacrificial worship system.
- God through progressive revelation determined to include singing and musical instruments in the sacrificial system as he introduced the Royal Covenant, pointing to the Prophet-King Jesus Christ.

- Singing Psalms and musical instruments were introduced under warrant from God, through the prophetic office of David.

When the New Covenant was introduced, changes in worship were also associated with that covenant administration of Christ. These changes were introduced by Christ—the great prophet—and the Apostles. The Apostles held the equivalent of the prophetic office in the NT economy and introduced changes in the form of worship under Christ’s authority. Jesus commissioned the twelve as his ambassadors (Mt 10.1-5; Mk 6.7; Lk 9.1-2) and sent them out as his official representatives to establish the NT Church—its doctrine, government, and worship. The Apostolic office was unique, and remains unique. A foundation is laid only once. A different foundation means a different building. In the NT Church, which is the temple of Christ, many living stones (1 Pet 2.4) have been added over the millennia, but the foundation remains solid and unmoving with Jesus as the cornerstone (Eph 2.20) that anchors it firmly.

Paul’s defence of his apostleship proves that membership in the Apostolic office was not simple to obtain (2 Cor 11 and 12). He claims both a direct commission and instruction from Jesus, like the twelve (Gal 1.11-17). The other Apostles accepted Paul’s calling (Gal 2), and Peter accepted his writings as Apostolic and therefore part of Scripture (2 Pet 3.15, 16). No one since the first century—regardless of the claims of pope or cult leader—has been commissioned directly by Jesus and thus can claim Apostolic authority. No new normative revelation from God is forthcoming. The Scriptures are complete and our only final standard for faith and practice. We are not to elevate pastors, teachers, new song compositions, confessions, or the rulings of assemblies of Elders to the level of Scripture.

The confirmation of the call of the twelve to the Apostolic office is shown as Jesus delegates to them authority (right and power) over the physical and supernatural realms. Their power to heal the sick and exorcise demons authenticated their call to the office. Paul refers to this delegation of authority as the ‘marks’ of an apostle (2 Cor 12.12). Anyone who claims Apostolic authority must demonstrate his claim by signs, wonders, and miracles—including raising the dead (Acts 9.40; 20.10).

We will examine more fully, in the next chapter, the full extent of the changes to worship introduced by Christ and the Apostles in the New Covenant.

From this brief examination of the connection between the prophetic office, changes of covenantal administration, and the introduction of new elements and forms of worship, we can derive the following conclusions:

- God’s regulations for worship were delivered through the prophetic office.
- A person holding the prophetic office, commissioned by God, is required to institute changes in the form or elements of worship.
- In the OT economy when individuals³ took it upon themselves to introduce changes in worship, without the authority of the prophetic office, they were rebuked (e.g., Lev 10.1-3).
- No unauthorized individual has the right to introduce changes in worship (Dt 4.2; 12.32).
- Once a new form was introduced by a person with prophetic authority, the generations that followed continued to observe the form (Josh 8.30, 31; 2 Ch 8.13-15; 2 Ch 29.25-26ff; Neh 12.24, 26).
- Changes in the form or elements of worship appear to be associated with changes in covenantal administration.
- The latest covenantal administration was the one introduced by Jesus Christ, directly and through the Apostles.
- There has been no prophetic office since the close of the NT era, with the passing of the Apostles who were part of the prophetic office (Eph 2.20).
- Our worship form must therefore be in accord with, and be based upon, the Apostolic form, the latest formulation of worship under the guidance of a person in the prophetic office and the latest formulation of worship at a change in covenantal administration.
- We have an obligation to do what we can to determine from Scripture what was the Apostolic form of worship, and follow it.

³ Representative individuals. Not all examples of false worship are punished; just as not all overt sins are immediately punished by God.

- Since the prophetic office has ceased to exist and the latest covenant administration is complete, changes in the elements or form of worship are not permissible.
- No one in the Church today fills the prophetic office. Therefore, no one has authority to make changes in the form or elements of worship.

We must ask popes, kings, Anglican liturgists, or twenty-first century worship leaders, who appointed them to the prophetic office and gave them authority to institute changes in the form of worship? If the person cannot show his commission as a prophet at the time of a new covenantal administration, then his innovations and changes in the elements or form of worship are not authorized by God—and are therefore man-made innovations, which in the Bible are called idolatry.

8. The Ceremonial Law is *Not* Abolished

Yes, you read the title correctly.

In this chapter, I wish to explore the idea that the OT Ceremonial Law has *not* been abolished in the NT era. I am not arguing for the use of a Judaistic ceremonial system (the elements of which, to a large extent, have been adopted by the Roman Catholic Church), nor for the observance of dietary provisions of the OT economy. How then, is it possible to suggest that the OT Ceremonial Law is *not* abolished? Before we answer that question, let's provide a context for the analysis that we will conduct.

Ask a typical member of almost any Evangelical Protestant church: "What are the role of priests and Levites, sacrifices, and the ceremonial ordinances of the Temple in the Church today?" How will he or she respond? Probably with words, something like this: "They have no role today, the Aaronic priesthood and associated ceremonial system performed by the Levites was abolished in Christ. There is no longer any need for priests or Levites, because the work associated with the sacrificial system has been abolished."

Ironically, this typical response appears to be contradicted by the current practice of most congregations and denominations throughout the broader Church today. Most of those who state that the OT ceremonial system of worship has been abolished, continue to practice essentially the same form of sacerdotal worship found in the OT. Large portions of the Church (especially Roman Catholics in the Mass) observe a bloodless ritual sacrifice. Church worship emphasizes the power of appointed 'priests' as mediators between God and man. They use 'ministries' of music to 'lead' us to God, passive congregants watching a spectacle of a trained choir, celebration of holy festival days such as Christmas and Easter, and the observance of 'high' liturgies (especially at Easter) that are similar (except for bloody sacrifices) to the liturgy of the Temple.

If an ancient Israelite, who believed in the Christ (Messiah), were to visit most churches in modern North America, he would find the liturgy similar to that which he had witnessed in the Temple. This would be the case whether he attended a Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Church, or a Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist or broadly Evangelical church (from Pentecostal to Baptist and even many Presbyterian and Reformed).

On the one hand, most people today state emphatically that the OT ceremonial system and laws have been abolished, but on the other hand, their form of worship on Sunday mornings is essentially the same as what was practiced in the Temple three thousand years ago, except for the absence of the ritual of the explicitly bloody sacrifices. What do people mean when they say that the ceremonial law has been abolished? Apparently, it means that they can now eat pork and wear cotton and polyester shirts, and don't have to wear ringlets on the side of their hair, but when it comes to worship it makes very little essential difference.

The Law Stands

It seems that we need to approach the matter of the ceremonial law from a radically different perspective, if we are going to be faithful to Scripture and Christ and avoid the inconsistency of saying one thing and acting in the opposite way. Rather than claiming that the ceremonial law has been abolished and then acting, in worship, as if it hasn't been, an alternative is to conclude that the ceremonial law celebrated by priests (yes, *priests!*) has *not* been abolished, but the *form* of worship has been changed dramatically with the introduction of the NT covenantal economy.

Before anyone concludes that I have gone too far, I am not proposing that we re-introduce into the Church a priestly caste, animal sacrifices, incense, Levitical choirs, Jewish dietary practices or the specific holiness-separation provisions found in Leviticus. Yet I will state again my proposition: the ceremonial law has *not* been abolished.

How can I defend such a statement? I base the argument primarily on Jesus' words, recorded in Matthew 5.17-19.¹ Jesus tells us that he did not come to *abolish* the law but to fulfill it and that not even "the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished." We cannot conclude from Jesus' teaching that the moral law has not been abolished, but that the ceremonial law has been. Jesus does not make that distinction, and to the Jewish mind the Law was a unit.

¹ See also: Lk 16.17.

OT Jews probably did not think in the terms of our abstract classes (e.g., moral, civil/judicial, and ceremonial). The examples that Jesus draws from the Law to illustrate the application of the Law in his following instruction (the *Sermon on the Mount*) are taken from all three parts of the Law as we define them today—moral (murder and adultery); ceremonial (prayer, fasting, giving offerings and taking oaths); and civil/judicial (divorce [Dt 22.18]). Although, as Greg Bahnsen notes: “Recognition of such a distinction (between morality *per se* and cult) can be illustrated in the Older Testament itself (e.g., unique capital crimes—Lev. 10:8-11; Num. 4:15; typological requirements—Ex. 25:40; special food restrictions to teach separation from pagans—[in context] Lev. 20:25-26; Deut. 14:21, godly living distinguished from cultic performance—1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:11-17; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8; sacrificial laws given, not to define sin as the other laws do, but to atone for existing sin—Lev. 4:35; etc.)”²

We also cannot conclude from what Jesus says in Matthew 5.17-19 that the summary laws (i.e., the Ten Commandments have not been abolished but, that the specific details have been. The Law stands or falls as a unit, even to the “smallest letter” or “least stroke of a pen”. Either Jesus abolished the Law or he did not. Based on Jesus’ own words, the ceremonial aspects of the Law have *not* been abolished and therefore continue to apply in the NT economy to the same extent that the moral law does.

Other lines of argument that the ceremonial law has not been abolished and that the Law should be considered as a unitary whole is provided by the following considerations:

- God has one law that is good and holy (Rom 7.12) against which all men will be judged (Rom 2.12-16; Jam 2.12). He does not have two law systems—one for the OT and one for the NT.
- Leviticus 17-19 intermingle laws relating to eating blood, sexual morality, sacrificing offerings, stealing and lying, and separation of seeds, animal kinds, and clothing material. The collection of laws as delivered by Moses does not differentiate among the classes—moral, civil and ceremonial. James refers to laws from these chapters many times, indicating their continuing applicability in the NT economy.³
- James tells the NT church that if anyone breaks a single law he has broken the entire law (James 2.10).

It is inconsistent to claim that the Law, in general, has not been abolished, or even that the moral law has not been abolished, but that the ceremonial law has been. Do not confuse the *way* in which the Law is to be observed with the substance or principle of the standing Law. For the moment, let’s focus on the *principle* that the Law stands perpetually. We can consider one example to illustrate. The principle of Sabbath-keeping is given in Genesis 2.3 and again in Deuteronomy 5.12-15. The principle of the Sabbath law was not changed but, clearly, the form of its observance changed. In the original form, there was no redemptive aspect to its observance, as there was no sin in the Garden. In the Mosaic economy, the Sabbath became a symbol of the deliverance from Egypt—representing redemption from sin. In the NT, the Sabbath-keeping principle continues but the form has changed again. In the NT covenantal economy the day of the week has changed and the commemoration of the resurrection has been added to its application. The ceremonial law (principle) has not been changed, but the *form* of its observance and application has been changed. We will consider later in this chapter how the form of the ceremonial law has changed in other areas of worship.

The Forms are Changed, the Law is Not Abolished

There is a lot of confusion about the continuing role of the ceremonial law and the distinction between the continuing principle and the various forms by which the continuing obligation has been fulfilled throughout God’s redemptive history. Because of this confusion, we find that many (most) people claim that the ceremonial law has been abolished, and put themselves in a position of contradicting Jesus. For example (*italic emphasis mine*):

- The *Irish Articles of Religion* (1615), believed to have been composed by Archbishop James Ussher, state: “Although the *Law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites be abolished*, and the Civil precepts thereof be not of necessity to be received in any Commonwealth:

² Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Ceremonial (Restorative) Law,” *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977), p. 213-214.

³ Lev 19.12 (Jam 5.12); 13 (Jam 5.4); 15 (Jam 2.6-9, 12, 13; 16 (Jam 4.11); 18 (Jam 2.8; 5.9).

yet notwithstanding no Christian man whatsoever is freed from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.”⁴

- John Gill, writing on Hebrews 13.9, says: “... which have not profited them that have been occupied therein; they were only profitable to the body; and could be of no other use to the soul, when they were in force, than as they led to Christ, and were regarded by believers; for they were of no advantage to hypocrites and carnal men; they could not sanctify, nor justify, nor cheer the spirits, nor establish the heart; and are of no manner of service at all, since the death of Christ, whereby *the whole ceremonial law is abolished*.”⁵
- Matthew Henry on John 19.19-30 writes: “It is finished, that is, *the ceremonial law is abolished*, and a period put to the obligation of it. The substance is now come, and all the shadows are done away. Just now the veil is rent, the wall of partition is taken down, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances, Eph. 2:14, 15. The Mosaic economy is dissolved, to make way for a better hope.”⁶
- A person writing to the Editor of the *Christian Baptist* in 1825 said: “That *the ceremonial law is abolished*, and that the political law of the Jews never was obligatory on any other nation, I cheerfully admit; but that the moral law was confined to the Jews, or that it has ever been abrogated, I have yet to learn. If I do not misapprehend the New Testament writers, they have every where (when speaking of the moral law) spoke of it with respect. “Think not,” says the Saviour, “that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil,” &c. Matt. v. 17-19. To argue that he came to fulfil, and thereby destroy it, would be directly charging him with self contradiction. If he destroyed by fulfilling it, then he accomplished what he never came to do. Besides, I cannot conceive how a man could justly be censured for breaking one of these commandments, or for teaching others so to do, if Christ had destroyed the whole. Many other places might be quoted where the New Testament writers “establish the law.”⁷ Mr. Bailey applies Mt 5.17-19 only to the moral law, but, as we noted above, Jesus does not make that distinction.
- Matthew McMahon writing on the Sabbath, shows how many people, including John Bunyan, use the assumption that the ceremonial law is abolished as an argument for the discontinuance of the Sabbath principle: ‘If any argument is brought up against the continuity of the moral law in order to discard the 4th commandment, the one which is used most is the appeal to reason. ... The argument goes like this: since natural men cannot, by the light of nature, abide by this commandment since they would have no idea that a Sabbath exists, then the law itself is not moral, but ceremonial. Thus, since the *ceremonial law is abolished* in Jesus Christ, the need to keep the Sabbath, in any form, is abolished as well. To his detriment, this is the argument that John Bunyan used being one of the very few exceptions to Puritan theology at that time concerning the 4th commandment. (Note: John Bunyan was a strict adherer to the Lord’s Day, but he did not believe this was as a result of the association to the 4th commandment. He took his proof from the New Testament passages which speak of the Lord’s Day. However, without the foundation of the 4th commandment, Bunyan simply contradicts himself in saying the Christian is “bound” by a New Testament Lord’s Day since he refutes himself in saying there is no moral obligation to do so under the Law. However, Bunyan’s line of reasoning is ill-founded.)’⁸

Other than Matthew Henry, none of the authors quoted above provide Biblical support for their statement that the ceremonial law is abolished. Matthew Henry refers to Ephesians 2.14-15. These verses along with those in Colossians 2.14-17 are the verses that most people use to support the view that the ceremonial law is abolished under the NT economy. We should consider what these verses have to say about the law.

In Colossians 2.14-17 Paul says that God has “cancelled the written code, with its regulations”. What is the ‘written code’ that is cancelled? Paul doesn’t say. Could he be referring to the entire Law? Most

⁴ “Of the State of the old and new Testament,” [Irish] *Articles of Religion agreed upon by the Archbishops and Bishops and the rest of the clergy of Ireland*, 1615, paragraph 84.

⁵ John Gill, *Exposition of the Entire Bible*, <http://www.gospelcom.net/eword/comments/hebrews/gill/hebrews13.htm>

⁶ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) p. 2047.

⁷ Eli S. Bailey, “To the Editor,” *Christian Baptist*, Vol. 3. No. 1. August 1, 1825, p. 177.

⁸ C. Matthew McMahon “Natural Law and the Sabbath,” A Puritan’s Mind.com.

commentators conclude that he isn't talking about every command, and limit his comments to the ceremonial law, inferring this from the examples Paul uses in verses 16 and 17. The problem with this inference, for those in the Reformed tradition, is that the law concerning keeping the Sabbath day is found in what is traditionally called the Moral Law (i.e., the Ten Commandments), not the Ceremonial Law. Anti-Sabbatarians pick up on this, and claim that, at most, only nine of the Ten Commandments still apply in the NT economy. On the surface, it seems that we have the following three options:

1. All of the law is abolished, because Paul draws examples from both what is traditionally called the moral and the ceremonial components of the law. This option contradicts Jesus' statements in Matthew 5.17-19.
2. Only the ceremonial law is abolished, including the Sabbath, which is ceremonial (even though it is found in the Ten Commandments). This option requires the discontinuance of Sabbath keeping in the NT economy.
3. The ceremonial aspects of the law are abolished, except the Sabbath which is moral (because it is found in the Ten Commandments). This option requires convoluted arguments to defend Sabbath keeping in the NT economy.

There is at least one other possible interpretation. Paul isn't speaking of the abolition of the law, but of the cancellation of the guilt we have for breaking the entire law (our guilt is covered by Christ). In this case, *none* of the Law is abolished, whether it is 'ceremonial' or 'moral'. Under this interpretation, the principles of the Law continue to be enforced but specific instances of *how* it is applied in the NT economy have been changed. The specific Jewish observance of dietary provisions, keeping of festivals and the Sabbath (e.g., seventh day) are not to be observed by NT Christians and have been *replaced* with their NT equivalents.

In Ephesians 2.14-15 Paul says that Christ "destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations". What is the 'law with its commandments and regulations' that is abolished? Paul doesn't say. Could he be referring to the entire Law? Most commentators conclude that he isn't talking about every command and limit his comments to the ceremonial law, inferring this from the reference to circumcision in verse 11. On the surface, it seems that we have the following two options:

1. All of the law is abolished. This option contradicts Jesus' statements in Matthew 5.17-19.
2. Only the ceremonial law is abolished, particularly circumcision. However, this option requires removal of the sign of the Covenant. No Presbyterian believes that the sign of the Covenant has been abolished, but rather has been *replaced* by baptism.

There is at least one other possible option: *none* of the Law is abolished, whether it is 'ceremonial' or 'moral'. Under this option, the principles of the Law continue to be enforced but specific instances of *how* it is applied in the NT economy have been changed. The specific Jewish observance of circumcision has been *replaced* with its NT equivalent, baptism (Mt 28.19; Acts 2.38, 39; Col 2.11, 12).

In Ephesians 2.15 we find the word 'abolishing' used in most English translations. The Greek word used in Matthew 5.17, translated 'abolished', is *kataluo*. However, in Ephesians 2.15, a different Greek word is used: *katargeo*. Since these are different words in the Greek, it might make better sense to translate them differently in English.

The Greek word *kataluo*, is translated as 'abolish' only in Matthew 5.17. In addition, it is translated as 'throw down' (Mt 24.2; Mk 13.2; Lk 21.6) and 'destroy' (Mt 26.61; 27.40; Mk 14.58; 15.29; Acts 6.14; Rom 14.20; 2 Cor 5.1; Gal 2.18). From these examples, it seems that the sense of the word can be understood, in general, as the 'utter destruction' of something.

The Greek word *katargeo*, is also translated as 'abolish', in (Gal 5.11), although the ESV translates it as 'removed'. In addition, it is translated as 'do/pass/take away', 'disappear, and 'cease' (Rom 6.6; 1 Cor 13.8, 10; 1 Cor 3.14; Gal 3.17), 'destroy' (1 Cor 6.13; 15.24, 26; 2 Tim 1.10; 2 Thes 2.8; Heb 2.14); 'fading' (2 Cor 3.7, 11, 13), 'nullify' (Rom 3.3, 31; 1 Cor 1.28), 'worthless' (Rom 4.14); 'released from' (Rom 7.2, 6), 'come to nothing' (1 Cor 2.6), 'used up' (Lk 13.7); 'put behind' (1 Cor 13.11), and 'alienated' (Gal 5.4). It is clear that the word used in Ephesians 2.15 has as a broader range of meanings than does the word used in Matthew 5.17. The various translations seem to indicate that the sense of the word can be understood, in general, as something 'being rendered ineffective'.

If this analysis is correct, then it may be better to translate Matthew 5.17 and Ephesians 2.15 with different English words in order to avoid an apparent contradiction between the two passages, where one

speaks of *not* abolishing the law and the other speaks of abolishing (some or all of) the law. For example, Ephesians 2.15 could be translated as ‘by nullifying’ or ‘by repealing’.

This suggestion may appear to be ‘splitting hairs’. However, it is interesting that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* makes a distinction of this nature. When the authors speak of the ceremonial law, they say the following: “Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now **abrogated**, under the New Testament.”⁹ [Emphasis added.]

In this section of the *Confession*, the authors supply both Colossians 2.14-17 and Ephesians 2.15-16 as proof texts supporting their statement. It is interesting, however, to note that they do not use the word ‘abolished’ that is found in Ephesians 2.15 in the *King James Version*, but rather they used the word ‘abrogated’ found in the Geneva translation of 1599. In addition, some historians of the confessions of the Church believe that the authors of the *Confession* were influenced by the *Irish Articles* that were written about thirty years before the Westminster Assembly, by James Ussher the Archbishop of Armagh, a member to the Assembly. The *Confession*, however, does not use the word ‘abolished’ as does the *Irish Articles*. The authors of the *Confession* were careful with their choice of words. It seems likely that they deliberately chose the alternate word to avoid the appearance of any contradiction with Matthew 5.17.

In Chapter 20 of the *Confession* (“Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience”), the authors say: “But, under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected.” They again avoid stating explicitly that the ceremonial law is abolished and speak of the removal of the burden of the yoke of the ceremonial law, as Paul does in Galatians 5.1.

It is clear from evidence elsewhere in the NT that the forms of the Levitical ceremonial system have been *replaced*. For example, Jesus placed himself at the heart of a new sacerdotal system (Mt 12.6; Jn 2.19). The NT writers also place Jesus at the heart of this new system, as a new form of high priest who can really deal with human sin (Heb 5.5-10; 7.11, 15-18). In the same way, the Mosaic forms of types and patterns have also been *replaced*. Is there an inconsistency here? On the one hand, does Scripture teach the continuing durability of the Law and yet, on the other hand, does it dismiss major components of the Law as being obsolete? Or, as Greg Bahnsen asks: “Does this mean that New Testament Christians are required to observe the Older Testamental *ritual*? The answer to this question is yes and no. Yes, Christians under the New Covenant are still responsible to offer blood atonement for their sins and tend to the obligations of the temple, etc.; however, we must be mindful of the fact that the *way* or *manner* in which Christians do these things under the New Covenant is *not* identical with the Older Testamental observation of the ritual and ceremony.”¹⁰

The answer to the apparent dilemma between the continuing obligation to keep the whole Law and the removal of the OT ceremonial rituals lies in making a distinction between the principle of the Law and the forms by which the principle is applied in the various covenant administrations. The *principles* of the components of the Law pertaining to ceremonial worship have not been abolished. Rather, the *forms* have been changed. They have not just evolved as they did through the covenantal administrations of the OT economy—they have been changed radically, i.e., they have been *replaced* as part of the New Covenant.

Greg Bahnsen presents it differently, but comes to the same conclusion: “The ceremonial observations no longer apply, but their meaning and intention have been eternally validated. The earlier sacrificial ritual was a foreshadow pointing to Christ (Heb. 10:1), and no repetition of a mere shadow can amount to the substantial reality! That which is the foundation of the new economy, in which the outward performance of the ceremonial ritual is not observed, is the obedience of Christ (cf. Heb. 10:8 f.). His obedience makes it no longer necessary for us to obey the ceremonial law in the way which the saints living in the period of expectation did. Ephesians 2: 14-16 says that Christ has put the principle of commandments contained in ordinances “out of gear.”¹¹ He goes on to say, ‘However, the meaning and intention of these laws is equally valid under the Older and New Covenants, even though the former manner of observation is now “out of gear.”’ The restorative law of the Older Testament declared that there is no remission of sin apart

⁹ “Chapter 19: Of the Law of God”, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, paragraph 3.

¹⁰ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, cited above, p. 207.

¹¹ Same as above, p. 209.

from the shedding of blood (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22). The truth of this law, its axiomatic content, could not be set aside, even though the way in which it is observed could. The meaning was secure. “Therefore, it was necessary” that the Older Testament copies be cleansed with blood because they anticipated the cleansing of the heavenly things by Christ’s sacrifice (Heb. 9:23-24). Christ did not cancel the requirement of the restorative ceremonies; He once and for all kept them so that we might observe them in Him.’¹²

Ceremonial Forms as Redemptive Types

The Mosaic *forms* for observing the redemptive types¹³ in God’s Law are no longer to be observed by NT Christians, as they were by the Jews under the OT economy, because of God’s completed revelation in Christ. While the OT ceremonial law has not been abolished, the forms have been *changed*, for example:

- A *new* priesthood has been established that is not dependent on blood-lineage from the sons of Aaron and does not depend on sinful humans who need to be purged of sin as did the sons of Aaron (Heb 7.11-28). This change in priesthood was anticipated in the OT economy (Ps 110.1, 4; Is 66.21).
- The bloody sacrificial system (e.g., Heb 7.11, 12, 27; 9.9, 10, 12; 10.4, 10) has been *replaced* with spiritual sacrifices (Heb 13.15).
- The ceremonial rituals (e.g., Col 2.16-17; Heb 9.1-14) have been *replaced* with spiritual forms (see below for a fuller discussion).
- The signs of the covenant have been *changed* (e.g., Gal 5.1, 2, 11; Mt 28.19; Acts 2.38, 39; Col 2.11, 12).
- The garments of the priests pointed to the righteousness of Christ; in the NT economy, the robes are *changed* to the imputed righteousness applied to his people (Is 61.10; Rev 7.13, 14).
- The specific laws of holiness and separation, e.g., food laws; clothing, seed and animal mixtures; intermarriage with ethnically non-Jews; Levirate marriage; cities of refuge; etc., (e.g., Acts 10.9-16; 11.7-9) were physical symbols of principles that are to be manifested in the spiritual life of believers (e.g., Mt 5.8; Mt 16.11, 12; Acts 10.28; 2 Cor 6.14-18; Tit 1.14, 15).

Notice, in the above examples, that ‘replaced’, ‘new’, and ‘changed’ have a substantially different meaning from ‘abolished’. The fulfillment of the Law by Jesus (Mt 5.17) does not abolish any of God’s laws (principles) but does change, particularly in the case of the ritual associated with the sacrificial system, the specific way or manner we are to apply the principles. Jesus, after stating that the Law is not abolished goes on, in his lessons in the *Sermon on the Mount* (Mt 5-7), to show how we are correctly to interpret and apply the Law.

The ceremonial law is not abolished. We are still required to worship God ceremonially.¹⁴ Some (most) of the external features/forms of the OT economy have been replaced under the NT economy, but not the principles. Also, the requirement to worship God according to his direction, in an orderly and disciplined manner and with a proper attitude of heart, still stands.

God has changed the specific ways in which his Law is to be applied and observed as he has dealt with men through his unfolding revelation. He places before us eternal requirements to worship him as he prescribes but he has changed the specific forms at various times. For example, Abraham offered sacrifices and was given a new covenantal sign (circumcision) to accompany the Sabbath which already existed as a covenantal sign. The sacrificial system under Moses became more elaborate with the introduction of many elements pointing to Christ. At the time of David, God added further new elements such as singing Psalms and instrumental music. With the resurrection of Christ and the destruction of the Temple, the form of worship was simplified in the NT economy. The typical and symbolical elements were mostly replaced by their spiritual equivalents, although symbolic aspects are still found in the NT worship form—for example, in the sacraments and the observance of the Sabbath.

¹² Same as above, p. 212.

¹³ Notice that ‘ceremonial’ is not the same as ‘typical’.

¹⁴ ‘Ceremonial’: marked by attention to or adhering strictly to prescribed forms, procedures, and details ... according to formal usage or prescribed procedures ... a formal act or series of acts prescribed by ritual, protocol, or convention (*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*).

One of the reasons that there is so much confusion in the Church today with respect to what constitutes proper worship is because the Church has lost the distinction being considered in this chapter. While the principles of the ceremonial law remain a standing obligation on the believer in Christ, the means of applying the ceremonial observance has been changed under the NT economy. However, most people in the Church today do not understand the principles of the ceremonial law and the reason for the change in the forms by which it is observed, and have focused on the specific forms isolated from their OT context. The Church today appears to keep, dispense with, or change the OT ceremonial forms at whim, but seems to have no standards for determining which forms to retain, eliminate, or change. For example, rarely would a congregation embroiled in a debate over the use of liturgical dancing, candles or incense, base their consideration on the principle that the observance of the ceremonial law has been changed through the death and resurrection of Christ.

NT Ceremonial Forms

It is necessary, therefore, to show how NT Christians should apply the principle that the ceremonial law has not been abolished and that we are still obligated to observe the ceremonial law—but under a new form. To make the application we will answer the question: What has *replaced* the OT Levitical ceremonial forms? We find the following changes in the form of ceremonial observance that have been made in the NT economy:

- There is no separate priesthood. **All believers** are members of the new **priestly class** (Ex 19.6; Heb 10.11-22 [especially v 14]; 1 Pet 2.9; Rev 1.6; 5.10; 20.6) with Christ as the only *high* priest.
- **All believers** have direct **access to God**, not just a separate priestly order (Heb 10.19-25 [especially v 22]).
- **All believers** (not just males as with circumcision and the Passover) are to **participate in the non-bloody ceremonial sacraments and offerings**: baptism; Lord’s Supper; tithes and offerings of income and in-kind; and fasting.
- Jesus is the antitype for the tabernacle and temple (Mt 12.6; Jn 1.14; 2.19-22), and in him, **all believers** are part of God’s **holy temple/city** (Heb 12.22, 23; 1 Pet 2.5). When believers assemble to worship corporately (i.e., public worship), they are assembling in/as the temple of God.
- **All believers** are called to live lives of **spiritual holy separation**. The Mosaic laws of separation have been discontinued (Acts 10.9-16; 11.7-9) and replaced by their spiritual equivalents which they typified (Mt 5.8; Mt 16.11, 12; Acts 10.28; 2 Cor 6.14-18; Tit 1.14, 15).
- **All believers** are to **offer (spiritual) sacrifices** to God (1 Pet 2.5), without the mediation of human priests. These spiritual sacrifices consist of:
 - Incense = Prayer (Ps 141.2; Lk 1.9-11; Rev 5.8; 8.3, 4)
 - Animal sacrifices = Psalms of praise (Ps 27.6; 69.30-31; 107.22; Heb 13.15, 16; Eph 5.18-19; Col 3.15-17; 1 Pet 2.5)
 - Holy garments = Dedicated life (Rom 12.1; 15.16, 17; Phil 2.17; 2 Tim 4.6; Rev 7.9, 13, 14).

Although I don’t agree with many of Peter Wallace’s conclusions, he has made a correct observation with regard to sacrifices under the NT economy: “New Testament worship is still sacrificial worship. New Testament worship still requires that we worship in the one place—namely, Jesus Christ and his Church—the true temple. Our assemblies are not merely gatherings for prayer and bible study.”¹⁵

The imperfect sacrifices (Heb 9.11-15) and ceremonial shadows (Heb 8.3-6) associated with the sacrifices were part of an obsolete covenant (Heb 8.13) and ineffectual system (Heb 10.4) that has been *replaced* by Jesus Christ and his work.¹⁶ Everything associated with the sacrifices, except singing Psalms¹⁷, including the priesthood, sacred garments, musical instruments, candles, incense, showbread, and altars are

¹⁵ Peter J. Wallace, *Which Regulative Principle? A Response to Steve Schlissel and Brian Schwertley*, <http://www.michianacovenant.org/sermons/rpw.html>

¹⁶ Jesus is the sacrificial lamb (Jn 1.29); lampstand (Jn 8.12; 9.5); bread of the Presence (Jn 6.48; 1 Cor 10.16-17); and altar (Heb 13.10).

¹⁷ Because we have explicit NT instruction to continue singing them (Eph 5.18-19; Col 3.15-17; Jam 5.13), and they represent the sacrifices of the ceremonial ritual (Heb 13.15) under the New Covenant.

discontinued under the NT economy. The old order has been replaced with a new order. Philo¹⁸ speaking of spiritual sacrifice equates the physical forms from the Temple with the spiritual equivalents in the Synagogue: “Though the worshipers bring nothing else, in bringing themselves they offer the best of sacrifices, the full and truly perfect oblation of noble living, as they honor with hymns and thanksgivings their Benefactor and Savior, God, sometimes with the organs of speech, sometimes without tongue or lips, when within the soul alone their minds recite the tale or utter the cry of praise.”¹⁹

The truly radical NT Christian is not the one who claims that the OT ceremonial system has been abolished and then goes about performing essentially the same outward forms, but the one who understands that in Christ the ceremonial requirements still stand but that there has been a total transformation of worship from the symbolical, outward, physical, and spectacular to the substance, inward, spiritual, and simple.

We can summarize the considerations of this chapter as follows:

- The NT Christian is obligated to keep the entire Law, including the ‘ceremonial’ or ‘ritual’ laws (Mt 5.17-19; James 2.10).
- The form of observance of the ceremonial or ritual laws has been changed under the NT economy (Eph 2.15).
- The typical elements that pointed to Christ were intended to be superseded (Heb 7.11, 12, 18, 19; 8.13; 10.1).
- Continuing to observe the ceremonial law in its OT form shows a misunderstanding of the meaning of the typical form, and is evidence of a bondage to an obsolete system (Gal 4.9, 10; 5.2-4).
- To be a faithful NT Christian, one must keep the principles of the ceremonial law by observing the NT *forms*.
- The NT ceremonial forms of sacrifices are:
 - Prayer
 - Psalms of praise
 - Dedicated life.

God Regulates Worship – A Summary

So far, in our consideration of worship, we have concluded the following:

1. *God alone defines true worship.* Anything that God does not require by precept or example as worship is, by definition, not true worship (Dt 12.28-32; Mt 28.18-20; Jn 4.23, 24).
2. *God has defined the elements of worship.* In each covenantal age, God provides a suite of elements that constitute worship. These are the only elements of worship that he permits; any other elements that people bring before God are false worship (Gen 4.4-7; Ex 20.4-6; Is 65.2-7; Mic 6.6-8).
3. *True worship consists of authorized reverential acts.* True worship consists of reverential acts authorized by God that are directed to him and that are performed to honour him or his name (Ps 96.9).
4. *God cannot tolerate false worship.* God’s nature requires that true worship be guarded jealously (Ex 20.4-6).
5. *God punishes false worship.* He shows by the example of severe punishments during the inauguration of new forms of worship associated with changes in Covenant administration that it is a sin to offer worship that is not required by him or that is required by him but not offered in the right manner (Lev 10.1-2; Acts 5.1-11; 1 Cor 11.29, 30).

¹⁸ Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-50 AD): a Hellenized Jew who developed speculative and philosophical justification for Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy.

¹⁹ Philo, *De specialibus legibus [Special Laws]*; 3.172.

6. *Men are finite creatures.* It is absurd to think that men can determine what is right as, or in, worship and what will please God (Dt 29.29; Is 40.12-14; 55.9).
7. *Men are sinful creatures.* Man's natural tendency is toward idolatry and toward the introduction of false worship (Is 29.13; Mk 7.6-13; Rom 1.18-23; Col 2.18-23).
8. *Men have no authority to change worship.* Only prophets, under direct revelation, were given temporary authority by God to introduce changes in his worship. These changes were associated with changes in Covenantal administration. There are no prophets today, and no changes to the Covenant, so there cannot be changes introduced in the elements or form of worship (Neh 12.24, 36).
9. *The Ceremonial Law is not abolished, but the OT form of worship has been changed in the NT economy.* The NT Christian is obligated to keep the entire Law, including the 'ceremonial' or 'ritual' laws (Mt 5.17-19; James 2.10). The form of observance of the ceremonial or ritual laws has been changed under the NT economy (Eph 2.15). A faithful NT Christian will keep the principles of the ceremonial law by observing the NT *forms*: prayer, psalm singing, and a dedicated life of spiritual holiness.
10. *NT worship is defined by Jesus and the Apostles.* Under the NT covenantal administration, we obtain our warrant for the elements of worship from the commands and examples of Jesus and the Apostles (Mt 28.19, 20; Jn 14.26; 1 Cor 11.1). Some elements (e.g., fasting or benedictions) and modes (e.g., baptism by immersion or sprinkling) may be derived from the OT and NT by inference from principles (Mt 5.17-19; 2 Tim 3.16, 17).

9. The Psalter: the Hymnbook of the Church

In this chapter, I will defend the position that the Psalter (i.e., the 150 Psalms) is the only hymnbook that the NT Church is authorized to use *as* worship. Notice that I did not say “in worship.” The position I have been presenting, thus far, is that worship is defined primarily by legitimate reverent acts, and not by times and places. As we will consider in chapter 11, the times and places of worship are important, but they don’t *define* what worship is. Therefore, in the following sections, I do not take the traditional Psalms-only view, which argues that the Regulative Principle of Worship applies only to public worship on Sunday, and therefore the Psalms are the only form of song that should be used in these services. Rather, I take the position that because Psalm singing is the only valid form of singing that can be offered to God as worship, it can be the only form of singing in any act of worship, whether private or public.

The use of the Psalms in worship has been greatly maligned in the Evangelical Church since Isaac Watts first produced his ‘psalter’. He was born in 1674 (died 1748), and was the eldest of nine children. His father, also named Isaac, was a minister among the Dissenters in Southampton. The elder Watts spent time in prison for his nonconformist views, and was in prison at the time of his son’s birth. Isaac Watts, the younger, began the process of introducing hymns by first creating paraphrases of the Psalms, *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, in 1719. Since that time, the Psalms have been replaced by mere human compositions, and in most churches are rarely sung. For example, in one church we attended because there was no Presbyterian and Reformed church available, a song book called *Sacred Songs and Solos* by Ira D. Sankey was used. In that collection of over 1,000 selections, only three Psalms were included. I realize that some churches today are considering the Psalms again and are including them in their worship. But overall, the Protestant Evangelical and even Presbyterian and Reformed churches do not sing the Psalms as did their forefathers in early Protestantism, the Medieval Church, or the early Church.

In the following sections, I present a series of ten arguments for using *only* the Psalms as worship. I also deal with objections that have been raised against the exclusive use of the Psalms in worship since Isaac Watts took the first ‘shots’ at the Biblical Psalter in the preface¹ to his first edition of the ‘psalter’.² Most of the objections used today against exclusive Psalmody were raised by Watts, although they have been refined and restated since his day. Watts initiated a process that has undermined, and largely eliminated, the use of Psalm singing as part of Protestant worship, so it is important that we consider his objections to exclusive Psalmody.

Only two of the objections I have ever heard against exclusive Psalmody speak to the supposed deficiencies with the Psalter. The remainder do not object to the use of the Psalms *per se*, but against the *exclusive* use of the Psalms as worship. However, only a few of these objections present positive arguments for singing new compositions not found in the Bible. Most of the objections challenge the exclusive use of Psalms through negative arguments (i.e., they speak against the exclusive use of Psalms) and claim to support the use of Psalms *and* other compositions—whether drawn from elsewhere in Scripture or from sources outside the Bible. The irony is, as history demonstrates, the Psalms *and* Hymns arguments quickly becomes an essentially hymns-only position in practice. The following table classifies the objections in terms of the nature of their argument:

Classification of Objections Against the Psalms-Only Position			
Objection	Against Psalms	Against Psalms-Only	For Hymns
Paul Tells us to Sing Hymns		✓	✓
Jesus isn’t in the Psalms		✓	
The Psalms Don’t Meet the Needs of the twenty-first century Church	✓	✓	

¹ Isaac Watts, “Preface,” *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

² Apparently the preface appeared only in the first edition. If so, this is not surprising. It is so inadequate as a polemic against exclusive Psalmody that any discerning reader can see through the flaws in logic and theology. In order for his imitation of the Psalms to be successful, it was necessary (whether deliberately or not) to be more subtle.

Classification of Objections Against the Psalms-Only Position			
Objection	Against Psalms	Against Psalms-Only	For Hymns
The Psalms are too Harsh for the NT Era	✓		
We are Told to Sing a 'New Song'		✓	✓
We Compose Prayers, Why Not Songs?		✓	
The Bible Contains Other Song Compositions		✓	
There is No Prohibition Against Using Hymns		✓	
Psalm Translations are Essentially Paraphrases		✓	
The Early Church Sang Hymns		✓	✓
Calvin Sang Hymns		✓	✓
Exclusive Psalm Singing is Practiced by a Micro Minority		✓	

Archetypal Christ

Jesus used the Psalms as worship; we should follow the example of Jesus. The Psalms were often in his mouth, including among his last words on the cross, indicating that he probably had grown up singing them.³ However, the most telling example of his use is found in the inauguration of the Lord's Supper. Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn (Mt 26.30) from the Hallel portion of the Psalter (Psalms 113-118) on the night before his greatest trial—the crucifixion.

Most commentators do not dispute that Jesus sang from the Hallel portion of the Psalter. Ralph P. Martin who disagrees with the exclusive-Psalmody position's interpretation of 'psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs' in Ephesians 5.19 and Colossians 3.16, given below, accepts the position that the hymn Jesus sang was from the Psalter:

[T]here can be no doubt that the early believers in Jesus inherited the desire to express their gratitude to God in the offering of vocal praises, as the Lord Himself had done (Matthew xxvi, 30 which is a reference to the *Hallel* psalm of the Passover festival). Moreover, there were ready to hand the Old Testament psalms which the early Church took over, as we can see from the use which was made of the Psalms in the prayers in Acts and in the theological discussions in Hebrews (which some scholars place in a liturgical context), especially chapters i, ii.⁴

Similarly, a Roman Catholic commentary that is not sympathetic to the protestant Reformed position says: "*a hymn*: Sung to conclude the dinner, this would have been Ps 114/5-118, the second part of the Hallel."⁵

The example of Jesus teaches us that we should sing the Psalms as part of our commemoration of the Lord's Supper and authorizes the use of the Psalms as worship, and in public worship. As Michael Bushell says: "Psalmody and the Lord's Supper are no more separable now than psalmody and the Passover ritual were in Old Testament times. There is thus no instance of Scripture that shows more clearly than this the abiding significance of the Old Testament Psalms for the New Testament Church."⁶

Apostolic Command

Under the New Covenant, we have a new form of worship that applies the spiritual equivalents (Heb 13.15) of the forms in the OT economy. The Apostles, under Christ, are the prophets who inaugurated this new form. The Apostles tell us how we are to worship. What do they instruct us to do?

³ For example: stone builders rejected (Ps 118.22, 23/Mt 21.42); David's Lord sitting at the right hand of the Father (Ps 110.1/Mt 22.44; 26.64); 'you are gods' (Ps 82.6/Jn 10.34); of his betrayal (Ps 41.9/Jn 13.18); hatred of him (Ps 35.19; 69.4/Jn 15.25); words on the cross (Ps 22.1/Mt 27.46; Ps 31.5/Lk 23.46).

⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 42.

⁵ *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Logos Library System.

⁶ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, 1977), pp. 66-67.

In Ephesians 5.19 Paul says, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.” He says something similar in Colossians 3.16, “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.”

What are the ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’ and ‘songs’ of which Paul speaks? The immediate reaction of most people when reading these passages is to think of ‘hymns’ as one of the human compositions such as *Amazing Grace*, and ‘songs’ as something like a scripture chorus. However, we should not assume that the words mean in the Bible what we mean today when we use them. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word ‘hymn’ as: “... taken from the LXX [Septuagint] to render various Heb. words, meaning a song of praise to God.” The first usage cited by the OED occurred about 825 in the *Vespasian Psalter* (Ps 136.3; Ps 137.3 in the English Psalter): “Hymmen singad us a songum Sione.” Another early citation occurred around 1300 in the *Early English Psalter* in Psalm 99 (Ps 100.4 in the English Psalter): “In schrift his porches bat be, in ymynes to him schrive yhe.”⁷ These early references indicate that when the word first came into English it was often understood as referring to one or more of the Psalms in the Psalter.

We should notice also, that the words ‘psalm’ and ‘hymn’ are not translations. They are transliterated Greek words expressed in our alphabet. The word ‘song’ is a translation of the Greek word for *ode*. So, what do the Greek words mean in the NT? What did Paul mean when he used the words?

In Paul’s day, there was a Greek translation of the OT (called the Septuagint; often abbreviated as LXX). Paul quotes the Psalms specifically from the LXX, rather than from the Hebrew, numerous times, showing that he used the LXX as his working Bible version when communicating with the Greek speaking world. The LXX translation used the words ‘psalm’, ‘hymn’, and ‘ode’ to refer to songs in what we call the Book of Psalms; they are used throughout the Psalter in the titles of the Psalms. We find the following usage of the words ‘psalm’, ‘hymn’, and ‘ode’ in the LXX:

Psalms...occurs some 87 times in the Septuagint, some 78 of which are in the Psalms themselves, and 67 times in the psalm titles. It also forms the title to the Greek version of the psalter....

Hymnos...occurs some 17 times in the Septuagint, 13 of which are in the Psalms, six times in the titles. In 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah there are some 16 examples in which the Psalms are called ‘hymns’ (*humnoi*) or ‘songs’ (*odai*) and the singing of them is called ‘hymning’ (*humneo*, *humnodeo*, *humnesis*).... *Odee*...occurs some 80 times in the Septuagint, 45 of which are in the Psalms, 36 in the Psalm titles.⁸

Even more important twelve titles use both ‘psalm’ and ‘song’, and two have ‘psalm’ and ‘hymn’. ... At the end of the first seventy two psalms we read that ‘the hymns of David the son of Jesse are ended’. (Ps. 72:20).⁹

One Psalm [Psalm 76; 75 in the LXX], in the LXX, has all three words in its title. The title reads: “For the end, among the Hymns, a Psalm for Asaph: a song for the Assyrian.” The words ‘psalm’, ‘hymn’, and ‘ode’ appear to refer to different characteristics of the Psalms; however, the terms also seem to be used essentially as synonyms.

The word translated ‘hymn’ is used in Matthew 26.30 where there is no doubt that what Jesus and the disciples sang was a portion of the Hallel (Psalms 113-118). The word ‘hymn’ is also used in Heb 2.12 in a quotation from Psalm 22.22. “In other words, there is no more reason to think that the Apostle referred to psalms when he said ‘psalms’, than when he said ‘hymns’ and ‘songs’, for the simple reason that all three were biblical terms for psalms in the book of psalms itself.”¹⁰

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians and Colossians, he likely had the titles in the Greek OT in mind when he told them to use the ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’, and ‘odes’. He used the three terms because they are the three terms used in the titles in the Psalter. He also, likely, used the three terms to express completeness. Jewish writers would list three identical or synonymous words or phrases, or list three aspects of a thing to

⁷ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume 1 A-O (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 1358.

⁸ Michael Bushell, cited above, pp. 72-73.

⁹ G. I. Williamson, “The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God,” http://www.reformed.com/triangle/t_giwill.html

¹⁰ Same as above.

emphasize perfection or completeness.¹¹ The use of three different terms does not mean that they are three parts that could be easily separated or distinguished to make up a whole. Rather, each of the three terms individually could represent the whole.

Josephus (37-100 AD) who was a contemporary of Paul for about 25 years uses the terms ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’, and ‘songs’ to refer to the Psalms of David [bold emphasis added].

- Speaking about the Ark of the Covenant being brought into Jerusalem by David, Josephus says, “Before it went the king, and the whole multitude of the people with him, singing **hymns** to God, and making use of all sorts of **songs** usual among them, with variety of the sounds of musical instruments, and with dancing and singing of **psalms**, as also with the sounds of trumpets and of cymbals, and so brought the ark to Jerusalem.”¹²
- Later in the same book Josephus tells us that after David had heard from Nathan about how the Temple would be built, he prayed, “And when he had said thus, and had sung a **hymn** of praise to God, he went his way.”¹³
- Continuing his account of David, Josephus says, “And now David being freed from wars and dangers, and enjoying for the future a profound peace, composed **songs** and **hymns** to God of several sorts of metre; some of those which he made were *trimeters*, and some were *pentameters*. He also made instruments of music, and taught the Levites to sing **hymns** to God, both on that called the sabbath day, and on other festivals.”¹⁴
- In recounting the return of the exiles at the time of Zerubbabel, Josephus says, “He also permitted them to offer their appointed sacrifices, and that whatsoever the high priest and the priests wanted, and those sacred garments wherein they used to worship God, should be made at his own charges; and that the musical instruments which the Levites used in singing **hymns** to God should be given them.”¹⁵
- Later in the same book, Josephus adds, “And when the temple was finished, the priests, adorned with their accustomed garments, stood with their trumpets, while the Levites, and the sons of Asaph, stood and sung **hymns** to God, according as David first of all appointed them to bless God.”¹⁶

It is clear from these examples that a Jewish writer living at the time of Paul used the words ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’, and ‘songs’ to refer to the collection of Psalms found in the Psalter.

Athanasius (c 295 – 373), the great defender of Christ’s deity against the Arian heresy, wrote a letter to Marcellinus¹⁷ in which he encouraged the young pastor to use the Psalms. In that letter, he uses the terms ‘psalms,’ ‘hymns,’ and ‘songs’ or ‘odes’ interchangeably, as Paul does in Colossians 3.16 and Ephesians 5.19, when he refers to the compositions in the Psalter; and as the Greek Septuagint Psalter itself does. For example, Athanasius says, “Psalms 47 and 64 voice the phrases of a hymn”; “For each advance you may recite the fifteen odes among the gradual psalms”; in contrasting the Psalter with the Law, Prophets, and histories, “On the other hand, things are expressed more broadly; of this kind are the phrases of the psalms, odes, and songs.”¹⁸

It is evident by Paul’s choice of words (in Col 3.16 and Eph 5.18, 19) that the compositions he refers to are not human ‘hymns’ but the God-breathed Psalms since he:

- Refers to them as the ‘word of Christ’ (Col 3.16). All of the compositions (whether ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’ and ‘songs’) that Paul tells the Church to use are the words of Christ. The only songs that meet that criterion are the songs found in the Bible.

¹¹ Compare for example: Ex 34.7; Dt 30.16; Is 6.3; Jer 7.4; Lk 24.44; Acts 2.22; 2 Cor 12.12; 1 Thes 5.23; 1 Tim 2.1.

¹² Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Translated by William Whiston (<http://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/ant-7.htm>), Book 7, chapter 4, para 2.

¹³ Same as above, para 4.

¹⁴ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Translated by William Whiston (<http://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/ant-7.htm>), Book 7, chapter 12, para 3.

¹⁵ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Translated by William Whiston (<http://www.ccel.org/j/josephus/works/ant-11.htm>), Book 11, chapter 3, para 8.

¹⁶ Same as above, chapter 4, para 2.

¹⁷ Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Macellinus* (Translation and Introduction by Robert C. Gregg), Paulist Press, NY, 1980.

¹⁸ Same as above, pp. 114, 122, 124.

- Tells his readers to ‘be filled with the Spirit’ (Eph 5.18). Non-Biblical hymns or songs cannot fill us with the Spirit, as they are not God-breathed.
- Refers to all the titles as ‘spiritual’ (Col 3.16; Eph 5.19). The word ‘spiritual’ can be understood as a modifier for all three terms.¹⁹ As a modifier, the word ‘spiritual’ means at least that the songs must be appropriate for use in worship, but more likely means that the songs are to be *from* the Holy Spirit²⁰; which implies that the words to be sung as worship are to be God-breathed.²¹ Paul is differentiating the ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’ and ‘songs’ he is commanding the Church to sing from mere human compositions that can also be called ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’ or ‘songs’. “If one wants to argue that spiritual does not apply to psalms and hymns, then one must answer ... why would Paul insist on divine inspiration for songs, yet permit uninspired hymns? We can safely assume that Paul was not irrational.”²²
- Quotes from the Psalms 4 and 67 in Ephesians 4.8 (Ps 68.18; Ps 67.19 in the LXX) and 4.26²³ (Ps 4.4; verse 5 in the LXX). Psalms 4 and 67 in the LXX are called ‘in the psalms, a song of David’ and ‘of David, a psalm, a song’, respectively. When he tells the Ephesians to use ‘songs’ (in Eph 5.19), he is referring to the collection of songs he has just quoted from earlier in his letter—the Psalter.

Paul intended the NT Church to use the Psalter to ‘make music in their heart to the Lord’, to express ‘gratitude in your hearts to God’ and to ‘teach and admonish one another’. Clearly, Paul tells us to sing Psalms to the Lord, *as* worship. In telling us to admonish and teach *one another* with the Psalms, he is giving us the authorization, actually commanding us, to use them in a corporate setting where more than one Christian is present. The Psalms are to be used *as* worship and *in* corporate worship.

The Puritans generally understood Paul to be referring to the Psalter, when he used the terms ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’, and ‘songs’. Consider the following, for example:²⁴

The Dutch Annotations say: “these several names seem to be taken from the several inscriptions of the Psalmes of David.”²⁵

Henry Ainsworth taught: “Ther be three kinde of songs mentioned in this book [the Psalms] ... All these three the Apostle mentioneth together, where he willetth us to speak to our selves with Psalmes & hymns & spiritual songs, Eph. 5.19.”²⁶

As might be expected, John Cotton was in agreement: “as the Apostle exhorteth us to singing, so he instructeth what the matter of our Song should be, to wit, *Psalmes, Hymnes, and spirituall Songs*. Now those three be the very Titles of the Songs of David, as they are delivered to us by the Holy Ghost himselfe.”²⁷

¹⁹ In Greek, when an adjective immediately follows two or more nouns, it can apply to all the preceding nouns (compare Col 1.9 [in the Greek: ‘spiritual’ follows the nouns]; 2 Thes 2.17 [in the Greek: ‘good’ follows the nouns]). The adjective ‘spiritual’ agrees in gender with the noun ‘songs’ only, but when an adjective occurs with more than one noun, it may agree in gender with only the nearest noun.

²⁰ Compare: Rom 1.11; 7.14; 15.27; 1 Cor 1.7; 2.13, 15; 3.1; 9.11; 10.3, 4; 12.1; 14.1, 12; 15.44, 46; Gal 6.1; Eph 1.3; Col 1.9. The only exception in Pauline usage appears to be Eph 6.12.

²¹ Edward A. Robson, “An Exposition of the Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16,” *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship* (Pittsburgh, PA: Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1974), p. 197.

²² Brian Schwertley, “A Brief Examination of Exclusive Psalmody,” (<http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/psalms.htm#f2>)

²³ It is particularly clear, in this instance, that Paul is quoting verbatim from the LXX and not translating the Hebrew.

²⁴ The following quotations are taken from: Matthew Winzer, “Should the Psalter be the Only Hymnal of the Church? By Ian Murray (Edinburgh: the Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), A Review,” *Credo Quarterly Theological Journal* (Edmonton, AB), 2001, pp.13-14.

²⁵ ‘Annotation upon Eph. 5:19,’ *The Dutch annotations upon the whole Bible*, trans. Theodore Haak (London: 1657).

²⁶ Henry Ainsworth, ‘Annotation on Ps. 3, title’ in *Annotations upon the book of Psalmes* (1617).

²⁷ John Cotton, *Singing of Psalmes*, p. 16.

Edward Leigh stated the matter in the exact same words: “as the Apostle exhorteth us to singing, so he instructeth what the matter of our Song should be, viz. *Psalmes, Hymnes, and spirituall Songs*. Those three are the Titles of the Songs of David, as they are delivered to us by the Holy Ghost himselfe.”²⁸

Thomas Manton ... writes ... “Now these words (which are the known division of David’s psalms, and expressly answering to the Hebrew words *Shurim, Tehillim, and Mizmorim*, by which his psalms are distinguished and entituled), being so precisely used by the apostle in both places, do plainly point us to the Book of Psalms.”²⁹

Thomas Ford, the Westminster divine, has given his thoughts: “I know nothing more probable than this, viz. that psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, do answer to *mizmorim, tehillim, and shirim*, which are the Hebrew names of David’s psalms.”³⁰

A contemporary English Presbyterian, Cuthbert Sydenham, speaks to the same effect, “I find they are used in general as the title of David’s psalms, which are named promiscuously by these three words.”³¹

An edition of the Westminster version of the Psalms in 1673 has the names of Dr. John Owen and twenty-five others signed to the preface which says: “To us David’s psalms seem plainly intended by these terms of psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, which the apostle useth. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16.”³²

Thomas Ridgeley came to the same understanding: “It cannot well be denied that the psalms of David are called indifferently by these three names, ‘psalms’, ‘hymns’, and ‘songs’.”³³

This view is expressed by Jonathan Edwards: “We find that the same [the words of David and Asaph] are appointed in the New Testament to be made use of in the Christian church, in their worship.” Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 are subsequently quoted.³⁴

John Gill might also be added to the list of orthodox commentators: “these three words answer to ... the several titles of David’s psalms; from whence it seems to be the intention of the apostle, that these should be sung in Gospel churches.”³⁵

Then there is John Brown of Haddington: “The Psalms, Hymns, and spiritual Songs, there recommended, are plainly the same with the Mismorim, Tehillim, and Shirim, mentioned in the Hebrew titles of David’s Psalms.”³⁶

James also gives us an instruction to sing Psalms. He says (lit.): “Is cheerful anyone, let him sing a psalm”³⁷ (Jam 5.13). Notice that he is writing to a Jewish-Christian audience (James 1.1). It is clear that his audience would understand him to be speaking of the Psalms found in the OT Psalter.

Notice also, that when Paul and James instruct the NT Church to use the Psalms, they assume that the songs are available for singing. Paul wrote the books of Ephesians and Colossians around 60 AD. The book

²⁸ Edward Leigh, *Annotations upon all the New Testament* (London: 1650), p. 306.

²⁹ Thomas Manton, *Works 4* (Worthington, PA: Maranatha Publications, rpt., n.d.), p. 443.

³⁰ Thomas Ford, *Singing of Psalms* (London: printed for Christopher Meredith, 1657 [1653 according to Thomason]), p. 16.

³¹ Sydenham Cuthbert, *A Christian sober and plain exercitation* (London: printed by Thomas Mabb, 1657), p. 179.

³² As quoted by The True Psalmody, p. 98.

³³ Thomas Ridgeley, *A body of Divinity* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993 rpt.), p. 442.

³⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Works 1* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990 rpt.), p. 554.

³⁵ John Gill, *Gill’s Commentary 6* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980 rpt.), p. 451.

³⁶ John Brown, *The psalms of David in metre* (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1991 rpt.), p. xiii.

³⁷ The NIV is inconsistent here in translating the Greek word ‘psalms’ as “songs of praise”. Although it is a valid translation, it is not consistent with the translation in Ephesians and Colossians.

of James is one of the earliest books in the NT, probably written before 50 AD. It is clear that the compositions that they are instructing the Church to use were already available at that time.

The first converts to Christianity were generally Jews. It is probable that they formed the nucleus of all, or nearly all, the Christian congregations that were organized not only in Jerusalem, but also in the other cities throughout the Roman empire; and they would naturally bring their songs of Zion with them into the worship of the Christian Church. In other words, they would naturally continue to use the same inspired songs by which they have so long been accustomed to celebrate the praises of God. And that they actually did so is admitted by all candid and intelligent advocates of human hymns.³⁸

A clear thinking person realizes that the NT Church was barely organized by 60 AD. It is simply untenable to think that a new collection of sacred songs was already developed and available for use across the scattered churches to whom Paul and James wrote. The songs that they instructed the Church to use were the collection found in the OT Psalter.

Objection: Paul Tells us to Sing Hymns

In spite of the evidence presented above, the common view throughout much of the Church today is that the terms 'psalms', 'hymns', and 'songs', as used in Ephesians 5.19 and Colossians 3.16, refer to the OT Psalms, non-Biblical hymns such as *Amazing Grace*, and Bible choruses. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for example, presents this position in a sermon preached on Ephesians 5.19, on Sunday November 29th, 1959, in Westminster Chapel, London.³⁹ Alternatively, Ralph P. Martin suggests that the three words apply to NT Christian writings, where psalms are Christian writings patterned on the Psalms, hymns are longer compositions, and spiritual songs are snatches of spontaneous praise.⁴⁰ These suggestions about what Paul means by the words 'psalms', 'hymns', and 'songs' are merely guesses, not based on thorough exegetical work.

Douglas Wilson challenges the Psalms-only advocates to provide contextual evidence that Paul is referring to the Psalter.⁴¹ The required exegesis, as above, has been provided, and it takes into account the context in which Paul wrote:

- *The version of the OT used in Paul's day—the Greek translation of the OT (LXX).* This translation uses the words 'psalm', 'hymn', and 'ode' to refer to songs in what we call the Book of Psalms; they are used throughout the Psalter in the titles of the Psalms.
- *Paul's understanding of the nature of the material to be sung.* Paul refers to the compositions that were to be sung as 'the words of Christ' and 'spiritual'. He is not referring to non-Biblical compositions.
- *The audience to whom Paul wrote.* The Ephesian and Colossian congregations were made up at first, primarily of converted Jews who had learned to sing the Psalms in the context of Jewish worship. "To ignore how Paul's audience would have understood these terms and how these terms are defined by the Bible; and then instead to import non-Biblical modern meanings into these terms is exegetical malpractice."⁴²

Contrary to what Douglas Wilson suggests, the burden of proof lies on those who wish to argue that Paul *commands* the churches in Ephesus and Colossae to sing new hymnic compositions not included in the Psalter. They must prove that Paul is commanding Christians to *compose* new song material for use as worship and not just commanding them to utilize compositions that already existed—the Psalms. No one has ever been able to demonstrate this to be a fact.

It is not sufficient to claim that Paul *permits* the singing of non-Biblical compositions as worship. If Paul is not speaking of only the Psalms (by using three terms—'psalms', 'hymns', and

³⁸ William Wishart, "The Psalms in the Apostolic and Early Church," *Psalm Singers' Conference* (Belfast: Fountain Printing Works, 1903), p. 51.

³⁹ Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Walking in the Light (Studies in Ephesians, v, 14-vi, 19), IX. Melody and Harmony," *The Westminster Record*, vol. 43, no. 10, October, 1968.

⁴⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), p.47.

⁴¹ Douglas Wilson, "The Worship Service," *Mother Kirk* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), pp. 140-141.

⁴² Brian Schwertley, "A Brief Examination of Exclusive Psalmody," <http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/psalms.htm#f2>

'songs') in the Psalter in Ephesians 5.19 and Colossians 3.16, then he is *commanding* the use of non-Biblical compositions. This creates major difficulties:

1. It requires that we sing hundreds of thousands of different merely human compositions that have been prepared since the fourth century.
2. Paul does not give us any guidelines for how to determine which non-Biblical hymns are to be sung and which are to be ignored.
3. It binds the conscience of anyone who refuses to sing non-Biblical hymns. We would be disobeying God's instruction through Paul. If 'hymn' in the passages under consideration really means a non-Biblical composition, then a person who refuses to sing a hymn in worship—i.e., he believes that only Psalms are to be offered to God as the sacrifice of Praise—is being disobedient to the elders of that congregation and should be subject to censure. In this instance his conscience is being bound. The Puritans and, in particular, the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* were scrupulous in their concern that nothing be introduced into worship that isn't required by God. They state: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to His Word; or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also."⁴³

Some of the opponents of the Psalms-only position claim that the words 'psalms,' 'hymns,' and 'songs' (particularly the latter two words) were used by writers in the early church to refer to non-Biblical compositions. This is undoubtedly the case, but it does not have any direct bearing on the question of what Paul meant. The terms used by Paul, without the adjectival modifier 'spiritual', were common Greek words used for different types of poetic compositions. It is no different from today, when a person uses the term 'hymn' to refer to one of the compositions of Charles Wesley. Even if someone were able to provide evidence that a first or second century Christian writer quoted from a hymn, this would not prove that the hymn was acceptable for use as worship. Preachers and writers today, who hold to the Psalms-only position, sometimes quote from a hymn if it succinctly summarizes a point that they wish to make. What must be demonstrated, with certainty, is that the Apostolic Church accepted any hymnic material as an acceptable sacrifice of praise.

It is probably the case that by the fourth century non-Biblical hymns were becoming acceptable as worship in some parts of the Church. This may be the reason that Athanasius felt it was necessary to write a letter to a young pastor encouraging him to use only the Psalms in worship.⁴⁴ Athanasius' passionate plea for singing the Psalms and condemnation of singing non-Biblical compositions⁴⁵ makes most sense in a context where exclusive Psalm singing is being threatened. The situation around 300 AD was probably somewhat akin to the late eighteenth century where there were some strongly in favour of introducing hymnody and others continuing to defend exclusive Psalmody. It is therefore irrelevant to quote later writers (e.g., Augustine), who may suggest, by their use of the Greek words for 'psalms', 'hymns', and 'songs' that there was a mixed usage of Psalms from the Psalter and non-Biblical compositions in worship.

Adoration Chants

The Psalms please God when used as worship and in a worship assembly. We know that to be the case, because:

- They are Holy Spirit breathed (2 Tim 3.16) and are therefore the perfect sacrifice of our lips as worship (Heb 13.15).
- When we sing Psalms we worship God acceptably with reverence and awe (Heb 12.28).
- The Psalms themselves speak⁴⁶ of using the Psalms or Hymns from the Psalter as worship.
- When we sing Psalms we join the Church in history, through all time and all places. We even join with Jesus and the Apostles in the upper room.

⁴³ "Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience," *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 22, paragraph 2.

⁴⁴ Athanasius, "Letter to Marcellinus," in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Macellinus*, cited above.

⁴⁵ See the section below: Ancient Church.

⁴⁶ For example: Ps 40.3; 47.6-7.

- When we sing the psalms we encourage agreement among Christians that cannot be obtained by groups that use various hymn books, each containing songs that exhibit a particular theological orientation.

Authoritative Catechism

The Psalms are quoted more than sixty times in the NT; the next closest book is Isaiah. The book of Hebrews is largely a commentary on the Psalms that teaches us about Christ's uniqueness. Jesus tells us that the Psalms speak about him (Lk 20.42; 24.44). They are his words (Col 3.16), and he is the speaker in many of them.⁴⁷ He used the Psalms himself in his teaching and as his songbook of worship (Mt 26.30). What mere human composition can make the claim to be written by God, speak about the Son of God, and were spoken by the Son of God?

The Psalms speak specifically about Christ, in terms of his:

- Divinity, eternal sonship and kingship (Ps 2⁴⁸ [7; Acts 13.33; Heb 1.5; 5.5], **45** [6, 7; Heb 1.8, 9], **72**, **102** [25-27; Heb 1.10-12]; **110** [1; Mt 22.42-45; Heb 1.13])
- Prophetic office (Ps **22** [22; Heb 2.12])
- Priesthood (Ps **110** [4; Heb 7.17])
- Humiliation and incarnation (Ps **8** [5; Heb 2.9])
- Work, suffering, and crucifixion (Ps **16** [8-11; Acts 2.25-31], **22** [1, 2; Mt 27.46], 35, **40** [6-8; Heb 10.5-7], **41** [9; Jn 13.18], **69**, 88, 116, **118** [22; Mt 21.42; Acts 4.11, 12])
- Compassion, tenderness and comfort (Ps 23, 27, 80, 91, 121)
- Exaltation (Ps 24, **45** [6; Heb 1.8], 47, **68** [18; Eph 4.8], 89, 98, 132)
- Second coming as judge (Ps 50.3, 4; 98.6-9 [Mt 24.31; 1 Cor 15.52]).

Objection: Jesus isn't in the Psalms

The charge is only semantically correct, since the name 'Jesus' does not appear in the Psalms. The person and work of Jesus appears throughout the Psalms, as shown by the list provided above, and in the following examples that speak of his redemptive work:

- Betrayal (Ps 41.9 [Jn 13.18])
- Agony in the Garden (Ps 22.2 [Heb 5.7])
- Trial (Ps 35.11 [Mt 26.59, 60])
- Rejection (Ps 22.6 [Mt 27.21-23; Lk 23. 18-23])
- Crucifixion (Ps 22, 69)
- Burial and Resurrection (Ps 16.8-11 [Acts 2.25-31])
- Ascension and Session (Ps 47.5 [Acts 1.11; 1 Thes 4.16]; 24.7-10 [Rev 5.6-14]).

It is ironic that many of those who use this argument would be thrilled to sing or listen to Handel's *Messiah*. In that oratorio the name Jesus appears only once and then only as part of a compound name. As in the *Messiah*, Jesus appears in the Psalms in the form of some of his other names: 'Lord' Ps 2.4; 110.1; 'Anointed' Ps 2.2; 'King' Ps 2.6; 24.8; 98.6; and 'Saviour' Ps 25.2; 42.5).

Isaac Watts complained that the Psalms do not provide adequate material to accompany the observance of the Lord's Supper [underlined emphasis added here and in subsequent quotations from Watts]:

I might here also remark to what a hard Shift the Minister is put to find proper Hymns at the Celebration of the Lord's Supper, where the People will sing nothing but out of David's Psalm-Book: How perpetually do they repeat some part of the xxxiii (23rd) or the cxviii (118th) Psalm? And confine all the glorious Joy and Melody of that Ordinance to a few obscure Lines, because the Translators have not indulged an Evangelical Turn to the Words of David: No not in those very Places where the Jewish Psalmist seems to mean the Gospel; but he was not able to speak it plain by Reason of the Infancy of that Dispensation, and longs for the Aid of a Christian Poet. Though to speak my own Sense freely, I do not think David ever wrote a Psalm

⁴⁷ For example: Ps 2.7; 22.1, 22; 40.7.

⁴⁸ Psalms highlighted are usually called "Messianic Psalms".

of sufficient Glory and Sweetness to represent the Blessings of this holy Institution of Christ, even though it were explained by a copious Commentator.⁴⁹

It borders on blasphemy for Watts to say that none of the Psalms are of sufficient glory and sweetness for use in Lord's Supper, for the following reasons:

- God is no more glorious now than he was in the Old Testament era. The Psalms were sufficient then for the expression of his praise, they are still sufficient.
- Jesus used all or a portion of the Hallel Psalms (113-118) when he instituted the Lord's Supper (Mt 26.30).
- Watts effectively accuses Christ of lying when he says that the Psalms speak of him (Luke 24.44). There are many directly Messianic Psalms that speak of Jesus' work of Salvation. These provide appropriate material for the Lord's Supper:
 - Humiliation, suffering, work (22, 40, 69, 88, 116, 118)
 - Kingship, priesthood, exaltation (2, 24, 45, 72, 89, 98, 110, 132)
 - Compassion, tenderness, comforter, guardian (23, 27, 80, 91, 121).

If the Psalter were truly inadequate for representing the work of Jesus, God would have had the writers of the NT provide us with a new songbook. The NT writers wrote about Christ and the Resurrection. They had a zeal for the glory of Christ and the worship of God, yet they did not give the NT Church a new songbook. They understood that the Book of Psalms is the songbook of the Church and, as shown by the number of times they quote from the Psalms, believed it adequately represents the work of Jesus. "The Psalter reveals such a clear portrait of Christ and His work that any suggestion that they [the Psalms] are inadequate in their exposition of Christ's work shows a lack of understanding regarding their content."⁵⁰

Objection: The Trinity isn't Explicitly in the Psalms

A related objection, to the one above, is that the Psalms don't provide sufficient instruction on the Trinity for the NT Church. Robert Latham in his book on the Trinity states this objection as follows:

This applies to the argument for exclusive use of the Psalter in church worship. The Psalms are the Word of God in human words, and so should feature strongly in the worship of the NT church, as they did in the later part of the OT. In this, we share in Christ's use of the Psalter in praise to the Father. However, the Psalms do not explicitly reflect the full range of Trinitarian revelation, as so cannot be the sole diet of the church without truncating its worship.⁵¹

The Psalter was the song book of praise used by Jesus and the Apostles. It therefore must provide the form of praise, with respect to the Trinity, that God requires and delights in. While it is true that in the OT economy God had not *fully* revealed his nature as a Trinity, nevertheless he chooses in praise-song to be worshipped primarily in a general theistic form. Latham, himself also says that "the Holy Spirit works anonymously in the background, not speaking of himself or bringing glory to himself, but testifying to Christ, the Son."⁵² To emphasize the Holy Spirit in prayer or song (as some do in the Pentecostal wing of the Church) is probably treading into forbidden territory. Jesus gives us an example of how we should correctly approach worship, with respect to the Trinity, in the prayer he taught his disciples (Mt 6.9-13). In this prayer he did not tell them to pray to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We also never find him addressing his own prayers to the Holy Spirit. Although, for us to direct a prayer specifically to Jesus is valid worship (Mt 14.33; Mk 9.24; Jn 9.38; Acts 2.21; 7.59; 22.16; 1 Cor 1.2). Where God wishes to be recognized explicitly as a Trinity he makes that clear through the teachings and the example of Christ and the Apostles—i.e., in the baptismal formulation (Mt 28.19) and at times in a benediction (2 Cor 13.14). To state that using only the Psalms truncates worship, is to accuse God of not knowing how he wishes to be addressed and worshiped in praise-song.

⁴⁹ Isaac Watts, "Preface," *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

⁵⁰ Brian Schwertley, "A Brief Examination of Exclusive Psalmody," <http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/psalms.htm#f2>

⁵¹ Robert Latham, *The Holy Trinity – In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), p. 422.

⁵² Same as above, p. 418.

We are taught a comprehensive theology in the Psalms. We learn of God's nature, his attributes (e.g., holiness, love), character, government, and providence. For example, in the Psalms we learn about God's:

- Self-existence (Ps 33.11; 115.3)
- Trinity (Ps 2.2; 51.11; 104.30; 110.1; 139.7)
- Omnipotence (Ps 115.3; 145.3; 146.6)
- Immutability (Ps 102.26-28)
- Eternal existence (Ps 90.4; 102.12)
- Omnipresence (Ps 139.7-10)
- Omniscience (Ps 1.6; 94.9; 119.168; 139.1-4)
- Wisdom (Ps 19; 104)
- Sovereignty (Ps 2, 47; 50; 95; 98)
- Creative power (19, 33, 136, 104, 146)
- Providence (Ps 22.28; 104.14 [specific]; 104 [general])
- Goodness (Ps 36.6, 9; 104.21; 145.9, 15, 16)
- Love (Ps 6.4; 103.8)
- Holiness (Ps 22.3; 33.21; 51.11; 71.22)
- Truthfulness (Ps 31.5)
- Mercy and patience (Ps 6.2; 78.38; 86.15)
- Revelation in nature (Ps 19.1-2) and through prophets (Ps 74.9; 103.7)
- Law and our duty toward it (Ps 1; 19; 119)
- Sin (Ps 14; 51)
- Hatred of sin (Ps 5.4; 11.5)
- Righteousness (Ps 1.7; 7.9; 119.137)
- Salvation (Ps 18.46; 27.9; 43.5)
- Justification by faith (Ps 32.1-5; 51; 143.2)
- Repentance and forgiveness of sin (Ps 103; 130)
- Judgement and punishment of the wicked (Ps 1.4, 5; 7.11; 9.16; 11.6; 59.13; 98.9).

Summarizing the teaching of the Psalter with respect to sin and salvation, Michael Bushell says:

The Psalter recognizes the reality of sanctification, on the one hand, but never loses sight, on the other, of man's inherent depravity. Side by side with emphatic assertions of personal integrity (e.g., 7:3 ff, 17:1 ff, 18:20 ff; 26:1 ff; cf. Acts 20:26 ff; 23:1; etc.) one finds "the fullest recognition of personal sinfulness (51:5; 69:5), of man's inability to justify himself before God (130:3 ff; 143:2), of his need of pardon and cleansing and renewal (32:1; 65:3), of his dependence on God for preservation from sin (19:12 ff.), of the barrier which sin erects between him and God (66:18; 50:16); as well as the strongest expressions of absolute self-surrender and dependence on God and entire trust in Him."⁵³

No collection of mere human compositions contains the balance of theology that God wishes us to have, as does the Psalter. We should sing and admonish one another with the Psalms to learn about Christ and his work, and how to live lives that will please God.

Objection: The Psalms Don't Meet the Needs of the 21st Century Church

Isaac Watts expresses the sentiment of this objection when he says the following:

IF I were to render the Reason of it, I would give this for one of the Chief, (viz.) that the Royal Psalmist here expresses his own Concerns in Words exactly suited to his own Thoughts, agreeable to his own personal Character, and in the Language of his own Religion: ... But when we sing the same Lines, we express nothing but the Character, the Concerns, and the

⁵³ A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge University Press, 1903), p. lxxxviii. Cited in: Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody*, cited above, p. 97.

Religion of the Jewish King, while our own circumstances and our own Religion (which are so widely different from his) have little to do in the sacred Song; and our Affections want something of Property and Interest in the Words, to awaken them at first, and to keep them lively.

THERE are several Psalms indeed which have scarce any thing in them personal or peculiar to David or the Jews, such as Ps. i, xix, xxv, xxxvii, lxvii, c, &c, and these if translated into the plain national Language are very proper Materials for Psalmody in all Times and Places; but there are but a few of this Kind in Comparison of the great Number which have something of Personal Concerns, Prophetical Darknesses, Hebraisms, or Jewish Affairs mingled with them.

THERE are several Songs of this Royal Author that seem improper for any Person besides himself; so that I cannot believe that the Whole Book of Psalms (even in the Original) was appointed by God for the ordinary and constant Worship of the Jewish Sanctuary or the Synagogues, though several of them might often be sung; much less are they all proper for a Christian Church.

OTHERS maintain that a strict and scrupulous Confinement to the Sense of the Original is necessary to do Justice to the Royal Author, but in my Judgment the Royal Author is most honoured when he is made most intelligible; and when his admirable Composures are copied in such Language as gives Light and Joy to the Saints that live two thousand years after him; whereas such a meer Translation of all his Verse into English to be sung in our Worship seems to darken our Religion, to damp our Delight, and forbid the Christian Worshipper to pursue the Song. How can we assume all his Words in our personal and publick Addresses to God, when our Condition of Life, our Time, Place, and Religion are so vastly different from those of David?

Now if by a little Turn of their Words, or by the Change of a short Sentence, we may express our own Meditations, Joys and Desires in the Verses of those antient Psalmists, why should we be forbid this sweet Priviledge? Why should we be tied up to Forms more than the Jews themselves were, and such as are much more improper for our Age and State too? Let us remember that the very Power of Singing was given to human Nature chiefly for this Purpose, that our warmest Affections of Soul might break out into natural or divine Melody, and the Tongue of the Worshipper express his own Heart.”

I come therefore to ... explain my own Design; which in short is ... to divest David and Asaph, &c. of every other Character but that of a Psalmist and a Saint, and to make them always speak the common Sense and Language of a Christian.

ATTEMPTING the Word with this View I have entirely omitted several whole Psalms, and large Pieces of many others, and have chosen out of all of them such Parts only as might easily and naturally be accommodated to the various Occasions of the Christian Life, or at least might afford us some beautiful Allusion to Christian Affairs: These I have copied and explained in the general Style of the Gospel.⁵⁴

Watts has a defective view of both the true religion of God and of God's word. We see in his statements hints of a form of Dispensationalism. He makes the religion of the OT different from that of the NT. There is, however, only one true religion. The OT saints believed in the same Messiah/Christ, were indwelt and converted by the same Spirit, and saved by the same Messiah/Christ as are NT saints.

The historical references in the Psalms have relevance and value to NT Christians in the same way they were of value to the returned captives at the time of Nehemiah. They teach about God's providential dealings with his people and serve as a type for the redemption that we receive from the evils of this world to the glories of the heavenly Promised Land.

If the Psalms have any value when read as Scripture, they also have value when sung. Watts' arguments can be applied not only against singing the Psalms but also against the instructional value of the entire OT. He ignores Paul's statements about the value of all of Scripture (2 Tim 3.16, 17) and would fit in well with modern liberals who class the OT as antiquated teaching about a different God than the NT God, and written by a tribe of wandering Bedouins.

⁵⁴ Isaac Watts, "Preface," *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

David and Asaph were men of God, who loved God and were loved by God. They were depending on the Messiah/Christ to come as we depend on the Messiah/Christ who has come. Their hope is our hope. They worshiped the same God that we worship. They are part of the same universal Church that we are part of. It is invalid to claim that they did not write in the 'language of a Christian'. The real problem is that Watts doesn't understand God's language!

God knows what balance we need in our theology and instruction, and has provided that balance in the Psalter. The Psalms contain a much greater variety of theological material than *all* the merely human compositions. God gave to the entire Church throughout much of its history what it *needs* to sing. We must remember that God doesn't *need* us to worship him as we *want* to. He *wants* us to worship him as we *need* to. We *want* to worship him with our own offerings. We *need* to worship him with the compositions that he has given us.

Since the Psalms were sufficient for Jesus and his disciples, they certainly are good enough for the Church in the twenty-first century. What can stir the soul more than words written by God himself that speak about Christ? Words written by sinful humans, even with the best of intentions, cannot express the heart and mind of God. To dismiss Psalms as irrelevant is a travesty. We should sing the Psalms if for no other reason than to proclaim the value of the OT today.

Watts continues his critique of the Psalms, claiming that they present a different religion than is found in the NT, and that they need to be 'Christianized'. Specifically he objects to the inclusion of elements from the OT ritual ceremonies:

BUT since I believe that any Divine Sentence or Christian Verse agreeable to Scripture may be sung, though it be composed by Men uninspired, I have not been so curious and exact in striving every where to express the antient Sense and Meaning of David, but have rather exprest myself as I may suppose David would have done, had he lived in the Days of Christianity. And by this means perhaps I have sometimes hit upon the true Intent of the Spirit of God in those Verses, farther and clearer than David himself could ever discover, as St. Peter encourages me to hope. I Pet.i.11, 12. In several other Places I hope my Reader will find a natural Exposition of many a dark and doubtfull Text, and some new Beauties and Connexions of Thought discovered in the Jewish Poet, though not in the Language of a Jew. In all places I have kept my grand Design in View, and that is to teach my Author to speak like a Christian. For why should I now address God my Saviour in a Song with burnt sacrifices of Fatlings and with the Incense of Rams? Why should I pray to be sprinkled with Hyssop, or recur to the Blood of Bulls and Goats? Why should I bind my Sacrifice with Cords to the Horns of an Altar, or sing the Praises of God to high sounding Cymbals, when the Gospel has shewn me a nobler Atonement for Sin, and appointed a purer and more spiritual Worship? ... What need is there that I should wrap up the shining Honours of my Redeemer in the dark and shadowy Language of a Religion that is now for ever abolished, especially when Christians are so vehemently warned in the Epistles of St. Paul against a Judaizing Spirit in their Worship as well as Doctrine? And what Fault can there be in enlarging a little on the more usefull Subjects in the Style of the Gospel, where the Psalm gives any Occasion, since the Whole Religion of the Jews is censured often in the New Testament as a defective and imperfect Thing?⁵⁵

His criticism that the Psalms contain animal sacrifices and offerings is over stated. These aspects of the OT ritual ceremonies are rarely mentioned or alluded to in the Psalms—probably fewer than ten verses include specific references (e.g., Ps 20.3; 66.15; 141.2), when historical allusions (e.g., Ps 106.28) are not considered. In some instances, the OT ritual ceremonies are mentioned in the Psalms to assert their ultimate inefficacy (Ps 40.6; 50.8, 9; 51.16).

Ironically, Watts himself uses the very terms he criticizes in some of his compositions, for example: "Before thine altar, Lord, My harp and song shall sound The glories of thy word."

Watts has no appreciation for the important lessons of the Psalms: the need for atonement, and Jesus Christ the final sacrifice. He also advocates a 'scissors-based' approach to the word of God. If we don't like what it says, then just eliminate it. If God's justice offends, cut it out; if his demand for repentance offends, cut it out; if the miracles offend, cut them out; if the legal requirements offend, cut them out ...

⁵⁵ Isaac Watts, "Preface," *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

Absolute Counsel

The Psalms bless and counsel us. They are filled with messages of salvation and comfort; guidance and direction; meaning and purpose; and encouragement and joy. This is why Paul speaks of using the Psalms to encourage one another (Col 3.16), and James tells us to use them for expressing joy (Jam 5.13 [NKJV]). Paul and Silas used them in prison in Philippi at midnight for comfort (Acts 16.25). The Psalms cover every emotion and yearning of the soul, for example:

- Confessions of sin (19, 32, 51, 130)
- Prayers to a merciful God (32, 51)
- Our dependence on the Holy Spirit (30, 51, 139)
- Spiritual desires and affections (43, 44, 63, 73, 119)
- The struggles of faith (3, 4, 73)
- Thanksgiving (many)
- Concern for, and joy in, the Church (48, 95, 96, 122).

Athanasius is of the same persuasion. In his letter to the young pastor, Marcellinus, he says:

[The Psalter] possesses ... this marvel of its own—namely, that it contains even the emotions of each soul ... these words become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul.⁵⁶

But in the Psalms we are instructed how one must praise the Lord and by speaking what words we properly confess our faith in him. And in the case of each person one would find the divine hymns⁵⁷ appointed for us and our emotions of equanimity.⁵⁸

For I believe that the whole of human existence, both the dispositions of the soul and the movements of the thoughts, have been measured out and encompassed in those very words of the Psalter. And nothing beyond these is found among men.⁵⁹

We should sing the Psalms for comfort and encouragement in every situation of life.

Assertive Challenge

Paul quotes Psalm 18.49 in Romans 15.9: “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.” The context of this quotation indicates that the Psalms have a universal witness—to Jew and Gentile. This teaches us that the Psalms are to be used by the Church to offer a challenge to the world since they present God’s glory, kingship over the earth, man’s lost state in sin, God’s judicial office, and the salvation God provides. There can be no better form of evangelism or Gospel call than to use the Psalms along with the preached word.

The Psalms are an appropriate instrument for apologetics (the defence of the Faith) because they:

- *Declare all of God’s holy counsel in the balance by which he desires it to be communicated to the world.* When the entire Psalter is sung regularly by a congregation, they receive a diet of doctrine precisely as God wishes it to be communicated.
- *Speak to a post-modern culture with a pre-modern voice.* “[T]he church must present a gospel that is post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and post-noeticentric.⁶⁰ The exciting thing about the Psalms ... is that they speak with a premodern voice. They represent a Hebrew world view and not a Newtonian one. Therefore, the Psalms speak against the extremes of modernism ...

⁵⁶ Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Macellinus*, cited above, p. 108.

⁵⁷ Athanasius uses the terms ‘psalms,’ ‘hymns,’ ‘and ‘songs’ or ‘odes’ interchangeably, as Paul does in Col 3.16; Eph 5.19 to refer to the compositions in the Psalter; see the discussion above: *Apostolic Command*.

⁵⁸ Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Macellinus*, cited above, p. 109.

⁵⁹ Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Macellinus*, cited above, p. 126.

⁶⁰ ‘Post-noeticentric’ refers to the need to focus on “the attainment of wisdom” rather than solely on the “accumulation of knowledge.”

First, the Psalms are inherently post-individualistic. The Psalms reflect the corporate identity, cry, and passion of the old-covenant church. ... Second, the Psalms are consistent with post-rationalism and post-dualism. The Hebrew world view did not simply focus on cognitive knowledge, and it did not radically separate mind from matter. ... Third, the Psalms fulfill the call to be post-noeticentric. The Psalms do not allow us to be complacent fact-gatherers, but rather call us to apply our knowledge for the benefit of social change. The Psalms are replete with cries for justice, freedom for the oppressed, and protection of the fatherless. ... Clearly, the Psalms are well suited to speak to postmodernists. In fact, they are timeless. They will speak to whatever world view supplants postmodernism.”⁶¹

- *Describe the gospel going to the nations.* The authors of the Psalms often assume that their words will be used in evangelism (Ps 66.1-4; 67.1-7; 72.19; 87.4-7; 96; 98; 100; 148.11-14).
- *Defend God’s word as the normative standard for faith and life.* Singing Psalms exclusively as worship teaches the world that God’s word is our holy standard.
- *Defend the church against the incursion of error.* Because the Psalms are superior to any merely human composition used for singing, we can be assured that when we sing only the Psalms as worship we will avoid the possibility of introducing error.

We must learn the Psalms and sing them, as God’s witness to his glorious gospel.

Objection: The Psalms are too Harsh for the NT Era

Many object to the use of some of the Psalms that speak about the destruction of God’s enemies or call down curses on them. This type of Psalm is often called an imprecatory Psalm (e.g., Ps 137). We can quote from Watts as an example of this objection:

Why must I joyn with David in his legal or Prophetic Language to curse my Enemies, when my Saviour in his Sermons has taught me to love and bless them? Why may not a Christian omit all those Passages of the Jewish Psalmist that tend to fill the Mind with overwhelming Sorrows, despairing Thoughts, or bitter personal Resentments, none of which are well suited to the Spirit of Christianity, which is a Dispensation of Hope and Joy and Love?

WHERE the Psalmist uses sharp Invectives against his personal Enemies, I have endeavoured to turn the Edge of them against our spiritual Adversaries, Sin, Satan, and Temptation. Where the flights of his Faith and Love are sublime, I have often sunk the Expressions within the Reach of an ordinary Christian. Where the Words imply some peculiar Wants or Distresses, Joys or Blessings, I have used Words of greater Latitude and Comprehension suited to the general Circumstances of Men. ... God’s tone should be our tone.⁶²

Watts argues, essentially, that the God of the OT isn’t the same as the God of the NT, that God has two sets of Laws, and that God judges men differently (i.e., less severely) in the NT era than he did under the OT laws. Paul in his sermon in Athens presents the truth (Acts 17.30, 31). Watts would fit in well with the misled thinkers of our day who can only espouse the love of God and dismiss the justice of God and the punishment of the wicked.

Anyone who claims we should not sing the imprecatory Psalms because they don’t have a ‘Christian tone’ must also charge the Apostles and Christ with being unchristian, because they use the imprecatory Psalms (Acts 1.20/Ps 69.25; Mt 16.27; 2 Tim 4.14; 1 Pet 1.17/Ps 28.4; Rom 11.9, 10/Ps 69.22, 23). He must also object to the imprecations of Jesus (Mt 23), the Apostles (Acts 1.18-20), Paul (1 Cor 16.21, 22), and the saints in heaven (Rev 19.1-3).

Asking God to avenge abuses of his righteousness and holiness (Dt 32.35; Rom 12.17-21) is different from our being personally vindictive. It is a form of false piety to ignore God’s retributive justice. The Church in the twenty-first century is too soft on wickedness. God is not soft against wickedness, and will punish those who are not covered with the blood of Christ. It is a glorious thing to ask God to defend his righteousness and holiness. “Nowhere is the church’s opposition to the world more pronounced than when it is engaged in public worship. Worship is the church’s

⁶¹ Anthony Selvaggio, “From Premodern to Postmodern,” *Reformed Presbyterian Witness*, November, 2003, pp. 6-7.

⁶² Isaac Watts, “Preface,” *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

renunciation of the world. We sing to a God that the world refuses to acknowledge, as so we sing in a way that the world cannot comprehend.”⁶³

We need to learn to praise God for his judgments as well as his mercies. We need to sing the imprecatory Psalms,⁶⁴ precisely because they keep God’s hatred of sin and his justice before our minds and the minds of those who come into our midst. Our tone should be God’s tone!

Absent Charge

The Psalms are part of the completed Scriptures, delivered through the hands of the Prophets and Apostles. In the New Testament, we do not find a ‘Christian Hymnal’ that is intended to replace or augment the OT Psalter. The NT Church has no Apostolic example to guide the creation of new songs, nor did the Apostles give instructions to the Church to compose new songs for inclusion in the Psalter. Instead, we are given instructions by the Apostles (as we noted above) to sing the Psalms from the OT Scriptures as part of worship. The Apostles did not add songs, or direct that songs be added, to the Psalter because they believed that the collection of 150 Psalms was a sufficient and complete songbook for the NT Church.

Since the canon of Scripture is now closed and we have no prophetic office today, we cannot add to the Psalter. There is no one today with the authority required to introduce new or changed elements to the worship that was established by Christ through the Apostles. There is therefore no separate or new songbook for the NT Church and no warrant to add songs for the worship of the NT Church.

Among the gifts given to the NT Church (1 Cor 12.4-11, 28, 31; Eph 4.11, 12), we do not find gifts of music or song composition mentioned, even though in the OT economy the gift was given to the sons of Asaph. To the contrary, the NT tells us to use the OT Psalter, because the Psalter is intended to be the songbook of NT Church as it was of the OT Church.

Anyone who introduces new compositions into the worship of God is:

- Claiming, by his actions, to have the authority to produce compositions that are equivalent to the words of God in Scripture.
- Claiming, by his actions, to have the authority of an OT Prophet or Apostle.
- Usurping the right of a few (and only a few) Prophets, under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, to make changes in the form of worship to God.

Objection: We are Told to Sing a ‘New Song’

Jesus told the disciples that he was giving them a ‘new command’ (Jn 13.34). What was this command? “Love one another.” The essence of this command is found in Leviticus 19.18 and 19.34. What did Jesus mean by ‘new’? He did not mean new in essence, or even new in form. Rather, he seems to mean new in spirit or application. Compare also John’s instructions in 1 John 2.7, 8, where he indicates that his new command isn’t really new. In the same way, some of the Psalms that speak of singing a ‘new song’ may not be referring to a song that presents a different message from what has been heard, but rather may be exhorting a renewal of spirit in those singing (Ps 96.1; 144.9; 149.1). The other references in the Psalter to ‘new songs’ (Ps 33.3, 40.3; 98.1) and in Isaiah (Is 42.10) may also be referring to a renewed spirit. As Brian Schwertley has observed, ‘Some think that “new” in new song merely means that the psalmist is asking God’s people to sing an inspired song of which they are not yet familiar. Others think that the phrase “sing a new song” is a liturgical phrase equivalent to “give it all you’ve got.” Calvin regards new as equivalent to rare and choice’.⁶⁵

Even if all of these references are to be understood as referring to entirely new songs, this does not provide a warrant for people today to compose new songs for use as worship. The writers of all the Psalms and Isaiah were members of the OT prophetic office, wrote under the direction of

⁶³ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p. 164. Although the authors do not support exclusive Psalmody, their view that singing to God is a counter-cultural activity is valid. Singing the Psalms makes the Church an even stronger counter-cultural force.

⁶⁴ For an analysis of the purpose and place of the imprecatory Psalms in the NT Church refer to: James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace—Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991). Refer also to: Jared Miller, “Psalms, For Reals,” *Credenda Agenda*, Volume 16.1, <http://www.credenda.org/issues/16-1tohu.php>.

⁶⁵ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1867] 1975), p. 408. Cited in: Brian Schwertley, “A Brief Examination of Exclusive Psalmody,” <http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/psalms.htm#f2>.

the Holy Spirit, and were authorized to write new compositions as part of the unfolding revelation of God.

The other two instances of 'new song' are in Revelation (5.9, 14.3).⁶⁶ Speaking of these instances, Michael Bushell writes:

The concept of 'newness' in the Book of Revelation is thus used as a poetic device to express in a heightened sense the fullness and scope of the eschatological redemption of all things. The 'new song', the 'new name', the 'new heavens', the 'new earth', and the 'new Jerusalem' are all yet future. The fact that we have in these visions a present anticipation of this newness, provides no more warrant for the production of 'new' worship song than it does for the building of a 'new Jerusalem.' Quite the contrary is the case. It is very significant, in fact, that worship song is placed in the category of the 'new' things of John's vision. The distinguishing character of the 'newness' attributed to these objects is its divine origin.⁶⁷

Some claim that restricting ourselves to the Psalms means that we could not sing the new song of Revelation 14.3. They ask, why we should not be allowed to sing this new heavenly song? John Cotton in his work on *Singing of Psalms a Gospel Ordinance* (1647) uses the same argument—not to justify hymn singing, but singing other parts of Scripture such as Revelation 15.3-4.

In the case of Revelation 14.3 we are not told what the saints in heaven sang. We will have to wait until we reach heaven to find out. With respect to Revelation 15.3 and 4, we need to consider the reference to the Temple in 15.5. This may indicate that John's vision was dealing with a symbolical representation of the worship in the Temple, indicating that the book of Revelation may have been written before 70 AD, rather than around 90 AD, as traditionally believed. In the eternal Heaven there is no longer to be a temple (Rev 21.22), so what John saw in Revelation 15.5 was passing.⁶⁸

Revelation 15.3 and 4 may be a metonymy (figure of speech substituting a part for the whole), or a summary of what was sung rather than a record of the exact words. It is possible that the reference is telling us that they sang the Psalms (Ps 86.8-10; 111.2, 4, 7; 71.22; 9.16; 64.9). However, the reference to the 'song of Moses' (Rev 15.3) confuses the issue about what they sang, because none of the Psalms, that have similar phrases, appear to have been composed by Moses. Regardless, the words are attributed to Christ (the Lamb) and Moses, a prophet of God. These words also proceed from the lips of sinless creatures. Human compositions today are produced neither by prophets nor by sinless creatures.

Even if the saints in heaven sang (or sing) these exact words as a truly new composition, their example does not apply to us living at the end of the "Last Days" under the NT Apostolic economy. The saints in heaven are under a different covenantal administration (the Eternal Covenant) in the same way that the saints in the OT were under one covenantal administration (Abrahamic; Sinaitic or Mosaic) and looking forward to another (Jer 31.30-34). They would have had no right to introduce elements of the New Covenant (e.g., the bloodless sacraments) in anticipation of what was to come.

In heaven, we will likely be introduced to a new order of worship as part of the covenant administration of the Eternal Covenant. For example, the Lord's Supper will likely be replaced with the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19.9), and the covenantal signs will once again be the tree of life and the eternal Sabbath. It may be that the songs of heaven will be different from those found in the Psalter (e.g., we will no longer need to ask for cleansing or forgiveness as in Psalms 19.12; 25.11; 51.2, 7; 79.9). It is possible that all believers will fill the office of prophet and write truly new songs to praise God for eternity. But that does not speak to the current covenant administration we are now under. "The Book of Revelation is filled to overflowing with obscure rites, with thrones and temples, and with a whole host of liturgical acts that cannot possibly relate to our own circumstances of worship. The attempt to derive elements of worship from such apocalyptic literature can only lead to liturgical chaos."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ The Greek word *καλως*, used here, means a qualitative newness and is different from the Greek word *νεος*, which means 'new in kind', or 'of recent origin'.

⁶⁷ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion: A Contemporary Case for Exclusive Psalmody*, cited above, p. 79.

⁶⁸ Most scholars date Revelation around 90 AD. However, Kenneth Gentry provides a persuasive argument for placing it around 68 AD, at the time of Nero: Kenneth Gentry, *The Beast of Revelation 666* (Tyler TX, Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

⁶⁹ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications), cited above, p. 78.

Objection: We Compose Prayers, Why Not Songs?

Many argue that since some of the Psalms were derived from prayers (e.g., Ps 17, 51, 61, etc.), and since we compose fresh prayers each time we pray, we can therefore write new songs for singing in praise to God. They say that there is no essential difference between saying a prayer or putting a tune to it and singing it. They say further, that the distinction between “admissible as worship but not singable” and “admissible as worship and singable” is a uniquely modern (i.e., post-Reformation) concept. However, this argument “proceeds on erroneous principles. It takes for granted that because a man can pray, therefore he is a poet; that because he can make a prayer, therefore he can compose a hymn. That all can pray will be readily conceded; that all are poets will not be admitted by anyone. Hence the fallacy is easily detected. ... That, of course, is not what is meant by the advocates of human hymns. They simply mean that because we are permitted to compose our own prayers we should let others compose hymns for us. It is quite evident, however, that there is no logical connection between the premises and the conclusion. It is the employment of words without meaning. Suppose any of us use the hymns of Watts or Wesley or Cowper, in what sense are they ours? They cannot be ours in any definite sense whatever.”⁷⁰

Some go on to suggest that since prayers, songs, and sermons all consist of words, there is no real distinction among them. Isaac Watts appears to have held a view similar to this:

ALL Men will confess this [speaking about Christ in our own Language and not in Jewish forms, types and figures] is just and necessary in Preaching and Praying; and I cannot find a Reason why we should not sing Praises also in a manner agreeable to the present and more glorious Dispensation. No Man can be persuaded, that to read a Sermon of the Royal Preacher out of the Book of Ecclesiastes, or a Prayer out of Ezra or Daniel is so edifying to a Christian Church (though they were inspired) as a well composed Prayer or Sermon delivered in the usual Language of the Gospel of Christ. And why should the very Words of the Sweet Singer of Israel be esteemed so necessary to Christian Psalmody, and the Jewish Style so much preferable to the Evangelical in our religious Songs of Praise?⁷¹

Simplistically, speaking a prayer or singing a prayer may appear to be the same thing. As modes of expression, praying to God and singing to him may contain the same content. However, as acts of worship, they are different elements. Prayer and songs are similar in the same way that elephants and mice are similar (i.e., they are grey, they have four legs, they have a tail, they are mammals, etc.), but they are, nevertheless, distinctly different kinds of animals. In the same way, prayers and song-praises may ‘walk on four legs’ and ‘wag a tail’ but they are distinctly different ‘beasts’.

When we compare prayer, praise in song and preaching/teaching by different attributes, we find that they are distinct elements of worship:

Comparison of Selected Worship Elements that Consist of Words			
Attributes	Prayer	Praise in Song	Preaching/ Teaching
Instruction to perform	Yes ⁷²	Yes ⁷³	Yes ⁷⁴
Petition for our needs	Yes	Yes	No
Praise directed to God	Yes	Yes	No
Intended to teach the congregation	No	Yes ⁷⁵	Yes ⁷⁶
Active congregational participation	No	Yes ⁷⁷	No
Anyone can perform	Yes ⁷⁸	Yes ⁷⁹	No ⁸⁰

⁷⁰ James Wilson, “Answers to the Common Arguments for the Use of Hymns in Divine Worship,” *Psalm Singers’ Conference* (Belfast, Fountain Printing Works, 1903), pp. 98-99.

⁷¹ Isaac Watts, “Preface,” *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

⁷² 1 Thes 5.17.

⁷³ Eph 5.19; Col 3.16; Jas 1.5.

⁷⁴ 2 Tim 4.2.

⁷⁵ Lk 24.44; Eph 5.19; Col 3.16.

⁷⁶ Tit 2.15.

⁷⁷ Col 3.16.

⁷⁸ Ac 1.13-14, 1 Cor 11.5.

Comparison of Selected Worship Elements that Consist of Words			
Attributes	Prayer	Praise in Song	Preaching/ Teaching
Stable ⁸¹ form required to participate	No	Yes	No
God-breathed prophetic words	No	Yes ⁸²	No
Collection or writings provided by God	No	Yes	No
Instruction to compose	Yes ⁸³	No	Yes ⁸⁴
Examples that show how to compose	Yes ⁸⁵	Yes	Yes ⁸⁶
Promise of God's help composing	Yes ⁸⁷	No	Yes ⁸⁸

Paul says that women are not to teach in a worship setting (1 Cor 14.33-35; 1 Tim 2.11-12). If preaching, singing, and prayer are nothing more than different modes of the 'word' element of worship, as some claim, then women must not be permitted to pray or sing either. Most of those who agree with Presbyterian and Reformed principles hold the view that women are not permitted to preach, but I know of no one who would not permit them to sing Psalms. Similarly, some congregations do not permit women to engage in vocalized pray in a worship setting, but permit them to sing Psalms. They admit by making these distinctions, that preaching, praying, and singing are in fact different elements. It is only when they are attempting to defend the introduction of hymns of mere human composition into worship that they inconsistently claim that preaching, prayer, and singing are modal variations of a common element of worship.

Objection: The Bible Contains Other Song Compositions

Vern Poythress identifies five possible positions with respect to what words may be used in song:

- (1) words of a translation of the 150 psalms (the exclusive psalmody position);
- (2) words of a translation of any song of Scripture, viz. the 150 psalms plus Exod. 15, Deut. 32, Jud. 5, etc. (the "inspired-song" position);
- (3) words of a translation of Scripture (the "inspired-words" position);
- (4) words that communicate the teaching (*didaskalia*) of Scripture (the didaskalia position)'
- (5) any words which are "edifying," whether or not they go beyond Scripture (the edification position).⁸⁹

He claims that the examples of Christ in Hebrews 2.12 and the people, with Ezra, who had rebuilt the altar (Ezra 3.11), show that position 1 is not valid. His argument with respect to Hebrews 2.12,⁹⁰ where the author of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 22.22 as found in the Greek OT translation (LXX), is that since the words quoted from the LXX are different (i.e., instead of "I will praise you" they are "I will sing your Praise"), Christ sang words not found in the 150 Psalms. This argument seems to be very weak. If I read from the NIV or the ESV I am not reading any less the word of God because the translations are different. In the same way, if I sing a Psalm in a translation, I still am singing the Psalm. Poythress's argument would require us to read and sing only from the original Hebrew or we are not reading or singing the word of God. Contrary to what Poythress

⁷⁹ Eph 5.19; Col 3.16; Jas 1.5.

⁸⁰ 1 Cor 14.34-35; 1 Tim 2.11-14.

⁸¹ For example, as a published text, or memorized.

⁸² Ex 15.20, 21; Judges 5; Is 5.1; 26.1; 2 Sam 23.1, 2; 1 Ch 25.5; 2 Ch 29.30; 35.15; Mt 22.43; Acts 1.16, 17; 2.29-31; 4.24, 25.

⁸³ Mt 6.9.

⁸⁴ 2 Tim 4.2.

⁸⁵ Mt 6.5-15.

⁸⁶ Acts 17.16-34.

⁸⁷ Rom 8.26; Eph 6.18.

⁸⁸ Lk 10.16; Eph 3.8.

⁸⁹ Vern S. Poythress, "Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 37, Fall 1974, p. 74.

⁹⁰ Same as above, pp. 84-86.

states, Hebrews 2.12 does not support singing other words than the Psalter. It shows that Jesus used, and sang, the Psalms.

With respect to Ezra 3.11, Poythress says, 'In Ezra 3:11, which is fulfilled in Christ, the people (or at least the priests and Levites) sing words that are not found in the 150 psalms. More precisely, the "upon Israel" is not found anywhere else following the refrain "for his steadfast love (loving kindness) endures forever." A general principle for song seems to be involved here, namely that with the progress of the history of redemption new richness and elaboration appears in the songs of God's people.' I have quoted the entire text of what Poythress says about Ezra 3.11. He goes on to discuss briefly Ezra 3 in general and claims that it supports the view that Jesus sang beyond the exact wording of the OT, but he says nothing more about the specific verse—i.e., Ezra 3.11.

Does Ezra 3.11 support the view that words other than the 150 Psalms were used in the worship at the time of the rebuilding of the altar? Poythress ignores entirely other possibilities. The words in Ezra 3.11 could be:

1. A summary of what they sang that day, rather than a literal quotation of the words they sang.
2. A quotation from a different version of a psalm than we find in the Hebrew OT today. There was some fluidity of the text of the OT before it settled into its final form. The existence of different versions can be demonstrated by the many places that the Greek OT (LXX) and Syriac versions of the text differ from the final Hebrew, and from the existence of variations within the Hebrew manuscripts (e.g., the Dead Sea scrolls versus the Masoretic Hebrew text).
3. A short-hand reference to one of the Psalms (e.g., 106 or 136). Psalm 106.1 contains almost identical words to Ezra 3.11.
4. A quotation of the meaning of the text rather than a literal word-for-word quotation of the text of the Psalm. It has been demonstrated that many of the authors of the Bible did not show laboured concern for exact quotation as long as the sense was maintained.
5. A statement by Ezra about God. Ezra 3.11 may not be referring to what was sung, but rather be a comment by Ezra that alludes to expressions found in the Psalms. Ezra does not introduce the words with the word "saying" as for example in 2 Chronicles 20.21. The quotation marks are a modern addition. Compare how the *King James Version* translates the verse: "And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel."

Ezra 3.11 does not support singing other words than the Psalter. In contrast Ezra 3.10 shows that Ezra took seriously the prescriptions of David in worship and did only what was authorized by God through David, including singing only the Psalms.

It is necessary to consider the claims of Poythress to show how far defenders of hymn singing have to go in an attempt to validate their position that non-Psalm and non-Biblical words can legitimately be offered to God as a sacrifice of praise. If positive arguments for singing non-Biblical words (i.e., modern hymns) could be found in Scripture, it would not be necessary to depend on arguments like the one Poythress presents.

A more common argument that is heard against exclusive Psalm-singing is that other songs found in the Bible were sung as worship to God. For example, Isaac Watts says:

Moses, Deborah and the Princes of Israel, David, Asaph and Habakkuk, and all the Saints under the Jewish State, sing their own Joys and Victories, their own Hopes and Fears and Deliverances, as I have hinted before; and why must we under the Gospel sing nothing else but the Joys, Hopes and Fears of Asaph and David? Why must Christians be forbid all other Melody, but what arises from the Victories and Deliverances of the Jews? David would have thought it very hard to be confined to the Words of Moses, and sung nothing else on all his Rejoycing-days, but the Drowning of Pharaoh in the fifteenth of Exodus. He might have supposed it a little unreasonable when he had peculiar Occasions of mournfull Musick, if he had been forced to keep close to Moses's Prayer in the Ninetieth Psalm, and always sung over the Shortness of human Life, especially if he were not permitted the Liberty of a Paraphrase; and yet the special concerns of David and Moses were much more akin to each other than ours are to either of them, and they were both of the same Religion, but ours is very different.⁹¹

⁹¹ Isaac Watts, "Preface," *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

Moses wrote and sang a song to instruct Israel (Dt 31, 22, 30; 32.1-27) and may have written the song in Exodus 15. He was a prophet, and what he wrote was God-breathed. If Miriam wrote the song mentioned in Exodus 15, rather than Moses, she also wrote as a prophet (Ex 15.20, 21), as did Deborah (Judges 4.4; with chapter 5), Isaiah (2 Ki 19.2 with Is 5.1; 27.1), and Habakkuk (Hab 1.1 with 3.1).

We must not miss the point that these compositions are part of Scripture and were delivered through the prophetic office. They are part of God's developing revelation. God didn't give the entire Bible at one time. He delivered it in various forms (story narrative, poetic, historic narrative, chronology, genealogy, apocalyptic, etc.) over an extended period—at least two thousand years if Job is dated from the time of Abraham, and possibly four thousand years if the Creation account is from the hand or time of Adam.⁹²

Even though the Apostles wrote the NT, they did not compose new songs to celebrate “their own joys and victories” or “their own hopes and fears and deliverances”. When Peter explained, in Acts 2, what was happening on the Day of Pentecost he didn't compose a new song, but rather quoted from the Psalms⁹³ along with other parts of the OT. To praise God for their deliverance from the Sanhedrin (Acts 4.25, 26) the Apostles quoted from Psalm 2. As we have already noted, the book of Hebrews is largely a commentary on the Psalms.⁹⁴ The author of Hebrews (likely Paul) did not consider it necessary to compose a new song to teach about Christ's uniqueness. Now that Scripture is complete, nothing more is to be added. “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.”⁹⁵

None of these song examples support the view that modern hymns or praise choruses can be used as worship. No composer of hymns today can claim to be a prophet or to be writing under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The claim that these song examples justifies the introduction of non-Biblical songs as worship undermines the completeness and sufficiency of Scripture, and is contrary to a key principle of the Reformation.

At most, it could be argued that the example of extra-Psalter Biblical songs supports the suggestion that the other songs in Scripture may be sung as worship by the NT Church. However, the idea that we may sing these other songs is not supportable, for the following reasons:

- Vern Poythress points out that the inspired-song position has special difficulties because it is not clear whether or not a portion of Scripture is a song or even cast as poetry.⁹⁶ For example, are the words of Mary or Zechariah in Luke 1 songs? Even though they were filled with the Holy Spirit when they spoke these words, did they sing them, and were they intended, by God, to be sung by his people as worship?
- All of Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim 3.16). However, some portions were given through extraordinary revelation rather than being the writings of men ‘carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Pet 2.21; Heb 1.1). We have no means of determining which parts of Scripture are to be sung. Is it only to be the poetic sections or only the poetic sections we happen to like? For example, what should we do with the words of Balaam? He was not a true prophet of God, yet the words he spoke were God-breathed (Num 23.12). The criteria for selecting which portions of the Bible could be sung as worship becomes merely subjective. This is contrary to the over-riding principle we have been considering—God regulates worship.
- What was valid as worship in the OT economy is not necessarily valid in the NT era. Even if all the extra-Psalter songs of the OT were sung as specific acts of worship, and approved by God as such, this does not provide warrant for our including them, any more than it provides warrant for our including incense or circumcision.
- God, in his providential superintendence, prepared the Prophets and Apostles to deliver and assemble his written word. When the Psalter was being assembled Moses' song in Exodus, Miriam's song (if she wrote one), Deborah's song and Habakkuk's song were not included. Although they are part of Scripture, they were not included in the developing songbook that was used in the worship of the Temple and likely in the Synagogue. God

⁹² Roland K Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969.), pp. 543-549.

⁹³ Psalms: 16 [Acts 2.31]; 110 [Acts 2.34, 35]; 132 [Acts 2.30].

⁹⁴ Psalms: 2.7 [Heb 5.5]; 8.4-6 [Heb 2.6-8]; 22.22 [Heb 2.12]; 40.6-8 [Heb 10.5-7]; 45.6-7 [Heb 1.8, 9]; 95.7-11 [Heb 3.7-11, 15; 4.3, 5, 7]; 110.1 [Heb 1.13], 4 [Heb 5.6; 7.17, 21]; 118.6 [Heb 13.6].

⁹⁵ “Of The Holy Scripture,” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 1, para. 6.

⁹⁶ Vern S. Poythress, “Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody,” cited above, pp. 93-94.

ultimately determined which songs were included in the Psalter, not pious Jews. God has given the standard for what songs are to be used as worship.

- Under the NT economy, we are told explicitly and clearly by the Apostles and NT Prophets to sing the songs found in the Psalter (Eph 5.19; Col 3.16; Jam 5.13 [NKJV]) and we are given the example of Jesus singing from the Psalter (Mt 26.30). We are not told to sing the song of Moses found in Deuteronomy 32 or Habakkuk's song (chapter 3).

There is one example of a song in the OT that appears to present special problems for the Psalms-only view—this is Hezekiah's song in Isaiah 38. Hezekiah apparently sang his song in the Temple (Is 38.20), but it is not in the Psalter. Although it is not clear what exact action he took, when we compare different translations,⁹⁷ we will assume that he sang the song recorded in Isaiah 38 in the Temple. If this is the case, there are only two possibilities:

- His action (i.e., singing his own composition in the Temple) was *wrong* and not endorsed by God. If this is the conclusion then, of course, his example does not provide a warrant for us. We cannot determine if his action was right or wrong. The historical account does not provide us with endorsement or condemnation. Was it right for Hezekiah to ask for a sign (2 Ki 20.8) or to show the envoys from Babylon his treasures (2 Ki 20.12-15)? The historical account doesn't tell us whether these actions were right or wrong. We must be careful how we use historical examples where the Bible does not give us insight into the rightness or wrongness of the action (e.g., Jer 38.24-26).
- His action was *right* and endorsed by God. Although Hezekiah is not called a prophet, it is probable that he was acting in the capacity of a prophet. His actions, which are recorded in 2 Chronicles 29-31, mirror those of David, and the Bible tells us clearly that he held a special place before God (2 Ki 18.5-7). In addition, it is recorded that he was concerned about following the commands and ritual ceremonial orders of Moses and David (2 Ki 18.6; 2 Ch 29.25, 27, 30). It is unlikely that he would have introduced anything into worship that was not explicitly endorsed by God.

Even if Hezekiah wrote a song that was sung in the Temple, his actions do not give us warrant to introduce new songs into worship. Hezekiah wrote his composition during a time when the Psalter was incomplete and still under development. It is quite likely that other songs were composed (under prophetic authority) besides his for use in the Temple but were not included in the Psalter. However, "[t]here came a time when every psalm used in the temple service had to be taken from the Psalter. Firstly, this means that the psalms which had from early times established themselves by regular use in the temple service would all be included in the Psalter. But secondly it must be added that in later Jewish times no psalms were used at the Temple service which were not found in the book. The Psalter attained such canonical authority and 'monopoly' that when a new festival was instituted and there was need of a special psalm for the festival offering, a new Psalm would no longer be composed, but one of the psalms of the Psalter was chosen and interpreted in a way which would fit in with the festival."⁹⁸

The correct question to ask is not what songs were sung as worship *before* the Psalter was complete or during the development of the Psalter but, rather to ask what songs were sung in OT worship and by the early NT Church, *after* the Psalter was complete. The answer is, the Psalms, and only the Psalms. Hezekiah's song, even though it is part of the God-breathed Scriptures, is not included in the Psalter and is therefore not intended by God to be used by the Church as song-praise. The NT Church is told to sing the songs in the Psalter, not Hezekiah's song.

Alternate Compositions

Only the Psalter provides a songbook written by God. Non-Biblical hymns are not God-breathed. If a pastor were to go into the pulpit of a typical Bible-believing Church and open a copy of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and say, "Hear the word of the Lord" we would hope that the Elders would remove

⁹⁷ For example:

NIV: "The LORD will save me, and we will sing with stringed instruments all the days of our lives in the temple of the LORD."

ESV: "The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD."

LXX: "O God of my salvation; and I will not cease blessing thee with the psaltery all the days of my life before the house of God."

⁹⁸ Sigmund Mowinckle, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. II. P. 202. Cited in Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh PA: Crown and Covenant Publications), cited above, p. 55.

him from the pulpit. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* is an excellent human composition, but it is only that—a human composition. We are never to elevate it to the same level as the words breathed by God.

In contrast, those same Bible-believing churches take the words of men (often words with suspect theology) every week and raise them to the level of the Psalms. Not only do they put the non-Biblical hymns on the same level as the Psalms, they often replace the Psalms entirely. You can see this by selecting almost any hymnal used by Evangelical Protestants, and counting the number of Psalms included in the collection. In most cases, you will find fewer than ten Psalms. Even in Presbyterian and Reformed churches, the number of hymns used for singing usually exceeds the number of Psalms. The word of God has been replaced by the word of men.

Objection: There is No Prohibition Against Using Hymns

It is often objected that singing human composition, as worship, is not forbidden in the word of God. This argument is presented in at least three forms:

- 1) God hasn't explicitly prohibited non-Biblical hymns.
- 2) God hasn't commanded only the use of inspired compositions. For example, Isaac Watts said, "IF I could be persuaded that nothing ought to be such in worship but what was of immediate Inspiration from God, surely I would recommend Anthems only, (viz.) the Psalms themselves as we read them in the Bible, set to Musick as they are sung by Choristers in our Cathedral Churches ..."⁹⁹
- 3) Non-Biblical hymns are God-breathed compositions on a par with the Psalms. For example, one writer said, "Christians might well ask whether they recognize today that poetic and musical communication may be inspired by the Holy Spirit, and may be one evidence of the Spirit's filling in a believer."¹⁰⁰

There are many things not prohibited explicitly in God's word that are not acceptable as worship (e.g., making marriage into a sacrament; juggling in the sanctuary after the sermon and before the Benediction, marching around the sanctuary with models of the 'tree of life', etc.). The principle derived from Scripture, as shown in chapters 2 through 4, is that if we don't have a command or Apostolic example (explicit or derived from principle) to include something in worship, we must not include it. What we offer to God as worship is to be only what he has required; what he has not required is not worship, and is not to be offered to him as worship (Dt 4.2; 12.30-32; Is 1.11-13; Mt 15.9). The *Westminster Confession of Faith* summarizes this: "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 men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture."¹⁰¹

To contend that new song compositions can be offered on a par with, or as a substitute for, the God-breathed Psalms is to advocate essentially a form of idolatry. In John 1.14, the living Word—Jesus—is attributed with having the glory of God. The written word of God—the Bible, including the Psalms—is the breath of the living Word (2 Tim 3.16) and is therefore glorious (perfect, holy, etc.; Jer 23.9; Ps 18.30; 19.7; Rom 7.12). Paul tells us further that men in sin exchange the glory of God with human substitutes (Rom 1.23). Therefore, with the equivalences between Christ and his word and glory, to substitute human words for Christ's words in the worship of God, is idolatry and, as Paul says, is the behaviour of fools claiming to be wise (Rom 1.22).

To offer new song compositions in the worship of God requires the belief that normative revelation did not cease with Christ and the Apostles and that the canon of Scripture is not closed. This leaves the Church with a serious problem of knowing what is to be our standard for faith and practice. It is unacceptable to respond that what is sung in worship does not need to be part of the closed canon of Scripture, since what we are *told* to sing by the Apostles—the Psalms (Eph 5.19; Col 3.16; Jam 5.13 [NKJV])—is part of the canon of Scripture.

Another significant problem with the view that new song compositions can be offered along with, or instead of, the Psalms is that it devalues the Psalms. As Michael Bushell states:

That man who prefers a humanly composed song to one written by the Spirit of God, when the latter fully suits his purposes, is, to say the least, lacking in spiritual discernment. And that man who would mix together in one book the inspired songs of God with the uninspired songs of

⁹⁹ Isaac Watts, "Preface," *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

¹⁰⁰ C. Nolan Huizenga, 'A Biblical "Tune-up" for Hymn Singing,' *Christianity Today*, June 27, 1980, pp. 20-22.

¹⁰¹ "Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day," *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, para. 1.

sinful men as if the latter were in any way comparable with the former in majesty, holiness, and authority; that man, whether he knows it or not, is guilty of sacrilege, of bringing the things of God down to the level of sinful men. The only way to avoid this charge is to claim that the Psalms are in a very real sense out-dated, so much so that even frail and sinful men may presume to improve upon them. Such a claim cannot possibly be substantiated and can only be seen as a signal instance of that defiant arrogance in which fallen man so easily persists.¹⁰²

The reality is that the Psalms, as God-breathed compositions, are of infinitely more value as an offering to God than the best words that mere humans could ever compose.

Adulterated Contributions

In Leviticus 22 (v 20), we read that the people were told not to bring any sacrifices with defects because they would not be accepted. The sacrifice we are to give today is to be a sacrifice of praise from our lips (Heb 13.15). It should be unblemished, or God will not accept it. The only unblemished songs of praise that we can offer God are those written by him—the Psalms!

If one individual can be ‘credited’ with the introduction of hymnody into the Protestant Church it is Isaac Watts. He complained that the Psalter lacked the dignity and grace that should be part of Christian worship. His father responded: “Try then whether you can yourself produce something better.” The product of his efforts was published in 1719 as Psalm paraphrases, the *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*. Watts went on to produce over 600 hymns and has become known as the “father of English hymnody”.

Many of his ‘Psalms’ are clearly not translations and are not even paraphrases. It is dishonest to present these as the ‘Psalms of David’. They are ‘false fire’ (Lev 10.1-2) and ‘blemished sacrifices’ (Malachi 1.6-14) before God. Consider, for example, three selections chosen more-or-less at random:

Comparison with Watts’ Rendition of Psalms with the NIV Translation	
Rendition by Watts ¹⁰³	New International Version
<p>Psalm 66 (portion) 1 Sing, all ye nations, to the Lord, Sing with a joyful noise; With melody of sound record His honors and your joys.</p> <p>2 Say to the Power that shakes the sky, “How terrible art thou! Sinners before thy presence fly, Or at thy feet they bow.’</p> <p>3 Come, see the wonders of our God, How glorious are his ways! In Moses’ hand he puts his rod, And cleaves the frighted seas.</p> <p>4 He made the ebbing channel dry, While Isr’el passed the flood; There did the church begin their joy, And triumph in their God.</p> <p>5 He rules by his resistless might: Will rebel mortals dare Provoke th’ Eternal to the fight,</p>	<p>Psalm 66 (1-12) 1 Shout with joy to God, all the earth! 2 Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious!</p> <p>3 Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. 4 All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name.” Selah</p> <p>5 Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man’s behalf!</p> <p>6 He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot— come, let us rejoice in him.</p> <p>7 He rules forever by his power, his eyes watch the nations— let not the rebellious rise up against him. Selah</p>

¹⁰² Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh PA: Crown and Covenant Publications), cited above, pp. 88-89.

¹⁰³ Isaac Watts, “*Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

<p>And tempt that dreadful war?</p> <p>6 O bless our God, and never cease; Ye saints, fulfill his praise; He keeps our life, maintains our peace, And guides our doubtful ways.</p> <p>7 Lord, thou hast proved our suff'ring souls, To make our graces shine; So silver bears the burning coals, The metal to refine.</p> <p>8 Through wat'ry deeps, and fiery ways, We march at thy command; Led to possess the promised place By thine unerring hand.</p>	<p>8 Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; 9 he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.</p> <p>10 For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.</p> <p>11 You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. 12 You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.</p>
<p>Psalm 127</p> <p>1 If God to build the house deny, The builders work in vain; And towns, without his wakeful eye, A useless watch maintain.</p> <p>2 Before the morning beams arise, Your painful work renew; And till the stars ascend the skies, Your tiresome toil pursue;</p> <p>3 Short be your sleep, and coarse your fare; In vain, till God has blessed; But if his smiles attend your care, You shall have food and rest.</p> <p>4 Nor children, relatives, nor friends, Shall real blessings prove; Nor all the earthly joys he sends, If sent without his love.</p>	<p>Psalm 127</p> <p>1 Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.</p> <p>2 In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat— for he grants sleep to those he loves.</p> <p>3 Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him.</p> <p>4 Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. 5 Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate.</p>
<p>Psalm 128</p> <p>1 O happy man, whose soul is filled With zeal and reverent awe! His lips to God their honors yield, His life adorns the law.</p> <p>2 A careful providence shall stand And ever guard thy head, Shall on the labors of thy hand Its kindly blessings shed.</p> <p>3 Thy wife shall be a fruitful vine; Thy children round thy board Each like a plant of honor shine, and learn to fear the Lord.</p> <p>4 The Lord shall thy best hopes fulfill For months and years to come; The Lord, who dwells on Zion's hill, Shall send thee blessings home.</p>	<p>Psalm 128</p> <p>1 Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in his ways.</p> <p>2 You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours.</p> <p>3 Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table.</p> <p>4 Thus is the man blessed who fears the LORD. 5 May the LORD bless you from Zion all the days of your life; may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem,</p>

<p>5 This is the man whose happy eyes Shall see his house increase; Shall see the sinking church arise, Then leave the world in peace.</p>	<p>6 and may you live to see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel.</p>
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Following the introduction of these 'imitations' into the Congregational churches, it did not take long for Presbyterians to follow suit. In May 1789, at the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the US held at Philadelphia, Adam Rankin raised the question of the propriety of using Watt's 'Psalter'. He asked, "Whether the churches ... have not fallen into a great pernicious error by disusing Rouse's versifications of David's Psalms, and adopting ... Watts's imitation?" The General Assembly discussed at length this matter and in the end recommended that Rankin show Christian charity to those who disagreed with him and admonished him to "guard against disturbing the peace of the church on this head."¹⁰⁴ In time, Watt's paraphrases became the standard among most Presbyterians in the US.

From the initial deviation from singing only the words of God, brought about by the singing of Watt's paraphrases, it was not long before churches introduced and accepted hundreds of hymns written by Watts and hymns written by others (e.g., Charles Wesley). It was in the approximately 150 years following Watts that the Church experienced the greatest flood of hymn writing and the replacement of Psalm singing with hymn singing. Since then, Robert Dabney's prediction sadly, has come true: "We shall in the end have a mass of corrupting religious poetry against which the church will have to wage a sore contest."¹⁰⁵ The process has continued, as even the 'traditional' hymns are being driven out of the Church. "A visit to representative Presbyterian and Reformed churches will indicate who is winning this war [i.e., hymns vs praise songs]. Increasingly, contemporary choruses and praise songs are replacing hymns in the same way that hymns drove out the metrical psalms over the course of the nineteenth century."¹⁰⁶

Objection: Psalm Translations are Essentially Paraphrases

Watts raised the objection that the Psalm translations in meter were at best paraphrases of the Psalms, and therefore this justified his even more liberal paraphrases. His argument is essentially that if we can sing paraphrased Psalms, then why not hymns that have the essence of the Psalms? It is only a matter of degree between singing a paraphrased Psalm or a hymn with the same sentiments. (Doug Wilson presents a similar argument in his book on the Church.¹⁰⁷) Watts said specifically:

IF I could be persuaded that nothing ought to be such in worship but what was of immediate Inspiration from God, surely I would recommend Anthems only, (viz.) the Psalms themselves as we read them in the Bible, set to Musick as they are sung by Choristers in our Cathedral Churches: For these are nearest to the Words of Inspiration; and we must depart far from those Words if we turn them into Rhyme and Metre of any Sort. And upon the foot of this Argument even the Scotch Version, which has been so much commended for its Approach to the Original, would be unlawful as well as others.

THOUGH the Psalms of David are a Work of admirable and divine Composure, though they contain the noblest Sentiments of Piety, and breathe a most exalted Spirit of Devotion, yet when the best of Christians attempt to sing many of them in our common Translations, that Spirit of Devotion vanishes and is lost, the Psalm dies upon their lips, and they feel scarce any thing of the holy Pleasure.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Mark S. Shuttleworth, "Isaac Watts: The Man Behind the Hymns," *Banner of Truth*, Feb, 1982, pp. 1-4.

¹⁰⁵ Cited in: D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship*, cited above, p. 171.

¹⁰⁶ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship*, cited above, p. 161.

¹⁰⁷ Douglas Wilson, "The Worship Service," *Mother Kirk* (Moscow ID: Canon Press, 2001), pp. 140-141.

¹⁰⁸ Isaac Watts, "*Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

The version of the Psalter in use in the dissenting congregations in England at the time of Watts was the one prepared by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins. This was the first complete Psalter in the English Language. It was first published in 1562. It was this version that Watts found unsatisfactory. The following table presents three examples of Psalm renditions from the Sternhold and Hopkins edition of the Psalter compared with the renditions from Watts and the translation of the King James Version.

Comparison of Psalm Translations with Watts' Rendition		
Rendition by Sternhold and Hopkins¹⁰⁹	Rendition by Watts¹¹⁰	King James Version
<p>Psalm 1 1 The man is blest that hath not lent to wicked men his ear, Nor led his life as sinners do, nor sat in scorner's chair.</p> <p>2 But in the law of God the Lord doth set his whole delight, And in the same doth exercise himself both day and night.</p> <p>3 He shall be like a tree that is planted the rivers nigh, Which in due season bringeth forth its fruit abundantly; 4 Whose leaf shall never fade nor fall, but flourishing shall stand: E'en so all things shall prosper well that this man takes in hand.</p> <p>5 As for ungodly men, with them it shall be nothing so; But as the chaff, which by the wind is driven to and fro.</p> <p>6 Therefore the wicked men shall not in judgment stand upright, Nor in th' assembly of the just shall sinners come in sight.</p> <p>7 For why? The way of godly men unto the Lord is known: Whereas the way of wicked men shall quite be overthrown.</p>	<p>Psalm 1 1 The man is ever bless'd Who shuns the sinners' ways, Among their councils never stands, Nor takes the scorner's place;</p> <p>2 But makes the law of God His study and delight, Amidst the labours of the day, And watches of the night.</p> <p>3 He like a tree shall thrive, With waters near the root; Fresh as the leaf his name shall live; His works are heav'nly fruit.</p> <p>4 Not so the ungodly race, They no such blessings find; Their hopes shall flee, like empty chaff Before the driving wind.</p> <p>5 How will they bear to stand Before that judgement-seat, When all the saints, at Christ's right hand, In full assembly meet.</p> <p>6 He knows, and he approves, The way the righteous go; But sinners and their works shall meet A dreadful overthrow.</p>	<p>Psalm 1 1 Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.</p> <p>2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.</p> <p>3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.</p> <p>4 The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.</p> <p>5 Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.</p> <p>6 For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.</p>
<p>Psalm 23 1 The Lord is only my support, and he that doth me feed; How can I then lack any thing, whereof I stand in need?</p>	<p>Psalm 23 1 My Shepherd will supply my need: Jehovah is His Name;</p>	<p>Psalm 23 1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.</p>

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, *The Whole Book of Psalms Collected into English Metre*, 1562.

¹¹⁰ Isaac Watts, *"Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to The Christian State and Worship*, 1719.

Comparison of Psalm Translations with Watts' Rendition		
Rendition by Sternhold and Hopkins¹⁰⁹	Rendition by Watts¹¹⁰	King James Version
<p>2 In pastures green he feedeth me, where I do safely lie, And after leads me to the streams which run most pleasantly.</p> <p>3 And when I find myself near lost, then doth he me home take, conducting me in his right paths, e'en for his own Name's sake.</p> <p>4 And though I were e'en at death's door, yet would I fear no ill; For both thy rod and shepherd's crook afford me comfort still.</p> <p>5 Thou hast my table richly spread in presence of my foe; Thou hast my head with balm refreshed, my cup doth overflow;</p> <p>6 And finally, while breath doth last, thy grace shall me defend; And in the house of God will I my life for ever spend.</p>	<p>In pastures fresh He makes me feed, Beside the living stream.</p> <p>2 He brings my wandering spirit back When I forsake His ways, And leads me, for His mercy's sake, In paths of truth and grace.</p> <p>3 When I walk through the shades of death His presence is my stay; One word of His supporting grace Drives all my fears away.</p> <p>4 His hand, in sight of all my foes, Doth still my table spread; My cup with blessings overflows, His oil anoints my head. 5 The sure provisions of my God Attend me all my days; O may Thy house be my abode, And all my work be praise.</p> <p>6 There would I find a settled rest, While others go and come; No more a stranger, nor a guest, But like a child at home.</p>	<p>2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.</p> <p>3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.</p> <p>4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.</p> <p>5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.</p> <p>6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.</p>
<p>Psalm 100¹¹¹</p> <p>1 All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice: Him serve with fear, his praise forth tell, come ye before him and rejoice.</p> <p>2 The Lord ye know is God indeed, without our aid he did us make; We are his flock, he doth us feed, and for his sheep he doth us take.</p> <p>3 O enter then his gates with praise, approach with joy his courts unto' Praise, laud, and bless his Name always, for it is seemly so to do.</p>	<p>Psalm 100</p> <p>1 Ye nations round the earth, rejoice Before the Lord, your sov'reign King; Serve him with cheerful heart and voice, With all your tongues his glory sing.</p> <p>2 The Lord is God; 'tis he alone Doth life, and breath, and being give; We are his work, and not our own, The sheep that on his pastures live.</p> <p>3 Enter his gates with songs of joy, With praises to his courts repair; And make it your divine employ To pay your thanks and honors</p>	<p>Psalm 100</p> <p>1 Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands. 2 Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing.</p> <p>3 Know ye that the LORD he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.</p> <p>4 Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and bless his name.</p>

¹¹¹ William Kethe is now accepted as the author of this version of Psalm 100, even though the Psalter attributes it to John Hopkins.

Comparison of Psalm Translations with Watts' Rendition		
Rendition by Sternhold and Hopkins ¹⁰⁹	Rendition by Watts ¹¹⁰	King James Version
4 For why? the Lord our God is good, hs mercy is for ever sure; His truth at all times firmly stood, and shall from age to age endure.	there. 4 The Lord is good, the Lord is kind, Great is his grace, his mercy sure; And the whole race of man shall find His truth from age to age endure.	5 For the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations.

A comparison of the Sternhold-Hopkins renditions with the King James Version shows a substantial variation from the translation that was the common version of the Bible in use at the time of Isaac Watts. This deviation provides a justification for Watts' contention that the renditions were closer to paraphrases than to translations. Watts mentions the *Scottish Psalter* (1650), which is closer to the original Hebrew but is still often far from being literal. In many places, it takes liberties to fit the Hebrew to English metre and is often inconsistent in its translation of the names of God.

The answer to Watt's objection is not to produce renditions of the Psalms like his own that deviate as much, or even further, from the original. The answer is to provide the best possible translations of the Psalms for singing.

Since we are commanded to *sing* the Psalms, we need to put them into a form that can be sung or at least chanted. We should however strive for faithfulness in translation while providing songs that can be sung, rather than forcing our verses to fit a particular rhyme or meter. However, even when the Psalms prepared for singing are not word-for-word translations, they are still the Psalms of God in the same way that a translation of the Gospel of John, even imperfect (as all translations are) is still the Word of God. It is a distinctly different activity to translate a Psalm or a Gospel than to write our own gospel (Gal 1.8, 9) or compose our own hymn. A translation of a Psalm is still a Psalm and the word of God.

Although not perfect, Psalters produced by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America¹¹² (RPCNA) and the Free Church of Scotland¹¹³ illustrate what can be accomplished in an effort to be faithful in translation and yet provide Psalm selections that can be sung easily by congregations. Both Psalters strive for faithfulness in translation in an effort to capture the meaning and force of the original Hebrew. The new Free Church Psalter follows the NIV as closely as possible, within the constraints of providing metrical verses for singing. In the RPCNA Psalter, some of the Psalms have been translated in unrhymed form and some use irregular meters in order to allow for a more accurate translation. Some of the Psalms have been included as chants and are exact copies of the text of the King James Version. One example deserves particular notice: a version of Psalm 100 uses the exact words from the King James Version and has been put to an irregular tune written specifically for this translation. It is easy to sing, and has become a commonly requested favourite among the children of our congregation. This example shows that it is possible to sing an accurate translation.

There is no doubt that more needs to be done to provide accurate translations of the Psalms for singing, and to remove stilted rhythms and rhymes leftover from the attempts to force fit the Psalms to popular sixteenth century English meters. However, as stated earlier, the real problems are with the translation, versification, and music—not with the Psalms themselves. The answer to the objection that some of the Psalm translations are nearly paraphrases, is not to produce compositions that deviate further from the original, but rather to apply the best linguistic, literary, and musical skills to produce Psalm translations for the praise of God.

Hymnody presents practical problems that are not present when we use the Psalter—the hymnbook of the Church—for the worship of God. Consider for example, the guidelines provided in various publications

¹¹² *The Book of Songs for Singing* (Pittsburgh, PA: Board of Educations and Publication, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1973).

¹¹³ The Psalmody Committee, *Sing Psalms: New Metical Versions of the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh, Scotland; The Free Church of Scotland, 2003).

for selecting hymns. One article, by Margaret Clarkson, gave the following criteria for picking a ‘good’ hymn:¹¹⁴

- Good hymns are God-Centered, not man centered.
- Good hymns are theologically sound.
- Good hymns are doctrinal in content.
- Good hymns have words of beauty, dignity, reverence and simplicity.
- Good hymns display preciseness and finesse of poetic technique and expression.
- Good hymns turn heavenward.

Another article gave the following criteria for picking a hymnal:¹¹⁵

- Distinguish innovation from mere novelty.
- Study the organization of the hymnal. The hymns should be in some logical sequence, making it possible to have a clear overview of the book.
- Read all the texts. They should be theologically correct and of good literary quality.
- Sing all the hymns. Be open to new hymns, but be discerning.
- The hymnal should represent our rich heritage of cultures, historical periods, and musical idioms.
- Consider the scholarship of the edition. All selections should exhibit musical and literary excellence.
- Consider the physical qualities of the book. Printing should be clear and easy to read, ... binding ... etc.

While these may be good and valid criteria for picking songs or songbooks, it should be noted that neither author derives *any* of the criteria from the Bible. Neither author provides a single Scriptural reference in the articles to show how any of the selection principles were derived. It seems to be inconsistent to discuss what is proper as worship and not once to consider what God might have to say on the matter.

Douglas Wilson in *Mother Kirk* gives his criteria¹¹⁶, with Biblical references to support his concepts, as:

- The lyrics must be Biblical.
- The lyrics must have catholicity and balance ... [to] avoid the temptation of limiting our music to only some truths, or to some favourite texts.
- The lyrics must be holy and reverent ... in the spirit of truth.
- The lyrics should be creedal and doctrinal.
- The lyrics should be pastoral.
- The lyrics should be edifying.
- The lyrics should be historical.

Ironically, Wilson says that God has provided a perfect example and expression of praise in the inspired words of the Psalms. The implication is that human compositions are imperfect and the Psalms are not.

Another article reviewing, positively, a new hymnal called *Christian Hymns*, said: “How can one select from such a prodigious mass of published verse? Has the criterion to be personal taste, or has attention to be paid to the standards set by the Christian community at large?”¹¹⁷ Since when is either personal taste or corporate opinion to be our standard for faith or practice? Where does God’s word weigh in?

By what standard are we to judge one person’s list of criteria for selecting hymns from another person’s? It cannot be the word of God, because the word of God doesn’t give the standard. It does not provide guidelines for writing or selecting hymns to sing. If we are to write or select hymns for congregational worship, then the Bible leaves us without guidance. Therefore, the criteria can be nothing

¹¹⁴ E. Margaret Clarkson, ‘What Makes a Hymn “Good”?’ *Christianity Today*, June 27, 1980, pp. 22-23.

¹¹⁵ Richard D. Dinwiddie, “Minster’s Workshop: How to Choose A Hymnal,” *Christianity Today*, May 19, 1978, p. 40. Dinwiddie was, when he wrote the article, director of the Sacred Music Department, Moody Bible Institute.

¹¹⁶ Douglas Wilson, “The Worship Service,” *Mother Kirk*, cited above, pp. 142-143.

¹¹⁷ S. M. Houghton, “Book Review, Christian Hymns,” *Banner of Truth*, month unknown, 1977, pp. 16-18.

more than human derived and defined. If we do not use the Psalms alone as worship, we are left with a purely subjective approach to selecting among human compositions for our 'praise'.

Hymnal selection and revision is a recipe for congregational and denominational problems. It is impossible to create a hymnbook that can be universally and permanently acceptable to the entire Church. Modern hymnal revision committees seem always to have agendas, such as: using 'inclusive' language, supporting a feminist agenda (e.g., emphasizing God's mother-like qualities), pushing a theological perspective, removing perceived racism, catering to youth, etc. 'Modernists' and 'traditionalists' seem to clash over the selection of hymns. The favorites of everyone can't be included in every edition. Also, copyright problems arise, especially when youth groups use new hymns or songs and congregations and hymnody committees want to include them in their collections. Suddenly they discover that "God gave me a song ... copyright restrictions keep it mine!"

The fading popularity of many (the great majority) of the 'great' old hymns and the widespread disagreement on what is suitable for inclusion in a hymnal indicates that there is a problem. "We no longer share a common body of church praise across the generations and around the world. We are stuck in the rut of the here and now."¹¹⁸ But the fundamental problem is not with hymns *per se*, but deeper. The problem is that men will never succeed in creating a fully suitable and acceptable hymnal for congregational or denominational worship, let alone for the entire Church, because they are doing what they aren't supposed to do. They are doomed to failure before they even start. This problem alone should show clearly that the right approach is to use God's songbook—*The Book of Psalms*.

Many hymns display subtle theological problems. Vernon C. Grounds referred to the old Spiritual, with the words: "On the Jericho Road, There's room for just two, No more and no less, Just Jesus and you." He said, "Think about it. If that song is right, we had better get *off* the Jericho Road. That is not the highway to glory because, as the New Testament repeatedly discloses, the glory highway is broad enough to allow all of God's people to march along together. Side by side."¹¹⁹ Whether or not you agree with his interpretation of Matthew 7.14, you can understand his point that hymns often contain theological problems. When there are theological errors, the Hymnal committees need to grapple with the problem of amendment. Do they have a right to change what an author originally wrote (e.g., using modern words or correcting theological problems) and include it as a hymn by that author? One writer enumerated his concerns with hymn revisions (changing the original artistic form, inconsistent attempts to be culturally relevant, removing biblical terminology, and accommodation to biblical illiteracy),¹²⁰ but didn't appear to be even remotely aware of the bigger problem—the lack of a biblical warrant to use hymns in worship.

Even if a hymnal committee could agree on a standard for including particular hymns, could identify only hymns that had no theological problems, and could assemble them together in a collection, they would still have a fundamental theological problem. That is the problem of not having a hymnal with Biblical-balance. Wilson realizes this as a potential problem and warns against it in his list of criteria. We can ask of any hymnal:

- Does the collection of hymns deal with God's justice adequately? Does it properly represent his creation, providence, kingship/lordship over the nations, election of believers, history of Israel, etc. along with his love, compassion, mercy, etc. in the balance we find in the Psalter, or the Bible as a whole?
- Does the collection of hymns include imprecations on God's enemies? How many hymns do you know of that include the kinds of imprecations found in the Psalms?¹²¹

If the theological balance in the collection of hymns is not the same as that found in the Psalter, then the collection is theologically faulty. The only way we can be sure that we do not have theological problems is to sing the Psalms, all the Psalms, and nothing but the Psalms! The Psalms alone meet all the objective standards for correct worship as laid out by God.

¹¹⁸ Michael Horton, *A Better Way—Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), p. 183.

¹¹⁹ Nomads on the Jericho Road, *Christianity Today*.

¹²⁰ Gary A. Parrett, 'Raising Ebenezer: We are misguided when we modernize hymn texts,' *Christianity Today*, January, 2006, p. 62.

¹²¹ Psalms: 35.1-18; 19-26; 40.14, 15; 55.9,15; 58.6-10; 68.1, 2, 21, 30; 79.6-12; 83.10-18; 94.1-4; 109.6-19; 137.8, 9; 139.19-22; 140.8-11.

It is interesting to compare the use of Psalms in Biblical Christianity with the use of songs in other religions. Hindus chant the Rig Veda and the Yajur Veda (chanted by priests during sacrifices). The chanting is based on various tones and syllables with a type of heightened speech and one syllable to a tone. Brahmin priests chant the Vedas during weddings and funerals. Vedic chanting (as well as devotional songs called *bhajans*) has been a prominent part of the Hindu religious culture for almost 3,000 years. The Hare Krishnas brought many of the teachings of the ancient Hindu religious writings—primarily derived from the Bhagavad-Gita (“Song of the Lord”)—into modern Western society. The following is a representative example of the Hindu songs from the Rig Veda:

1 INDRA and Agni I invoke fain are we for their song of praise:
Chief Soma-drinkers are they both.
2 Praise ye, O men, and glorify Indra-Agni in the holy rites:
Sing praise to them in sacred songs.
3 Indra and Agni we invite, the Soma-drinkers, for the fame
Of Mitra, to the Soma-draught.
4 Strong Gods, we bid them come to this libation that stands ready here:
Indra and Agni, come to us.
5 Indra and Agni, mighty Lords of our assembly, crush the fiends:
Childless be the devouring ones.
6 Watch ye, through this your truthfulness, there in the place of spacious view
Indra and Agni, send us bliss.¹²²

In Japan, Shintos perform chants, known as *norito*, during rituals as an offering to the gods as praise and as entertainment. Chanting Buddhist hymns is known as *shomyo*. In both Shinto and Buddhism, chanting enables adherents to participate in their own ‘divine’ communication. The whirling dervish (‘doorway’) is a Sufi dancer (an Islamic mystic) who performs an intoxicating religious ritual, in a prayer trance to Allah. The dance of the dervish is accompanied by music and chanting as his movements build in intensity. At the height of the ceremony, the dervish is considered to be spinning in ecstasy. African and Native-American religions also have repetitive chants, often accompanied by intoxicating drinks.

As men moved away from the landing site of the Ark, and as their religions deteriorated into animism and pantheism, the songs used in their religious rituals became meaningless drivel. In like manner, the further Christianity drifts from its Biblical foundation the more it replaces the intellectually and emotionally satisfying Psalms with repetitive choruses that bring the participant into a state of ‘intoxication’. They *dull the mind* and *inflame the soul*.

No other religion has a collection of songs like the Psalms. Singing the Psalms distances us from the repetitive, mindless chants of other religions. Singing the Psalms also keeps us from following the path of other religions and assists us in resisting the lure of the repetitive and mindless choruses that are popular throughout the Church today.

The Psalms alone allow us to speak to God corporately in words that please him. Singing Psalms places us in true communion with God and *enlightens the mind*, and *calms the soul*. It is important that we hear the words of Paul speaking about the Psalms: “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.” (Col 3.16).

Ancient Church

Psalm singing was used in the Temple worship. Some think that only the Levitical choirs performed the singing in the Temple liturgy. However, the entire congregation may have participated in the singing in the Temple assembly (Ps 22.25; 26.12; 35.18; 68.26; 149.1) when they went to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. All Jews appear to have learned to sing the Psalms, most likely in weekly Synagogue worship. The early NT Church continued the practice of singing Psalms as worship, following the example of Jesus, the Apostles and the Jewish converts. There is no evidence that the Apostolic Church sang anything other than

¹²² “Hymn XXI. Indra-Agni” *Rig Veda*, Book 1, translated by Ralph Griffith, 1896.

Psalms. In the generations immediately following the Apostles, the Church continued to use the Psalms exclusively in worship.

When non-Biblical hymns began to enter the Church is unclear. Some claim that non-Biblical hymns were introduced for use in worship during the first century, and even claim that we find snippets of Christian hymns in the NT. But there is absolutely no evidence of any hymns other than Psalms being used in the first century Church. It appears from an objective review of the evidence, that heretical movements first introduced non-Biblical hymns for use in worship, during the late second century. Up until the time of Constantine, exclusive Psalmody was the *predominant* practice in the Church, although it was being challenged. Following the example of the Apostolic and early Church we should sing only the Psalms as worship.

There is debate about whether or not Psalms were sung in the worship of the Synagogue before the time of Christ. Massey Shepherd, says: “Some authorities believe that from early times Psalms appointed for certain days and festivals in the temple services were used in the synagogue, and from this custom the use of psalmody in the services of the early Christians was derived. Others believe that psalmody in Christian worship ante-dated its introduction in the synagogue.”¹²³ C. W. Dugmore takes a firmer position when he states, “We know that the worship of the synagogue played a very great part in the development of the worship of the Church. Our examination of the latter has shown that the Church took over from the synagogue the customs of chanting Psalms, of reading portions of the Scriptures, of sermons based on the lections, and prayers.”¹²⁴

Heather McKay attempts to discredit the traditional Protestant and Reformed view that the Christian worship practices developed out of the OT Synagogue. She dismisses the work of Alfred Edersheim¹²⁵ and other scholars as a ‘grandiose reconstruction’¹²⁶ and claims that much of what is recorded in the NT about synagogues was introduced at a late date, implying that the statements of Jesus and the Apostles cannot be taken at face value.

McKay argues that the Synagogue was at most a place of study, teaching, and prayer and that there was not much similarity between what Christians did in the first century during Sunday (first-day Sabbath) worship and what had been done in the Synagogue, particularly on the seventh-day Sabbath, before the time of Christ. Her conclusion is that “Jews of the first centuries BCE and CE did not have sabbath worship services, and that when they met together, it was in buildings that were known as [places of prayer; not synagogues].”¹²⁷ She dismisses the idea that before the time of Jesus and the Apostles there was singing of Psalms in the synagogues. We cannot take time now to refute the liberal (unbelieving) biases that permeate her work. However, we should note that she quotes (or mentions) twenty-seven selections from Philo’s¹²⁸ writings. She, however, does not mention a key selection in which he speaks of singing in the synagogues:

Though the worshipers bring nothing else, in bringing themselves they offer the best of sacrifices, the full and truly perfect oblation of noble living, as they honor with hymns and thanksgivings their Benefactor and Savior, God, sometimes with the organs of speech, sometimes without tongue or lips, when within the soul alone their minds recite the tale or utter the cry of praise.¹²⁹

If Jews did not sing the Psalms in their Synagogues, one has to wonder where Paul and Silas learned to sing the Psalms that they used in prison (Acts 16.25) and where Mary¹³⁰ and the disciples learned to sing them (Mt 26.30)? Mary and the disciples were not from Jerusalem, so it cannot be argued that they learned

¹²³ Massey H. Shepherd Jr., *The Psalms in Christian Worship, A Practical Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), p. 26.

¹²⁴ C. W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1944), p. 102. Cited in Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications), cited above, p. 60.

¹²⁵ A. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1897).

¹²⁶ Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath & Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers, 1994), p. 136.

¹²⁷ Same as above, p. 131.

¹²⁸ Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-50 AD): a Hellenized Jew who developed speculative and philosophical justification for Judaism in terms of Greek philosophy.

¹²⁹ Philo, *De specialibus legibus [Special Laws]*; 3.172.

¹³⁰ Luke 1.46-55 is a compendium of allusions to the Psalms.

the Psalms just by listening to the Levitical choirs or possibly participating three times a year in the singing at the annual feasts. The disciples may have learned the Hallel portions of the Psalter from participation over the years at family Passover celebrations. Where did the Ephesian and Colossian congregations, made up, at first, primarily of converted Jews, learn to sing the Psalms that Paul instructed them to sing (Eph 5.19; Col 3.16), if not from their previous practice in the Synagogue? It is more reasonable to accept the obvious, and traditional view that the early Church learned the Psalms singing them in the Synagogue¹³¹. (We will consider in chapter 11, the question of whether the Synagogue or the Temple provides the basis for NT worship.)

The Apostolic Church and the early Church for the first few generations after the Apostles sang only the Psalms as worship. This is demonstrated by early references to liturgical practice and order.

In 1873 Philotheos Bryennios, then Head Master of the higher Greek school at Constantinople, discovered a collection of manuscripts in the library of a monastery in Constantinople. This collection is bound in one volume, and the same hand wrote the individual documents. It bears the Greek date of 6564 (1056 AD). There has been debate about the authenticity of the documents, when they were originally written, and by whom. The scholarly opinion is that the earliest part of the collection of documents has similarities to the writings of Ignatius and dates from as early as the first half of the second century, and probably no later than 120 AD. Here is a portion of what is stated in one of the documents, the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*:

When thou callest an assembly of the Church ... In the middle, let the reader stand upon some high place: let him read the books of Moses, .. [etc., listing the sections of the OT] But when there have been two lessons severally read, let some other person sing the hymns of David, and let the people join at the conclusions of the verses. Afterwards let our Acts be read, [etc., listing much of the NT sections, including the four Gospels]. ... As to the deacons, after the prayer is over, let some of them attend upon the oblation of the Eucharist, ministering to the Lord's body with fear.¹³²

Be not careless of yourselves, neither deprive your Saviour of His own members, neither divide His body nor disperse His members, neither prefer the occasions of this life to the word of God; but assemble yourselves together every day, morning and evening, singing psalms and praying in the Lord's house: in the morning saying the sixty-second Psalm, and in the evening the hundred and fortieth, but principally on the Sabbath-day. And on the day of our Lord's resurrection, which is the Lord's day, meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent Him to us, and condescended to let Him suffer, and raised Him from the dead."¹³³

Clement of Alexandria (153-217) also speaks of the Psalms being used in worship,

For "if thou shalt love the Lord try God," and then "thy neighbour," let its first manifestation be towards God in thanksgiving and psalmody, and the second toward our neighbour in decorous fellowship. For says the apostle, "Let the Word of the Lord dwell in you richly." And this Word suits and conforms Himself to seasons, to persons, to places. In the present instance He is a guest with us. For the apostle adds again, "Teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to God." And again, "Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and His Father." ... And as it is befitting, before partaking of food, that we should bless the Creator of all; so also in drinking it is

¹³¹ Whether or not the Synagogue can serve as a model for the worship of the NT Church is a debated topic today. It is claimed by some that since the Synagogue does not have warrant in Scripture and that since Jesus attended worship in the Synagogue, his actions show that the Regulative Principle of Worship is invalid. We will address this claim in chapter 11.

¹³² Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, "*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*," Book 2, sec. 7, para. 57, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume VII*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

¹³³ Same as above, para. 59.

suitable to praise Him on partaking of His creatures. For the psalm is a melodious and sober blessing. The apostle calls the psalm “a spiritual song.”¹³⁴

By late in the second century, and into the third, hymns began to appear and *may* have been used in worship at some point in the third century in some segments of the Church. We, however, do not accept the practice of the post-Apostolic Church as normative. Our standard must be what Christ and the Apostles taught by word and example. However, hymn singing was not a universally accepted practice until well into the 5th century. Athanasius who lived in the fourth century defended exclusive Psalmody in his Letter to Marcellinus on the importance of using the Psalms. He warns the young man:

Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with the persuasive phrases of the profane, and do not let him attempt to recast or completely change the words. Rather let him recite and chant, without artifice¹³⁵, the things written just as they were spoken so that even the Spirit who speaks in the saints, seeing words inspired by him in them, might render assistance to us. ... [T]hose deserve judgement who abandon them [the Psalms], fashioning phrases meant to be persuasive in the pagan style.¹³⁶

Around the time of Athanasius, and earlier, there were heretics who attempted to introduce compositions for singing which were not God-breathed. As a result, the Church had to speak against these compositions. The Synod of Laodicia, held from 343 to 381 AD, concluded, in Canon LIX, the following, “No psalms composed by private individuals nor any un-canonical books may be read in the church, but only the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.” Some writers, influenced by the modern belief that hymn singing is permissible, focus on the phrase ‘composed by private individuals’ and suggest that this does not *exclude* hymns composed by officials of the Church, or hymns specifically sanctioned by the Church. This is merely a guess, and an attempt to force-fit an endorsement of hymn singing into the canons of a fourth century Church council. These writers also question the intent of this dictum by noting that it does not speak about what may be sung but about what may be *read*. They forget that in the early NT Church singing was probably not of the form we know it (e.g., four-part harmony with rhymed meter) but rather was conducted as a form of congregational ‘reading’ called chanting. Ironically, the people who suggest that we must make a distinction in this instance between singing and reading are often the same ones who use the opposite argument when it suits them—i.e., that there is no difference between singing and praying (i.e., since we can compose prayers we can compose songs). It seems clear that the Synod’s mention of Psalms separately from the other parts of Scripture is to emphasize their use as the only suitable songbook of praise. The Synod likely made its pronouncement because the use of hymns, like the *Te Deum*, was becoming a common practice that needed correcting in the Church.

It is clear that Scripture instructs us to sing the Psalms (Col 3.16; Eph 5.19; Jam 5.13 [NKJV]). The overwhelming evidence is that the early Church, for the first few generations, sang only Psalms as worship, and for the first few centuries most churches sang them exclusively.

Objection: The Early Church Sang Hymns

It is claimed that the Apostles and first generations of the Church sang non-Psalms compositions in their worship. However, this is purely conjecture.

One commonly heard claim is that the NT contains samples of hymns. For example, Ralph P. Martin suggests that the most likely ‘hymnic’ sections of the NT are Ephesians 5.14; Philippians 2.6-11; Colossians 1.15-20; 1 Timothy 3.16; and Hebrew 1.3. He does not give the standards for pronouncing these as hymns, as he says this would require a technical discussion and he refers the reader to an article he wrote entitled *Vox Evangelica*.¹³⁷ Other suggestions for NT hymnic

¹³⁴ Clement of Alexandria, “How to Conduct Ourselves at Feasts,” in *The Instructor* [Paedagogus.], *Book I, Chapter IV* in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume II*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

¹³⁵ i.e., without instrumental accompaniment.

¹³⁶ Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Macellinus* (Translation and Introduction by Robert C. Gregg), (New York, NY: Paulist Press, NY, 1980), p. 127, 128.

¹³⁷ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 47-51.

material include: John 1.1-18; Acts 4.25-31; 1 Corinthians 13. Ephesians 1.3-14; and Romans 11.33-36.

We could examine the evidence for the claim that these passages are hymns or hymn fragments. For example, James Pennington examines Ralph Martin's claim¹³⁸ that Colossians 1.15-20 is an early Christian hymn and concludes: "[W]hile Colossians 1:15-20 contains what may be described as poetic or "hymnic" elements, it is neither a pre-Christian or early Christian hymn or of non-Pauline origin. Rather ... the passage is a great Christological confession composed by the Apostle Paul, and not intended for use in public worship as a hymn of praise to God."¹³⁹

An examination of the remainder of these passages is beyond the scope of this work. It is also unnecessary, as there is no Biblical or extra-Biblical evidence that any of these portions of the NT were ever put into the Hebrew or Greek style of hymns or songs at the time of the Apostles, although some of the passages do have 'hymnic elements' (e.g., use of parallelism, or rhythmic structure, or a particular vocabulary).

There are a number of significant problems with the claim that portions of the NT are early Christian hymns or hymn fragments:

- It is not clear, from the Biblical context or extra-Biblical material, whether a suggested portion of Scripture is a song or even cast as poetry.
- Exalted theological writing tends to sound poetic because of the nature of the subject, even if it is not explicitly written as poetry, making it impossible to distinguish which portions of Scripture are 'hymns'.
- Each person who reconstructs a particular portion of Scripture that he claims is hymnic, proposes versification, meter, etc., differently. This demonstrates that the hymnic form is not obvious.
- Often the reconstruction of the supposed hymn requires imposition on the text, rather than derivation from it. For example, words have to be dropped or added to achieve the supposed strophic structure.
- None of the supposed hymnic portions are identified by the writers as being hymns.
- None of the source material from which Paul, for example, is supposed to have quoted has survived. This does not prove that the supposed hymnic portions were unhistorical, but it does prove that if they existed, God did not deem them worth preserving.
- Even if portions of the NT can be cast in poetic form, there is no evidence that they were sung by the Apostles or the first century Church. It is pure speculation and conjecture to suggest that the early Church ever considered any part of the Gospels, Acts, or Paul's epistles as songs of worship.

It appears that the first hymns that were composed for use as (false) worship came from the hands of heretics, such as the Gnostics¹⁴⁰ or Donatists¹⁴¹. For example, "It is well known that as early as the latter part of the second century, Bardesanes, a man of talent, who belonged to the Gnostic sect, and so was a zealous opponent of the doctrine of the Divinity of Jesus Christ, composed hymns and used them in the Syrian Church as a means of teaching and propagating his heretical opinions."¹⁴²

Philip Schaff summarizes the situation in one of the major divisions of the early Church, "[T]he Greek church of the first six centuries produced nothing in this field [hymns in rhythmic prose] which has had permanent value or general use. It long adhered almost exclusively to the Psalms of David, who, as Chrysostom says, was first, middle, and last in the assemblies of the Christians,

¹³⁸ Ralph P. Martin, "An Early Christian Hymn" (Colossians 1:15-20), *Evangelical Quarterly*, XXXV-XXXVI (Oct.-Dec., 1964), pp. 195-205.

¹³⁹ James C. Pennington, 'An Exposition of Colossians 1.15-20—The Biblical Doctrine of Worship in the Pauline Epistles' Is Colossians 1:15-20 an "Early Christian Hymn?"; *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship* (Pittsburgh, PA: Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1974), p. 197.

¹⁴⁰ See for example: Hans Lietzmann, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church, Volume I of History of the Early Church* (New York, NY: Scribners, 1937-1951), pp. 149-150; and Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 Beginnings to 1500* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003), p 207.

¹⁴¹ "[T]he Donatists reproach us with our grave chanting of the divine songs of the prophets in our churches, while they inflame their passions in their revels by the singing of psalms of human composition, which rouse them like the stirring notes of the trumpet on the battle-field. But when brethren are assembled in the church, why should not the time be devoted to singing of sacred songs, excepting of course while reading or preaching is going on ..." Augustine, Epistle 55.18.34, in: *Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series: Volume I, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.*

¹⁴² William Wishart, "The Psalms in the Apostolic and Early Church," *Psalm Singers' Conference* (Belfast: Fountain Printing Works, 1903), p. 56.

and it had, in opposition to heretical predilections, even a decided aversion to the public use of uninspired songs. Like the Gnostics before them, the Arians and the Apollinarians employed religious poetry and music as a popular means of commending and propagating their errors, and thereby, although the abuse never forbids the right use, brought discredit upon these arts. The council of Laodicea, about a.d. 360, prohibited even the ecclesiastical use of all uninspired or "private hymns,"¹⁴³ and the council of Chalcedon, in 451, confirmed this decree."¹⁴⁴

In another place, Philip Schaff says, "The oldest Christian poem preserved to us which can be traced to an individual author is from the pen of the profound Christian philosopher, Clement of Alexandria, who taught theology in that city before A.D. 202. It is a sublime but somewhat turgid song of praise to the Logos, as the divine educator and leader of the human race, and though not intended and adapted for public worship, is remarkable for its spirit and antiquity."¹⁴⁵

By late in the second century, and into the third, other poetic compositions such as the *Te Deum* began to appear and *may* have been used in worship at some point in the third century. It is claimed by some that Eusebius makes reference to these non-Biblical hymns: "For who knows not the words of Iranaeus and Melito, and the rest, in which Christ is announced as God and man? Whatever psalms and hymns were written by the brethren from the beginning, celebrate Christ the word of God, by asserting his divinity."¹⁴⁶ However, in this passage, Eusebius is more likely speaking of the book of Psalms, as shown by William Wishart:

The following is a literal and accurate translation of the Greek text:—"And how many psalms and songs of the brethren, translated by faithful men, from the beginning, praise Christ as the Word of God by ascribing Divinity to Him." Now, we have no hesitancy in affirming that there is a reference in this passage simply to the Psalms of inspiration: (1) Because we have here the very names by which the inspired Psalms are so frequently designated, many of them being called both psalms and songs. (2) The followers of Jesus, as a distinct and peculiar class of people, were in primitive times, not called Christians, but *brethren*; and of course the psalms and songs which they employed in the worship of God would be called the psalms and songs of the brethren, in order to distinguish them from the songs which the heathen employed in their idolatrous worship. But this language does not imply that these psalms and songs were *composed by the brethren*, and no such idea is contained in the passage. They are not said to have been composed by the brethren from the beginning ... but to have been *transcribed, written, or copied by the faithful*—that is, faithful scribes—from the beginning; and this is literally true of the inspired Psalms. (3) The inspired Psalms do most emphatically praise Jesus Christ as the Word of God by ascribing Divinity to Him, and were so understood and explained by the fathers in the early Church. In confirmation of our position here, we beg leave to refer to a note of Dr. A. A. McGiffert, author of the late translation of Eusebius, under the editorial supervision of Dr. Philip Schaff. On the passage under consideration Dr. McGiffert gives the following note:—"This passage is sometimes interpreted as indicating that hymns written by the Christians themselves were sung in the Church of Rome at this time. But this is by no means implied. So far as we are able to gather from our sources, nothing but the Psalms and New Testament hymns (such as the Gloria in Excelsis, the Magnificat, Nunc Demittis, etc.), were as a rule sung in public worship before the fourth century. ..." [Emphasis in original].¹⁴⁷

Objection: Calvin Sang Hymns

What difference would it make if Calvin did sing hymns? Our standard for worship is not to be what Calvin did, but rather the Apostolic example found in the Word of God. We are not to make Calvin's practice normative for our practice in worship. However, since most people in the

¹⁴³ Can. 59: Οὐ δεῖ ἰδιωτικούς ψαλμούς λέγεσθαι ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ. By this must doubtless be understood not only heretical, but, as the connection shows, all extrabiblical hymns composed by men, in distinction from the κανονικά βιβλία τῆς καινῆς καὶ παλαιᾶς διαθήκης

¹⁴⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 311-600.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, First Published: 1882), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc3.all.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume II: Ante-Nicene Christianity. A.D. 100-325.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, First Published: 1882), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc2.all.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Eusebius Pamphilus, *The Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1955), p. 213.

¹⁴⁷ William Wishart, "The Psalms in the Apostolic and Early Church," *Psalm Singers' Conference* (Belfast: Fountain Printing Works, 1903), p. 55.

Presbyterian and Reformed context respect Calvin's teachings and practice, we should consider what he taught about hymn singing and, if possible, determine what he did in practice.

It is clear that Calvin sang Psalms in worship. It is not obvious that he sang anything other than Psalms, and if he did, he may have sung them only in the early part of his ministry. He lived at a transitional period when the early sixteenth century Reformers were rediscovering and systematizing the Biblical principles governing worship, and purging from the Church the non-Biblical additions of the Middle Ages.

Dick Schuler states that Calvin's *La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques* (1542) "contained musical versions of the Song of Simeon, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed."¹⁴⁸ He goes on to say that this is "a real blow for exclusive psalmodists looking for Calvin's support." This is not a 'real blow' as we simply don't know what Calvin's practice was in worship. Even though this early Psalter, of which there is only one known copy, and later ones contained a few other selections beside Psalms, this does mean that Calvin approved of the use of these other selections.

Calvin did not work in isolation. In working with other men in Geneva, he did not always get his way (e.g., his desire to observe the Lord's Supper weekly¹⁴⁹). It is quite possible that Calvin had to defend exclusive Psalmody against those who disagreed with him, just as some editions of the *Scottish Psalter* contain paraphrases after Psalm 150. This does not mean that every person who used the *Scottish Psalter* agreed with the inclusion of the alternate material. Today, in some Presbyterian denominations there are people who hold the exclusive Psalmody position and others who don't, yet they choose to work together and to allow one another latitude in their respective congregations.

We know from the preface included in a Psalter issued a year later (1543) that Calvin did not approve of the use of non-Biblical hymns in worship:

Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but that it have weight and majesty (as St. Augustine says), and also, there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain men at table and in their houses, and the Psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels. ... [T]he ancient doctors of the Church complain frequently of this, that the people of their times were addicted to dishonest and shameless songs, which not without cause they referred to and called mortal and Satanic poison for corrupting the world. Moreover, in speaking now of music, I understand two parts: namely the letter, or subject and matter; secondly, the song, or the melody. It is true that every bad word (as St. Paul has said) perverts good manners, but when the melody is with it, it pierces the heart much more strongly, and enters into it; in a like manner as through a funnel, the wine is poured into the vessel; so also the venom and the corruption is distilled to the depths of the heart by the melody. ... What is there now to do? It is to have songs not only honest, but also holy, which will be like spurs to incite us to pray to and praise God, and to meditate upon his works in order to love, fear, honor and glorify him. Moreover, that which St. Augustine has said is true, that *no one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from him*. Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly, and searched here and there, *we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him*. And moreover, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these, as if he himself were singing in us to exalt his glory. Wherefore Chrysostom exhorts, as well as the men, the women and the little children to accustom themselves to singing them, in order that this may be a sort of meditation to associate themselves with the company of the angels. ... this present book ... ought to be singular recommendation to each one who desires to enjoy himself honestly and according to God, for his own welfare and the profit of his neighbors: and so there is need of all of it being much recommended by me: seeing that it carries its value and its praise. But that the world may be so well advised, that in place of songs in part vain and frivolous, in part stupid and dull, in part foul and vile, and in consequence evil and harmful which it has used up to now, it may *accustom itself hereafter to the singing of these divine and celestial hymns with the good king David*. Touching the melody, it has seemed best that it be moderated in the manner we have

¹⁴⁸ Dick Schuler, "History of the Genevan Psalter, Pt. 3," *Credenda Agenda*, 15:1 (<http://www.credenda.org/issues/index.php?issue=15-1>).

¹⁴⁹ Michael Horton, *A Better Way—Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), p. 158.

adopted to carry the weight and majesty appropriate to the subject, and even to be proper for singing in the Church, according to that which has been said. [Emphasis added]¹⁵⁰

It is ironic that Massey Shepherd, a Lutheran professor of Liturgics, states that Calvin endorsed singing of exclusively Psalms in worship, whereas today many in the Presbyterian and Reformed context attempt to find evidence to the contrary, to defend the inclusion of non-Biblical hymns in worship. Shepherd says: “Calvin ... promoted psalm-singing—albeit in metrical forms—as the one legitimate song that conformed to scriptural models of worship.”¹⁵¹

Objection: Exclusive Psalm Singing is Practiced by a Micro Minority

There are about 50,000 exclusive-Psalm singers today in the Church, worldwide. If there are about one billion Christians, then those who sing Psalms-only as worship, represent approximately .005% of the Church—i.e., almost zero. This is less than a rounding error in most calculations. If truth is determined by majority opinion, then we can conclude that the Psalms-only position is incorrect. But truth is not determined by how many votes it receives. If this were the case, Christianity would have to be considered false, since it receives at best only one out of every seven ‘votes’ throughout the world. When it comes to majority opinion, its opinion is more often wrong than right.

The questions of final truth must be determined from God’s teaching in Scripture, not by counting noses.

The Psalms are the breath of God. They contain the words of Christ and as he himself says (Lk 20.42), they speak of him. Everything that we need for praise-worship of God is in the Psalter—the songbook of the Church. We are not to add to it or subtract from it. We should cherish this great gift from God. We have been blessed with the opportunity to learn and sing the Psalms, the word of the living God. What a privilege it is for us to sing these words with Jesus and his Apostles.

A Parable

There once was a king of a small principality. He was generous, kind, and just. He was loved by most of his subjects. His laws were fair and enforced justly by the magistrates of the land. Throughout the land there was a peace and harmony that was not found in the kingdom’s neighbours. Almost everyone knew that in the other kingdoms there was much unrest because they did not live by the rule of law, so the subjects of the kingdom tried hard to obey the laws.

At times, people from the surrounding nations would request admission to the kingdom. Some would attempt to buy their way into the kingdom, but the King would meet each prospective subject personally, and if he deemed them acceptable subjects, would tell him, “Your coins have no value in our land; however, you are welcome to enter freely. Obey my laws and you may stay in the kingdom.”

Amazingly, the taxes in the kingdom were low (because the king was a fiscal conservative and knew about the Laffer curve). He required payment once per year of a fixed 10% of the value of the income generated by his nobles’ estates. He, however, placed one condition on the payment of their taxes. He would not accept payment in kind (e.g., sheep, wool, wood, fish, etc.). He demanded that the taxes be paid only using the gold coins that were imprinted with the king’s image. In general, dukes and lords were faithful to this command and obeyed. In duty, each year, they converted their bounty into the currency of the realm at the moneychangers in the markets.

However, a few of the nobles thought that this requirement was unfair. They grumbled that he was not letting them show off the excellence of the produce of their estates and that they couldn’t show him the results of their talents and efforts. Others said that the king was just being selfish in his demand.

One duke, a prince, and a son-in-law of the king, believed that his father-in-law was going too far in this demand. So, one year he decided that he would bring his annual tax-payment in the form of diamonds

¹⁵⁰ Calvin, “Preface to the Psalter,” from the facsimile edition of: *Les Pseaumes mis en rime françoise par Clément Marot et Théodore de Bèze. Mis en musique a quatre parties par Claude Goudimel. Par les héritiers de François Jacqui* (1565), (published under the auspices of La Société des Concerts de la Cathédrale de Lausanne and edited, in French, by Pidoux, Pierre, and in German by Ameln, Konrad. (Baerlenreiter-Verlag, Kassel, 1935), http://www.fpcr.org/blue_banner_articles/calvinps.htm.

¹⁵¹ Massey H. Shepherd Jr., *The Psalms in Christian Worship, A Practical Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), p. 50.

that had been taken from mines in the hills of Sel'wil in his Dukedom. The jewellers living in the towns in his territories had even cut and polished the diamonds. They were the most excellent and renowned diamonds on the whole continent.

The son-in-law arrived at court and was announced by the herald. He entered the throne room and bowed respectfully to his father-in-law, the king, saying, "Sire, I have brought my tax payment for this year. It has been an excellent year. I have been blessed bountifully. May all your dominions flourish as have my territories! Sire, here is my payment." He handed over the bag of excellent diamonds.

The king opened the bag, and in surprise demanded, "Where are the gold coins?"

The duke replied, "But, sire, these diamonds are of equal value, and see how excellent they are!"

In response the king said, "The law of the land requires taxes to be paid in the legal tender of the realm. I commanded the use of gold coins. Only gold shall be delivered!"

"But, sire, the diamonds come from my own mines. I even collected some of them with my own hands. I have had my best jewellers prepare them for you. This shows that I really do care for you greatly."

The king became flushed and replied, "This payment doesn't have my image stamped on it. It is not legal tender of the realm. You must obey the law!"

"But sire, I am obeying the law. I am paying my taxes."

"You are not obeying the law! Obeying the law means obeying *both* the intent and the prescription of the law."

"But sire — I am your own son-in-law, married to your beautiful eldest daughter? You know I respect your laws."

The furrows on the king's head became deeper as he replied, "I love you as my own son but that does not excuse your behaviour. — Guards! Remove this man and his diamonds, and do not permit him to return into my presence until he is carrying the correct amount of his taxes in the currency of the realm!"

10. Praise Him with the Spiritual Harp and Lyre

God first instituted the use of different kinds of musical instruments to accompany singing as worship at the time of David. This change occurred with the changes in the sacrificial system that were introduced for the Temple that would be built by Solomon.

There were no musical instruments or singing in the worship of Abraham and the other patriarchs. For the Tabernacle system of worship, a trumpet announced the time of the offering of the sacrifice; but no other instruments were used and singing, accompanied by musical instruments, was not included as part of the ceremonial system of worship. The trumpet was used only in the context of the *sacrifice* (Lev 23.24, 25; Num 10.10; 29.1-4). It may have been used to let the people outside the immediate courtyard know that the sacrifice was being offered, since it would have been impossible for all the people in the camp to enter the courtyard at one time. The trumpet was not used in the Tabernacle to accompany singing. There is no reference in the Bible to singing in the Tabernacle worship. Beyond the specific use of the trumpet at the time of the sacrifice, the trumpet was also used for signalling the times of worship (Num 10.1-9; 31.6).

The nations around Israel used musical instruments in their worship of false gods. “According to the concepts of antiquity, music was a part of each sacrifice even when only incense or a libation were offered. Flutes, various stringed instruments, noisy kettle-drums, trumpets, and little bells, the so-called *sistrum*, were employed. The music was meant to ward off the demons and to invite the coming of the gods.”¹ It would not have been proper for Abraham to introduce the use of musical instruments to accompany the sacrifice, or for Moses to introduce additional musical instruments with singing as a component of the worship of sacrifice. If they had done so without direct revelation from God, they would have been introducing the practices of the pagans. Instead of innovating in worship and introducing the instruments and singing to accompany sacrifices, as did the nations around them, they did exactly what God required (Gen 4.7; Ex 25.9; Nu 8.4). Abraham and Moses were both prophets, and they did not do anything in worship that was not explicitly authorized by God. If they could not introduce musical instruments into the worship of God, without explicit warrant, certainly no one outside of the prophetic office could do so.

Musical Instruments and Sacrifices

The context for the use of musical instruments in worship appears consistently in the Bible to be that of animal sacrifices. We have seen this with respect to the use of the trumpet. Instruments (other than the trumpet) along with singing were only introduced with the express provision of God for the new liturgy that would be associated with the Temple sacrifices. These changes were introduced under the direction of David as a prophet, with revelation from God.

Under David, musical instruments were used before the Temple was actually built, wherever the sacrifices were offered up (1 Ch 16.37-42). At this time, there were two shrines and (apparently) two high priests. One of the high priests, Zadok, was with the Tabernacle at Gibeon, the other, Abiathar (1 Ch 15.11), was with the ark in Jerusalem. It appears that David introduced the use of additional musical instruments and singing to accompany the worship of the sacrifice offering at both the Tabernacle (1 Ch 16.41, 42) and the ark. When the ark was first brought into Jerusalem, it was brought up from Kiriath Jearim where it had been for twenty years (1 Sam 6.21-7.2), and placed near the area of the future Temple. While the ark was being moved, there was a continuous offering of sacrifices accompanied by an offering of music and singing as worship (2 Sam 6.2-5, 13-18 [especially verses 13, 18]; 1 Ch 15.14-28 [especially v 26]).²

Musical instruments were used in the Temple in Jerusalem built under Solomon and rebuilt under Zerubbabel and Joshua, according to the plan and order of David (e.g., 2 Ch 5.11-14; 7.4-6; Is 38.20).

¹ Josef A. Jungmann, Tran. Francis A. Brunner, *The Early Liturgy: To the Time of Gregory the Great* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. Notre Dame Press), 1959, p. 124.

² The ark was transported to Jerusalem in two stages, separated by a three-month interval (2 Sam 6.11). During the first stage, musical instruments are mentioned (2 Sam 6.5) without specific reference to sacrifices. In the second stage, musical instruments (2 Sam 6.15; 1 Ch 15.24, 28) are explicitly associated with sacrifices (2 Sam 6.13,18; 1 Ch 15.26). It is not unreasonable to assume that: 1) musical instruments and sacrifices occurred together during the first stage, or 2) if musical instruments and sacrifices were not used together during the first stage, they were associated during the second stage because David was concerned about doing everything correctly—even as he corrected the way the ark was transported (compare 2 Sam 6.3, 4 with 2 Sam 6.13).

Throughout the Temple era, the collection of musical instruments (i.e., trumpets, harps, cymbals, lyres, etc.) accompanying singing was used *only* during the offering of animal sacrifices (2 Ch 29.25-28; 2 Ch 30.15, 21, 24). When the sacrifices ended, the music ceased.

When musical instruments were used outside the Temple, after the time of David, they were used in conjunction with *sacrifices* (2 Ch 7.1, 5-6; Neh 12.36, 40-43). Even when God rebuked the Jews for their misuse of songs and musical instruments, he associated them with the misuse of the sacrificial elements of worship (Amos 5.21-23), showing their intimate connection.

Apparent Exceptions

Those who wish to decouple the use of musical instruments from animal sacrifices in order to defend the use of musical instruments in the NT context of spiritual sacrifice often point out apparent exceptions. They believe that these proposed exceptions provide examples of musical instruments being used in worship without accompanying sacrifices and that this provides warrant for their use today. As far as I can determine the following references are the only other examples, or classes of examples, of the use of musical instruments in the context of worship outside of their use for military purposes (e.g., a trumpet to summon troops) or entertainment (e.g., the use of a harp to sooth the king's nerves).

- *Exodus 15.20, 21* – This appears to be the *only* example in the Bible where musical instruments are used to accompany singing in worship in which there is no explicit, or suggested, association with the offering of sacrifices. However, this example of worship must be considered in its historic context. The crossing of the Red Sea was a miraculous event and Moses, a prophet, and Miriam, a prophetess, were the leaders of this act of worship. We cannot rip musical instruments out of their historic context and argue that this gives us warrant to use them under the NT Covenant economy. We would need a miraculous event and the presence of a prophet to have a similar context. If this reference can be considered normative for teaching the use of musical instruments in NT worship, then it also teaches that dancing women should accompany the singing. Our NT context for worship is Jesus in the upper room who, as the final prophet, would perform the ultimate miracle on the cross and through his resurrection. His worship praise consisted of singing Psalms without musical instruments to symbolize the sacrifice of his body (Psalms 116 and 118). To develop a theology of worship based on this example from Exodus could set a very dangerous precedent (e.g., 1 Sam 19.23, 24; 1Cor 15.29).
- *1 Samuel 10.5 [see also: 2 Kings 3.15-16]* – The “high place” implies a place of sacrifice. Regardless, the use of the musical instruments was not accompanying singing but prophetic utterances. The musical instruments may have been, in this venue, a symbol of the presence of the Holy Spirit (e.g., 2 Pet 1.21) and served as an outward sign of the Spirit's revelation. Even if their actions were representative of typical prophetic behaviour, they have no relevance for singing in the NT worship. Since the canon of Scripture is closed and the prophetic office has ended, the activities of these prophets cannot serve as a reference model for any activities in the post-Apostolic Church.
- *Ezra 3.10, 11* – At the dedication of the foundation of the second-temple musical instruments were used. Note, however, earlier in chapter that the altar and sacrifices had already been restored. There were probably sacrifices associated with the use of the instruments at the dedication of the Temple foundation. Notice also that in Ezra 3.10 we are told that they did what was in accord with the Davidic prescription.
- *Habakkuk 3.19 (and 3.1)* – The reference “for the director” puts this song with musical accompaniment into the liturgical context of the Temple worship. Compare the headings of Psalms 42 and 44 and Psalms 42.4 and 43.4. This composition of Habakkuk may have been used in the Temple worship at one time, but was not incorporated into the Psalter.³

³ See the explanation in the previous chapter in the section entitled: *Objection: The Bible Contains Other Song Compositions.*

- *Revelation 5.8; 14.2; 15.2* – Notice that the context of these passages includes incense and references to the altar (6.9; 8.3, 5; 9.13; 11.1; 14.18; 16.7) and Temple (7.15; 11.1, 19; 14.15, 17; 15.5, 6, 8; 16.1, 17). John is using symbolical language taken from his experience in the OT Temple worship to portray events in his allegory. He was known to the high priest (Jn 18.15) and probably had first-hand knowledge of the rituals and liturgy of the Temple. Since Revelation was probably written before the destruction of Jerusalem,⁴ the use of the Temple liturgy in symbolical form makes sense. However, notice that later in the book of Revelation (chapters 20-22) when the new order of the renovated heavens and earth is described there is no reference to the Temple or to musical instruments. In fact, we are told explicitly that there is no temple in the new order (Rev 21.22). The situation described in Revelation cannot be considered normative for us since it uses symbolical language derived from the Temple in Jerusalem. With the completion of Christ’s work on the cross and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, we no longer observe any of the specific rituals that went along with the Temple (animal sacrifices, incense, musical instruments), except in their spiritual form. Psalm singing unaccompanied by musical instruments—i.e., the fruit of lips—is the form of ceremonial sacrifice appropriate for the NT covenantal economy (Heb 13.15).
- *The Psalms* – The Psalms mention musical instruments a number of times.⁵ However, when we examine the references, we find evidence that the use of musical instruments was understood to be in the context of animal sacrifices (e.g., Ps 27.6; 43.4). All of the Psalms that mention musical instruments were written in the context of the Temple worship established by David. They were either written by David or Asaph and Korah, or their descendants in the Levitical order.

Without understanding the Temple context for the references to the use of musical instruments, many people suggest that since the Psalms tell the singers to use musical instruments we should therefore use them when we sing in worship. The Psalms also tell us to:

- Bind a sacrifice to the altar (118.27 NIV note)
- Go to the altar (43.4)
- Offer sacrifices and burnt offerings (4.5 [command] 20.3; 51.19; 54.6; 66.13, 15; 96.8 [command]; 107.22 [command])
- Cleanse/sprinkle with hyssop (51.7)
- Dance (149.3; 150.4)
- Offer incense (141.2)
- Worship toward God’s holy temple/tabernacle (5.7) or sanctuary (150.1).

We interpret all of these aspects of the ceremonial system as types pointing to Jesus Christ. It is the same with the use of musical instruments—they are types for NT worship. When Jesus was crucified as the final sacrifice, the types were replaced with their permanent spiritual equivalents. The Psalms themselves anticipate the symbolical nature of the offering of sacrifices (e.g., 43.4; 107.22 141.2). If the references in the Psalms are used to support the use of instruments in worship, then they also justify the offering of bloody sacrifices. “If, now, the argument holds good, which is derived from the Psalms in support of the use of instruments in the public worship of the Christian church, it equally holds in justification of the offering of bloody sacrifices in that worship. The absurdity of the consequence completely refutes the argument.”⁶

You will likely never hear anyone arguing that we should inflict vengeance and punishment on pagan nations with the sword and fetters as we sing praises (Ps 149.6-9). Yet people will use the same Psalm to argue for the use of musical instruments to accompany the singing of praises (Ps 149.3). It is clear, that the argument from the Psalms proves too much and is therefore worthless.

⁴ See: Kenneth Gentry, *The Beast of Revelation 666* (Tyler TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

⁵ Ps 4.1 [heading]; 6.1 [heading]; 33.2; 43.4; 49.4; 54.1 [heading]; 55.1 [heading]; 57.8; 61.1 [heading]; 67.1 [heading]; 71.22; 76.1 [heading]; 81.2; 92.3; 98.5; 108.2; 144.9; 147.7; 149.3; 150.3-5.

⁶ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, 1983, reprint of the 1888 edition), p. 78.

When there was no Temple, the Jews did not use musical instruments to accompany singing in worship, even though they sang Psalms that called for the use of instruments. For example, the Levites hung up their harps (Ps 137.2)—i.e., they did not perform their liturgical duties—while in captivity in Babylon as there were no sacrifices being offered since Solomon’s Temple had been destroyed. When Jews met for worship outside of Jerusalem and the Temple, they did not use musical instruments in worship. Regardless of what position one holds about when Jews began to sing Psalms in the Synagogues (i.e., before the time of Christ or after the early Christian Church began developing), it is clear that they understood the use of musical instruments to be part of the Temple liturgy and did not use them. “People who appeal to Psalm 150 as a justification for the use of musical instruments in new covenant worship violate a number of standard interpretive procedures. First, what did this Psalm mean to the original old covenant Jewish audience? Did the Jews use this Psalm and other such Psalms as a justification for the introduction of musical instruments in their synagogue worship? No. They most certainly did not. Jewish synagogues did not use musical instruments in praise until 1810.”⁷

None of these apparent exceptions provides a warrant for using musical instruments to accompany singing in praise-worship under the NT economy. Also, all the passages, except Exodus 15, appear to support the connection between the use of musical instruments and sacrifices. Rather than providing support for the use of musical instruments in NT worship, these passages reinforce the fact that musical instruments were part of the liturgical system of the OT ceremonial economy that has been replaced in the NT with spiritual equivalents.

Musical Instruments: Not Used by the Early NT Church

The Early NT Church did not use musical instruments in worship. Most of the early NT congregations consisted of Jews who had learned that musical instruments were part of the Temple liturgy and associated with the bloody sacrifices. The view that musical instruments were part of the OT ceremonial system that was replaced with the final sacrifice of Christ was the predominant view throughout the NT Church. Musical instruments were universally excluded from worship. “An absolute rejection of ... noisy music as a whole was achieved only by Christianity. The Church excluded in those days [i.e., the first half dozen centuries] all musical instruments from her worship; plain homophonic singing only was allowed, unaccompanied by any musical instruments. The human voice and the human heart alone were to sing God’s praises; the use of the one voice only was to symbolize the unity which was to obtain in the Church.”⁸ It was not until well into the Middle Ages that musical instruments came into the Western Church, and even then, their use was not universally accepted. The following quotations are examples of the attitude of the Church leaders to the use of musical instruments, from the time of the Apostles until a few hundred years before the Reformation.

- Justin Martyr (—165): “Plain singing is not childish, but only the singing with lifeless organs, with dancing and with cymbals, etc. Whence the use of such instruments and other things fit for children is laid aside, and plain singing only retained.”⁹
- Clement of Alexandria (153-217): “The Spirit, distinguishing from such revelry the divine service, sings, “Praise Him with the sound of trumpet;” for with sound of trumpet He shall raise the dead. “Praise Him on the psaltery;” for the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. “And praise Him on the lyre.” By the lyre is meant the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum. “Praise with the timbrel and the dance,” refers to the Church meditating on the resurrection of the dead in the resounding skin. “Praise Him on the chords and organ.” Our body He calls an organ, and its nerves are the strings, by which it has received harmonious tension, and when struck by the Spirit, it gives

⁷ Brian Schwertley, *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God*, <http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/music.htm#r87>.

⁸ Josef A. Jungmann, Tran. Francis A. Brunner, *The Early Liturgy: To the Time of Gregory the Great* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. Notre Dame Press, 1959), p. 124.

⁹ Quoted in, John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, cited above, p. 157.

forth human voices. “Praise Him on the clashing cymbals.” He calls the tongue the cymbal of the mouth, which resounds with the pulsation of the lips. ... We no longer employ the ancient psaltery, and trumpet, and timbrel, and flute, which those expert in war and contemners of the fear of God were wont to make use of also in the choruses at their festive assemblies; that by such strains they might raise their dejected minds.¹⁰

- Eusebius (church historian/bishop, Palestine, c. 325): “Of old at the time those of the circumcision were worshipping with symbols and types it was not inappropriate to send up hymns to God with the psalterion and kithara and to do this on Sabbath days (breaking the rest and transgressing the law concerning the Sabbath). But we in an inward manner keep the part of the Jew, according to the saying of the apostle...(Romans 2:28f.). We render our hymn with a living psalterion and a living kithara, with spiritual songs. The unison voices of Christians would be more acceptable to God than any musical instrument. Accordingly in all the churches of God, united in soul and attitude, with one mind and in agreement of faith and piety, we send up a unison melody in the words of the Psalms.”¹¹
- Athanasius (—373): “Indeed the melodic reading is a symbol of the mind’s well-ordered and undisturbed condition. Moreover, the praising of God in well-tuned cymbals and harp and ten-stringed instruments was again a figure and sign of the parts of the body coming into natural concord like harp strings, and of the thoughts of the soul becoming like cymbals ... Do not let anyone amplify these words of the Psalter with the persuasive phrases of the profane, and do not let him attempt to recast or completely change the words. Rather let him recite and chant, without artifice, the things written just as they were spoken ...”¹²
- John Chrysostom (347-407) "David formerly sang songs, also today we sing hymns. He had a lyre with lifeless strings, the church has a lyre with living strings. Our tongues are the strings of the lyre with a different tone indeed but much more in accordance with piety. Here there is no need for the cithara, or for stretched strings, or for the plectrum, or for art, or for any instrument; but, if you like, you may yourself become a cithara, mortifying the members of the flesh and making a full harmony of mind and body. For when the flesh no longer lusts against the Spirit, but has submitted to its orders and has been led at length into the best and most admirable path, then will you create a spiritual melody.”¹³
- John Chrysostom: “It [instrumental music] was permitted to the Jews, as sacrifice was, for the heaviness and grossness of their souls. God condescended to their weakness, because they were lately drawn off from idols; but now instead of the instruments we may use our bodies to praise withal. Again, let no man deceive you, these [instruments] appertain not to Christians; these are alien to the Catholic church; all these things do the nations of the world seek after.”¹⁴
- Thomas Aquinas (c 1225-1274): “Instruments of music such as harps and psalteries, the church does not adopt for divine praises, lest it should seem to Judaize.”

In spite of this evidence, most people in Evangelical churches assume that ‘everyone’ uses musical instruments in worship, and since God blesses congregations that use musical instruments, their use must be proper. Because ‘everyone’ does something in worship does not make it right. Majority opinion among

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, “How to Conduct Ourselves at Feasts,” in *The Instructor* [Paedagogus.], *Book I, Chapter IV* in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume II*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

¹¹ Eusebius, “Commentary on Psalm 91 [92] vv. 2-3”, *Patrologia Graeca* 23, 1171.

¹² Athanasius, “Letter to Marcellinus,” in *Athanasius – The Life of Antony and The Letter to Macellinus* (Translation and Introduction by Robert C. Gregg) (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 125-127.

¹³ Chrysostom, “Exposition of Psalms 41,” *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. O. Strunk, (New York NY: W. W. Norton and Co., 1950), p. 70.

¹⁴ Chrysostom, “Homily on Psalm 149,” *Patrologia Graeca* 55, 494.

unbelievers and Christians does not establish right or wrong, and is often far from being correct. If majority opinion were right, Christianity would be a falsehood, evolution would be true, and everyone in the Church would be an Arian and believe in transubstantiation and the veneration of Mary. If majority opinion is right, then the Church did the right thing when it exiled Athanasius multiple times because of his insistence that Jesus was truly and fully God; Wycliffe and Tyndale deserved censure because they insisted that the scriptures should be made available to the common people in the 'vulgar' tongue (in common English rather than in Latin); and Luther should have stopped his preaching when Eck reminded him that everyone else disagreed with him. In addition, God may, at times, bless the work of the Church in spite of its sinful behaviour (Phil 1.18).

The truth, however, is that not 'everyone' has used, or does use, musical instruments in worship. An objective review of the history of the Church shows that musical instruments were not first used in the Church (and then only part of the Church) until around the middle of the eighth century:

Coptic music is above all considerations vocal; and the use of cymbals and triangles in churches was certainly introduced in the course of the Middle Ages long after the era of primitive Christianity.¹⁵

In the Greek Church the organ never came into use. But after the eighth century it became more and more common in the Latin Church; not, however, without opposition from the side of the monks. Its misuse, however, raised so great an opposition to it that, but for the Emperor Ferdinand, it would probably have been abolished by the Council of Trent. The Reformed Church discarded it; and though the Church of Basel very early reintroduced it, it was in other places admitted only sparingly, and after long hesitation."¹⁶

The use of organs is ascribed to Pope Vitalian (657-672). Constantine Copronymos sent an organ with other presents to King Pepin of France in 767.... The attitude of the churches towards the organ varies. It shared to some extent the fate of images, except that it never was an object of worship.... The Greek church disapproves the use of organs. The Latin church introduced it pretty generally, but not without the protest of eminent men, so that even in the Council of Trent a motion was made, though not carried, to prohibit the organ at least in the mass. The Lutheran church retained, the Calvinistic churches rejected it, especially in Switzerland and Scotland; but in recent times the opposition has largely ceased.¹⁷

Reformed and Puritan congregations from the sixteenth century until about the mid-nineteenth century discontinued the use of musical instruments. They understood the use of musical instruments to be invalid under the NT covenantal economy. For example:

- Calvin (1509-1564) on Ps 71.22: "To sing the praises of god upon the harp and psaltery, unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law and of the service of God under that dispensation of shadows and figures, but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving."
- John L. Girardeau (1888): "Whatever may be the practice in recent times of the churches of Holland, the Synods of the Reformed Dutch Church, soon after the Reformation, pronounced very decidedly against the use of instrumental music in public worship. The National Synod at Middleburg, in 1581, declared against it, and the Synod of Holland and Zeeland, in 1594, adopted this strong resolution; "That they would endeavor to obtain of the magistrate the laying aside of organs, and the singing with them in the churches...." The Provincial Synod of Dort also inveighed severely against their use."¹⁸

¹⁵ Aziz S. Atiya [former President of the Institute of Coptic Studies, Cairo], "Coptic Music," *Coptologia: Journal of the Copto-Pharaonic Society*, Vol 6, 1985, p. 10.

¹⁶ Albert Hauck (professor of theology, Erlangen, Germany), "Organ" in *A Religious Encyclopaedia: or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, and Practical Theology* [i.e., Schaff-Herzog] (1883).

¹⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1885), Vol. 4, chap. 10, sect. 98, http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/4_ch10.htm.

¹⁸ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, cited above, p. 170.

Before the Westminster Assembly of Divines undertook the office of preparing a Directory of Worship, the Parliament had authoritatively adopted measures looking to the removal of organs, along with other remains of Popery, from the churches of England. On the 20th of May, 1644, the commissioners from Scotland wrote to the General Assembly of their church and made the following statement among others: “We cannot but admire the good hand of God in the great things done here already, particularly that the covenant, the foundation of the whole work, is taken, Prelacy and the whole train thereof extirpated, the service-book in many places forsaken, plain and powerful preaching set up, many colleges in Cambridge provided with such ministers as are most zealous of the best reformation, altars removed, the communion in some places given at the table with sitting, the *great organs at Paul’s and Peter’s in Westminster taken down* (emphasis added), images and many other monuments of idolatry defaced and abolished, the Chapel Royal at Whitehall purged and reformed; and all by authority, in a quiet manner, at noon-day, without tumult.”¹⁹ So thorough was the work of removing organs that the “Encyclopaedia Britannica”²⁰ says that “at the Revolution most of the organs in England had been destroyed.”²¹

[A]s the types of the Holy Spirit in the temple-service are fulfilled in his application to believers of the benefits of a purchased redemption, to retain them in the Christian church is as much to dishonor him as to retain bloody sacrifices would dishonor Christ.²²

- C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1892): “We should like to see all the pipes of the organs in our Nonconformist places of worship either ripped open or compactly filled with concrete. The human voice is so transcendently superior to all that wind or strings can accomplish ... It is not better music which we get from organs and viols, but inferior sounds ...”

It was during the nineteenth century that musical instruments were reintroduced into the Protestant churches from which are descended most of the Evangelical churches of today. “The nineteenth century and its mentality and outlook is responsible for most of our troubles and problems today. It was then that a fatal turn took place in so many respects, as we have been seeing, and very prominent among the changes introduced was the place given to music in various forms. Quite frequently and especially in the non-episcopal churches, they did not even have an organ before that time.”²³ People today cannot see beyond their current practice of using musical instruments, because they are ignorant of the vast sweep of the historical practice in the Church. The Church in the twenty-first century does not have the monopoly on valid beliefs and is not the standard or measure for proper practice.

Musical Instruments: Not Required for Evangelism

Many people today are convinced that the use of musical instruments in worship is required to further evangelism. They believe that the use of musical instruments and special singing is one of God’s key means of drawing the unsaved into the Church. We won’t consider the false notion that worship of God is supposed to be formulated to appeal to unbelievers. Rather, we will consider the notion that musical instruments are necessary for evangelism, by asking what evidence supports the thesis. Even if some people are saved through a ‘ministry of music’, this argument is a form of pietized pragmatism that says: “If it works, it’s good. If it brings people to Christ, it’s good.”

When we consider the success of evangelism from the perspective of history, we see that musical instruments are not required. The missionaries from Celtic Christianity associated with Columba (521-597) and his followers did not use musical instruments in their evangelistic work. They were instrumental in bringing the truth of Christ to much of Northern Europe. Most of the people reading this book are the

¹⁹ Girardeau cites this quotation from the *Acts of Assembly of the Church of Scotland*, 1644.

²⁰ Girardeau cites *Art., Organ*.

²¹ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* cited above, pp. 132-133.

²² Same as above, p. 74.

²³ Dr. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), p. 267.

spiritual heirs of Celtic Christianity from the sixth and seventh centuries. Columba and his cohorts would frown at the notion that musical instruments are required for evangelism.

It is not the case that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were so different from the sixth and seventh centuries that only the use of musical instruments could be successful in bringing the gospel to modern pagans. To the contrary, much of the ‘ministry of music’ ends up being taken over by the world. It is much more an honouring of man than God. Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones makes an interesting observation on the ‘importance’ of music: “I contend that we can lay it down as a fairly general rule that the greater the amount of attention that has been paid to this aspect of worship—namely the type of building, and the ceremonial, and the singing, and the music—the greater the emphasis on that, the less spirituality you are likely to have; and a lower spiritual temperature and spiritual understanding and desire can be expected.”²⁴

A recent study of effective evangelistic churches²⁵ indicates that music doesn’t rank in the top three, and only as seventh, of the ‘methodologies’ for effective evangelism. Preaching, prayer, and Sunday School, hold the top three positions in perceived effectiveness (followed by relational evangelism, weekly outreach and youth ministry). Churches effective in evangelism use all kinds of worship styles. In the study, there did not appear to be any correlation between worship style, including the use of music, and effective evangelism. In addition, the study found that targeting populations with event evangelism (including evangelistic concerts) scored very low as effective techniques for leading to conversions and/or baptisms.

Preaching is God’s chosen instrument for evangelism, not musical concerts (1 Cor 1.18-21; Tit 1.1-3; Rom 10.14, 15; Jn 5.24, 25; 10.3, 16). To deviate from his prescription may produce short-term gains but is guaranteed to be a long-term failure.

Musical Instruments in Worship: Five Challenges

An advocate for the use of musical instruments in worship must face and address five challenges:

- *Consent* – The evidence from the Bible shows that musical instruments in worship were only used with the sacrifice. The proponent of their use in worship today must provide a warrant for their use, derived from Scripture, which overrides the arguments showing their typical nature. It is incumbent that he demonstrate that musical instruments can also be used in worship contexts other than the ceremonial-sacrificial. It is also necessary to explain why they weren’t used in the patriarchal, pharisaic, and patristic worship contexts. “Their only hope would be to prove from the synagogue worship that instruments also had a non-ceremonial worship function or to find warrant for musical instruments in public worship in the New Testament. The synagogue worship ... did not involve any musical instruments at all. The New Testament does not authorize the use of musical instruments in Christian public worship.”²⁶
- *Contrast* – If he uses musical instruments in worship, then he must demonstrate why he does not also introduce the other aspects of the *sacrificial* system, such as incense, sacrifices, priests, vestments, burning oil lamps, etc. He needs to show why musical instruments should be treated differently, and on what grounds he makes the distinction when God clearly associated musical instruments with the sacrificial system.
- *Circumstance* – Some argue that musical instruments are just an aid to worship and not of the essence of worship. The same type of argument is used to defend the use of icons and images by the Eastern and Roman Catholic Churches. The advocate of musical instruments must show how the use of musical instruments is incidental to—i.e., a circumstance—and not of the essence of, worship—i.e., an element. Musical instruments were introduced into worship under God’s direct revelation, and were not introduced without his warrant. Only priests and Levites were authorized by God to play musical instruments in the context of worship (1 Ch 15.16-24; 2 Ch 5.12, 13; Ezra

²⁴ Dr. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), p. 267.

²⁵ Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches*, (Nashville, TN, Broadman & Holman, 1996).

²⁶ Brian Schwertley, *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God*, <http://reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/music.htm#r87>

3.10; Neh 12.35-36). Musical instruments are, therefore, more than circumstances. Circumstances do not require God's explicit command. If the use of musical instruments in worship were only a circumstance of worship such explicit warrant would not have been necessary.

- *Convention* – One writer has said that, “Instrumental accompaniment is not necessary; its use is largely a matter of taste.”²⁷ The implication is that matters of worship are merely determined by human convention. The proponent of the use of instruments must face the practical question of determining what is right and wrong practice. For example, should instruments be used only to accompany singing, or is it appropriate to use them as a prelude? Can acoustic and electric guitars along with pianos and organs be used? Should there be a single instrument, a few musicians, or an entire orchestra? Since the Bible gives no warrant for the use of musical instruments in NT worship, the answer to these questions can be derived only from personal opinion. God, however, is not the author of chaos and confusion.
- *Confession* – We have seen that the early church (for the first seven-to-eight centuries) did not use musical instruments. We must not ignore the conclusion of the Fathers that the use of musical instruments in the worship of God is to re-introduce the shadows and types that pointed to Christ. These are “miserable principles” that enslave the Church (Gal 4.8-10).

²⁷ Massey H. Shepherd Jr., *The Psalms in Christian Worship, A Practical Guide* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976), p. 88.

11. Of Time and Place

Where and when *can* we worship? Where and when *should* we worship? The Biblical answer to both questions is anywhere and everywhere. We can, and should worship God on our beds (Ps 63.6), in our living rooms (Rom 16.5; 1 Cor 16.19; Col 4.15), at work (Dt 11.18, 19; Ruth 2.4), sitting in a field or garden (Gen 24.63; Mt 26.36; Jn 1.48), and in the public¹ (corporate) assembly of the saints (Ps 107.32; 111.1). God is pleased with private worship (Mt 6.6) and with corporate worship (Lev 23.2; Ps 87.2). What makes worship *worship* is not where or when it is performed, but what correct acts of worship are performed with a proper attitude. An anti-liturgist who feels that the organized Church is too stuffy might respond with an 'Amen!'

A traditional defender of the Regulative Principle of Worship will likely feel uneasy with the idea that worship is not defined by time or place. He makes a distinction between regulated and unregulated worship by the time and place in which it is performed. His usual assertion is that God regulates *public* (formal) worship, implying, if not explicitly stating, that God does not regulate private or 'casual' worship. For example: "The regulative principle (we do only what God explicitly commands) applies only to what we call public worship. Life would be absurd if we applied the same principle to other areas of life."² This notion is invalid. First, because we are not to offer false worship to God in the corporate assembly or in private (Dt 27.15; Ezk 8.7-12; 14.4). Second, it is invalid because, as we have seen, God regulates worship at all times and in all places.

The elements of worship, that we identified earlier, are *the* acts of worship, if they are performed with a proper attitude to honour God, regardless of where they are performed. It is not the performance of the acts of worship at a particular time or in a particular place that makes them worship or makes them acceptable to God. The performance of the valid acts of worship *is* worship. The authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* understood the fact that the acts of worship are not dependent on time or place, and can be performed privately or corporately. The *Confession* says:

Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now under the Gospel either tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed: but God is to be worshipped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as in private families daily, and in secret each one by himself; so, more solemnly, in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or wilfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by His Word or providence, calleth thereunto.³

Too much emphasis has been placed on time and place by the traditional defenders of the Regulative Principle of Worship. As a result, they have done a disservice to the defence of this great Biblical principle. Two examples illustrate the difficulties that arise from this approach:

- Most of the arguments for Psalm singing as worship, unaccompanied by instruments, that I have read are based on what the Jews (apparently) did in their Synagogues before, or at, the time of Christ. This presents a number of challenges: 1) the evidence for what the Jews did in their Synagogues at that time is not entirely clear, and thus open to debate. 2) The origin of Synagogue worship is not laid out clearly in Scripture, leading opponents of exclusive Psalmody to claim that the practice is based on a model for worship not explicitly introduced by God. 3) It can be argued that the Temple, just as much as the Synagogue, could serve as the basis for NT worship.
- Many of the defenders of the Psalms-only position argue that they are not against the use of hymns *per se* and are certainly not against the use of musical instruments. They argue also, that it is only in public (corporate or formal) worship that hymns and instruments are excluded. They admit that young-people sitting around a campfire can sing hymns and choruses and even sing Psalms to guitar accompaniment. However, it is nearly impossible to convince any intelligent young person that the distinction between time and place is valid. What exactly is the line of demarcation? Is it a

¹ The primary meaning of 'public' when used as an adjectival modifier of worship is 'corporate', not 'open to anyone'.

² Alex J. MacDonald, "Upfront: All truth is God's truth," *The Monthly Record* (The Magazine of the Free Church of Scotland), February 2004, p. 3.

³ "Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day," *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, para. 6.

meeting called by the Elders, any meeting on Sunday, or only on a Sunday morning, in which the rules apply?

Time and place are irrelevant for *defining* true worship. That does not mean that time and place are unimportant. I will address the importance of time and place from a different perspective in the next section. However, the view that time and place, *per se*, determine what is true worship and provide *the* differentiation between what God regulates and what he does not regulate in worship is both misguided and wrong.

There is no problem, in principle, with someone singing *Amazing Grace* or any similar hymn. The problem is with claiming that it is worship. By God's definition, singing Psalms, with the right attitude, is worship. Consider a parallel example: There is no problem with reading the *Westminster Confession of Faith* or Calvin's *Institutes*, but no matter how sincere our devotion is, reading them is not worship. Reading the Bible with an attitude of reverence is worship whether done from the pulpit or in a private study.

There is no problem, in principle, with young people sitting around a campfire and singing songs to guitar accompaniment. However, just because a particular song has the name Jesus in it, or even addresses God, this does not make it worship. In the same way, singing *Amazing Grace* in the public (corporate) assembly of the saints does not make the action worship, any more than riding a donkey through the sanctuary would be worship. The following table may help to illustrate the distinction

Determination of which Classes of Songs are True Worship			
Representative Places of Singing	Subject Song		
	Psalm	Hymn⁴	Pop Song
Private or Family <i>designated</i> time of worship	Worship	False worship	False worship
Campfire ⁵	Worship	Not worship	Not worship
Concert Hall	Possible worship ⁶	Not worship	Not worship
Public (corporate) Assembly of the Saints at a <i>designated</i> time of worship	Worship	False worship	False worship

Worship, as the Bible defines it, consists of God-directed acts that God has required of us and authorized, and that are performed to honour him or his name. Anything else that we do is by definition not worship, or is false worship (depending on the context). Time and place do not determine what acts are, or are not, worship. However, if we bring actions that are permissible in other settings into a *designated*⁷ time of worship and present them to God as if they are worship, we are guilty of offering false worship.

The Assembly of the Saints

Private worship is pleasing to God. A person who prays, reads the Bible, or sings a Psalm before heading off to work or to bed, has offered God worship that pleases him. While private worship is good, Christians assembling to worship God is more pleasing to him. Worship by oneself is good, worshipping together is better. God is most pleased when his people assemble for worship. God will be supremely pleased when all of the saints assemble before his throne in perfect harmony and joy in the New Heaven and Earth. The diagram below illustrates this principle.

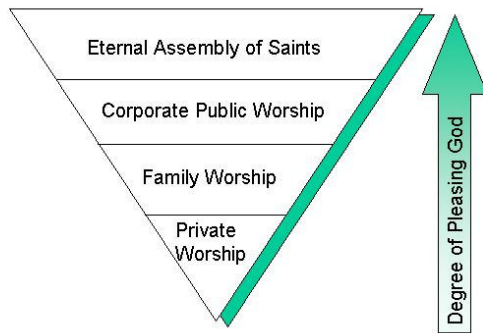
⁴ A song (hymn) written by a Christian that contains highly reverential words and thoughts and appears to be directed to God and is intended to honour him or his name, may be false worship rather than non-worship because the intention of the author was explicitly to offer worship to God in a form other than what he had required (Gen 4.3-7; Lev 10.1-3).

⁵ Among Christian youth, campfire singing is often considered to be a time of 'praise worship'. If the time is set apart as a time of worship, then only Psalms should be sung.

⁶ A school or community youth choir singing a Psalm in a medley of 'religious' songs is probably not addressing God in a worshipful attitude, whereas a choir from a Christian university singing a collection of psalms may be able to do so in a worshipful Spirit.

⁷ Designated by a competent authority; e.g., the Elders of a congregation or the Covenant head of a household.

In private worship, many of the elements of worship can be enjoyed without distraction. Also, some elements of worship are essentially private (fasting and personal prayer). However, some of the elements of worship cannot be performed privately. For example, in private worship there is no prophetic preaching, no public (corporate) reading of the Bible, and no administration of the sacraments. Private worship, while good, is not complete. Worship is more complete, and therefore more pleasing to God, when the saints assemble and participate. This is one of the reasons why the Psalmist encourages us to participate in the public assembly (Ps 22.25; 26.12; 35.18; 40.9, 10; 68.26; 122.1). The primary difference between private and public worship is not the presence of God, or even the elements performed, but the presence of the



assembled saints. Public worship is where the saints worship *with* others. Public worship is the junction point of all the dimensions of worship—downward, upward, outward, and inward—where we come to meet with God and our fellow saints (Acts 2.46; Heb 10.25).

In the OT economy, the people of God were to assemble regularly at the Tabernacle, or later at the Temple in Jerusalem (Zion), for corporate worship activities. This assembly was most pleasing to God (Ps 87.2). In this sense, worship was to be conducted in a *place*—the place where God made his presence known. Only at this place were the worshipers able to observe

and participate in all the elements of worship of the OT ceremonial system, including the sacrifices with their accompanying music and songs mediated by the priests and Levites. In the NT economy, all believers are also to assemble where God reveals himself—i.e., in the assembly of the saints (1 Cor 3.16; Heb 12.22, 23). Under the NT economy, all believers, as God’s covenant people, are priest-kings (Ex 19.6; 1 Pet 2.9; Rev 1.6; 5.10; 20.6) and are to participate in the public (corporate) sacrifice of praise. In other words, we are to be present at the public worship of God—the place where God makes his presence known in a special way.

Worship is an innate impulse in man. However, because of sin, true worship of God is not a natural or ordinary behaviour. When the saints assemble for worship, they do something that is extraordinary. “To assemble the people of God is to have them stand before the Lord. ... Just as Israel was called out of Egypt to Sinai, so the church is the gathering of God’s people, out of the world and into fellowship with God. ... [T]he contrast between the church and world will be most obvious when the church is at worship.”⁸

The fact that worship is otherworldly is one of the main reasons why it must be performed as God dictates and not as man desires. It is also one of the reasons why it is inappropriate to reshape worship to be ‘user-friendly’ or ‘seeker-sensitive’. Natural man, born in sin, cannot understand or appreciate worship so it is wrong to adapt worship to his needs or desires. The assembly of the saints is for God’s covenant people to worship their God and commune and fellowship with one another. “Contemporary confusion about the Great Commission arises from two fundamental mistakes. The first is an unwillingness to believe God’s promise to use the church and the things the world considers foolish to accomplish his purpose of reaching the lost. Much of the innovation in worship today reflects a loss of confidence in the promises that God is bound to keep. We don’t seem to believe that he has entrusted to the church the ministry of gathering and perfecting the saints, that he will make the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments effectual to salvation ... Instead of dumbing it down, we need to have our worship wise up.”⁹

The assembly of the saints for worship not only distinguishes them from the world; it brings them together for participation in the communal elements of worship. ‘American Protestants generally overlook

⁸ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), p. 27, 33.

⁹ Same as above, pp. 47-48.

the communal, and therefore churchly, character of their faith. They commonly practice what some have dubbed “churchless Christianity,” where church membership and worship attendance is incidental to the Christian Life. . . . Moreover, the means of grace are fundamentally corporate in character. When we come to worship, we are not engaging in an individual experience. Public worship is always in the company of the saints, and its activities are for the participation of the whole congregation.’¹⁰

As with the place of worship, so with the time of worship: as it is better for saints to assemble for worship than to worship alone, so it is better to worship on the Lord’s Day than on any another day of the week. It is a good thing when Christians get together during the week to pray, and read and study the Bible. But it is better for them to assemble on the Lord’s Day for worship. In anticipation of the eternal Sabbath, when the saints assemble on the Christian Sabbath—the Lord’s Day¹¹—they honour that day and are blessed through their observance of corporate worship on God’s Holy Day (Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2; Rev 1.10). Some people would argue that there is a crisis in worship because people in the Church have a diminished attitude toward the Sabbath and don’t see the importance of the corporate assembly of the saints. This correlation is undoubtedly true. But there is probably an equally strong correlation between diminished attitudes to corporate worship and Sabbath observance. Because worship is no longer considered a special act performed ideally by the corporate body of Christ, the Sabbath is no longer considered a special day reserved for the Lord.

We have already noted that God regulates all worship activities. This, however, does not mean that the regulations for worship are identical for every time and place. The form of the regulations has changed with each covenantal administration. In addition, the regulations for corporate public worship are different from the regulations for private family worship. For example, Paul is explicit that the involvement of women in the public assembly is different from their involvement in worship at home (1 Cor 14.34, 35; 1 Tim 2.8-14).

Synagogue or Temple

Any complete discussion of the time and place for worship must inevitably lead to a consideration of the question of the place of the Synagogue or the Temple, if any, as normative models for NT worship. Most people who defend the exclusive use of the Psalms, without instrumental accompaniment, point out that the worship of the NT Church is based on the Synagogue model rather than the Temple model. They argue that since most of the early NT congregations were formed from Synagogue congregations or composed of former Jews who brought the Synagogue model with them when they became Christians, the NT form of worship is to be based on the Synagogue.

Some opponents of the view that the NT worship is based on the Synagogue claim that there was no singing in the Synagogues, but only study of the Torah and prayer, before the time of Christ. If this is true, then the Synagogue cannot be the model for NT congregational worship that includes praise-song. Others argue that the existence of the Synagogue form of worship disproves the Regulative Principle of Worship, since there is no Biblical warrant for the introduction of the Synagogue. Finally, others argue that the Temple just as much as the Synagogue could serve as a model for NT worship and therefore as a basis for defending the use of musical instruments in worship.

To this point, I have been careful not to base the argument for the regulation of NT worship on what was done in the Synagogue. It isn’t necessary to demonstrate that what was done in the Synagogue is normative, or even to contend that it was endorsed by Jesus, in order to defend the singing of Psalms without instrumental accompaniment. For this reason, I refer to Synagogue practice as directly influencing the practice of the NT Church only in one section (*Ancient Church*, in Chapter 9). In that section, I dealt with the question of whether or not the Jews sang Psalms in their synagogues, and concluded that they probably did.

¹⁰ Same as above, p. 139.

¹¹ The first day of the week is the continuing Sabbath for NT Christians for at least the following reasons, it: commemorates the resurrection of Christ (Luke 24.1-12; Jn 20.1-9), symbolizes his re-creative work, symbolizes his redemptive work of bringing his people out of a spiritual ‘Egypt’, was blessed by Jesus’ appearances after the resurrection (Mt 28.1-9; Mk 16.12, 14; Jn 20.19-23; 26-29), was invested with significance by his actions (Lk 24.40; Jn 20.12, 19-23; 26), was probably the day of his ascension, was set apart by the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, was the day that the NT church assembled (Acts 20.7), is the day Christians are expected to contribute to the treasury of the Church (1 Cor 16.1, 2), is called the Lord’s Day (Rev 1.10), and is confirmed by the early Church.

It is necessary, however, to address a key counter-argument that many opponents of the Regulative Principle of Worship make—that the existence of the Synagogue form of worship disproves the Regulative Principle of Worship since there is no Biblical warrant for the introduction of the Synagogue. Many of those who have written against the Regulative Principle of Worship have argued along these lines: 1) we do not find in Scripture any authorization for the worship of the synagogue, and 2) Christ and the Apostles participated in the Synagogue assembly, therefore, 3) Christ and the Apostles did not abide by the Regulative Principle. Following essentially this argument, Steve Schlissel, as an example, writes: “The very existence of the synagogue, however, undoes the regulativist’s position! For he knows that the synagogues existed. And he knows that Christ and the Apostles *regularly* worshipped at synagogues without so much as a breath of suggestion that they were institutionally or liturgically illegitimate. And he knows that he cannot find so much as a sliver of a Divine commandment concerning what ought to be done in the synagogue. And, according to his principle, if God commanded naught concerning what ought to be done, then all was forbidden. And if all was forbidden, then the whole if it—institution and liturgy—was a sinful abomination. But that brings him back to Christ attending upon the service of God there and Christ following its liturgy: did *He* sin by participating in an entire order of worship that was without express divine warrant? The thought is blasphemy!”¹²

In response, a number of proponents of the traditional view of the Regulative Principle of Worship argue that the attendance of Jesus at the Synagogue (Mt 4.23; Mk 6.2) validated that form of worship and gives warrant for the NT church to base its worship on the Synagogue. A retrospective endorsement of the Synagogue is not a convincing argument for defending the Synagogue model as normative for the NT Church.

A fundamental problem with Schlissel’s argument is that he assumes that the time and place of the worship is the key determining factor for establishing the worship as valid, rather than focusing on the elements of worship. Notice for example the words Schlissel uses: ‘worshipped at synagogues’ and ‘done in the synagogue’. He jumps from the *place* of worship to the conclusion that the ‘institution and liturgy’ (i.e., the elements) are wrong.

Peter Wallace is even more explicit in this faulty view that the worship is determined by the place where it is performed rather than by the actions performed. For example, he says: “Recent scholarship reveals that the earliest synagogues did not meet for worship, which should not surprise us because according to the Scriptures true worship could only occur in the temple (or more precisely, in the place that God chose). Indeed, the language of worship was only applied to the synagogue after the destruction in [sic.] the temple in 70 AD.”¹³ While the Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of true worship,¹⁴ the idea that true worship could only occur in the Temple is clearly not true, since Jesus worshiped in an upper room (Lk 22.11, 12) and in a solitary place (Mk 1.35). Wallace’s faulty definition of worship, based on time and place, and his misunderstanding of the changed form of ceremonial worship under the NT economy, leads to the following false conclusions:¹⁵

Therefore it is actually false to say that Jesus regularly worshiped in the synagogue—because no one *worshipped* in the synagogue! The synagogue was designed to train people how to worship—it was the Sabbath school of the Jews. Jesus regularly *attended* the synagogue because it was a place of instruction and teaching—and the purpose of his early ministry was to preach the kingdom of God (cf. Luke 4).

Jesus here [Jn 4.20-21] makes it clear that until he establishes the new temple, Jerusalem is still the true place of worship. Jesus does not think of the synagogue as worship, otherwise he could have told the woman that the synagogue was also an acceptable place of worship. The reason why Jesus and the Samaritan woman do not consider the synagogue to be a place of worship is because they both understood that true worship requires a sacrifice.

¹² Steve M. Schlissel, “All I Really Need to Know About Worship... I Don’t Learn from the Regulative Principle (Part II),” <http://www.caledonianfire.org/caledonianfire>.

¹³ Peter J. Wallace, *Which Regulative Principle? A Response to Steve Schlissel and Brian Schwertley*, <http://www.michianacovenant.org/sermons/rpw.html>.

¹⁴ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 Beginnings to 1500* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003), p. 16.

¹⁵ Peter J. Wallace, *Which Regulative Principle? A Response to Steve Schlissel and Brian Schwertley*, cited above.

The view that the Synagogue was not a place of worship has become very popular recently.¹⁶ Writers from both a liberal and Reformed Protestant persuasion have championed this view. Beside Peter Wallace, Heather McKay¹⁷ and David Gordon,¹⁸ a number of others have dismissed the idea that acts of worship were performed in the Synagogue.

For the sake of discussion, we will assume that the increasingly popular modern view is valid and that the only things done in the synagogue were prayer, reading the Torah, and teaching/study. This being the case, we find that at least these three acts of worship were performed in the Synagogue, based on the definition of worship that we developed in chapters 3 and 5. Synagogue meetings included worship, because the elements of worship were performed in the Synagogue. Worship was worship, wherever the acts of worship were performed in a reverential atmosphere, not because of the specific location (Temple, Synagogue, upper room or beside a river) in which they were performed.

We find in the OT warrant for performing all of these actions outside of the Temple, by command and example: reading the Scriptures (Dt 17.18, 19; Neh 8.2-5, 18), preaching/teaching (Lev 10.8-11; 2 Ch 17.7-9; Neh 8.7-8), and prayer (2 Ch 6.34-39; Neh 8.6). In response to Schlissel, we ask what elements of worship were performed in the Synagogue which did not have express warrant from God? In response to Wallace, McKay, and Gordon, we ask what are prayer, reading Scripture, and Bible-teaching, if not worship?

In addition, there appears to be Biblical warrant for synagogue-like assemblies in the OT (Lev 23.3; Ps 74.8). For example, on Psalm 74.8, Matthew Poole writes: "All the *synagogues of God in the land*, i.e., all the public places wherein the Jews used to meet together to worship God *every sabbath day*, as is noted, Acts xiii. 27, and upon other occasions. That the Jews had synagogues is manifest, both from these and other places of Scripture.... it is undeniable that they did worship God publicly, in every sabbath, and other holy times, even then when they neither did nor could go up to Jerusalem ..."¹⁹

However, Nehemiah 8 is the key passage for establishing the principle that the elements of worship found in the Synagogue can, and should, be performed in places other than the Temple. As noted above, reading the Scriptures, preaching/teaching, and prayer are all found in the worship recorded in Nehemiah 8. In addition, we also find giving of tithes and offerings (Neh 8.12), and probably Psalm singing (Neh 8.12²⁰), in this worship assembly. The prophetic work of Ezra and Nehemiah, recorded in Nehemiah 8, provides full warrant for the spiritual form of worship that does not include sacrifices that was observed in the synagogues of the Jews at the time of Jesus. Whether or not it is called a 'synagogue', all the elements of worship of the Synagogue (according to the traditional view) are present in Nehemiah 8. It was worship performed outside the Temple. It included non-bloody sacrifices of praise, and was authorized by a prophet (one who wrote a portion of the Scriptures).

Observe further that the religious exercise of Nehemiah 8 occurred on a sabbath, and likely *the* Sabbath. Periodically the feast of Trumpets would fall on the Sabbath day. The work of building the wall ended on the 25th Elul, since they worked on that day it was not a Sabbath. Somewhere during the next 7 days until the 1st day of the 7th month (Tishri/Ethanim) a Sabbath must have occurred. If the builders finished the work on a Sunday, the following Saturday would have been the Sabbath. It is quite likely that the Sabbath and the Feast of Trumpets fell on the same day, and thus Nehemiah called a special assembly in Jerusalem. This *may* provide a model for regular Sabbath worship, with prayer, preaching/teaching, tithing/offerings, and *likely* Psalm singing.

The acts of worship performed by the assembly on the Sabbath, and not directly associated with the Temple, are most of the spiritual, non-localized, and perpetual ceremonial observances that God requires under the NT economy. In addition, Ezra and Nehemiah did not introduce anything that was not already an element of worship as God had defined it. It appears, therefore, that we have in the example of Nehemiah 8

¹⁶ Contrast this new view with the classic view: "[T]he synagogues were the places where most of the Jews worshipped and were taught." Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 Beginnings to 1500*, cited above, p. 14.

¹⁷ Heather A. McKay, *Sabbath & Synagogue: The Question of Sabbath Worship in Ancient Judaism* (Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers, 1994).

¹⁸ T. David Gordon, "Review Article: The Westminster Assembly's Unworkable and Unscriptural View of Worship?" *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65, Fall 2003, pp. 346-47.

¹⁹ Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1962 [1700]), vol 2, pp. 117-118.

²⁰ The means the people used to "celebrate with great joy" was singing; compare: Ps 9.2; 68.4; 71.23; 81.1; 95.1; Is 30.29.

the beginnings of the formal Synagogue²¹, and thus the precursor of the NT organized formal worship assembly on the Christian Sabbath—the Lord’s Day.

Since NT worship has its roots in the worship performed in Nehemiah 8 and subsequently observed in the Synagogue, does this mean that NT worship is not based on the Temple? The answer, surprisingly, is ‘no’. NT worship is in fact the logical conclusion of the OT Temple ceremonial liturgy. NT corporate worship is ‘temple’ worship. Under the NT economy the temple is the Church assembled for worship (1 Cor 3.9-17; 2 Cor 6.16; Eph 2.20, 21; Heb 3.3-6; 12.22, 23 1 Pet 2.4-7). As we observed in chapter 8, the Ceremonial Law is not abolished, and NT believers are the new priestly class who participate in the non-bloody ceremonial sacraments and offerings—baptism; Lord’s Supper; tithes and offerings—and offer (spiritual) sacrifices to God consisting of prayer and Psalms of praise.

Peter Leithart has shown that there is a logical connection and continuity between the worship of the Temple and the Synagogue and that Jews, such as Philo, considered the Synagogue to be an extension of the Temple.²² While this is true, Leithart misses the point that the Synagogue form of the ceremonial worship was anticipatory of the NT form of ceremonial worship in which the symbolic and typical elements that pointed to Christ were intended to be fully superseded (Heb 7.11, 12, 18, 19; 8.13; 10.1). “The worship of the synagogue was very different from that of the Temple, in that it had no sacerdotal rituals and supported no sacrosanct priesthood.”²³ In the same way, the form of observance of the ceremonial or ritual laws has been changed under the NT economy (Eph 2.15). Continuing to observe the Ceremonial Law today in its OT Temple form shows a misunderstanding of the meaning of the typical form, and is evidence of a bondage to an obsolete system (Gal 4.9, 10; 5.2-4).

We need to consider the reason for asking what formed the basis for NT worship, the Synagogue or the Temple. The reason that this question is asked appears not to be to show how the typical elements of the Temple liturgy were observed only in their perpetual spiritual form in the Synagogue. Rather, it appears that the reason is to find a justification for including, at least, instrumental music to accompany singing in the Church’s liturgy. In contrast, no one seems to ask the question: “Synagogue or Tabernacle?” Since singing with musical accompaniment was not used in the Tabernacle, no one bothers to show how the symbolical and typical Tabernacle elements are mapped to their NT spiritual equivalents. Ironically, the writer of Hebrews, writing to Jews, felt that it was important to show how the Tabernacle ceremonial system is fulfilled in Christ and replaced with the New Covenant equivalents. He never mentions the Temple. But to appeal to the Tabernacle wouldn’t serve the hidden agenda of those who are trying to find a justification for the use of musical instruments in NT worship. They are enslaved by the “weak and miserable principles” (Gal 4.9).

Order for Public Worship

By the early second century, and probably no later than 120 AD, churches began to draw up orders for guiding various aspects of their communal life, including public (corporate) worship. Two early examples are the *Didache*²⁴ and the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*²⁵. During the Middle Ages, various popes and founders of monastic orders developed liturgical guidelines for the Church. Over time, these settled into liturgical books such as the *Breviary*, *Missal*, *Pontifical*, and *Ritual*.

During the Reformation, Luther, Calvin and Knox, among others, were instrumental in the development of books of common order for public worship. For example, the *Order of Geneva* was drawn up in mid-1550s under the direction of John Knox. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland adopted a book of common order, derived from the Geneva model, in 1562. During the early seventeenth century, one of the struggles between Presbyterianism and Prelacy revolved around the imposed use in

²¹ Bannerman, D. Douglas. *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church, Historically and Exegetically Considered*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1887), pp 124-125.

²² Peter J. Leithart, “Synagogue or Temple? Models for Christian Worship” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 63, Spring 2002, pp. 119-133. See also: Peter J. Leithart, “Synagogue or Temple?” *Credenda Agenda*, Volume 13, Issue 1, <http://www.credenda.org/issues/13-1liturgia.php>.

²³ W. White, Jr., in Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 5, p.556.

²⁴ *The Didache, or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, translated by Charles H. Hoole, <http://www.ocf.org/OrthodoxPage/reading/St.Pachomius/Liturgical/didache.html>.

²⁵ Roberts, Alexander and Donaldson, James, “*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*,” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume VII*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

Scotland of a book of order based on the Anglican liturgy—the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Westminster Assembly, to settle the matter of church order, issued the *Directory for the Publick Worship* of God along with the *Confession of Faith*, *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms*, and the *Form of Presbyterian Church Government*. The *Directory* was accepted by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1645 and superseded the *Book of Common Order*.

The *Directory* was somewhat different from most of the previous books of order since it did not lay out precisely the order of each step of the public service and the exact words that were to be used at each step. Rather, it was meant simply to make known the “general heads, the sense and scope of the prayers and other parts of public worship”, and “if need be, to give a help and furniture.” The authors stated that they had taken care “to hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance; and other things we have endeavoured to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the word of God.” They concluded that a minister was to order the public services “by meditation, by taking heed to himself, and the flock of God committed to him, and by wise observing the ways of Divine Providence ... to furnish his heart and tongue with further or other materials of prayer and exhortation, as shall be needful upon all occasions.”²⁶

The *Directory* provides an outline order for a typical public service of worship that consists of the following:

- Prayer of invocation (call to worship)
- Reading of the Holy Scriptures (one chapter from each Testament)
- Psalm
- Prayer
- Sermon
- Prayer
- Psalm
- Baptism (if applicable)
- Lord’s Supper (to be celebrated frequently; after the morning sermon)
 - Exhortation, warning, and invitation
 - Word of institution and prayer
 - Celebration
 - Prayer
 - Collection for the poor
- Benediction (solemn blessing)

Michael Horton, in a chapter entitled “What Should Our Service Look Like?”²⁷ suggests an order for public worship, derived primarily from Nehemiah 8, that consists of the following elements:

- Invocation
- God’s Greeting (the Votum)
- Reading the Law
- Confession and Absolution
- Pastoral Prayer
- Preached Word
- Lord’s Supper
- Thanksgiving and Offerings
- Benediction.

Peter Wallace provides a suggested order for public worship in his critique of Steve Schlissel’s and Brian Schwertley’s approaches to the Regulative Principle of Worship. Wallace says that, “Since we must worship in the heavenly temple, since we must have a sacrifice in order to come into the presence of God, and since we must only do in worship that which God has commanded, therefore we must seek our pattern of worship from the Word of God. There are only a few worship services described in detail in Scripture

²⁶ “Preface,” *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*.

²⁷ Michael Horton, *A Better Way—Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), pp. 148-160.

(Exodus 19-24; 1 Ch 15-16; 28-29; 2 Ch 5-7; 29; 35; Neh 8-10), but they all follow a remarkably similar pattern. What is that pattern? 2 Chronicles 5-7 provides perhaps the clearest description:

1. Assembling the people in Zion (2 Ch 5:2-5)
2. Sacrificing the sheep and oxen (2 Ch 5:6)
3. Entering the Most Holy Place (2 Ch 5:7-10)
4. Singing the praise of God (2 Ch 5:11-14)
5. Hearing the Word of God, read and preached (2 Ch 6:1-11)
6. Praying for the covenant community (2 Ch 6:12-42)
7. Fire from heaven (2 Ch 7:1-2)
8. Singing praise in response to the fire from heaven (2 Ch 7:3)
9. Sacrificing the peace offerings/covenant meal (2 Ch 7:4-9)
10. Benediction/Blessing (not stated, but possibly from Numbers 6:24-27)²⁸

Douglas Jones, in an article in *Credenda Agenda*, considers the question of how to structure public worship around the key classes of offerings in the OT, and suggests the following order:

- Call to worship and adoration
- Prayer of confession—guilt offering
- Offering ourselves in consecration (reading, sermon, offering)—ascension offering
- Lord’s Supper—peace offering
- Benediction/Blessing.

Jones concludes: “Our contemporary worship is threadbare because we are lazy, and do not want to take the effort to study what God says about how we are to approach Him.”²⁹

I will not comment on the specifics of the different orders for public worship suggested by Horton, Wallace, or Jones. Since Scripture does not spell out a specific order for public worship, we are to endeavour, in the words of the *Directory*, “to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the word of God” an order for public worship. Basing this order on Nehemiah 8, 2 Chronicles 5-7 or the classes of sacrifices in the Levitical ceremonial liturgy, may all be legitimate modes for structuring public worship, as long as the specific elements of the worship service are those explicitly laid down in Scripture.

It has been suggested by some, that the public worship service is a weekly renewal of our covenant with God. If weekly public worship on the Lord’s Day is in fact a covenant renewal exercise, then another possible model for structuring the public worship service may be the Covenant form (e.g., how the book of Deuteronomy is structured). Applying the covenant form to structure corporate public worship could provide an order similar to the following:

A Covenant Renewal Model for the Order of Public Worship	
Introduction	Call to Worship
Preamble	Psalm Prayer
Historical Prologue	OT Scripture Reading Psalm NT Scripture Reading
Stipulations	Pastoral Prayer Sermon

²⁸ Peter J. Wallace, *Which Regulative Principle? A Response to Steve Schlissel and Brian Schwertley*, <http://www.michianacovenant.org/sermons/rpw.html>

²⁹ Douglas Jones, “Thema: Renewed Weekly,” *Credenda Agenda*: Volume 14, Issue 3.

Ratification	Lord's Supper Tithes and Offerings Prayer Psalm
Leadership Succession/ Commissioning into the World	Benediction/Blessing

More work is required to formulate a conscious model for how to structure the public (corporate) worship of God. It may be the case that different models can be used for different worship settings and circumstances. It may also be the case that we can derive legitimate models for the NT church from Nehemiah 8, 2 Chronicles 5-7, the classes of sacrifices in the Levitical ceremonial liturgy, or the second millennium BC covenant model. It would be useful, in a spirit of open enquiry, to review the structure of Synagogue worship and see how the Jews from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah adapted the Temple worship into a non-bloody sacrificial system and how the early church adopted the Synagogue worship. This study will be difficult as there is little available source material on the origins of the Synagogue and on the specific worship liturgies used in the Synagogue. It may also be useful to study the background to the formation of the various liturgies in the Reformed churches of the sixteenth century to determine what may have influenced their development. This suggested study is beyond the scope of this book, and would probably make a good topic for a doctoral thesis in historical theology.

12. Honest Subscription to the Westminster Standards

Most conservative Presbyterian denominations still require subscription to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in its original 1646 form or in the modified American form (*circa*. 1788), by its teaching Elders (and in most cases, ruling Elders). A few denominations require subscription to the complete set of Westminster Standards that include the *Confession, Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* and *The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*. This subscription usually requires the person under oath (e.g., a candidate for the ministry) to make a statement in which he indicates that he agrees with the system of doctrine contained in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

One of the chapters in the *Confession* deals with the topic of worship and the Sabbath day.¹ In addition, the authors of the *Confession* wrote an entire separate document dealing specifically with worship—the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*. In the *Directory* we find the following references to Psalm singing:

Of Publick Prayer before the Sermon.

AFTER reading of the word, (and singing of the psalm), the minister who is to preach ...

Of Prayer after Sermon.

The prayer ended, let a psalm be sung, if with conveniency it may be done.

Concerning the Observation of Days of Publick Thanksgiving.

And, because singing of psalms is of all other the most proper ordinance for expressing of joy and thanksgiving, let some pertinent psalm or psalms² be sung for that purpose, before or after the reading of some portion of the word suitable to the present business.

And so, having sung another psalm, suitable to the mercy, let him dismiss the congregation with a blessing, that they may have some convenient time for their repast and refreshing.

Of Singing of Psalms.

IT is the duty of Christians to praise God publickly, by singing of psalms together in the congregation, and also privately in the family.

In singing of psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord.

That the whole congregation may join herein, every one that can read is to have a psalm book; and all others, not disabled by age or otherwise, are to be exhorted to learn to read. But for the present, where many in the congregation cannot read, it is convenient that the minister, or some other fit person appointed by him and the other ruling officers, do read the psalm, line by line, before the singing thereof.

It is clear that the *Directory* does not support the singing of non-Biblical hymns—i.e., it is written with the assumption that only Psalms were acceptable as worship. Matthew Winzer comments on the significance of the *Directory*:

In the *Directory* for Public Worship the divines state that every literate attendant upon the worship service ought to possess a “psalm book.” Now, the divines were only concerned to produce one psalm book which was intended to be used *exclusively* in all of the churches of Scotland, England, and Ireland. This “psalm book” consisted only of metricated translations of the Old Testament psalms. From all which it is abundantly clear that the Westminster Assembly, as a body, though not necessarily every member of the Assembly, “believed that biblical principle debarred the use of hymns.”³

¹ “Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day,” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21.

² It is not valid to argue that because the word ‘psalm’ isn’t capitalized, the authors aren’t speaking of the Psalms. They also use the word ‘word’ when referring to Scripture.

³ Matthew Winzer, “Should the Psalter be the Only Hymnal of the Church? By Ian Murray (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), A Review,” *Credo Quarterly Theological Journal* (Edmonton, AB), 2001, p. 19.

Since most Presbyterian denominations today do not include the *Directory* among their required, or publicised, subordinate standards, it has been common for people who subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to disagree with a key position defended in this book—unaccompanied *a cappella* Psalmody as the only acceptable form of singing as worship before God. It is quite common for Presbyterians to claim that they adhere to the Regulative Principle of Worship, even as defined in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and yet to reject the position of the authors of the *Confession*.

We are confronted with a dilemma when two people both claim to hold to both the Regulative Principle of Worship and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, and yet their practices in worship are diametrically opposed to one another. Can a person honestly subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and reject the Regulative Principle of Worship held by its authors—as defended in this book?

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* when listing elements of worship says the following (italicized emphasis added):

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence, *singing of psalms* with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.⁴

This statement of the *Confession* indicates that the authors expected Psalms to be sung as worship. The response of most people is that they meant general “songs of praise” and not specifically the Psalms found in the Psalter, or that the authors did not really mean that only Psalms could be sung, since they didn’t specifically exclude hymn singing.⁵

One writer, for example, trying to get around the *Confession’s* statements about the use of Psalms said:

[I]t should be stated that even if the majority of Puritans at Westminster were exclusive Psalmists, this does not mean that one is non-confessional if he is not an exclusive Psalmist. . . . [C]hapter XXI of the confession does not denounce the use of inspired or uninspired hymns and songs. It merely calls for the “singing of Psalms” as one “part” of the regulative principle. . . . Says Westminster, those elements listed in section 5, “are all **parts** [emphasis in original] of the ordinary religious worship of God”. That is, they are to be included in such worship, but they are not necessarily to be considered “all inclusive.”⁶

To suggest that because the *Confession* does not explicitly rule out hymns, when it says Psalms, misses the logic of the *Confession*. “The Confession is negative and exclusive as well as positive — God “may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.” This defines the extent of the limitation mentioned in the preceding clause, or it may be regarded as a consequence flowing from the said limitation. It is so limited that the succeeding are excluded.⁷

Consider also a comparable statement in the *Confession*: “Marriage is to be between one man and one woman.”⁸ We would not accept someone claiming that since the authors did not specifically rule out ‘marriage’ between two men or between a man and a donkey that these are permitted. So why would we accept the notion that when the authors say Psalms are to be used as worship, they really mean Psalms and

⁴ “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day,” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, para. 5.

⁵ This same form of argument is used by those who wish to claim adherence to the *Confession*, but reject its six-day creation position (chapter 4, paragraph 1). They claim that the authors didn’t really mean six literal 24-hour days because they didn’t say that the days had only 24 hours.

⁶ W. Gary Crampton, “Psalms Hymns and Spiritual Songs” Thoughts on Exclusive Psalmody,” *The Counsel of Chalcedon*, May 1991, pp. 9-13 [9].

⁷ John Murray, “Song in the Public Worship of God: Part II,” *Minority Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God submitted to the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 1947, <http://members.aol.com/RSICHURCH/song2.html>

⁸ “Of Marriage and Divorce,” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 29, para. 1.

anything else we want to bring alongside them. The plain teaching of the *Confession* is that Psalms, and Psalms alone, are to be used in the worship of God.

The reality is that the majority of the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* did not accept the use of anything other than Psalms in worship. This is supported by historical contextual evidence. As we have already noted, the *Directory*, written by the same men, mentions the use of Psalms multiple times. In addition, as Horton Davis shows, the English Puritans and Presbyterians from which the majority of the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* were drawn held to the exclusive-Psalms position:

[T]he Calvinist service is corporate and congregational. God is conceived as declaring his will to the Elect and their prayers were the corporate response to the Word, as were their praises sung in the metrical psalms. ... Calvin's praises were entirely Scriptural. He would allow only the Psalms.⁹

The Presbyterian Ministers presented their 'Exceptions against the Book of Common Prayer' to the Bishops at a meeting held on the 4th of May [1661]. ... There are eighteen general exceptions tabled: ... xii. 'Because singing of psalms is a considerable part of public worship, we desire that the version set forth and allowed to be sung in churches be amended; or that we may have leave to make use of a purer version.'¹⁰

[The followers of Calvin remained true to their criterion of reformation 'according to the Word of God'. The Puritans therefore confined themselves to psalmody until the eighteenth century. ... [T]he Genevan Psalter ... became the exclusive praise-book of Geneva as well as the distinctive mark of the Huguenots in court and in camp. Furthermore, as a precedent for Reformed worship it had a great indirect influence upon the worship of the Puritans both in England and in Scotland, where metrical psalmody was for long the sole medium of praise.¹¹

The Puritans objected to Sunday dancing, to the use of instrumental music in the worship of the Church, and to ecclesiastical representations of the Trinity and the Saints. But it is utterly untrue to affirm that therefore music, dancing and art were banished from the Commonwealth. ... A group of people who produced Milton, and who popularized the Psalms, are unfairly described as Philistines. Privately they encouraged the arts and, if they objected to the use of the arts in the service of Church, their conviction was not aesthetic but religious in basis. It was not that they disliked art, but that they loved religion more."¹²

There was unanimity among the members of the Westminster Assembly with respect to the form of worship. One historian, writing about the Assembly, says the following about their agreement:

The Directory of Public Worship was another of the strictly theological subjects which engaged the attention of the Westminster Assembly. As the whole Prelatic system had been abolished before the Assembly met, and as the enforcement of its Liturgy and ceremonies had already been the cause of such prolonged contests and excessive afflictions in England, till nearly all its truly evangelical ministers had been forced to join the Puritans, and in doing so had already adopted a purely scriptural form of public worship, the Assembly had little to do but to state, in their own well-weighed and concise terms, a Directory of Public Worship in which nearly all were already agreed."¹³

John L. Girardeau, writing in 1888, also shows that the members of the Westminster Assembly were in full agreement with respect to the use of only Psalms, without instrumental accompaniment:

⁹ Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (Morgan PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997, reprint of the 1948 edition published by Dacre Press), p. 23.

¹⁰ Same as above, p. 147.

¹¹ Same as above, pp. 162-163.

¹² Same as above, p. 272.

¹³ William Maxwell Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edmonton AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1993, reprint of the third edition, 1856), p. 343.

When, therefore, the Assembly addressed itself to the task of framing a Directory for Worship, it found itself confronted by a condition of the churches of Great Britain in which the singing of psalms without instrumental accompaniment almost universally prevailed. In prescribing, consequently, the singing of psalms without making any allusion to the restoration of instrumental music, it must, in all fairness, be construed to specify the simple singing of praise as a part of public worship. The question, moreover, is settled by the consideration that had any debate occurred as to the propriety of allowing the use of instrumental music, the Scottish commissioners would have vehemently and uncompromisingly opposed that measure. But Lightfoot, who was a member of the Assembly, in his "Journal of its Proceedings"¹⁴ tells us: "This morning we fell upon the Directory for singing of psalms; and, in a short time, we finished it." He says that the only point upon which the Scottish commissioners had some discussion was the reading of the Psalms line by line.¹⁵

Matthew Winzer illustrates further the degree of agreement about singing of only Psalms in worship by how the Westminster Assembly dealt with the matter of singing of a doxology:

The emphasis upon an inspired psalmody was so present in the Westminster Assembly that it was thought fit to do away with the uninspired doxology, or conclusion, which some customarily sang at the end of a Psalm. Brownists opposed it from the first, but moderate English Independents and Scottish Presbyterians alike made use of it. Notwithstanding this agreement, Robert Baillie mentions that because the Assembly had resolved "to keep punctually to the original text, without any addition," both parties were content to omit it.¹⁶ It can be seen by placing this quotation in its proper context that the divines were not prepared to include any matter in their covenanted hymn-book which did not adhere closely to the inspired psalms.¹⁷

The majority of the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* were exclusive Psalm singers (without instrumental accompaniment). This can be seen from examples of what they wrote outside of the published Westminster Standards. For example:

Having given this general view of their own feelings, they proceed to state briefly the way and practices of their churches, which, accordingly, we quote in their own words: "Our public worship was *made of no other parts* than the worship of all Reformed Churches doth consist of: As public and solemn prayers for kings and all in authority, &c. —the reading the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, exposition of them as occasion was; and constant preaching of the Word, the administration of the two sacraments, baptism to infants, and the Lord's supper, *singing of psalms*, collection for the poor, &c., every Lord's day."¹⁸

[W]e cannot but admire the good hand of GOD in the great things done here already, particularly; That the Covenant (the Foundation of the whole Work) is taken; Prelacie and the whole train thereof, extirpated; The Service-Book in many places forsaken, plain and powerful preaching set up; Many Colledges in *Cambridge* provided with such Ministers, as are most zealous of the best Reformation; Altars removed; The Communion in some places

¹⁴ Girardeau cites *Works*, Vol. xiii., pp. 343, 344; London, 1825.

¹⁵ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Havertown, PA: New Covenant Publication Society, 1983, reprint of the 1888 edition), p. 133.

¹⁶ Robert Baillie, *Letters and Journals* 2:259.

¹⁷ Matthew Winzer, "Should the Psalter be the Only Hymnal of the Church? By Ian Murray (Edinburgh: the Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), A Review," *Credo Quarterly Theological Journal* (Edmonton, AB), 2001, p. 19.

¹⁸ William Maxwell Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, cited above, p. 185.

given at the Table sitting; The great Organs at *Pauls* and of *Peters* in *Westminster* taken down; Images and many other monuments of Idolatry defaced and abolished.¹⁹

But it hath been often said, *Take away the Common Prayer Book, take away our Religion.* Nay, our Religion is in the Bible, there is our God, and our Christ, and our Faith, and our Creed in all points. The whole Bible was Paul's belief; there are the Psalms of David, and his Prayers, and the Lord's Prayer, and other prayers, by which we may learn to pray. We have still the Lord's Songs, the Songs of Zion, sung by many with grace in their hearts, *making melody to the Lord*, though without organs. There we have all the commandments.²⁰

God's spirit worketh not with Ceremonies, and so they are as the offering of Swine's blood, and the slaying of a man; and so Abomination to God, Isa. 66:1, 2. The holy spirit is merited to us by Christ, Joh. 16:14. He shall receive of mine, and shew unto you: But who can say that the grace of joy in the holy Ghost, wrought by the droning of Organs, and the holinesse taught by the Surplice, is a work of the spirit merited by Christ as our High Priest?... Now Altars, Organs, Jewish Ephods, or Surplice, Masse-cloaths, and Romish Crossing, bowing to Altars, Images, are badges of Jewish and Popish Religion.²¹

"In Robert Baillie's catalogue of sectarian errors, he tells of the practice of the Independents of Arnheim in composing their own hymns."²²

The only valid conclusion we can reach when considering the historical context is that it was the intent of the authors of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to introduce a uniformity in worship across the kingdom that included exclusive Psalm-singing and excluded the use of musical instruments. "It is sometimes forgotten that when the Westminster Assembly was drawing up its Directory for *Public Worship*, it was doing so as a part of the covenanted uniformity of religion which, it was hoped, would forever characterise the kingdoms of Scotland, England and Ireland. The fact that the divines worked upon an accurate translation of the Psalms,²³ and that no provision was made for the bringing in of uninspired hymns into the worship of the church, demonstrates, to some degree, that the divines saw no warrant for uninspired hymns in public worship."²⁴

What is the implication of this conclusion? It is that subscription to the *Confession* means accepting the intent of the authors of the confession in all the areas of doctrine covered in the *Confession*, and this includes their doctrine of worship. A person cannot honestly subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* if he does not agree with the authors' position on the Regulative Principle of Worship. If the subscriber is unwilling to accept the authors' view that singing anything other than Psalms as worship is not consistent with God's requirements, he is not an honest subscriber to the *Confession*. If he uses musical instruments in worship, he reintroduces components of the OT ceremonial ritual that have been replaced in Christ and is not in agreement with the intent of the authors of the *Confession*.

We find, however, that there is a desire on the part of many Presbyterians to appear to be orthodox by stating their agreement with the *Confession*, while their practice in worship shows that they in fact reject the *Confession*. Doug Wilson commented about people in the US who claim to abide by the Constitution but act contrary to its intent:

¹⁹ John Maitland, Alexander Henderson, Samuel Rutherford, Robert Baillie and George Gillespie, *The Letter from the Commissioners at London to the General Assembly*, (1644).

²⁰ Samuel Gibson, *The Ruin of the Authors and Fomentors of Civil War*, c 1645.

²¹ Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication*, c 1646.

²² Robert Baillie, *A dissuasive from the errors of the time* (London: printed for Samuel Gellibrand, 1645), 118. Cited in: Matthew Winzer, "Should the Psalter be the Only Hymnal of the Church? By Ian Murray (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), A Review," *Credo Quarterly Theological Journal* (Edmonton, AB), 2001, p. 20.

²³ See S. W. Carruthers, *The every day work of the Westminster Assembly* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 161-167, for a brief account of this forgotten aspect of the Assembly's work.

²⁴ Matthew Winzer, "Should the Psalter be the Only Hymnal of the Church? By Ian Murray (Edinburgh: the Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), A Review," cited above, pp.18-19.

The prevailing sentiment in our [US] courts today is that the Constitution is a “living document” and that we should not attempt to tie it down to the “original intent” of the framers. But if we are not to be bound by the intent of the framers, then why not dispense with the framers entirely, and with the very idea of a written constitution? If all we wanted was a blank screen on which to project our current desires, then it would seem that all those curious, old-fashioned words just get in the way.

The reason we do this is that we want to have it both ways. Suppose we had judges who delivered their skewed rulings and, when pressed, said that they did this because it seemed like a good idea at the time. They had too much anchovy pizza the night before, and this ruling came to them in a dream. The general public would be upset, and the game would be over. But, in contrast, if they limited themselves to the plain meaning of the Constitution, their party would be over. And so the Constitution must be kept around to provide the smell of a hoary antiquity, and a relativistic hermeneutic is slapped on top of the whole operation to provide them with the untrammelled liberty of doing whatever they want.²⁵

Let’s restate what Wilson says by substituting the *Confession* and applying it to worship: The prevailing sentiment in Presbyterian churches today is that the *Confession* is a “living document” and that we should not attempt to tie it down to the “original intent” of the authors. But if we are not to be bound by the intent of the authors, then why not dispense with the authors entirely, and with the very idea of a written *Confession*? If all we wanted was a blank screen on which to project our current desires, then it would seem that all those curious, old-fashioned words just get in the way. The reason we do this is that we want to have it both ways. Suppose we had Pastors who introduced innovations in worship and, when pressed, said that they did this because it seemed like a good idea at the time. The folks in the pews would be upset, and the game would be over. But, in contrast, if they limited themselves to the plain meaning of the *Confession*, their party would be over. So the *Confession* must be kept around to provide the smell of a hoary antiquity, and a relativistic hermeneutic is slapped on top of the whole operation to provide them with the untrammelled liberty of doing whatever they want in worship.

An article that appeared in *Christianity Today*,²⁶ pointed out that the ‘intentional fallacy’, that dismisses the original intent of the author as irrelevant, is infecting both culture and the Church. Not only are the courts ignoring the intent of national constitutions and laws enacted by elected representatives, but church presbyteries and assemblies are doing the same thing. There are many in Presbyterian churches today who need to face this reality and apply it to their own situation. A subscriber to the *Confession* cannot honestly claim to adhere to the Westminster Standards and then ignore the clear intent of its authors with respect to worship. He cannot claim to adhere to the Westminster Standards and twist the *Confession* to support any interpretation of what constitutes worship. If he does not wish to worship in accordance with Biblical standards, informed by the Regulative Principle of Worship, and as documented in the *Confession*, then he should be honest and jettison the *Confession*.

²⁵ Douglas Wilson, “The Worship Service,” *Mother Kirk* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), pp. 199.

²⁶ Bob Wenz, “‘Truth’ on Two Hills: What Happens when Church and Culture Conspire to Ignore the Meaning of Words,” *Christianity Today*, July, 2004, pp. 46-48.

13. What About ...

In this chapter, we will address a miscellany of questions related to worship. These questions often arise from a consideration of the Regulative Principle of Worship, but they also arise in congregations that don't adhere to, or have an understanding of, the Principle. I have purposely left these questions to the end of our considerations of worship so that we will have the context of guiding principles on which to base the answers. However, the answers I present, to at least some of the questions, should be considered tentative as more analysis and thought is probably required to provide consistent and complete direction. Without doubt, many of these questions are difficult to answer and we, as creatures of our culture, are often unable to be fully principled and Biblical.

... Jesus' Passive Approach to False Worship?

Some critiques of the Regulative Principle of Worship, as presented in this book, suggest that Jesus must not have been too concerned about applying the Regulative Principle of Worship or he would have attacked more vigorously the false worship practices of his day—for example, the additions of the Scribes and Pharisees such as fasting twice per week or hand washing and other ablutions. From this, they conclude that God was more concerned about regulating worship under the OT economy than he is under the NT economy.

The same argument could be applied to any number of subjects: unjust slavery, homosexuality, adultery, abortion, infanticide, abuse of civil authority ... If Jesus was against unjust slavery why didn't he stop it? If Jesus was against homosexuality, why didn't he speak out against it? If Jesus was against abortion ... Jesus does speak against all these things. The entire Scripture is his word. In addition, he does condemn, directly, the false worship practices of the Pharisees (Mt 15.2-9; 23.1-36). However, during his first time on earth, Jesus did not come to act as a judge (Lk 12.13, 14; Jn 8.1-11). At his second coming, he will bring all false worship under judgement (Ps 98.9; Rom 2.4-11; Acts 17.31).

... Reading Confessions in Public Worship?

Some Presbyterian and Reformed congregations, especially those from a Dutch background read a portion of one of the historic confessions or catechisms during a designated portion of the public worship of God. For example, they designate a place in their order of worship called "Confession of our Faith" or something similar. This practice places the confession or catechism on the same level as Scripture. As much as confessions and catechisms are worthwhile documents, they are merely human compositions and the reading of them should not be equated with the God-ordained elements of worship.

All of the actions of life can be divided into four classes:

	Worship	Non-Worship
God-Honouring	God-ordained elements of worship performed with a proper attitude (Jn 4.24)	Any legitimate, non-worship action performed for the glory of God (1 Cor 10.31)
Sinful	Any unauthorized act of worship to God, or devotion or offering to anything other than God (Ex 20.3-6)	Any wrong action (Ex 20.3-17), or right action performed for the wrong reason (Prov 15.8)

Reading a confession of faith or catechism falls into the category of Non-Worship/God-Honouring, but it is not worship, any more than rescuing a drowning child or planting tulip bulbs are acts of worship.

This raises the question about the practice of many who have been brought up in the Puritan traditions—is it proper to include a time of catechetical instruction during family worship? The best approach is probably to distinguish the time of catechism memorization from the time of worship. For example, after the time of Bible reading, praise, and prayer to indicate that the time of family worship is complete, and then to work with the children in their memorization. In the same way, a congregation that wishes to study and memorize a confession or catechism can do so during a period that is not designated specifically as a time of worship—for example, during a Sunday School class.

... Singing Hymns?

Does what I have said throughout this book mean that we can never sing one of the ‘great’ hymns or a song composed by a Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) songwriter? The answer cannot be ‘no’ any more than it is wrong to write or read a theological essay or textbook or a confession of faith.

In Toronto, where I live, there is a small, grassed area near the Toronto Stock Exchange surrounded by the tall buildings of the financial district. In this ‘park’ lie a number of full-sized bronze cattle. The image of these cattle provides a visual statement of contrast between the aggressive ‘bull’ markets and the pastoral pace of an agrarian society. I chuckle every time I walk past these sculptures. They speak against the idolatry of our age. Ironically, a bronze image in this case is not only art but also serves to condemn idolatry. Making these representations of cattle is, clearly, not what God was speaking about when he condemned making images for the purpose of worship (Ex 20.4, 5; Lev 26.1).

The problem with hymns and CCM is not their existence, their use *per se*, or their theology—which is increasingly suspect since it is often man-centric. The problem with hymns and CCM is that they are considered adequate for use in worship of the eternal God. “Vagueness about the object of our praise inevitably leads to making our own praise the object.”¹

Writing poetry, writing a poem about God’s providence or work in history, writing a poem about Christ’s death and resurrection, and even singing a poem, are not what God objects to. What he objects to is claiming that such human compositions are worthy of being offered to him as a sacrifice of praise-service—as worship. When they are brought to him as worship, they are equivalent to the false coals that Nadab and Abihu attempted to offer to God (Lev 10.1-4).

In the section above, we noted the distinctions between worship vs non-worship and God-honouring vs sinful. Composing or singing, in non-worship settings, hymns or songs from the CCM genre are legitimate exercises of our artistic gifts. When brought into a worship setting, they are false worship and therefore an abomination. I realize that this distinction will appear to be subtle and artificial to some. However, it is worth considering what John Murray says, when speaking of the sanctity of truth, “But if we wish to call it a fine distinction, we must remember that the biblical ethic is built upon fine distinctions. At the point of divergence between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, is not a chasm but a razor’s edge. And if we do not appreciate this fact then certainly we are not sensitive to the biblical ethic.”²

There is a significant difference between joining friends to sing Christmas carols³ at the mall or attending the concert of a CCM artist and bringing these compositions into what would normally be considered a worship context—e.g., a meeting held in a church building that has been called by the Elders of the congregation. When attending a service of worship in a congregation that does not sing Psalms, I refrain from singing the hymns in that context.

When considering the use of hymns or carols, we must be careful not to allow pragmatism and subjectivism to be our standards. Pragmatism argues that since there is a great need for people to hear the Gospel, any approach that brings sinners in contact with the truth is good. Subjectivism argues that if we feel the presence of the Lord by His Spirit when we sing these compositions, then he must be blessing their use. There are many forms of religious observation about which men can say: 1) it works, and 2) it feels right. For example, the organizers of a typical evangelistic crusade based on ‘decisions’ for Christ will point to the results as justification for their method, and the Charismatic movement claims the ‘presence’ of the Spirit as endorsement for its meetings. The fact that God, at times, uses man’s invalid methods for the expansion of the Church does not mean that he endorses the means we use. God uses our sinful methods in spite of our sin.

... Choirs?

Direct references to choirs in the Bible are rare (primarily: 1 Ch 15.27; 2 Ch 29.25-30; Neh 12. 31, 38, 40, 42). Some translations include the term “choir director” in the titles of a few of the Psalms (e.g., Ps 4.1) and in Habakkuk. From these passages, we learn very little about how the choirs of the OT Temple liturgy actually preformed their duties. For example, it is not clear whether choirs sang alone or if they led the

¹ Michael Horton, *A Better Way—Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), p. 26.

² John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 141.

³ See the section below on celebrating holidays.

singing of the entire congregation, although the latter appears to be the case. What seems to be clear is that: 1) only Levite males were members of the choirs, and 2) the choirs only sang when sacrifices were being offered. These two facts indicate the typical nature of the OT choirs.

Having a trained choir singing in a worship context, while the congregation sits listening, is contrary to the NT concept of the priesthood of all believers and draws attention from God to the human performers. All believers are to offer up a sacrifice of praise to God in song, not to be entertained by a choir (or individual performer). The only place for a 'choir' in worship may be to have trained leaders, rather than a single precenter, for assisting the assembled worshipers to sing the harmonic parts of the tune.

... the Leaders of Public Worship?

The question of who may lead in worship is a difficult issue that seems to confront most congregations or denominations. The basic question can be formulated in many different ways: Can anyone who has not been ordained (e.g., as an Elder/Pastor) preach in the public assembly? Are women permitted to preach or teach Sunday School classes or present a children's message during public worship? Can women lead in prayer during public worship or at a prayer meeting? Is it proper to have people, other than the preacher, read the Scriptures during a worship service, prayer meeting or Bible study? Can women lead the singing? Can anyone other than the Minister (Pastor) officiate at a Lord's Supper? Can an Elder other than the Minister perform a baptism? Can young people (male or female) collect the tithes and offerings?

How we answer these questions is often based on our cultural backgrounds and denominational traditions and practices. Without a doubt, twentieth century movements and trends such as feminism, the emphasis on youth, and the tearing down of authority structures have also all had an influence on how these questions have been answered recently. We must however attempt to base our answer on Scripture.

At least the following Biblical principles should be taken into consideration:

- Explicit command or clear example of Apostolic practice; per the Regulative Principle of Worship.
- The primary dimension of a worship element—downward *from* God (e.g., prophetic: preaching, teaching, or reading scriptures) or upward *to* God (e.g., priestly: Psalm singing or prayer).
- The distinction between the rules governing worship in public assemblies and those governing worship in a family setting (1 Cor 14.33-35; 1 Tim 2.11-12).
- The covenantal responsibility given to men as heads of households or congregations (Gen 17.23, 27; 1 Tim 3.4, 12).
- The place of the plurality of Elders within a congregation (1 Tim 5.17; Tit 1.5).

We can now consider the question of leadership in worship, by applying these guiding principles to a few examples:

- *Prayer* – If prayer is considered a teaching (prophetic) element, then Paul's prohibition against women teaching in the church prohibits their engaging in prayer in the public assembly. However, if prayer is a priestly function, then it may be appropriate for women to pray in public (corporate) worship. The idea that they may pray in a prayer meeting of the congregation but not in public worship does not seem to be a consistent, and makes an invalid distinction between two forms of meeting that the Bible does not. We may have a Biblical example of women engaging in prayer in the assemblies of the congregation (Acts 1.14).
- *Children's Message* – Paul does not permit women to teach in the public assembly. He does not limit this prohibition to preaching. Paul basis this prohibition on the order of creation and the role each gender played in the fall into sin (1 Tim 2.11-14). A woman may be permitted to teach *children* in a Sunday School class, but she is not to teach children in a setting where men are present—e.g., a children's message during public worship—because this would put her in a position of having authority over a man.
- *Bible Reading* – If Bible reading is a function of the prophetic office and considered a form of teaching, then women should not read the Scriptures in the public assembly. The same prohibition would logically seem to apply to the other meetings of the church, such as a mid-week Bible study or during a Sunday School class.
- *Lord's Supper* – Presbyterian and Reformed congregations generally do not permit Elders, who are not 'Ministers', to officiate at a congregational observance of Communion. They require that a 'Minister' be brought in from a sister congregation. This seems to have the flavour of

sacerdotalism. There does not appear to be any Biblical warrant to divide the office of Elder into categories in which some Elders can, and others cannot, offer the communion elements to the members of a congregation.

- *Leading Singing* – Singing in the public assembly is permitted to the entire congregation. It appears that it is appropriate for women or a non-ordained young person, serving in a NT priestly capacity, to lead the congregational praise.

... Celebrating Holidays Such as Christmas and Easter?

In the *Directory*, the observance of regularly occurring holy days, such as Christmas and Easter, are conspicuous by their absence. There is a direct prohibition against the observation of holy days, which is ignored by most churches that claim adherence to the Westminster standards:

“THERE is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord’s day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.”⁴

There is considerable evidence that the holy days observed by the Church before the Reformation had pagan origins or became associated with pagan festivals. The holy days were often adapted from, or substituted for, pagan festivals in an attempt to make the transition from paganism to Christianity easy for the new adherents.⁵ This is particularly so of Christmas and likely the case with Easter.

In the Western Church, December 25th was originally proposed by Hippolytus (d. 235) as the date for the birth of Christ, but was not accepted by the Eastern Church that continued to hold to January 6th as the date of Christ’s birth. Christmas, as a holy day, was adopted only in the fourth century under Emperor Constantine, which proves that it was not of Apostolic origin. Chrysostom of Antioch preached a Christmas sermon in 386 in which he argued that the recently introduced holy day had faced much opposition, but was, nevertheless, of value for Christians.

The observance of December 25th as the birth of Christ became associated with the festival celebrating the birth of Zammuz the sun-god (celebrated on December 25th) that in the Roman Empire became known as Saturnalia and was held in honour of *Natalis Sol Invicti* (birth of the unconquered sun-god). The juxtaposition of the dates for the birth of Christ and the re-birth of the sun-god allowed the Church to adapt the pagan festival of the ‘yule’ (probably from an Aramaic name for an infant) by replacing the pagan deity with the Christ-child.

Most Christians today excuse the celebration of Christmas by arguing that it long ago lost its pagan connotations and has now become an exclusively Christian festival. Regardless of the source of the holiday, its observance as a sacred day of worship and much of what goes on in churches on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day (pageants, singing carols, lighting candles, special music, remembrance of a patron saint named Nicholas) are contrary to the principles for worship that we have developed thus far.

Easter was an adaptation of the fertility rites of Astarte or Astaroth, the Queen of Heaven (Jer 44.19) that came into Germany as Eastre (Ostara or Oster), and that were celebrated at the time of the spring equinox. As the Germans were Christianized, their Easter rituals became mixed with the celebration of the resurrection. The observance of Good Friday and Easter are an irrelevant human invention. Each Lord’s Day is to be a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus.

In addition to objecting to the pagan origin of these festivals, the Puritans were concerned about the nature and limits of Church power and, in particular, what authority the Church had to institute festivals. For example, David Gordon says:

The issue that separated the Puritans from the Anglicans was the authority of the church to *call* saints to certain assemblies, and then to determine what would be *done* in those assemblies. This is why the authority of the church to declare holy days was an issue. Is it lawful for the officers to call its people to rest from their labors and close shop more than 52 times annually? By what authority do the church-officers declare that a cobbler must close his shop on any day than the first day of the week? That the

⁴ “An Appendix touching Days and Places of Publick Worship,” *The Directory for the Publick Worship of God*.

⁵ See for example: Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 Beginnings to 1500* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2003), p 76.

first day of the week is sanctified for the Christian assemblies was disputed by neither party; what was disputed was the lawfulness of sanctifying (with the concomitant closing of businesses) any *other* day. More precisely, what is, and was, under discussion is the nature and limits of church-power. If the officers may require attendance at Sunday meetings because the Scripture *requires* such, may they then require anything of the assembled saints that is not taught in the same Scriptures? Note that James Bannerman⁶, as a representative of the historic Presbyterian view of worship, places the entire discussion of the regulative principle of worship under the section on the Matters in Regard to Which Church Power is Exercised.⁷

The main reasons for not celebrating holy days are the following:

- God has appointed one perpetual holy day, the Sabbath (Gen 2.3), which in the NT economy is the Lord's Day.
- God has not given authorization, explicitly or by Apostolic example, for the celebration of holy days other than the Lord's Day.
- Christmas and Easter have pagan origins. Both Christmas and Easter celebrations bring along pagan elements (trees, sunset and sunrise observances, fertility rabbits and eggs, sacred buns).
- Church officials do not have a right to *require* the assembly of Christians on any day other than the Lord's Day.

One of the popular objections to the Puritan and *Directory's* position against the introduction of holy days is that Jesus honoured Chanukah (the Feast of Dedication) by his presence at its celebration (Jn 10.22). Whether Jesus observed Chanukah cannot be determined from the text. All the text says is that Jesus was in Jerusalem at that time of the feast. It is no different from my saying, "I went to Florida during the Christmas Holidays." or "We hold our Church services at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday." The references to Christmas and Sunday do not prove that I accept the celebration of Christmas or that I worship the Sun.

For the sake of discussion, we will assume that Jesus did participate in the rituals of Chanukah. On what authoritative basis might he have done so?

2 Maccabees 1.18 assigns the 25th of Kisleu (early December) to the events in Nehemiah 12.31. Some have argued that this date cannot be correct since it is too late in the year compared with the dates for the events in the preceding chapters:

- Completion of the wall on the 25th Elul (Oct 2nd, 444 BC), from Nehemiah 6.15;
- Reading of the Law on the 1st day of the 7th month of Tishri/Ethanim (October 8th, 444 BC), from Nehemiah 7.73; and
- Confession of sin on the 24th day of the (same) month Tishri/Ethanim (Oct 31st 444 BC), from Nehemiah 9.1.

If the dedication ('chanukah') of the wall took place immediately after the completion of its reconstruction, then 2 Maccabees is incorrect. However, it is equally possible, and more probable, that the dedication ceremony was held only after the intervening events recorded in Nehemiah 8.1-12.26. Support for the idea of a delay is given in Nehemiah 12.27, which seems to reflect back on earlier events, and 12.27 and 28 which refer to the Levites and singers being sought out for the ceremony. A reasonable case can be made that the dedication was delayed until after the reading of the Law (Neh 8), confession of sin (Neh 9), renewal of the Covenant (Neh 10), repopulation of the city (Neh 11), and appointment of liturgical officers (Neh 12). Therefore, the dedication did not occur until early December as 2 Maccabees states. This date also provides support for the view that Nehemiah records in chronological order the events that transpired from his arrival in the city until the dedication of the wall.

Based on this analysis, it is possible that Judas Maccabees chose to rededicate the temple, about 260 years later, on the traditional date for the dedication that was established at the time of Nehemiah. Thus, if Jesus observed Chanukah, he was observing a festival that was first established by the prophets Nehemiah and Ezra, not a festival instituted by Judas Maccabees.

⁶ See James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (2 vols., Edinburgh. T&T Clark, 1868), 1:277ff.

⁷ T. David Gordon, "Review Article: The Westminster Assembly's Unworkable and Unscriptural View of Worship?" *Westminster Theological Journal*, 65, Fall 2003, pp. 352-353.

Another attempt to show that the Bible supports the introduction of feast days or holy days under the NT economy is an appeal to the institution of the Feast of Purim by the Jews (Est 9.22-28). It is ironic that the account records that “the Jews took it upon themselves to establish the custom.” It is almost as if God is making it clear that this feast was not established by his authority. The fact that an historical event is recorded in Scripture does not mean that God sanctions what happened. Purim may have been a national commemoration instituted by the civil magistrate—Mordecai acting as the prime minister to King Xerxes. This would make the day similar to Remembrance Day or Memorial Day, and not associate it with the worship of God that was accompanied by the ceremonial liturgy of sacrifices and Levite choirs. Recall that the institution of this festival was during the time of the Captivity when the people were not in Jerusalem and there was no Temple.

Scripture seems to indicate that we are not permitted to establish our own holy days (1 Kings 12.33 compared with chapter 13; Is 1.13, 14; Gal 4.9-11). John Thornbury, speaking of the religious innovations of Jeroboam, provides us with a warning about the introduction of holidays, and any other practices not sanctioned by the Bible, into the Worship of God:

Jeroboam’s calf-worship is the prototype of all compromising religion which is introduced in the name of the true God. It serves as a warning that religious activities are not necessarily acceptable to God simply because they are instituted in His name. Rituals of worship can be convenient, popular and sanctified with the sacred name of Jesus and yet be delusive.⁸

... ‘Christian’ Drama?

Can we perform a ‘Christian’ play? If by ‘Christian’ the inquirer means one that is written or produced by a Christian, the answer is ‘yes’. If, however, the inquirer means ‘perform a skit or dramatic production during worship’, the answer is ‘no’.

Some argue that dramatizations of the word are just logical extensions of reading the Scripture or preaching. They claim that there is only a difference in degree and not in kind between a preacher reading the Word with emphasis; a trained actor using voices, costumes, and props as he reads the Word, and a team of ‘readers’ dramatizing the Word.

Jesus appears to have used ‘props’ to illustrate some of his lessons (Lk 20.24). This may give preachers warrant for using objects to illustrate a point—for example, in a Children’s message. There is, however, no Biblical example, or warrant, for dramatic re-enactments of a passage of Scripture.

A significant factor to consider when addressing the question of dramatic productions is whether it is right to include a portrayal of Jesus. Some Protestants asked this question when there was much excitement in the Church about the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, produced by Mel Gibson. This portrayal of Christ is not proper for at least the following reasons:

- **The Written Word** – God, in his providence, chose to communicate the life of Christ through the written word of the Scriptures. He could have sent his Son to earth during a technologically advanced age in which there would have been TV crews covering the events of his crucifixion. He could have planned for technology to develop more quickly or could have delayed his Son’s arrival on earth, but he chose to send Jesus at a time when there were no cameras. His timing was right (Gal 4.4). We have no idea what Jesus looked like as a man and no written or visual record has been preserved of his physical appearance. God must have had a purpose for keeping that information from us. We overstep the bounds of propriety before God, and present a false statement about Jesus, when we presume to communicate the life and death of the Son of God with a visual representation.
- **The Preached Word** – God has chosen preaching as his primary means of presenting the Gospel. This God-appointed means of reaching the lost with the Gospel is being undermined everywhere today—in the Church and society. A movie such as *The Passion* reinforces the trend to replace preaching with entertainment.

⁸ John F. Thornbury, “Jeroboam the First and His Religion of Convenience: A Warning for Today,” *Banner of Truth*, April, 1988, pp. 25.

- **The Living Word** – Jesus is the visible representation of the eternal God (Jn 1.14; Col 1.15; Heb 1.3). It is inappropriate for us to make representations of God in any form (Is 40.18; Acts 17.29)—whether a stone carving, a renaissance painting, or a movie. In addition, it is wrong for a sinful person (an actor) to portray the sinless Christ. *The Passion* is, in essence, no different from a medieval morality play. We need to reconsider why the Council of Constantinople in 753 AD reinforced the position of the early NT Church against the use of images and why the Sixteenth century Reformers were against visual representations of Jesus. They understood that God is not pleased with having men create images of the Living Word, separating his physical nature from his divine nature.

The pragmatic response to these objections is, “But many people will hear about Christ and be converted.” There is no doubt that some people will begin to consider Christ, and thus receive salvation, through attendance at a movie such as *The Passion*. We should thank God that he will use this means as an instrument for the salvation of souls. However, does this mean that we should approve of an incorrect means because it produces good results? Some people were probably saved by considering their future destiny when they were on the sinking Titanic. Should we sink cruise ships to bring people to consider the meaning of life? Some people are saved when they exit from a drug-induced stupor. Should we push drugs so that someone will be saved? Paul answers the pragmatist’s arguments with an emphatic ‘no’ (Rom 3.8; 6.1, 2).

Some will say that these examples are unwarranted. After all, “The movie isn’t like sinking a ship or pushing drugs; it is a good thing!” For the sake of discussion, assume that a dramatic production like *The Passion* is a good thing in itself. Is the resurrection of a dead person a good thing? Yet, what does Jesus say to the suggestion that a resurrection could be used to bring people to consider their future destiny? “He [Abraham] said to him [the rich man], ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (Lk 16.31) The God-appointed means of reaching the lost with the Gospel is preaching Moses and the Prophets. Of course, it is possible that the modern way of ‘preaching’ is to show movies that hit people at the visceral level.

Regardless of what we may think about *The Passion*, in God’s providence it was a ‘blockbuster’. God in his mercy uses for his purposes means he has not authorized, and appears to have done so through the movie. Certainly, he can, and does, save some people through means that are improperly used or introduced by men (Phil 1.18). Thinking of *The Passion* in particular, however, there are two other key reasons why it was a very significant cultural phenomenon. They are summed up by what Paul says he preached: “Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” (1 Cor 1.23)

1. **Stumbling Block** – Many complained that the movie was anti-Jewish. Mel Gibson was called a ‘sadist’ (by *Newsweek*’s David Ansen) for stirring up hatred against Jews. *The Passion* is no more ‘anti-Jewish’ than the Gospels themselves. Jesus was a Jew, Mary at the foot of the cross was a Jewess, three of the Gospel writers were Jews, and the thief on the cross who repented of his sins was a Jew. ... The reason that Jews don’t want to hear the Gospel’s message is because it presents the truth. It reminds Jews today that their ancient leaders and many of the Jewish people at the time of the crucifixion rejected Jesus. Jews today do not want to hear that Jesus was the true Messiah, and they do not want to be reminded that *they* have rejected him.
2. **Foolishness** – Non-Jews criticized the movie for its violence, or as just a money-grab by Gibson. Who would have believed that an R-rated movie about Jesus, in Aramaic and Latin with English sub-titles, was a viable commercial venture? These very critics turned a small-scale niche movie into a ‘blockbuster’ by their free publicity. God overruled their belief that Jesus of Nazareth is foolishness and slapped them in the face with the reality that an event that happened outside a city wall in an obscure province of the Roman Empire about two thousand years ago is the most important event in the history of the world.

The Church needs seriously to rethink many things: Where do the media fit? What are the Biblical principles guiding their use? What is preaching? Why is preaching so ineffective at reaching the lost today? Is the problem with the preachers or our lack of prayer? However, there is one thing we don’t need to rethink: the horror of the Cross of Jesus Christ continues to offend (Gal 5.11) both Jews and Gentiles. God is never going to let men forget that on the cross Jesus Christ bore our sins and the punishment we deserve.

... Our Response to Those Who Disagree?

The Reformers insisted that no church is perfect. They understood that, in many cases, purity is a matter of degree. While this does not provide an excuse for negligence in determining God's will with respect to worship, it does remind us that we must not hold in contempt any assembly of believers for whom Christ died, regardless of their form of worship. G. I. Williamson reminds us,

Who can say which church, after all, is burdened down with more impurities? One church may excel in one way (such as faithful preaching), while lacking sadly in another (such as purity of worship). Another may sing only the inspired Psalms without musical instruments, and yet allow such human inventions as the altar call (and often an Arminian sub-gospel). Neither church would have any reason to boast. It may, under certain circumstances, be wise to attend the church that preaches the gospel most faithfully, even though (in doing so) one would have to lament the defective elements of worship. ... We have no right to boast, or feel self-satisfied, merely because of purity in one aspect of the life of the church.⁹

As a response to the uncertainty about which congregations are part of the true Church, the Reformers developed the concept of the marks of a true church—pure doctrine, faithful preaching of the gospel, right administration of the sacraments, exercise of proper discipline.¹⁰ They held the belief that where these marks are present to some extent, we are to treat a congregation as part of Christ's true Church. For example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says, "This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them."¹¹

Our response to disagreements about the subject of worship should never be to fall into parochial disassociation or stand aloof in sectarian haughtiness. Rather our response to the blemishes in the Church must be prayer that Christ will purify his Church. That prayer must include a sincere request that God will lead each of our congregations to remove all false practices and improper attitudes in worship. We must come to believe that worship is service—service for the glory of God. The words of J. I. Packer are a fitting conclusion to this study of worship:

In most churches, worship is in a state of transition. Both the pastor and the people know by now that worship is important and what we come to church to do. But most ministers are nervous about proposing changes to ingrained patterns and many congregations do not want to accept them. Churches are experimenting, and I feel that at times congregations are a bit bewildered and uncertain. Many times they don't have enough criteria to determine what constitutes reverent worship of God; all they're clear on is what helps them feel good and strengthened. I don't think congregations have a strong corporate sense that the greatness and holiness of God is what we should be seeking above all. What will change this confusing situation is a renewal of the kind of preaching that gives congregations a strong sense of God. Here I think we need to learn from the Puritans. The strong preaching of the glory of God, of His holiness and awesomeness, will create a sense of how we ought to worship Him. I can't see a congregation ever agreeing on how to worship unless they become united with a deeper and stronger sense of the greatness and glory of God.¹²

⁹ G. I. Williamson, *Instrumental Music in Worship: Commanded or Not Commanded?* (Part II), <http://members.aol.com/RSICHURCH/music2.html>

¹⁰ See for example, Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession*.

¹¹ "Of the Church," *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 25, para. 4.

¹² J. I. Packer, "The Challenge of the Third Millenium [sic]," *RTS Reformed Quarterly* 19:2 (Summer 1999), <http://www.rts.edu/quarterly/summer99/qa.html>.