

# **Minority Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God Submitted to the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church**

**By John Murray and William Young**

The above-mentioned committee presented to the Thirteenth General Assembly a report bearing upon the question of the regulative principle of worship. This principle is to the effect that divine warrant or authorization is required for every element entering into the worship of God. In the words of the Confession of Faith of this Church, "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" (Chapt. XXI, Sect. 1).

In terms of the commission given by the Eleventh General Assembly and in accordance with the regulative principle set forth in the report of the committee, presented to the Thirteenth General Assembly, the question with which this report is concerned is: What does the Scripture warrant or prescribe respecting the songs that may be sung in the public worship of God?

In dealing with this question it should be appreciated that the singing of God's praise is a distinct act of worship. It is to be distinguished, for example, from the reading of the Scripture and from the offering of prayer to God. It is, of course, true that songs of praise often include what is of the nature of prayer to God, as it is also true that in the offering of prayer to God there is much that is of the nature of praise and thanksgiving. But it is not proper to appeal to the divine authorization or warrant we possess as to the content of prayer in order to determine the question as to the content of song. Prayer is one element of worship, singing is another. Similarity or even identity of content does not in the least obliterate the distinction between these two specific kinds of exercise in the worship of God. Because of this distinction we may not say that the offering of prayer and the singing of praise to God are the same thing and argue from the divine authorization we possess respecting the one to the authorization respecting the other. One or two examples may be given of the necessity and importance of guarding the distinctiveness of the several parts of worship and of determining from the Scripture what its prescriptions are respecting each element.

Both reports submitted by this committee are agreed that some Scripture songs may be sung in the public worship of God. But these Scripture songs may also be read as Scripture and they may be used in preaching. In such cases the actual materials are the same. But reading the Scripture is not the same exercise of worship as singing, and neither is preaching the same as singing, or reading the Scripture. The same kind of distinction applies to the exercises of praying and singing even when the content is identical.

The Lord's Supper is an act of thanksgiving as well as one of commemoration and communion. But though the partaking of the bread and the wine includes thanksgiving, just as prayer and singing do, yet the celebration of the Lord's Supper is an act of worship distinct from both prayer and singing, and the divine prescriptions respecting the celebration of the Lord's Supper cannot be determined by the divine prescriptions regarding prayer or singing but must rather be derived from the revelation God has given respecting the observance of that distinct element of the worship of God.

Consequently the minority contends that the argument used in the report of the committee, to wit, that, since we are not limited in our prayers to the words of Scripture or to the "prayers" given us in Scripture, therefore the same freedom is granted in song, is invalid. We may not argue thus from the divine warrant respecting one element to the divine warrant respecting another. The question of the divine prescription regarding the songs that may be sung in the public worship of God must be answered, therefore, on the basis of the teaching of Scripture with respect to that specific element of worship.

When we address ourselves to the question of the teaching of Scripture we find that the New Testament does not provide us with copious instruction on this matter. It is for that reason that we are placed under the necessity of exercising great care lest we overstep the limits of divine authorization and warrant. This report will deal with the evidence that is directly germane to the question.

### **The Scripture Evidence**

I. Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26. Here we are told that, on the occasion of the passover, Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn before going out to the Mount of Olives. The Greek is *humesantes*, which literally means "having hymned." The evidence available to us from other sources is to the effect of indicating that the hymn sung on this occasion was what is known as the Hallel, consisting of Psalms 113-118. This instance evinces the following facts.

(1) No warrant whatsoever can be adduced for the singing of uninspired hymns. There is no evidence that an uninspired hymn was sung on this occasion.

(2) The evidence we do possess evinces that Jesus and His disciples sang a portion of the psalter.

(3) The singing took place in connection with the celebration of the Old Testament sacrament of the Passover and the New Testament sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

II. I Corinthians 14:15, 26. Paul is here dealing with the assembly of the saints for worship. He says, "I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the understanding also" (vs. 15), "Each one hath a psalm" (vs. 26). From the verb that Paul uses in verse 15 we might quite properly translate as follows: "I will sing a psalm with the spirit and I will sing a psalm with the understanding also," just as in verse 26 he says, "Each one hath a psalm." We must conclude,

therefore, that psalms were sung in the church at Corinth and such singing has, by obvious implication, the apostle's sanction and is confirmed by his example.

The question does arise: What were these psalms? It is possible that they were charismatic psalms. If so, one thing is certain—they were not uninspired compositions. If charismatic they were inspired or given by the Holy Spirit. If we today possessed such charismatic psalms, sung by the apostle himself in the assemblies of worship or sanctioned by him in the worship of the church, then we should have the proper authority for the use of them in the songs of the sanctuary. It so happens, however, that we do not have conclusive evidence to show that we have any of such alleged charismatic psalms. But even on the hypothesis that they were charismatic psalms and even on the hypothesis that we have examples of such in Acts 4:23-30; 1 Timothy 3:16, we are not thereby furnished with any authorization for the use of uninspired songs in the worship of God.

On the hypothesis that they were not charismatic psalms we have to ask, what were they? To answer this question we have simply to ask another: what songs in the usage of Scripture, fall into the category of psalms? There is one answer. The Book of Psalms is composed of psalms and, therefore, by the simplest principle of hermeneutics we can say that, in terms of Scripture language, the songs that are repeatedly called psalms perfectly satisfy the denotation and connotation of the word "psalm" as it is used here. If inspired Scripture says, "Each one hath a psalm," and Scripture also calls the "Psalms" psalms, then surely we may also sing a Psalm to the praise of God in His worship.

So far as these two texts are concerned we can say that they provide us with no warrant whatsoever for the use of uninspired hymns. We can also say that, since the psalms we possess in the psalter are certainly psalms in the terminology of Scripture itself, we are hereby provided with divine warrant for the singing of such in the worship of God.

III. Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16. With respect to these two texts it should be noted, first of all, that Paul is not necessarily referring to the public worship of God. The context does not make clear that Paul is confining himself here to exhortation that concerns the behaviour of believers in relation to one another in the assemblies of worship. Paul may very well be giving general exhortation. Indeed, the context in both passages would appear to show that he is exhorting to a certain kind of exercise in which believers should engage in reference to one another in the discharge of that mutual instruction and edification requisite to concerted advancement of one another's highest interests and of the glory of God.

This consideration does not, however, remove these texts from relevancy to the question of the public worship of God. For, if Paul specifies psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs as the media through which believers may mutually promote the glory of God and one another's edification in those more generic Christian exercises, this fact has very close bearing upon the question of the apostolically sanctioned and authorized media of praise to God in the more specific worship of the sanctuary. In other words, if the apostolically enjoined media or materials of song in the more generic exercises of worship are psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs, then surely nothing

inferior to psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs would be enjoined for use in the more specific exercises of worship in the assemblies of the church. If psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs are the limits of the materials of song in praise of God in less formal acts of worship, how much more are they the limits in more formal acts of worship. With respect to these two texts the following considerations are to be borne in mind.

(1) We cannot determine the denotation or connotation of psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs by any modern usage of these same words. The meaning and reference must be determined by the usage of Scripture.

(2) Some of the facts with reference to the usage of Scripture are very significant.

The word *psalmos* (psalm) occurs some 94 times in the Greek Scriptures, that is to say, some 87 times in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament and 7 times in the New Testament. In the Septuagint some 78 of these instances are in the Book of Psalms. In the great majority of instances in the Book of Psalms, some 67 in all, it occurs in the titles of the Psalms. In three of the seven instances in the New Testament the word is unmistakably used with reference to the Psalms, in two instances in the phrase the "Book of Psalms" (*biblos psalmon*) and in the other instance with reference to the second Psalm. It is surely significant, therefore, that in some 70 of the 94 instances the reference is clearly to the Book of Psalms or to Psalms in the Book of Psalms.

The word *hymnos* (hymn) occurs some 19 times in the Greek Bible, 17 (?) times in the Old Testament and 2 times in the New (in the passages under consideration). Of the 17 Old Testament instances 13 occur in the Book of Psalms and 6 of these are in the titles. In the seven instances not occurring in the titles the reference is in each case to the praise of God, or to the songs of Sion. The other four instances in the other books of the Old Testament have likewise reference to the songs of praise to God.

The word, *odee* (song) occurs some 86 times in the Greek Bible, some 80 times in the Old Testament and 6 times in the New. Apart from these two passages (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), it occurs in the New Testament only in the Book of Revelation. Of the 80 occurrences in the Old Testament some 45 are in the Book of Psalms and 36 of these are in the titles of the Psalms.

It is surely apparent, therefore, how large a proportion of the occurrences of these words is in the Book of Psalms. These facts of themselves do not prove that the reference here in Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16 is to the Book of Psalms exclusively. But these facts must not be forgotten as we proceed to determine the character of the lyrical compositions mentioned in these two texts.

(3) In the New Testament the word *psalmos* occurs seven times, as was just stated. Two of these instances are in the texts we are considering. One of these instances is I Cor. 14:26, a text dealt with already. Two instances (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20) refer to the Book of Psalms (*biblos psalmon*). Luke 24:44 clearly refers to Old Testament inspired Scripture and probably to the Book of Psalms. Acts 13:33 refers to the second Psalm. In none of these instances is there any

warrant for supposing that "psalms" refer to uninspired human compositions. In the majority, without the least shadow of doubt, the reference is to inspired Scripture.

In the New Testament the word *humnos* occurs only in these two passages. The verb *humneo* (to hymn) occurs four times (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26, Acts 16:25; Heb. 2:12). As we found already, the synoptic passages most probably refer to the singing of the Hallel by our Lord and His disciples. Acts 16:25 refers to the singing of Paul and Silas in prison. Hebrews 2:12 is a quotation from the Old Testament (Ps. 22:23)—*en meso ekklesias humneso se*.

No evidence whatsoever can be adduced from the usage in support of the use of uninspired hymns.

Apart from these two instances the word *odee* occurs in the New Testament only in Rev. 5:9; 14:3 (2); 15:3.

From the New Testament, then, no evidence can be derived to show that these words may be used here (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) with reference to uninspired songs. Even though *odee* is used in the Book of Revelation with reference to songs other than those in the Book of Psalms it is not used there with reference to uninspired human compositions but with reference to inspired songs.

(4) We now come to the consideration of some facts which are even more significant than those already discussed. The Book of Psalms is composed of psalms, hymns and songs. We have already found that the overwhelming majority of the instances of these words in both Testaments has reference to the Book of Psalms. We now come to the discussion of the meaning of these words in the titles of the Psalms.

In the Septuagint *psalmos* occurs some 67 times in the titles to the Psalms. In most cases it is the translation of the Hebrew *mismor*, but in a few cases it translates other Hebrew words. *Psalmos* means simply "song of praise." The frequency with which the word *psalmos* occurs in the titles is probably the reason why the Book of Psalms is called in the LXX version simply *psalmoi*. In the Hebrew it is called *tehillim*.

It is perfectly obvious, therefore, that the New Testament writers, familiar as they were with the Old Testament in Greek, would necessarily have the Book of Psalms in mind when they used this word *psalmos*. There is no other piece of evidence that even begins to take on the significance for the meaning of the word "psalm" in the New Testament that this simple fact takes on, namely, that the Book of Psalms was called simply "Psalms" (*psalmoi*). The usage of the New Testament itself puts this beyond all doubt. There the Psalms are called the Book of Psalms.

There is nothing in the context of these two passages requiring us to regard "psalms" as referring to uninspired compositions. On the other hand, there are abundant instances in the usage of Scripture elsewhere which show that the word "psalm" refers to an inspired

composition. Furthermore, there is no instance in which the word "psalm," as used with reference to a song of praise to God, can be shown to refer to an uninspired song. It is therefore quite unwarranted to regard "psalms" in these two passages as referring to uninspired songs, whereas there is abundant warrant for regarding them as denoting inspired compositions. Consequently, if we are to follow the line of the evidence provided by the Scripture, we are forced to find the "psalms" here mentioned within the limits of inspiration.

As we found, the word *humnos* appears some 17 times in the Septuagint version. In thirteen cases it appears in the Book of Psalms. In five or six cases it appears in the titles of the Psalms as the translation of the Hebrew *neginoth* or *neginah*. It is significant that on several occasions in the text of the Psalms *humnos* translates the Hebrew word *tehillah*, which is the word used to designate the Book of Psalms in the Hebrew. This shows that psalms may be called hymns and hymns are psalms. Psalms and hymns are not exclusive of one another. A psalm may be not only a psalm but also a hymn.

These facts show that when, in the usage of Scripture, we look for the type of composition meant by a "hymn," we find it in the Psalms. And we have no evidence whatsoever that a hymn, in the usage of Scripture, ever designates an uninspired human composition.

The word *odee* occurs much more frequently in the titles of the Psalms than does the word *humnos*, but not as frequently as does the word *psalmos*. There are some 36 instances. It usually translates the Hebrew word *shir* but not always. Occasionally it is the translation of *mismor*, the word generally translated by *psalmos*. *Odee* occurs so frequently in the titles of the psalms that its meaning would be definitely influenced by that usage.

The conclusion to which we are driven then is that the frequency with which these words occur in that book of the Old Testament that is unique in this respect that it is a collection of songs composed at various times and by various inspired writers, the book that stands out distinctively and uniquely as composed of psalms, hymns and songs, would tend most definitely to fix the meaning of these words in the usage of the inspired writers. The case is simply this that beyond all dispute there is no other datum that compares with the significance of the language of the Septuagint in the resolution of this question. When taken in conjunction with the only positive evidence we have in the New Testament, the evidence leads preponderantly to the conclusion that when Paul wrote "psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs" he would expect the minds of his readers to think of what were, in the terms of Scripture itself, "psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs," namely, the Book of Psalms.

(5) The evidence does not warrant the conclusion that the apostle meant by "psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs" to designate three distinct groups or types of lyrical compositions. It is significant in this connection that in a few cases in the titles of the Psalms all three of these words occur. In many cases the words "psalm" and "song" occur in the same title. This shows that a lyrical composition may be a psalm, hymn and song at the same time.

The words, of course, have their own distinctive meanings, and such distinctive meanings may intimate the variety and richness of the materials of song the apostle has in mind. Paul uses three words that in the established usage of Scripture designate the rich variety of such lyrical compositions as were suited for the worship of God in the service of song.

(6) Paul specifies the character of the songs as "Spiritual"—*odais pneumatikais*. If anything should be obvious from the use of the word *pneumatikos* in the New Testament it is that it has reference to the Holy Spirit and means, in such contexts as the present, "given by the Spirit." Its meaning is not at all, as Trench contends, "such as were composed by spiritual men, and moved in the sphere of spiritual things" (*Synonyms*, LXXVIII). It rather means, as Meyer points out, "proceeding from the Holy Spirit, as *theopneustos*" (Com. on Eph. 5:19). In this context the word would mean "indited by the Spirit," just as in I Corinthians 2:13 *logois...pneumatikois* are "words inspired by the Spirit" and "taught by the Spirit" (*didaktois pneumatos*).

The question, of course, arises: why does the word *pneumatikos* qualify *odais* and not *psalmois* and *hymnois*? A reasonable answer to this question is that *pneumatikais* qualifies all three datives and that its gender (fem.) is due to attraction to the gender of the noun that is closest to it. Another distinct possibility, made particularly plausible by the omission of the copulative in Colossians 3:16, is that "Spiritual songs" are the genus of which "psalms" and "hymns" are the species. This is the view of Meyer, for example.

On either of these assumptions the psalms, hymns and songs are all "Spiritual" and therefore all inspired by the Holy Spirit. The bearing of this upon the question at issue is perfectly apparent. Uninspired hymns are immediately excluded.

But we shall have to allow for the distinct possibility that the word "Spiritual," in the grammatical structure of the clause, is confined to the word "songs." On this hypothesis the "songs" are characterized as "Spiritual," and therefore characterized as inspired or indited by the Holy Spirit. This, at least, should be abundantly clear.

The question would arise then: is it merely the "songs" that need, to be inspired while the "psalms" and "hymns" may be uninspired? The asking of the question shows the unreasonableness of such an hypothesis, especially when we bear in mind all that has already been shown with reference to the use of these words. On what conceivable ground would Paul have insisted that the "songs" needed to be divinely inspired while the "psalms" and "hymns" did not need to be? In the usage of Scripture there was no hard and fast line of distinction between psalms and hymns, on the one hand, and songs on the other. It would be quite impossible to find any good ground for such discrimination in the apostolic prescription.

The unreasonableness of such a supposition appears all the more conclusive when we remember the Scripture usage with respect to the word "psalms." There is not the least bit of evidence to suppose that in such usage on the part of the apostle "psalm" could mean an uninspired human composition. All the evidence, rather, goes to establish the opposite conclusion.

We see then that psalms are inspired. Songs are inspired because they are characterized as "Spiritual." What then about the hymns? May they be uninspired? As already indicated, it would be an utterly unreasonable hypothesis to maintain that the apostle would require that songs be inspired while psalms and hymns might not. This becomes all the more cogent when we recognize, as we have established, that the psalms and songs were inspired. It would indeed be strange discrimination if hymns might be uninspired and psalms and songs inspired. But it would be strange to the point of absurdity if Paul should be supposed to insist that songs had to be inspired but hymns not. For what distinction can be drawn between a hymn and a song that would make it requisite for the latter to be inspired while the former might not be? We, indeed, cannot be sure that there is any distinction so far as actual denotation is concerned. Even if we do maintain the distinct colour of each word there is no discoverable reason why so radical a distinction as that between inspiration and non-inspiration could be maintained.

The only conclusion we can arrive at then is that "hymns" in Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16 must be accorded the same "Spiritual" quality as is accorded to "psalms" by obvious implication and to "songs" by express qualification and that this was taken for granted by the apostle, either because the word "Spiritual" would be regarded as qualifying all three words, or because "Spiritual songs" were the genus of which "psalms" and "hymns" were the species, or because in the usage of the church "hymns" like "psalms" would be recognized in their own right and because of the context in which they are mentioned to be in no other category, as respects their "Spiritual" quality, than the category occupied by psalms and songs.

In reference to these two passages, then, we are compelled to conclude:

- (a) There is no warrant for thinking that "psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs" can refer to uninspired human compositions. These texts provide us with no authorization whatsoever for the singing of uninspired songs in the worship of God.
- (b) There is warrant for concluding that "psalms, hymns and Spiritual songs" refer to inspired compositions. These texts provide us, therefore, with warrant for the singing of inspired songs in the worship of God.
- (c) The Book of Psalms provides us with psalms, hymns and songs that are inspired and therefore with the kind of compositions referred to in Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16.

### **General Conclusions**

This survey of the evidence derived from Scripture shows, in the judgment of the minority, that there is no evidence from Scripture that can be adduced to warrant the singing of uninspired human compositions in the public worship of God. The report of the committee maintains that we do have warrant for the use of such songs. The minority is well aware of the plausibility of the arguments of the committee, to wit, the argument drawn from the analogy of prayer and the argument drawn from the necessity of expanding the content of song to keep pace with the expansion of the revelation given in the New Testament. The former of these arguments has

been dealt with in the earlier part of this report. The latter is much more cogent. There are, however, two considerations that require to be mentioned by way of answer.

(i) We have no evidence either from the Old Testament or from the New that the expansion of revelation received expression in the devotional exercises of the church through the singing of uninspired songs of praise. This is a fact that cannot be discounted. If we possessed evidence that in the Old Testament period the church gave expression to revelation as it progressed by the singing of uninspired songs in the worship of God, then the argument from analogy would be rather conclusive, especially in view of the relative silence of the New Testament. But no evidence has been produced to prove the use of uninspired songs in the worship of the Old Testament. Or, if instances of the use of uninspired songs in the worship of the New Testament could be adduced, then the argument of the committee would be established. But the very cases adduced by the committee to show that there was an expansion of song in the New Testament do not show that uninspired songs were employed. Hence we are compelled to conclude that, since there is no evidence to show the use of uninspired songs in the practice of the church in the New Testament, the argument of the committee cannot plead authorization from the Scriptures. The church of God must in this matter, as in all other matters concerned with the actual content of worship, confine itself to the limits of Scripture authorization, and it is the contention of the minority that we do not possess evidence on the basis of which to plead the use of uninspired songs in the public worship of God.

The argument of the committee that "the New Testament deals with conditions in the early church which have not been continued and which cannot be our present norm" fails to take due account of the normative character of Scripture. It is true that we today do not have the gift of inspiration and, therefore, we cannot compose inspired songs. But the Scripture does prescribe for us the way in which we are to worship God in the conditions that are permanent in the church. And since the Scripture does warrant and prescribe the use of inspired songs but does not warrant the use of uninspired songs, we are to restrict ourselves to those inspired materials made available to us by the Scripture itself. In other words, the Scripture does not provide us with any warrant for the exercising of those gifts the church now possesses in the composition of the actual content of song.

(ii) If the argument drawn from the expansion of revelation is applied within the limits of Scripture authorization, then the utmost that can be established is the use of New Testament songs or of New Testament materials adapted to singing. Principally the minority is not jealous to insist that New Testament songs may not be used in the worship of God. What we are most jealous to maintain is that Scripture does authorize the use of inspired songs, that is, Scripture songs, and that the singing of other than Scripture songs in the worship of God has no warrant from the Word of God and is therefore forbidden.

On the basis of these studies the minority respectfully submits to the Fourteenth General Assembly the following conclusions:

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

Respectfully submitted,  
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