

Ephesians 5:15-20

"What Should the Church Sing?" Pt. 1 (the focus will be Ephesians 5:19)

15 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise,

16 redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,

19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

While I am an admirer of every chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 21 has always been one of my favorites (*you'll find it on page 860 in the back of your hymnals*). It begins by introducing us to the guiding principle behind all true Christian worship, the idea that God is the only One who can tell us how we should worship Him, or as the authors of the confession the Westminster Divines (incidentally the word divine there simply means a professor of divinity) put it in their more dignified manner, ***“the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself”***. The Divines went on to state that because God has taught us the only acceptable way of worshipping Him in the scriptures He has forbidden the invention of new ways of worshipping Him not found in scripture, stating 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.”***(WCF 21.1) Those who are familiar with Presbyterian theology will immediately recognize this formula as the “Regulative Principle of Worship” or RPW for short.

In my own life, the RPW, which I firmly believe to be the teaching of scripture, has been a huge help. During my initial years as a Christian in the early 1990s I was exposed to Protestant worship styles varying from Pentecostal to Charismatic to High Church Episcopalianism and quickly learned that amongst evangelicals churches there was a “worship war” going on pitting the advocates of what is most often called “traditional worship” against those who were in favor of “contemporary worship”. More often than not, the advocates of traditional worship argued that their older style of worship was more orderly, more reverent, and more acceptable to the older members of the church while those in favor of contemporary worship argued that their style of worship was more Spirit filled, more exuberant, and more likely to result in unchurched people, usually described as “seekers,” coming to church.

I was torn between these positions, I saw some pragmatic value to contemporary worship, but I also appreciated the more traditional approach to worship, and I didn't think the halfway house of “blended” worship was going to ultimately satisfy anyone. It was a great relief then to learn that there was a better and more scriptural answer to the question of how Christians should worship than simply following the preferences of the pastor or the strongest faction in the congregation. The RPW gave men an answer that I supposed should have been obvious, namely if our objective is to worship our Almighty God, shouldn't He be the one who decides how He is to be worshiped? And if scripture really is sufficient to guide us in every aspect of life, faith, and practice so “that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:17) then we can be sure that God has given us sufficient instruction in how to worship Him within its pages. This meant that worship was also an area where we could safely trust in God and lean not on our own understanding (per Proverbs 3:5).

Finding the RPW finally meant that I didn't have to worry about my preferences any longer, and I grew to love simple, biblical worship.

However, it wasn't long after I embraced the RPW that I began to encounter Presbyterians who told me that my views on worship didn't really follow the Regulative Principle. If I *really* wanted to follow the Regulative Principle and worship God the way He commanded in scripture, then I needed to stop singing hymns and sing only Psalms. They even pointed out what section 5 of chapter 21 of the WCF said about singing in worship. It said, identifying the parts of scriptural worship: **“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”**

You see, they said, the Westminster Confessions speaks only of singing psalms, the inspired psalms we find in scripture in the book of psalms. That is the hymn book of the church. We aren't supposed to be making up our own hymns of praise to God and singing them! This is the position widely referred to as EP or exclusive psalmody, and is followed by Presbyterian denominations like the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (*whose **Blue Psalter we use in worship***) and the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing).

Now, at first, that position seemed very beguiling to me, it seemed to be the more conservative approach, *let God determine the content of what we are going to sing*, and to tell the truth after years of often having to sing repetitive hymns and praise songs that were often either theologically “iffy” or devoid of any real theological content the idea that I'd never have to sing “Shine Jesus Shine” or it's like again was attractive. But I also immediately had misgivings, I knew that the authors of the Westminster Confession were quoting Col. 3:16 when they mentioned “*singing of psalms with grace in the heart*” but that isn't what Col. 3:16 actually says, it says, **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”** Which is basically what Eph. 5:19 says. Why then, I asked my Exclusive Psalmody friends does the bible say, in two places, that we are to sing,

“Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs” and not just “Psalms”. “Ah, they explained, well in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, in the Book of Psalms, psalms are sometimes also called hymns (*humnos*) and songs (*ode*) in the titles. So what Paul was saying is sing Psalms, Psalms, and Psalms.”

What they neglected to mention is that these uses are infrequent, especially that of hymn (*humnos*), never all used together in a title, and the phrase “*spiritual songs*” is never used. In fact the more I looked into it, the more I began to doubt that phrase did mean *singing psalms, psalms and psalms from the book of psalms*. Over time I became convinced that we are actually supposed to be singing, psalms from the book of psalms, or more properly metrical arrangements of psalms, in other words psalms rearranged so that they can be sung in English. As well as Christian Hymns and Songs not found in the psalter.

In the end I had many reasons for coming to that conclusion, but I’m just going to discuss just one of them with you today and then hit some others next week. The First is from the actual exegesis of Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 and the Second is from the fact that Psalms Only is not the pattern we find in the New Testament.

First in Eph. 5:18-19 Paul counsels *the Ephesians 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,*

He says that their worship, they are not speaking to themselves, but to one another, is to be filled not with drunken carousing, but with spirit filled singing. Singing what? Well psalms, and even that is not necessarily a reference to a psalm from the book of psalms. You see the Greek word *psalmos* by itself

simply refers to a song designed to be sung with musical accompaniment, and could refer

- 1) One of the sacred poems contained in the book of Psalms
- 2) Or a sacred poem formed on the model of the Old Testament Psalms, 1 Cor 14:26 reads regarding the worship of the Corinthian brethren - ***NKJ 1 Corinthians 14:26 How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.***

There he is speaking of the ecstatic worship of the Corinthian church, he's not saying each of you says, lets sing psalm 22 and another says no, psalm 100. These are new compositions, so Hodge says, "***1 Corinthians 14:26, where ψαλμόν appears to mean such a song given by inspiration, and not one of the psalms of David.***"

A hymn, is a song of praise to God, a divine song, Augustine, in more than one place, states that a hymn has three essentials: ***it must be sung; it must be praise; it must be to God.*** Psalms therefore could also be spoken of as hymns, but by this definition we also find hymns that do not belong to the Old Testament Psalter scattered throughout the New Testament; Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55) and Zecharia's Benedictus (Luke 1:68–79), the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32). Then of course we have the heavenly hymns of Revelation, its interesting that around the throne in heaven, they don't just sing psalms but hymns of praise to the Lamb – Jesus Christ, such as the one we started worship with today. And if our worship is practice for heaven, then it should follow their pattern. Then exegetes are certain that we find fragments of other New Testament in the letters of Paul (Eph. 5:14; Col. 1:15–20; I Tim. 3:16, and perhaps others). Additionally we are told by historians like Eusebius that the early church sang hymns and not just Psalms, I'll do more on the history here next week, but its worthwhile that after torturing Christians in 112AD Governor Pliny reported to Emperor Trajan:

“They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god,”

This is only approximately 20 years after the writing of Revelation the last letter in the bible

Finally what is this Spiritual Song or Pneumatikos Ode, first Pneumatikos, spiritual, that was one of the terms that Paul used to refer to Christians:

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

We forget that “Christian” was a term coined by the enemies of Christ. For Paul the way of saying Christian song would have been Pneumatikos Ode.

Most non-EP commentators are convinced this does not refer to a Psalm, and even The 19th Scottish Theologian John Eadie stated in his commentary:

The ode is a general term, and denotes the natural outburst of an excited bosom—the language of the sudden impulses of an Oriental temperament. Such odes as were allowed to Christians are termed “spiritual,” that is, prompted by the Spirit which filled them. But the psalms and hymns are already marked out as consecrated, and needed no such additional epithet. For the prevailing meaning of the adjective, see under Ephesians 1:3. Odes of this nature are found in Scripture, as that of Hannah at her boy’s consecration, that of the Virgin at the Annunciation, and that of Zechariah on the birth of his son. As a considerable portion of the church at Ephesus was composed of Jews, these psalms in the idiom of a Jew might be

the Psalms of the Old Testament, and not merely sacred poems thus named by them, as is the opinion of Harless; and the hymns might be compositions of praise specially adapted to the Gentile mind, though not inapposite to the Jew. The imagery, allusions, and typical references of the Psalms could not be fully appreciated by the Gentile sections of the churches. And these “spiritual odes,” perhaps of a more glowing and individual nature, taking the shape both of psalms and hymns, might be recited or chanted in their assemblies or churches, as the Spirit gave utterance. Acts 10:46. Tertullian says in his Apology-... Many hymns which were originally private and personal, have thus become incorporated with the psalmody of our churches.

So, I’ll have more to say about this especially from a theological and historical viewpoint, but let me leave you with one thought. Our singing goes in two directions, we sing to the Lord and one another, it has the function of teaching and praise, so to be right our singing should be the result of Col. 3:16 *letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly* that is the gospel maturing in our hearts and we sing his word, we sing about his work giving him praise.

For us to sing rightly therefore, regardless of whether it is a psalm or a hymn, the word of *Christ has to dwell in you richly in all wisdom* and regardless of musical talent this is only possible for the Christian. Only someone who BELIEVES the Gospel can truly sing the Gospel.