

A Brief Defense of the Use of Both the Biblical Psalms and New Songs in the Public Worship of God

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In the Bible we are told, “Sing unto him, *sing psalms* unto him” (Ps. 105:2).¹ Thus, the biblical Psalms ought to be sung in Christian worship.

We are also told, “Sing unto the LORD a *new song*, and his praise in the congregation of saints” (Ps. 149:1). Here is an express command to sing a “new song ... in the congregation of saints”—that is, in the public worship of God. The word translated “new” means *something not seen before*, as in the phrase “I will do a *new thing*” (Isa. 43:19).² New songs that are faithful to Scripture are to be used in public worship per express divine command.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, summarizing Scripture, teaches that “the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped 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.*”³ Acceptable worship is that only which is prescribed in Holy Scripture, God’s infallible self-revelation, by express command or approved example (the “regulative principle”).

We submit that *both* singing Psalms and singing a new song are prescribed in Holy Scripture. The faithful church sings both the biblical Psalms and God-glorifying new songs, per our Lord’s express instruction. It is wrong to omit the biblical Psalms; it is wrong to omit biblically faithful hymns (new songs). Some churches never sing the Psalms, others never sing hymns. Both extremes are wrong.

It is very telling that the two most influential books arguing for exclusive Psalmody and against the use of hymns (Michael Bushell’s *The Songs of Zion* and Brian Schwertley’s *Exclusive Psalmody: A Biblical Defense*⁴) completely pass over the divine command to sing a “new song” in public worship; there is no exegesis or discussion of Psalm 149:1 in either work. This is more

¹ The word translated “sing” is זָמַר (zameru), the piel plural imperative verb from which the noun מִזְמוֹר (mizmor, psalm) is derived (see BDB). That מִזְמוֹר (mizmor) refers to the biblical Psalms is evident from its use in the superscription above Ps. 3:1. In like manner Jas. 5:13 has “let him sing psalms” (ψαλλέτω, psalletō, the verbal form of the noun ψαλμός, psalmos, psalm). KJV and NKJV correctly translate these expressions as “sing psalms.” NASB, ESV and most newer English translations, by the less literal rendering “sing praise,” obscure the etymological connection between מִזְמוֹר mizmor – זָמַר zameru and ψαλμός psalmos – ψαλλέτω psalletō (1 Chron. 16:9, Ps. 105:2, Jas. 5:13), leaving readers without a knowledge of the original languages unaware of these important witnesses regarding the church’s duty to sing the biblical Psalms in worship.

² “New song” is the translation of the Hebrew שִׁיר הַדָּשׁ (shiyr hadash); שִׁיר (shiyr) is defined as “new, fresh” (William L. Halladay, *A Concise Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament*); cf. “new covenant” (בְּרִית הַדָּשׁ, berith hadashah, Jer. 31:31), “new heavens and a new earth” (שָׁמַיִם הַדָּשִׁים וְאָרֶץ הַדָּשָׁה, shamayim hadashim va’aretz hadashah, Isa. 65:17); cf. Greek ὁδὴ καινὴ (ōdē kainē), Rev. 5:9, 14:3. “New song” is an important theme in the Bible, occurring nine times (Ps. 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1; Isa. 42:10; Rev. 5:9, 14:3).

³ WCF 21.1, citing Deut. 12:32, Matt. 15:9, Acts 17:23–25, Matt. 4:9–10, Deut. 4:15–20, Ex. 20:4–6, John 4:23–24, Col. 2:18–23 as Scripture proofs.

⁴ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 1980). Schwertley accessed 3-5-22 at <https://pdf4pro.com/amp/view/exclusive-psalmody-a-biblical-defense-5960a4.html>.

than a simple oversight, for the omission utterly demolishes the case for exclusive Psalmody. If the God of heaven instructs his people to sing a “new song” in worship, there is no biblical case for exclusive Psalmody.⁵

True theology encompasses the teaching of *all* of Scripture. If an alleged teaching contradicts Scripture at any point, it is false. The case for exclusive Psalmody is contradicted by Psalm 149:1; therefore it is not the teaching of Scripture.

The composition of new songs is appropriate at new junctures in salvation history (cf. the examples in Ex. 15:1–18; Deut. 31:30–32:43; Isa. 38:9–20; Hab. 3; Luke 1:46–55, 67–79; 2:27–32; Rev. 4:11, 5:12, 7:12, etc.). Surely the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant is a new juncture in salvation history calling for the singing of new songs!

It cannot be denied that the Psalter itself teaches God’s people to sing a new song (Ps. 149:1). Here is a command issued by the Lord of the church. It must not be ignored. It is the word of God expressing the will of God.

This is not to argue that every Christian worship service must of necessity include a hymn or hymns. Perhaps there are occasions when only biblical Psalms fit in best with the worship theme. But if a congregation resolutely refuses to sing new songs as commanded in Psalm 149:1, it is refusing to submit fully to Scripture; it is substituting the opinion of men for the will of God.

It must be concluded that exclusive Psalmody is a human tradition, not the express teaching of Scripture. To hold to it in spite of its conflict with Psalm 149:1 is to come under the like judgment that Christ declared against the Pharisees: “Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition” (Matt. 15:6). Far better to bring worship practice into accord with all of Scripture and insist upon the regular singing of the biblical Psalms, as well as biblically faithful “new songs” of human composition.⁶

The Christian is required to obey *all* of Scripture. Let us use the biblical Psalms in worship! But let us also not forget that Psalm 149:1 is the authoritative command of the Lord of the church: “Sing unto the LORD a *new song*, and his praise in the congregation of saints.”

⁵ Some have suggested that the “new song” may be old songs “sung from a new heart”; “the same content sung with a renewed significance”; “called new ... because sung afresh, or again”; “sung in a new way in light of new mercies”; “new in richness of meaning and fullness of glory”; “an exhortation to sing the very Psalm in which the phrase occurs in view of redemptive history and our personal and corporate experiences of God’s blessings and trials.” I humbly submit that none of these interpretations is expressly taught in holy Scripture or by good and necessary consequence deduced from Scripture. The Author of Scripture declared, “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17); man is not permitted either to take away from it or add to it. The inspired phrase “new song” is perfect exactly as written; its Author expected that it would adequately communicate the divine will to readers in all the diverse cultures of the world without the “clarifications” of human intermediaries.

⁶ There is a reference to such songs in Isa. 38:20, where Hezekiah testifies, “The LORD was ready to save me: therefore we will sing *my songs* to the stringed instruments all the days of our life in the house of the LORD.” Hezekiah expresses his desire that God’s people sing his songs (נְגִינֹת, *neginōt*—plural) “in the house of the LORD,” that is, in the public worship of God. The song in Isa. 38:10–20 is the only writing of Hezekiah in Holy Scripture; the other songs of his to which he refers are not found in the sixty-six books of holy writ and are lost; they were uninspired songs of human composition, not words of Scripture given by inspiration of God (2 Tim. 3:16). But Hezekiah’s expressed desire that God’s people sing his songs in public worship is *part of inspired Scripture*, and he is nowhere rebuked for expressing it. Hezekiah is a godly role-model; “he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father did” (2 Kgs. 18:3).