

A SERIES OF
DIALOGUES ON CHURCH COMMUNION,
IN TWO PARTS,

THE FIRST BEING
A VINDICATION OF SCRIPTURAL CHURCH COMMUNION
IN OPPOSITION TO LATITUDINARIAN SCHEMES.

THE SECOND BEING
A DEFENCE OF THE COMMUNION MAINTAINED
IN THE SECESSION CHURCH.

Can two walk together, except they be agreed.....Amos iii. 3.

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By John Anderson

A Dialogue on Psalmody Between Alexander and Rufus

Alexander and Rufus were both ministers of the Presbyterian denomination; both desired the welfare of the church of Christ; but they had different views of the present state of the church, and of the means which ought to be used for promoting its welfare. Rufus considered it as his duty to warn his hearers against whatever he judged contrary to the Word of God in the public profession and avowed practice of the various denominations of Christians. Alexander, on the contrary, was careful to avoid controversy in his discourses addressed to the people. Satisfied with the declaration of those truths which he reckoned the more important, he seldom stated those which, he knew, were denied by other denominations, among Protestants; and said nothing of the sinfulness or danger of their errors. They lived near one another; and, notwithstanding their different opinions, they often had friendly interviews. One evening, as they took a walk together in the fields, they had the following conversation concerning church communion [which included this exchange on Psalmody].

Alexander: Let us now proceed to the consideration of the third article complained by the Seceders, which is, our singing of hymns of human composure in public worship. Why do the Seceders make such a noise about our singing such compositions as contain nothing but Scripture truth, and tend to animate our devotion?

Rufus: It is easy to state their objections to our practice [of singing hymns] on this head. 1st, they judge, that by this practice, we disregard the authority of God in appointing the Psalms given by the inspiration of his Spirit to be sung in the solemn worship of his

church. By the Psalms, they mean those parts of the Scriptures bearing the titles of Psalms or Songs; particularly, the Book of Psalms. These, the Seceders believe, God appointed to be sung in the solemn worship of his church. Hezekiah and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises to God in the words of David and of Asaph the seer. With regard to the authority by which all the regulations concerning the singing of the Levites were established, we are informed, that it was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets. These songs were delivered by the inspired writers to be sung in the public worship of the church, according to 1 Chron. xvi. 7 and according to the inscriptions of the Psalms.

The authority of the Old Testament (which the Seceders, agreeably to our confession of faith, consider as the same with that of the New) binds us to continue in the practice of singing the Psalms given by Divine inspiration; as being a practice which has never been abrogated. They are much confirmed in this belief by observing, that the multitude and variety of the Scripture songs are such, that the people of God, in all the changes of their condition, have never been at any loss to find some part of these songs exactly adapted to their case, giving them lively impressions of the omniscience and goodness of the Divine Author, in foreseeing each of their cases, and furnishing them with such suitable words of reproof, instruction and consolation. It is true, there are many truths more fully stated and declared in other parts of scripture, than in the Psalms: but these truths are implied, or supposed and proceeded upon in the Psalms; which the Seceders regard as comprising a system of songs and hymns sufficient to answer all the purposes of singing in the solemn and public worship of the church.

Secondly, the Seceders urge, that the singing of human compositions in the solemn and public worship of the church, is not warranted by any precept or example to be found in the Word of God. Hence, they consider those who adhere to this practice, as chargeable with mixing something of human invention with the instituted worship of God. They regard our singing these hymns of human composure, instead of the inspired Psalms, in the same light with Jeroboam's observation of the feast of tabernacles on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, instead of the fifteenth day of the seventh month; the month in which God had appointed it to be observed. In short, they declare, they cannot help looking upon this practice as a superstitious innovation in the worship of the Presbyterian Church, and as one of the causes of God's wrath against this generation.

Thirdly, the Seceders complain, that their grievance on this head has been nothing lessened, but rather increased, by the manner in which the singing of these human composes in public worship has been defended. The advocates for this practice, have advanced such opinions, in defending it, on the defects of the Psalms, and of the whole scriptures of the Old Testament, on the difference between the worship of Jesus Christ under the Old Testament, and under the New; on the warrantableness of instrumental music in New Testament worship, and on other subjects; as appear to be inconsistent with the doctrine taught, according to the Holy Scriptures, in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. The Psalms, which the Holy Spirit indited to promote our devotion, have been represented as damping it; and the words and forms of the Psalms, when translated, have been denied to be any more the Word of God, than the words and

forms of the hymns of human composure; and that it is not necessary, in translating the Scriptures, to preserve the phraseology of the original. The opinion, that some have expressed in defending our new psalmody, namely, that the words of Scripture, even when literally and justly translated, are no more the words of the Holy Spirit than English is Hebrew or Greek, has been shown, I think, to be a Deistical opinion.

Alexander: In the heat of controversy, even sensible men are sometimes carried into extremes. But we have a sufficient warrant for singing in solemn worship such hymns as we ourselves compose, as well as those we find in the book of Psalms, in Col. iii. 16, where the apostle exhorts us to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. The Seceders, from an obstinate attachment to their favorite opinion, dislike this text, as much as the Arians do the 7th verse of the fifth chapter of the 1st epistle of John. The book of Psalms never obtained these various titles, nor was known by them; but, on the contrary, the name of Psalms was appropriated to it. The apostle, by these various names of such different derivation, did not mean that book exclusive of all others, nor indeed any one collection of compositions then extant.

Rufus: We should not say, that the Psalms never obtained these various titles; nor were known by them; since the words psalms, hymns, and songs are an exact translation of the Hebrew titles of the Psalms; since the Greek words, so rendered, are all found in the titles of the Psalms in the Septuagint translation of this book. When Josephus speaks of David's hymns and songs, I suppose every reader understands him as speaking of the Psalms. Indeed, I think it cannot be denied, that there are hymns and spiritual songs in the book of Psalm; and if so, it follows, that we do what the apostle exhorts us to do; that is, we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, when we sing the compositions contained in that Book.

Alexander: But can it be proved, that these are meant exclusively, or that we should sing no other in public and solemn worship?

Rufus: This part of the Holy Scriptures is called by Christ and his apostles *biblos psalmon*, the book of Psalms. From their use of this title we conclude, that the Psalms, not only considered separately, but as forming a collection or system, are of Divine authority. We have indeed other songs in scripture, such as, those of Hezekiah and Habakkuk. Hezekiah concludes his song with these words *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 here expresses his resolution to employ the remainder of his days in celebrating the praises of his Divine Deliverer; but does not say, that his preceding meditation, as here recorded, was to be sung, like the songs in the book of Psalms, in the ordinary public worship of the temple. If this writing of Hezekiah had been designed for that purpose, it would probably have been placed, (as Vitringa on this passage says, he believes, was the case with other songs of Hezekiah) in that book. This song was not necessary, on account of the subject of it, as a supplement to the book of Psalms, as there are several in that book, such as the 38th, the 39th and 90th, on the same subject. So there are several psalms concerning the same illustrious events that are described in the song of Habakkuk, such as the 68th and the 76th. With regard to the

words in this song, which are rendered in our translation, *To the chief musician on my stringed instrument*, it may be observed, that while the word *neginoth* is found in the inscription of the 4th, 6th, 54th, 67th and 76th psalms; but in none of them has it, as here, the pronominal affix rendered *my*; a circumstance which leads us to consider the word *neginoth*, as respecting the personal exercise of the prophet, rather than the joint exercise of the singers in the temple. But though it had been the case, that these and other parts of scripture, bearing the title of songs, were sometimes warrantably sung in solemn and public worship of the church; yet it would not follow, that we may warrantably sing in that worship portions of scripture which bear no such title; and far less does it follow, that we may sing in that worship songs or hymns, which, as such, cannot at all be pretended to be given by Divine inspiration. As it was the prerogative of Jehovah to add to the canon of scripture; so it was his prerogative to add, if it had been necessary, to the system of psalms, which he had given by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit to be sung in the public and solemn worship of his church. But this only serves to show the impious presumption of men's attempts to add to that system.

I can easily see the reason why the Arians abhor the text, you cited, in the first epistle of John, because it expressly asserts, (what these heretics deny) that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are one in respect of their Divine essence or being. But to affirm, that the Seceders as much dislike the other passage you cited in the third chapter of the epistle to the Colossians, because they are against the making of hymns by persons that are uninspired for the purpose of being sung in solemn and public worship, and against the use of them according to such a purpose, is quite unreasonable; while there is nothing in the passage now referred to about hymns or songs of that particular description. If it had been either expressed or necessarily implied in this text, that the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs used in solemn or formal worship were to be of human composure, it would have been formidable to the tenet of the Seceders; but as it is, I think, we must yield the cause to them, unless we can produce some other text, which is more to the purpose.

Alexander: At present, I would rather decline entering largely into the merits of the cause. The contest has been triumphantly managed by the reverend and venerable Messrs. Black and Lata. But it seems absurd to say, that we may not use such songs in our solemn worship, as express our praises of God for the incarnation, obedience, atonement, and resurrection of the Divine Mediator, as events which have already taken place.

Rufus: It is true, we cannot, in this conversation, enter largely into the merits of every particular that comes under our review. What we assign, however, as a reason for our adherence to any side of a question ought to be something that appears satisfactory. But to say that such a cause has been triumphantly managed by two of our ministers, you can hardly suppose will satisfy my mind, especially, when that which has been advanced against them, on the part of the Seceders, remains, to this day, unanswered. With regard to the remark you added, I observe, that the faith of God's people, even under the Old Testament, always rested upon Christ's obedience and atonement, as if they had been already finished; and, as if God's acceptance of them had been already manifested in his resurrection and ascension. Hence these events are celebrated in the Psalms, as if they

had been past events. *They pierced my hands and my feet: they gave me gall for my meat, and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink. Thou hast ascended on high: thou hast led captivity captive. The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner.* Dare we say, that in singing these and the like expressions the people of God do not sing praises to him for Jesus Christ as already crucified and exalted? Dare we deny, that the Holy Spirit, in giving these expressions to be sung in solemn worship, intended that they should be used and applied in praising God for Christ's finished work? On the other hand, if it was the design of the Holy Spirit, that they should be so used and applied, is there no impiety in teaching, that these parts of the Psalms are not well adapted by the infinite wisdom of God to that end?

Alexander: There is one plain simple argument, which satisfies myself with respect to the propriety of singing what the Seceders call human composures in the worship of God. It is this: If we are to use our own words in prayer and preaching, provided they are agreeable to the Word of God, why not in praising also?

Rufus: To this the Seceders have often returned a very plain answer. God hath given us a book or system of Psalms, and hath commanded us to sing them in his worship; but he has nowhere in the scriptures signified, that the duties of prayer and preaching are rightly performed by the mere repetition of a prescribed form of words. It is evident, that we cannot join together in singing the praises of God in his worship, without some prescribed form. We have in our Bible, forms of psalms or songs adapted to every occasion, on which we are called to sing his praise: the question is, which of these forms are we to prefer on such occasions? Those which God hath given by the immediate inspiration of his Holy Spirit, and which he has appointed to be sung in his worship; or human composures, which have no such authority? Which psalmody are we to prefer? That which is certainly from Heaven, or that which we know to be of men? Besides, if we admit this reasoning from the use of our own words in prayer to the use of them in singing, I cannot see, why we should not also admit the reasoning of the advocates for liturgies and set forms of prayer from the use of set forms in singing. There is hardly any church without some established form of psalmody. Amongst ourselves, Dr. Watts' Imitation has obtained a sort of establishment; and why, may not Episcopalians say, should we not have a common form of prayer established among us, as well as a form of psalmody? I know not how we can confute such reasoning without showing the difference between singing and prayer in this respect; without showing, that there is a warrantable use of a set form of words in the one, but not in the other. The words we use in prayer, whether we use the words of scripture or others, expressing sentiments or desires agreeable to the scriptures, must, from the very nature of the exercise, be considered, in their tenor or connexion, as our own words. But the words we sing are often not our words to God, but God's words to us, words of doctrine reproof, direction, or instruction: such as those of the 1st, 37th, 49th, 50th, and other Psalms. It is a pity, that any should be so uncandid as to deny such a plain truth. It is also inconsistent with candour to impute to the Seceders a superstitious attachment to what is called Rouse's Version of the Psalms. They prefer it as the most correct verse-translation in our language. They have reason for this preference from its having undergone the correction both of the Westminster assembly and of the general assembly of the Church of Scotland.

They disapprove the singing of Dr. Watts' Imitation in public and solemn worship, because it is not a version of the Psalms at all. It was never intended to be so by the author, as appears by his preface and the title of the work as published by himself. He accounted much of the matter and the style in general of the Psalms, as they stand in the Old Testament, unsuitable to New Testament worship; and therefore he did not mean to preserve the whole matter of the Psalms, or their style, but to express as much of the matter as he judged suitable to his purpose, not in the language of the Old Testament, that is, in their own language, but in the language of the New Testament. Hence the title of A Version, or An Improved Version, in the editions of that work lately printed, must seem to be an imposition on the public.

Alexander: It has been so common to hear disputants call one another uncandid, that the accusation is now little regarded.

Rufus: It may, however, be sometimes well grounded; as well as some of the charges of injustice which we continually hear people bring against their neighbours in their civil affairs; and is it not even more necessary to distinguish between justice and injustice in controversies about matters of religion, than in those about civil affairs?