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THE PSALMS AND THEIR USE, OR THE MATTER AND MANNER OF PRAISE.

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PERSUADED that the Psalms of the Bible were designed to be permanently and exclusively the matter of God's praise; convinced that they are not used as they might be, and as they should be, by Christians; seeing that the tendency of the times is to depart altogether from the use for which they were specifically intended, and this to the diminution of the glory of God, and the great injury of truth and the souls of men, we submit the following propositions on this subject for the consideration of the thoughtful, intelligent and candid reader:

I. *It is the duty of all men to sing praise to God.* "Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises unto our king, sing praises" (Ps. xlvii. 6). "Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee" (Ps. lxxvii. 3). "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands" (Ps. c. 1). "Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord" (Ps. cl. 6).

II. *In order to praise God, matter of praise must be provided in advance.* Songs of praise cannot be extemporized. The leader of public worship can, to edification, extemporize prayer. This cannot be done by the leader of praises. By necessity, to sing intelligently and in unison, the matter of song must be provided, and must be before each worshiper. Universal practice confirms this position. Nowhere is the attempt made to conduct social and public praise without matter of praise previously provided.

III. *God is certainly the best judge as to what shall constitute the matter of his praise.* This proposition is so self-evident as to need no elaboration. If God has revealed his will in relation to this, and has given matter with which praise is to be sung, we could scarcely conceive greater presumption on the part of the creature than to make matter for his praise. The very thought of doing so should cause trembling.

IV. *God has given a distinct book of praise in the Bible.* It is the "Book of Psalms." This book was evidently a growth. The oldest one in the collection, probably (the 90th), was written by Moses. Through a period of a thousand

years or more, additions continued to be made. By whose hands all were collected into one book we do not know; but we can hardly doubt that the collecting and arranging was done under the divine guidance. At all events, we do know that the book which we now have in our Bibles, entitled the Book of Psalms, was admitted to the canon of Scripture. Our Lord when on earth distinctly recognized it as the "Book of Psalms" (Luke xx. 42). So also his apostle Peter, in his address to the one hundred and twenty disciples at Jerusalem (Acts i. 20). The Septuagint or Greek version of the Old Testament, made in the third century before Christ, contains the Book of Psalms. It was therefore a distinct book of the Hebrew Scriptures before that translation had existence. In view of these facts, no one can fairly doubt that this is the book of Psalms which we have in our Bibles to-day.

V. *This Book of Psalms is inspired.* The fact of its being admitted as a part of the Scriptures, of course, implies its inspiration. Its equal authority with Moses and the prophets is expressly asserted by Christ—"And he said unto them, these are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses and in the Prophets, and in the *Psalms*, concerning me" (Luke xxiv. 44). The divine origin of the book is asserted also in Paul's declaration, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. iii. 16). The Psalms are also specifically referred to the Holy Spirit as their author, in Matt. xxii. 43, Mark xii, 36, and Acts i. 16. This remark, that the Psalms are inspired, is made only in view of the fact that they seem to be so lightly esteemed even by many professing Christians, and also to emphasize their superiority as the matter of God's praise.

VI. *This inspired Book of Psalms was designed to be used in singing the praises of God.* This is evident, (1) from the peculiar names given. The entire collection is called the "Book of *Psalms*." Individual Psalms are called *Psalms*, *songs* or *hymns*. (2) From the peculiar character of the matter. It is emphatically matter for praise. (3) From the use which was originally made of these Psalms by the Church of God—see this specially in the history of David. (4) From the command of God. See in the reformation under Hezekiah, 2 Chron. xxix. 30, "Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord, *in the words of David and of Asaph the seer.*" (5) The Psalms were actually sung, and evidently with divine approval, in the services of the temple, and the worshiping assemblies of God's people. See 2 Chron. xv. 13, 14, and elsewhere. (6) The Jews were familiar with the Psalms as matter of praise. Christ and his apostles sang from these (as is almost universally admitted) at the conclusion of the Passover and the Lord's Supper, the same night in which he was betrayed. When Paul and Silas sang praise at midnight in the jail at Philippi, it can hardly be doubted that they sang from the Psalms. Their familiarity with them enabled them to sing without light or books. (7) We are exhorted by the Apostle Paul, Eph. v. 19, and Col. iii. 16, to sing praise to the Lord in "*Psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs.*" Whatever question has been raised about the meaning of the terms "*hymns and spiritual songs,*" it may be said that none has been raised in relation to the

term "Psalms." It is conceded, that this term refers to the Psalms of the Bible. This settles the question of authority for their use. (8) The admissions of those who have used hymns of human composition in the worship of God. Prof. J. A. Alexander says, in his Preface to his Commentary, "They (the Psalms) are not only poetical, but lyrical, *i. e.*, songs, poems, *intended to be sung.*" Again he says, they were "*intended to be permanently used in the worship of God,* not excepting those which bear the clearest impress of original connection with the social, domestic, or personal relations and experience of the writers." The Rev. Albert Barnes, in his Preface to his Commentary on the Psalms, says, "They (the Psalms) are adapted to the worship of God. For this many of them were originally designed in their very composition, to this *the entire* book seems to have been intentionally adapted by those who made the collection." Again, he says that the Psalms were designed "*to be sung, not read.*"—the italics are his. It is needless to quote the judgment of others. There can be no doubt in the mind of candid persons, that the Psalms of the Bible were intended to be and authorized to be used as the matter of God's praise.

VII. *The authority thus to use the Book of Psalms has never been withdrawn.* No one who admits that the Psalms of the Bible were divinely authorized as the matter of God's praise, claims that the authority has been annulled. For whatever end they were given to the church, they continue to be given for the same.

VIII. *Divine authority must be shown for the introduction of any other songs to the worship of God.* God is a jealous God. He has shown his jealousy specially with respect to his worship, the matter and the manner of it. He has indicated in his word that he would have his people to be very watchful in relation to this. The divine appointment is to be their rule. It is sound scriptural doctrine that they are to receive, observe, and keep pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath *appointed* in his word. It is unsound, unscriptural doctrine, which teaches that God may be worshiped in any way *not appointed* in his word. The Calvinistic Church, at least, teaches that the principle that what is not forbidden may be introduced to the worship of God, is not a sound principle. She has insisted on that which is positive,—that there must be divine authority, commandment, a *Thus saith the Lord*, for what she does.

IX. *No authority has been given to make or sing in the praise of God other songs besides those contained in the Bible.* Such authority has been claimed, and the present practice of the large majority of professing Christians in the world would seem to indicate that there must be some good ground on which to base the claim. In this intentionally brief article, we cannot even note all the considerations that have been advanced in favor of using hymns of human composition in the worship of God. Most of these are of little moment, and do not at all touch the vital question of authority. In these late days that question is rarely referred to. The *right* to make and use hymns in worshiping God is *assumed*. When the question of authority is introduced, the reference

is to Eph. v. 19, and the parallel passage in Col. iii. 16. It may be safely said (hymn-singers themselves being judges) that if there be not authority in these two texts of Scripture, for making and singing hymns in God's worship, the authority is not in the Bible. We therefore quote the passages, and consider them. In Eph. v. 18, 19, Paul says: "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." The parallel passage in Col. iii. 16 is, "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."

That these passages do not authorize the making and singing of hymns in the worship of God, seems to us to be clear from such considerations as these: (1) The word "Psalms," refers to the psalms of the Bible. This is so generally admitted by commentators that it may be regarded as a point settled. (2) The presumption is therefore that the terms "hymns" and "spiritual songs" likewise refer to the Scripture psalms. It can hardly be believed that the Apostle would link compositions of men with those of the Spirit of God; put them on the same level; assign to them the same use as matter of God's praise, and give to them the same efficiency in filling believers with the Spirit, and equal virtue as matter with which believers are to exhort one another. All this we must believe he has done, if "psalms" means the psalms of the Bible, and "hymns and spiritual songs" mean the uninspired compositions of men. (3) The three terms used by the apostle, have corresponding terms in the Hebrew psalter—psalms, hymns, songs. Those to whom the Apostle was writing were familiar with these in the Greek version of the Scriptures. They would readily understand him as referring to these. (4) The very Greek words which he employs are in the titles to the psalms in the Septuagint or Greek version. Paul and those to whom he wrote, no doubt, familiarly used this version. It is, therefore, morally certain that he referred to the scripture psalms. (5) The word "spiritual" qualifying "songs," is properly that which is produced by the Spirit. So Dr. Hodge regards it in every instance in which it occurs in the books of the New Testament on which he has commented, except in *this single instance*. Mr. Barnes might be referred to as sustaining the same view. (6) The apostle is urging the right use of the "Word of Christ"—that is, the Bible. Hymns and songs made by men are not the word of Christ. (7) If the reference in "hymns and spiritual songs," be to the compositions of men, then the apostle enjoins Christians without exception to *make* as well as *sing* these—an injunction with which the vast majority of Christians could not possibly comply. (8) It is inconceivable that the apostle would make it the imperative duty of the members of the Church at Ephesus and Colosse to *make* hymns with which to praise God. The most of them were just out of heathenism. What a hopeless task would our missionaries now assign their new converts, if they would impose on them the making of hymns of praise! (9) If a work so important as making songs with which to praise God, has been assigned to the Church, it is amazing that no promise of the aid

of the Spirit has been given for this end. We have the promise of help in prayer; but we have no promise of assistance in making hymns. (10) If the Church was commanded to make and sing her hymns, it is unaccountable that we have no record of an early attempt on her part to fulfil this obligation. Certainly no serious effort was made in the days of the apostles, or for a length of time after them. No hymns of those days have come down to us. Mr. Barnes candidly admits this. The oldest Christian hymn known to be in existence was written some two hundred years after Christ. In view of all these considerations, we submit that there is not authority in these passages of Scripture for making and singing hymns in the worship of God. The great God whom we worship has given us hymns in his Word with which to praise him. He has not authorized uninspired men to make others. In the whole history of the Church given us in the Bible, there is no evidence that God was ever praised with an uninspired hymn. It is not his will that he should be so praised.

X. *The psalms of the Bible are all-sufficient as the matter of God's praise.* (1) If the object be to praise God, what psalms are equal to these? Praise is their grand characteristic. The volume of song swells from the beginning, grows like the work of redemption itself, and ends in a grand hallelujah of earth and heaven. (2) If the object be to edify the church in connection with singing God's praise, what psalms can be compared with the Bible Psalms for this end? As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are these Psalms above any ever made, or that ever can be made, by man. So the best men of all ages, when not engaged in argument on the subject, have judged. Luther and Calvin may be taken as expressing the pious judgment of the church, in relation to this matter. Said Luther, "Where do we find a sweeter voice of joy than in the Psalms of thanksgiving? There you look into the heart of the holy, as into a beautiful garden—as into heaven itself. What delicate, fragrant and lovely flowers are there, springing up of all manner of beautiful, joyous thoughts toward God and his goodness! On the other hand, where do you find more profound, mournful, pathetic expressions of sorrow than the plaintive Psalms contain? There again, you look into the heart of all the holy, but as into death, nay, as into the very pit of despair." Calvin said, "I have been accustomed to call this book, not inappropriately, an anatomy of all the parts of the soul, for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious, that is not there represented as in a mirror." Again, we ask, what songs can be compared with the songs of the Bible for edifying the church? The Psalms are all-sufficient as the matter of praise. For the great purposes for which they were intended, they are quite as well adapted to this dispensation as to the former. They are the hymns for all ages, the only *union* hymns in existence.

XI. *The position occupied by the United Presbyterian Church, in regard to the matter of praise, is right.* In the XVIIIth Article of her Testimony, she says, "We declare, that it is the will of God, that the songs contained in the book of Psalms be sung in his worship, both public and private, to the end of the world; and in singing God's praise these songs should be employed, to the

exclusion of the devotional compositions of uninspired men." In view of the considerations presented above, we believe that the truth contained in the declaration of this Article of the Testimony cannot be successfully controverted.

XII. *The best possible use should be made of the Psalms.* Not only should the Church sing them exclusively in the praise of God: but she should also put them in the best possible metrical dress, and sing them with enthusiastic devotion. She should sing them more than she has been wont do in her sanctuaries and meetings for prayer. They should be used more in praising God, and more in edifying the church. None are like them. Let them be used, not as if made by man, but as becometh this God-given matter of praise!