

# Predominant Psalmody – FAQ

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A number of friends & acquaintances have read my piece [here](#) recommending NOT exclusive psalmody (EP) but predominant psalmody (PP) in formal Christian worship. In it I proposed:

- *that Psalm singing ought to dominate the public worship of God,*
- *that only those other ‘songs’ essentially found within Scripture or plainly based upon a Scripture passage may supplement Psalm singing & consequently,*
- *traditional hymn singing generally & contemporary so called ‘worship songs’ ought to be rejected within Christian Church services, being unsanctioned by the Divine will.*

The following represent my considered and PROVISIONAL answers to their questions. I do not pretend to have arrived at necessarily a final, settled mind. I hope that on this topic, as with any subject, I might yet be open to duly warranted argumentation & careful exegesis, etc.

1. ***You seem to be advocating Exclusive Psalmody (EP). Are you?***

Some, having read my piece, suppose I am advocating Exclusive Psalmody (EP). I am not. It appears to me that what God sanctions is the singing of Scripture – i.e. paraphrases of Scripture that naturally lend themselves to formal songs/hymns. That God has supplied in His word a compendium of ‘spiritual songs’ implies – especially to convinced covenant theologians – that such songs ought to feature ‘predominantly’ in what we sing. Calvin (apparently) sanctioned the singing of the Ten Commandments & the Lord’s Prayer in Geneva along with the Psalter. He seems thus to have much the same mindset as myself.

2. ***There were inspired songs before the Psalter (eg after the Exodus) and afterwards (eg Mary’s song). Are such songs sanctioned?***

Yes, see bullet point two above and my clarification re EP in Q1.

3. ***Famously Paul talks about Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs. I’m aware that the EP proponent holds that Paul is talking about three different categories of Psalm. But you have to assume that in order to prove it. He uses three different (greek) words, each of which crop up in (the greek translation of) the Hebrew Psalter. But where does the Bible say that those words only refer to the Psalms? ....So why should we assume Paul only has the 150 Psalms in mind in Colossians 3.16 just because he uses three words found there?***

Once more, I’m NOT advocating EP – but was impressed by the argument they use to advocate psalm singing. One has to ask, ‘What did the original audience understand by the terminology used by the apostle?’ The very presence of the Book of Psalms in the Christian Bible together with NT references to the psalms being sung by the NT Church plainly warrants their use. Just as Calvin (& others) allowed for supplementary songs utilising paraphrases of various other passages so would I.

4. ***What different words could he have used if he didn’t have the Psalms in mind?***

This is an odd question. We assume St Paul meant X but utilised vocabulary signifying Y. The question overlooks the various ‘sentinels’ found throughout Scripture from which reformed believers deduce the Regulative Principle. So loud and clear is the caution against going beyond what God has plainly sanctioned, the question becomes almost impertinent.

5. ***A number of the Psalms have no superscription, or are labelled as something other than Psalm/Hymn/Spiritual song. Should we not sing those?***

No, I think we probably should. They have found their way into the Bible’s Book of Praises; that’s their context. Context is of paramount importance when determining the signification of

something. One could just as easily argue that some NT references to psalms being sung (e.g. James 5:13) appear to be 'generic'.

**6. *If we are aiming to sing Sola Scriptura then any kind of Scripture paraphrase is surely out. Would it not be more honest to call your personal site a 'Psalter Paraphrase' rather than a Psalter?***

I don't think so; and I sincerely hope I'm not being dishonest. Songs are not the same as technical prose. Typically songs employ a form of words that is designed to convey a certain meaning utilising turns of phrases that may well be poetic, parabolic, metaphorical, allegorical, etc. Moreover, they are designed to be sung. As such they are more easily memorised & afterwards rehearsed – especially if they are metrical & if possible/desirable rhyming. Thus a certain latitude is allowable if this procedure is to be followed. Interestingly, comparing the (Greek) Septuagint's translation (acceptable enough to NT authors!) of the original Hebrew, it becomes apparent that it is the meaning that is key, not the original sounds & syllables in their original language. This is why it is acceptable & desirable to have new versions of the Psalms to sing – and why we should have Bibles in our own native tongue. Language may well become archaic & the meaning consequently obscured. St Paul's maxim is worthy of repetition: 'Therefore I will sing with my spirit & sing with my understanding'. (1Cor 14:15).

**7. *Have you not broken the RP already by putting Psalms into your own words, (i) with your own interpretation, (ii) with little reference to the underlying Hebrew text, and (iii) with little or no external review, and then calling it a Psalter ready for use by the wider church? (iv) Or does it automatically carry divine authority simply because it's based on the Psalms?***

(i) My interpretation of each psalm may well be faulty. I concede as much on the web-site. I welcome suggestions & alterations, etc. That I have attempted to find poetic/metrical paraphrases which yet convey accurately the objective meaning in the Biblical text is for third party users to decide for themselves. God knows my heart & my desire to be duly systematic in my comprehension of the whole Biblical narrative & then to allow that 'Big Picture' to constrain the meaning I seek to assign. That anyone should succeed perfectly when faced with such a task is, I reckon, doubtful. That I have tried to do such a thing is, I believe, honourable & praiseworthy.

(ii) Again, if I have missed nuances evident in the underlying Hebrew text let me know. I readily concede I'm no scholar & have no working knowledge of Hebrew. As I point out on the site, my goal was to produce a contemporary version of the Psalter which duly recognised the holistic nature of the gospel of the kingdom – i.e. something much broader & greater than what is commonly rehearsed in contemporary hymns & songs, etc.

(iii) No external review? I explicitly invite criticism & review. At the foot of the homepage I write: "*P.S. Please use the Psalter as you see fit. Do let me know of ways I might improve it!*"

(iv) As I've stated above, I reckon this sort of endeavour – i.e. creating (metrical/memorable/tuneful) songs is NEVER going to be perfect. I reckon God welcomes our efforts. A few times in the Psalms the invitation goes out, 'Sing a new song to the Lord' (e.g. 96:1, 98:1, 40:3, 104:1)

**8. *Since God allows us to use our own words in prayer, and even requires us to use our own words in preaching, the pattern follows that he allows us to use our own words in singing. We would expect a very clear guidance in Scripture if this were not the case. It might be argued that prayer and praise are different components of public worship. In one formal sense, they certainly are. But it is much less clear cut than that; we***

***surely are praying when we sing, aren't we? We are praising when we pray, aren't we?***

What is required here is for me to demonstrate that the categories of formal praise, formal prayer & preaching are distinct. As the question here suggests, I would say they are different components of public worship. You say it's less clear cut, etc. You say "surely we are praying when we sing". I answer, not necessarily. Here's two quick examples: Ps 1; Ps 2. (I thought I'd start at the beginning and skim forwards through the psalms. I didn't get very far!) You say, "we're praising when we pray, aren't we?" I answer, not necessarily. I recall learning years ago a simple acrostic drawn I think from Scriptural prayers I think. It identified four elements via 'ACTS of prayer' – Adoration; Confession; Thanksgiving & Supplication. Adoration seems to most naturally represent the praise component. I might add then, that I am most appreciative of that prayer of adoration, prayed publically, which draws distinctly from Scriptural references – i.e. employs Scriptural turns of phrase.

Prayer, it seems to me, is that necessary exercise we undertake that demonstrates the reality of covenant relationship we enjoy with our Maker/Redeemer, etc. As covenant creatures we are persons made in the image of our Maker. He is a PERSONAL communicator & so we exhibit that same attribute via personal communication made to Him in prayer (& to one another). Praise highlights the transcendence of God & His place over us/all His creatures (i.e. hierarchy). Of course, all the elements of 'covenant' are to be included: Transcendence, Hierarchy, Ethical obligations (Laws), Oaths (sanctions) & Succession (inheritance). It wouldn't be hard to show that these elements pervade the Psalter! It is my concern that these elements have been lost, overlooked or else distorted over the course of time by uninspired hymn writers, etc. The best way to safe-guard the full-orbed gospel of the kingdom (far deeper & broader than the acquisition of my 'ticket to heaven') is to formulate songs/hymns around Scriptural passages. And of course, the backbone of our 'stomping ground' ought to be that portion of Scripture God has provided us with for our song compositions. What is crucial in acceptable praise is that we sing what is true about God & His great work of redemption, etc. The provision of the Psalms (songs of God's own composition) within the context of the whole of Scripture ought therefore to be the staple of what we use.

Returning then to your opening assertion, "*Since God allows us to use our own words in prayer, and even requires us to use our own words in preaching, the pattern follows that he allows us to use our own words in singing.*" I would say, 'No, it doesn't follow'. Since prayer praise & preaching are distinct elements in formal worship the rules & protocols that constrain their exercise might reasonably be expected to be different. The fallacy appears to be one of 'false analogy'.

**9. *Historically, the writing of new songs has been associated with the progress of the gospel.***

I'm all for new songs! As with the drag-net & the parable of the field however, there will generally be some good fish & some bad fish, some wheat & some tares. I merely venture to identify the criteria we ought to apply to differentiate between them.

**10. *Why did Martin Luther write so many songs at the time of the reformation?***

Luther wrote, "*The human heart is like a ship on a stormy sea driven about by winds blowing from all four corners of heaven. The Book of Psalms is full of heartfelt utterances made during storms of this kind. Where can one find nobler words to express joy than in the Psalms of praise or gratitude? In them you can see into the hearts of saints as if you were looking at a lovely pleasure-garden, or were gazing into heaven. How fair and charming and delightful and the flowers you will find there... It is therefore easy to understand why the Book of Psalms is the favourite book of all the saints. For every man on every occasion can find in*

*it Psalms which fit his needs, which he feels to be as appropriate as if they had been set there just for his sake. In no other book can he find words to equal them, nor better words... Place the Book of Psalms in front of you; you will see your own self in it, for here is the true "know thyself," by which you can know yourself as well as the God who created all things."*

A brief enquiry into Luther's actual practice seems to indicate that he yet recommended 'predominant psalmody' – i.e. my own position. As with Calvin, Luther allowed for supplementary hymns/songs drawn from Scripture (e.g. Lord's Prayer & Ten Commandments). He may well have composed other 'thematic songs/hymns' but the extent to which these were used in formal worship is unclear. There are many fine uninspired songs & hymns that I will sing informally.

#### **11. *Why did Watts or Wesley write (hymns) so voluminously?***

Doubtless because they felt motivated to do so. But 'good intentions can be evil'. At this point however, I wish to underscore the point just made above: namely, there is a difference between what we legitimately sing informally (either individually or collectively) and what we are permitted (by RPW) to sing as part of formal worship. This difference is significant. Many complain that the transition from one to the other (informal to formal) is at times apparently arbitrary. I maintain that for the self-aware Christian the transition is generally undertaken consciously and with due deliberation. Beyond this I'd rather not be pressed however!

I do not know whether many great 'evangelical' legacy hymns were written necessarily for congregational worship. I concede that they certainly came to be used that way. But the whole point of my recommendation for a return to 'predominant psalmody' was to address the doubtful hegemony that that tradition, well-intentioned I've no doubt, brought upon the more comprehensive advancement of God's kingdom.

Nancy Pearcey in her treatise 'Total Truth' (see [here](#)) courageously dares to identify the honourable work of 18<sup>th</sup> century evangelists such as Whitfield & Wesley as a possible occasion in which the full-orbed gospel of the kingdom began to be diluted until it became increasingly a gospel of personal salvation - which those of us keen to recover the more holistic, all-embracing gospel of the kingdom term 'pietism'.

#### **12. *Why is it a common occurrence on the mission field for new converts from tribal peoples to want to write songs of praise to Jesus?***

Probably because Scripture itself warrants it & the Holy Spirit moving in their hearts stirs them to do so. As rehearsed already, I'm advocating intelligible singing that is both culturally comprehensible & Biblical. Nothing more. New converts are hardly likely to suddenly get it all right. Sanctification is a life-long process. Principled missionaries ought to seek to impress upon their new zealots the principles God's Law so that they might self-consciously live out their lives to the glory of God.

#### **13. *Scripture itself commands us – particularly in the Psalms – to 'sing a new song to the LORD' (see e.g., Psalm 96.1, 98.1, 149.1, 33.3, 144.9, Isaiah 42.10). Applying the RP here seems pretty clear to me. God authorises and desires his people to keep writing new songs, since he is endlessly worthy of praise.***

I agree. See Q7 (iv). I venture to believe that the new songs we compose ought to be constrained by protocols & limitations set by God

#### **14. *The tone of the NT is that, in the full revelation of Jesus in the gospel, 'something greater is here'. The revelation in the OT – including the Psalter – is true, glorious, and***

***no less spiritual. But the revelation of Jesus, the lamb who was slain, is the clear fulfilment of all that was anticipated, and the clear revealing of all that was concealed. How can we not explicitly praise the name of Jesus in song – when it is at the name of Jesus that every knee will bow, when it was Jesus of Nazareth who appeared in glory on the mount to Peter, James and John, and to Saul on the Damascus road, and when it is Jesus the Son of Man who is loved by the Father and has received all authority from him? For sure, the Psalter anticipates and foretells ‘the Christ’. But why does that mean we can’t praise this foretold Christ as Jesus who is now incarnate, has died and been risen, and reigns forevermore, etc (cf 1 Peter 1.10-12)? For sure, the triune nature of God is implicit in the Psalms; but does that mean we can’t joyfully praise him as Father, Son and Spirit according to the rich Trinitarian texts the NT gives us? For sure, the Psalms are rich with covenantal language, but does this mean we can’t sing the blessings of union with Christ according to the fuller light of the NT? David and the prophets longed to see our day (Matthew 13.17, Luke 10.24). This Biblical-theological escalation must surely be reflected in our praise.***

We can! My own version of the Psalter includes specific reference to Christ, His redemptive work & the Trinity as laid bare in the NT. Here’s a few examples:

*Saints cosmopolitan drawn into Zion,  
Struck by magnificence of rampart and wall,  
Shall humbly fortify each new generation,  
Boldly affirming Christ’s reign over all! (From Ps 48)*

*O Father, we are defeated,  
Your hand has cast us down;  
The earth You made is trembling,  
Disquieted by Your frown.  
Your people, bruised and shaken,  
Beneath confusion drown.*

*Who’ll capture for us the city,  
Who’ll rescue Edom too?  
Our God who us abandoned  
And from us His hand withdrew!  
The help of man is futile,  
But Christ will lead us through. (From Ps 60)*

*O Christ, we’ll magnify and praise for endless days  
The sacrifice by which you paid the solemn priestly-price of all our  
Foolishness and pride when we were gone astray;  
Let all the world – each sheep within its fold –  
Express the manifold perfections of Your way. (From Ps 145)*

- 15. *I would be happy in any type of church to make extensive use of the psalms both directly and with songs based on them. But 'dominate' is too strong a word as it allows insufficient room for individual creativity under present day direction of the Holy Spirit.***

Our happiness with a practice is inconsequential. The RPW, derived I reckon with due warrant from Scripture, requires that we worship God in line with His own directives. How are we to judge whether individual creativity is ‘spiritual’? By composing sympathetically with what God has graciously provided us – a Book of Praises within the context of the whole of Scripture. We perceive the ‘direction of the Holy Spirit’ as we apprehend the care taken by

the song/hymn writer to work within the limits that God has set.

16. ***I would accept that Scripture should be the basis of anything we sing. I would certainly be unhappy if someone suggested singing a song that portrayed an unscriptural position. But very little of the New Testament is in song or poetic format, so to limit ourselves only to those songs that feature in the New Testament would be unnecessarily restrictive.***

I need to qualify what I originally wrote. To clarify then, I would be happy to sing as a minor supplement to the Psalms a song derived plainly from a Scriptural passage. My own version of Ecclesiastes 3 might serve to illustrate. See [here](#).

17. ***In Ephesians 5 v 19 and Colossians 3 v 16 Paul encourages us to use "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" in worship. I know you quoted Brian Schwertley as saying that these are descriptions of 3 types of Psalms from the 150 included in Scripture. However I have consulted several commentaries and it appears that Paul could have meant that, but he could also have meant what the words appear to mean to us at first glance, or he could even have meant 3 different types of Christian-penned song. At the very least the meaning is ambiguous and it is always unwise to be dogmatic when the words of Scripture are themselves not 100% clear.***

I applaud the hermeneutical principle of avoiding the attachment of undue significance to obscure verses, etc. However, my principal justification for singing Psalms in formal worship springs from the conviction that we are to worship God as He has ordained, etc. This is again basic RPW exposition. It may be more implicit than explicit but a moment's reflection ought to strike any fair-minded enquirer that God has supplied us with a Book of Praises to furnish our worship. As Schwertley says, that Book is most likely what the readers of Paul's letters (Ephesians & Colossians) would have connoted when hearing his words.

18. ***CALVIN "We shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him" I basically agree with that but it is a long way from there to saying that the Psalms should dominate and/or other types of hymns or spiritual songs should be left out. After all, there is nothing to say that the Holy Spirit may not inspire other writers after New Testament times***

Once again, there is an implicit denial of RPW in this question. We believe in the sufficiency of Scripture as well as its infallibility. As a scientist I am unwilling to entertain interpretations of evidence (rocks, star-light, etc) that suggest a cosmic history older than that history that God has revealed to me in Scripture. Similarly, I am unwilling to entertain the prospect of newly inspired songs/hymns adding or augmenting my understanding of God & redemption beyond what God has provided me with in His word.

19. ***The Heidelberg Catechism asks "What does God require in the second commandment?" The answer given is: "That we in no wise make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has commanded." The answer given would appear to be adding to Scripture, as the underlined words do not appear in either the Exodus or Deuteronomy version of the 10 commandments. The second commandment gives no instructions as to HOW we should worship, only WHO we should worship (and WHAT we should not worship)***

Once again, this question represents a denial of RPW. I can only disagree. I think there is an IMPLICIT expectation upon us that we worship God according to the way in which He has ordained. One could employ that same 'literalistic' hermeneutic that you seem to be here

advocating in Luke 10:37. That would duly limit Jesus' followers from exercising mercy TOWARDS SAMARITANS but not necessarily to folk in general. No, it is the 'equity' of God's law that we must embrace, not merely the literal particulars.

20. ***"To worship God truly, is to worship him in the manner which he himself has prescribed." I can't argue with that statement. But has God prescribed that we must worship him only by singing the Psalms of David? I do not see that command anywhere in the Bible. The clearest prescription I can find of how to worship is in John 4 v 23-24: "The true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth"***

Again, the RPW is a principle of worship drawn from a holistic & systematic approach to the totality of Scripture. It is perhaps an inference that we draw rather than something standing out for which there is a clear single 'proof-text'. In that regard, it is not unlike the doctrine of the Trinity.

21. ***"If a worship practice can be shown to have apostolic sanction or approval, then that worship practice has the same normative force as it would have if it came in the form of a direct commandment. Or, to say the same thing in a different way, if we find that a certain practice had apostolic sanction then that is sufficient proof that the practice is something the Lord has commanded".***  
***I honestly cannot accept the conclusions of this paragraph. If a certain practice had apostolic sanction then that may be proof that the Lord has permitted it but not proof that he has commanded it. Therefore the argument that Williamson later puts forward, that the method of worship is part of the Great Commission as something Jesus has commanded, is not valid.***

The proper worship of God is obviously something of immense importance. Are we to suppose that God has left us in the dark concerning how it is to be undertaken? I think not. The great text of 2Tim 3:16,17 stands as an assurance to us, His people, that IN THE SCRIPTURES we will find ALL the necessary principles & precepts to guide us safely in the fulfilment of our Christian duties. Worship is plainly a good work and a high Christian duty. This text....

*(All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.)*

... tells us that we shall, BY careful exegesis of the entire Scriptures, be thoroughly equipped to execute worship in Spirit & in Truth. That at the very heart of Scripture, the Book of Psalms stands there as exemplary song verses, that such singing was practiced throughout time, across both testamental epochs, that it was the predominant practice of the early Church & was recognised & practiced by the Reformed & Puritan churches during the zenith of God's great 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century awakening collectively serves to persuade this poor saint that it is what God principally requires of us.

*Steve Layfield – Summer 2017*