

# Exclusive Psalmody

*Why We Reject this Reformed Extreme to Sing Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs*

*Exclusive Psalmody* of a few Reformed churches restricts congregational worship to the singing of the psalms by David, Asaph, and others in the Bible's book of Psalms.

But we also sing other hymns and songs in worship, though limiting them to reverent and sober content with doctrinal depth and with appropriate musical composition.

The issue of accompaniment by musical instruments is another matter, though we do reject musical instruments for Biblical reasons in our public worship (see below).

Note: The goal here is to be short and simple, though all the points could be more fully developed.

## **Reason #1: The Bible teaches three types of songs for N.T. church use.**

*“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:19).*

*“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” (Col 3:16).*

We understand and practice these three types of odes or songs for singing this way:

**Psalms.** The inspired poems written by David, Asaph, and others in the Bible book of Psalms.

**Hymns.** Songs of reverent praise to directly worship God, often in the second person to Him.

**Spiritual songs.** Other less formal religious songs teaching Bible truth about the Christian faith.

We use three songbooks to assist this distinction. We use the Scottish Psalter of 1650 for singing the Bible's Psalms; we use the Trinity Hymnal of the Presbyterians for its many hymns of praise to God; we use the Old School Hymnal of the Primitive Baptists for its many spiritual songs about the Christian faith and the Christian life.

We deny the EP presumption that Paul’s three categories intend only the book of Psalms, for (1) such a distinction is not found elsewhere in the Bible for Psalms, (2) would be redundantly valueless, (3) would mock the modifying adjective *spiritual*, (4) would require knowledge of uninspired Jewish scribal notations, and (5) would create confusion with James’ exhortation to sing psalms when merry.

Psalms are marked by uninspired scribal titles and introductions in the Bible as a *psalm* (Psalm 3 for example), as a *song* (Psalm 45), as a *psalm and song* (Psalm 30), as a *song and psalm* (Psalm 48), as a *psalm or song* (Psalm 67), and as a *song or psalm* (Psalm 66). There is little to no strict demarcation. Matthew Poole wrote that the words are used promiscuously. The English word *hymn* is not used in Psalms.

The Bible uses *hymn* four times – the two times above and twice for what Jesus our Lord and the apostles sang at the Last Supper (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26).

The N.T. refers to *psalms* in seven other places, but never adds hymns or songs alongside them (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33,35; I Cor 14:26; James 5:13).

**Reason #2: Other inspired songs and hymns are in the Bible but not in Psalms.**

The exclusive crowd rejects other inspired songs in the Bible that certainly fulfill the definition of *hymn* or *spiritual song* like these examples:

Song of Moses or Miriam (Ex 15:1-21)	Song of Judah of trust in God (Isaiah 26:1-21)
Song of Israel about water (Num 21:17-20)	Song of Habakkuk of judgment (Hab 3:1-19)
Song of Moses to Israel (Deut 32:1-44)	Song of the Redeemed in heaven (Rev 5:9-10)
Song of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5:1-31)	Song of Moses and the Lamb (Rev 15:3-4)
Song of Solomon in its entirety	More in Isaiah e.g. 12:1-6; 25:1-12; 27:1-13
Song about Israel as vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7)	

Their absolute and redundant interpretation of Paul restricting singing to *psalms*, *psalms*, and *psalms* leaves out other inspired, glorious *hymns* and *spiritual songs*.

Paul’s use of *hymns* and *spiritual songs* can only reject inspired songs of Moses, Solomon, Isaiah, and others by superstition about uninspired Jewish scribal notations or other manmade tradition. Let us not reject inspired songs for ordinary worship.

**Reason #3: Exclusive psalmody rejects singing the name of Jesus or many other glorious aspects of the unsearchable riches of God's grace in our salvation.**

We are far more blessed than David to know details and doctrine of God's Son, salvation, and spiritual truth. As a prophet, he only saw obscurely (I Pet 1:10-12). We know details of our Lord's life and the details of salvation far beyond David.

We are to sing with the word of Christ dwelling in us richly (Col 3:16). We are to sing with grace in our hearts to the Lord (Col 3:16). Christians exceed David in both, but they must revert in singing worship to David's ignorance if limited to his psalms.

The Psalms say to sing a new song (Ps 96:1), and never were God's people more convicted and passionate to sing a new song than New Testament Christians should be after learning the great mystery of godliness (I Tim 3:15-16; Is 42:10; Rev 5:9).

How can the EP advocates glory in Jesus Christ's cross like Paul did (I Cor 2:1-5; Gal 6:14), if they are limited to one psalm of David that refers to His cross (Ps 22)?

New Testament Christians should not limit the content of their singing worship to Old Testament shadows and types, which are inferior in every respect and passed away. Where is the reformation of this aspect of worship (Heb 9:10; John 4:20-24)?

**Reason #4: Singing only Psalms keeps a Jewish yoke of bondage on Gentiles.**

The two inspired directives by Paul for church singing in N.T. churches were written to Gentile churches at Ephesus and Colosse. They had less knowledge of or loyalty to Jewish scribal notations for Psalms than they did Moses' rules for circumcision.

As apostle to the Gentiles and lead reformer in the true reformation (Heb 9:10), Paul's instructions for worship should be viewed independent of Jewish practice and tradition, other than when he makes direct appeal to the Old Testament.

If this retention of O.T. practice or tradition, even if that can be proven, is still a mandate for N.T. Gentile churches, why no mention of it at the council of Jerusalem? The Spirit there had few rules for Gentiles churches, and several of them temporary.

The word *new* for the new covenant or new testament in Jesus Christ means that the old way of worship passed away (Heb 8:13). Christians see everything in a new light, just like their new apostolic scriptures, and their singing should surely reflect it.

**Reason #5: Singing by a psalter, no matter how well done, is not singing the Psalms as they were given by the inspiration of God.**

Exclusive Psalmody in part assumes only inspired content is good enough for the regulative principle and covenant worship in the N.T. Yet their psalters change the words, contrary to Proverbs 30:5-6 and John 10:35, and they also change the order of the words, meaning they are not scripture in content, but only scriptural in content.

In addition, elements of Hebrew rhyme and rhythm and other unique features to the language and people are lost (consider the organization by Hebrew letters of Psalm 119). Thus, they have the need to alter the words and use common meter cadence and tunes never imagined by David or Asaph. Such is hardly Psalm singing.

Uninspired *hymns* and *spiritual songs* of the Christian faith are also not scripture in content, but they are certainly scriptural in content, and often more so than inspired Psalms themselves, for they glorify God and Jesus Christ by better N.T. revelation.

**Reason #6: Limiting *hymns* and *spiritual songs* to Psalms is language games.**

There is no exclusive psalmody argument in English, because there is no use of the word *hymn* in the book of Psalms (or the word *spiritual* for that matter, which precludes Paul's use of *song* from applying to any of Psalms' songs).

The only way to justify making Paul foolishly redundant with *psalms*, *psalms*, and *psalms* is to play games in Hebrew or Greek (Septuagint), and those games with the uninspired notations in introductions, so most commentators reject this approach.

The use of such a generic word as *song* in the introductions or titles of the Psalms or even in the content of the Psalms is proof of nothing, for there are many more songs in the Bible, even inspired ones, than just those in the book of Psalms.

**Reason #7: Using scribal notes for Psalms is inconsistent without instruments.**

EP advocates use the introductions to psalms (the scribal notations attached to some of them) to argue that Paul intended three different kinds of psalms with his *psalms*, *hymns*, and *spiritual songs*. They argue this by the introductions in the Septuagint.

They argue from these scribal notations that the distinction between psalms and odes (songs) is by the noted instrumentation for one or the other, because this is the only or principal difference between the two classifications indicated by the scribal notes.

But consider that most or all EP churches reject instruments and sing acapella. They deny the Jewish instrumental argument for EP in their actual church practice by rejecting any instruments in worship, singing these instrumental psalms acapella.

**Reason #8: The modifying adjective *spiritual* denies David's inspired Psalms.**

Why would the Holy Spirit modify the word *song* with *spiritual*, especially if *song* is exclusively the word in the title and introduction of certain of David's psalms, since He had inspired all of them for the highest spiritual content possible?

It is obvious to basic thinking that *spiritual* as a modifier is to reject any carnal, light, or worldly songs in God's worship e.g. *Happy Birthday*, or, *The Star-Spangled Banner*, etc. The limit by *spiritual* requires the songs considered to be uninspired.

**Reason #9: James' exhortation to sing psalms would preclude many psalms!**

If there are three kinds of singing material in the book of Psalms, as the exclusive crowd tells us when interpreting Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16, then James 5:13 requires singing only those labeled as psalms and rejecting those called hymns or songs.

If this is not the case, then why did Paul make a three-fold distinction of Psalms?

**Reason #10: The Corinthians brought psalms into worship that were their own.**

Paul corrected the Corinthians for holding disorderly services by many members bringing psalms among many other spiritual things for a free for all (I Cor 14:26).

It is strongly implied by the context within and around this text that the material brought was not merely David's inspired Psalms but poetry of their own creation. He did not prohibit the bringing of uninspired psalms, just their disorderly use.

**Reason #11: The Psalmist was not an exclusive psalmody practitioner himself.**

In Psalm 119:54, the Psalmist (likely David) declared that God's statutes (given by Moses in his five books) had been his songs during his life, though not psalms.

The only hope for the EP advocate here is that this psalmist only sang these legal songs in private, not in corporate or public worship. Let them prove this to us.

**Reason #12: If we cannot sing uninspired words, we cannot pray such words.**

The Bible considers praying and singing to be closely connected acts of worship (I Cor 14:15). If they are both done by the Spirit and the understanding, then the rules should be consistent between them. Only inspired Bible prayers should be prayed.

We appreciate Charles Spurgeon for rejecting instrumental music by claiming that praise by machinery (musical instruments) justified praying by machinery. He knew the connection between singing and praying and used it for a logical comparison.

**Reason #13: If we cannot sing uninspired words, we cannot preach such words.**

The Bible considers singing a means of speaking, teaching, and admonishing others (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16), which three actions are also true about preaching.

If we cannot sing uninspired words, then we should limit preaching to the recorded sermons in the Bible and preach them as recorded lest we stray to manmade religion.

**Reason #14: If the Psalms are exclusive content, then so is all their baggage.**

The Psalms are full of Moses' form of worship with everything from oxen to incense to instruments to violent vengeance. But these things have passed away forever and are replaced by the new covenant, and the church and state are two separate entities.

Why should a New Testament church have much or most of its singing content the things Jesus nailed to His cross (Col 2:14)? Why should such a congregation sing about dashing infants against stones (Ps 137:9), yet not sing of Christ as an infant!

**Reason #15: The wisdom associated with N.T. singing is not merely inspiration.**

Paul required N.T. singing with all wisdom (Col 3:16), but he did not mean inspired wisdom of Psalms, but rather Spirit-led wisdom to create and convey meaningful songs of praise and instruction to teach and admonish the church by grace.

**Commentators Against Exclusive Psalmody** (commentaries on Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16):

**Albert Barnes** (Presbyterian; 1798-1870)

**John Calvin** (Presbyterian; 1509-1564)

**Adam Clarke** (Methodist; 1760-1832)

**Geneva Bible** (1560)

**Jamieson, Fausset, Brown** (1871)

**Matthew Henry** (Nonconformist; 1662-1714)

**Matthew Poole** (Nonconformist; 1624-1679)

**Charles Spurgeon** (Baptist; 1834-1892; published his own hymnal; no musical instruments)

**Commentators For Exclusive Psalmody** (commentaries on Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16):

**John Gill** (Baptist; 1697-1771)

**Examples of Hymns:**

*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*

*Ah, Dearest Jesus*

*Immortal, Invisible*

*God of Our Fathers*

*Crown Him with Many Crowns*

*How Great Thou Art*

*All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*

*Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven*

*O God, Our Help in Ages Past*

*Fairest Lord Jesus*

**Examples of Spiritual Songs:**

*Christ Arose*

*Sweet Hour of Prayer*

*Victory in Jesus*

*Babylon Is Fallen*  
*Onward Christian Soldiers*  
*Arise, My Soul, Arise*  
*Blest Be the Tie that Binds*  
*Amazing Grace*  
*There Were Ninety and Nine*  
*Trust and Obey*

**For Further Study:**

1. Extensive Collection of Pro and Con EP articles ... <https://exclusivepsalmody.com/articles-exclusive-psalmody/>.
2. EP Debate in Greenville, SC (2003) ... <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2003/a-psalmody-debate/>.
2. Ivan Foster against EP ... [http://www.tdgordon.net/theology/ecclesiology\\_worship\\_polity/exclusive.pdf](http://www.tdgordon.net/theology/ecclesiology_worship_polity/exclusive.pdf).
3. T. David Gordon against EP ... [http://www.tdgordon.net/theology/ecclesiology\\_worship\\_polity/exclusive.pdf](http://www.tdgordon.net/theology/ecclesiology_worship_polity/exclusive.pdf).
4. Robert Morey against EP ... [https://www.the-highway.com/exclusive-psalmody\\_Morey.html](https://www.the-highway.com/exclusive-psalmody_Morey.html).
5. W. Gary Crampton against EP ... <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=63>.
6. Daniel Chew against EP ... [http://www.mountainretreatorg.net/apologetics/exclusive\\_psalmody.shtml](http://www.mountainretreatorg.net/apologetics/exclusive_psalmody.shtml).
7. Why We Are Not Reformed Baptists ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/reformed-baptists.pdf>.
8. Against Instrumental Music (slides) ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/instrumental-music-powerpoint.pdf>.
9. Against Instrumental Music (Crosby) ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/pdf/instrumental-music-word.pdf>.
10. Against Instrumental Music (Guess) ... <http://www.letgodbetrue.com/bible/church/musical-instruments-in-the-church.php>.