

“Psalmody, God’s Guide to Just Sentiments”
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C. S. Lewis offers the following assessment of the teachers of his day:

They see the world around them swayed by emotional propaganda—they have learned from tradition that youth are sentimental—and they conclude that the best thing they can do is fortify the minds of young people against emotion. My own experience as a teacher tells an opposite tale. For every one pupil who needs to be guarded against a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awakened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts. The right defense against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.¹

Lewis talks about inculcating *just sentiments*. What are sentiments? *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (1962) describes a sentiment as “a complex combination of feelings and opinions as a basis for action or judgment; general emotionalized attitude: as patriotism has been called a noble *sentiment*.” Our sentiments combine our knowledge or understanding, with our feelings or emotions, and our volitions or wills.

God instills just, good, wholesome, uplifting, enriching, gracious sentiments in us. He does so by the Spirit. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). In this context, note Psalm 92:4. “For You, O LORD, have made me glad by what You have done, I will sing for joy at the works of Your hands.” God uses His word as a primary means to instill just sentiments. Consider Psalm 119:104, “From Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way.” It is not inconsequential that we turn to the Psalms when we think of expressing just and godly sentiments. The Psalms of the Old Testament are a divine guide for the expression of godly

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 24.

emotions and sentiments. In addition, Psalmody is one of God's primary means for instilling within us just and godly sentiments and guiding us in the expression of such sentiments.

To validate this thesis, we will review the stance of the Westminster standards regarding worship. We will see Westminster's position on both the regulative principle and Psalmody. Why Psalmody? To help us answer this question, we will examine a proof-text used by the Westminster Confession of Faith, Colossians 3:16. Even if Scripture commands Psalmody, the question remains, "Why?" This leads us to consider the so-called subjective element of the Psalter. Once we grasp the significance of this subjective element, the validity of our thesis emerges: Psalmody is one of God's primary means for instilling within us just and godly sentiments and guiding us in the expression of such sentiments.

The Westminster Standards set forth what we call the regulative principle of worship in three places: WCF 21.1, WLC 109, and WSC 51. WCF 21.1 reads as follows

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped 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* (italics added).

We are not to worship God in any way *not prescribed in Holy Scripture*. This is the regulative principle of worship. We may state it this way: In worship, whatever God does not appoint He forbids. This is the negative statement. Putting it positively we may say: In worship, whatever God appoints He permits. The alternative is the so-called normative principle. In worship, whatever God does not forbid, He permits. The normative principle is much more permissive and the default position of many Christians and churches.

The Westminster Standards, however, base their position on the second commandment.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me (Exod. 20:4-5, KJV).

WLC 109 teaches in part, “The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counselling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, *any religious worship not instituted by God himself...*” (italics added). WSC 51 succinctly says, “The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, *or any other way not appointed in his word* (italics added). These statements of what we call the regulative principle are clear. The prooftext the Standards use in each case is Deuteronomy 12:30-32,

Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou enquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.”²

At this point, we should also acknowledge that we are dealing with the regulative principle of *worship*. *In worship*, whatever God does not appoint He forbids. This is not the regulative principle of life. The principle is not: In all of life whatever God does not appoint He forbids. All the books that could possibly be written could not contain all that God could positively command for all of life. For example, God does not command the use of cars, computers, copy machines, or commuter planes, trains, or busses. What we have before us is the regulative principle of *worship*.

² *The Confession of Faith; The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with the Scripture Proofs at Large* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985), 61, 194, and 301. Italics used in the prooftexts.

WCF 21.5 relates certain Biblical elements of worship.

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; *singing of Psalms with grace in the heart*; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God (italics added).

The prooftexts for singing the Psalms are Colossians 3:16, “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” (KJV); Ephesians 5:19, “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and *making melody in your heart to the Lord.*” (KJV); and James 5:13, “Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? *let him sing psalms*” (KJV).³

That these texts refer to the Psalms of the Old Testament was the common understanding. For example, the title page of the “Bay Psalm Book” published in 1640 reads, “*The Whole Book of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre. Whereunto is prefixed a discourse declaring not only the lawfullness, but also the necessity of the heavenly Ordinance of singing Scripture Psalmes in the Churches of God.*” There then follows quotations of Colossians 3:16 and James 5:13.⁴ The title page for the Sternehold-Hopkins psalter published in England in 1562 bears two Scripture quotes: *If any be afflicted, let him pray: if any by merry, let him sing Psalmes; Let the word of God dwell plenteously in you, in all wisdom teaching and exhorting one another, in Psalmes, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs, and sing unto the Lord in your heart.*⁵

³ Ibid. Italics used in prooftexts.

⁴ *The Bay Psalm Book, Being a Facimile Reprint of the First Edition, Printed by Stephen Daye At Cambridge, in New England, in 1640* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), 19.

⁵ Thomas Sternehold and John Hopkins, *The Booke of Psalmes Collected into English Meeter*, bound with *The 1599 Geneva Bible, Facsimile Edition* (Ozark: L. L. Brown, 1995).

Since the Westminster Confession of Faith, based on Scripture, enjoins Psalmody, we ask: Why the Psalms? Colossians 3:16 helps us there. The text reads as follows in the *English Standard Version*. Note the word order. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, *teaching and admonishing* one another in all wisdom, *singing* psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (italics added). Paul’s basic command is simple, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Adverbial participles follow. They indicate *how* we follow the basic command. The participles are *teaching and admonishing* on one hand and *singing* on the other hand.

The *New American Standard Update* translates the text differently. Again, note the word order. “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom *teaching and admonishing* one another *with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (italics added). This version links psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with teaching and admonishing. Again, noting the word order, compare the *English Standard Version*. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, *teaching and admonishing* one another in all wisdom, *singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (italics added). This version links psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with singing. Why the difference?

As just mentioned, the main clause in the text is an imperative, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” The two participle phrases indicate *how* we follow the command. They are present active participles indicating contemporaneous action with the main verb, dwell. Literally the text reads: The word of Christ let dwell in you richly (1) with all wisdom *teaching and admonishing* one another; (2) with grace *singing* with your hearts to God. The words *psalms, hymns, songs spiritual* fall between the two participle phrases. As a result, some versions place

these words with teaching and admonishing, as do the *Authorized Version* and the *New American Standard Version*. “Our objection is,” says John Eadie, “that while metrical or musical compositions are not the common vehicle of instruction or admonition, they are specially connected with sacred song.”⁶ Other versions therefore consider it more logical to place psalms, hymns, and songs with singing, as do the *New International Version* and the *English Standard Version*. Eadie suggests a similar division of the text.

Let the Christian truth have its enduring abode “within you”—let it be no stranger or occasional guest in your hearts. Let it not be without you, as a lesson to be learned, but within you, as the source of cherished and permanent illumination. . . . Different ideas have been formed of the best mode of dividing the following clauses of the verse. . . . [T]he idea of wisdom is better joined to the following clause, which refers to mutual teaching—“in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another.” . . . Our translators, too, so point the verse as to make psalms and hymns the material of instruction, whereas, it seems better, and more appropriate, to keep the clause distinct, thus—“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another: in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto the Lord.”⁷

There are three other grammatical considerations in looking at the exegesis of Colossians 3:16. First, the text literally reads, “psalms, hymns, songs spiritual [*psalmois humnois ōdais pneumatikais*].” Paul packs the terms of the text together without using *and*. This is the figure of speech *asyndeton*, without conjunctions. It “ordinarily join[s] coordinate words or clauses. . . . The terseness of expression usually adds effect to the words.”⁸ In this case, where psalms, hymns, and songs are joined as one, we have a *conjunctive asyndeton*.⁹ Bullinger therefore says these three terms are synonyms.¹⁰ They refer to the Psalms of the Old Testament.

⁶ John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 252.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸ James D. Hernando, *Dictionary of Hermeneutics* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 2005), 111.

⁹ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 333.

Second, what about the modifier, *spiritual*? The adjective “‘spiritual’ means produced by or belonging to the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ B. B. Warfield says,

[O]f the twenty-five instances in which the word occurs in the New Testament, in no single case does it sink even as low in its reference as the human spirit; and in twenty-four of them is derived from [*pneuma*], the *Holy Ghost*. In this sense of *belonging to, or determined by, the Holy Spirit*, the New Testament usage is uniform....¹²

Since the modifier, *spiritual*, appears at the end of the figure, *psalms, hymns, songs*, it applies to all three terms.¹³ That is, these psalms and hymns and songs of the Old Testament, all three, are spiritual because they come from the Holy Spirit; they are inspired by the Spirit. They are the Psalms of the Old Testament.

Finally, “psalms, hymns, songs spiritual” is in the dative case, *psalmois humnois odais pneumatikais*. Lightfoot argues that the datives describe the instruments of the teaching and admonishing.¹⁴ Eadie counters, “The datives, without the preposition, denote the materials of song.”¹⁵ Eadie’s approach and the translation of the *English Standard Version* seem preferable. That the Westminster Confession of Faith uses Colossians 3:16 as a proof-text for Psalmody, taken together with these grammatical considerations, confirms that the terms *psalms, hymns*, and *songs* used by Paul refer to the 150 Psalms of the Old Testament.

What is the significance of this understanding of Colossians 3:16? If our exegesis holds, Paul circumscribes our singing more closely than our teaching. How so? First, Paul defines “teaching and admonishing with all wisdom” as preaching. He does so in Colossians 1:28. “We

¹¹ John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Minneapolis: James and Klock, 1977), 14.

¹² B. B. Warfield, “Pneumatikos and Its Opposites in the Greek New Testament,” *The Presbyterian Review* 1:3 (1880): 561.

¹³ Edward A. Robson, “Interpretation of the Two-Kai Configurations of the Greek New Testament,” *Semper Reformanda* 7:2 (Summer 1998): 9.

¹⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), 224.

¹⁵ Eadie, *Colossians*, 252.

proclaim Him, *admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom*, so that we may present every man complete in Christ” (italics added). Proclamation is preaching. Preaching involves teaching and admonishing. The element of teaching or preaching comes from the synagogue. The general practice there was to expound Moses through the eyes of the prophets. The objective was to apply the teachings of Scripture to contemporary circumstances. To do so, this teaching and preaching had to be Scriptural. This seems to be the point Paul is making. He exhorts teaching Christian truth. This teaching and preaching must be rooted in Scripture. It must be Scriptural.

Second, Paul is more specific when it comes to our singing. He not only requires our singing to be Scriptural, he specifies the Scriptures we are to use in our singing; he specifies the psalms, hymns, and songs inspired by the Spirit found in the Book of Psalms. Again, the *English Standard Version* exhorts, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . singing *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (italics added). What are we to sing? We are to sing psalms, hymns, and songs spiritual. If the Westminster Standards with prooftexts are correct, and we believe they are, these are the songs of the 150 Psalms of the Old Testament. In other words, Paul requires *exclusive* psalmody. He gives these directions to the New Testament church by the power of and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is an outworking of the regulative principle. God appoints Psalmody. In worship, whatever God does not appoint He forbids.

If, however, Scripture does appoint Psalmody, our question still remains. Why the Psalms? To grasp the genius of Psalmody, we must reorient our approach to the Psalms. Michael LeFebvre points out that we rightly read sixty-five books of the Bible as *God’s word to us*. “But the Psalmbook is different: it alone is composed as a collection of *songs from men to God*. They

are no less God's inspired word..., but of all the Bible's books, in the Psalms we receive an exceptional gift designed to become *our words to God*' (italics added).¹⁶ LeFebvre adds,

The Book of Psalms is unique. It is a hymnal. It is the only book of the Bible with God as the audience and God's people as its appointed speakers. This is an important feature of the Psalms with significance for how we should use them in the church today.

The Psalms are words for God's people to sing to Him. This does not mean the Psalms are any less God's word to us than other books of the Bible. ... Like the rest of Scripture, the Psalms are fully God's word to us. But unlike the rest of Scripture, the Psalms are further designed to become our words to sing back to God.¹⁷

The Psalms also have a distinctive subjective element. This is the *special significance* of the Psalms as God's word given to us to sing back to Him in worship. Geerhardus Vos alerts us to this important aspect of the Psalter. As God's words we sing back to Him, the Psalms, says Vos, are distinguished by a "penetrating subjectiveness."¹⁸ He clarifies this subjective element.

The deeper fundamental character of the Psalter consists in this that it voices the subjective response to the objective doings of God for and among his people. *Subjective responsiveness is the specific quality of these songs.* As prophecy is objective, being the address of Jehovah to Israel in word and act, so the Psalter is subjective, being the answer of Israel to divine speech (italics added).¹⁹

As both God's inspired Word to us and our subjective response to God and His deeds, the Psalms become the divine guide for our subjective responses to Him and His deeds. As we take the words of the Psalms on our lips, God guides us in responding to Him both objectively, the words we sing, and subjectively, the feelings and emotions we express. Calvin puts it just this way when he too speaks of this subjective element in his Preface to the Psalms. Notice the stress Calvin places on this subjective aspect of the Psalms in giving expression to our emotions.

¹⁶ Michael LeFebvre, *Sing the Songs of Jesus* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁸ Geerhardus Vos, "Eschatology of the Psalter," *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 356-357.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 324.

The varied and resplendent riches which are contained in this treasury it is no easy matter to express in words; so much so, that I well know that whatever I shall be able to say will be far from approaching the excellence of the subject. But as it is better to give to my readers some taste, however small, of the wonderful advantages they will derive from the study of this book, than to be entirely silent on the point, I may be permitted briefly to advert to a matter, the greatness of which does not admit of being fully unfolded. *I have been accustomed to call this book, I think 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 here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.* The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particulars in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, when all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy. *In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing our safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in The Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine.*²⁰

As we sing the Psalms, the Spirit probes the anatomy of our souls. He lays bare our raw emotions. He counters our deep-seated tightly held hypocrisies. Then, when we cry out to God and vent our own emotions, the Spirit provides us an “unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise [which] cannot be found elsewhere than in The Psalms...”²¹

The subjective element of the Psalter becomes our own as we sing the Psalms. As God’s word and a means of grace, the Psalms are the divine guide for the proper expression of our emotions. Through the Psalms, God bridles and trains us in the inner person. As we mimic the Spirit in His divinely given guidance, He forms Christ in us.

²⁰ John Calvin, “The Author’s Preface,” *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 1:xxxvii.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Ultimately, this may be the reason the apostle Paul circumscribes singing more closely than teaching. He knows the subjective element of the Psalter from his own study, experience, and singing. His experience is deeply rooted in the Old Testament and reverberates with the emotions, heart, and soul of David. Holding this thought, listen to Colossians 3:16 and note Paul's own emphasis on the subjective element. "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God*" (ESV, italics added).

Calvin's emphasis on the subjective element in the Psalter goes back to Athanasius of Alexandria (296-373). Here are excerpts from his "Letter to Marcellinus Concerning the Psalms."

[A]mong all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given. Elsewhere in the Bible you read only that the Law commands this or that to be done, you listen to the Prophets to learn about the Savior's coming, or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about yourself. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill. Prohibitions of evil-doing are plentiful in Scripture, but only the Psalter tells you how to obey these orders and abstain from sin. Repentance, for example, is enjoined repeatedly; but to repent means to leave off sinning, and it is the Psalms that show you how to set about repenting and with what words your penitence may be expressed. Again, Saint Paul says, Tribulation worketh endurance, and endurance experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed; but it is in the Psalms that we find written and described how afflictions should be borne, and what the afflicted ought to say, both at the time and when his troubles cease: the whole process of his testing is set forth in them and we are shown exactly with what words to voice our hope in God. Or take the commandment, In everything give thanks. The Psalms not only exhort us to be thankful, they also provide us with fitting words to say. We are

told, too, by other writers that all who would live godly in Christ must suffer persecution; and here again the Psalms supply words with which both those who flee persecution and those who suffer under it may suitably address themselves to God, and it does the same for those who have been rescued from it. We are bidden elsewhere in the Bible also to bless the Lord and to acknowledge Him: here in the Psalms we are shown the way to do it, and with what sort of words His majesty may meetly be confessed. In fact, under all the circumstances of life, we shall find that these divine songs suit ourselves and meet our own souls' need at every turn.²²

Imagine songs for worship which give you divinely inspired words to express all your longings, griefs, sorrows, and praise. Imagine a book designed and edited by God for this purpose. The Psalter is such a book. It is a marvel. Athanasius continues,

[B]ut the marvel with the Psalter is that, barring those prophecies about the Savior and some about the Gentiles, the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own, and each one sings the Psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person's feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering the words to God as his own heart's utterance, just as though he himself had made them up. Not as the words of the patriarchs or of Moses and the other prophets will he reverence these: no, he is bold to take them as his own and written for his very self. Whether he has kept the Law or whether he has broken it, it is his own doings that the Psalms describe; every one is bound to find his very self in them and, be he faithful soul or be he sinner, each reads in them descriptions of himself.

It seems to me, moreover, that because the Psalms thus serve him who sings them as a mirror, wherein he sees himself and his own soul, he cannot help but render them in such a manner that their words go home with equal force to those who hear him sing, and stir them also to a like reaction. ... And every other Psalm is spoken and composed by the Spirit in the selfsame way: just as in a mirror, the movements of our own souls are reflected in them and the words are indeed our very own, given us to serve both as a reminder of our changes of condition and as a pattern and model for the amendment of our lives.....

It is possible for us, therefore, to find in the Psalter not only the reflection of our own soul's state, together with precept and example for all possible conditions, but also a fit form of words wherewith to please the Lord on each of life's occasions, words both of repentance and of thankfulness....²³

²² Athanasius, "Letter to Marcellinus Concerning the Psalms," *Fisheaters.com*, accessed November 15, 2011.

²³ *Ibid.*

We neglect this subjective element and abandon Psalmody to our peril. As just observed, we see the subjective element in Paul as he advocates Psalmody (Early 60s AD). Athanasius carried the subjective element forward in his teaching of Psalmody (c. 350 AD). Calvin (1543) likely derived his understanding of the subjective element from Athanasius and he too advocated Psalmody. Finally, we see the subjective element in Geerhardus Vos (1902).

LeFebvre asks a question about the Psalms posed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945). “How did these words which men sang to God come to be regarded as words from God to man? That is, if the Psalms were composed for worshipers to lift their thoughts (by singing) up to God, why do we study them (by reading) as thoughts from God down to us?”²⁴ The answer to this question is crucial. We dropped the subjective element. As LeFebvre observes, “We stopped *using* the Psalms as human words to God” (italics added).²⁵

For Vos, the subjective element in the Psalter comes into its own in the heart’s longing for the life to come. “The Psalter bears eloquent witness to the truth that a hope of infinite perpetuation for the collective body is not enough. It requires the *assurance* of the eternity of religion *in the individual soul* to secure the permanence of religion as such” (italics added).²⁶ How do we come to this assurance? “The Psalmists had their faces set toward this [assurance] and through wrestlings of prayer with Jehovah won their way to the light.”²⁷ We take the wrestlings of the Psalmists on our own hearts and lips. Their groaning, seeking, joy, and praise become our groaning, seeking, joy, and praise. Their words from God become our words to God. Vos contrasts God-born eschatological assurance with modern humanism and skepticism. We dare not abandon God-born Psalmody-instilled eschatological assurance and compromise with

²⁴ LeFebvre, *Singing*, 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶ Vos, “Eschatology,” 364-365.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 365.

this humanism or with this skepticism. “The Church by compromising and affiliating with this would sign her own death-warrant as a distinct institution.”²⁸ To extend Vos’ train of thought, we stop using the Psalms as our own words to God and we abandon the subjective element in Psalmody to our own peril.

The thread running through objections to Psalmody is the supposed insufficiency of the Psalter for New Testament praise. These objections generally view the Psalms, like the rest of Scripture, as presenting God’s word to us. If there is any relevance to the Psalter as our words and our subjective response to God’s acts and deeds, as presented above, it is either unknown or studiously avoided. This, of course, colors expectations when coming to the Psalter or engaging in Psalmody. We forget the God ordained purpose of the Spirit inspired Psalms. As a result, we readily put other songs in the place of Psalms in the worship of God.

When a Christian young lady with a beautiful voice announced the song she was about to sing in the special community joint worship service, she said something like this: “As David was inspired to write the Psalms, I was inspired to write the song I am going to sing for you this evening.” If challenged, this young lady would have readily admitted that her song was not inspired in the same way Scripture is inspired. Yet the subtle temptation is to substitute *our* songs for His songs. The Psalms are *God* given inspired songs. We dare not forget this is the case. The coordinate truth is that God is most holy, excellent, and good. Jesus Christ goes so far as to say, “No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18, Luke 18:19). To be truly good is to be Godlike. At the same time, we fall infinitely short of this perfection. We live in a crooked and perverse generation (Acts 2:40, Phil. 2:15). Malcolm Watts therefore says,

Once this is understood, the question naturally arises: how can men, even with the aid of revelation, set forth in praise the wonders of a Being so illustriously great?

²⁸ Ibid.

He is surely “exalted *above* all blessing and praise” (Neh 9:5, emphasis added), and it must surely follow that our most sublime songs fall unspeakably below His transcendent majesty. The problem, of course, is further aggravated by the fact that men are fallen and therefore subject to sin and error. If the divine glory rises far above the flights of human praise, certain it is that men corrupted in all their faculties of soul, with defective understanding of spiritual things, are altogether incapable of producing material for praise. The general principle lies in the question, “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?” (Job 14:4; cf. 11:12, Eph. 4:18).²⁹

God Himself solves the dilemma. He gives His people a book of praise He inspires. He gives His people the sacrifice of praise His people may offer to Him. We have the privilege of singing back to Him the praise He condescends to give to us. All of this is in keeping with the regulative principle. This position is not new, unusual, nor remarkable. Calvin goes back to Augustine to make this point.

Now what Saint Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from Him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate to the purpose than the Psalms of David which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through Him.³⁰

However, grasping the fact that the Psalms are songs inspired by God and are given to us to sing back to Him is not enough. It is the *subjective element* of the Psalter that is the key to understanding Psalmody. Again, what is this subjective element? As already stated, “The deeper fundamental character of the Psalter consists in this that it voices the subjective response to the objective doings of God for and among his people. Subjective responsiveness is the specific quality of these songs.”³¹ The Psalms therefore present us a divine guide for our subjective

²⁹ Malcolm H. Watts, “The Case for Psalmody,” *Sing a New Song*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Anthony T. Selvaggio (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 127-128.

³⁰ John Calvin, “‘Preface’ to the Geneva Psalter (1545),” in Charles Garside, *The Origins of Calvin’s Theology of Music: 1536-1543* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979), 33.

³¹ Vos, “Eschatology,” 324.

responsiveness to God. The Psalms shape our sentiments and are a divine guide for the expression of them. To take hold of this is to grasp the import of the subjective element.

Listen to Geerhardus Vos as he begins a sermon he titles *Songs from the Soul*.

The Psalter is of all books of the Bible that book which gives expression to the experimental side of religion. . . . Hence the Psalter has been at all times that part of Scripture to which believers have most readily turned and upon which they have chiefly depended for the nourishment of the inner religious life of the heart. . . . Our Lord himself, who had a perfect religious experience . . . found his inner life portrayed in the Psalter and in some of the highest moments of his ministry borrowed from it the language in which his soul spoke to God, thus recognizing that a more perfect language for communion with God cannot be framed.³²

This is stunning. A language more perfect than the Psalms for communion with God cannot be framed. How can this be? It is inspired language. It is language breathed out by God. It is language given to us by the Holy Spirit. It is language given to us for the expression of our own hearts and souls. “Here the language of the Bible comes to meet the very thoughts of our hearts before these can even clothe themselves in language and we recognize that we could not have expressed them better than the Spirit has here expressed them for us.”³³

The language of the Psalms is therefore useful and suitable and functional for all peoples in all times. Vos continues,

At first sight, this may easily seem strange to us when we remember that the Psalmists lived under the conditions of a typical and preparatory dispensation; that on many points they saw through a glass darkly, whereas we, who live in the full light of the complete gospel, see face to face. But for the very reason that the Psalms reflect the experimental religion of the heart, which is unvarying at all times and under all circumstances, we need not greatly wonder at this.³⁴

Fallen human nature is always the same. The operations of sin within the heart are ever the same. The work of the Spirit within the human heart is ever the same. The Psalms, songs

³² Geerhardus Vos, “Songs from the Soul,” *Grace and Glory* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1994), 169-170.

³³ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

especially fit for the expression of the soul, are therefore useful and suitable and functional for all peoples in all ages. This is especially true when these songs of the soul are given for this very purpose by the Spirit in the Psalms. Grasping this subjective element is a key to understanding Psalmody.

Listen to Colossians 3:16 again. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, *teaching and admonishing* one another in all wisdom, *singing* psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (italics added). God commands, Let the word of Christ make its home in your heart through Scriptural preaching *and* let the word of Christ settle down in your heart by singing inspired Scripture, specifically the inspired psalms, hymns, and songs of the Psalter. “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word; ... and ... singing of Psalms with grace in the heart; ... are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God” (WCF 21.5). In worship, whatever God does not command He forbids. Why then Psalmody? Psalmody is one of God’s primary means for instilling within us just and godly emotions and sentiments and guiding us in the expression of them.