

God's Favorite Hymns

Written by Calvin Fox

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Now let us consider the matter of singing. There is no question that God commands singing songs of praise and thanksgiving. Therefore, this is an essential in Worship.

Psalm 96:1 Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord , all the earth!

Psalm 96:2 Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

Psalm 100:4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!

But is the singing governed by the Regulative or the Normative Principle? A very good case can be made that God commands, not simply singing, but the singing of inspired Psalms (the ones found in Scripture). Furthermore, the case can be made from Scripture that singing of the Psalms only is commanded and that singing is to be a cappella (without instruments). Indeed, the Church agreed and that was the practice well into the 18th Century!

If the advocates of the RP are consistent, their Worship must include and be limited to a cappella singing of the Psalms. That was the historic practice of Reformed Calvinists for centuries, although very few Reformed Calvinists follow the RP or the WC in this matter, nor do they follow it in keeping the Sabbath, the Day God commanded for corporate Worship when the Psalms are to be sung. These inconsistencies undermine the argument of such Reformed Calvinists that the RP must govern Worship).

Chap XXI, Section VIII. This Sabbath is to be kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

I agree, the Psalms are very important and they should be used often in today's Worship, but I am not convinced that only Psalms are to be sung and that instruments are not to be used. I do not buy the argument that the clear use of instruments to accompany singing Psalms in Old Testament times and in Heaven doesn't count because those times are, respectively, before and after the current Church Age. The history of Psalm singing is very interesting. All agree, the Psalms are in the Bible to be sung and the Psalter was rightly the Hymnbook of the Church until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th Century.

No one knows for sure the tunes to which the Psalms were originally sung. Does the command to sing Psalms include a specific musical setting or tune? Almost all of the Psalms have titles and many of them include musical directions. These titles are considered to be part of the

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inspired words of the Psalms themselves. They indicate, among other things, that instruments were used to accompany the singing. The problem is that scholars do not know or agree about what the musical notations mean. There have been many tunes written and used through the centuries, as well as various translations and versions of the words themselves. This means we can not be dogmatic today as to what "singing the Psalms" involves. In the earliest years the Psalms were chanted a cappella. That chant, with Hebrew origins, was plainsong. In the Middle Ages, it became the "Gregorian Chant" and was sung primarily by Monks, not the congregation. Martin Luther strongly advocated congregational singing and eventually gave musical settings for the congregation to use with the Psalms. He also composed his own Hymns with musical accompaniment. His followers adopted the Normative principle in Worship, as did the Anglicans. In the Anglican "39 Articles of Religion" we read-

XXXIV. Of the Traditions of the Church.

It is not necessary that the Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word. Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely, doth openly break the Traditions and Ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, (that others may fear to do the like,) as he that offendeth against the common order of the Church, and hurteth the authority of the Magistrate, and woundeth the consciences of the weak brethren.

Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish Ceremonies or Rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.

Instrumental worship with the Psalms or with newly composed Hymns and Songs was not widely practiced until the 18th century, and it was opposed vigorously by Christian Leaders along the way, but not on the basis of a Scriptural command, but mostly because it seemed too formal, liturgical or, in a word, "Catholic". It also seemed worldly and secular.

Not only were instruments gradually introduced and accepted, there was a constant rewriting and paraphrasing of the Psalms and their musical settings through the Centuries, influenced greatly by trends in secular music and popular tastes. These changes were occasions of controversy. It seems no one likes "new music" and, after a while, all new music becomes old music and out of fashion. The applies to translations of Scripture and the introduction of new versions. The KJV was strongly opposed for more than 50 years after it was published. The Genevan Bible and was the version the Pilgrims used. Nevertheless, all agree that reading and preaching the Word, no matter what the version may be, is still an absolutely essential element of Worship. Likewise, we can not be dogmatic about what Music is appropriate and must allow for variations. (Nevertheless, there are good albeit debatable reasons to prefer one version of the Bible and one type of music over another .)

I have become convinced that what God has commanded in Worship is His praise, as well as thanksgiving and prayers. That is what God requires as essential in His Worship; Words and

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music are only a means to that end. Singing the Psalms or anything else was never intended as an end in itself. The praise and prayers are essential, the words and instruments we use for that are non-essential.

There are wonderful websites devoted to singing Psalms. [insert]