

Psalm-Singers'  
Conference.

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## THE PSALMS IN THE APOSTOLIC AND EARLY CHURCH.\*

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Various opinions have been entertained with respect to the Psalmody of the Apostolic and Early Church. One is, that hymns of human composition were exclusively employed as the matter of praise in the early Church during the first three centuries of our era, that the Psalms of inspiration were not introduced into the worship of the Christian Church till the fourth century, and that they were then introduced in subservience to the Arian heresy.

This strange opinion seems to have been developed and formulated in the controversy which arose from the introduction of Dr. Watts' hymns and his imitation of the Psalms in the worship of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in the latter part of the eighteenth century. A number of Presbyterian ministers became zealous advocates not only of this change or innovation, but also of the reason given by Dr. Watts for the rejection of the Psalms and the substitution of human hymns and imitations in their place. Hence they affirmed that the Psalms of David are now without Divine appointment and utterly unfit for the worship of God under the present dispensation. They maintained that when the Apostle exhorted the Colossian Christians thus: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord," he, by the phrase, "word of Christ," referred exclusively to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament, and by "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs", he intended hymns of human composition that were derived from and founded upon this word of Christ, or the Gospel as revealed in the New Testament. And they endeavoured to prove—though, as we think, with ill success—that these hymns of human composition thus authorized by the Apostle, were the only matter of praise in the early Church until the fourth century of our era, when through the prevailing influence of the Arian heresy the Psalms of David were introduced into the worship of the Christian Church.†

Again, another opinion is that hymns of human composition and the Psalms of inspiration were both employed as the matter of praise in the early Church in the time of the Apostles

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\* Read by Rev. Edward M'Fadden, D.D., Hamilton, Ohio, U.S.A.

† See McMaster on the Psalms, pages 30-34 and 156.

as well as after their death. Hence it is inferred that hymns of human composition, as well as the inspired Psalms, have the sanction of Apostolic authority. This is the opinion generally maintained by the advocates of human hymns at the present time.

And again, another opinion is that the inspired Psalms were employed exclusively in the early Church not only in the time of the Apostles, but also for some time after their death, when the Church had to a great extent fallen from her primitive and Apostolic purity both in doctrine and worship.

In this discussion we may well ignore the first opinion. We believe it has very few, if any, advocates at the present time. The real controversy now is between the second and third opinions: Were hymns of human composition, as well as the Psalms of inspiration, employed as the matter of praise in the early Church during the time of the Apostles as well as after their death? or, were the Psalms of inspiration employed exclusively in the early Church until some time after the death of the Apostles? We have no hesitancy in denying the former, and affirming the latter of these propositions.

I. We shall turn our attention to the Psalmody of the early Church during that period in which she was under the government and guidance of the inspired Apostles. That the Psalms of inspiration were employed exclusively as the matter of praise in the early Church during this period will appear from such considerations as the following:—

1. The first converts to Christianity were generally Jews. It is probable that they formed the nucleus of all, or nearly all, the Christian congregations that were organized not only in Jerusalem, but also in the other cities throughout the Roman empire; and they would naturally bring their songs of Zion with them into the worship of the Christian Church. In other words, they would naturally continue to use the same inspired songs by which they had so long been accustomed to celebrate the praises of God. And that they actually did so is admitted by all candid and intelligent advocates of human hymns.

2. The inspired writers of the New Testament refer in various places to certain songs that were then employed as the matter of praise in the Church, just as they refer to certain Scriptures that were then employed as the matter of instruction and rule of obedience in the Church. Now as these Scriptures could not have been any other than the inspired Scriptures of the Old Testament, so these songs certainly could not have been any other than the inspired songs contained in the Old Testament. They could not have been derived from and founded upon the Gospel as revealed in the

New Testament, because they were already in existence while the New Testament was being revealed. They are called by the same names which were employed to designate the inspired Psalms in the Septuagint or Greek version of the Old Testament, viz., Psalms, Hymns, and Songs; and the same verbs are used to express the singing of them which were employed to express the singing of the inspired Psalms by the Levites under the former dispensation, namely, the verb, *Psallo*, which signifies to sing psalms, and the verb, *Humneo*, which signifies to sing hymns. See Psalms 9, 2, and 105, 2; 1 Chron. 16, 8; and 2 Chron. 29, 30, Septuagint version. Our Lord and His Apostles sang some of these inspired Psalms, when they are said to have sung a hymn at the conclusion of the first supper (Matt. 26, 30). Paul and Silas sang them, when they are said to have prayed and sung hymns unto God at midnight in the prison at Philippi (Acts 16, 25). Paul declares that he will sing them, when he says, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also" (1 Cor. 14, 15). And James exhorts those Christians to whom he wrote his epistle to give expression to their spiritual joy by singing these inspired songs—"Is any merry? let him sing psalms" (James 5, 13).

Now while the Apostles themselves sang these inspired songs and exhorted other Christians to sing them, they composed no other songs, nor did they authorize any other person to do so. And if we should admit that the inspired Apostles could have authorized some uninspired man to compose songs of praise for the use of the Church, and could have placed such songs in the same category with the inspired Psalms as the matter of praise to God—a supposition too absurd to be believed—still there is no evidence that they did so. Concerning the existence of any other songs in the time of the Apostles, besides those inspired songs which already existed in the Old Testament, the New Testament is absolutely and profoundly silent, as are also all the records of history.

3. Many of the Jewish converts to Christianity were characterized by a tenacious and zealous attachment to the rites, forms, and customs of their forefathers. It was owing to this fact that the abrogation of the rite of circumcision and of some other ceremonial observances caused no little contention and agitation for some time in the Apostolic Church. And if any change or innovation had been introduced into the Psalmody of the Church, either by way of substitution or addition, we have reason to believe that the same effect would have followed. But the fact is, that on the subject of Psalmody, peace and tranquility universally

prevailed, both in the time of the Apostles and for some time after their death.

II. We shall now turn our attention to the Psalmody of the early Church after the time of the Apostles ; and if the early or primitive period of the Christian Church be viewed as extending down to the beginning of the fifth century, then we admit that hymns of human composition were employed as the matter of praise in the early Church during this period, but we deny that they were employed at such a time and under such circumstances and conditions as to imply any Divine appointment or Divine approbation. The advocates of human hymns have put forth their utmost efforts to prove that hymns of human composition were employed in the Christian Church as early as the beginning of the second century, only a few years after the death of the last Apostle. And although the sentiment and practice of the Church after the time of the Apostles cannot in themselves, apart from the Word of God, be an authoritative factor in determining what is lawful and what is unlawful in the worship of God ; yet we admit that if it could be proved that hymns of human composition were employed in the worship of God immediately after the death of the Apostles, while the fathers who had been associated with them and taught by them were still alive, and before the Church had fallen from the simplicity and purity of the Apostolic period, this fact would militate strongly against the truth of our position. But after some examination of the subject, we are free to affirm that this supposed fact has not been, and, we believe, cannot be, proved.

We shall, then, as briefly as possible, notice some of the reasons that are usually offered, in order to prove that hymns of human composition were used as the matter of praise in the Church immediately after the death of the Apostles.

1. The advocates of human hymns almost invariably appeal to the testimony of Pliny, the pro-consul of Bithynia, in his letter to the Emperor Trajan, near the beginning of the second century. Our answer is, that Pliny bears no testimony whatever on the point in dispute. He declares that the Bithynian Christians "were accustomed to meet on a certain day before daylight, and to sing a song to Christ as a god." But whether this song was an inspired Psalm contained in the Old Testament or a song composed by some Christian poet, he does not say.

2. Another reason is taken from the case of Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch, and a well-known anti-trinitarian. He was charged not only with grave heresy, but also with gross immorality, and was deposed from his office by a council

of seventy bishops, about A.D. 269; and a part of the charge on the ground of which he was condemned and deposed was as follows:—"That he put a stop to the Psalms in honour of our Lord Jesus Christ as modern, and the compositions of modern men, and trained women to sing psalms on the great day of Easter in honour of himself." Now, in the interpretation of this passage the advocates of human hymns take the little word *as* (*hos*) in the sense of "because", and affirm that the psalms to which Paul put a stop were hymns of human composition, and that Paul abolished the use of them, *because* they were modern and the compositions of modern men, and that he trained his female choir to sing the old inspired Psalms in honour of himself. That is, Paul set aside the modern hymns which contained ascriptions of praise to Jesus Christ, and substituted in their stead the old inspired Psalms which contained ascriptions of praise not to Jesus Christ, but to Paul himself. Now, without stopping to notice the palpable absurdities which are involved in this interpretation, let me say that the particle, *hos*, when followed, as it is in the Greek text of the passage under consideration, by a noun in the accusative case cannot be taken in the sense of the conjunction *because*. The grammatical construction absolutely forbids it. This particle, as commonly used in the Greek language, is an adverb of comparison, and is translated in the New Testament generally by the English word *as*, and also sometimes by the words *as though*. See Acts 23, 15, and 27, 30; Rom. 4, 17. And this is evidently its meaning in the passage under consideration. Hence we affirm that the psalms in honour of our Lord Jesus Christ, to which Paul put a stop, were the inspired Psalms of the Old Testament; and the sin, on account of which he was deposed, consisted in the fact that he set aside these sacred Psalms *as though* they had been modern psalms and the compositions of modern men—that is, merely hymns of human composition; and, also, in the fact that he trained his female choir to sing psalms that had been composed especially to honour himself and to celebrate his own praise. "He was delighted," says Neander, "to receive the incense of exaggerated expressions about himself, in poems and declamations, in holy places, and to be called, in bombastic and rhetorical phrases, an angel sent down from heaven."

3. Again, another reason is founded upon an extract preserved by Eusebius, from an anonymous work which was written against the heresy of Artemon, a notorious opponent of the Divinity of Jesus Christ. This work is now generally ascribed to a certain Roman presbyter, by the name of Caius, and it seems to have been written at Rome about A.D. 230.

Now, there is one passage in this extract to which the advocates of human hymns often appeal. Bingham, in particular, refers to it, in order to prove that human hymns were employed in the worship of the Church from the beginning of the present dispensation. He says, "That ancient author in Eusebius, who wrote against the heresy of Artemon, among other arguments, urges this, for one: 'That from the beginning there were psalms and hymns composed by the brethren, and written by the faithful, setting forth the praises of Christ as the Word of God, and declaring the Divinity of His person.'" But Bingham often translates his original authorities very loosely and inaccurately, and so makes them say what he wants them to say.

The following is a literal and accurate translation of the Greek text:—"And how many psalms and songs of the brethren, transcribed by faithful men, from the beginning, praise Christ as the Word of God by ascribing Divinity to Him." Now, we have no hesitancy in affirming that there is a reference in this passage simply to the Psalms of inspiration: (1) Because we have here the very names by which the inspired Psalms are so frequently designated, many of them being called both psalms and songs. (2) The followers of Jesus, as a distinct and peculiar class of people, were in primitive times, not called Christians, but *brethren*; and of course the psalms and songs which they employed in the worship of God would be called the psalms and songs of the brethren, in order to distinguish them from the songs which the heathen employed in their idolatrous worship. But this language does not imply that these psalms and songs were *composed by the brethren*, and no such idea is contained in the passage. They are not said to have been composed by the brethren from the beginning, as Bingham has it, but to have been *transcribed, written, or copied by the faithful*—that is, faithful scribes—from the beginning; and this is literally true of the inspired Psalms. (3) The inspired Psalms do most emphatically praise Jesus Christ as the Word of God by ascribing Divinity to Him, and were so understood and explained by the fathers in the early Church. In confirmation of our position here, we beg leave to refer to a note of Dr. A. C. M'Giffert, author of the late translation of Eusebius, under the editorial supervision of Dr. Philip Schaff. On the passage under consideration Dr. M'Giffert gives the following note:—"This passage is sometimes interpreted as indicating that hymns written by the Christians themselves were sung in the Church at Rome at this time. But this is by no means implied. So far as we are able to gather from our sources, nothing but the Psalms and New Testament hymns (such as



the Gloria in Excelsis, the Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis, etc.), were as a rule sung in public worship before the fourth century. The practice which had sprung up in the Church at Antioch seems to have been exceptional."

Now I need not say that Dr. M'Giffert is one of the most eminent Church historians of the present day, and being himself a hymn-singer, he certainly cannot be charged with any bias or prejudice against the use of human hymns in the worship of God. Yet he here testifies, "that nothing except the Psalms and New Testament hymns were, as a rule, sung in public worship before the fourth century," and let it be remembered that these New Testament hymns to which Dr. M'Giffert refers were *inspired hymns*. There were certain verses in the New Testament which were sung or chanted in the worship of God without any human additions or modifications, at least until the latter part of the fourth century. But to this testimony of Dr. M'Giffert, we may add the testimony of the great historian Neander in proof of the same fact. In his history of the Church during the sixth century he writes as follows:—"Besides the Psalms which had been used from the earliest times, and the short doxologies and hymns consisting of verses from the Holy Scriptures, spiritual songs composed by distinguished Church teachers, such as Ambrose of Milan, and Hilary of Poitiers, were also introduced among the pieces used for public worship in the Western Church. To this last named practice much opposition, it is true, was expressed. It was demanded that, in conformity with ancient usage, nothing should be used in the music of public worship, but what was taken from the sacred Scriptures."

It is not, indeed, denied that previous to the fourth century hymns of human composition were employed in the worship of God by some who professed to be Christians. It is well known that as early as the latter part of the second century, Bardesanes, a man of talent, who belonged to the Gnostic sect, and so was a zealous opponent of the doctrine of the Divinity of Jesus Christ, composed hymns and used them in the Syrian Church as a means of teaching and propagating his heretical opinions. But if Bardesanes and his followers are to be regarded as a part of the visible Church, it is evident that their conduct in this respect was singular and exceptional. It does not prove that human hymns were, at that period, employed in public worship by evangelical Churches and evangelical Christians, but rather the contrary. And far less does it prove that there was any Apostolic appointment or Divine sanction of the use of such hymns.

And the same thing may be said with regard to the conduct

of Paul of Samosata, in the following century. He was also a zealous opponent of the doctrine of the Divinity of Jesus, and he abolished the use of the old inspired Psalms in the Church of Antioch, as though they had been no more divine and sacred than the compositions of modern men; and he introduced hymns of human composition in their place, in order to teach and propagate his own heretical opinions, and to gratify his own ambitious and vainglorious spirit. But his conduct and that of his followers in this respect was singular and exceptional, and, indeed, constituted a part of the charge on the ground of which he was deposed from his office by a council of orthodox bishops.

We are then led to the conclusion that the Psalms of inspiration were employed exclusively as the matter of praise in the early Church, during the time of the Apostles and for some time after their death, when errors and corruptions had to a great extent crept into the Church. This conclusion might be strengthened and confirmed by other lines of argument which we cannot at present pursue within the space to which this paper must be confined. Let any honest enquirer after truth examine the writings of the primitive fathers, such as Tertullian, Jerome, Cyril, Augustine, Cassian, and others, and he will find that the evidence from this source is in harmony with the conclusion at which we have arrived, and that much of it is incompatible with the supposition that human hymns were used in worship during the time of the Apostles or soon after their death, or that they were ever used with Divine approbation. Is there no significance in the fact that no hymn of human composition now in existence can be traced back to the time of the Apostles, and that the earliest hymn now extant is that of Clement, composed about one hundred years after the death of the last Apostle, and evidently not intended to be sung in the praise of God, but to be read for edification. If human hymns were used in the Apostolic and early Church, what has become of them? If, as Bingham and others maintain, Ignatius, who suffered martyrdom under Trajan, about A.D. 107, was the author of hymns as well as epistles, why is it that the latter have been preserved to the present time, but the former have perished? Would not the hymns of such an eminent saint and heroic martyr, who was known and admired by the whole Church, have been preserved as precious mementoes in after ages, if they had ever existed? But the fact is, there is no adequate evidence to prove that they ever existed. I must, however, forbear. I cannot, at present, enter into the consideration of the Psalmody of the Church during the Mediæval period. Indeed, I have been able to do but little more than to give a brief and imperfect

outline of the arguments that may be derived from the history of the Apostolic and early Church in favour of the exclusive use of the inspired Psalter. But I must not add, lest I trespass upon the time of the Conference.

May our Heavenly Father Who has graciously given the inspired Psalter to His Church, as the all-sufficient and only manual of praise in His worship, also give to His Church and people the wisdom and grace to receive and use this Psalter according to the manifest will and design of Him Who has graciously given it!

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PRAISE—Psalm 99, 5-9.

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### BRIEF ADDRESSES.

Rev. Dr. Corkey, Glendernot, Londonderry, Ireland, in discussing "The Psalms in the Reformed Churches on the Continent, and in the Early Scottish Church, up to the time of the Westminster Assembly," said—Before the Reformation there was, practically, no congregational song in the Church of Rome. There was singing; but it was confined entirely to choirs of monks and, I suppose, nuns. The voice of the people was not heard in the Church of Rome in praises at all. All the Reformers, as is well known, gave much attention to the subject of congregational song. They prepared translations of the Psalms—metrical translations—in the language of the people, and they cultivated song with the greatest care. This is true of the great leaders whose names are familiar—Luther, Calvin, and Knox. Luther had the Psalms translated into the language of the people, and encouraged the practice of congregational song. It is true—and with this remark I may pass from the Lutheran Church—that hymns were early introduced, just as there were other corruptions retained in it, to its lasting injury. But it was otherwise with the Churches founded by the Presbyterian Reformers. Calvin gave great attention to the subject of congregational song, and he prepared, as is well known, a Psalter; and in the preface he says, "Searching all round, we find no songs better and more suitable for praise than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit dictated and gave to him." And in this Psalter there was practically nothing but the Psalms. It was introduced.