



*A Brief Explanation of Exclusive Psalmody, Acapella Worship*  
By Pastor Grant Van Leuven, Puritan Reformed Presbyterian Church (PRPC)  
[www.puritanchurch.com](http://www.puritanchurch.com)

*This document is not a polished or formatted work, and simply reflects notes from an original lecture series for the church. It is still mainly in outline form for you to use to study (you will need to look up most of the Scriptures, for instance). It is meant to serve as a simpler study collecting from much of what is provided on our website for free (longer, detailed studies).*

As you read this overview explanation of singing only Psalms without instruments as presented by the Pastor, it may be helpful to know that he used to be a volunteer and paid worship leader for churches, retreats, and mission trips. He grew up in churches both with traditional hymns and contemporary praise tunes (both with instruments). He came to agree with the same position PRPC holds to in worship (they would not have accepted the call otherwise, and nor would he) by studying the topic in the Scriptures and with resources mentioned in this booklet. As well, Pastor is a trained musician and singer-songwriter who still enjoys such things in their proper context (see [www.dumbsheep.org](http://www.dumbsheep.org)). This is simply volunteered to say we can understand this all may seem very foreign at first, and we can relate with you.

As Pastor served in various church worship environments, he noticed that the “worship wars” of debate always focused on personal preference, and not God’s prescription; this leads to what should be our primary consideration with what and how we worship – what does God want as determined from His Word (with considerations of the transition from the OT types to the NT realities)? This focus of the discussion is what is referred to as The Regulative Principle of Worship.

We pray you will consider the following with these Scriptures guiding you:

- *But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness ... (Matthew 6:33)*
- *These [Bereans] were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. (Acts 17:11)*
- *For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)*

### **What is worship, and how do we decide to do what we do?**

The light of nature is why men make false religions. As Augustine famously said, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” And as Blaise Pascal said, “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” God made us to glorify and enjoy Him. It makes sense that He also has determined how we are to do so as we assemble to do so.

First, let us not overlook why we worship. Wayne Spear answers, we worship because of “... the existence, lordship, sovereignty, and goodness of God.”<sup>1</sup> See such Psalms as 5:7; 29:2; 45:11; 95:6-7; 96:8-9; 99:5, 9; 115:1; 132:7; 138:2. Worship comes from “Worth-ship”: Ascribing God’s worth to Him.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wayne Spear, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 110.

## Regulative Principle of Worship

- “Purity of Worship” (See *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, “Of Religious Worship, and the Sabbath Day”). Purity of doctrine and practice are both in view. Purifying worship was just as much a concern in the Reformation out of Rome as was the doctrine of justification.
- Worship must be done in the way God expressly said He wants to be worshipped in the Bible, not according to men’s “imagination and devices” (WCF 21). Worship is not a free-for-all.
- John Lafayette Girardeau notes: “A divine warrant is necessary for every element of doctrine, government and worship in the church; that is, whatsoever in these spheres is not commanded in the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements, *is forbidden.*”<sup>2</sup> This is not the same understanding as the Lutheran’s view, which is that anything not explicitly forbidden is allowed (consider where such a path can lead).
- What is worship? Roland Ward: “Worship is response to God in the context of his covenant.”<sup>3</sup>
- Worship is for God, not us. We honor God by honoring Him the way He wants, exactly.
- Pastor’s experience being in contemporary praise teams working within more traditional environments and the challenges that came with it: “What does God want?” was never asked on either side of the “worship wars”. It was all about what *we* wanted! Who is being worshipped, then?
- His favorite illustration is that he wants lemon cake with lemon icing on his birthday. So his family gives it to him. He also does not want any “un-prescribed coconut” in the cake batter, as was tried one year (even though I like coconut, just not in my birthday cake). If we truly want to honor someone on their birthday, we find out what they want and don’t force what we want. His friend’s mother-in-law always makes brownies with walnuts for him, even though she knows he doesn’t like walnuts in his brownies!
- The Lord’s Day is the Lord’s Day, so we offer what *He* wants in worship on His prescribed day.
- Keep in mind what the *Confession* notes in 1:6 as the difference between worship *circumstances* (light bulbs, time, location, mics and amplification) with *elements* (Bible reading and preaching, the Sacraments, prayer, singing Psalms, tithing and discipline corporate and individual oaths, vows – often seen as “covenanting”, fastings, and thanksgiving). It is an important disclaimer. One illustration is this: forcing the lighting of candles that are not needed to see but are for some un-prescribed religious service is forcing them on others as an element. But using candles if necessary to be able to see in worship makes them only a circumstance.

## Examples of the Regulative Principle in Scriptures:

- Notice that the first four of the Ten Commandments are all essentially expressing this principle.
- God burns up the priests, Nadab and Abihu, for offering un-prescribed fire. Leviticus 10:1-7.
- Uzza is killed because he was not authorized to handle the Ark, nor did he handle it in the way God prescribed. 1 Chronicles 13:6-14 with 1 Chronicles 15:1-15, 25-26; Numbers 4:1-15.
- Samuel told Saul that his “good intentions” with offerings were a direct violation of God’s specific commands, and thus were rejected (and so was he). 1 Samuel 15:1-26.
- To objectively consider all this with an open heart, this needs to be our attitude: *Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake.* (Psalm 115:1)

## **Exclusive Psalmody**

- Keep these Scriptures in view for this study:
  - *Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.* (Psalm 95:2)
  - *Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him: talk ye of all his wondrous works.* (Psalm 105:2)
  - *But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship*

---

<sup>2</sup> John Lafayette Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of The Church* (Crown Rights Book Company: Dahlonega, GA, 2005), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Rowland Ward, *Commentary on WCF*, 132.

- him must worship him in spirit and in truth.* (John 4:23-24)
- Jesus says in Luke 24:44: ... all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.
  - The Church's history is singing Psalms:
    - OT Church sang the Psalms (only). NT Church sang the Psalms (only).
    - Mathew 26:30: Jesus and His disciples at the last Passover sang from what was the "hallel" section of the Psalms (113-118).
    - Paul/Silas sang the Psalms in prison (Acts 16:25). James 5:13 instructs singing the Psalms.
    - During the post-apostolic period there were no hymns in the church, only Psalms.
    - Bushell, *Songs of Zion*:
      - “Tertullian, in the second century, and Jerome in the fourth, both testify that ‘reading the Scriptures and singing the Psalms’ were essential features of religious worship. One can read of the Scottish farmers in previous centuries singing the Psalms while working in the fields, the martyrs singing the Psalms as they faced their deaths, and Dutch prisoners singing the Psalms in exhausted gratitude when freed from Spanish slave ships.”
      - Heretics like the Gnostics, the Arians, and the Donatists (the latter, if not heretics, certainly not orthodox) began to introduce songs other than the Psalms.
      - Introduction of uninspired hymns was a slow process and was not widespread until the fourth century.
      - The Synod of Laodicea (A.D. 343) and Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) opposed uninspired "hymns."
      - The Council of Braga 561 AD decreed hymns not to be used in worship, which the Council of Toledo (589) repeated and endorsed. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Agobard of Lyon reminded readers in letter of this important history.
      - Psalm singing deteriorated in the Middle Ages, but was preserved in monasteries.
      - Wycliffe and Huss, morning stars of the Reformation, re-introduced singing the Psalms into the churches.
      - The Protestant Reformation brought back psalm singing. Calvin insisted on them for His return to Geneva. Psalm-singing was known as the “signature of Puritanism”.
    - “it will be observed that the Confession does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the use of modern hymns in the worship of God (WLC 21:5), but rather only the psalms of the OT.”<sup>4</sup>
    - Modern hymns began to compete in Presbyterian and other churches in the 1700s/1800s.
  - We sing Psalms because that is the hymnal God gave us in the Bible to sing to Him. It was the commitment to *Sola Scriptura* that led the Reformers to return to the reading, preaching, praying, and *singing* of God’s Word. We sing Holy Spirit-inspired songs, not man-made ones.
  - Christ is everywhere in the Psalms, which are the most quoted OT references in the NT to prove Jesus is the Messiah. Why? They speak of Christ, and it is what they worshiped with, so they would be particularly familiar with them and have many memorized. Singing memorizes. Such Psalms as 2, 8, 16, 22, 40, 45, 110 are specifically quoted in the NT to prove Jesus is the Christ (see Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 for instance).
  - Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19: “Sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs”. A command!
    - Paul never had Amazing Grace or God of Wonders in mind. Avoid anachronism in thinking this through (your experience should not be read back into what wasn’t in existence).
    - In the Jewish mind, Paul was periphrastically saying to sing the Psalter, each of those words being titles of Psalm sections found in the OT Psalter as well as each being a designation in the Psalter. What is known as the Greek Old Testament (The Septuagint) has each of these Greek words from Colossians and Ephesians (psalms, hymns, spiritual songs) as headings for different psalms within the OT Psalms (a collection of Scripture written to sing in corporate worship).
    - Look at the context. Paul was not introducing a new concept or idea of what to sing, but reminding them to sing what they sang: the Psalms God wrote to sing to Him.
    - “Spiritual” songs. Literally means songs written by the Spirit. Only the Psalms fit that criteria. *Sola Scriptura*. When folks speak of being “inspired”, we must not confuse that to be on the par of infallible, inerrant canon (especially when they inadvertently, or deliberately, espouse

---

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, Commentary on WCF, 167.

- heresy).
- Reformers' Example:
    - Calvin produced the Geneva Psalter. Required it to return to Geneva. He learned of the Scriptural singing of Psalms in worship by the example of Martin Bucer during his happy stay in Strasbourg, a haven of the early Reformation.
    - The first book printed in America was the Bay Psalter in 1640.
    - The Westminster Assembly produced a metrical Psalter only with the 150 Psalms, and it was later revised in Scotland and became the Scottish Psalter of 1650<sup>5</sup>; our Comprehensive Psalter is that Psalter with various new tunes.

How can we NOT want to sing what God Himself wrote to be sung to Him? If we are unfamiliar, this is not God's fault. It is our duty to get familiar and learn to love singing His Word (and learn to know it by singing it). If you have contempt for singing the Psalms, consider what you are saying about what GOD Himself wrote! And consider your lack of familiarity with the Psalms and how it would be aided (not only in knowing God better, but Christ in the New Testament better).

May this motivate us: The early Church Father, Athanasius (b. ca. 296-298 – d. 2 May 373), in his Letter to Marcelinus concerning the Psalms, wrote: *... let whoever reads this Book of Psalms take the things in it quite simply as God-inspired; and let each select from it, as from the fruits of a garden, those things of which he sees himself in need. For I think that in the words of this book all human life is covered, with all its states and thoughts, and that nothing further can be found in man. For no matter what you seek, whether it be repentance and confession, or help in trouble and temptation or under persecution, whether you have been set free from plots and snares or, on the contrary, are sad for any reason, or whether, seeing yourself progressing and your enemy cast down, you want to praise and thank and bless the Lord, each of these things the Divine Psalms show you how to do, and in every case the words you want are written down for you, and you can say them as your own.*

May we also appreciate the words of Horatius Bonar; *To tear away the Psalms from us as obsolete, and to deny them to be the proper utterance of Christian worship ..., is to deprive us of the means of identifying ourselves with Old Testament saints, and to shut us out from the use of language which best embodies the feelings of one wrestling, not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers ... those who know something of the [spiritual] warfare, will welcome them as suitable and precious above measure,--the breathings, not of the spirit of bondage, but of liberty and adoption. (God's Way of Holiness, 215,6).*

---

<sup>5</sup> Spear, FOF, 113.

## Acapella Worship

“A capella” is Latin for “In the manner of the chapel” or “In the manner of the church”. During the Renaissance, choral music in church was more popular than instrumental, and it was unaccompanied.

Church's history:

- NT: no account of singing with instruments (Yes, in the OT, but there has been a transition from types to reality.)
- Girardeau: instruments first formally come in by the Roman Catholic Church in 1290 AD. In the Orthodox Greek Church, they never have been used.
- The Reformers got rid of instruments. The Dutch got rid of organs (not just the Scots). The famous London Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, agreed instruments were Old Testament Temple (like incense and priestly vestments) and not to be used now. Google his quotes.
- “In fact, up until about 200 years ago, the use of instruments in worship was quite limited to those of the Lutheran and Catholic persuasions. Protestants didn't use instruments for the most part and sang only from the psalter which is the actual worship book of the church, i.e., the Psalms ...” (Timothy Hammons, *Aquila Report* article on worship, August 21, 2012).

Understanding the Old Testament Worship Types and Signs as Fulfilled in Christ:

- When Moses was first given Tabernacle commands (Ex. 25-29), no musical instruments are mentioned.
- Only trumpets are later mentioned and were not for accompanying singing. Numbers 10:2ff: they were for calling assemblies and calling to arms. Also, in terms of the Tabernacle, they were to be blown over the burnt offerings – (Numbers 10:10). It was OT ceremony.
- In 2 Chron. 5:12-13, the priests play instruments while bringing the Ark into the Temple for dedication. This was not the same as corporate worship we are speaking of (similarly, signing on the other side of the Red Sea in Ex. 15 was national rejoicing, not corporate tabernacle worship).
- No instruments are mentioned in worship until David: 1 Chron 23:1-6; 1 Chron 28:11-13, 19; 2 Chron 29:25-27. Instrumental music was never involved with singing until David received divine commandment to introduce setting up the Temple (by Solomon).
- See how the use of priestly instruments stop after the animal sacrifice is completed, while singing yet continues unaccompanied in 2 Chronicles 29:28-30.
- No instruments were used in the Synagogue worship (where Jews worshipped when not at Temple, and much the model of NT worship). Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Orthodox Jews did not use instruments (some still). They are led by a cantor (male singer, something like our precenter). Instruments were only in the Temple where the animal sacrifices were made (the Temple is now gone). The Synagogue grew out of the need to gather and study in dispersion; but it would never execute temple functions, such as musical instruments.
- Dr. James Begg: “As good an argument can be made for the use of priests, sacrifices, indeed of the whole temple system, as for the use of instrumental music in Christian worship.” (“On the Use of Organs”, in Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Worship of the Church*, 68).
- The work of Christ is typified in OT Temple System. Just as much so, the work of the Holy Spirit. The washing with water and the anointing in Tabernacle and Temple both typified work of the Holy Spirit in N.T. Lamp stands in Zech 4/Revelation 11:4 for instance. The work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as the New Testament Temple also was prophesied in Ezekiel and Jeremiah; see also Joel 2:28-30 (Zech 12:10) used in Acts 2:1(15)-21. The instruments in the Old Testament Temple typified the instruments of our hearts in the NT today: Spirit-filled worship.

Ephesians 5:19: “making melody” in our hearts is literally in the Greek “to pluck or twang”. The instruments of the joy of the Holy Ghost are now our hearts in worship, which the priestly instruments represented in the Old Testament. Remember, we are now the Spiritual Temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). Girardeau notes, “... the instrumental music of the temple-worship was typical of the joy and triumph of God's believing people to result from the plentiful effusion of the Holy Ghost in the New Testament times ... it pleased God to typify the spiritual joy to spring from a richer possession of the Holy Spirit through the sensuous rapture engendered by the passionate melody of stringed instruments and the clash of cymbals, by

the blare of trumpets and the ringing of harps.”<sup>6</sup>.

If we do not sing Psalms acapella to God as He wishes us to do with joy like the playing of instruments, then let us pray for the Holy Spirit to move in us to worship Him with our whole hearts with more full appreciation of our redemption fully accomplished by Christ and fully applied to us by the Holy Spirit (as typified in the OT ceremonial system, now fulfilled and so done away with).

***Suggestions for Further Study:***

- *Instrumental Worship in the Church*, John Lafayette Girardeau (a deceased Presbyterian pastor)
- *Old Light on New Worship*, John Price (a contemporary Baptist pastor)
- *Public Worship 101: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Worship, the Elements of Worship, Exclusive Psalmody, and A Capella Psalmody*, Dennis Prutow
- *Worship: From Genesis to Revelation*, Douglas Comin
- PECA website “Resources/Articles and Media” section, under “Purity of Worship” here: <https://puritanchurch.com/about/doctrine-and-practice/practice-what-duty-god-requires-of-us/>
- At the above link, please see the 10-minute video produced by Pastor Van Leuven on “Purity of Worship” while interning at Grace Reformed Presbyterian Church in Gibsonia, PA

---

<sup>6</sup> Girardeau, 60-61.