

The Controversy over Exclusive Psalmody

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Being a review of two polemical booklets:

1) *The Psalter—The Only Hymnal?* by Iain H. Murray (Edinburgh: Banner, 2001) ISBN 0 85151 809 5

2) *God's Hymnbook for the Christian Church* by Malcolm H. Watts (James Begg Society, 2003) ISBN 0 9539241 8 1*

How should we worship God?

How many people ask that question today? Few alas! Or if they do, it is fundamentally only to ask what modern innovations they may introduce into the service ... charismata, liturgical dance, choruses, “gospel” pop concerts, healing crusades, and so on. An older generation, steeped in the “hymn sandwich” liturgy of post-18th century worship, is often put out by what they see as a challenge to orthodox tradition in their services, without realizing that:

1) their own tradition was introduced 200 and more years ago in defiance of the orthodoxy of those days; and

2) their tradition cannot provide them with a biblical and logical platform able to withstand the new trends. Almost inevitably they collapse under the pressures and slide into the flippant, presumptive, and impertinent modes of modern, so-called “worship,” that addresses God as “Father” in tones as if they are talking to the old man in the rocking chair over by the fireplace.

It is refreshing, therefore, to see that recently these issues have been tackled by two well-known writers, albeit from opposite points of view. At the heart of the controversy generating their polemics is the question with which we began: How should we worship God?

Both writers are concerned to answer this question as it impinges particularly on one aspect of Christian worship, that of congregational sung praise to the Most High. Both men realize the importance of this question, and both see that it is at the point of sung praise that the battle lines are drawn and the issues are really decided. Other aspects of worship, such as prayers, readings, doxologies, sermons, sacraments, are all important, but it is at the point of congregational

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praise that a most important principle rises to the surface and affects the outcome of the discussion in a way that it could not do in these other areas.

But firstly, and fundamentally, there is a prior issue, and that is: How shall we answer the question?

Now this is no conundrum. If I am to find an answer to the question “How should we worship God,” I must first of all face the problem of how the question itself is to be answered. For instance, may I make recourse to the philosophers, to Aristotle, to Locke, to Mill, or to Hegel? Or may I call in the services of the Pope to make an *ex cathedra* pronouncement on this issue? Or may I simply look to tradition; in which case *what* tradition? Or may I simply work it all out using my “sanctified” common sense?

Where then, and what are, the authorities that should decide our question?

At this juncture, a little child can lead us. “Let us ask the Lord Jesus,” he might say. Yea, of such is the kingdom of heaven! (Matt. 19:14). How simple the formula; how easy to apply! We need to know how to worship God, so let’s ask HIM how we should do it! Let us consult His Word. What could be easier? And who could possibly quarrel with that? If we consult His Word, we find His answer to our question, and HIS answer is bound to be absolutely and unconditionally and totally right. An answer drawn purely from and centred upon a correct exegesis of God’s Word! No need to import anything in from outside, or to supplement that answer with various bolt-on qualifications, is there? Well, is there?

It is at this juncture that the old serpent will try to get his hiss in edgeways. “Hath God said?” Has God really given us in His Word precise details as to His worship? Or has He only given us there the general principles and left us with substantial latitude of freedom as to what the details are to be?

Well, as the old saying goes, “the devil is in the details” and he certainly insinuates his devious undulations into this issue at this point. And not a few otherwise good men are taken in by his “sales talk.”

And so we see the question revolving around this issue, as to whether the Word of God is, or is not, totally specific with regard to Christian worship, and we see this issue arising most acutely at the point of congregational sung praise.

The two booklets we review herewith reflect this feature of the conflict. One of the writers is a minister of Scottish Presbyterian attachment, indeed in 1972 he took an oath to uphold the *Westminster Standards*, documents which insist on a rigid application of the Word of God as being definitive of the details of Reformed worship, and specify that in congregational sung praise the biblical

Psalms—and them only—shall be sung, because this alone is in accordance with Scripture. This same writer has also aligned himself—to all appearances, at least—with the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) as over against the main body of the Free Kirk (those who support Prof. Macleod). He has also been responsible for the publication of numerous reprints of Puritan and Reformed tomes, many of which have advocated the “regulative principle” that all worship is to be regulated by the Word of God alone.

The other writer comes from an English dissenting background, trained for the ministry at London Bible College, and for some 30 years has laboured as a pastor in an independent church in the south of England.

Surely then, it is the first writer, the one with the impeccable theological pedigree of Scottish Presbyterian connections that will hold us, in his booklet, to the strict regulative principle of the *Westminster Standards*, and insist on exclusive psalmody as being what the Word of God requires of corporate Christian worship in song? And surely it is the Englishman who will be the one who has listened to the old serpent’s hiss, and ducks away from the child-like, innocent referral to God’s Word in order to answer the question we have posed herewith?

Surprise, surprise! It is entirely the other way around!

I must confess to being shocked! Shocked that Iain Murray (hereafter IHM) should be flying in the face of the very Reformed heritage he has done so much to promote via his work with the Banner of Truth Trust over the last nearly 50 years! But his booklet *The Psalter—The Only Hymnal* is an argument for the introduction of “some hymns,” and the foundation of his polemic against exclusive psalmody is precisely this, that he believes that the Scriptures only give us general principles of worship, and therefore allow us to fill in the details with matters of our own composing. The regulative principle, says he, “controls what shall or shall not be parts of worship: it is sung praise that is authorised as a part, not the very words of which that part has to be made up” (IHM, p. 11). IHM states that other features of public worship that are commanded by God, such as prayer, and the sermon, are necessarily spoken in our own words. Therefore, why not sung praise? Scripture commands us to pray, but does not supply us with the words of our prayers; we have to compose them ourselves. Scripture merely gives us general directions about *how* we should pray, without telling us *what words* we are to use. Likewise, bearing in mind that fact that many of the biblical Psalms are denominated as “prayers” (IHM, p. 7), then surely these too cannot be prescriptions as to the words to be “sung.” Thus IHM advances out to meet exclusive psalmodists with his attempted rebuttal, that as the regulative

principle allows us latitude with prayers, so also it must allow us the same freedom with sung praise, otherwise the principle itself is inconsistent. Now since all sides, including the exclusive psalmodists, agree that Scripture requires us to bring in our own words in prayers, liturgy, and sermons, the sticking point is found at the level of sung worship.

Having read through IHM's booklet carefully I have to say I find it totally unconvincing and superficial. No proper attempts are made at exegesis of important biblical texts, and the weight of IHM's arguments repose on foundations outside of Scripture. In all this, I regret to have to say I do not like the way IHM utilises evidence, and that the tractate seems to me to be a propaganda piece relying on colourful flourishes with the pen rather than on evidence. This disturbing set of features may be seen if we follow the sequence of the arguments in IHM's booklet. This we do in the following pages, and into our analysis and comments we introduce from time to time the excellent points made by Malcolm Watts in his booklet, which follows the sequence of Murray's format. All references in the following paragraphs are given in parenthesis, giving the initials IHM and page number to refer to Murray's booklet, and the initials MHW and page number to refer to the excellent booklet of Malcolm Watts.

At the very outset, in IHM's first section, the title is "Common Ground" (IHM, pp. 3-4). Extending to but two brief pages it merely cites three Scriptures to indicate some basic features of worship which IHM evidently deems to be common to *both* hymn-lobbyists and exclusive psalmodists. After considering that sung praise is "intended to be of special benefit to believers in the uplifting of their spirits," he avers, erroneously, that "joyless singing is a contradiction" (IHM, p. 3). We have to disagree strongly and say that the singing of a confessional Psalm, like Psalm 51, can hardly be joyous. Grief, sorrow, remorse, disappointment, are all emotions entrained in the Christian pilgrimage, and all have their legitimate lyrical expressions. The book of Psalms *sans pareil* covers the whole spectrum. Modern hymnals fail miserably in this respect.

Following this, IHM makes a logical jump. After dealing with the above "common ground" in worship, he adds,

It has also to be recognised that there is a human element in this discussion. Things which have become part of our lives are not readily changed. Tunes associated with memories of our childhood are likely to be with us all our days and their use or disuse belongs to those issues "common to human actions and societies, which

are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence”
(*Westminster Confession* 1:6; IHM, p. 4).

Now the following features are evident in IHM’s argument here, first, that there is no logical connection between this, his final “common ground,” and those that go before, and secondly, we have to refer to what we feel is the unsatisfactory way IHM utilises evidence. He introduces here a quote from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (*WCF*), which, if the reader consults the *Confession*, will be seen not to support IHM’s use of it. The exact paragraph actually begins by asserting that

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: into which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men (*WCF* 1:6).

That is plain enough, and in the paragraphs following, exceptions clearly refer to attendant circumstances of worship: place, time, mode of dress, etc. These matters the *Confession* here refers to as “common to human actions and societies” (*WCF* 1:6).

Thus the full *WCF* paragraph gives a different flavour than IHM’s quote. IHM has here avoided all reference to *WCF* 21:5 which quite unequivocally specifies the contents of worship, one of which is “singing of psalms with grace in the heart,” and no mention of any “hymns.” By this quick flourish of *WCF* 1:6, IHM gives the impression that a “human element” is necessarily present in worship, and that this element is deemed part of acceptable “common ground” between exclusive psalmodists and the hymn-lobby, and that the *WCF* backs up this notion!

We expressly repudiate IHM’s reasoning here, and find it to be cavalier and deficient, and grossly misleading. Grossly misleading because, if you agree with the position he thinks he has established in his “common ground,” you will be handicapped in refuting the rest of his tract. For this “common ground” forms IHM’s platform to launch, in the rest of his booklet, his polemic against exclusive psalmody. He moves, therefore, from a faulty and inadequate foundation, and the errors and the pollutions eddy forth and mix right through the rest of the tract. We find indeed that in MHW’s booklet, it is rightly contended that

IHM's "common ground" is certainly not satisfactory as "common ground" for all Reformed churches. MHW rightly complains too, that IHM fails to introduce and explicate the regulative principle here with all the relevant Scripture references which indicate psalmody as the only acceptable content of the church's sung worship (MHW, p. 7).

IHM's second section sets out "The Area of Controversy," viz., the issue that "Christians are not at liberty to determine what they shall sing in public worship" (IHM, pp. 4-5). At this juncture we must censure IHM yet again for the way he handles evidence. He asserts that this exclusive psalmody position has been put forward in "recent publications." A footnote draws attention to four such, three of which were printed as recently as 1992-1994, and a fourth which is a 1992 reprint of a 1907 work (IHM, p. 5, n. 3). This creates the unmistakable impression that exclusive psalmody is a recent (20th century) innovation, though IHM *does not explicitly say so*. Later IHM goes on to ramify this false impression by a plethora of quotes from divines of past ages which appear to assert that hymnody was acceptable in the Reformed tradition right back to Calvin at the Reformation (IHM, pp. 12-20).

We cannot allow this to pass. We find what IHM is asserting is contrary to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Perhaps, IHM is ignorant of what he is missing out here, but I find it difficult to countenance this, given his vast and long experience in the study of Reformed theology, and the testimony of much of the very material printed by the Banner over the last nearly 50 years.

We are pleased, however, to note how MHW thoroughly corrects IHM on these issues, showing how "believers were never told to write their own praise" and how "the Christian church, like the Jewish church, confined itself to the singing of Biblical Psalms." MHW gives us Scripture and scholarly references in support of the position he advances against IHM here (MHW, pp. 7-9).

IHM next follows with his third section, "The Psalms-Only Case Stated" (IHM, pp. 5-6). Again, his treatment is appallingly brief and shallow in dealing with this important subject. With a passing flourish he refers now to *WCF*21 as stating "God claims in Scripture the right to determine how he shall be worshipped." This, he admits, is applied as the "regulative principle" to govern the content of sung praise, and he also points out that exclusive psalmodists have strong arguments when they say that Christ sang from the Psalter, and when they say that none can improve on the Divinely inspired words of the Psalter. (This last point, believe it or not, IHM denies as valid, later on from page 27

onwards.) But at this juncture, after noting a plethora of historical Reformed heroes that all sang Psalms—but without pointing out to the reader that these nearly all sang Psalms exclusively—IHM does admit that

This argument [for exclusive psalmody] looks impressive to anyone who takes the Bible seriously, and, if the case is true that inspired material for the praise of the churches in all ages is alone warranted by Scripture, then *loyalty to the truth would require the disuse of all hymnody in Public worship* (IHM, p. 6; italics mine).

And at this point, in putting forth the exclusive psalmodist case, IHM has not exegeted ONE of the many Scriptures underpinning their position! We wonder why? In his excellent response to IHM at this juncture, MHW painstakingly and succinctly lays out seven sound and Scriptural reasons “why the Psalms should be sung *alone* in the worship of God” (MHW, pp. 9-11; italics MHW’s). The concatenation of these seven reasons is an indicator of what IHM has totally by-passed in his booklet, and means that his appreciation of the Psalms-only position is either extremely ill-informed, or utterly cavalier. Again, to the reader uninitiated in the whole historical debates over Christian worship, IHM’s tract presents a grossly inadequate, and therefore distorted view of the exclusive psalmodists position.

IHM’s fourth section is entitled “A Response” (IHM, pp. 6-11). It is his attempted rebuttal of the claims of the exclusive psalmodists extends. In reply, MHW supplies us with over twenty pages of detailed refutation of IHM’s arguments, and informative expatiation on a host of relevant biblical texts including a most useful analysis of biblical terminology concerning psalmody (MHW, pp. 11-31). The candid reader is struck straight away by the vastly more erudite level and careful analysis contained in MHW’s work.

IHM introduces this section by noting that the issue is *not* how highly we regard the book of Psalms. Non-exclusive Psalm singers, even non-Psalmsingers, are alleged herewith to be able to regard the book of Psalms as highly as exclusive psalmodists. C. H. Spurgeon is introduced here as an example. He had such a high regard for the psalms that he spent “twenty years in expounding the Psalms” and produced a six-volume commentary on them, but “He had no hesitation about compiling a hymnbook” (IHM, pp. 6-7). *Again*, we have to dispute the manner of IHM’s *use* of evidence. What he deduces from Spurgeon is illogical. Think about it! If you regard the Psalms as the being the only di-

vinely authorised vehicle of public sung praise, then you must, axiomatically, regard them more highly than extra-biblical songs. On the other hand, if you think extra-biblical hymnody is equal to, or perhaps even better than, the Psalms for worship, then it is equally axiomatic that you cannot regard the Psalms as highly as does an exclusive psalmodist.

Yet more, IHM endeavours to ramify his erroneous logic here by a footnote referencing Spurgeon's "disagreement with exclusive psalmody" as in the latter's review of the *The True Psalmody; or, The Bible Psalms the Church's Only Manual of Praise* (IHM, p. 7, n. 4). In contrast, MHW can fill us in with the full reference here. Spurgeon was reviewing the book *The True Psalmody* published by the Reformed and United Presbyterian Churches of Philadelphia, and actually admitted that the book was an excellent defence of exclusive psalmody (MHW, p. 11). Again we see the idiosyncratic use of evidence by IHM, from which he *hurries on* to note that the point at issue is not how highly we regard the Psalms, but whether they are to be used exclusively in worship. MHW rightly asserts that there would be no point for IHM to refer to Spurgeon anyway if he had an argument solidly Scripture-based. And for that matter, as MHW says, for "every Spurgeon" that IHM quotes, the exclusive psalmodist can "quote a Calvin, a Knox, a Romaine, a Kennedy, or a Murray [*John Murray!*] ..." and we could add *infinitum* to this list. What IHM needed to have done, says MHW rightly, is to deliver "a strong biblical argumentation—and that is the very thing he fails to deliver!" (MHW, p. 11). We might add that this fundamental failure actually imports an important value into Iain Murray's booklet! It stands, fairly considered, as a clear example of the bankruptcy of the hymn-singer's case! As such, we might recommend it for reading! But only if you read Mr. Watts' booklet alongside it.

IHM follows with three sub-sections. In the first, he asks for Scriptural proof that God appointed the 150 Psalms of David for the worship of the Old Testament people of God (IHM, pp. 7-9). In answering his own question, IHM admits firstly that "some fifty-five Psalms," on the ground, we believe, of their titles, were given for Levitical choirs in corporate temple worship, but that other Psalms are evidently for personal use, and are denominated as "prayers" (IHM, p. 7). (It does not seem to have struck IHM that prayer can be sung.) Here IHM cites exclusive psalmodist William Binnie, who in his book *The Psalms; Their History, Teaching and Use* (1870) appears to support IHM's assertion that it is "an assumption" that "rests on no evidence" that "all the Psalms were ever used in the temple in worship, or that all were ever given for congregational praise ..."

(IHM, p. 7). IHM's usage of Binnie here is *again selective*, and subject, we apprehend, to "spin." MHW can tell us that Binnie here was merely noting that some Psalms were not likely to have been used for temple worship, but were intended for home and synagogue (MHW, p. 16). We might point out that Psalm 137 most certainly was not intended for temple use, as it was written during the Babylonian captivity when the temple was in ruins and the worshippers were hundreds of miles away. This is proof positive, if one needed it, that Psalms were sung by Israelites outside of temple worship, and not always under the aegis of Levitical choirs.

Again, IHM's cavalier usage of evidence produces a false impression. The reader is swept breathlessly along a trail that is deviating from biblical truth more and more, and into a maelstrom of further and compounded errors. In short, IHM's argument in this section majors on the idea that not all the Psalms were intended to be sung, and because some are specifically denominated as prayers, then, he assumes of course they cannot be regarded as material for corporate lyrical praise. Furthermore, just as we are to use our own words in prayer, why not also in praise? IHM goes on to quote Robert Candlish and James Hamilton in his support, wheeling them out as if they are to be considered the ultimate authority on this matter (IHM, pp. 8-9). MHW explains how IHM has over-blown what Candlish said, and neglected to tell us that Hamilton was well and truly refuted by Dr. James Gibson (MHW, p. 14). In this connection we have a statement by MHW which succinctly, and brilliantly sets forth the correct Scripture view of prayers and praises: "Whereas when we pray to God our thoughts suggest words, when we render praise his words suggest thoughts" (MHW, p. 13). This assertion is backed up with appropriate Scripture references, and MHW notes that whereas the disciples asked the Lord to "teach them how to pray" they did not ask him to "teach them how to make praises" (MHW, p. 13).

After more appropriate Scripture references, MHW declares,

These considerations lead us to conclude not only that prayer and sung praise are separate elements in worship *but that different biblical rules apply to them ...* What we may do in any given part of worship *depends upon the divine regulation for that part of worship.* It is thoroughly confusing therefore to confuse prayer and sung praise (MHW, p. 13; italics mine).

We would only want to add to this that the Psalter does include *sung prayers* too, and Psalm 51 is a salient example. But this does not contradict Mr. Watts' assertion here. It is a fact that "praise" is inclusive of "prayer" and is indeed a mode of prayer itself. The rule is that in corporate worship, sung praise must be psalmodical, and that such sung praise includes inspired psalmodic prayer as an element. This feature is proved by the following biblical considerations:

1) The Book of Psalms is in Hebrew designated the "Book of Praises" (Sopher Tehillim). That designation, "praises", is a blanket cover and refers to all those Psalms IHM wants to isolate as "prayers" in distinction to "praises."

2) At the end of Psalm 72, David writes, "the prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended." Examination of Psalm 72 indicates a mixture of prayer and praise interspersed throughout. And if this last verse of Psalm 72 be construed to refer as a summation of the whole of Davidic Psalms that precede it, then obviously the conclusion that prayer and praise are inseparably intertwined is further strengthened.

3) Corporate sung prayer therefore is included under the provisions that pertain to corporate sung praise. Spoken prayer, whether private or public (e.g., leading in a prayer meeting), is a different category altogether, since only one person is actually doing the speaking, and the rest listen, and concur with their "amens" or demur with their silence. And the vital principle is that anything that is done corporately together in address to God must be done in unison, to avoid confusion, and that *unison must be on the basis of the Word of God alone*. Once enforce on the congregation a unison in the words of man, and you open the door for heterodoxy, since the words of even the best of men will err to some extent.

IHM moves on in his second sub-section to assert that "Hebrew poetry is very different from our own," and "it is in prose not metre," and that, hence, "there is a strong case for saying that the Churches which chanted the Psalms were more correct" (than the Scottish or Genevan metrical Psalters, for instance; IHM, pp. 9-10). He continues, "It is hard to see how chanting would be musically uplifting in congregational praise today" (IHM, p. 10). He then insinuates that "some freedom" must be indulged by the exclusive psalmodist in turning the word order of Hebrew poetry into English, and that this effectively nullifies the exclusive psalmodists case for singing only the words of God in congregational praise (IHM, p. 10). We find this to be a fiasco of misrepresentation. To call Hebrew poetry "prose" is utter nonsense.

MHW gives us the technical details which IHM either is ignorant of, or does

not wish to reveal to his readers (MHW, pp.18ff.). Hebrew poetry, says MHW, is characterised by “rhythm,” which consists of “a fixed number of accented syllables in the line” (MHW, p.18). (Contrast European lyrical verse, which usually has a fixed number of *total* syllables per line without any recourse to *accented* syllables.) Again, Hebrew poetry is distinguished by parallelism, of which there are some eight or more kinds, and there are clearly such phenomena as stanzas, verses, and refrains. And IHM would have us believe that Hebrew poetry is “prose, not metre” (IHM, p. 8)!

Again, says MHW, it is not a matter of taking liberties with the text when one alters word order to process Hebrew poetry into English. What is paramount is to convey the same lyrical impression in the English as the Hebrew does to the Hebrew, and hence metric versification in English can be justified. Indeed, one might add that it is a facile and puerile appreciation of foreign languages to suppose that correct translations necessarily follow the exact word order of the originals, since grammar, morphology, idiom, and syntax differ from tongue to tongue, and in the translation of the Hebrew and Greek Bibles into English, such adjustments of word order in even the manifestly prose passages are necessary. In the poetic, and lyrical passages, this is more so.

One might also add that IHM has seemingly never developed an appreciation for “chanting.” He might do well to listen to some good cathedral choirs chanting the psalms. There is a set of CD’s that cover the whole Psalter, and it is amazing what depth of pathos and variation can be nuanced into a chant. IHM should listen to CLASSIC FM, and note the popularity of Gregorian chant and similar chanting amongst the classical music buffs. So much for his assertion that “it is hard to see how chant would be musically uplifting in congregational praise today” (IHM, p. 10). If chanting has one great drawback, it is this: it is more difficult to perform than it is to sing a simple melody.

But with MHW we concur that “metrical psalmody helps to preserve the poetic nature of the Psalms” (MHW, p. 19).

IHM finishes this subsection with a flourishing sneer at what he calls the amount of freedom exclusive psalmodists need to exercise in translating the Psalms into English verse, and insinuates that such freedom takes the translator away from the actual inspired “words of God” in the originals (IHM, p. 10). MHW demolishes him here, with a detailed examination of the technicalities underlying such translation. MHW refers to the meticulous nature of the translation of the Scottish Psalter as verified by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and such eminent Puritan divines as Manton, Owen, Jenkyn, Watson,

Matthew Poole and others . All concurred in declaring how faithfully close the English Psalter was to the Hebrew original (MHW, pp. 19-20).

In his third sub-section, IHM posits that even if it could be proved that the Psalter was the alone authorised praise for the Old Testament people of God, then that does not establish it as the sole manual of praise for the New (IHM, pp. 10-11).

IHM seems oblivious to the fact that in the Hebrew the book of Psalms is, as MHW shows, entitled “The Book of Praises” (MHW, pp. 17-18). MHW gives seven irrefutable reasons why the Psalter is evidently the praise manual for the Old Testament times—seven reasons which IHM seems never to have heard of. What about the Psalter’s occupying the same exclusive position for the New Testament people of God? Ephesians 5:19, for example, is interpreted by the exclusive psalmists to refer to the Psalter alone. However, IHM roundly asserts, “we know of no prominent orthodox commentator who takes that view.” He cites Eadie, Charles Hodge, Lenski, Hendriksen, etc. (IHM, p. 10). Again, we are forced to say that this is hideous use of evidence. Eadie was a Scottish United Presbyterian of the mid-19th century. His denomination was throwing psalmody out; the same goes for Charles Hodge. Lenski was a Lutheran, and Lutherans never were in favour of exclusive psalmody. Hendriksen was a doyen of the Christian Reformed Church in the USA, which denomination had introduced hymnody and thrown out exclusive psalmody. (Something to do with common grace, I believe, a feature which also induced that denomination to throw out the whole Reformed faith ultimately.)

And IHM “know[s] of no prominent orthodox commentator[s] who take [the exclusive psalmist] view [of Ephesians 5:19]!” MHW can point us to them and give apposite quotes from them (MHW, pp. 27-30). Here they come, with their provenance and date of relevant writing in brackets: Nicholas Byfield (Puritan; 1615), Henry Ainsworth (Puritan; 1627), Jean Daillé (Huguenot; 1648), John Cotton (New England Puritan; 1649), Isaac Ambrose (Puritan; 1650, 1659), George Swinnock (Puritan; 1662), Thomas Manton (Puritan; post-humously published in 1701), Dr. John Gill (English Baptist; early 1700’s), and John Brown of Haddington (1775). That is of course, just to name a few.

Question: Was IHM really ignorant of all this lot? No, he knows of John Cotton as an exclusive psalmist because he cites him at the bottom of the next page. Again we question the reliability of the way IHM utilises evidence.

What is notable here is that IHM makes absolutely no attempt to exegete Ephesians 5:19 and its associated New Testament texts. If you want that, you

have to read MHW, who will show you that such texts indubitably prove exclusive psalmody as incumbent on New Testament Christians.

Let us proceed to IHM's next step. He compounds his error from the previous assertion and *assumes* that as the material referred to as praise in Ephesians 5:19 is "uncertain," then "it is far less so in the case of 1 Corinthians 14:26" where the apostle says, "Every one of you hath a psalm." Now here I would immediately say that a biblical Psalm is positively specified. But IHM gives us this following mealy-mouthed assertion from Hodge: "It appears to mean such a song given by inspiration, and not one of the Psalms of David" (IHM, p. 11). What kind of exegesis is this? Is this Princeton in all its glory, is it? "It *appears* to mean ...!" And on such a rickety platform IHM would stand his exegesis and his doctrine? Surely the question is: "What *does* it mean?" And is not the Bible capable of supplying a solid answer to that? But IHM thinks he has an ally here, he goes on to cite the exclusive psalmodist John Cotton as agreeing with Hodge on this! Well, does he? MHW explains that Cotton was speaking of it as possibly an extraordinary gift under immediate divine inspiration, as part of the charismata, and certainly not as a natural poetic gift to compose hymns (MHW, p. 30). Now if Cotton is right, such a charismatic Psalm would be every bit as divine inspired scripture as the Book of Psalms. And use of such a composition would effectively be an addition to the Old Testament manual of praise. But we see here nothing to support the idea that an "uninspired" lyric is warrantably introduced into New Testament worship. As MHW says, either this text refers to a Psalm of David, or it must refer to another Psalm equally as inspired. "Either way" he sums up, "it provides no warrant for the introduction of uninspired hymns" (MHW, p. 31).

IHM at last moves on to discuss "The Regulative Principle" in his fifth section (IHM, pp. 11-20). Regrettably, we find we have to say that this whole section is a miasma of misconception, misquotes, and continual idiosyncratic use of evidence. Also IHM naturally enough assumes that what he has said thus far is valid, and hence plunges ahead loaded with the accumulated down-drag of his previous errors. There is no formal explanation of the regulative principle given, with any exegesis of the cardinal Scriptures that pertain to it, only a brief flourish in allusion, in which he presents an erroneous picture of what the principle is, asserting that it only requires that sung praise be a part of worship, but does not specify what words we are to use in such singing. This is just plain untrue. But IHM asserts that exclusive psalmodists object that the "best Reformed churches and authors thought otherwise and saw hymns of human com-

posure as an intrusion on divine authority” (IHM, p. 11). This contention of the exclusivists he then subjects to nine pages in which he claims to prove the contrary (IHM, pp. 12-20).

He begins, of course, citing Luther as unfamiliar with a restriction to psalmody. Then he alludes to the presence of such Scriptural songs as the *Nunc Dimittis* in the Genevan Psalter, and with the old chestnut concerning the hymn allegedly composed by John Calvin, which he says, was “to be found in the same Genevan Psalter.” He argues that Calvin gave priority to Psalms as a *preference*, not as a *principle* (IHM, p. 12).

However, MHW in response can quote Calvin’s *The Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers and Songs* of 1542. Therein Calvin asserts exclusive psalmody founded on Scriptural principles. And contra IHM’s claim that Calvin’s hymn was included in the Genevan Psalter, MHW can inform us that this was NEVER so, because in every edition of the Genevan Psalter between 1542 and 1562, it NEVER contained a single human hymn. MHW can also tell us that it was not until the 19th century that anyone ascribed that particular hymn to Calvin, and he is able to present us with an array of evidence counter to IHM’s assertion, linking the particular hymn with someone else (MHW, pp. 31-34).

The rest of IHM’s fifth section follows the same desultory path. He purports to find evidence from all quarters of old-time divines who agree with him against the exclusivists. It is sufficient, for this review, we believe, to say that all his evidence is thoroughly overturned and refuted by the diligent researches of MHW (MHW, pp. 31-46). One example may suffice: IHM wheels out the Puritan John Flavel, claiming that nobody was a “stronger upholder” than he of the regulative principle. He says that Flavel warned that there was no “surer and speedier way” to men’s ruin than to “bring their own inventions into God’s worship.” But on the other hand IHM claims Flavel was “far from supposing that hymns belonged to that category” which Flavel was proscribing, and so much so that Flavel provides us with a “hymn of his own composition in the same volume in which the warning was written” (IHM, p. 15). All this is again a misuse of evidence by IHM. MHW points out, first, that Flavel’s “hymn” was composed from two biblical passages, and as such it could not be considered to be an *uninspired* hymn. Second he shows that in the 17th century a “hymn” was just another name for “a lyrical poem” not understood to be “a metrical composition sung in a religious service.” MHW brings other examples of the same to our notice, and sums it all up by giving solid historical reasons explaining that the Puritan indulgence in poetry and lyrical poetry was not intended for public

worship. A 20th century expert on these matters, Prof. Erik Routley, who was Lecturer and Tutor in Ecclesiastical History at Mansfield College, Oxford, concurs with MHW. Routley states: “during the seventeenth century scarcely any English hymns were written at all. The familiar hymns from that age are *poems which their authors never designed for congregational singing*” (MHW, pp. 37-38).

IHM throughout this section makes the unwarranted logical jump again and again, that poems are hymns. A man may compose a plethora of poems, and even sing some of them, without denying exclusive psalmody for corporate worship. This feature leads IHM into the logical trap whereby he tries to undermine exclusive psalmody on the grounds that some exclusivists sang uninspired lyrics in private. As the issue concerns corporate praise, IHM’s assertion lacks logical justification.

MHW also gives us a thorough exposition of the Scripture texts underlying the case for exclusive psalmody (MHW, pp. 18-27), a feature which IHM studiously and significantly avoids, even in his section entitled “The Regulative Principle.”

In his sixth section, IHM considers “The Positive Case for Hymns” (IHM, pp. 20-29). At the outset he starts with the words: “I believe it can be argued”—not a confidence-generating beginning. Why could he not say, “I believe it can be definitely established from the Word of God!” The fact is that he is here tacitly admitting that what he wants to establish cannot be established from Scripture. Nevertheless, with his usual flourish and rattle of pseudo-authority, he blunders on, claiming that “there is good reason for believing” that the New Testament leaves matters “open” on the case concerning hymns and Psalms (IHM, p. 20), and that fundamentally New Testament truth, including the work of Christ and the New Covenant, are not adequately portrayed in the Old Testament Psalms. IHM considers the example of “Christ crucified” as illustrative of his claims here. He takes issue with “a recent defender of exclusive psalmody” who wrote that “no human poet can advance beyond Psalm 22 or indeed approach anywhere near it” (IHM, p. 24). IHM goes on to say that the words of “O sacred head sore wounded” (by Bernard of Clairvaux), and the words of “And can it be that I should gain” (IHM does not inform his readers that this hymn was written by an Arminian, Charles Wesley), and the words of “When I survey the wondrous cross” (IHM does not tell his readers that this hymn was written by the quasi-Arian Isaac Watts, who right to his last days doubted the Scripture doctrine of the Trinity, and openly said that David’s wording in many

Psalms was inappropriate for Christians), are, in fact, better expressive of the believer's feelings than the words of Psalm 22 (IHM, p. 25). Whether he realizes it or not, IHM is effectively saying that the lyrics of the Arminian and the quasi-Arian are superior to those of the Holy Ghost. And unwittingly he is exemplifying the whole problem of human hymnody, that in its very method and application it requires Christian believers to swallow the words of composers from every spectrum of Christendom. And we have the gross spectacle today, of Evangelical, even Calvinistic Christians, singing the lyrics composed by Romanists, Anglo-Catholics, Arminians and who-knows what else. A check out of even *Christian Hymns*, probably the best and most evangelical of modern hymnals, will yet reveal such idiosyncrasies.

From page 25 on IHM enlarges on this theme, claiming to show how hymnody is superior to psalmody for the New Testament Christian. He is explicit. For instance, on the subject of heaven, "hymns have excelled the Psalter" (IHM, p. 25). "I believe there is confirmation from history of the argument that the larger blessings of the New Testament era warrant additional forms of praise" (IHM, p. 27). He goes on to suggest that the eras of revival such as the Great Awakening have been richest in the production of new hymns because in those times there was "a new measure of the Spirit given to the churches" (IHM, p. 27)! Now this reveals it all, the fact that in the rock bottom of the argument for hymnody its proponents tacitly regard hymn-writers as being moved, inspired, under a "new measure of the Spirit." And that what they compose under this Divine influence is superior to the words of God in the Psalms. Superior, because not only equally theopneustically generated by the Holy Ghost, they also supersede psalmody with an assumed manifestation of greater light and greater relevance to each modern situation as history unfolds. This is the high-horsed arrogance of the whole hymn lobby, that, like the Pope in Rome, they regard themselves as being under the charismatic anointing of the Holy Spirit, and moved, "borne along" (II Peter 1:21), by the inspiration of the heavenly Paraclete. Hence, though they dare not admit it openly, they nevertheless smuggle the principle through into their theology and practice, that non-biblical hymns are effectively new Scripture. They may indeed, be rather fuzzy in their assertions over all this, but their attitude and their practice give them away. Read one of their sermons, even of such a fine pulpiteer as Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and you will find that whereas in the New Testament the apostolic writers are rich in the quantity of Old Testament Scripture they quote, and indeed quote the Psalms probably more than any other Old Testament book, nevertheless, our modern

hymnody-evangelicals like MLJ fill their sermons with quotes of extra-biblical hymns. This whole practice betrays a sub-conscious mind-set which, at its deepest level, regards the words of hymnody as being as sacred and authoritative as Holy Writ, and superior indeed to that Word in terms of their ability to reveal Divine Truth, and lead believers in worship.

And in their liturgical praxis, they usually supersede psalmody with hymnody, virtually totally. And is not such total obliteration of psalmody the exact and axiomatic result of the kind of “positive argument for hymns” that IHM advances here? For if hymns indeed “excel the Psalter,” as he says, then it is inescapable logically that hymns ought to replace the Psalms totally. And this is strangely more than IHM wants to establish. He explicitly says in his booklet, “I agree Psalms are needed today. More psalm singing would be a blessing to many” (IHM, p. 30). It is exclusive psalmody IHM wants to rule out. He agrees that some Psalms should be sung. But if hymns are superior, which according to his “revival-orientated” theology they are, then surely the Psalms must be a second-class ticket, and unworthy of Christ? And is this not the tacit belief of millions of modern, untaught, misled professors of faith? Hymnody is their total practice, and any thought of psalmody seems to them a strange, and unsupportable innovation?

Suffice to say, that IHM’s assertions here, and in the rest of his booklet, are hounded off the battlefield by MHW’s steady, patient, and efficient cascade of refutation. It is impossible in the space of a review to do justice to MHW’s weighty argumentation. We can only exhort the reader to purchase his booklet, and read it alongside an open Bible, and he will see indubitably the biblical answer to the question posed at the beginning of this review article.

In conclusion, it seems apposite now to compare the two booklets, side by side, as it were.

First, *The Psalter—The Only Hymnal?* (Edinburgh: Banner, 2001) by Iain H. Murray costs £1.50. It measures approximately 125 mm. X 180 mm. and runs to about 10,000 words. The booklet has 32 pages, carries 43 footnotes, and is set out in 8 sections, with some 35 Scripture references, but no bibliography and no indices of Scriptures, topics or persons. Neither does it contain any exegesis of relevant Scripture texts, nor any examination of the philology of key words.

Second, *God’s Hymnbook for the Christian Church* (no place: James Begg Society, 2003) by Malcolm H. Watts costs £3. It is a response to Iain Murray’s booklet, and follows its sequence of argumentation, but with so much more

depth, detail, and precision, that one can only say that it outclasses Murray's work. Watt's booklet is produced in an immaculate style and measures 150 mm, X 210 mm. It runs to some 64 pages with approximately 25,000 words in the main body of the text, carries 127 footnotes, and is replete with a general index covering three pages (each double column), and a Scripture index of some 309 references (200 OT, 109 NT), as well as a useful bibliography.

Whereas Murray's use of evidence is deficient, and, we feel justified in saying, subjected to "spin," Watts' argumentation is characterised by a meticulous carefulness and avoidance of spin. He is thereby able to fully refute Murray on every point. Also Watts carefully examines the philology of the apposite Scripture terms endemic to the argument and produces a detailed, and precise exegesis of the relevant biblical texts.

Malcolm Watts has evidently done his work far more thoroughly than the Banner man, and his booklet deserves the widest possible circulation. It ranks, we believe, as the best booklet on Psalmody we have ever seen (and we have examined quite a few over the last 40 years). If Michael Bushell's 240-page book, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant, 2nd edition 1993), provides the standard for a thorough and full work establishing exclusive psalmody, then Malcolm Watts' booklet is its equivalent at a level more accessible and understandable to most Christians. As such, Mr. Watts' booklet ought to be in every Christian home. The publishers, the James Begg Society, are to be commended for bringing this work to the public, and bringing it in such an attractive and well-arranged format. The booklet is worth buying in bulk, and copies ought to be distributed world-wide as far and as fast as they can go.

Iain Murray's booklet too, is not without its use. It is, as we asserted earlier, an example of the biblical, theological, and logical bankruptcy of the hymnody lobby. And here and there he makes concessions and admissions that suggest that he is not as convinced by his own reasoning as he would really like to indicate. He admits the cogency of the exclusivist position, and he concedes that Psalms ought to be sung in worship. It is sad that his reasoning has been so swayed by unbiblical considerations. Exclusive psalmodists ought to read his booklet candidly, for in a back-handed manner, it will only testify to them even further, if such further testimony was needed, of the correctness of their position. But those who are uninformed, are likely, we fear, to be led astray by the idiosyncrasies therein, the full force of which is an unwitting, and unintended argument promoting *exclusive hymnody*, as Mr. Murray himself would see if he were to inspect the ramifications of his logic.

In evaluating these two productions, we have had it brought to our notice that a much briefer review of Mr. Watts' booklet was printed recently in the *Evangelical Times (ET)* for October 2003 (page 22). The review was really as dismissive as it was brief, and the writer seemed to think Mr. Watts had not "convincingly answered Iain Murray's request for scriptural proof that the 150 Psalms were the God-appointed manual of public worship for the Old Testament church, and that they remain the sole manual for the New." Also, the reviewer did not accept that Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 "can bear the weight that exclusive psalmodists seek to place on them."

In response to this we would affirm the absolute opposite on both the above points. Mr. Watts fully answers the reviewer's quibble on the matters of exegesis and biblical philology, but we wonder at the reviewer's ability to appreciate such arguments (MHW, pp. 19-31). And as to Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, the reviewer should rather be asking whether those texts can "bear the weight" the hymn-lobby "seek to place on them." The fact is that modern evangelicals virtually *in toto* read the Bible as if it first appeared in the 20th century, and interpret it in the thought categories of modern Western man. The real meaning of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" in the above texts is to be determined by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and not importing modern predilections or traditions. As such the answer is inescapable, and the *ET* reviewer has not, in my considered view, really come to terms with the *Sola Scriptura* of the Reformation. But then, if he had been convinced by Malcolm Watts' work, would the *Evangelical Times* have printed his review? The whole evangelical set-up in Britain is filled with hymnody right up to the back of its teeth, and practically they read Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 as meaning "[man-made] hymns and hymns and hymns." And psalmody goes to the wall completely. And that is the force of Mr. Murray's logic as I demonstrated above. If you regard modern hymnody as inspired by the Holy Ghost, tacitly you are subconsciously regarding it as Scripture, and if you add to that the notion that these hymns are superior vehicles to the Psalms as to the amount of revelation and relevance they possess, then of course, you *should* abandon psalmody *altogether!* Mr. Murray does not want that, a fact that the hymn-lobby and the *ET* reviewer seem to have missed.

So how should we worship God?

Personally, I am sick of having other people ram the uninspired words of modern hymnists down my throat, and expecting me to sing them. I find error, even heresy, and distortion abound in them, and I have to concur with the late C. S. Lewis that the bulk of them are no more than fourth rate poetry set to fifth

rate music. (As CSL was an Oxbridge Professor of the English language, I think I can rightly say that his words carry some weight.) So when, in the modern evangelical services of today, I am required to praise the Most High with the profane words of fallible men, I stand up, I look up, and I shut up. What right, what authority, has any minister, cleric, or office-bearer got to shovel down the throats of all and sundry the words of mere men and say, "Sing!" But such office bearers have the mandate, indisputably, if what they call us to sing, is the pure words of God. None can quarrel with the Psalms. You can quarrel with the Arminian Wesleys, with the quasi-Arian Isaac Watts, and the plethora of Romanist, Anglo-Catholic, and charismatic hymn-writers whose productions pepper the pages of even the best of evangelical hymnals, but you cannot object to being required to sing the Words of God. May God bring forth more and more of his pure psalmody, is my prayer. All Christians could unite around the Psalter. *This could not be said of any hymnal.*

Three hundred years ago, an English dissenting minister named Watts began a full-scale crusade against psalmody. He began by paraphrasing the 150 Psalms with cavalier liberty, and also produced a book of hymns, and led our forefathers away from the wholesome biblical psalmody. Shaky on his doctrine of the Trinity, he failed in 1719 at the Salter's Hall Conference to come forward to support those ministers who wanted the English Dissenters to maintain fidelity to the *Westminster Standards*, and so was a party to the triumph of the Arians in abolishing subscription to those standards. This Watts carried on his work against the Scottish and other Psalters, and became world-renowned as a hymnist.

Today, amazingly, lightning strikes at the same place a second time, only in its mirror image. It is an English dissenting minister, name of Watts, who now takes up the battle for exclusive psalmody, and his adversary is a man of Scottish Presbyterian connection, who in 1972 swore allegiance to the *Westminster Standards*, has a world-renowned reputation for his work in Reformed publishing, and is an advocate for hymnody.

Well! Chance? Or predestination?