By Writing "Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs," Did Paul Really Mean, "Psalms, Psalms and Psalms?"

Stewart E. Lauer

Concerning singing in public worship, the of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* declares the "parts of the ordinary religious worship of God" to include, the "singing of psalms with grace in the heart." Putting aside the question of the lower case "p" in the original text of the confession and assuming that the expression refers to the various psalms which comprise the Book of Psalms (*cf.* WCF 1:2), a most interesting matter arises when the proof texts for this paragraph are examined. Among them are Col 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." and Eph 5:19, "be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." (Greek: psalms=*psalmois*, hymns=*humnois*, spiritual songs=*odais pneumatikais*) In other words, soon after crafting a confession which defines worship in singing to be singing <u>psalms</u>, the confession's authors attached (though never formally adopted) two proof texts for this very teaching, in which the apostle appears to exhort the saints to sing praise among themselves by employing not only "psalms," but "hymns" and "spiritual songs" as well!

As curious, or even inconsistent as this may seem on the surface, the OPC's exclusive Psalm-singing sister church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA), has just published a tract seeking to reconcile these two Scriptures with its practice, in effect, with a strict reading of the WCF on worship, whereby public worship services include only the Psalms in their repertoire ("What Did Paul Mean by 'Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs'?" Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publ., 2001; www.psalms4u.com). This tract argues that "the terms 'psalms, hymns, and songs' are all modified by the adjective 'spiritual' which describes their quality as something given directly by the Holy Spirit" (emph. orig.). Further, it claims that, given the use of these musical terms in the superscriptions above many of the psalms in the Greek translation of the OT (the LXX) used routinely by the Greek speaking early churches, "it is natural that [Paul] would be referring to the well-known hymns and songs of the inspired psalter by using those terms." I seek to address the validity of the interpretation of these two Scriptures advanced in this tract. Only "by singing those [psalms, hymns and songs] of the biblical psalter," the tract argues, "can [Christians] be confident that we are bringing Him a sacrifice of praise as He desires."

There appear to be three key points claimed by the tract which ought to be scrutinized since they appear to be at odds with the KJV translation of these two texts which was published just before the WCF and used for the proof texts of the WCF. (1) Does this adjective denote, "given directly by the Holy Spirit," as claimed? (2) Does this adjective, 'spiritual' (pneumatikos fem. plural) naturally modify all three nouns? (3) By using these terms, "psalms, hymns, songs"—if indeed all are modified by "spiritual"— is it indeed "natural he would be referring to the well-known hymns and songs of the inspired psalter"? It is important to note that as the argument is constructed in the tract, #3 depends upon both #1 and #2, hence for the interpretation to be credible, all three elements must be compelling. Ordinarily when authors use three different but similar expressions, readers naturally assume that three at least somewhat different connotations are attached. Thus, the burden of proof lies firmly with the interpreter who wishes to

claim that, in effect, by "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs," Paul simply meant, "the Psalms" of the OT.

(1) **Does this adjective, 'spiritual', really denote, "given directly by the Holy Spirit," as claimed?** Liddell and Scott, the standard dictionary of general ancient Greek, recognizes prior uses pertaining to the 'wind' or to 'breath', other meanings of the root. The meaning here is specialized, "of spirit, spiritual, N.T." As an adjective derived from the general word spirit, the standard translation, "spiritual," would be the expected starting point for inquiry, but from etymology, "given directly by the Spirit," does not necessarily follow. (Why did Paul coin the expression, 'God-breathed (theopneustos)', in 2 Tim 3:16, if the Gk. Word for 'spiritual' already meant "given directly by the Holy Spirit" in his normal parlance?)

Some NT Uses of 'Spiritual'

In the NT, 'spiritual' can denote *spiritual gifts* of the Holy Spirit (eg. 1 Cor 14:1); obviously, there, the tract's definition would fit, but is not required. In Rom 7:14, Paul says "the law is <u>spiritual</u>." There, the tract's definition seems possible, though not required. Paul believes the OT law is given by inspiration, but is that really the force of the argument he is making at that point in Romans? Is Paul's contrast really between, "the law is *given directly by the Holy Spirit*, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin," or simply, as usually rendered, "the law is sp., but I am unsp."? In Galatians 6:1 it is very doubtful that by, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are <u>spiritual</u> should restore him," that Paul meant, "you who are *given directly by the Holy Spirit*." In each case, the notion of pertaining to the spirit, hence 'of the Spirit, spiritual' is quite adequate to fit the Pauline context, and in at least the last case (Gal 6:1), the tract's definition does not to fit. Hodge, commenting on Eph 5:19, says it well, "This may mean either *inspired* [songs], . . . or [songs] expressing spiritual thoughts and feelings; this latter is the more probable; as not only inspired men are said to be filled with the Spirit [v 18b]."

Finally on this question as to whether the force of Paul's use of 'spiritual' is intended to mean, *given directly by the Holy Spirit*, as opposed to a more general 'spiritual', it should be noted that Paul himself in a number of other passages expressly modifies nouns with various adjectival forms of expression to unequivocally emphasize that the noun in question is *from God* (Eg. "a bldg. from God," 2 Cor 5:1; "growth from God," Col 2:19). That the noun is God rather than the Spirit is beside the point. One of these uses would clearly and naturally communicate the notion of a 'song from the Spirt', if that is really what Paul intended to say.

In short, I cannot agree that by calling songs $(od\varsigma)$ "spiritual" specifically asserts, as the tract claims, that the songs to be sung in public worship must have been "given directly by the Holy Spirit," since the evidence in Paul's letters does not support rendering the adjective any more specifically than, as in most English translations, by the word 'spiritual'. Anything inspired would qualify for the NT technical use of this adjective, but one cannot say that the adjective, in and of itself had come to mean inspired; the lexical evidence is just not there to go that far.

(2) **Does this adjective, 'spiritual'** (*pneumatikos* fem. plural), naturally modify all three nouns? After reading commentaries on both sides, and searching NT Greek

Grammars in vain, I think the answer is, 'We do not know.' Commentators are split. Older ones tended to say, yes, though Hodge answers, no. More recently F.F.Bruce (NIC) replies 'no', while A. Lincoln (WBC) says, 'yes'. The last man claims support from the grammar by Blass, et al., but his reference turned out to be a section dealing with subject-predicate relationships—participles, in particular—not to adjectives with lists of nouns.

If one could be sure as Lincoln claims that these three terms are essentially synonymous, one could agree that "their synonymity makes it all the more likely that the adjective . . . embraces all three terms." However, as we shall see, the first term, often (if not always) has a very specific (technical) meaning in the NT. Thus, assuming all three are close synonyms, here, in order to discern the force of the adjective is circular reasoning. Due to the usage pattern of 'psalm' in the NT, I lean toward reading spiritual only with the 'song' (indeed the other two already have the notion of 'religious', hence for Christians 'Spiritual', as a connotation); however, until a very thorough study of similar constructions in contemporary Greek usage is conducted, one ought not to be dogmatic on this 2nd question. This tract's, "Moreover, the terms...are all modified by the adjective 'spiritual'," seems much too confident for the evidence which I have seen in grammars and commentaries. Thus, I say, "We do not know" well enough to say how many nouns are modified by the adjective 'spiritual'.

(3) By using these terms, "psalms, hymns, songs"—if indeed all are modified by "spiritual"— may one really say it is "natural [Paul] would be referring to the well-known hymns and songs of the inspired psalter"? The tract provides but two strands of evidence: (a) the appearance (variously) of these terms in the superscriptions above some of the Psalms in the LXX and (b) a quote from "Josephus, a Jewish contemporary of Paul." "David . . . composed songs to God and hymns [ôdas eis ton theon kai humnous] in varied meters." (Ant IV.12.3)

It is important to note, that the tract does not try to argue that "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" <u>as an expression</u> had ever become a fixed term for referring to the Psalms, as, for example, 'the Law and the Prophets' had for the OT (e.g. Mat 7:12, Lk 16:16). Thus, the tract is claiming that each of these three words on its own, or by contextual association with the others or the adjective 'spiritual', which had come, in the Christian church, to mean not simply a psalm, but a psalm within the Psalms, not simply a hymn, but a hymn within the Psalms, and not simply a spiritual song, but a spiritual song within the Book of Psalms. Again, the only evidence offered is the varied appearances of the words in the headings of the LXX psalter, and one place in a 1st century Jewish author where the words 'hymn' and 'song' appear close together in reference to David's compositions.

To analyze this claim fairly, one must first understand the ordinary meanings of these words and then ask whether there is any evidence for a specialized or "technical meaning" having developed with in Jewish or Christian usage. Apart from such evidence, these words, in and of themselves, must be presumed to have their ordinary Greek meaning as elsewhere in the 1st century Roman Empire.

The word 'psalm', though it does have a more general usage (originally the "sound of a harp" and later "a song" or "a song sung to a harp"), is recognized as having just such a NT technical meaning, i.e. "a psalm" (L. & S.). The word for 'hymn',

generally can be "a *hymn*, *festive song*, or an *ode* in praise of gods or heroes," or, occasionally, a "mournful song" (L. & S.). The word for song, according to L. & S., is "a *song*, *lay*, *ode*," or can in the plural be "*lyric poetry*." Aside from the first of these (psalm), no technical usage is recognized by lexicons. In other words, as Hodge puts it, "the early usage of [the 3 Greek terms] appears to have been as loose as that of the corresponding English terms, *psalm*, *hymn*, *song*, is with us. A psalm was a hymn, and a hymn a song. Still there was a distinction." In short, Lexicons support the KJV's (and others') rendering of these terms as quite accurate, with only the term 'psalm' established as having a technical meaning (i.e., esp. a Psalm). Are they right?

Technical Definitions for 'psalm', 'hymn', 'song'?

As noted, 'psalm' in the NT has the technical meaning of a psalm in the OT Book of Psalms. Putting aside the two cases under study, four out of five other uses are definitively to the OT book, with only 1 Cor 14:26 disputable. Some assert that "When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation..." necessarily implies Psalm-like Christian songs given by charismatic inspiration, but unless one shares the common (errant—Hebrews was likely sent as a sermon) conviction of many modern NT scholars that use of the OT is NT worship was very limited, there is no reason why the Corinthian brother 'having a psalm' from the Spirit might not be sharing OT Psalms with the church. In short, there is no reason not to read all of the other uses of the word 'psalm' in the NT as references to the Book of Psalms.

No such technical usage for the term 'hymn' is recognized, generally. L. & S. define it as, "a hymn, festive song or ode, in praise of gods or heroes." Thus, like the English word, general usage gave the word a religious 'flavor', but there is no evidence that it referred to any particular collection or body of religious songs. The six appearances of the term in the LXX psalter headings match this usage, perfectly. Similarly, the words of Josephus offer no evidence that the word, 'hymn', by itself, or even nearby the word, 'songs to God' had come to carry the specific force of a hymn in the Psalms. Josephus specified 'David' as the composer, so there can be no positive evidence for such special usage in Josephus' statement. (The reference to the Psalter is in the context and thus cannot be shown to come from the words 'hymn' or 'song'.)

Finally, the word, "song", like its English counterpart, is very broad, hence the need to modify (at least) it by using the word "spiritual." Josephus' words similarly no more prove a technical definition for this word than for 'hymn'. In fact, the opposite is true. This word (or possibly 'hymn', too) is modified by the prepositional phrase, "songs to God." Such modifiers are unnatural when a technical definition is being employed. (If one goes from 'the white house', to 'the great big white house', the technical force of the term evaporates.) There is good evidence both in Josephus and in Paul against any technical meaning for 'song'.

Conclusion and Summary

If there is no proof for a technical meaning referring to the Psalms for the words 'hymn' or for 'song'; there is no evidence for taking 'spiritual' beyond its ordinary English meaning; and, the case for distributing that adjective across all three terms is unproved. Thus, the KJV translation cited by the authors of the WCF as a proof text for exclusive Psalm singing in worship, "p[P]salms, hymns, and spiritual songs," remains a

faithful rendering of the full force of the Greek original, but rather than supporting restricting Christian worship to the OT Psalms, Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16 are commands encouraging the use of (1) Psalms, (2) hymns, and (3) spiritual songs. The presence of these English terms ('song' and 'psalm' in fact appear in the KJV) scattered throughout the superscriptions of the English Bible's Psalter would surely not lead the average reader to read the expression "p[P]salms, hymns and spiritual songs" to be merely a reference to the OT Psalter. It is very dubious that the mere addition of the term, 'hymn' to the KJV superscriptions of six of the 150 Psalms would change this.

In summary, the evidence suggests that "psalms" means "Psalms," but there is no evidence "hymns" or "songs" ever came to have a technical force. There is good evidence that the latter does not have such special meaning in the two contexts mentioned in the tract. Thus, the latter two terms ought to be presumed to have their usual general meaning: fairly synonymous, but with the former term carrying a religious connotation. The claim in the tract that "1st Century Jews and Christians would have understood these psalms, hymns, and songs as biblical psalmody" based upon comparison with the LXX psalter and Josephus is without merit.