

Two Points of Difference for those holding the Regulative Principle On Psalms and Instruments

Part I: an evaluation of exclusive Psalmody (EP)

7A. Transition to positive argument

8A. Positive arguments for singing uninspired songs in worship

1B. Finding the answer within the difficult question

2B. Finding the answer within the Psalms

For discussion on September 7

3B. Finding the answer in the imprecatory Psalms

Former associate pastor at Southfield Presbyterian Church, Brian Schwertley, wrote a defense of EP: *A Brief Examination of Exclusive Psalmody*. I quote his approach to the problem of imprecatory Psalms. My comments & Qs are in brackets and italicized; the #s are mine.

1) Another objection to the sufficiency of the Psalter is the idea that the imprecatory Psalms are inappropriate for worship in the new dispensation. The imprecatory Psalms are songs in which the psalmist petitions God (often in a strong manner) to pour our His wrath upon his (the psalmist's) and/or the covenant people's enemies. Isaac Watts (who did more to destroy exclusive Psalmody among Reformed believers than any other person) wrote, "While we are kindling into divine love by the Meditations of the Loving Kindness of God and the Multitude of His Tender Mercies, within a few Verses some dreadful Curse against Men is propos'd to our lips." The idea that the imprecatory Psalms are inappropriate for Christians to sing is totally unbiblical for a number of reasons. First, the Psalms were written by the Holy Spirit; therefore, the idea that these imprecatory petitions are barbaric or unethical is totally wicked.

[Do you see some way to reply to this point?]

2) Second, one can only regard the imprecatory Psalms as improper for new covenant believers if one holds to a dispensational or modernistic hermeneutic. Both of these theological perspectives are unscriptural and outside the pale of the Reformed faith.

[How might we counter-argue this claim (leaving the modernistic point to the side)?]

3) Third, the imprecatory Psalms are frequently quoted in the New Testament (e.g., Ps. 69 and 109). "Psalm 69, which bears more of the imprecatory character than any other Psalm except 109, is quoted in five separate places and referred to in several others. No other psalms are more frequently quoted in New Testament than the imprecatory psalms, except the Messianic psalms."⁵² Jesus even applies Psalm 69 as a prophecy regarding His own situation (cf. Jn. 15:25).

[What are some fair and reasonable counter-points to raise to this line of argument?]

4) fn52:

"Any argument that wars against the divine inspiration of the Psalms that we are considering wars against the whole Book of Psalms. They stand or fall together. The believer in inspiration will not therefore be guilty of irreverence and profanity of flouting these Psalms; for that which is said and done against them is said and done against the Holy Spirit; and who will dare to risk having such a charge lodged against him?" (J.H. Webster, "The Imprecatory Psalms" in Ed. John McNaugher, *The Psalms in Worship*, p. 312).

[How can we reply to this fn?]

5) Many believers have argued that the imprecatory Psalms are an excellent reason why the church must have kinder, gentler hymns to supplement the Psalter. This type of thinking is unbiblical. It ignores both Scripture and history. One must always keep in mind that the Psalter was written and organized by the Holy Spirit. It therefore contains a balance and proper emphasis on the attributes of God and His dealings with men that is *exactly* what God desires. The attributes of God, such as His wrath, are not ignored or downplayed, but given proper

emphasis. God's hatred of the wicked and His awful judgments against them are an important part of the Psalter. "God is both sovereign and righteous; he possesses the unquestionable right to destroy all evil in his universe; if it is right for God to plan and effect this destruction, then it is right also for the saints to pray for the same."

[From this paragraph, what can we learn about the people who hold to EP?]

Some further comments in reply to these EP arguments are in order.

A) Without even considering song in the assembly, the place and use of the imprecatory Psalms for the NT is difficult and all should acknowledge that fact. This would promote more humility and love.

B) S's biblical basis in defense of EP is threefold. For short, only the 3rd has merit: the quotation of imprecatory Psalms in the NT. Of course, the contextual use the NT makes is the key. For example, Jn. 15.25 quotes from Ps 69 but not in the vein of imprecation (believer's asking God to curse unbelievers). Jesus quotes it to confirm sinful hatred of Messiah by unbelievers.

[Q: does Jesus quote the Psalm to confirm imprecation for believers today?]

C) Per the now/not yet of the coming of the kingdom, the imprecatory context of the OT text informs us of the final judgment of those who hate Christ, but now there is delay and gospel (wheat and tares) instead of imprecation and judgment. Therefore, it looks to me that the EP position has many "biblical theology" mistakes in its view. It is amazing how important BT is for a number of areas where there is polarization (including women praying in the assembly). Accordingly, Ps. 69 is quoted in connection with Jesus cleansing the temple with holy zeal for God's house. This anticipates the historical-redemption judgment on Israel (epitomized in 70 AD) and the formation of new temple worship for the time between. It also thus anticipates final judgment on all "not my people" (Jew and Gentile) that is delayed to the end of the age.

[How does Jesus apply the imprecation/judgment theme of Psalm 69?]

D) The difficulty we have with imprecation as NT followers of Christ (and the disagreements that exist on how to handle it) reveals the fact that even EP folk must do fallible interpretation every time they sing a Psalm and how they apply it may or may not be true to Scripture just as preaching is fallible and may not be true to Scripture. They do not get away from the fallibility issue because in the use of Scripture in song there is interpretation and when it is OT material, the misinterpretation is more common than we may see or admit.

[How does this give a plus to formally composed interpretive hymn-psalms?]

E) It seems that imprecation is an Achilles heel for the EP position; it is a tough doctrine and it sifts and tests the strength of our BT, as well as our love as disciples of Christ who called us to pray for our enemies (Sermon on the Mount) and to give them gospel instead of judgment in the present time (the lesson of the wheat and tares). Granted, EP defenders want to read the OT in light of the NT and the Psalms in light of the NT, but how they work through this seems mistaken on one hand and reveals that the uninspired fallibility problem that EP seeks to transcend is unavoidable on the other. They intuitively interpret what they sing; they do so in light of the NT; they do so fallibly, though Christians probably get most of it right in the big picture of Christ in the OT.