

THE APOTHEOSIS OF MAN IN EVANGELICAL CHURCH WORSHIP

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I present this article as a challenge to Christians to review current church worship. I set it forth in dialogue format between two Christian friends, one of whom is increasingly convinced of the Reformed interpretation of Scripture on the subject and his evangelical friend, who is convinced of the evangelical tradition. Henceforth the friends shall be designated R.B. (Reformed believer) and E.B. (evangelical believer).

E.B. What does apotheosis mean?

R.B. The *Chambers Dictionary* defines it thus: "The action of raising someone to the rank of a god." The *Collins Dictionary* defines it as the "elevation to the rank of a god."

E.B. Do you mean to say that we evangelicals are elevating man to a sort of god?

R.B. I have for about fifteen years been comparing Reformed worship with evangelical worship. Every time I read another book or pamphlet on the subject, I become more convinced that there is a hidden mystery behind evangelical worship, which does indeed amount to the apotheosis of man.

E.B. I protest most strongly, for we who are Reformed evangelicals believe in the total depravity of man and we would never elevate man.

R.B. I am glad to hear this. We have much common ground, for there are not many people today who accept the verdict of the Bible on the true nature of man, in his natural, moral and spiritual state.

E.B. I do not understand how you can make such a charge.

R.B. Then let me ask you a question. In your church service, what material do you use when you sing to God?

E.B. We use hymns and songs written by men and women.

R.B. Very well. My next question is, by what authority do you use these?

E.B. I suppose I could quote Ephesians 5:19, where the apostle commands us to sing hymns and songs.

R.B. Look at the text carefully. Does it not include psalms?

E.B. Yes. I think it gives us a choice; we can use either or both.

R.B. I suspect you are reading this verse as if it had been written some time during the past two hundred and fifty years. Have you ever thought what the Holy Spirit meant as He was communicating through Paul and also what the first-century Christians understood what was meant when they read this verse? The letter to the Ephesians was written around AD 64, which was long before churches discarded psalm singing for singing human compositions. It can be a common problem today that where we read Scripture, we wear, as it were, twenty-first-century spectacles. Then we tend to read into the verse the familiar Christian culture of the present day. For an accurate meaning of God's Word, we must seek to understand the times, customs and context then prevailing to arrive at the truth of a text.

E.B. I appreciate what you say. So what do you believe this text means?

R.B. The word "psalms" hardly requires any explanation. I am sure you will agree that it refers to the one hundred and fifty psalms in the Bible.

The word "hymn" in our English translation comes from the Greek *hymnos*, which appears in the following places in the Greek Septuagint version of the Psalms, whether in the body or in the title: Psalm 6:1; 40:3; 54:1; 55:1; 61:1; 65:1; 67:1; 72:20; 76:1; 100:4; 119:171; 137:3; 148:14.

The word "song" comes from the Greek *odee*, which appears in the following places in the Greek Septuagint version of the Psalms in the titles: Psalm 4; 18; 29; 39; 45; 48; 65-69; 75-76; 83; 87-88; 92; 108; 120-133. In addition, the titles of Psalms 67 and 76 contain *all three words* (psalm, hymn and song).

In Colossians 3:16, and its parallel in Ephesians 5:19, the three terms used (psalms, hymns and songs) are qualified by the adjective "spiritual." The word "spiritual" is used in recognition of the divine inspiration of

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the Psalms by the Holy Spirit, which transcends the human authors, such as David, Asaph, Ethan, Moses and others. The word “spiritual” is translated from the Greek *pneumatikos*. It is found in the following New Testament verses: Romans 1:11; 7:14; 15:27; I Corinthians 2:13, 15; 3:1; 9:11; 10:3-4; 12:1; 14:1, 37; 15:44, 46; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 1:3; 5:19; 6:12; Colossians 1:9; 3:16; I Peter 2:5. In all the verses above, *pneumatikos* is used as an adjective qualifying the work of God’s Holy Spirit. The exception is in Ephesians 6:12, where the reference is to demonic activity. Therefore, if Colossians 3:16 were amplified to its full meaning, it would read like this: “And sing *spiritual* psalms and *spiritual* hymns and *spiritual* songs,” pointing to the inspired Psalter. This would be consistent with the use of the word *pneumatikos* in the rest of the New Testament.¹

E.B. I am amazed. Why have I never heard of this before?

R.B. I do not know. I have been listening to Sunday sermons and midweek Bible studies for nearly four decades, yet have never heard this. I have had to find this out by my own research.

E.B. I had never looked that far into the verse but I can see that your explanation makes a lot of sense.

R.B. Not only do Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 command us to sing psalms using the three titles from the book of Psalms but there are also other Scriptures, most notably James 5:13. Not only are there positive commands to sing psalms in the New Testament church; there is also a complete absence of any Scripture commanding, warranting or advising us to discard psalms in favour of alternative material. Even among the miraculous, temporary gifts given to the apostles or the more ordinary, permanent gifts, there is not one of composing and compiling songs for worship.

E.B. I must object again. If we may not compose our own songs to praise the Lord, then neither may we pray or preach. If the danger is that we may

¹ Kenneth Stewart (ed.), *Songs of the Spirit* (Glasgow, UK: Reformation Scotland Trust, 2014), p. 29.

bring in something of our corruption or error into song, we may do so also in our prayers and preaching.

R.B. Alas. It is so. We have all heard prayers and preaching that leave much to be desired. Yet we must be forbearing because there is a fundamental difference. The New Testament commands us to pray and it commands those who are lawfully called to preach.

E.B. I went once when I was on holiday to a church midweek Bible study, where the minister spent the whole study proving from the New Testament that we have authority to discard psalms in favour of our old traditional hymns.

R.B. I am not surprised. Man is a rational creature. Therefore, he needs a rationale for action contemplated and, if executed, he requires a defence thereafter. He was defending action taken by his spiritual forefathers, so they could happily continue in the tradition of singing hymns invented by fallible men and women. How did he go about it?

E.B. First, he referenced Revelation 14:3, where we read, “And they sung as it were a new song before the throne.” He then appealed to the Lord’s Prayer, where at Matthew 6:10 we read, “Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” He then concluded that, if the saints in heaven sing a new song, then so should we still upon earth. He reasoned that we have here authority to invent our own hymns and to sing them as the “new songs upon earth.”

R.B. I have heard of this before. A number of years ago, a book was published, written by a respected minister, and this was his argument in the book. Very likely, the minister you heard followed the same book for his study.² What did you think of the study?

E.B. I thought it was rather artificial and forced. In fact, I felt uncomfortable and unsettled by the evening’s proceedings. Actually, on further reflection, it raised more questions in my mind than I had answers.

R.B. That is interesting. Allow me to continue and briefly explain the false position of the book as I came to understand it when I read it for myself.

² Peter Masters, *Worship in the Melting Point* (London: Wakeman Trust, 2002), p. 99.

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If the author had taken a little more time to search the Scriptures, he would have made the discovery that this same “new song” is already being sung here on earth. In fact, he would find several references to it in the Old Testament (Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10).

Also, it is a pity that he did not read the text more carefully, for Revelation 14:3 reads, “as it were” a new song. So it was not a new song sung in heaven at all! Moreover, notice three things: (1) the words of the new song have been put in our mouths by God Himself, not by any man; (2) the songs are full of latent, inherent power; and (3) the songs are naturally evangelistic producing development and growth.

E.B. I see now that it is pointed out to me. So what does the new song refer to?

R.B. To follow up a study of this song in the Old Testament would be very interesting but it would be out of place at this point. Sufficient for now is to notice that Israel sang the “new song” when it passed through the Red Sea as recorded in Exodus 15 and Deborah sang the song in Judges 5 in celebration of God’s deliverance of Israel from the Canaanites.

It surely becomes clear that the song sung in heaven is not new to heaven but that it began in the Old Testament. It is a song of great praise and thanksgiving to God for His deliverance of His people, and a song on the theme of redemption, taken up in the psalms and perfected in heaven. Notice as well, that only the redeemed can learn this song (Rev. 14:3).

By singing the psalms ourselves, we are joining with all saints, learning the “new song,” and developing Christian faith, hope, praise and much more.

It is ironic in the extreme that, through faulty and careless exegesis, he ends up turning away from the very new song he is attempting to prove we should sing. He continues to hold his congregation to sing alternative material with the underlying supposition that the alternative is better or more Christian!

E.B. In the Bible study I have mentioned, the minister then quoted many hymns, proving how scripturally based they are and how helpful they are

to sing. You can hardly deny, can you, that the old conservative hymns and some more modern ones do contain a lot of scriptural truths and great views of God which can help to teach and build us up in our most holy faith?

R.B. No. This cannot be denied but I could also tell you of those who have scrutinized the hymns and have documented many errors.³ These are, however, often subtly hidden, rather than glaring, so for the majority of Christians they pass unnoticed. In contrast, in singing the psalms there will be confidence in inerrancy, with no possibility of any false teaching hidden within the verses. You may be interested to know the meaning of *Maschil*, which is found in the titles of the following Psalms: 32; 42; 44-45; 52-55; 74; 78; 88-89; 142. The meaning is a psalm to teach or give instruction, especially wisdom. This is the meaning of Paul's exhortation in Colossians 3:16, the result of which is that during corporate singing of the psalms there will be a gentle spirit of teaching and of admonishing one another, not by our words or anyone else's, but rather by the material sung, which Paul calls the word of Christ.

Your account of the minister's Bible study has raised some questions in my mind. Tell me, what provision has been made to preserve unity throughout the ages? Who is to authorize each new invention? Who is to compile the collection and how often must it be reviewed to receive new material? What about the churches of every nation: Is there to be a universal standard hymnal translated into every language or will each nation follow its own independent invention?

E.B. He did not answer those issues.

R.B. He could not, as there are no answers and the problems are not anticipated.

E.B. Are there any other texts which shed light on the matter?

R.B. Yes. I think it is really important to realise that Jesus Christ is an example to us, as well as our Saviour. It can easily be proved from many places

³ E.g., Angus Stewart, "Our Own Hymn Book Versus God's Own Hymn Book: A Critique of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster Hymnal" (www.cprf.co.uk/articles/freepresbyterian-hymnal.htm).

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in Scripture that He sang from the book of Psalms. In Matthew 26:30, and Mark 14:26, we read, “And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives.” As is well known, this was at the occasion of the Last Supper, just prior to His betrayal, arrest, false accusations and trial, which led to His atoning death on the cross at Calvary. The occasion is a focal point for both Old and New Testaments. From the viewpoint of the Old, it is where the types and shadows of prophecy flee away and turn into reality, from which point onwards the glory of the New Testament comes into view. From the New Testament viewpoint, it is where the Passover meal becomes our Lord’s Supper or communion, where we look back to His sacrificial suffering and death on our behalf. The occasion is presided over by the real Paschal Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ and the Lord of glory, who unites the church of both dispensations to Himself as His one church or bride. All commentators agree that Jesus and His disciples sang from Psalms 113 to 118, known as the “Great Hallel” Psalms. When we sing these Psalms, we are singing with Jesus Christ and following His royal example (Heb. 2:12).

- E.B. Are there any more Scriptures in the New Testament proving we should sing from the book of Psalms?
- R.B. We could mention Acts 16:25 and James 5:13, which if examined honestly also refer to David’s Psalms, but I think we should move on. The reality is that the burden of providing proof for hymn singing really rests with them, not with those who follow the ancient Christian practice of singing psalms.
- E.B. I have found these thoughts really fascinating, but tell me, does it really make such a big difference which practice we follow? After all, the hymns we sing have been composed by godly Christian people, intended to be used to worship God. So whether we sing David’s Psalms or our own songs, we are sincerely worshipping God in our own congregations.
- R.B. I fear it does matter. For how are you and I to judge sincerity? The Bible tells us, “Let God be true, but every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). Since all men are liars, we cannot judge sincerity by any means of man’s measuring, only by bringing it to the light of God’s Word, of which, in contrast to man’s word, we read “every word of God is pure” (Prov. 30:5).

What we need to do is to analyze the different types of worship. In order to examine the difference, what we could do is to take a fictional church that has voted to introduce a limited number of hymns into its worship service. We could then look into the hidden or real spiritual effect on that Psalm-singing church by scrutinizing that change in light of God's Word. In order to do this, some preliminary remarks are necessary.

What is the source of hymn singing? Who was responsible for introducing hymns? Who sanctioned or authorized them? Was it by a recognised ecumenical council or synod? Do they have any creedal authority? A great deal can be discovered by checking the historical development and tracing it back to its source. By a search of early church history, we discover that it was the heretics of the day who first introduced uninspired hymns. During this period, the church stood its ground, continuing from the apostolic period to use Psalms. For example, the Synod of Laodicea (AD 343) forbade "the singing of uninspired hymns in the church" (Canon 59).⁴ The Council of Laodicea (c. AD 381) prohibited the ecclesiastical use of uninspired or "private psalms."⁵

Hymn singing never enters suddenly, as if a church changes on a given Sunday or even over a year. Speaking now of the post-Reformation development of hymn singing, it seems to me that it first enters in a small way, gradually increases until over a period of a generation or more hymn singing takes over, until a point is often reached where the hymn book becomes more important than the Psalter itself.

From what I have read, post-Reformation hymn singing enters in painfully. The early attempts met with rejection, were an embarrassment and sometimes proved financially disastrous for the pedlars.⁶

Let us now look at a fictional church, which we shall call "Congregation Itching Ears." The previous year, their denomination called "New Ideas" voted on a motion which was carried at Synod to allow a very modest

⁴ G. I. Williamson, *The Singing of Psalms in the Worship of God* (Belfast, UK: Cameron Press, repr. 1998), p. 17.

⁵ Michael Bushell, *Songs of Zion* (Virginia, USA: Norfolk Press, repr. 2011), p. 252.

⁶ Bushell, *Songs*, pp. 290-293.

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number of hymns to supplement their Psalter. “Congregation Itching Ears” subsequently votes and passes a motion to sing one hymn in the Sunday evening service.

Several things are now about to happen:

- 1) On the one hand, a song inspired by the Holy Spirit is removed, while on the other hand, the invention of a fallible and corrupt man is introduced.
- 2) The Word of God is replaced by the word of man. We could look more closely at this replacement process, for there are two actions taking place simultaneously. The Word of God is being removed from this element of worship and man’s word is added. “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it” (Deut. 12:32). “Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar” (Prov. 30:6). “But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandments of God by your tradition?” (Matt. 15:3). “Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7). “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophesy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book” (Rev. 22:18).
- 3) The fulcrum, balance and direction of worship are altered, for the works of deity are slighted, deemed insufficient and rejected, while the works of man are elevated as being supposedly superior. “I have not found thy works perfect before God” (Rev. 3:2).
- 4) Purity of worship becomes compromised: it is no longer pure. “All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the LORD weigheth the spirits” (Prov. 16:2). “Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him” (Prov. 30:5).
- 5) The effect is schismatic, for some will be in favour of the new innovation and others will be opposed to it. “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another” (I Cor. 12:25).
- 6) There is a real tendency to venerate both the written hymn and, even

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more, the author or authoress. “Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of?” (Isa. 2:22).

- 7) There is hidden hypocrisy involved, now introduced into the service, from which repentance will not be easy. As leaven, it will continue to diffuse within the heart and soul of the congregation. “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (Gal. 5:9). Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? (I Cor. 5:6)
- 8) The Spirit of Jesus will not be singing with the congregation for the duration of the hymn, for the fictional congregation above is now using a different hymn books from that given it by the Triune God.

I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee (Ps. 22:22).

For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee (Heb. 2:11-12).

Let us examine and consider these verses carefully. In the book of Psalms, we are extraordinarily privileged to see into the inner soul life of Jesus Christ. In the Psalms, we see Jesus’ pure spirit of worship, His thoughts and prayers, as well as His curses. Psalm 22:22, with the inspired commentary on this verse in the New Testament at Hebrews 2:11-12, reveals a church worship service where Jesus Christ is revealing the Father to the congregation as He sings the Father’s praise. The sanctifier and sanctified are all one, we read. What a rupture this is causing when a congregation sings a song made by man leaving Jesus Christ to sing alone! The body is not holding the head (Col. 2:19).

- 9) The Holy Spirit will be grieved. “And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).
- 10) There is congregational disobedience, for there is now corrupt communication proceeding out of their mouths. “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good

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to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Eph. 4:29).

11) As we analyze this fictitious church, we must realise it is a representation of multitudes of real churches in real history in the Western world since the sixteenth-century Reformation. These churches have redirected their projected future into the way of spiritual degeneration. Untold injury will be brought upon the congregation.

E.B. I am glad you chose this subject for us to discuss this evening because developments over recent years in many evangelical churches are a concern to me, which has caused me to think about the doctrine of worship in the Scriptures. Many who have thought about these issues have supposed the problem was a generational difference, a difference of taste and personal preference. However, as I have been hearing your views, I realise the problem is an issue of principle founded on our interpretation of Scripture as it pertains to the doctrine of congregational worship. Your thoughts have also caused me to realise that the root of the problem really goes back a long way. Coming from a conservative hymn singing background, as I do, I have been coming to a resolution. I am resolved to make a study of this subject for myself.

R.B. That is excellent. Fortunately there are a number of places to go to in the United Kingdom and elsewhere where you can obtain useful material.

You have no doubt noticed the time. Our evening is drawing to a close, but before you go, I must add somewhat to the points above. The organic life of a church is not static, so over time further developments are very likely to affect a church that has made a choice similar to the one above. Such a church predisposes itself to such things as Liberalism, Modernism, Arminianism, Pelagianism or Universalism. Further down the time line, it will not be surprising if spiritual sleepiness, dullness, apathy and traditionalism gradually steal over the people. Do not be surprised if in future generations outright unbelief and apostasy come in bringing spiritual death. I fear there is evidence of this all over the land of Wales, where I live.

With these brief thoughts, I defend my charge: “There is a spirit of apotheosis of man in evangelical church worship.” It is tantamount to

the occult idolatry of Man. Idolatry is not intended by hymn singers; it is hidden and so well concealed that it is not at all apparent. However, I do maintain it is present and also very real.

If any Reformed believer reads this article and has the ability and inclination to expand and build on these views, I should be very grateful. I am a busy, working man and to do full justice to this subject would be beyond my scope and remit.

To all evangelical Christians and churches, if God should be pleased to place this article in your hand, give it serious thought and make your own search of these matters. To that I would add this question: Is it too hard a step to take to return church services to singing the God-appointed Psalms of David?

Hear the advice of the Westminster Assembly on the elements of public worship: “The reading of the Scripture with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart” (*Westminster Confession* 21:5). “It is the duty of Christians to praise God publicly, by singing of psalms together in congregation, and also privately in the family” (“The Directory for the Publick Worship of God”).

I quote from the Westminster Assembly because it has produced one of the great creeds of Christendom, and I do so also despite the fact that the creeds are sidelined and virtually neglected in a large number of today’s churches. Nevertheless, creeds are not only supported by, but are also undergirded with, scriptural authority. The faithful creeds of the church catholic have a binding authority over churches, which have a duty to follow and accept them willingly and obediently. To argue otherwise will naturally bring discord and disorder into the lives of churches. “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

I believe I can honestly say that to follow this advice will bring a great blessing from God to churches, families and all Christians.

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O sing unto the LORD a new song: sing unto the LORD, all the earth. Sing unto the LORD, bless his name; shew forth his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the heathen, his wonders among all people. For the LORD is great, and greatly to be praised: he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols: But the LORD made the heavens (Ps. 96:1-5).

I will extol thee, my God, O king; and I will bless thy name for ever and ever. Every day will I bless thee; and I will praise thy name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable (Ps. 145:1-3).

And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise unto our God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in the LORD (Ps. 40:3).