

**New Testament Instruction on Congregational Singing:
An Examination of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16**
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Introduction

The discussion below examines Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 in order to apply these passages to how to worship with singing and music in a congregational assembly. While there are many passages in the Bible that instruct us on music, these two are key New Testament texts that allow for representative applications for how to approach worship in general. Not only does this paper give an in-depth analysis of these two verses, but it also represents how I approach worship and its music in general as an individual Christian and the pastor of my church.

Ephesians 5:19

Ephesians 5:18–19 (ESV)

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,

Ephesians 5:18 gives the command to “be filled in the Spirit.” While Luke and Acts often record miracles that result from an individual being filled by the Spirit, Paul’s command to be filled with the Spirit here means to live in a way controlled by the Spirit, as the following context shows.

In Ephesians 5:19–21 there are five participles that are subordinate to the command to be filled with the Spirit and thus carry the command’s imperatival force (addressing, singing, making melody, giving thanks, submitting). The first three of these five involve how the church worships with singing and music in a congregational assembly.

The first participle, “addressing,” comes from *laleō*, a general word meaning “to speak or say.” More will be said later of the next two participles, “singing and making melody,” but suffice it to say for the moment that these participles indicate that the congregation’s “addressing” is in musical form. The audience of the congregation was the congregation itself—they were to address “one another.” Three terms follow that specify the content of their address—“psalms,” “hymns,” and “spiritual songs.” This brief list is likely not meant to provide an exhaustive categorization of what the church may sing since these terms overlap and can even be somewhat interchangeable. At the same time, examining the differences is instructive to understanding the range of what a church may sing together.

The term *psalm* (*psalmos*) can indeed refer to a psalm in the OT (cf. Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33) but may refer to a general song for the church as well (1 Corinthians 14:26). Implied in the use of a psalm is a number of literary features that one would find in the OT psalms—rhyme, assonance, consonance, meter, etc.

The term *hymn* (*hymnos*) is referred to only here and Colossians 3:16 and is general enough to be described as loosely as “a song with religious content.”¹ When this term is used as a verb in the NT (*hymneō*), we see the eleven and Jesus singing a hymn at the end of the Last Supper (Matt 26:30; Mark

¹ BDAG, s.v., “ὑμνος,” 1027.

14:26), Paul and Silas singing hymns in prison (Acts 16:25), and the Lord Jesus singing praise to the Father in the midst of the congregation (Hebrews 2:12; cf. Psalm 22:22).

The term *song* (*odē*) is used elsewhere only in Revelation to refer to the songs of the redeemed in heaven (Revelation 5:9; 14:3; 15:3, 2x), and the content for two of these songs is given (Rev 5:9–10; 15:3–4).

In many translations (e.g., NASB, KJV, ESV), “songs” is the only noun in this list to be described by an adjective, “spiritual” (*pneumatikos*), which indicates that the Spirit is actively involved in each individual and the congregation as they sing these songs to one another. In the Greek, the feminine gender of “spiritual” matches only “songs” (both “psalms” and “hymns” are masculine). At the same time, “spiritual” technically falls after the list in the Greek in 5:19a, and the very wording and rhythm of 5:19a with 5:19b suggests that “spiritual” as a modifier is similar to “with your heart,” a description that modifies another list—“singing and making melody.” This being said, just as “singing and making melody” is to be done “with your heart,” so also not only “songs” but also “psalms” and hymns” were to be done in a “spiritual” manner, that is, as led by or filled with the Spirit (cf. Eph 5:18).²

Coming to the second participle, just as the term *song* is used only elsewhere in Revelation 5:9, 14:3, and 15:3, so also “singing” (*aidō*) is used only in these same verses: “they *sang* a new song” (Revelation 5:9), “they were *singing* a new song” (Revelation 14:3), and “they *sang* the song of Moses...and the song of the Lamb” (Rev 15:3). These examples indicate what the verb means—to verbally sing with one’s mouth.

Similarly, the third participle, “making melody,” is from *psallō*, the verb form of *psalm*. While this verb could refer to using only one’s voice to “sing” (cf. Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; James 5:13), it can easily imply the use of instruments along with singing and in fact was often used to simply mean “to play a stringed instrument.”³ Given this range of meaning, it is no surprise to find that many of David’s psalms were sung vocally and involved the use of instruments (and specifically for him, a stringed instrument; e.g., Psalm 33:1–3; cf. 2 Samuel 16:16, 23). Other examples of singing in the NT cited above explicitly mention the use of stringed instruments as well (Revelation 5:8–10, “each holding a harp...And they sang a new song”; Rev 15:2–4, “those...with harps of God in their hands...singing the song of Moses...and the song of the Lamb”).⁴

Just as the text indicated that psalms, hymns, and songs were all to be “spiritual,” so also singing and making melody were to be “with your heart to the Lord” (literal translation). “With your heart” describes the two participles just as “spiritual” describes the three forms of singing—whereas one is by the Spirit, so also the music is “with your heart,” that is, “the whole of one’s being.”⁵ Moreover, just as “addressing” was directed to “one another,” so also is the “singing and making melody” directed “to the Lord.” All three participles describe the activity of worship in song in various ways, and the congregation sings to one another and ultimately to the Lord, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Ephesians

² Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 396. See p. 397 for his explanation of the “chiasmic relationship” between the related terms in Eph 5:19.

³ TDNT, s.v., “ὕμνος, ὑμνέω, ψάλλω, ψαλμός” 8:490–91

⁴ Interestingly, Revelation 14:2–3 describes the 144,000 as “singing a new song,” which “was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps.” A voice that sounds like instruments in the presence of the Lamb implies the approval of the latter (cf. Revelation 14:1).

⁵ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 396.

3:11; 5:20). We obviously sing to both the Father and the Son (cf. Ephesians 5:20–21), and according to Ephesians 5:18–19, we do so through the Spirit.

In summary, the Ephesians were to address one another as in psalms, hymns, and songs, all of which were to be done as filled with the Spirit. The content of this address was to be through singing and making melody as carried out with the whole of one's person and directed to the Lord.

Colossians 3:16

Having examined Ephesians 5:19 above, the parallel terminology and concepts in Colossians 3:16 have already been explained, making for a briefer examination of this verse. Nonetheless, Colossians 3:16 has its own distinctive elements, which give us further instruction for how to worship with singing and music in a congregational assembly.

Colossians 3:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Colossians 3:16 begins with a command: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”⁶ This “word” (*logos*) is perhaps not so much what Christ Himself spoke as it is what is spoken about Him.⁷ This phrase (“the word of Christ”) is used only here in the NT,⁸ and the ones who speak in context are the readers themselves, and that in musical form (“teaching and admonishing... singing”). This phrase helpfully specifies for us the priority of their content (Christ), and He as the content must dwell “richly” so among the congregation. A dismissal of this command could lead to a poor or nonexistent presentation of Christ in the church's singing, which thus leaves the word of Christ *not* dwelling richly among the congregation.

The means whereby the word of Christ dwells richly in a congregation is through “teaching and admonishing,” which involves both the positive instruction of the word of Christ (“teaching”) and, in contrast, warning or correcting others of what comes to those who disbelieve or disregard this word (“admonishing”; from *noutheteō*; cf. Acts 20:31; 1 Corinthians 4:14; Colossians 1:28; 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 14; 2 Thessalonians 3:15).⁹ “One another” specifies the recipient of this teaching and admonition. The individuals of the congregation are thus teaching and admonishing and being taught and admonished at the same time. This teaching and admonition must be done “in all wisdom,” which

⁶ Col 3:16 specifies the recipient—“you.” Though “you” is singular in the Greek, the context indicates a collective “you,” that is, the body that was able to sing the word of Christ to “one another.” See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 286.

⁷ Moo, *Colossians*, 285–86. Even if one takes “the word of Christ” to be what Christ Himself spoke, it is still a word about Him. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 160 comments that, in this understanding, the word would be “objective, special revelation that proceeds from (and concerns) Christ.” Even a position between these two leaves one with the same understanding in the end. James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 236, states, “As such it can denote both the word (gospel) of which (the) Christ is the content...and the word which (the) Christ spoke...there is no reason why the genitive form should be pressed to an either-or decision (either objective or subjective).”

⁸ “The word of Christ” in Romans 10:17 (NASB, ESV, etc.) is a translation of *rhema* and not *logos* for “word.”

⁹ But these means are by no means the only means—e.g., consider teaching, exhortation, and the reading Scripture (cf. 1 Tim 4:13).

implies a careful examination of the words used about Christ, a consideration of those singing, and a thoughtful look at the music being used for singing.

This congregational teaching and admonition are presented in three ways, through “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” As explained above, there are differences between the terms, but these differences are not necessarily important. What is helpful about these terms, though, is what they imply, which is also mentioned above—the use of instruments, singing psalms, singing other songs, etc. Like Ephesians 5:19 above, so also in Colossians 3:16 “spiritual” technically falls after this threefold series and matches the gender of “songs” but refers to the series as a whole. All three forms of singing are “spiritual” in that they are sung as the congregation is led by the Spirit of God.¹⁰

“Singing” technically falls after “spiritual” and even after “with thankfulness” in the Greek. This being said, it is clear that “singing” indicates how the psalms, hymns, and songs were to be communicated. “With thankfulness” indicates gratitude was to be the underlying motivation and manner whereby the singing was to take place. “With thankfulness” also implies that whatever the words about Christ were, they were to involve texts that provoked the Colossians to thank God for Him. “In your hearts to God” parallels Ephesians 5:19’s “with your heart to the Lord” (literal translation). Just as the Lord Jesus is the One to whom we sing, so also is God the Father. We thank Him in song for what He has done for us in Christ, and we do so with the heart, the whole person.

In summary, Col 3:16 commands the congregation to let the word of Christ dwell richly in them, and that this rich dwelling takes place by teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. This teaching and admonition are through song, motivated by thankfulness, and ultimately directed to God.

Practical Applications

The comparison and contrast of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 above gives us guidance for practical applications related to congregational singing in the church.

First, *congregational singing is imperative*. While the focus of Ephesians 5:19 is to detail how the congregation engages in Spirit-filled worship (cf. Eph 5:18), the focus of Colossians 3:16 is how the word of Christ is to dwell richly among them through their singing. In both cases, singing is not the primary command of either verse, but it is an imperative means of how to let the word of Christ dwell richly in us and how to live a Spirit-filled life.

Second, related to the previous point, *worship is not entertainment*, a performance by some for the enjoyment of a congregation that never participates. However a congregation is led to worship by its pastors, it should be clear that everyone is worshipping together.

Third, congregational singing is *an exercise involving our inner man*. Each individual accepts the word of Christ desires to have Him dwell richly in himself and among the congregation. Singing involves songs that are spiritual and thus led by the Spirit within. Singing and making melody are with hearts motivated by thankfulness. Singing must be guided in all wisdom. A good hymn and its music do not distract or dull the mind and heart from understanding the Scriptural statements being sung.

¹⁰ Moo, *Colossians*, 289–90.

This being said, fourth, *Christians should be immediately suspect of incorporating the unbelieving world's styles of music into their Spirit-filled worship of God.* While some of what the world produces in music may reflect the common grace of God, most of it does not, and what could otherwise be good is sometimes overly tainted by the sinful lifestyles and associations of the artists. Lines inevitably have to be drawn somewhere, and as a Christian and pastor, I will not use or listen to so-called Christian music that obviously uses the world's pop-style melodies, seductive styles, or driving syncopation. At my church, we have a pastor or another godly man lead the music, and we simply use a piano to accompany our singing. When in doubt, we simply use time-honored hymnody that is free of cultural baggage.

Fifth, *there is variety* in how the congregation may worship in song. Both verses list psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Though these terms overlap and are interchangeable on occasion, they may be distinct as well. The use of *psalms* indicates that the OT psalms should be sung as appropriate, and *hymns* and *songs* indicate that Christians may wisely craft their own texts and melodies inasmuch as they promote a richer dwelling of Christ among the congregation.

Sixth, the use of wisdom indicates that *discretion is necessary* in considering what a text should say, how a song should be sung, and the congregation itself. Many texts and melodies should be avoided if they do not help a congregation let the word of Christ dwell more richly among them.

Eighth, the terms *psalm* and *sing* (from *psallō*) imply that instruments may be used in congregational worship, and the chief instrument for each person is the voice itself.

Ninth, the term *psalm* indicates that we already have a songbook of 150 selections for congregational worship. The psalms are also examples for hymns and songs in showing what a text and its literary features should be. Further instruction for worship in song can be found within the psalms, and the Bible offers other examples of hymns and songs as well.

Conclusion

The points above are not exhaustive, and only two texts have been examined above. Other passages have been references along the way. As mentioned at the outset, these two verses are particularly instructive for the worship of the church, and the study offered above is representative for my approach to worship in general.