

## CHURCH MUSIC IN EPHESIANS/COLOSSIANS

## Part 2

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History of Interpretation

Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 200) cited Col. 3:16 in his chapter on conduct at banquets (Instructor 2.4.41-44). In this passage he condemned the pipe and aulos as instruments associated with revelry and unsuited to a temperate banquet. He gave qualified approval to the kithara and lyre in such a setting, but clearly his preference was for vocal music with emphasis on the words. He cited Col. 3:16 in support of this vocal emphasis.

Psalmody is the most suitable music at a Christian's meal.

Clement associated psalmody with thanksgiving and said that the apostle (Paul) called the psalm a "spiritual song." It is characteristic of Clement to weave together texts about religious worship with his discussion of daily activities, so his use of Col. 3:16 here is no indication that he thought the verse applied only (or even primarily) to a private social gathering. His approval of the kithara and lyre applies to social banquets and not to assemblies of the church.

Tertullian from Carthage, a younger contemporary of Clement of Alexandria, set singing to the Lord with psalms and hymns (Eph. 5:18-19) in contrast to drinking wine with drums and psalteries (Isa. 5:11-12). (Against Marcion 5.18.7.)

The first commentary on either of these books for which there are significant remains is Origen's Commentary on Ephesians (first

half of the third century). Origen applied the adjective "spiritual" to all three nouns in Eph. 5:19. He distinguished hymns, psalms, and songs according to his usual allegorical method: Hymns have to do with God and divine things; psalms with practical matters and what we do with our bodies; songs with the natural world and the created order. Here are his words:

Hymns declare the power and divinity of God, and if one knows how to discourse about God it would be in spiritual hymns; and perhaps the one who grasps practical matters and those things that must be done through the instrument of our body as if it were a psalterion [a musical instrument] does so in spiritual psalms. The one who investigates natural phenomena concerning the order of the universe and other created things does so in spiritual songs. For one must sing with reference to natural causes and make melody to the Lord with reference to the description properly settled in regard to customs. For this is to make melody and sing with the heart to the Lord.

His comments on "psalms" imply the association he made elsewhere of psalms with the instrument known as a psalterion (etymologically related to psalmos and psall\*) but applied, again as was his custom, to the human person. In commenting on Psa. 33:2 he makes an allegorical distinction between the kithara and the psalterion, two stringed instruments that differed in their construction, the kithara having its sounding board at the bottom of the instrument and the psalterion having its sounding board at the top. Thus Origen could find it appropriate to apply the

kithara to practical activities and the psalterion to the higher part of human nature. Here is his interpretation:

The kithara is the active [or practical] soul moved by the commandments of God, the psalterion is the pure mind moved by spiritual knowledge. The musical instruments of the Old Covenant are applicable to us when understood spiritually. Speaking figuratively, the kithara is the body and the psalterion the spirit. These things have been applied to the wise person who employs for reverence the members of his body and the powers of his soul like strings. The one who makes melody well makes melody [psall\* both times] with the mind, speaking spiritual psalms and singing to God with his heart. (Cf. Ferguson, A Cappella 52-53).

Origen, therefore, it is to be noted, interpreted the Psalms by the New Testament, not vice versa.

Eusebius of Caesarea (early fourth century) made explicit in regard to worship what was implicit in Origen's allegorizing about Christians' practice. Christians "are accustomed to employ spiritual psalmody and kitharas, since the apostle teaches this, saying `psalms, odes, and spiritual hymns.'" Then he proceeded to contrast these with instruments, for the body is the kithara, the soul is a hymn, and the ten-stringed psalterion is worship performed by the Holy Spirit through the five senses and five powers of the soul (Commentary on Psalms 92:2-3).

Jerome's Latin commentary on Ephesians essentially repeats Origen's interpretations of hymns, psalms, and songs. He makes a point against certain singers in his day: "Listen young men whose

duty it is to recite the office in church: God is to be sung not with the voice but with the heart. Nor should you, like play-actors, ease your throat and jaws with medicaments, and make the church resound with theatrical measures and airs."

Pelagius (early fifth century) wrote a Latin commentary on the epistles of Paul, and he makes some of the same observations as the Greek commentators did. On Col. 3:16 he identifies the Psalms as the Psalms of David, the hymns as the hymn of the Three Youths in the (apocryphal) additions to the book of Daniel, and the songs (odes) as the song of Moses and other songs in Scripture. The fifth-century Greek manuscript of the Bible known as Alexandrinus collects fourteen Biblical Odes in one place, and nine of these came to be used in the liturgy of the Greek church. Patristic authors after this time commonly referred the "songs (odes)" of Paul's statements to these Biblical songs.

John Chrysostom, the great preacher of Antioch and Constantinople at the end of the fourth century gave full attention to our verses in his homilies on these books. His Homily 9 On Colossians in commenting on 3:16-17 takes the "teaching and admonishing" as being done "in all wisdom" by the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. These kinds of songs are to replace the "songs and dances of Satan." Hymns contain nothing human but are "a diviner thing." In keeping with a common patristic interpretation that gave a higher evaluation to hymns than to psalms because the etymology of psalmos (which referred to the sound made by plucking a string) had the connotation of physical activity in contrast to the higher activity of

contemplation associated with hymns (Ferguson, A Cappella Music 62-67), Chrysostom says, "The powers above chant hymns, not Psalms." He offers different possible meanings of singing "with grace": God in his grace has given us these songs; singing is to be done with grace; admonishing is to be done in a gracious way; Christians had these gifts in grace; song comes from the grace of the Spirit. "In your hearts" means to sing not simply with the mouth but with heedfulness, not to the air but to God. It is not to be done for display. When a person is in the market place or walking, he can sing and pray in the heart.

Chrysostom's Homily 19 On Ephesians 5:18-21 comments, "They who sing Psalms are filled with the Holy Spirit, as they who sing satanic songs are filled with an unclean spirit." The phrase "with your hearts to the Lord" means "with close attention and understanding, for they who do not attend closely, merely sing, uttering the words, while their heart is roaming elsewhere." We should give thanks, he said, for everything that befalls us. We can even be thankful for hell itself, for the dread of hell is a bridle on our hearts.

Theodoret of Cyrus (fifth century) says on Col. 3:16 that "The old law commanded continual meditation on the divine word" with Deut. 6:7 quoted. "The divine apostle commands this so that we may always carry about the teaching of Christ in our soul, to praise him, and to sanctify the tongue with spiritual songs." We are to sing "not only with the mouth" but "with the heart."  
(Commentary on Colossians 3.16.)

Theodoret interprets being filled with the Spirit in Eph. 5:18 as "praising God continually, deferring to one another, and always stimulating the reasoning." "The one who makes melody with the heart moves not only the tongue but arouses the mind to the understanding of the things said." (Commentary on Ephesians 5:18-19.)

Moving ahead to the Middle Ages, I select Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century), who wrote a commentary on Ephesians. In order to be filled with the Spirit in relation to God, Thomas says that Paul prescribes spiritual meditation, spiritual exultation (5:19b), and thanksgiving (5:20). He explains that there are two ways of "speaking to yourselves": external, of a man talking to other men; and interior, of a man speaking to himself. The latter speech ought to be repentant and to be done in secret. He identified the subjects of meditative prayer as "Psalms, hymns, and spiritual canticles." He built on patristic exegesis in interpreting psalms as concerned with good works, hymns with divine praises, and spiritual canticles with the hope of eternal realities.

Thomas continues that spiritual exultation and joy relate to "singing and making melody": so that our will would be stirred by spiritual joys to undertake good works [1 Cor. 14:15; Col. 3:16]."

Furthermore, Thomas responded to the error that the singing was to be only in the heart and not vocalized. It is an error to claim that "it is useless to sing vocal canticles to the Lord; that only spiritual ones matter." "In your hearts" is an essential element, but there is another element, the external

expression. This external expression has two purposes: "One is that it is for us, to stimulate our minds to an interior devotion. If someone is rather moved to frivolity or vain glory by it, this is contrary to the Church's intention. Its second purpose is for others, since by it the illiterate become more devout." Moreover, "The third effect is thanksgiving because, when someone is influenced in these ways toward God, he recognizes that everything he has is from God." All blessings come through the "Lord Jesus Christ." Singing, therefore, is addressed to three persons: God, one's neighbor, and one's self.

He continues that to be filled by the Spirit in relation to one's fellow men is by "being subject one to another" (Eph. 5:21). (St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, tr. Matthew L. Lamb [Albany: Magi Books, 1966], pp. 213-216.)

Thomas' Summa theologiae, Question 91 also is relevant to our subject. Here he dealt with two questions, "Whether God should be praised with the lips?" and "Whether God should be praised with song?" Thomas affirmed both. He answered the first question with Psa. 63:5 in the Latin, "My mouth shall praise Thee with joyful lips." The second question received longer treatment. Among the five objections that were raised to praising God in song and to which Thomas responded the first is based on Col. 3:16--God should be praised with spiritual, not bodily, canticles. Another objection (the fourth) included a passage that is often quoted out of its context as a viewpoint to which Thomas replied: "In the Old Law God was praised with musical instruments and human song,

according to Psa. 33:2-3, . . . . But the Church does not make use of musical instruments, such as harps and psalteries, in the divine praises, for fear of seeming to imitate the Jews. Therefore in like manner neither should song be used in the divine praises." (Q. 91, art. 2, obj. 4.) Thomas then affirmed the place of song in the church. In responding to the first objection he said that "the praise of the voice is necessary in order to arouse man's devotion towards God." He replied to the fourth objection by saying that "musical instruments move the soul to pleasure rather than create a good disposition within it." They were employed in the Old Testament because the people were carnal and needed to be aroused by material instruments and because such instruments were "figures of something else." (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas [London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1922], Vol. 11, pp.163-168.)

The interpretation of Colossians 3:16 as requiring "silent singing" was picked up by the early Anabaptists from the teaching of Zwingli. A letter from Conrad Grebel and his friends in Zurich to Thomas M\*ntzer, dated Sept. 5, 1524, argued, among other things, against singing in church. Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 were cited as teaching that we should speak to one another and only sing and give thanks in the heart. (George H. Williams, ed., Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers, Library of Christian Classics 25 [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957], pp. 75-76.) This viewpoint did not prevail among either the Swiss Reformed nor the Anabaptists.



John Calvin's Commentary on Ephesians (1548) included comments against silent singing: "`Speaking to themselves' is `speaking among themselves.'" He added, "Nor does he enjoin them to sing inwardly or alone." "`Singing in your hearts'" he interpreted as, "Let your praises be not merely on the tongue, as hypocrites do, but from the heart." He further says the saints are not told to "sing to themselves," that is, for individual pleasure. (John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, tr. John Pringle [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], pp.217-18.)

Calvin's Commentary on Colossians offered the following explanation of how the three terms were "commonly distinguished": "A `psalm' is that, in the singing of which some musical instrument besides the tongue is made use of; a `hymn' is properly a song of praise, whether it be sung simply with the voice or otherwise; while an `ode' contains not merely praises, but exhortations and other matters. He would have the songs of Christians, however, to be `spiritual,' not made up of frivolities and worthless trifles." "`Singing in your hearts'" Calvin related to the disposition "that there may not be merely an external sound with the mouth. Paul did not intend everyone to "sing inwardly to himself, but he would have both conjoined, provided the heart goes before the tongue." (John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians and Ephesians, tr. William Pringle [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], pp. 315-316.) Although Calvin gave the common etymological definition of "psalm," he must have understood that the command was only to "sing" the Psalms.

This conclusion follows from the fact that he elsewhere said that musical instruments such as were mentioned in the Psalms were no more to be employed than other practices of the Old Testament law "in the holy services of the church," where only understandable vocal music was to be used (Commentary on Psalms 33:2). The Reformed churches followed Calvin's rejection of instrumental music in their services until the nineteenth century.

The commentaries by J. B. Lightfoot on Colossians (J. B. Lightfoot, St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon [London: Macmillan, 1879; repr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan] and B. F. Westcott on Ephesians (B. F. Westcott, St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians [London: Macmillan, 1906; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952] have been justly influential for their solid philological and historical learning. Lightfoot understood the "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" as the instruments of the teaching and admonition (p. 224). He distinguished them etymologically: "While the leading idea of psalmos is a musical accompaniment and that of hymnos praise to God, \*d\* is the general word for a song" (p. 225). He observed, however, that in the text the reference in psalmois "is specially, though not exclusively . . ., to the Psalms of David." Lightfoot concluded that "The reference in the text is not solely or chiefly to public worship as such" (p. 225). "In your hearts" indicated that "There must be the thanksgiving of the heart, as well as of the lips" (p. 226).

On the three items to be sung, Westcott cited Jerome, who followed Origen (referred to above). He considered the passage to refer to the Christian congregation: "The same strains which set

forth aspects of God's glory elevate the feelings of those who join in them" (p. 82). The outward song is accompanied by the inward music of the heart (p. 82).

Two substantial recent commentaries in the Word Biblical Commentary series may be noted as representing the current state of evangelical scholarship: Peter T. O'Brien on Colossians and Philemon and Andrew T. Lincoln, on Ephesians. I drew extensively from them in the exegesis given previously.

This, admittedly selective, review of the history of interpretation of Col. 3:15-17 and Eph. 5:18-20 shows what the predominant views have been. There is general agreement that these passages refer to unaccompanied vocal music. It is agreed that, although the songs are directed to God in Christ, there is also an emphasis in these verses on a horizontal dimension so that the words bring mutual benefit. Most interpreters refer these passages to the assembly of the church, although granting that the instructions are not limited to that setting. The overwhelming consensus is that the verses call for audible expressions and do not refer to silent music in the heart. Rather, the verses call for sincerity of heart to accompany the words.