

CHURCH MUSIC IN EPHESIANS/COLOSSIANS

Part 1

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Exegesis of Colossians 3:15-17

Col. 3:15-17 is part of a passage that describes sins to be avoided (Col. 3:5-11), virtues (including worship) to be practiced (3:12-18), and a code of conduct for the members of a household (3:18-4:1). Some scholars suggest that this sequence of putting away sins, putting on the virtues of Christ, and conduct according to one's position in society represented the pattern followed in the instruction of new converts in early Christianity. At any rate, these topics provide the context of the verses we will study.

Verses 15 and 16 have a similar grammatical form, each introduced by a third person singular imperative, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts" and "Let the word of Christ dwell in you . . . with gratitude in your hearts" (NRSV). The readers must open themselves up to peace and the word of Christ and allow those things to work. The dominant themes of this section, as they are of Colossians as a whole, are Christ and thanksgiving. The passage speaks of the peace of Christ (3:15), the word of Christ (3:16), and the name of Christ (3:17). The idea of thanksgiving also occurs in each of these verses (3:15, 16, 17).

The peace that Christ gives is to hold sway over the whole of our lives. "Hearts" is used in the Biblical sense of the center of intellect and will that governs the total person. God calls us to peace (1 Cor. 7:15). This calling takes place "in the one

body," that is the church (Col. 1:18). The calling is not just individual but collective. In this one body there is to be unity. As there is one body, there is to be one spirit, that of peace, animating it. Along with peace there goes thanksgiving as characteristic of the church. The command calls for more than a grateful attitude: thanksgiving is to be expressed. Be a people who are thankful, Paul says. The community should give thanks. On the theme of thanksgiving in Colossians see 1:3, 12; 2:7; and 4:2.

The reference to the collective church, the one body, continues in 3:16. "Let the word of Christ live in you" (plural). The word of Christ is to be active among you, in your midst. We may compare 1:27, "Christ in you," with 3:16, the "word of Christ in you"--in both cases the reference is not individual, "inside you," but collective, "among you." The individual indwelling would accompany the collective presence of Christ and his word; that individual aspect is expressed by "in your hearts" in 3:15 and 16). Col. 3:16 may refer to three elements of the corporate assembly: the announcing of the word (either by prophetic speech or reading), teaching and admonition, and singing. A corporate context is indicated by the "one another" who are taught and admonished. Notice the emphasis on everyone in 1:28. Although the term translated "one another" is the reflexive pronoun (heautous, literally "yourselves"), in usage it does not really differ from the reciprocal pronoun (all*lous, "one another") and is frequently used in that sense, as in verse 13, where both words occur together.

The literary context of Col. 3:16, as of Eph. 5:19, is instruction on Christian living. However, the social context from which these verses are drawn is that of the church assembled. Therefore, it is appropriate to cite these verses for what is to be done in church. That is the ultimate context from which Paul draws his wording.

The "word of Christ" is the message that centers in Christ. It is not clear whether the genitive is subjective (Christ as the source of the word) or objective (Christ as the content of the word). Both ideas may be involved (cf. 2:17). Parallel expressions to the "word of Christ" are "the word of the truth, the gospel" (1:5-6); the "word of God" (1:25; Acts 12:24); and "word of the Lord" (1 Thes. 1:8; 2 Thes. 3:1; Acts 8:25). We may compare Ps. 37:31 for the law of God dwelling in the hearts of his people; for Christians it is the word of Christ. On the word "richly" cf. 1:27 and 2:2.

The richly indwelling word results in teaching and admonishing and in singing. These participles have the force of imperatives. Participles can be used as imperatives. Here the sentence begins with an imperative, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you," which sets the tone for the following construction. Compare verse 13, where "bear with one another . . . and forgive each other" are actually participles that get their imperative meaning from the main verb, the imperative "clothe yourselves," in verse 12.

There are two possible ways to construe the grammar of verse 16: We may read, (1) let the word of Christ richly dwell in you

in all wisdom, as in gratitude you teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with your hearts to God; or we may read, (2) let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing with thanks in your hearts to God. Other arrangements of the words are possible, but the main choice is whether the teaching is done by the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, to which is added the singing with grace, or whether these songs are the objects of the singing, with their singing taken as a distinct activity from the teaching. The former construction (with the teaching done by the different kinds of songs) is closer to the sense of Eph. 5:19, but recent commentators favor taking the items sung with the participle "singing," and I give a cautious preference to this construction.

The three activities of teaching, singing, and giving thanks are marked each by a prepositional phrase. The teaching is "in wisdom," the singing is "in gratitude," and the giving thanks is "in the name of Christ." Wisdom is a prominent theme in Colossians (1:9, 28; 2:3, 23; 4:5). This emphasis is possibly intended as a contrast to the false teachers' claim to wisdom. The phrase "with gratitude" is literally "in grace [charis]." The word charis has three meanings: charm (graciousness--which could be the meaning of 4:6), divine grace (as in 1:6), and thanks (possible in 1 Cor. 10:30). Either of the latter two are possible here (in a state of grace, or with thankfulness), but I have opted for the repetition of the theme of thanksgiving.

The other prepositional phrase with "in," "in your hearts," is not silent worship but as in verse 15 refers to the center of one's being, "with your whole self."

Most modern commentators recognize that it is impossible to distinguish "psalms, hymns, and songs." If one were going to do so, the psalms would be primarily the Old Testament Psalms or compositions like them; hymns would be songs of praise; and songs (odes) would be the more general word. The words can be distinguished by their etymology, as was done by Gregory, bishop of Nyssa in the fourth century. He said: "A psalm is the melody made by a musical instrument. An ode is a melodious expression made by the mouth with words. . . . A hymn is the honor rendered to God for the good things which are ours." (On the Titles of the Psalms 3.2.) In spite of this etymologically correct definition, Gregory's own usage, like that of other Christians, was to refer "psalms" to vocal music. By the time of the writing of the New Testament, Christian and most Jewish usage had dropped instrumental associations from psalmos. The three terms are interchangeable in the titles appearing in Greek manuscripts of the Psalms and in other compositions, such as the Psalms of Solomon (first century B. C.). Philo and Josephus use "hymns" to mean the "Psalms." It may be that "spiritual" modifies all three nouns, not just "songs" and is feminine because the nearest noun ("songs") is feminine. It is possible that these types of songs are seen as the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit. If "spiritual" is to be applied only to "songs," then the contrast is to secular songs (the other two words already referred to

religious songs); in this case there is no explicit note of the Holy Spirit at work in them. Cf. the phrase "spiritual wisdom" in 1:9.

Verse 17 shows that these injunctions are not limited to the assembly of the church. To do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus recalls 3:11, "Christ is all in all." In the Old Testament one's "name" meant the person's self. To do all in Jesus' name is to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. He is the mediator of Christian worship. "Giving thanks" is another imperatival participle. Linking Jesus with "everything" one does means that one asks, "Can I do this in the name of Jesus?" "Can I thank God for the opportunity of doing this?" (Bruce 160).

Exegesis of Ephesians 5:18-20

Like Colossians, there is in Ephesians the sequence of renouncing the old life (4:17-5:14), walking in wisdom (including worship--5:15-20), and a household code (5:21-6:9); but there is no confirmation that this was a standard sequence in early Christian instruction.

Eph. 5:15-20 contains three exhortations in the second person plural imperative. Each is constructed in a contrast: (in Greek m* . . . alla, "not [one thing]. . . but [something else]"). In 5:15, "not as unwise but as wise"; in 5:17, "not be foolish but understand"; and in 5:18, "not get drunk . . . but be filled with the Spirit."

The last of these exhortations, "Do not get drunk with wine" (5:18), quotes Proverbs 23:31 according to the Greek version. The comparison between drunkenness and being filled with the Spirit is

that a person is under the control of an external power--spirits or the Spirit. Drunkenness, Paul says, leads to profligacy (wastefulness) or debauchery (sexual excess). Some suggest that the contrast between being drunk with wine and being filled with the Spirit occurs because of drunkenness in the worship of Dionysus, but there is no indication that such was a special problem for the readers. Drunkenness is probably introduced simply for the sake of making a contrast with the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we may observe that the Spirit is the Christian's alternative to alcohol and drugs. The Spirit pushes us not to ecstasy but to songs of praise and to mutual submission.

We may translate "Be filled with" or "Be filled by" the Spirit--both are possible. Or, to paraphrase, "Let your fullness come through the Holy Spirit" (Bruce 379 n.). When the Spirit is in control, the exercise of the intellect is not eliminated but is enhanced. The Spirit strengthens the inner person (3:16). Being filled with the Spirit, therefore, is the equivalent of the word of Christ living within a person in Colossians 3:16. The two ideas of being filled with the Spirit and having the word dwelling within belong together, and it is not necessary to interpret one as really being the other.

What is involved in being filled with the Spirit is indicated by five participles in vv. 19-21: speaking, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and submitting oneself. These are the results, not the means, of the filling with the Spirit. According to Ephesians the Spirit provides wisdom (1:16), inner strength (3:16), and worship (5:19).

The "speaking," undoubtedly a vocal activity, includes "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," the same triad as in Col. 3:16. In Ephesians the double verbs, "singing and making melody," and the three nouns--"psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," are examples of the writer's fondness for piling up synonyms and for multiple descriptions. As instances of triple expressions compare 3:6; 4:22-24; 4:32. What was said about the difficulty of distinguishing the three terms in Colossians applies here as well.

Even if "spiritual" means inspired by the Spirit, the verbal expressions in song are still intelligible, because the believers speak to one another in the "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." The singing derives from the Spirit, but it involves understandable articulation, because the songs are addressed to one another as well as to God.

Heautois (translated "among yourselves" or "to one another") is once more used not as a reflexive pronoun ("talking to yourselves") but in a reciprocal sense ("speaking to one another"). The same usage is found in 4:32, where the two pronouns (the reflexive and the reciprocal) are interchangeable. This "speaking to one another" underlines the communal character of the instructions. The occasion where this was possible was the common meeting of Christians, for everyone was to take part. Although addressed to one another, the songs were still directed to the Lord.

The participles "singing and making melody" are verbal forms of two of the nouns that describe what is sung, namely songs and psalms. The construction in verse 19 follows the phraseology of

the Greek translation of the Psalms, where ad* ("sing") and psall* ("make melody") frequently occur together (Psa. 21:13; 27:6; 57:7; 101:1); they sometimes occur in synonymous parallelism, showing their equivalent meanings for vocal music (Psa. 13:6; 59:16-17; 68:4, 32; 104:33).

The Greek translation of the Old Testament contains the construction psall* with the preposition en and the name of an instrument and a reference to "the Lord" also in the dative case with the meaning "to play on the (named) instrument to God" (Psa. 33:2; 71:22; 98:5; 144:9; 147:7; 149:3). Ephesians may be following this construction, although some of the best manuscripts lack the preposition en. If so, the heart is the specified instrument on which the music is made. One difference is that in Psalms the "Lord" is God but in Ephesians is always Christ. Where the instrumental connotation of psall* is present in early Christian literature, it is with such a metaphorical meaning, but even that metaphorical usage is not the principal way the word is used. Most often the verb psall* in Christian writings means simply "sing the Psalms" or "sing praise." It is probably best, therefore, to take the combination of the verbs "sing and make melody" in Ephesians as an example of hendiadys, that is, saying the same thing in two words joined with "and."

The melody comes from the heart as well as from the lips. The presence of the pronoun "your" with "heart" rules out the possibility that t* kardia is adverbial "heartily." The heart in Biblical language, unlike modern usage, does not refer primarily to the emotions. The heart is the center of intellect and will,

the total person. The thought is that the singing is to be with sincerity and conviction, rather than with heartiness. The outward melody is accompanied by the inward music of the heart.

There was a rich vocal environment of early Christianity. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain many hymns and also psalms in addition to the canonical Psalms; the Jewish sect of the Therapeutae described by Philo had a richly varied vocal music; and choruses were prominent in Greco-Roman religions. From these sources we know of various ways in which song could be expressed: solo (one person singing at a time), responsorial (a leader singing the main line with the group responding with the same words or with a refrain), antiphonal (with two choruses alternating with each other), and a group singing all together. Early Christian literature outside the New Testament attests responsorial, antiphonal, and congregational or unison singing in the assemblies of the church and solo singing in other contexts.

Instrumental music was present in the Jewish temple and in pagan religious activities. Thus there was available to the early church religious music that was instrumental (and not just pagan, because it was used in the temple at Jerusalem), music that was vocal and instrumentally accompanied, and music that was vocal. Early Christianity followed the vocal but not the instrumental practices of its time. This would appear to have been a deliberate choice out of the musical options available.

A parallel to Ephesians 5:19 is found in the report the Roman governor Pliny sent to the emperor Trajan about A.D. 110 concerning what he had learned about Christian meetings: "They

were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god" (Letters 10.96). Both statements refer to the context of a meeting together. The "alternate verses" of Pliny's description correspond to Paul's "speaking to one another," but the specific interpretation of this activity as antiphonal singing is not necessarily the meaning of Pliny or of Paul. Responsorial singing also would fit both statements, and collective congregational singing would accord with Paul's statement. That the hymns were addressed to Christ is common to both statements.

Singing in Ephesians 5 is associated with thanksgiving, as it was in Colossians 3. Verse 20 reminds the readers that thanksgiving is to be made in all circumstances (cf. 1:16). It is made with reference to the name of Christ and directed to God the Father.