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EXEGESIS OF EPHESIANS 5: 19 AND COLOSSIANS 3: 16

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I have been asked to do an exegesis of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. I welcome this opportunity, but first I need to say a few introductory words about what I am attempting to do. "Exegesis," generally speaking, refers to an explanation of a text. More specifically, it is a critical interpretation of a text by the use of linguistic and historical tools. As applied to a portion of Scripture, exegesis seeks to arrive at the original meaning of a passage. In other words, what did the text first mean to its first readers? When, for example, Paul wrote his letter to the church at Colossae, it was to be read in the hearing of the congregation (Colossians 4:16). What did the letter mean at that time and place, to those who first heard it read in their public assembly? If only we could have been there! Exegesis, as far as possible, attempts to place us there in order that we might understand the texts in the light of their historical circumstances and problems. We today often make the mistake of reading the Bible through our twentieth-century glasses (our own situation and struggles) instead of through first-century eyes. No wonder we inject all kinds of ideas into the text that were never originally there.

Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 are close parallels, and it is necessary to treat them together. Colossians and Ephesians may be referred to as companion letters, since each in thought and style is similar to the other. About two-thirds of Colossians is parallel to Ephesians; and Ephesians, which is longer, reflects about one-half of Colossians. Both letters, for example, speak of the "fullness" of God and of Christ (Ephesians 1:23; 3:19; 4:13; Colossians 1:19; 2:9); of Christ as the head of His body, the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18); of redemption as "the forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14); of Christians "rooted" in Christ or in His love (Ephesians 3: 17; Colossians 2:7); and so forth.¹ But, of course, there are distinct differences in the two letters, largely because Colossians is polemical and deals with a specific false teaching that was rearing its ugly head among the Colossian Christians (see esp. chap. 2). Yet both letters, particularly Ephesians, reveal the prayerful and thankful spirit of Paul the prisoner, for both sound praises in the highest to God and to Christ. "Christ in all, Christ above all."

The passages at hand both occur in sections on the new life in Christ. The word "walk" (*peripatein*, often translated as "live," "lead a life") is the key word. Christians once walked in the way of sin (Ephesians 2:1-3; Colossians 3:7), but now they "walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8; cf. 2:10; 4:1,17; 5:2; Colossians 1:10; 2:6; 4:5). Another key word is "wisdom." The false teaching at Colossae had an "appearance of wisdom" (2:23), but real wisdom and knowledge are in Christ (2:3; Ephesians 1:9,17; cf. 3:10). Christians, therefore, are to be filled with this "spiritual wisdom" (Colossians 1:9; cf. 1:28; 3:16) and are to "walk in wisdom" (Colossians 4:5).

In a short paper it is impossible to give an extended exegesis of these grand passages on singing. So I propose to sketch their meaning in context, and then by way of further explanation to raise several relevant questions and to offer some concluding observations.

The verses leading to Ephesians 5:19 present a series of contrasts on wise and unwise actions. The main thoughts of verses 15-18 may be represented as follows:

Look carefully how you walk

Not as unwise men, but as wise

(Do not waste time, implied), but make the most of it

Do not be foolish, but understand the Lord's will

Do not get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit

The structure shows that foolish people are characterized by wasting their time and by being drunk with wine. On the other hand, the wise are those who use their time to the fullest—the days are evil—and learn to comprehend what the will of the Lord is. The wise also are those who are filled with the Holy Spirit; that is, they experience the fullness that the Spirit imparts. It is important to notice that "be filled with the Spirit" is passive. Some people go around trying to pump themselves up with the Spirit, not remembering that the filling of the Spirit is a blessing that comes only from God.

"Be filled with the Spirit" is the leading thought of verses 19-21. The main ideas of these verses may be represented as follows:

Be filled with the Spirit

Speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs

Singing and

Making melody to the Lord with all your heart

Giving thanks to God in the name of Christ

Submitting to one another in reverence for Christ.

The structure shows that five present participles amplify the imperative, "be filled with the Spirit." To put it another way, the effects of being filled with the Spirit are speaking in songs, singing, making melody, giving thanks, and submitting. "Submitting to one another. . ." provides a concluding statement of general application and a transition to the next paragraph.

Ephesians 5:19f. wonderfully fits in with a letter that gives itself so much to the exalted praise of God. A supreme manifestation of being filled with the Spirit is that Christians address one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. "To yourselves" (*heautois*) is reciprocal in force and is used in the sense of "one another," as in "forgiving one another" (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13) and having "love for one another" (1 Peter 4:8).² Speaking to yourselves" (KJV), although possible, is open to misunderstanding, as though one communes with himself. Older commentators (Trench, Lightfoot, etc.) carefully distinguished between "psalms," "hymns," and "spiritual songs," but now it is widely accepted that there is scarcely any difference of meaning in the terms. The

Septuagint uses these terms rather indiscriminately, as do Philo and Josephus.³ Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich defines each term generally as a "song of praise."⁴ "Psalms" here does not refer to the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament. But to Christian songs of praise, as in 1 Corinthians 14:26.⁵ If it is asked why Paul uses three equivalent terms for songs of praise, the context supplies the answer. Being "filled with the Spirit" (v. 18) and "giving thanks always for everything" (v. 20) bracket "psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs" in verse 19, and thus Paul seems to be heaping up terms in an overflow of his spirit in divine praise.

"Singing" and "making melody" is to be understood similarly. William Tyndale, known as "the father of the English Bible," coined the expression "make melody." Attaching approximately the same meaning to the two words, he could not very well translate "singing and singing"; so he chose the alternative, "synginge and makeinge melodie." The Greek word for "make melody" is *psallo*. Since its meaning has been much disputed, it deserves attention later. Suffice it to say now that *psallo* occurs here in Ephesians 5: 19 and in four other places in the New Testament, Romans 15:9, 1 Corinthians 14:15 (twice), and James 5:13. In these four instances *psallo* clearly means "sing" or "sing praise," and is so rendered by the various translations.

The singing of which Paul speaks is a matter of the heart. In ancient times some believed that silence was the ideal of worship; Philo, for example, speaks of songs of praise that were to be offered not audibly but by the invisible mind.⁶ Some people today say that they simply "sing in the heart!" But Paul obviously is not referring to silent worship. One cannot "sing" only in the heart, nor is it possible to "address one another" in songs of praise and remain silent. Paul's expression "in your heart" (*en te kardia*) is not the same as "from the heart" (*ek tes kardias*). "In your heart" however, might mean "with the heart"; thus the Revised Standard Version translates, "with all your heart," that is, heartily, enthusiastically. But this rendering does not fit in with Paul's use of "heart" (*kardia*) elsewhere in Ephesians and Colossians, where in the nine other instances Paul consistently employs "heart" for the inner person, the inmost self. Besides, Colossians 3:16 has "in your hearts." Is there really a difference between "in your heart" in one passage and "in your hearts" in the other? Indeed, the immediate context in Colossians helps to explain what Paul means. Colossians 3:15 says, "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts!" Verse 15 has "in your hearts" (*en tais kardiais*), verse 16 has "in your hearts" (*en tais kardiais*). As Christ's peace is to become the ruling principle, Paul says, "in your hearts," that is, *within you*, so, Paul says, "sing in your hearts," that is, sing *within you*. Paul's teaching, then, in both Colossians and Ephesians is that the innermost depths of one's being must *also* participate in worship to God. The outer song of the lips is to be accompanied by the inner song of the soul.

Colossians 3:16 presents further similarities and differences. Again, wisdom is fundamental: teach and admonish "in all wisdom" (v. 16). But the key word in the Colossian parallel is "thankful," which occurs in three consecutive verses (vv. 15,16,17; cf. Ephesians 5:20). The leading thought of Colossians 3:16f is, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"; and the main ideas can be represented as follows:

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom
Teaching and
Admonishing one another
In psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
Singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God . . .
Giving thanks to God the Father through him (Christ).*

The structure gives prominence to four participles, three of which are directly connected with the indwelling word of Christ, with the other forming part of a concluding statement of general application and being transitional. “The word of Christ” may refer to “the teachings Christ gave”; but more probably it denotes “the teachings about Christ,” the all sufficient word centered in Him, previously referred to as “the word of the truth of the gospel” (1:5). That word is to live in the Colossians “richly” and abundantly. As it does, by means of their hymns they are to teach and admonish one another. This is a strong command for mutual ministry in song along the lines of mutual edification as in 1 Corinthians 14:26ff.

It is possible to take the participles here as in Ephesians as imperatives, for this is rather common in Koine Greek.⁷ But this breaks up the flow of Paul’s thought; “filled with the Spirit” is closely related to “speaking to one another” and the indwelling “word of Christ” to “teaching and admonishing one another.” It is also possible in Colossians 3:16 to translate “singing with grace” (“in the realm of God’s grace,” “on the basis of His grace,” etc.), but the context of thanksgiving argues for “singing gratefully,” “singing with thankfulness.”

These are the classic passages in the New Testament on singing, and it is remarkable how many enigmas they pose to translators and skilled exegetes. It is not surprising, then, that these passages often raise certain questions for us today. I want to deal briefly with some of these questions; and because they are controversial, I will try to address them in the kindest way possible.

1. Is the singing in these passages congregational or individual? This is often asked about various passages, and answers are not always easy to give. We forget that this sort of questions would scarcely arise in the first-century church. We should remember that most of the New Testament letters were written to churches and were read to assembled congregations. Yet in response to the question one needs to ask: When today do Christians generally address one another in songs of praise? Under what circumstances so they teach and admonish each other in these songs? Usually this takes place in the worship assembly. So it was in the early church. While teaching certainly occurred outside the assembly, Christians taught and admonished one another in the assembly.⁸ Of course, this is why Christians were not to neglect the assembly because this is where exhortation took place (Hebrews 10:25). Practically all recent scholarly research on this point understands Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 to refer to congregational worship—Schilier, Rengstorf, Behm, Preisker, Delling, Lohse, M. Barth, Bartels,

- R. Martin, Moule, etc.⁹ At the least, it can be said that these passages on singing reflect the scene of the primitive church in worship.
2. What and how did the early church sing? They sang not in harmonious parts, but probably in responsive-type singing. Perhaps Romans 11:36 is an example of responsorial singing, with the congregational "Amen!" In the early centuries of the church the ideal of praise was *koinonia*, singing in unison.
 3. Does 'the mention of "spiritual songs" mean that these songs were inspired by the Spirit? This is possible, but if so, this cannot refer to ecstatic tongue-speaking because Ephesians 5:17 clearly says, "understand what the will of the Lord is." But "spiritual songs" more likely distinguishes songs as to "sacred and profane," and even as to "pagan and Christian."
 4. What is the meaning of "make melody"—*psallo*? I do not at all want to be argumentative here. I will simply summarize the most up-to-date research on the question.
 - a. *Lexicons*. The standard New Testament lexicon is Baurer-Arndt-Gingrich. Unfortunately, this lexicon has occasioned confusion. The first edition of Arndt-Gingrich, in 1957, said of *psallo*: "in our lit., in accordance w. OT usage, *sing* (*to the accompaniment of a harp*), *sing praise*" (p. 899). But the second edition, in 1979, correcting many errors of the first edition, reads:

*in our lit., in according with OT usage, **sing, sing praise**. . . In the LXX ps. freg. means "sing," whether to the accompaniment of a harp or (as usually) not (psalm 7:18; 9:12; 107:4 al). This process continued until ps. in Mod. Gr. means "sing" exclusively. . . it is likely that some such sense as **make melody** is best here. Those who favor "play" . . . may be relying too much on the earliest mgn. of *psallo** (p. 891).
 - b. *Theological wordbooks, etc.* It is important to notice that of the many articles by various authors in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, every article that so much as touches on the meaning of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 consistently explains the passages simply in terms of "sing," "sing praises." G. Delling wrote the articles on *psallo* and related words. Speaking at first of "singing and making melody," he says:

*The expression **adontes kat psallontes** in v. 19b.underscores v. 19a. The combination of verbs in this order is found in the OT, Ps. 26:6; 56:8; 104:2, 107:2. The literal sense "by or with the playing of strings, " still found in the LXX, is now employed figuratively (VIII, 498-99).*

Schlier wrote the article on *ado* ("sing"). Discussing its use in the New Testament, he says pointedly: "There is no distinction from *psallein* in Ephesians 5:19."¹⁰ In other words, Schlier says that "sing" and "make melody" are used interchangeably. But this cannot be true if *psallo* here means "play with an instrument." Thus the one verb "sing" in Colossians does service for the two verbs "sing" and "make melody" in Ephesians.¹¹

The evidence indeed could be multiplied.¹² But are there not other authorities that define *psallo* differently? If so, why? Yes, sometimes one can find something to the contrary. This happens, I believe, for the reason already noticed in the new Arndt-Gingrich: "those who favor 'play'. . . may be relying too much on the earliest mgn. of *psallo*." I add two

other reasons: (1) too frequently a term is defined by its root meaning, but a word should be defined by its use, and (2) no matter what a word can or does mean elsewhere, the important thing is what it means in a given verse in context. Contextually here, and according to New Testament usage, *psallo* means "to sing," "to offer praise."

In conclusion, let me try to put all of this in perspective. I want to state clearly that I do not believe that this is the most vital of all topics. The most important question in all the world is, "What do you think of Christ?" This is the crucial question that every person must answer for himself. On the other hand, I do believe that what we have considered today is important. Some, indeed, do not understand this, for they regard it as a slight matter. To the contrary; however, anything Scripture teaches on must not be looked upon as minor. How can we submit to the Lordship of Christ if we do not listen to Scripture? It is not just the use or non-use of the piano or organ in worship. What is involved here is the larger principle of how the New Testament teaches us on any subject. If the New Testament requires immersion for the forgiveness of sins, can baptism be something less? If in the New Testament men are the elders of congregations, do we have the right to appoint women as elders today? To ask these questions is but to answer them in the negative. The first-century church met in worship and sang songs of praise. The New Testament requirement to sing (*adein, psallein*) does not leave the option to sing and play.

There is one point I have not developed thus far. Not only were early Christians to address one another in songs, but these passages stress that their singing was to be directed to God. Their praises were outward and upward, manward and Godward. The church meets, therefore, to exhort and to offer praise. The Jerusalem temple and its animal sacrifices are no more. In their stead, let us draw near God in worship with real hearts (Hebrews 10:22). Let us continually offer up to Him a sacrifice of praise (Hebrews 13:15).

¹On Eph.-Col. parallels, see the commentaries of T .K. Abbott (p.xxiii f.) and Wm. Hendriksen (pp. 5-32); for a thorough treatment of Pauline style in these letters, see A. Van Roon, *The Authenticity of Ephesians* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 192-212. Van Roon defends the Pauline authorship of Ephesians.

²Heautois = the reciprocal *allelouis* even in classical Greek and in the LXX. See Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1979), 212. Hereafter referred to as BAG. cr. Blass-Debrunner-Funk, sect. 287; Robertson, 690.

³William Sheppard Smith in his *Musical Aspects of the New Testament* (Amsterdam, 1962) has an excellent discussion of these terms (pp. 60-65).

⁴BAGm 891,836,895.

⁵See BAG,891.

⁶See J. Quasten, *Music & Worship in Pagan & Christian Antiquity*. Trans. by B. Ramsey (Washington, D.C., 1983), 5]-55; also Smith, op. cit., 165f.

⁷See Moulton's *Prolegomena*, 180-183; Blass-Debrunner-Funk, Sect. 468. Cf. NEB, TEV, etc.

⁸The word "admonish" (*noutheteo*) seems to have assembly connotations in such passages as 2 Thess. 3:15 and 1 Thess. 5:12, and probably also here.

⁹See the articles in TDNT, *The New International Dictionary of NT Theology* (hereafter, NIDNTT), the commentaries, and the relevant works on New Testament worship.

¹⁰TDNT, I, 164.

¹¹Smith, *op. cit.*, 61.

¹²See K.H. Bartels, "Song, Hymn, Psalm," NIDNTI, III, 668-676; also the books of G. Delling, C.F.D. Moule, & R. Martin on New Testament worship.

