



THE LINE

singing in scripture

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Introduction

This is a brief exegetical analysis of two passages in the NT that describe, to some degree, what worship through music looks like in the local church. Please note that most of my work is in Colossians, with references from several commentators. This is due to a paper for an exegesis class. However, most commentators will mention along the way that since Colossians was most likely written after Ephesians, Paul may be “copying” words written to the Ephesians for the Colossians. I do not think this is significant, but should at least be acknowledged. Also note that the Greek text is present. Below I tried to show some structure and parallelism between the two texts and I also comment on the grammar/syntax of the Greek. However, this should not deter you and you should be able to follow the flow of the argument.

Exegesis

Colossians 3:16

ÔO lo/goß touv Cristouv e'noikei÷tw e'n uJmi√n plousi÷wß, e'n pa;shØ sofi÷a[^]
dida;skonteß kai« nouqetouvnteß e'autou/ß, yalmoi√ß u¢mnoiß w^Ôdai√ß
pneumatikai√ß e'n [thØv] ca;riti a^†donteß e'n tai√ß kardi÷aiß uJmw∅n tw^∅ qew^∅:

(Let the Word of Christ dwell richly in you, by teaching and instructing each other in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God).

The main clause of this verse parallels the structure of v. 14, where *oJ lo/goß* takes the place of *hJ ei rh/nh*, in each instance followed by a present imperative and an *e'n* prepositional phrase referring to the community. The entire structure of this verse is governed by the imperative of *e'noike=w* and the three participles (*dida;skonteß*, *nouqetouvnteß*, *a^f;donteß*) that modify it, all of which are employed by Paul to show the means by which “the word of Christ” should “dwell” in them—namely by teaching, instructing, and with thanksgiving.

Though *oJ lo/goß touv kuri=ou* (“the Word of the Lord,” 1 Thes. 1:8) and *touv qeouv* (“of God,” Acts 13:46, Rom 9:6) occur more frequently in Paul’s writing, *oJ lo/goß touv Cristouv* (“the Word of Christ”) occurs only here.¹ The genitive *touv Cristouv* modifies *Ôo lo/goß*, but in what way? Is it “the word that comes from Christ” as a subjective genitive or is “the word concerning Christ” where it is taken as an objective genitive? Commentators differ in their conclusions,² but Dunn wisely states that “there is no reason why the genitive form should be pressed to an either-or decision (objective or subjective).”³ It can be taken that the words from Christ are about Christ and the words about Christ are from him. One need look no further than the conversion experience of Paul to understand this. Christ comes to Paul and speaks to him (“Saul” in Acts 9:7) and when the Lord comes to Ananias in a vision, he tells him that Saul is “a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kinds and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (vv. 15-16). This is a clear example of Christ’s words given for the intent of spread the words concerning him. And now, as with the other apostles, Paul is a “chosen instrument” to continue what Jesus started in his life.

Like with *brabeu/w*, the present imperative of *e'noike=w* is used by Paul to urge for the continuous action to “let the word of Christ dwell.” Wilson points out that the parallel also indicates “that this is not something the Colossians are to achieve, but something they are to allow to happen, and not hinder,⁴ thus Paul follows with *e'n uJmi√n plousi=wß*. This phrase is ambiguous, referring either to the individual believers (“in you richly”) or the community as a whole (“among you richly”). As with *oJ lo/goß touv kuri=ou* the ambiguity does not present an either-or situation, though the words that follow, referring to communal activity, favor “among.” However, the Word of Christ should dwell in each of them richly as well as richly among the entire community. Here we have an introduction to one of the few descriptions of worship in the early church. So what does the Word of Christ dwelling “richly” look like?

The two instrumental participles, *dida;skonteß* and *nouqetouvnteß*, show that the Word of Christ will continue to dwell in and among them by the ongoing means of

¹ For a discussion on the variant readings, see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 625.

² Lightfoot favors the subjective, 224, as does F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 157. O’Brien, 206, and Moo, 286, take it as objective.

³ Dunn, 236.

⁴ Wilson, 266.

“teaching and admonishing each other.”⁵ The prepositional phrase, that precedes these participles, ἐν παῖσι σοφία, is in question as to whether it modifies ἐνοικεῖτε or the participles that follow it. NA²⁷ makes the decision for the latter by placing a comma before the phrase, and most English translations reflect this (NRSV, NIV, NASB), while some may consider the former in part due to the parallel structure with the previous ἐν phrase (NKJV).⁶ The latter is favorable as Paul relates “wisdom” teaching and admonishing with “all wisdom” in 1:28. It is not conjecture to think that he is communicating that the responsibility he has as one who proclaims Christ to the world is similarly the responsibility the Colossians have, except it’s for each other.

The participle of ἀψάδω (“singing”) governs this final section and indicates the third way in which worship should occur in the Colossian church. But does the first word in this section, ψάλλετε, go with νοουεὶς or ἀψάδετε? Moule concludes that the translation could go either way (“...while you teach and admonish one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing” or “...in all its richness while you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, singing with psalms...”).⁷ If compared to the parallel passage in Eph. 5:19, it would favor the latter,⁸ and Dunn suggests not ruling this out because “prior to the invention of printing, hymns and songs were a necessary and invaluable means of implanting Christian teaching—and even after.”⁹ Given this historical reality, the translation could maintain the balanced, fairly ambiguous view of the Greek text, reflecting yet another rich way in which Christ’s word “dwells” within the community. The three words tied to singing—ψάλλετε, ψαλμοὺς καὶ ᾠδαὺς πνευματικαῖς (“psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” with “spiritual” as a qualifier to “songs”)—are similar in meaning, but can be distinguished. ᾠδή/ is suggested as referring to a general song, accompanied or unaccompanied; ψαλμοὶ refers in most instances to the Psalms of David, which would have been a part of the early Christian community; ᾠδαί is designated for the new songs that would have been composed by the Christians themselves.¹⁰

How then should they sing? Harris’ discussion for the two prepositional phrases that surround ἀψάδετε is worth noting. He writes that both should be taken circumstantially, agreeing with O’Brien who states that these phrases are employed by Paul to show that “they are to sing thankfully to God with their whole being.”¹¹ Dunn concludes that this type of singing to God “underlines the importance of a worship

⁵ Lightfoot argues that “the participles are here used for imperatives, as frequently in hortatory passages,” 224, but as O’Brien points out that whichever way they are taken, “the teaching and admonition in all wisdom arise from the indwelling of the word,” 206.

⁶ Lightfoot argues for this position also based on Col 1:9; Eph. 1:8; 5:18, 19.

⁷ Moule, 125.

⁸ O’Brien takes this position, 208.

⁹ Dunn, 237.

¹⁰ Wilson, 268. Cf. Lightfoot, 224-225; Dunn, 237-239.

¹¹ Harris, 169-170. Cf. O’Brien, 210. See also Harris, 169-170, for the textual critical issue τοῦ, as he concludes the inclusion of the article, which, “with καὶ, may be anaphoric, pointing back to εὐχαριστοί, (‘thankful,’ v. 15).”

rooted in the depths of personal experience and springing up from that source—heart worship and not merely lip worship.”¹²

Ephesians 5:18b-19

αὐτὰρ πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι, λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [ἐν] ὑμνοῖς καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς, ἀψάλλοντες καὶ ᾄδοντες ὁδῶν καρδίας ᾠμῶν καὶ ᾠδῶν πνευματικῶν, (...but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to each other with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and “psalming” in your hearts to the Lord).

Paul is giving two commands in v. 18, though we only see this one. The first is a strict prohibition: μή μεθύετε οἴνω (“do not get drunk with wine,” ESV). He immediately follows this with the contrasting, positive command of to “be filled with the Spirit.” Note the concept of filling in both the prohibition and the call. How are we going to be filled is the question? Will we be filled with wine, that produces a fallen form of “losing self” (debauchery, v. 18), or will we be filled with the Spirit, which is in line with the will of the Lord, making the best use of the time (vv. 14-17)? We as God’s people should desire the latter and live toward the latter. Paul then goes on to tell us how the latter actually looks in v. 19.

The imperative Paul gives, πληροῦσθε, (“be filled”) is a present imperative,¹³ meaning Paul wanted his readers to continue being filled with the Spirit. It is not a one-time event, but something that should be consistent in the life of the Ephesians (and the believer today). The imperative is followed up with three participles (closely mirroring his words to the Colossians): λαλοῦντες, ἀψάλλοντες, ᾄδοντες, (“speaking...singing...making melody”). The first participle can either be instrumental (“by speaking...”) or attendant circumstance (“as you speak...”). The former maintains the force of the participial form and is favored. Some would also consider the participle to have imperatival force, thus being rendered as a command. However, this is not the case because Paul could have easily chosen the imperatival form here.¹⁴ Instead, he is showing the connection to being filled to how it should look in the lives of the Ephesians. The musical terms, ὑμνοῖς καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς (psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs), are part of the prepositional phrase that modifies λαλοῦντες either instrumentally (“with psalms...”) or as to how they should “speak” to each other. English translations do not catch the nuances here, which is okay. As we saw in the Colossian example, the ambiguity allows for room as to whether it a means of being filled or if these are signs that show we are filled with the Spirit. Both should be in view here.

¹² Dunn, 240.

¹³ O’Brien argues for an instrumental usage of ἐν πνεύματι, saying that it does not indicate content (“with”), but instead “by” to show the means by which they are “filled.” However, I do think there is room for interpretation that it can contain both, given the reality of being “filled” with drink (i.e. wine). See PNTC, 391-392, where he concludes that the content is “the fullness of (the triune) God or of Christ,” where “the Spirit’s mediating the fullness of God and Christ to believers.”

¹⁴ O’Brien argues correctly that these participles should be taken as dependent, but chooses to say that they are “of result, which describe the overflow or outworking of the Spirit’s filling believers. Spirit-filled Christians are people whose lives are characterized by singing, thanksgiving, and mutual submissions” PNTC, 387-388.

The participle, $\text{ya}\zeta\text{llonte}\beta$, is interesting because this is the only time it occurs in this form. As with the Colossians passage, it has implications of OT psalms, possibly with instrumental accompaniment, but why did Paul choose the participle?

$\text{th}\text{Ø}\text{v kardi}\div\text{a}^{\wedge}\text{ uJmw}\text{Ø}\text{n}$ (“in your heart”). “Heart” is singular, so Paul may be implying the collective heart of the community of believers. This would make sense given Eph. 2 as Paul addresses the reality that God has broken down the dividing wall (v. 14-15, “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace) . There is no longer any division. Just as we are one body, we are one heart. This is how we sing. Also, this should not be taken as a locative, meaning that we sing only “in” our hearts. As Moo noted in Colossians, the same applies here. Though song may affect our hearts, we do not sing within ourselves. We sing outwardly, with one heart *toward* the Lord. Note finally here that the songs are not to God ($\text{tw}^{\wedge}\text{Ø qew}$), but to “the Lord” ($\text{tw}^{\wedge}\text{Ø kuri}\div\text{w}$), who, as we know throughout the NT, is Jesus.

O’Brien’s final comments:

In the light of this exegesis, then, v. 19 describes the singing of psalms, hymns, and songs by those who are Spirit-filled from different, though closely related, perspectives. The two clauses of v. 19 refer not to two separate responses or activities, but to one and the same action, each with a slightly different focus. To start with, the ‘audiences’ are distinct. According to v. 19a, believers speak in psalms, hymns, and songs *to one another*, reminding each other of what God has done in the Lord Jesus Christ. A further distinction is the purpose of this singing, namely, to instruct and edify members of the body. In a sense, this singing has a horizontal and corporate focus to it. In v. 19b, the singing and making music are directed *to the Lord* Jesus. This activity thus has a vertical focus and a personal dimension, for believers praise the Lord Jesus ‘with their whole being.’ It is in and through singing and making music, by which other members of the body are instructed and edified, that praise is offered to the Lord Jesus. The same singing has a twofold function and purpose.¹⁵

Conclusion

The clearest things to pull from these passages for us today are the following:

- These are commands, not suggestions. Paul is not hoping that they might do this. He is telling them that as God’s people, to be filled with/by the Spirit and to let the Word of Christ to dwell richly in their community. This is of utmost necessity for the unity of the Body.

¹⁵ O’Brien, 397.

- A clear way this is done is through teaching, admonishing, and speaking to each other. There is mutual instruction within the church, meaning we all need to be informed as to what the “Word of Christ” is and how to edify each other with it.
- A method or outpouring of this that Paul sees as crucial is through songs of various forms: from the OT, written on their own accord, with voice, with instrument, with a focus on the “spiritual.” I take this to be comprehensive in form, which should allow for freedom of expression. There is no one “right way” of doing “church music.”
- Ultimately the goal is worship. It occurs 1) in the horizontal instruction of fellow believers and 2) the vertical projection of song toward our Triune God. It is a family thing intended to worship God, resulting in the maintaining and strengthening of our familial unity established in Christ by the Holy Spirit.