

# IN RESPONSE - COLOSSIANS 3:16, ANOTHER LOOK, PART ONE

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Because of questions arising out of the parallelism within Colossians 3:16, I'm taking another look at this text. The New American Standard version reads:

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

The New International Version says:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

The verse breaks into a natural outline. We are to let the word of Christ richly dwell within. The product of this indwelling word of Christ is twofold, our teaching and admonishing one another and our singing to God. The outline would look something like this:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you

1. Teaching one another
2. Singing to God

Here is where we encounter our problem. With which part of the outline do the words "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" belong? The New American Standard Version places them with the words "teaching and admonishing." The translation therefore runs: "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." A comma comes after the word "songs."

The New International Version places the words in question with the word "singing." This translation therefore runs: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

The argument for exclusive psalmody presented in these pages hangs on a translation similar to the New International Version. I strongly maintain Paul restricts the singing in the congregation

more closely than the teaching. While our teaching and admonishing must be biblical, it is not limited to simply reading the Bible. We must teach, expound and apply the Bible.

Our singing, however, must not only be biblical, it must be taken from the psalm, hymns and songs of the Bible. In referring to psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, Paul means the Psalter of the Old Testament. See In Response, Volume IV, Number 6.

Once again, here is the problem: With which part of the outline given above do the words "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" belong? The problem is compounded by the fact there is reason for the two different translations of Colossians 3:16 quoted. In the original Greek in which Paul wrote, the words "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" come *between the two subordinate clauses*. They come between the words "teaching and admonishing" and "singing" [NASV] or the words "as you teach and admonish" and "as you sing" [NIV]. This lends to our confusion even though the Holy Spirit was without confusion when He inspired Paul's writings.

When we follow the word order of the Greek New Testament, we have a translation something like this:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms hymns and spiritual songs with grace singing in your hearts to God.<sup>1</sup>

I have not added any punctuation. In the original manuscripts, the letters were all capitals, uncials. The words were all run together and there was no punctuation. This means we often have a tough job of interpretation.

How should we punctuate this text? The editors of The British and Foreign Bible Society Greek New Testament punctuate as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Here is the Greek text.   
ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νοθετοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς, ψαλμοῖς ὑμνοῖς ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν τῇ χάριτι ἃ δούντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ

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

The New International Version follows this punctuation. How do we justify it?

Many people argue like this. My upbringing and tradition indicate the singing of uninspired hymns is perfectly acceptable. I grew up knowing nothing different. I'm quite comfortable with the tradition of my church. Those who do not agree are stuffy and intolerant.

On the other side, individuals within the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America might say something quite similar. My upbringing and tradition indicate singing only the inspired psalms of the Old Testament is the acceptable way of worship. I grew up knowing nothing different. I'm comfortable with the tradition of my church and find those who do not agree strangely intolerant.

Unfortunately, too many people on both sides of the issue argue in this fashion. Tradition, upbringing and personal preference determine the interpretation of Scripture they prefer. We may easily fall into this trap when we look at how Colossians 3:16 is translated in the different versions. We cannot allow this to happen no matter on what side of the issue of exclusive psalmody we find ourselves.

It is therefore my desire to look at the text piece by piece to see how it fits together. I think we will then see the translation given in the New International Version is superior and that it supports the exclusive use of psalms in worship.

Beyond doubt, the parallel already indicated exists in our text. Once again, the basic outline is as follows: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (1) as you teach and admonish one another and (2) as you sing to God. Now how do we properly fit the rest of the words into this exegetical puzzle? We will answer this question in the next lesson.

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## IN RESPONSE - COLOSSIANS 3:16, ANOTHER LOOK, PART TWO

by Dennis Prutow

Here is Colossians 3:16 given in the basic order of the original Greek.

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

Although not translated as such in the New International Version, we have three participles describing the outcome of the word of Christ dwelling within. They are on one side “teaching and admonishing” and on the other side “singing.”

Note first of all, if we place a comma after the word “richly” we have Paul’s basic exhortation. It is possible to add the following prepositional phrase but it is not necessary. The text would then read, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.” However, perfect sense is derived simply with the words, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”

The next clause would then begin with the words, “in all wisdom.” The first sub-point in our outline then looks like this: “in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another.” The first expression of being filled with the word of Christ is our teaching and admonishing one another. It is not uncommon for Paul to begin a thought with a prepositional phrase. Colossians 4:2 is an example.<sup>1</sup> In addition, as we teach and admonish “one another,” we sing “to God.”

What about the second sub-point in our outline? It has to do with singing. Here we also must deal with prepositional phrases. Again, Paul’s thought can begin with the phrase “with grace.” Here we have another question. Is it the grace which is in our hearts or is it the singing which is in our hearts. Should the English read “with grace in your hearts singing to God” or should it read “with grace singing in your hearts to God”?

The teaching and admonishing Paul exhorts is obviously the public variety. We must engage in these activities in small groups and in public worship. By the same token, the grace in our hearts

impels us to sing openly, publicly. To be sure, we must have a song in our hearts. That song, however, must not stay within. We must express our praise to God. Since the teaching and admonishing of our text is open and public, I take the singing to be similar. This seems to fit the parallel construction of the text.

The result so far is this translation of Colossians 3:16.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another, with grace in your hearts singing to God. There is balance in the two subordinate clauses. Paul tells us how we are to teach, *in all wisdom*. Paul tells us how we are to sing, *with grace in our hearts*. Paul tells us to whom our admonitions must be directed, *one another*. Paul also tells us to whom our singing is directed, *God*.

We then come to our final question. With what clause do the words “with psalms hymns and spiritual songs” belong? We can frame the question differently. Does Paul intend us to primarily teach and admonish one another using psalms, hymns and spiritual songs or does Paul want us to sing to God using psalms, hymns and spiritual songs? We certainly can and do use the psalms for teaching and exhortation. When we frame the question this way though it does seem much more logical that Paul has in mind singing songs rather than teaching with songs.

When we think about it, this is certainly the most logical conclusion to draw. For this reason, I favor the New International Version’s translation of Colossians 3:16. It simply breaks down the text in the most understandable way.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Allow me to quote two authorities in support of the position I am taking. The first is John Eadie. With reference to the Greek text of Colossians 3:16 and the words “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs,” Eadie says,

Some take the words down to *χαριτι* [grace], as connected with the

preceding participles—“admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” Our objection is, that while metrical or musical compositions are not the common vehicle of instruction or admonition, they are specially connected with sacred song. The datives, without the preposition, denote the material of song.<sup>2</sup>

William Hendricksen, a contemporary commentator, agrees. He quotes Herman Ridderbos who says, “The idea that this mutual teaching and admonishing must be carried out by means of song seems rather unnatural to us.”<sup>3</sup> Hendricksen goes on to say he thinks arguing from Ephesians 5:19 carries little weight. Ephesians 5:19, he says,

is, in my estimation, hardly sufficient proof. It is one thing to speak to one another in song. It is something else again to say that *teaching and admonishing* must be done by means of song.<sup>4</sup>

Here we have an old Scottish psalm singer and a contemporary hymn singer agreeing on our text. I agree with them both. It is also of no small interest that a principle modern version, the New International Version, also agrees with these commentators.

Although we may follow the tortuous trail of others commenting on our text, the differences outlined will remain. Dare I say a common sense approach to Colossians 3:16 should prevail? If it does, we will be in the camp of Eadie, Ridderbos and Hendricksen. We will also take a common sense approach to worship and sing the psalms.

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<sup>1</sup> This is another injunction. “In prayer [you] continue or be devoted.” The NASV says, “Devote yourselves to prayer.” The Greek text reads, *Τῇ προσευχῇ προσκατερέετ*.

<sup>2</sup> John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1977), p. 252. Originally published 1856.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 161, n. 137.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*