

Exegetical Brief Colossians 3:16

Teaching and Admonishing with Music

¹ Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. ² Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. ³ Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy. ⁴ For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. ⁵ The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

Psalm 33:1-5

God's people praise him. God's people can praise him with singing. When God's people praise him, with melody or without, they naturally repeat the great things that God has done.

Praise of God, then, embraces and focuses on the substance of God's work and revelation. Going further on in Psalm 33, the psalmist speaks about the creation of the world. He describes God's acts of judgment on enemies and the immutability of divine purpose. He commands all to fear and revere the Lord. He proclaims the blessing of being one of God's children. He notes the futility of depending on earthly strength for success. He highlights the gracious eye of the Lord that watches and cares for those depending on him. The psalmist concludes with a confession of confidence and a prayer. "We trust in you, Lord. Show us your mercy."

The psalm encourages sung praise. Yet clearly such praise is not seen as an alternative to instruction. Rather, the praise is linked to the realities that produce the praise. Repeating such realities serves to instruct. Strikingly, the psalm also admonishes and warns. Yet even these truths are realities that produce praise. We give praise to God for all that is true of him, including truths which identify danger and error.

Psalm 33, then, serves as a model of a concept presented in Colossians 3:16.

Paul writes to the Colossians, Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νοουθετοῦντες ἑαυτοὺς, ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν [τῇ] χάριτι ἄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ.¹

The placement of the comma after the ἑαυτοὺς hints already at the issue which divides interpreters of this verse. The primary question is this: Should the terms ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς (psalms, hymns and spiritual songs) be read with the participles διδάσκοντες and νοουθετοῦντες (teaching and admonishing), or ought they be attached to the participle ἄδοντες

¹ Aland, B., Aland, K., Black, M., Martini, C. M., Metzger, B. M., & Wikgren, A. (1993). *The Greek New Testament* (4th ed.) (528–529). Federal Republic of Germany: United Bible Societies.

(singing)?² More simply, is Paul saying that teaching and admonishing are to occur in connection with the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, or are those musical elements to be viewed as distinct from the functions of teaching and admonishing?

English translations that match the punctuation of the Nestle-Aland Greek text, attaching the “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” to the word “singing” and creating a clear break between singing and the teaching and admonishing, include the Revised Standard Version and the 1984 version of the New International Version. The NIV 1984 reads, “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.” Such a translation has the effect of unlinking the concepts of teaching and admonishing from the musical elements of worship.

English translations that connect the terms “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” to the participles “teaching and admonishing,” and thus also subordinate the participle “singing” to the earlier two participles, include the King James Version, the New American Standard Bible and the 2011 version of the New International Version. This last translation reads, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom **through** psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”

So, should the terms ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς be read with the participles διδάσκοντες and νοουθετοῦντες, or ought they be attached to the participle ἄδοντες?

The fact that all three datives refer to music might make it seem natural to connect these terms to the verb that means “to sing.” But word order, as well as the presence of the intervening ἐν χάριτι clause, would lead one initially to consider whether the terms could attach to the preceding participles. In addition, note that another ἐν clause with a dative precedes the introduction of the first participle clause in verse 16 (ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ). Might this offer more support for viewing the second ἐν clause as parallel in a certain respect, initiating the second participial clause? If so, one would consider the datives which precede that clause as being outside of that clause and thus connected instead to the clause that precedes.

² There is a second relevant question that might be asked, though it becomes moot if the answer to the initial question is, “The datives connect with teaching and admonishing.” The question is this: “Should the participle ἄδοντες be understood to modify διδάσκοντες and νοουθετοῦντες, noting that singing is a way that teaching and admonishing can occur, or does ἄδοντες serve in a coordinate fashion with the other pair of participles (with each phrase addressing a way in which the word of Christ dwells in one richly).” There are at least two translations which connect the terms “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” to the participle “singing” yet leave the door open for seeing the participle “singing” as further explaining the participles “teaching and admonishing”. The New English Translation and the English Standard Version proceed in this fashion. The ESV says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” While the arguments that follow in this brief will challenge these translations’ linkage of the “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” to the participle “singing,” it must be noted that these translations avoid presenting the “teaching and admonishing” and the “singing” as inevitably parallel concepts, two separate ways that the word of Christ lives in us richly. Rather, these translations still permit an understanding that singing is one of the ways that we teach and admonish. The absence of a καί before ἄδοντες supports this element of the NET and ESV translations. (See Douglas Moo in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, pages 287-288.)

While word order can incline one in a particular interpretative direction, one would be hard-pressed here to declare “case-closed” based on this feature alone. Another grammatical factor to consider is the dative case of ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς. If the terms connect with the participles that precede, the datives would be instrumental: “teach and admonish *with/by means of* psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.” But if the terms connect with ἄδοντες, what is the function of the dative case?

Many translations make “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” the objects of ἄδοντες. This could lead one to surmise that ἄδω must take a dative object. (The NIV 1984 says, “. . . as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”). But ἄδω does not take a dative object. As Revelation 5:9 indicates, the thing that is sung is found in the accusative: “καὶ ἄδουσιν ᾠδὴν καινὴν (and they sing a new song).”³ ἄδω is found with the dative, but only when the dative noun is the recipient of the praise (e.g. singing *to the Lord*). Is the presumption that datives with ἄδοντες could also be instrumental in some fashion (“singing by means of songs”)? At best, proposing such a construction seems a stretch, particularly when one can communicate the idea much more clearly with a simple accusative object.⁴ At worst, proposing such a construction could be fairly viewed as inconsistent with the known usages of ἄδω.⁵ There already is a case that is regularly used with ἄδω when listing something that is sung: the accusative case.

This consideration of case usage with ἄδω may be sufficiently compelling on its own to recommend connecting the “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” with “teaching and admonishing.” But a most compelling piece of evidence remains.

In Ephesians 5:18-20, concepts very similar to those found in Colossians 3:16 are addressed: ἀλλὰ πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι, **19** λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [ἐν]⁶ ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς, ἄδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ, **20** εὐχαριστοῦντες πάντοτε ὑπὲρ πάντων ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρί. (NA27) [Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (NIV 1984)]

³ See also Revelation 14:3 and 15:3.

⁴ S.J. Kistemaker offers an instrumental dative translation but does not discuss any issues related to this construction (New Testament Commentary: *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, p. 161). No other commentary surveyed addressed this.

⁵ One might wonder whether there could be some special cognate function occurring here—“sing by means of a song” (ᾠδαῖς . . . ἄδοντες). A Greek construction does exist which some have called the “cognate dative,” viewed by others simply as another manifestation of the instrumental dative (see Robertson 530-531). It is used in circumstances similar to those where one would use an infinitive absolute in Hebrew, with the author seeking to strengthen the force of the main verb [see Blass Debrunner 198(6) and Robertson 531]. Such a function would not seem to be required by the context here. In addition, one expects in such a construction only the single dative which is cognate. Here we have the dative which is cognate plus two additional non-cognate terms.

⁶ The textual evidence for inclusion of the ἐν is not strong. P⁴⁶ and B do include the ἐν, but all of the other major manuscripts omit it (Aleph, A, D, Byzantine minuscules). Omission of the ἐν seems more likely. Omission makes the structure of Ephesians 5:19 even more similar to the structure of Colossians 3:16, though whatever the textual conclusion, the meaning is the same—the datives communicate instrumental means. Do note that when the structures are compared later in this brief, the bracketed ἐν is removed. (Incidentally, the 25th edition of Nestle-Aland did not include the ἐν in their main text; NA26 and NA27 do include the ἐν in brackets.)

While many comparisons could be made between this citation and the Colossians verse, consider simply the relationship of ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς to the surrounding participles. Do they attach to the participles that follow (ἄδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες) or to the participle that precedes (λαλοῦντες)? Here, there is no question. They must attach to the participle that precedes. Why? First, it would be extremely awkward to have two participles attached to a trio of nouns where one of the nouns is a cognate of one of the verbs, so that—in essence—you are “singing and ‘psalming’ psalms”.⁷ Second, word order recommends attaching the datives ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς to the participle that precedes. But third, and most important, what would λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς mean all by itself should the datives that follow go with ἄδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες? The clause would need to have clear meaning on its own.⁸ Would Paul simply be encouraging Christians to talk to each other? That would not help the reader understand what is meant by Paul’s encouragement to be filled with the Spirit. Explaining that they are to communicate with one another using psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, however, does an excellent job in helping a Christian understand one key activity associated with being filled with the Spirit.

In Ephesians 5:19, then, the three datives clearly serve an instrumental means function relative to the participle that precedes. This usage presents a compelling reason to conclude that an almost identical sequencing of words in Colossians 3:16 should be understood in a similar fashion.

Compare key components of the two verses:

Ephesians 5:18-20 ἀλλὰ πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι, **19 λαλοῦντες** ἑαυτοῖς **ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς, ἄδοντες** καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ, **20 εὐχαριστοῦντες** πάντοτε ὑπὲρ πάντων ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρί.⁹

Colossians 3:16 Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ **διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες** ἑαυτοὺς **ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς, ἐν [τῇ] χάριτι ἄδοντες** ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ.¹⁰

The initial question posed was this: “Should the terms ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς be read with the participles διδάσκοντες and νουθετοῦντες, or ought they be attached to the participle ἄδοντες?” Considering word order, the role of the dative case, and the parallelism with Ephesians 5, it seems quite clear that the datives should be read with the participles διδάσκοντες and νουθετοῦντες. Paul is affirming for the Colossians that music is to be an instrument for teaching and admonishing.

⁷ Perhaps one can ‘psalm’ psalms. But would one “sing and ‘psalm’” psalms?

⁸ A succeeding participial phrase can offer additional information, but the initial clause still needs to carry clear and significant meaning on its own.

⁹ See footnote 6

¹⁰ The comma has been moved from its Nestle-Aland placement after the ἑαυτοῦς to the position after the πνευματικαῖς to reflect the conclusions of this brief.

In Psalm 33, the Spirit uses a musical form in just that way. Psalm 33 teaches. Psalm 33 admonishes.

May the Lord give us the commitment to seek and to encourage such function in the worship music we employ, whether the style be older or newer. May the Lord also give the capacity to compose and to discover such Spirit-filled lyrics, ones which observe the inspired apostle's earnest direction in Colossians 3:16 . . .

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.