Church singing according to the Pauline Epistles

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ABSTRACT
Paul utilises Roman, Greek and Jewish musical traditions to encourage the congregation in Rome to praise God in unison. Paul, furthermore, remarks on the musical instruments used, and hymns sung, in the Corinthian congregation. The Colossians and Ephesians are exhorted to sing in order to instruct and to admonish one another to glorify God. Three Christ-hymns are analysed: these hymns are teaching aids in the upbuilding of the church of Christ, expressing and driving home the theology of the congregation, pouring forth the believers's adoration, gratitude, faith, hope, love, joy, doubt and sorrow to God.

1 INTRODUCTION
In Romans 15:9–12 Paul quotes Psalm 18:50 (2 Sm 22:50), Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117:1 and Isaiah 11:10. He writes to the Christian congregation in the centre of the Roman world, in Greek, quoting from the Jewish Scriptures. These three cultures, each with a long musical tradition, enriched the Christian communities in the expression of their faith, joy, longing, sorrow, love and hope.

Romans 15:5–6 is a prayer for unity of mind in the congregation by following the example of Christ's self-denial, in pleasing others for their own good, to build them up in faith, so that with one heart and mouth the congregation may praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The prayer aims at the singing in unison of strong and weak believers, of Jews and Gentiles, united in their praise of God and in making one another happy, instead of despising or condemning one another (see 15:1–3, 8–9, 14:3, 10).

In the light of the quotations in 15:9–12, praising God with one mouth implies singing together, not merely speech. The reason for their unified praise is Christ's obedience to God (θεόν...του κυρίου) and his unity with Him (πατέρα...του κυρίου), God's verification of his promises to the Jews and his mercy in accepting the Gentiles.
2 SINGING, MUSIC AND THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

2.1 The Jewish background

The four quotations in Romans 15:9-12 come from the Law (Dt 32:43), the Prophets (Is 11:10; 2 Sm 22:50), and the Writings (Ps 18:50; Ps 117:1). The songs of Israel abound in all three sections of the Hebrew Bible.

2.1.1 Romans 15:10

Εὐφράνθητε, ἐθνὲς, μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ—rejoice, o Gentiles, with his people (MT: at his people; Rm 15:10 quoted from Dt 32:43, LXX). In this song of Moses the Gentiles are summoned to join Israel, rejoicing in God's salvation of his people. Paul quotes this song to substantiate his admonition that Jews and Gentiles should accept one another to glorify God in unison, implying joyful singing together in the congregation.

2.1.2 Romans 15:12

καὶ ὁ ἀνιστάμενος ἄρχειν ἐθνῶν,

the root of Jesse will spring up,

one who will arise to rule over the nations;

the Gentiles will hope in him (Rm 15:12 quoted from Isaiah 11:10, LXX).

In the Masoretic text Isaiah sings in tricola about Hezekiah who will become the rallying-point for the nations seeking after God. The Septuagint sees him as ruler over the Gentiles, in whom they will put their hope. Paul applies this prophetic chorus to the humble Christ as ruler and hope of Jews and Gentiles in their united praise of God. In his mission Christ fulfills the universal salvation of the nations.

2.1.3 Romans 15:9

Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles

I will sing hymns to your name (Rm 15:9 quoted from Ps 18[17]:50[49], LXX; see 2 Sm 22:50).

It is David's wish that the nations become acquainted with his Lord who delivered and enthroned him, therefore he tells (יָדוּ—דֵעַ תַּהַנָּה הָאָדָם) them by singing with instrumental accompaniment (דַּעַת—בֵּאָלָה) about Yahweh. Paul cites this royal
thanksgiving psalm as proof of God’s saving will to join Jew and Gentile in
his praise.

2.1.4 Romans 15:11

αινεῖτε, πάντα τὰ ἑθνη, τὸν κύριον
καὶ ἐπανεσύνεσαν αὐτὸν πάντες οἱ λαοὶ
Praise the Lord, all Gentiles;
and all nations are singing praises to him (Rm 15:11 quoted from Ps 117:1,
changing the imperative of the LXX in the second line to imperfect, accord­
ing to the best manuscripts).

This post-exilic psalm enlists the aid of the nations of the world to sing
the praise of the faithful graceful covenant Lord in the congregation. Paul
capitalises on this invitation to call on Jews and Gentiles, to sing the praise of
the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one heart in the congregation.

Paul’s acquaintance with these songs testifies to their influence on his
thinking and practice, and on his thoughts on the singing in the congrega­
tions. Singing as a common part of worship in Judaism, was carried over to
become an integral part of early Christian worship as well (Fee 1993:671).
According to Mark 14:26 (ιμυηθαιτες, see Mt 26:30) Jesus and his disciples
concluded the last supper with singing. The Passover meal traditionally con­
cluded with Psalms 113–118, the so-called great Hallel, which proclaim
God’s power to redeem and his faithfulness in leading [srael to freedom (Har­

Writing in Greek and quoting from the Greek translation of the Jewish
Bible to a congregation of Romans, Greeks and Jews, Paul seemingly expects
them to sing together in the lingua franca, to express their one faith in the Fa­
ther of our mutual Lord, Jesus Christ.

2.2 Accompaniment

The psalms and hymns of Israel were sung to the accompaniment of lyres,
tambourines, flutes and harps, sistra and cymbals, as indicated in the
Hebrew titles of different Psalms (4, 5, 6, 54, 55, 61, 67, 76), and in references
like 1 Samuel 10:5, 2 Samuel 6:5, and Isaiah 30:29, 32. Psalm 150:3–6 calls
every type of instrument—wind, string and percussion—to aid the efforts of
praising voices and sacred dance to create a loud symphony of praise to God,
rising to a crescendo in the clashing cymbals (LXX: ἐν κυμβάλοις ἀλαλογμοι), following on its simmering sound by rubbing two cymbals
against one another (ἐν κυμβάλοις εἴηκοις). The Hebrew term Selah, used
seventy-one times in the Book of Psalms and three times in the psalm of Hab­
bakuk, is rendered by διάψαλμα in die Greek Old Testament, which might
be taken to imply ‘pause,’ or ‘instrumental interlude,’ or even ‘louder’
(Craigie 1983:76). This possibility also points towards the use of instrumental accompaniment in the congregation as was customary in the synagogue.

Even the Greek words ψαλμος/ψαλλω, used by the Septuagint, primarily indicated the plucking of strings, and later acquired the meaning of singing to a harp (Liddell, Scott & Jones 1968:2018 [=LSJ 1968]). Likewise indicated singing with instrumental accompaniment (Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:257–8, 518 [=KB 1958]). A cappella singing by choirs could be indicated by the Hebrew captions addressed to the musical director without any instrumental or the ψαλμος/ψαλλω indication, like Psalms 3, 11, 14, et cetera. Psalms were also sung in alternation between a soloist and the congregation (responsive psalmody), antiphonal psalmody with two chorusses, and reciting prescribed passages from Scripture by a soloist using certain melodic formulas (Grout 1980:12).

Nehemia 12:46 remarks on the antiquity of Israel’s temple choirs and singing, since the time of David and Solomon (see Ezra 3:10). 1 Chronicles 23:5 refers to the musical instruments David provided for the Levites (see 2 Chr 29:26). The Pentateuch points to Yubal (blow of the ram’s horn?) as the predecessor of all who play the harp or the long flute (Gn 4:21). Abraham came from Ur, where excavations unearthed magnificent harps or lyres from the Sumerian civilization of 2500 BC. Israel was influenced by Egyptian, Babylonian and Greek musical heritages. (Dn 3:5, 7, 10, 15 mentions a whole orchestra of musical instruments used in worship, known at least in Antiochene times).

The synagogues in Palestine, under the rule of the Pharisees, seemingly forbade the singing of psalms in their meetings, probably as a precaution measure against heretics. Institutionnalised singing of psalms in Palestine was primarily limited to the temple and its choirs of Levites (see Hengel 1983:90-93; Kraeling & Mowry 1986:302 limit this prohibition only to the use of instrumental accompaniment). But the Qumran discoveries are evidence that in Jewish Palestine there was abundant composition of religious songs, which were probably sung even in worship at Qumran (see their hymns scroll, Vermes 1973:149–201). In the Jewish diaspora the singing of hymns was of great significance according to the testimony of Philo (The Contemplative Life 80, quoted in Vermes 1973:149–150).

The first believers’ constant participation in the worship of the temple and of their attendance upon the services of the synagogue influenced their liturgy when they established themselves as independent groups (see Acts 2:46; 5:12, 42; 6:9; 9:2; 13:5, 14; 14:23, 27). The early church sang Old Testament hymns and psalms, especially the messianic psalms, in a new way, and composed new hymns about Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, using the external form of Jewish songs (see Hengel 1983:90–93).
2.3 Greek background

There were few important occasions of Greek life which were not graced by music. Choral song, which included a greater or lesser degree of mimetic dancing, was the most characteristic feature. Choirs of men, women, boys or girls, accompanied by the *kithara*, the *aulos*, or by both, sang in the cult of the gods, marriages, funerals, etc. (Groves 1966:771).

In the cult of Apollo the lyre was the characteristic instrument, while in that of Dionysus it was the *aulos*. Both these instruments probably came into Greece from Asia Minor. The lyre and its larger counterpart the *kithara*, were instruments with 5-7 strings. In the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides choruses and other musical portions were accompanied by or alternated by the sounds of the *aulos*. Plato went so far as to suggest the prohibition of *aulos*-playing in his ideal Republic, because of its association with the chaotic rites of Dionysus (Alberti 1974:27).

By the beginning of the Christian era Greek musical theory and probably also its practice, had become simplified. It was primarily monophonic, a melody without harmony or counterpoint. Musical performances were improvised. The performer was, to a certain extent, also the composer. Greek music was almost always accompanied by words or dancing or both (Grout 1960:3-5).

2.4 Roman background

In all walks of life music could be heard in the old Roman society: in the cult, the work place, the army, at festivals. Interest in music increased during the Empire, with Roman expansion opening the way for new music and foreign influences from Greece, Egypt and the East. In private life, ceremonies and on state occasions, music played an increasingly important part (Scott 1986:404-413). Solo singing made way for more choirs in the time of Augustus (Günther 1963:677).

To the congregation in this culturally receptive Rome Paul wrote to encourage all of them together to praise with one voice the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (15:6).

3 PAUL'S REMARKS ON THE CORINTHIAN HYMNS AND MUSIC

3.1 Musical instruments

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul mentions some of the musical instruments of his day. In 1 Corinthians 13:1 he refers negatively to the clang of the brass gong (*χαλκός ἡχωρ*, resounding brass) and the shrill clash of the
cymbal (κύμβαλον ἀλαλάξων, resonant rumbling cymbal), instruments associated with the orgiastic cults of Cybele and Dionysus (Groves 1960:772). Its enslaving rhythm over-stimulates the nerves to captivate the mind on its way to ecstasy. The point of comparison to the speaking in tongues is the senseless inarticulateness of the sounds compared to the melodic articulation of the flute (see Weiss 1970:313). To speak in tongues with no concern for building up the community, makes them sound like the empty, hollow noises of pagan worship (Fee 1993:623). Speaking in tongues without practising love is not only meaningless, but mere paganism. Schmidt (1939:1037) suggests that Paul’s love-test concurs with the prophets who condemned Israel’s outward worship as no better than pagan, without obedience to the will of God.

1 Corinthians 14:7 refers to the melodious sounds of the flute αὐλὸς and the lyre/harp κιθάρα, which the Greeks associated with the worship of Apollo. The distinction of tones refers to some melody that is played. Sound from these instruments, without distinction in tones, makes it unintelligible. Likewise speaking in tongues produces sounds, but they make no sense to benefit the listener. Paul’s reference to the αὐλὸς and the κιθάρα in his discussion of the Corinthian liturgy could suggest their accompaniment of the congregational singing.

The αὐλὸς was a musical wind instrument consisting of a tube with a series of finger holes used to alter the tone. The earliest prototypes of the αὐλὸς were found in the royal tombs of Ur, dating around 2500 BC, in the form of a twenty-three centimeter silver double pipe, another pipe pierced with four finger holes, as well as a reed instrument (Abraham 1979:10). Homer had already mentioned the double piped αὐλὸς (Abraham 1979:23). Its sound was rather high pitched, like our modern day oboe (Alberti 1974:24).

The κιθάρα was a small stringed harp-like instrument held in the hands and plucked, either with the fingers or with a plectrum. It is the name for the lyre or its larger counterpart, the harp. The lyre and the harp were already played by the Sumerians 2500 years BC, as evidenced from the royal tombs of Ur (see the harp of queen Pu-abi, Abraham 1979:9). Homer called it a φώμης, especially known as the instrument of Apollo (Il 1.603; Od 17.270).

1 Corinthians 14:8 refers to the distinct/clear notes of the bugle/trumpet, σάλπιγξ, summoning soldiers to battle. Speaking in tongues is like a bugler who blows the bugle without sounding the battle cry. 1 Corinthians 15:52 refers to its summoning the dead from their graves, the trumpet that signals the end. It is a wind instrument frequently used in signalling, especially in connection with war. The trumpet’s present day equivalent is the bugle. It is a long narrow tube ending in a bell-like amplifier.
3.2 Hymns

1 Corinthians 14:15 refers to the practice of singing the praise of God (ψαλλω) in the congregation with an active mind for the upbuilding of one another, and to singing His praise (ψαλλω) in one’s spirit. While Paul makes room for both, in the worship of the congregation only intelligent singing is to be employed, while singing with one’s spirit is referred to private practice. While singing is here associated with the praise and thanksgiving of God (εὐλογία and εὐχαριστία in 14:16), it also serves as instruction in the gathered community (οἶκοςτομῶν, 14:17). The singular (ψαλώ, σὺ) might indicate that some of the singing in the congregation was solo singing by one member or a leader, to which the congregation responded with an amen of wholehearted agreement. The word ψαλώ can imply instrumental accompaniment (see Louw & Nida 1988:111).

The singular ἐκαυστὸς ψαλμῶν ἔχει in 1 Corinthians 14:26 also suggests that some of the singing in worship was ‘solo’ and probably spontaneous (Fee 1994:671), according to the Greek tradition of musical performance based essentially on improvisation, without fixed notation, creating music anew each time within communally accepted conventions, using certain traditional musical formulas (Grout 1980:11; see Stanley 1958:173: often composed on the spur of the moment thanks to the Spirit’s inspiration). In the context of the different gifts of the Spirit, these songs of praise are to be seen as gifts of the Spirit for the upbuilding of the congregation’s faith in Jesus as Lord (see 14:3). Paul seems pleased with the contribution of each member to the liturgy on condition that it edifies the congregation (πρὸς οἶκοστομὴν γυνέσθω). In the light of the marker of condition ἐὰν in 14:27, ἐκαυστὸς ψαλμῶν ἔχει...ἔχει... in 14:26 should mean that some members, and not each and everyone, contribute a hymn. The rule of 14:40 would also apply to these solo contributions: everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

3.3 Exhortations to sing

3.3.1 Colossians 3:16

ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖται ἐν ὑμῖν πλούσιως,
ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκαλητε καὶ νοθετοῦτες ἐκαντούς,
ψαλμοῖς ὑμημοίς ὑδαίς πνευματικάς
ἐν γὰρ χάριτι σάκοιτε ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ.

The Colossians are exhorted to let the message that centers on Christ as its source and content dwell richly among and in them. The phrase ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ appears only here in the New Testament (see ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου in 1Ts 1:8, 4:15; 2Ts 3:1; 1Tm 6:3; Stanley 1958:174 follows Schlier 1933:164–
165 to distinguish it from the message and teaching about Christ, in explaining it as the voice of the community, the *alter Christus*, the Voice of Christ singing gratefully to God). *Διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες* imply that the word of Christ lives in their meetings as a congregation, εὐαγγελίῳ, and in each individual, ἐν τοῖς καρδίαις (3:15, see Bruce 1957:283). The gospel must play a comprehensive role among and in them, be the center of their interest, their guide for life (*πλήθος* which exists in a large amount, with the implication of its being valuable, Louw & Nida 1988:59:57; O'Brien 1982:207: The gospel has to have its gracious and glorious way in their lives, when they come together, listening to the word of Christ and bowing to its authority).

From this indwelling of the word about Christ, the members of the congregation teach and admonish one another in a thoughtful and tactful manner (*ἐν πάσῃ σοφία, see Bratcher & Nida 1977:90), with psalms, hymns, and songs, all prompted by the Spirit (the feminine adjective governs all three nouns, see Blaß, DeBrunner & Rehkopf 1979:112: attributives which belong to two or more connected substantives customarily agree with the nearest). Probably the apostle had in mind antiphonal praise or solo singing for mutual edification in church meetings (Bruce 1957:284).

Schlier (*TH WNT* 1:164) agrees that the congregation taught and admonished itself through song, but Delling (*TH WNT* 8:501) denies that the admonition is done through the hymns. He links the three nouns with ὁδοιποτες, but then the three nouns should have been accusative. Ewald (1910:427) deems it unnatural (*sic!*) for Christians to teach or admonish one another by presenting a song. He opts for three ways in which the congregation let the word of Christ dwell amongst them: by letting it teach and admonish them, by psalms and hymns and songs, and by singing in their hearts. Louw and Nida (1988:112) reduce it to ‘instruct each other to sing psalms...’ O’Brien (1982:208-9) follows Meyer, Lightfoot, Percy, Bruce in joining the hymns with teaching and admonishing, on account of the symmetry of the two participial clauses commencing with *ἐν*, followed by participles.

The three words ψαλμός ὑμνός ὕμνον are not sharply to be distinguished. They indicate, whatever kind of song it may be, that it should be made the vehicle of instruction and admonition (Peake 1951:541). Viljoen (1990:193) accepts a central meaning for ψαλμός referring especially to the Old Testament Psalms on account of its usage in Luke-Acts. But Paul’s use of ψαλμός in 1 Corinthians 14:26 obviously does not refer to them, throwing doubt on Viljoen’s (1990:244) deduction that ψαλμός in Colossians 3:16 probably refer to Old Testament Psalms or to songs using them as prototype. (Josephus and Philo use ὑμνός to refer to Old Testament Psalms, see Delling *TH WNT* 8:499). In the titles of the Psalms the Septuagint mostly uses ψαλμός to translate דְּבִּרָה, ὑμνός for לְבִּנָה and וּמַעֲשֶׂה for דְּשָׁש. Although the collection of Psalms
was already known as ἡσαλμοῖ by Luke-Acts, its seems as if Paul uses all three Septuagint titles to indicate the songs of the congregation.

Ἑσαρμῶς, psalm, is a song of praise, ὑμνός, hymn, a song with religious content, ὕδη, song, a particular melodic pattern with verbal content (Louw & Nida 1988:33:110, 112, 114). Through their hymns the congregation instruct one another in their faith. In the context of Colossians, the verbal content of these spiritual compositions centers on the word of Christ as its source and substance (3:16). He is praised as the exalted and coming Lord (3:1-4), the executor and goal of creation (1:16), the visible likeness of the invisible God in whom the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form (1:15; 2:9), the head over every power and authority (2:10), God's reconciler in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins through his death on the cross (1:14, 20; 2:13, 14), the head of the church (1:18). Through their hymns the members also admonish one another to put to death the earthly desires at work in them, and to clothe themselves with the qualities of Christ (3:5-15).

Ἐν [τῇ] χάριτι ἔδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ. As the congregation teach and admonish each other with these Spirit inspired songs, they should sing thankfully to God with their whole being. Ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις does not refer to a silent worship (Peake 1951:542) but to wholehearted thanksgiving (as in Mt 22:37, see καρδία in 3:15, 22, the causative source of a person's psychological life in its various aspects, with special emphasis on thoughts Louw & Nida 1988:26:3; Lohse 1968:217: not only with their lips, the entire man should be filled with songs of praise). Ἐν [τῇ] χάριτι 'gratefully' in conformity with the thanksgiving theme in 3:15,17 (O'Brien 1982:210), not 'those who are in grace' (Lohse 1968:217).

The Spirit-prompted singing of the congregation with which they instruct and admonish one another glorifies God by witnessing to the rich dwelling of the word of Christ among and in them.

3.3.2 Ephesians 5:19

5:18b ἀλλὰ πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι,
5:19 λαλοῦντες ἐναυτοῖς [ἐν] ψαλμοῖς καὶ ὕμνοις καὶ ψάλλοις πνευματικοῖς,
ἔδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ.

'Speaking to one another with spiritual psalms and hymns and songs, singing and praising the Lord wholeheartedly' is depicted as the result of constantly being filled by the Spirit of God (πληροῦσθε continuous present). In the light of 5:15,17 Roberts (1983:157-158) explained πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι as a life filled by the Spirit with insight into the norm of life given by the Lord, with wisdom and resolution to apply it to everyday life (ἐν with dative denoting the Spirit as the agent of the filling, over against ἐν denoting the Spirit as the content of the filling by God, Grosheide 1960:84; or by the be-
liever, Schlier 1971:245). Roberts also stresses the joyful enthusiastic way of life bubbling over in song when they meet to communicate their faith and God's way of life to one another.

While Ephesians 5:3-14 uses the antithesis between light and darkness to contrast the behaviour of the believing community with that of unbelieving outsiders, 5:15-20 sets off wise Spirit-filled living against foolish living, like the folly of liquor-filled recklessness. Instead of the orgiastic songs of the drunk, the meetings of the believers should resound with joyful song. The contrast is between two elevated conditions, one due to the excitement of wine, the other to the inspiration and enlightenment of the Spirit (Salmon 1951:363).

The congregation is instructed to acquaint themselves with the will of their Lord (5:17). This can be done in the singing worship service of the congregation. The communication through song in the congregation is more generally indicated as speaking to one another λαλοῦντες κοινοῖς, than the specified instructing and admonishing in Colossians 3:16. The contribution by different members of a variety of well-known hymns and newly created songs is their way of acquainting themselves with the will of their Lord.

As in Colossians, ἐν ψαλμοῖς καὶ όμοιοι καὶ ψαλμοίς πνευματικοῖς refer to the array of songs, inspired by the Spirit, with which fellow believers are addressed in the gathering of the congregation, to promote the knowledge of their Lord's will.

Ephesians lacks the ἐν χαρά with thankfulness of Col 3:16; has a second participle next to ἀσπέται/singing: καὶ ψαλμούνται/singing praises; uses the dative singular τῇ καρδίᾳ instead of ἐν plus the dative plural; and makes their Lord, Jesus Christ (see 5:20), the object of their singing and praising instead of Colossians' πάρ θεῷ. Τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν with your heart, the singular emphasizing each member's wholehearted participation in the congregation's praise to the Lord (contra Roberts 1983:159: an inner song of joy silently praising the Lord).

The way to find out what the Lord wants one to do is through the songs in the congregation in which wholehearted praise is offered to the Lord, Jesus Christ, who acquired forgiveness for sins through his blood (1:7), who rules in love over all things and over his church, and makes his home in the hearts of the believers (1:21-23, 3:17, 18; 4:15). While speaking to one another in hymns, and singing the praise of the Lord, they should always give thanks for everything to God the Father (5:20), who chose us as his sons, saved us by his grace, and blessed us in Christ, whom He raised from the dead, and placed all things under his feet (1:4, 5, 20, 22). It is the Holy Spirit that prompts the hymns of the congregation, He marks the believers as God's people (1:13), He makes them wise and reveals God to them (1:17), He introduces Jews and
Gentiles to God (2:18), God lives in the congregation through his Spirit (2:22), gives them his power through his Spirit (3:16), and the Spirit is grieved when the believers do not live according to God's will (4:30). Therefore the believers are called to be continually filled by the Spirit, the motivating force for their distinctive life of wise conduct and glad worship (see Lincoln 1990:348). The spiritual songs build their faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as their communal and private life.

3.4 Examples of spiritual hymns


Hymns are recognised by their striking style, original charm, their special role in the letter, and their moving persuasion, surpassing ordinary language usage, inviting the reader to astonishment, praise and worship (see Botha 1989:80; for useful criteria for the identification of hymns, see Gloer 1984:124-129, Martin 1978:260-261; on account of the disagreement on strophes and poetic form, Roberts 1988:93 doubts whether Col 1:15-20 is a hymn; see, however, Botha's 1989:66-80 suggestions on the function of the hymn in the letter; for a full discussion on the New Testament hymns and the literature on it, see the works of Martin 1967, 1982, 1983a, 1983b). The introduction into the flow of the argument, the rhythmic cadence of words, the strophic patterning of sentences, the uniqueness of vocabulary, and so on, present them as hymns.

Martin looked for the 'catalyst' that led to the creation of new forms of hymns in the New Testament period, specifically the hymn directed to the praise of Jesus Christ as exalted Lord and ruler of creation. He found the attribution of a cosmological role to the person of Christ in the church's response to the threatening gnostic charge that Christ was part of an angelic hierarchy (1982:789-790, 1983a; he is followed by Snyman 1989:45-46). Against the multitude of suggestions about the origin of the christological hymns, Hawthorne (1983:78-79) thought it may be closer at hand. He suggested it to be the result of deep meditation on one particular event from the life of Christ as recorded in the gospel tradition—Jesus washing his disciples'
feet. He noted the startling parallels in thought and in the progression of action between John 13:3-17 and Philippians 2:6-11. The significance of that incident, though, may have been effectually interpreted in terms of the religious language of any of the contemporary systems of thought. Hengel (1983:78-96) traced the origin of the Christ-hymn to the earliest community in Jerusalem, driven on by the power of the Spirit, trying to explain their overwhelming experience of the resurrection of Jesus, and being led to certainty that God had now enthroned this Jesus according to the messianic Psalms (see Ps 110). Their joy at the presence of their Lord in heaven and in their fellowship with Him in the Spirit was expressed in their hymns to Christ at the Lord's supper (see ἄγαλλίασις Acts 2:46). Hengel sees the development of thought that the unrestricted eschatological plenipotentiary of God must also be the protological plenipotentiary, not as a gnostic syncretistic falsification, but a necessary last consequence of primitive Christian thinking, arrived at even before the beginning of the world-wide Pauline mission.

3.4.1 Philippians 2:6–11

Philippians 2:6–11 is one of the examples of a hymn, well-known to the congregation and to Paul. This hymn praises Christ as the pre-existent Lord who became man, obeyed unto death, and was exalted to God's side as ruler over all men. Paul uses it to strengthen the faith and joy of the congregation in Christ Jesus. He urges the Philippians to follow Jesus' example of humble, self-sacrificing, self-denying, self-giving service leading to the glorification of God, in their relations toward one another (2:1-4). God exalts Christ Jesus to become Lord of the universe (2:9-11), and the believers to shine as stars in the universe, as God's perfect children, who live in a world of corrupt and sinful people until the Day of Christ (2:15-16; for the controversy about the hymn's 'ethical' or 'soteriological' function in the letter, see Hawthorne 1983:79–80, contra Martin 1967:287–311; 1983b:xii-xix, who contends that the unique incarnation of a heavenly being cannot be an example of humility for humans; see Marshall's questioning of Martin's arguments for changing his mind, 1968:117–119; and Martin's reiteration of his addition of φυρετίν δει instead of ην in 2:5).

A hymn is an expression of joy, par excellence. The letter to the Philippians is the letter of joy. Joy is one of the aspects of faith. Paul shows them what gives joy, the joy that deepens in suffering, the joy about the gospel, the joy in their Lord of whom they sing in the Christ-hymn (see 1:4, 18, 25; 2:2, 17-18, 28-29; 3:1; 4:1, 10).
3.4.2 Colossians 1:15–20

The thanksgiving for God's redemption of the Colossians through his Son (1:12–14) flows over into a hymn praising Christ (1:15–20), which leads on to an admonition to stand firm in their faith in Christ and not to be moved from the gospel (1:21–23). In this hymn the early church sings about its faith in Christ as mediator of creation (1:15–17) and mediator of redemption (1:18–20). This hymn of praise and adoration deals with Christ's role in creation (15–16), his pre-existence (17a), his maintenance of everything (17b), his headship of the church (18a), his resurrection to supremacy (18b), his incarnation (19), and the meaning of his death on the cross (20). The hymn sings about Christ's relationship with God (15a), with creation (15b-17), and with the church (18–20; see Roberts 1988a:93). In this hymn the early church expresses its confession of who Christ is and what He means to them (Botha 1989:76). He is the ruler of the world and the head of his church, reigning supreme over everything, since all things were created by him and for him, and through his death on the cross God reconciled all things to himself. Those who belong to this Lord receive forgiveness of sins, which includes liberation from the regime of spiritual powers, and resurrection to a new life with Him.

As part of the thanksgiving in the letter, the hymn's emphasis on all powers in creation introduces one of the main themes of the letter, the believers' relationship to spiritual powers and authorities (2:9–10, 15, 18). With their faith in Christ, as expressed in the hymn, they should not become confused by false doctrines which deny the total adequacy and the unique supremacy of Christ (diverse theories try to identify these opponents, see Roberts' suggestion, 1988:812–828). As an example of hymn, it prefigures the exhortation to teach and admonish one another through spiritual psalms, hymns, and songs (3:17).

3.4.3 1 Timothy 3:16

This hymn praises Christ as Lord of heaven and earth: (i) His exultation: He became man like us, He is vindicated by God by his resurrection through the power of the Spirit; (ii) His presentation: The angels subject themselves to the Ascended One, to the nations He is preached as Saviour and Lord; (iii) His enthronement: in the world He is Lordship is affirmed wherever people subject themselves in faith to Him as their Saviour, in heaven He is gloriously seated at the right hand of God (Jeremias 1963:23–25, see Ridderbos 1967:100–108).

With this hymn the congregation is called to consider their enormous responsibility as the pillar supporting the truth, and the foundation or basis of God's revelation to the world in Christ. They are the only bulwark and witness to God's truth in the world (3:15). This secret of our religion is sung...
in this hymn, known to the congregations and to Timothy and Paul, to urge them to live according to God’s will.

The hymn leads to a warning against false teachers who fail to appreciate God’s creation of the natural life (4:1-5), and the meaning of true religion (6:3-10; Van Rensburg 1989:90 identifies the false teaching as Gnosticism). On the other hand the hymn is a formulation of the sound doctrine which is enjoined (6:3, see 1:10).

4 CONCLUSION

A hymn is a very effective teaching aid. Through its rhythm it drives home concepts. Its tune enhances memory. A song with pleasing words, a striking style, and a compelling melody is easy to remember (see Botha 1989:74). Therefore Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 urge the congregations to instruct one another in their meetings with various hymns.

The theology of the congregation is expressed in its songs. Although bible readings, sermons and confessions aim at the transmission and confirmation of the church’s theology, it is the words of the hymns that fill the minds of the members in times of crises and when they look for guidance. Therefore church hymns should transmit sound doctrine, like the three Christ-hymns in Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20 and 1 Timothy 3:16. Hymns like these guide the believers in their daily decisions and in their contact with false teachings, like they were used in the Pauline Letters.

Hymns are primarily the means of the congregation’s worship of God. Through them they pour forth their adoration, gratitude, faith, hope, love, joy, doubt, sorrow to God (Col 3:16, 17; Eph 5:20). In song they also express their unity as the household of God (Rm 15:5, 6; Col 3:15). It is also the way in which an individual believer participates in the upbuilding of the congregation, and contributes to the praise of God (1 Cor 14:26).

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