

The Psalms in Christian Worship  
New Testament Warrant for Singing the Psalms

1. The two NT passages that deal with singing in church.

**Colossians 3:14-17** <sup>14</sup> *But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.* <sup>15</sup> *And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.* <sup>16</sup> ***Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*** <sup>17</sup> *And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*

**Ephesians 5:17-21** <sup>17</sup> *Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* <sup>18</sup> *And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,* <sup>19</sup> ***speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,*** <sup>20</sup> *giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,* <sup>21</sup> *submitting to one another in the fear of God.*

2. The nature of praise in the church.
  - A. Church life in holy obedience to the Lord.  
Col 3:12; Eph 5:1-2.
  - B. Spirit filled people.  
Eph 5:18. (See 5.A. below).
  - C. Singing to the Lord and speaking to one another are both commanded.
    - (1) Ephesians 5:19 Structure:  
speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and songs spiritual  
singing and psalming in your heart to the Lord  
psalms...psalming;  
songs...singing;  
to one another...to the Lord
    - (2) Col 3:16  
“teaching and admonishing” paralleled by “singing”
  - D. “In all wisdom” (Col) paralleled with “with grace” (Eph).  
Praise to God and edification for the church both take place simultaneously under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
3. The songs of praise and edification in the church.  
What did the apostle mean by “psalms, hymns, songs”?
  - A. Greek words from the vocabulary of “religious songs.”  
Nearly synonymous.  
Common in the Septuagint (LXX), which is the Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures.  
What Hebrew terms do these Greek words translate?

B. The “Book of Psalms” in Hebrew.

The title of the Book of Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures is “The Book of Praises,” which in Hebrew is *sefer tehillim*.

‘tehillim’ is derived from ‘tehillah,’ ‘song, praise,’ found, for example in

**Psalm 22:3** But You *are* holy, Enthroned in the praises of Israel. ‘tehilloth israel.’

C. Paul’s Greek terms refer to the “tehillim,” the praises of Israel.

“Psalms, hymns, songs” are three of the most common descriptions of the types of “praises” in the LXX titles of the Psalms.

An analysis of the use of these terms in the LXX leads us to the conclusion that Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 use synonymous Greek terms which grouped together refer most naturally to the praises of the Psalter.

4. The use of ‘psalm,’ ‘hymn,’ and ‘song’ in the Greek Old Testament (LXX).

A. Psalm.

“Psalm” is very frequent in the Psalter, occurring a total of 72 times.

**Psalm 3:1** A Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son.

Outside the Psalter, it occurs only seven times in the OT Scriptures. In the NT the Greek word ‘psalmos’ is found in Luke 20:42; 24:44 and Acts 1:20; 13:33; 1Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 5:19 & Colossians 3:16.

B. Hymn.

“Hymn” is mostly translated “praise” in our English versions, but the Hebrew to which it corresponds means a song of praise.

**Psalm 119:171** My lips shall utter praise. For You teach me Your statutes.

**Psalm 100:4** Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, *And* into His courts with praise.

However, *hymnos* is used mostly in an instrumental sense in the titles of the Psalms, where the Hebrew is often translated into English as “with stringed instruments.”

**Psalm 67:1** To the Chief Musician. On stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song.

**Psalm 76:1** To the Chief Musician. On stringed instruments. A Psalm of Asaph. A Song.

Hymn’ occurs thirteen times in the Psalter and only three times elsewhere in the OT, always in reference to the songs of the Lord (2Chronicles 7:6; Nehemiah 12:46) and the “new song” in Isaiah 42:10. The only occurrences of this word (hymn) in the NT are found in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16.

C. Song.

In koiné Greek, “song,” ‘ōdē,’ is the most general of the three terms. It can refer to secular songs, whereas psalm and hymn were generally religious songs. In the OT it also has the widest distribution.

**Psalms 120-133** A Song of Ascents.

**Psalm 45:1** To the Chief Musician. Set to "The Lillies." A Contemplation of the sons of Korah. A Song of Love.

In the LXX, the word occurs 44 times in the Psalter and 27 times elsewhere in the OT Scriptures. In the NT the only occurrences of this word are in Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16 and Revelation 5:9, 14:3, 15:3. In the Apocalypse they occur as "New song" and "Song of Moses and of the Lamb."

D. Combinations of these words.

These words also occur in various combinations in the LXX Psalter,

- (1) "psalm-song" found in the titles of the Psalms in the LXX.

**Psalm 30:1** A Psalm. A Song at the dedication of the house of David.

**Psalm 48:1** A Song. A Psalm of the sons of Korah.

Psalm 65:1; 92:1; 67:1; 83:1.

- (2) "hymn-song"

**Psalm 137:3** For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song.

And those who plundered us *requested* mirth, *Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"* (LXX lit. a hymn sing us from the songs of Zion)

E. Hebrew *shir chadash* "new song" is translated variously into the Greek of the LXX.

- (1) 'aisma'

The most frequently used Greek word in this expression is 'aisma', found in Psalms 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1

**Psalm 96:1** Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth.

In the title in the LXX this "new song" is also referred to as an "an *ōdē* of David." Neither this noun, 'aisma', nor its related verb occur in the NT.

- (2) 'ōdē'.

**Psalm 144:9** I will sing a new song to You, O God;

- (3) 'hymnos'

**Psalm 40:3** He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.

**Isaiah 42:10**... Sing to the LORD a new song,...

5. Spiritual singing is commanded the church.

A. Spiritual...

"teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"

"speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs"

In Greek 'spiritual' modifies all three words: psalms, hymns, songs.

The word "spiritual," is itself set in a context which explicates "the word of Christ" (Colossians 3:16) or being "filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18), it is clear that the apostle is referring to divinely inspired praises. David said of himself: *The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue* (2Samuel 23:1,2).

B. From the heart...

Colossians 3:16 "singing in your hearts to God,"

Ephesians 5:18 "singing and 'psalming' in your heart to the Lord."

“singing” is a participle governed by a higher verb. In Colossians this verb is “let dwell” (the word of Christ in you) and in Ephesians it is “be filled” (with the Spirit). The singing of the Church is thus one consequence of being indwelt by the Lord. He dwells in us by his word and his Spirit.