

Psalms, Hymns & Spiritual Songs - A Biblical Study

A common objection to singing only the book of Psalms in worship is, “Doesn’t the New Testament instruct us to sing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19)?”

Many churches, especially those with “traditional worship” sing “hymns,” which are songs written by men and women, set to various tunes, and compiled in a hymnal. The majority of “hymns” in modern hymnals were written in the 1800s and 1900s. Many churches that consider themselves “contemporary” sing “praise songs” in worship, which are usually shorter, simpler, and more repetitive choruses. The majority of praise songs have been written since the 1970s, and the charismatic movement took the lead in producing a significant portion of these new songs. Are modern hymns and praise choruses what the apostle Paul had in mind when he spoke of “hymns and spiritual songs” in the New Testament?

Additionally, Paul referred to singing “psalms,” and yet very few churches in our day actually sing the psalms. Most hymnals have a few hymns based on psalms and many praise songs include short excerpts from various psalms, but didn’t Paul mean more than that when he said to sing “psalms”?

In order rightly to grasp Paul’s meaning regarding “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” we must consider the historical context of Paul’s writing and the grammatical meaning of the words in Scripture, as it was written 2000 years ago. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. At the time of Christ and the apostles, it was customary to read from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was called the Septuagint. Several of the New Testament writers quote from the Septuagint. When we compare the original text of the New Testament with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we discover that the words “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” used in the New Testament are **the same words** that appear in the Old Testament Book of Psalms to refer to the 150 psalms that God’s people sang in worship before the coming of Christ.

When we consider this relationship, it becomes clear why many in church history and at the time of the Protestant Reformation went back to singing the Psalms in worship instead of hymns and praise songs written by men. If Paul’s readers in the first century would understand “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” to all refer to the content of the Book of Psalms, then we also should view these in the same way. God says to “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” (Col. 3:16). “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19, NIV). In these two passages, God is instructing us to sing, speak, teach, and admonish by using the 150 Psalms of Scripture, which are God’s divinely-inspired song book. Such an understanding of these passages should cause us to return to singing the psalms and to incorporate the 150 psalms in our Christian worship.

Here are the words from the Greek New Testament:

Colossians 3:16 ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως, ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ διδάσκοντες καὶ νουθετοῦντες ἑαυτούς, **ψαλμοῖς (psalms) ὕμνοις (hymns) ᾠδαῖς (songs)** πνευματικαῖς (spiritual) ἐν [τῇ] χάριτι ἄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ·

“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.” (NKJ)

Ephesians 5:19 λαλοῦντες ἑαυτοῖς [ἐν] **ψαλμοῖς (psalms) καὶ ὕμνοις (hymns) καὶ ᾠδαῖς (songs)** πνευματικαῖς (spiritual), ἄδοντες καὶ ψάλλοντες τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμῶν τῷ κυρίῳ,

“speaking to one another in **psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord”

The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint [LXX])—translated about 250 B.C., used at the time of Christ and the apostles, and quoted by the New Testament writers, employs these same three Greek words to refer to the songs found in the Book of Psalms:

Hymn, Psalm, Song

LXT Psalm 75:1 εἰς τὸ τέλος ἐν ὕμνοις **ψαλμὸς** τῷ Ασάφ **ᾠδὴ** πρὸς τὸν Ἀσσύριον

“For the end, among the **hymns**, a **Psalm** for Asaph; a **Song** for the Assyrian.”

Psalm, Song

LXT Psalm 4:1 εἰς τὸ τέλος ἐν **ψαλμοῖς ᾠδὴ** τῷ Δαυιδ

“For the end, a **Song** of David among the **Psalms**.”

LXT Psalm 47:1 **ψαλμὸς ᾠδῆς** τοῖς υἱοῖς Κορε δευτέρα σαββάτου

“A **Psalm song** (“ode” or psalm of praise) for the sons of Core on the second day of the week.

Song

Psalm 44:1 εἰς τὸ τέλος ὑπὲρ τῶν ἀλλοιωθησομένων τοῖς υἱοῖς Κορε εἰς σύνεσιν **ᾠδὴ** ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ

“For the end, for alternate strains by the sons of Core; for instruction, a **Song** concerning the beloved.”

Psalm

Psalm 45:1 εἰς τὸ τέλος ὑπὲρ τῶν υἱῶν Κορε ὑπὲρ τῶν κρυφίων **ψαλμός**

“For the end, for the sons of Core; a **Psalm** concerning the secret things.”

Hymn

Psalm 53:1 εἰς τὸ τέλος ἐν **ᾠμοῖς** συνέσεως τῷ Δαυιδ

“For the end, among **hymns** of instruction by David.”

Psalm 54:1 εἰς τὸ τέλος ἐν **ᾠμοῖς** συνέσεως τῷ Δαυιδ

“For the end, among **hymns** of instruction by David.”

Psalm 60:1 εἰς τὸ τέλος ἐν **ᾠμοῖς** τῷ Δαυιδ

“For the end, among **hymns** of David.”

Psalm 99:4 εἰσέλθατε εἰς τὰς πύλας αὐτοῦ ἐν ἑξομολογήσει εἰς τὰς αὐλὰς αὐτοῦ ἐν **ᾠμοῖς** ἑξομολογεῖσθε αὐτῷ αἰνεῖτε τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ

“Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with **hymns**; give thanks to him, praise his name.”

Psalm, Hymn

Psalm 66:1 εἰς τὸ τέλος ἐν **ᾠμοῖς ψαλμός** τῷ Δαυιδ

“For the end, a **Psalm** of David among the **Hymns**.”