

THE USE OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN WORSHIP

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Several years ago I visited an Orthodox Jewish synagogue in the city of Detroit on a Friday evening. This was a most unusual experience for me, for there were several unusual factors in the surroundings and in the service. First of all, it was held on a Friday evening, which is the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath. The second thing I noticed that was different from the way we Christians worship was that only the men were permitted to enter the main floor of the place of worship. The women were required to go to a balcony area where they were screened from the main auditorium by a curtain. In addition, the men all wore hats during the period of worship. This was an indication, so they told me, of their belief that the Messiah had not yet come. There were also several other factors of interest.

As the service continued I was particularly pleased that two young Jewish men, seeing that I was a stranger, came to sit by me to explain what was being done. They were solicitous to see that I, a visitor, might understand their way of worship. I have thought of that incident a number of times in the intervening years, and I have wished that in some way I might explain to those who visit with us what we believe and why we do as we do.

When a person comes for the first time to attend a period of worship in a church of Christ his immediate impression is likely to center on our singing, and on the fact that we do not use mechanical instruments of music. The use of such instruments is almost universal in our day so that when a person visits in one of the 18,360 churches of Christ scattered throughout the world he is likely to wonder just why there is no organ to be heard in the background. I have chosen to include a study of this theme in our current series of lessons on "What We Believe and Why."

Why Do We Not Use Instruments of Music In Our Worship?

The answer begins with the fact that in reading the New Testament we find, that the early Christians were taught to sing. New Testament teaching, relative to the musical worship of God, is found in a rather limited number of places. Always when we do find music mentioned it is a specific kind of music, singing. Bear in mind that these are the only passages in all the twenty-seven books of the New Testament which deal with the worship of God through the avenue of music. We begin with the reference in Matt. 26:30 which takes us back to the evening in which Christ instituted the Lord's Supper in the upper room in Jerusalem. Then the text of scripture says, "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives." (Also Mark 14:26).

Next in the order of printing in the New Testament is a reference in Acts 16:25, where we find Paul and Silas at midnight in a prison in Philippi. The passage reads, "But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns unto God." In Romans 15:9 we next find a quotation from the Psalms in which there is the expression, "Sing unto thy name." Then, in I Cor. 14-15, the apostle Paul says, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also." Two passages of deepest significance follow. Eph. 5:19 says, "Speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." Col. 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God." In Heb. 2:12 we find, "In the midst of the congregation will I sing thy praise." Finally, in James 5:13 we read, "Is any among you suffering? let him pray. Is any cheerful? let him sing praise."

Generic or Specific

When you have read these eight statements concerning music you have read all that the New Testament, with the exception of three symbolic passages in the book of Revelation, says concerning this avenue of devotion to God and of admonition to one another. As you notice, each of these passages uses the specific word "sing" rather than the generic, or general word "music." It is our belief that had the Lord and his inspired writers used the general word "music" it would have been left to the discretion of the elders of each local church whether they would use instrumental music, or vocal music, or a combination of the two. Since the Lord has specified singing, a specific word, singing is all we are authorized to do.

Now may I make this point a little plainer. In the Old Testament, for example, in the giving of the law of Moses, God admonished the people to make a candlestick of gold. The word "gold" is a specific word rather than a general word. Had the Lord said make it out of "metal" then they might have chosen silver, or brass, or something else, but when God used the specific word "gold" it excluded every other kind of metal. Similarly, in the New Testament, when the Lord's Supper was given, Christ specified "unleavened bread" and "the fruit of the vine." By the using of these specifics he excluded everything else. In similar fashion when the Lord indicated the kind of musical worship he wanted, he used the specific word "sing." If we remain within the bounds of the New Testament, then, we have authority only to do that which the word "sing" includes.

It is sometimes thought that in Eph. 5:19 the use of the Greek word “psallo” authorizes the instrument in the very definition of the word. This is true in Classical Greek. The word “psallo” in Classical Greek is capable of being defined as including the use of an instrument, but in no case do we find such a definition endorsed in the Koine Greek. Note carefully the difference between the Classical Greek of the ancients and the Koine Greek used in the New Testament. In no case, then, in Biblical Greek do we find any implication of anything other than vocal music.

Further, if the instrument is included in the word “psallo” it is mandatory that we always use an instrument when we sing. If the instrument is not included in the word “psallo” it is likewise mandatory that we not use the instrument. How, then, can we know with absolute certainty what “psallo” really means? Does it include an instrument, or does it not? The best answer that I know to give is that we should define it as it was defined by the apostle Paul who wrote it, for after all he was the penman of Eph. 5:19 which uses the word “psallo.”--“Make melody with the heart.” How did the apostle Paul and other first-century Christians define the word “Psallo”? By their practice they defined it as not including an instrument, for their worship was exclusively singing. Our first reason, then, for not using instrumental music in worship is simply that in the New Testament we are taught to sing.

The New Testament Our Blueprint

Our second reason is that we are deeply committed to the following of the New Testament as a pattern or guide in everything that we do--in how we become Christians, how we worship, and how we live. Since we are committed to follow this pattern we must find authority within the New Testament for everything that we do in faith and in practice. We must have a “Thus saith the Lord” for everything that we do. We must speak where the scriptures speak and remain silent where the scriptures are silent.

This is not an idea of our own making. It is clearly taught in the scriptures. For example, in II Tim. 3:16-17, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit the apostle Paul wrote, “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.” The scriptures completely furnish man unto every good work, but the scriptures do not mention instrumental music. I would also mention I Cor. 4:16 which says, “That in us ye might learn not to go beyond the things which are written.” The great tragedy of the religious world is that men have gone beyond the things that were written, bringing in different ideas and doctrines so that the Lord’s church has been fractioned into more than 250 different groups which profess to be followers of Christ. The great disunity of the religious world has come primarily because men have gone beyond the things which are written.

II John 9 says, “Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son.” Finally, I would mention in this connection, Gal. 1:8-9, where the apostle Paul wrote, “Though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema. As we have said before, so say I now again, If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema.” In view of passages like these, we feel bound to restrict ourselves in worship and in all other religious matters to that which is written, to that for which we have a “Thus saith the Lord” in the scriptures.

The Law of Exclusion

Sometimes this is called the Law of Exclusion. We exclude everything that is not taught in the scriptures. This Law of Exclusion means that those things for which we do not have a direct command, those things for which we do not have an approved apostolic example, and those things for which we do not have necessary inference, are left out of our worship and practice. Only those things for which there are direct commandments, or approved apostolic examples, or necessary inferences may be used by us if we are following this basic principle of speaking where the scriptures speak and remaining silent where they are silent.

At this point I would like to elaborate on the idea of necessary inference. There are some things for which we do not have a direct commandment. For example, no sentence in all the New Testament speaks about the erection of church buildings. There is no reference to church buildings in all the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, yet they are scriptural. When the Lord commands Christians to worship he authorizes everything necessary for the carrying out of that command. When the Lord tells us to do something he authorizes everything necessary to the fulfilling of that commandment. When he commands that we worship it becomes necessary to provide a place, and since he has given no specific instructions the elders of the local church can determine whether to rent a place, borrow a place, or buy a place. They are bound, in order to carry out the command of assembling for worship, to provide a place and are left the responsibility of choosing the best method.

I mention this because sometimes a person says, “Where in the scriptures do you find the authorization for a building, or for benches, or for a public address system, or for a song book?” Whatever is necessary to the carrying on of the worship is authorized by God as a matter of necessity. So, a building of some kind is authorized. Whatever is necessary to make it possible for people to assemble is authorized. This includes lights, benches, a heating system, and the like. Even song books are included. In order for people to sing in unison there must be some means of starting them along the same line of words and according to the same pattern of melody. This can be done in several ways. It can be done as it was several generations ago through the leader lining out the song sentence by sentence. Or it can be done by flashing the words and the music on a screen so that all may see. But the most acceptable and efficient way is to

provide an unobtrusive song book so that all may know what words and what music are to be used. All of these are inactive, passive, unobtrusive elements which do not participate in worship. They simply make worship possible. How is it with instruments? Are they necessary? It would be difficult to so contend in view of the fact that Christians worshipped for centuries without instruments and in view of the fact that the finest choral groups, even today, do their finest singing a cappella. Instrumental music is an active participant in worship--an unauthorized additional element in the worship itself. So, because we have no authority to do so, we do not bring in instruments though our own aesthetic taste might thoroughly enjoy them.

At this point I would like to read a statement from John Milton, one of the greatest religious poets of all ages. He said, "True religion is the true worship and service of God learned and believed from the word of God only. No man or angel can know how God would be worshipped and served unless God reveal it; he has revealed and taught it us in the Holy Scriptures by inspired ministers, and in the gospel by his own Son and his apostles, with strictest command to reject all other traditions whatsoever." Because the New Testament teaches us to sing, and because we are committed to following God's book as our absolute pattern, we sing without any additions of a different kind of music.

The Scholars Speak

I would point out, finally, that the early Christians, who were guided by the apostles, did not use instrumental music, but rather sang in a cappella fashion. Dr. Curt Sachs, of Columbia University, one of the most eminent musicologists of our time, said, "All ancient Christian music was vocal."

Lyman Coleman, an outstanding Presbyterian scholar, wrote, "Both the Jews in their temple service and the Greeks in their idol worship were accustomed to sing with the accompaniment of instrumental music. The converts to Christianity must have been familiar with this mode of singing, but it is generally admitted that the primitive Christians employed no instrumental music in their religious worship." I might add that they had the harp, the cymbal, the sackbut, the dulcimer, and many other instruments. Not because they did not have instruments did they leave them out. We continue to read from Lyman Coleman, "Neither Ambrose, or Basil, nor Chrysostom, in their noble encomiums which they severally pronounce upon music make any mention of instrumental music. Basil condemns it as ministering only to the depraved passions of men ... Musical accompaniments were gradually introduced; but one can hardly be assigned to a period earlier than the fifth and sixth centuries. Organs were unknown in the church until the eighth or ninth century. Previous to this they had their place in the theatre rather than in the church. They were never regarded with favor in the Eastern church; and were vehemently opposed in many places in the West."

Joseph Bingham, of the Church of England, in his book, *Antiquities of the Church*, says, "Music in the church is as ancient as the apostles; but instrumental music is not."

The American Encyclopedia, Vol. XII, p. 688 says, "Pope Vitalian is related to have first introduced organs into some of the churches of Western Europe about 670; but the earliest trustworthy account is that of one sent as a present to the Greek Emperor Constantine Copronymous to Pepin, king of the Franks, in 755."

The Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, in an article by J. M. Brown, page 852, adds, "That instrumental music was not practiced by primitive Christians ... is evident from church history. The organ was first introduced into the church service by Marianus Sanatus in the year 920; and the first that we know in the West was one sent to Pepin by Constantine Copronymous about the middle of the eighth century."

The Shaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. II, p. 1702, adds, "In the Greek church the organ never came into use (the Greek Orthodox Church), but after the eighth century it became common in the Latin Church, not, however, without opposition from the side of the Monks ... The reformed church (the reformation group) discarded it, and though the church of Basil very early introduced it, it was in other places admitted only sparingly and after long hesitation." These respected scholars simply say that in the early church no instruments were used. They came in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, too late to be authorized by inspiration in the scriptures.

Richard Wagner, the great composer, one of the great musicians of the world, expressed his own opinion in these words, "There is no doubt but that those qualities absolutely necessary to church music, namely, modesty, dignity and soulfulness are more inherent in the vocal style than in any other. Reserve and humble restraint befits the house of God ... That vocal music is in general more expressive than the mechanically produced tones of instruments is undeniable. Religious feeling finds its most natural expression in vocal utterance, for the human heart is the source of both devotion and song." I have read from an article by Gietman in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. X.

John Calvin, the founder of a significant strain of the reformed churches, in his *Commentary on the Twenty-Third Psalm*, said, "Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law."

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, puts it this way, “I have no objection to the organ in our chapel, provided that it is neither seen nor heard.”

Adam Clarke, noted Methodist preacher, in writing his great *Clarke's Commentary*, in Vol. IV, p. 686, puts it in these words, “I am an old man, and an old minister; and I here declare that I never knew them (instruments of music) productive of any good in the worship of God; and have had reason to believe that they were productive of much evil. Music, as a science, I esteem and admire; but instruments of music in the house of God, I abominate and abhor.

Conclusion

I have tried to tell why we do not use instruments of music in our worship: first, because the New Testament teaches singing; second, because we are committed to follow the New Testament as an exclusive pattern in everything religious, and third, because unbiased scholars testify that instruments were not used in the early church. They are not used even yet in the Greek Orthodox Church in Europe; they were used in the Roman Catholic Church and then abandoned in the Reformation; they were brought back into Protestantism approximately one hundred fifty years ago. Because instrumental music has so lately come into Protestantism we find Adam Clarke, John Wesley, John Calvin and others speaking out boldly against that which is now almost universally practiced by their descendants.

We reject instrumental music in worship because we are not to add to or take from what God has taught. It is a matter of conviction. If we add this, where do we stop? To add instruments to the worship would be like adding the doctrines of infant baptism, or sprinkling for baptism, or the burning of incense, or the lighting of candles. Let us continue to pour out our heartfelt devotion to God in song. Let us “sing and make melody with the heart to the Lord.”