

erly. In other words, instruments have become a necessary aid to the practice of a Scriptural element of worship, as if congregational singing is impossible or impractical without mechanical help. Looking at it this way, some argue that instruments are a circumstance to worship, not an element regulated by Scripture, much like the building, what pulpit is used, and other things common to any kind of meeting.

Even if instrumental music could be considered as an aid to worship, the Lord still strictly controls what aids are allowed in His worship. The Israelites, in their zeal to offer to the Lord true worship, nevertheless committed idolatry when they forged the golden calf at Sinai to magnify the great power of God. They weren't blind pagans; they intended to worship the God of Israel, not some pagan deity. But in their desire for an aid to worship, they sinned and instead provoked the wrath of God. To them the golden calf was an aid to worship that they thought the Lord would have allowed, but to the Lord it was an unauthorized aid that He abhorred. In matters of worship, both reason and the will of man is a fatal guide. We would do well to remember the words of Solomon in Prov. 16:25, *"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."*

In relation to Christian conscience, we must realize that employing instruments treads on the liberty of conscience Christ purchased for all His saints. On the other hand, since it can't be demonstrated that instruments are expressly commanded in worship, no harm is done to any conscience where instruments are prohibited and the unity of the Spirit can be maintained in the bond of peace.

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Why Not Instruments In Worship?

by
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"What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." (Deut. 12:32)

"But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. 24 God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:23-24)

For the majority of evangelical churches, questions regarding the use of instruments in worship revolve more around which instruments to use and how to employ them than whether or not they have any place in Biblical worship. Today instrumental worship has taken on a life of its own, where churches identify themselves not by doctrinal understanding but by musical theme. Some have opted for the classical, orchestral approach, appealing to those with more refined tastes. Others have gone the populist route, adopting everything from cowboy themed worship to cutting edge rock and roll band concerts. In an attempt to redefine worship according to the desires of men, the essence of true worship has been lost. Biblical worship has been replaced with a preference for man-centered entertainment that appeals more to the flesh than conforms to the word of God.

However, God has revealed in His word the parts of worship and precisely how those elements must be observed. Exod. 34:14 tells us that the Lord is jealous for His own worship. In other words, He refuses to accept worship offered to other gods or worship offered to Him according to other gods, that is, in any other way than He appointed in His word. The question then regarding the place of instruments is no abstract theological exercise. It goes to the very essence of the Christian faith. If we do not worship the Lord in the way He accepts, worship offered our own way becomes like Cain's offering, unacceptable in the eyes of God, no matter how much it may meet with others' approval.

In order to understand the Bible's teaching regarding the

place of instruments in worship, we must realize that the Lord determines the context and character of our worship. We are not the audience in worship, but servants in His holy presence. Worship before the Most High God is a command performance; He alone decides what is acceptable to Him. Our role is simply to worship according to His commands rather than invent our own.

I. Worship Regulated By Scripture

The Second Commandment declares how God is to be worshipped. Forbidding the use of any images of God in worship, it also forbids the use of any other inventions of man not expressly commanded by God; all other options are forbidden. *“But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”* (Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 21:1)

In addition to the Second Commandment, there are many other references in Scriptures to unacceptable worship before the Lord. Two examples should suffice. First, in Lev. 10:1-2 Nadab and Abihu offered *“strange”* fire before the Lord, *“which he commanded them not.”* They were commanded to use fire from the coals of the altar, but they offered fire from another unauthorized source, incurring the wrath of God for neglecting His express command. (see also Lev. 16:12-13)

Second, in 1 Sam. 13:14 the kingdom was stripped from Saul when he violated God’s commands regarding worship. He took it upon himself to offer sacrifices rather than wait for the prophet Samuel to offer them as the Lord commanded. *“But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee.”* No matter how good or sincere may be the intentions of those like Nadab, Abihu, or Saul, the Lord only accepts the worship He prescribes in His word. We are still bound to the Second Commandment today and all its implications (Matt. 5:17-20, 1 John 5:21). We may not do what is right in our eyes; we must do nothing but what the Lord commands in worship. Deut.

teach that the Reformation ought to embrace the expulsion of that kind of music from its services?”

From the volume and clarity of their writings, Reformers such as John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Knox all denounced instrumental music in worship as an idolatrous return to the shadowy Old Testament form of worship.

In his commentary on the 33rd Psalm, Calvin states, *“But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews.”* Though Huldrych Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, was an accomplished musician in his own right, he agreed with Calvin that instruments were not approved by God in public worship.

Instruments were not only prohibited from use in public worship in Switzerland, but the French and Dutch Reformed Churches were decidedly against the use of instrumental worship as well. In Scotland, instruments were banned from public worship, and to this day several Presbyterian and Reformed denominations there still worship without any instrumental music. In England, non-prelatic Independents and Presbyterians opposed the use of instruments in worship. Later, the great 19th Century Minister, Charles Spurgeon, echoed the thoughts of his puritan forefathers against instrumental music when he was reported as saying, *“I would as soon pray to God with machinery as to sing to God with machinery.”*

When Scottish and English Puritans came to America, they continued their practice of non-instrumental worship, a tradition some denominations, such as the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, along with the Presbyterian Reformed Church continue to practice.

V. A Common Reason Answered

There are many who consider the use of instruments as merely an aid to singing. If Christians are commanded to sing in worship, what is wrong with using an instrument to assist the voice in carrying the tune? After all, it is argued, without an instrument to assist, many would not be able to sing the tunes prop-

Passover Lamb sacrificed for us, to whom we offer ourselves as living sacrifices to our Great High Priest. Instrumental music, as symbolic of inward worship, has passed away. The New Testament church is now a kingdom of priests, where all praise the Lord with the inward instrument of the heart and the outward voice, *“For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”* (Rom. 10:10)

IV. An Historical Perspective

In New Testament times, believers understood the temporary role of instrumental music in worship from the start. The Apostles gave no command to either Jew or Gentile to include it in the worship of the early church. Early Christians argued against the use of instruments in Biblical worship. *“The one instrument of peace, the Word alone by which we honour God, is what we employ. We no longer employ the ancient psaltery, and trumpet, and timbrel, and flute, which those expert in war and contemners of the fear of God were wont to make use of also in the choruses at their festive assemblies; that by such strains they might raise their dejected minds.”* (Clement of Alexandria, 190 AD)

The 4th century church father John Chrysostom stated in his Homily on Psalm 149, *“It was only permitted to the Jews as sacrifice was, for the heaviness and grossness of their souls. God condescended to their weakness, because they were lately drawn off from idols; but now, instead of organs, we may use our own bodies to praise him withal....Instruments appertain not to Christians.”* The unwavering testimony of Christians for several hundred years after the ascension of Christ was decidedly against using any instruments in public worship.

Historians have noted that instruments didn't appear in Christian worship until the Dark Ages, when in the 7th century Pope Vitalian introduced organs to Western European churches. Even then it was controversial, and it wasn't until A.D. 1200 that instrumental use in worship became more widespread. 19th Century theologian John Girardeau points out, *“In spite of this opposition, the organ, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, steadily made its way towards universal triumph in the Romish church. Then came the Reformation; and the question arises, How did the Reformers deal with instrumental music in the church? Did they*

12:8, *“Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes.”*

As we will see, this has an important bearing upon the place of instruments in worship. Those who have argued for the inclusion of instruments have taken the opposite understanding based on the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, called the Normative Principle of Worship. This approach turns the Regulative Principle of Worship on its head, claiming anything goes in worship unless the Lord expressly forbids it. They have taken the mere presence of instruments in the Old Testament as an unqualified endorsement from the Lord that they are authorized today. As a result, instruments have been brought back into New Testament era worship with a vengeance. But is this really what the Lord commands for us today?

II. Introduction of Instruments in Old Testament Worship

Instrumental music has been with man almost since the beginning. Instruments were invented along with other cultural achievements by Jubal (Gen. 4:21) from the line of Cain, the line not involved in the worship of the Lord. Instruments didn't enter into the worship of God until the time of Moses. At Mt. Sinai, where the Lord gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments, He not only instituted for the first time instruments of music in worship, but also was the first to use it Himself. In Exod. 19:13 the Lord Himself announced His presence *“when the trumpet soundeth long.”* He then commanded Moses to make trumpets for the priests to blow to call the assembly for worship and to be blown over the sacrifices at the altar. From the days of Moses until the time of David, the Lord only commanded the use of trumpets for calling assemblies, warning for battle, and announcing sacrifices.

It was only during the reign of King David that the Lord temporarily enlarged the use of instruments to include worship. In 1 Chron. 13 the Israelites attempted to bring the ark from Kirjath-jearim to Jerusalem. This included instrumental music, but neither the music nor the transport itself was done as God had prescribed in His word. *“And David and all Israel played before God with all their might, and with singing, and with harps, and with psalteries, and with timbrels, and with cymbals, and with trumpets.”* (1 Chron. 13:8) Of course, the Lord was not pleased with

the effort, sincere though it was. Uzzah died *“before the Lord”* as a result of David’s unauthorized, inclusive approach to worship and the laws of God were neglected.

Once David realized the importance of worshipping according to the word of God (1 Chron. 15:13) as instructed by Nathan the prophet of God (2 Chron. 29:25), the ark was successfully moved to Jerusalem. This time, however, only the Levites, appointed by God, played instruments when the ark was moved. The transport of the ark itself was also corrected to reflect Scripture’s demands that the Levites carry the ark upon staves (1 Chron. 15:13-15). When there was a return to Biblical worship in the days of Hezekiah, the Levites played instruments only as God had commanded, that is, only while sacrifices were made. Once the sacrifices were completed, worship continued without the use of instruments. 2 Chron. 29:28, *“And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt offering was finished.”* Instrumental music, along with all the details regarding the rituals and furnishings of the tabernacle and the temple afterward were all by divine command. Nothing was added that the Lord did not specifically command (See 1 Chron. 28). Instrumental music, therefore, was merely one part of ceremonial worship, symbolic of Christ’s sacrifice and typical in nature, pointing as a shadow to the reality to come. This is crucial to our understanding of instrumental music in worship. Once the Lord Jesus finished His work on the cross, ceremonial worship, with all its sacrificial and musical representations, ended. *“And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost. 38 And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.”* (Mark 15:37-38)

Because instrumental music was directly connected to the temporary aspects of temple worship by divine appointment, instrumental music was part of God’s worship only for a time. Like the rest of the sacrificial system of worship, instruments, along with the Levitical priests who played them, were temporary aspects of worship fulfilled in the New Testament. Just as sacrifices pointed to the sacrifice of Christ, the Levitical instruments were also typical of an aspect of true worship fulfilled in the New Testament worship service.

III. Fulfillment of Instrumental Music in New Testament Worship

With temple worship abolished, New Testament believers, both Jew and Gentile, had only the synagogue pattern for worship remaining, which had no provision for instrumental music. Early synagogues of believing Jews became the first New Testament churches. The Lord gave no new commands regarding worship practices in the New Testament, so there was no early attempt to add temple rituals or its shadows to synagogue worship. Its pattern for worship, unlike the temporary, symbolic form of worship in the temple, was permanent. It highlighted the essence of true worship.

True worship does not consist in mere outward forms or formal demonstrations. Worship offered to the Lord must always be done *“in spirit and in truth”* (John 4). The Lord *“searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts”* (1 Chron. 28:9), and desires truth in the inward parts, that is, in the heart or soul of man. (Ps. 5:6) This is just what instrumental music represented. The outward beauty of instrumental music portrayed the inward beauty of true worship, hidden in the heart of man. There, in the inward recesses of the mind, the Lord is worshipped in the beauty of holiness. Ps. 96:9, *“O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth.”* The inward beauty of gospel worship is a sacrifice of praise, done from the heart, not with the hand. Heb. 13:15, *“By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.”* Instrumental music was an outward sound symbolically representing the movements of the affections toward God. Now that Christ has come, we have no need of symbolic demonstrations of praise. Today every believer is called to be filled with the Spirit of God, *“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.”* (Ephes. 5:19) The heart is the instrument every believer plays before the Lord in worship, making melody within to the Lord and expressing it with the voice of praise to the glory of God. When the Psalms are sung in worship, the Christian can sing these with a deeper understanding of the spiritual nature of worship that instruments represented. In the same way, Christians can sing with greater spiritual understanding those Psalms speaking of offering sacrifices unto the Lord, our