

The Case Against Instrumental Music In Worship

Introduction

One of the most striking differences between churches of Christ and most other religious groups is the fact that churches of Christ do not use instrumental (mechanical) music in worship. Many people are surprised to discover, upon visiting our services, that this is true. They are probably not aware of our reasons for rejecting the use of Instrumental Music in our worship to God. Sometimes even those who are members of the church of Christ do not fully understand the absence of Instrumental Music from our worship services.

Perhaps, then, it would be well to explain to those who visit our services as well as to our friends in the community **what** we believe about music in worship and **why**. We are convinced that there are overriding reasons for not using the instrument. But many people are unacquainted with these reasons. Let us, then, consider together the case against instrumental music in worship.

I. Instrumental Music Is Not Authorized By The New Testament

It is always our aim to "speak where the Bible speaks." (1 Peter 4.11.) "In reading the New Testament we find that early Christians were taught only to sing." ¹ Music is mentioned in the New Testament in only a limited number of places. But in each of the eight New Testament references where music is mentioned, it is singing which is specified.

Note the references: **Matthew 26.30:** *"And after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."* (Also Mark 14.26) **Acts 16.25:** *"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."* **Romans 15.9:** We find a quotation from the Psalms in which there is the expression: *"Sing to Thy name."* **1 Corinthians 14.15:** *"I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also."* **Ephesians 5.19:** *"Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord."* **Colossians 3.16:** *"Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."* **Hebrews 2.12:** *"In the midst of the congregation I will sing Thy praise."* **James 5.13:** *"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises."*

These passages represent the totality of the New Testament teaching on music in worship. It is true that there are three passages in the book of Revelation where music is mentioned, but in these instances it is obviously used in a symbolic way to stand for something else. For example, in Revelation 14.2-4 the voice John heard speaking from heaven is said to be *"like the sound of harpists playing on their harps."* The argument is sometimes made that this indicates heavenly approval of instrumental music in worship. But of course it does not! The language in this passage is obviously symbolic. This same chapter also speaks of four living creatures (beasts), celibates (virgins), Babylon, a golden crown, a sharp sickle and a wine press--all obvious symbols. The harps are used by John to suggest the sweetness of the singing which he heard just as thunder and the sound of many waters represent the volume and the swelling rhythm of that heavenly singing. Note specifically that John does not say he heard harps, but rather he heard voices that were so sweet they were *"Like the sound of harpists."* (14.2.)

Each of the New Testament passages dealing with music in worship use the specific word "sing" rather than the general term "music" -- that limits us to doing only what the word "sing" allows. In 1 Corinthians 4.6, Paul warns us that we must not do more than the scriptures allow: *"That in us ye might learn not to go beyond the things which are written."* (ASV) "Such is the nature of our relation to God, that we cannot know what acts of worship are acceptable to Him except from revelation." "From the very nature of the case, then, we are limited in our acts of worship to those which are authorized by the scriptures, and we sin if we go beyond them." ² (cf. John 4.24; John 17.17.)

II. Instrumental Music Was Not Used by the New Testament Church

The absence of any mention of mechanical instruments being used in worship in the New Testament is easily understood when we realize that it was not the practice of the Apostolic church to use such instruments.

Bible scholars and historians of all faiths agree on the entire absence of instrumental music from the New Testament church. Dr. Curt Sachs of Columbia University, one of the most eminent musicologists in America has said: "All ancient Christian music was vocal" ³ Dr. Frederic Ritter, in his book, **History of Music From The Christian Era To The Present Time**, says "We have no real knowledge of the music which formed a part of the religious devotion of the first Christian congregations. It was, however, purely vocal." ⁴ **The Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge**, in an article by J.M. Brown notes: "That instrumental music was not practiced by primitive Christians...is evident from church history." ⁵ **The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge** documents the fact that "...the

organ...was rejected in early Christian circles." ⁶ McClintock and Strong observe: "The Greek word PSALLO is applied among the Greeks of modern times exclusively to sacred music, which in the Eastern Church has never been other than vocal; instrumental music being unknown in that church as it was in the primitive church." ⁷ Emil Nauman writes in **The History of Music**, Vol. I, p. 177: "There can be no doubt that originally the music of the divine service was everywhere entirely of a vocal nature." ⁸ Early Christian writers (Justin Martyr, Chrysostom, Tertullian, Eusebius) confirm that it was the practice of the early church simply to sing.

Continued references to the testimony of religious scholars and historians could be presented almost indefinitely--however, by now it should be clear that Instrumental Music was not practiced in the Early Church! Those early Christians, who were guided by the Apostles, did not make use of mechanical instruments of music, but, rather, sang psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. The question is: If we seriously intend to be New Testament Christians, can we do that which was never permitted as a part of the worship of the New Testament Church?

III. Instrumental Music Originated in the Apostate Church

If the use of mechanical instruments of music is not authorized by the New Testament, and was not permitted in the early church, where did the practice originate? In the 2nd and 3rd Centuries, the purity of the church was tarnished by gradual departures from the New Testament pattern. This departure from the truth had been predicted by the writers of the New Testament. Paul, for example, wrote: *"But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron."* (1 Timothy 4.1-2.) Departures took place in the area of church government, terms of membership, and with regard to the elements of worship. Before long, the church of the New Testament was submerged in a sea of Apostasy. Having abandoned the simple worship of the New Testament, the Apostate Church began to develop a more elaborate and liturgical ceremony in its place. According to **The American Cyclopedia**: "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 the one sent as a present by the Greek emperor, Constantine Copronymus, to Pepin, king of the Franks, in 755." (Vol. 12, p. 688.) ⁹ At first, the instrument was not widely accepted. As late as the 13th Century, the noted Thomas Aquinas, a world-renowned Catholic scholar, was writing against its use. Indications are that even in his time the practice was not widespread. ¹⁰ It is interesting to note, that when the Reformation began in Europe, one of the first abuses against which the Reformers took a stand was that of Instrumental Music. Congregations which were guided by the principles of the

Reformation generally made three changes in the arrangement of their houses of worship: (1) The altars were changed to communion tables, (2) Religious statues were taken down, and (3) Organs were taken out. Leaders in the Reformation were united in their opposition to Instrumental Music. Martin Luther called the organ "an ensign of Baal." John Calvin said that Musical Instruments were "no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of other shadows of the law."¹¹ When the Reformation came to England, the Anglican church came within one vote (58-59) of abolishing instrumental music in 1562.¹² John Knox called for Christianity to be purified of a "popish corruption" and urged the restoration of "plain singing of psalms unaccompanied by instrumental music." John Wesley, who attempted further reformation in the Church of England in the 1700's, and ended by establishing the Methodist Church was also adamantly opposed to Instrumental Music.¹³ Charles Spurgeon, perhaps the most famous preacher among the Baptists of the last century, refused to allow instrumental music in the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London where he preached to 10,000 weekly. He commented: "I would as soon pray to God with machinery as sing to God with machinery."

The record is clear--wherever and whenever men have sought to purge Christianity of the innovations adopted by the Apostate Church, they have begun with the rejection of Instrumental Music; All of the great reformers were agreed--returning to the simplicity of the New Testament Church means dispensing with Instrumental Music!!!

IV. Instrumental Music Is an Element of Divisiveness

Unity is commanded by the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 1.10: *"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, that there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment."* Romans 15.5: *"Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus."*

Throughout history, instrumental music has been disruptive of the unity of the church. It has been a source of strife and unnecessary division. Congregations have been split over it, yet none argue that it is essential.

The famed Methodist scholar, Adam Clarke, wrote: "I am an old man, and an old minister; and I here declare that I never knew them (i.e. instruments) 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."¹⁴

Conclusion

In this study we have sought to determine why churches of Christ do not use instruments of music in worship. We have seen that

1. Instrumental Music is not sanctioned by the New Testament;
2. Instrumental Music was not used in the Early Church;
3. Instrumental Music originated in the Catholic Church; and
4. Instrumental Music is a source of strife and disunity.

Savanorola, the 15th Century Florentine Reformer, said that when he preached the doctrines of human invention he pleased an impatient and fickle people, but when he turned to the Bible he shook men's souls. Our Plea is for a return to the Bible. In worship as well as in becoming Christians let us resolve to speak only "as the oracles of God" speak!

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ Batsell B. Baxter, "Music in Worship," Herald of Truth sermon, June 14, 1964. (Radio Sermon #646.)
- ² J.W. McGarvey in The Apostolic Times, reprinted in World Evangelist, Oct. 1976, p. 1.
- ³ Baxter, op cit., p. 11.
- ⁴ Quoted in James M. Tolle, Instrumental Music In Worship, p. 13.
- ⁵ Quoted in Baxter, op cit., p. 20.
- ⁶ S.M. Jackson, Editor-in-chief, The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. VIII, p. 257, "Organ."
- ⁷ McClintock and Strong, Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol VIII, p. 739.
- ⁸ Quoted in Tolle, op cit., p. 13.
- ⁹ Quoted in M.C. Kurfees, Walking By Faith: Origin of Instruniental Music In Christian Worship, p. 17.
- ¹⁰ Op Cit., p. 19.
- ¹¹ Four State Gospel News, Feb. '77, p. 4. Kurfees, 2psi~., pp. 19-20.
- ¹² Hetherington's History of the Westminister Assembly of Divines, p. 30 in Kurfees, p. 21.
- ¹³ Adam Clarke, Clarke's Commentary, Vol. IY, p. 684.
- ¹⁴ Ibid