

The Music of the New Testament Church

Most churches in Christendom today use **mechanical instruments** of music, either alone or to accompany their singing, in worship to God. In fact, so widespread is the practice that its verity, or its **scripturalness**, is not generally questioned. Churches which do **not** employ mechanical instruments in worship are looked upon as being eccentric groups, irregular in doctrine, freakish in custom and non-conformable to the rules commonly accepted by the majority. Besides comprising a kind of oddity, being abnormal and "out of tune" with the times, they are often accused of being narrow, bigoted, and fanatical. It seems strange and unorthodox that a minority could be so dogmatic and unreasonable as to find ground for objection to anything so beautiful, innocent, refined and elevating as an implement that could aid in praising and glorifying God!

A Comparatively Recent Innovation

May it be said here, however, that this has not always been the case. This position occupied by the majority today has not always been accepted. Present and general acceptance of a principle or a thing does not guarantee its genuineness or authenticity. The Lord once said, "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil" ([Exo 23:2](#)). Jesus said that the number that will be saved eventually will be relatively small ([Mat 7:13,14](#)). If we were governed by the principle of following the majority, we would all be heathen idolaters!

God's Word is the Only Standard

The most **urgently needed** lesson of our time is that the **only** rule for deciding what is right is the **word of God**. Men must be guided by the standard of the New Testament, perfect and authoritative, in all that they believe and practice. It behooves us, therefore, to inquire: "What does the New Testament teach upon the subject of music in the church?"

"Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" ([Eph 5:19](#)). "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 unto the Lord" ([Col 3:16](#)). "I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also" ([1Co 14:15](#)). "Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee" ([Heb 2:12](#)). See also [Mat 26:30](#); [Act 16:25](#); [Rom 15:9](#); [Jam 5:13](#).

Specifies Kind of Music

From these passages, it is evident that the Lord authorized **singing** as the kind of music Christians are to render to him in worship and in honor of Christ. There are two distinct and separate kinds of music: *vocal and instrumental*. God **specifies** the kind we are to render - **vocal**. And when God specifies a thing in a command, everything else except that thing named is to be **excluded**. This is a simple principle recognized in other areas by all of us. For example, God commanded Noah to build an ark ([Gen 6:14ff](#)). Doubtless, there were many kinds of wood which Noah could have used in the ark's construction, but Jehovah specified one particular kind of wood out of which he was to build it - *gopher wood*. In thus stating definitely the wood which was to be put to this purpose to accomplish the end God intended, every **other** kind of wood was positively **excluded**. If Noah had disregarded this divine command, there is no doubt that he would have been lost, along with the whole antediluvian world. But it is very refreshing to read: "Thus did Noah according to all that God commanded him; so did he" ([Gen 6:22](#)).

In two of the passages before us, [Ephesians 5:19](#) and [Colossians 3:16](#), not only does he denote and particularize the sort of music we are to render vocal, but he **designates** the very class of that vocal music - psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. No other types of songs can we present to God in worship and expect to receive his approval. All other songs (however much we may enjoy and appreciate them) which do not come within this scope, these classifications enumerated by Paul, are **prohibited**. The learning of this simple principle would solve our problems and promote the unity of a divided Christian world.

Respect for Authority of God's Word

If the principle and practice of promoting genuine ecumenism (cooperation, understanding, real unity, peace and harmony) among differing religious faiths ever become a reality, we must first learn well the lesson of **respect** for the authority of God's word. We must **speak** where the Bible speaks; we must be **silent** where the Bible is silent. It is permitted for us to do **only** what is authorized in his word. From everything else we must abstain. "Whoever goes on and does not abide in the doctrine which is from Christ has not God" (2Jo 1:9). There is no more authority in the New Testament for the use of mechanical instrumental music in Christian worship than for the burning of incense, the offering of animal sacrifices, or the observance of Jewish religious days - such as the Passover, Pentecost and the Sabbath.

Why Some Favor Its Use

There are, as one would expect, many arguments offered in favor of the use of mechanical instruments in worship.

1. The Bible does not specifically prohibit its use, we are told.

The New Testament is **not** a catalogue of *Thou shalt*s and *Thou shalt not*s. Rather, **principles** are laid down by which we are to be governed in our religious activities. "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus..." (Col 3:17). To do anything in the *name of Jesus Christ* is to do it by **His** authority; it is to do it by his divine approval and permission. To assert that God does not say, *Thou shalt not use an instrument in worship*, is begging the question. It assumes that this is proof of the very thing that needs to be proved. If one followed this principle, he could also say that God does not prohibit the observance of Jewish days of worship by saying, *Thou shalt not keep the Passover, the Pentecost and the Day of Atonement*. Nor does he say, *Thou shalt not offer animal sacrifices* in worship to God. On this ground, there is hardly anything one could not do in worship that he should choose to do; and this, you know, would open the floodgate to countless innovations nowhere referred to in the New Testament.

2. The argument is made, **David used instruments of music in worship, and David was a friend of God; so it would be permissible for us today to use them.**

It must be remembered that David lived under the **law of Moses**, but Christians live under the **law of Christ**, the New Testament. "He taketh away the first that he may establish the second, by the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ once for all" (Heb 10:9,10). Christ is the mediator of the New Testament (Heb 9:15). "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah..." (Heb 8:7,8). To endeavor to justify a practice on the grounds that **David did it**, is a very insubstantial and dubious argument. Simply because **David did it** does not make it right. David had eight wives and took more, with concubines besides (2Sa 5:13). David took the wife of another man, committed adultery with her, got him drunk in an effort to deceive him, and finally sent him to the front lines of battle and commanded his own army to retreat so the man might be slain. It is pretty weak to say, "We can do it because David did it." It sounds mightily as though David was condemned for the very thing in which so many people want to follow his example: "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria that lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; that chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of music, like David but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph" (Amo 6:16). It is time for us to learn that David is not the standard nor the authority for worship in the New Testament church.

3. Another postulation advanced in favour of the use of the instrument in worship is that the word *psallo* - *make melody*, Eph 5:19 permits its use! The claim is even made that the instrument is in the word.

Examination of the Word "Psallo"

If this were so (that the instrument is included in the word), it would be absolutely necessary to use the instrument in order to carry out God's injunction to *make melody* in this passage. Moreover, it would be imperative for every Christian to play an instrument to please God in worship, for this is a command, but inasmuch as *making melody* is a command of God to us, how can it be merely permissible? God's commands are not permissible; they are **mandatory**; they are necessary. When God commands us to do

something, it is required that we comply. It is not left to our discretion, or wishes, or volition, as to whether or not we will carry it out. There is no choice in the matter. So, if *psallo* (making melody) contains the instrument, **every** Christian is commanded to play an instrument in order to *psallo*, and there is no alternative. The plain fact is that the instrument was **not** named or included in the word *psallo* in the music of the New Testament church.

Scholars on Meaning of "Psallo"

To verify this statement, your attention is called to the findings of scholars and lexicographers of the New Testament language:

J. W. McGarvey: "No scholar has ever taken the position that the singing of psalms requires the use of a mechanical instrument."

W. B. F. Treat: "It (*psallo*) simply means to pluck or its equivalent; and whether this plucking is of the beard, the hair, the bowstring, the strings of a musical instrument, or something else, must be determined by other words, and not by *psallo*. It determines nothing as to that, no more than baptize determines the subject and element of baptism."

J. S. Dunn: "Can we get instrumental music from this word *psallo*? It is only ignorance that would lead anyone to think that, as used in the New Testament, this word countenances the use of instruments in Christian worship."

Thayer: "I will sing God's praises, indeed, with my whole soul stirred and borne away by the Holy Spirit; but I also will follow reason as my guide, so that what I sing may be understood alike by myself and the listeners." In defining the word *psallo*, Thayer says, "In the New Testament to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song."

Abbott & Smith: "In the New Testament to sing a hymn, sing praise."

Arndt & Gingrich: "Sing praise in spiritual ecstasy and in full possession of one's mental faculties."

W. E. Vine: "In the New Testament to sing a hymn, sing praises."

Harper (Analytical Greek Lexicon): "In New Testament to sing praises."

Lidell & Scott (Classical Greek Lexicon): "Pluck, pull, twitch, twang. Send a shaft twanging from the bow. A carpenter's red line, which is twitched and suddenly let go, so as to leave a mark." (It may be noted that Liddell and Scott, being Classical lexicographers, do not give the New Testament meaning of the word *Psallo*, but show its original and literal meaning.)

Robinson's Greek Lexicon: "In the New Testament, a psalm, a song in praise of God."

Green's Lexicon: "In the New Testament, to sing praises." The noun form of the word "*psalmos*" he defines a sacred song, psalm.

E. A. Sophocles, who examined all the Greek literature from a period before Christ of 150 years to 1100 years after Christ, did not find the instrument idea in a single passage. The only meaning he found to the word *psallo* was: "To chant, to sing religious hymns."

Harper's Latin Lexicon: *Psallo*, [1Co 14:15](#): "To sing the psalms of David."

The expression in [Eph 5:19](#) is: "psalming with the heart" - *psallontes te kardia*. This is instrumental case. It names the instrument with which we are to make melody, and that instrument is the **human heart**.

Inasmuch as it has been plainly shown what the New Testament teaches on the subject of the use of mechanical instruments in Christian worship, let us examine other great and reputable scholars in their standard works.

Record of Encyclopaedias

McClintock and Strong: "There is no warrant in the New Testament for their use." (No scriptural example for their use; no command to use them; no direction for their use.) "Instruments were not used in the worship of the ancient synagogue." "The early Reformers, when they came out of Rome, removed them as the monuments of idolatry." "The instruments of the former economy were ceremonial." "Instrumental music is incompatible with directions for singing given in the New Testament." "The Greek word psallo is applied among the Greeks of modern times exclusively to sacred music, which in the Eastern Church has never been any other than vocal, instrumental music being unknown in the primitive church ... But students of ecclesiastical archaeology are generally agreed that instrumental music was not used in churches till a much later date."

The American Encyclopedia, Vol. XII, page 688: "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 by the Greek Emperor Constantine Copronymus to Pepin, King of Franks in 755..."

Chambers Encyclopedia, Vol. VII, page 112: "The organ is said to have been introduced into church music by Pope Vitalian in 666 A.D."

Catholic Authorities: (Music: The Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. X): Advent and use of organ: "In Carolingian times, however, the organ came into use, and was, until the sixteenth century, used solely for the accompaniment of the chant..." page 651. The times referred to here began about 768 with the accession of Charlemagne page 349, The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. III.)

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: "Explicitly stated here ([1Co 13:1](#)) is the primacy of vocal performance over any instrumental music. Implicit is the contempt of all instrumental music, and the emphatic disparagement of gong and cymbals, two of the temple's percussion instruments ... Paul however denounced their usage on account of their role in the mystery cults ... Paul himself a Pharisee of the Pharisees' shared fully these views; in all his exhortations, he speaks only of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" ([Eph 5:19](#); [Col 3:16](#)) ... Occasionally Paul even speaks of an instrument, but like the DS, he uses it only for metaphorical or rhetoric purposes (as bugle in [1Co 14:8](#)). In general, however, he considers all musical instruments lifeless or soulless ... Later Christian authorities had more cogent reasons for their antagonism against all instrumental music."

Schaff-Herzog: "But this argument would prove that it is as much a duty to play as to sing in worship. It is questionable whether, as used in the New Testament, psallo means more than to sing ... The absence of instrumental music from the church for some centuries after the apostles and the sentiment regarding it which pervades the writings of the fathers are unaccountable, if in the apostolic church such music was used." "In the Greek church the organ never came into use, but after the 8th century it became common in the Latin church, not, however, without question from the side of the monks..."

Fessenden's Encyclopedia: "That instrumental music was not practiced by the primitive Christians, but was an aid to devotion of later times, is evident from church history."

Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, J. N. Brown: "Musical accompaniments were gradually introduced but can hardly be assigned to a period earlier than the 5th and 6th centuries. Organs were unknown in the church until the 8th or 9th century. Previous to this they had their place in the theater 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." "That instrumental music was not practiced by primitive Christians, but was an aid to devotion of later times, is evident from church history. The organ was first introduced into the church service in the year 1290; and the first we know in the west, was one sent to Pepin by Constantinus, about the middle of the 8th century."

Evidence of History

W. D. Killen - The Ancient Church: "It is not, therefore, strange that instrumental music was not heard in their congregational services ... In the early church the whole congregation joined in the singing, but instrumental music did not accompany the praise."

E. S. Lorenz - Church Music: "Singing, (there was no instrumental accompaniment) was little more than a means of expressing in a practicable, social way, the common faith and experience ... The music was purely vocal. There was no instrumental accompaniment of any kind ... It fell under the ban of the Christian church, as did all other instruments, because of its pagan association."

Alfredo Unterseiner - A Short History of Music: It was exclusively vocal, the Christian had an aversion to instruments which served at pagan feasts."

Dr. F. L. Ritter - History of Music From The Christian Era to The Present Time: "Instrumental music was excluded, at first, as having been used by the Romans at their depraved festivities; and everything reminding them of heathen worship could not be endured by the new religionists."

Edward Dickinson - History of Music: "...while the pagan melodies were always sung to an instrumental accompaniment, the church chant was exclusively vocal."

Frank L. Humphreys - The Evolution of Church Music: "All the music employed in their early services was vocal..."

George P. Fisher - History of The Christian Church: "Church music, which at the outset consisted mainly of the singing of the Psalms, flourished specially in Syria and Alexandria."

Dr. A. H. Newman - Manual of Church History: "The worship of the early Christians was very free and informal. It consisted of prayer, the singing of psalms, and the reading and exposition of the Old Testament Scriptures (prophesying)."

Philip Schaff - History of The Christian Church, Vol. 1, age 463: "The Lord himself inaugurated psalmody into the New Covenant at the institution of the Holy Supper, and Paul expressly enjoined the singing of 'psalms and hymns and spiritual songs' as a means of social edification."

J. L. Mosheim - Ecclesiastical History: "The psalms of David were now received among the public hymns that were sung as a part of the divine service."

J. W. McGarvey - What Shall We Do About The Organ?: "To sum up these arguments, you can now see that this practice is one of recent origin among protestant Churches, adopted by them from the Roman apostasy; that it was one of the latest corruptions adopted by that corrupt body; that a large part of the religious world has never accepted it; that, though employed in the Jewish ritual, it was deliberately laid aside by the inspired men who organized the church of Christ; and that several precepts of the New Testament implicitly condemn it."

A Summary of Commentaries

Layman Coleman (Noted Presbyterian author and scholar): "It is generally admitted that primitive Christians employed no instrumental music in their religious worship."

Charles H. Spurgeon (A Baptist preacher, preached for twenty years in the great Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle in London, England. Twenty thousand persons heard him every Sunday): "Instruments of music were never used in his tabernacle."

John Calvin (Founder of Presbyterianism): "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 other shadows of the law."

Adam Clarke (Methodist Commentator): "I am an old man, and an old minister; and I here declare that I never knew them (i.e. musical 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."

Albert Barnes - [Ephesians 5:19](#): "Endeavouring to edify one another, and to promote purity of heart, by songs of praise ... From the beginning, praise was an important part of public worship ... The psalms of David were sung by the Jews at the temple, and by early Christians, and singing of those psalms has constituted a delightful part of public worship in all ages... The prevailing character of music in the worship of God should be vocal... The idea here is, that of singing in the heart, or praising God from the heart."

William Hendricksen - [Ephesians 5:19](#): "But should edify each other, speaking to one another in Christian song, and doing so from the heart, to the praise and honour of their blessed Lord."

Pulpit Commentary - [Ephesians 5:19](#): "Some have argued that while *adontes* denoted singing, *psallontes* (make melody) means striking the musical instrument. But *psallo* is so frequently used in a more general sense, that it can hardly be restricted to this meaning here. The great thought is that this musical service must not be musical only, but a service of the heart, in rendering which the heart must be in a state of worship. In [Ephesians 5:19](#) we read, With our hearts, the instrument (here the region) of the song."

Macknight: "Instead of singing loud songs, like the heathens in the festivals of their gods, repeat to one another, in the seasons of your joy, the psalms of David, and those hymns and spiritual songs which are dictated to you by the Spirit, singing them, and making melody in your heart by accompanying them with devout affection, a melody most pleasing to the Lord. [Colossians 3:16](#): Let the doctrine which Christ spake, and which He inspired his apostles to speak, be often recollected by you; and with the greatest prudence teach and admonish each other, by the psalms of David, and the other hymns recorded in scripture, and by such songs as yourselves or others have uttered by the inspiration of the Spirit; singing them with true devotion in your hearts to God."

F.F.Bruce: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. The voice must express the praise of the heart if the singing is to be really addressed to God."

David Lipscomb: "Some claim that *psallo* carries with it the idea of mechanical instrumental accompaniment, but if the word in the New Testament means to sing with a mechanical instrument, it is not only allowable but obligatory to it ... the word *psallo* then would and did from the beginning, embrace the music of the voice as well as that made by stringed instruments of man's invention. The voice is a stringed instrument of God's make. Nor is it singular that as the use of the voice was so much more common and universal than that of any other instrument, the word should come to be applied exclusively to the music made by the voice, unless it was specifically said to be by some other instrument. This is what did come to pass. So the word unqualified in the New Testament times came to mean only to sing."

The Evidence of the Translations

I have examined about sixty-five translations of the New Testament and their rendering of the word *psallo*. Out of the more than 200 times they translate it, 29 times it is translated sing. Other times it is rendered praise or make melody. Only once out of all of this host of scholars is it expressed play harp. This seems weak and insubstantial.

The ground for belief that the New Testament church did not use mechanical instrument of music to accompany its singing in worship to God is so solid that it is not really disputable. The teaching of the New Testament itself and the almost limitless information from the lexicons, encyclopaedias, commentaries and translations establish the New Testament practice beyond question. All are replete with the evidence that the early Christians, under the supervision of inspired men of God, sang with their hearts as they worshipped.

The subject can be easily and readily resolved today when we decide we shall have utmost respect for the authority of God's word.