

Why Instruments of Music Should Not Be Used in Christian Worship^[1]

Introduction:

1. So common is the use of musical instruments in various denominational assemblies that a guest at worship in a Church of Christ is immediately struck by the oddity of its absence.
2. The resulting question, “Why do you not have instrumental music?” tends to put brethren on the defensive.
3. Reasons for not using instrumental music in worship has nothing whatever to do with personal music preferences nor economic ability to afford such instruments, but rather has to do with the conviction that obedience to God will not allow it.
4. Many people fail to realize that instrumental music was NOT used in the church either during apostolic times or for many centuries thereafter.
 - a. Instruments of music in worship did not originate in worship assemblies until the seventh century after Christ, and then was used only infrequently.
 - b. Many outstanding Reformation church leaders opposed instruments of music in Christian worship.
 - c. The use of mechanical instruments of music in worship is but a comparatively modern practice. In the overview of the centuries, those who do not now use instrumental music in worship are neither alone nor rare.

I. WE SING IN WORSHIP BECAUSE ONLY SINGING IN WORSHIP IS TAUGHT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

- A. New Testament passages that speak of music in worship specifically require singing while they say absolutely nothing about the use of instrumental music. Here are *all* the New Testament references (N-KJV) to music in worship.
 1. **Matthew 26:30**, “And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” (See also Mark 14:26)
 2. **Acts 16:25**, “But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.”
 3. **Romans 15:9**, “and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, And sing to Your name.” (See Psalm 18:49)
 4. **1 Corinthians 14:15**, “I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.”
 5. **Ephesians 5:19**, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,”
 6. **Colossians 3:16**, “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.”
 7. **Hebrews 2:12**, “saying: I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You.” (See Psalms 22:22)
 8. **Hebrews 13:15**, “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.”
 9. **James 5:13**, “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.”

10. (Revelation 5:9; 14:3; 15:3 all refer to worship in heaven after this life is over. These passages are therefore not applicable to Christian worship in church assemblies.)

B. Singing accomplishes God's desires, whereas the use of mechanical instruments of music does not. Note: . . .

<u>These scriptures</u>	<u>Command that we</u>	<u>Which the voice</u>	<u>But the instrument</u>
1 Corinthians 14:15	Sing with the heart	Can do	Cannot do
1 Corinthians 14:15	Sing with understanding	Can do	Cannot do
Ephesians 5:19	Speak in song	Can do	Cannot do
Ephesians 5:19	Make melody in heart	Can do	Cannot do
Colossians 3:16	Teach and admonish	Can do	Cannot do

II. WE DO NOT USE INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN WORSHIP BECAUSE IT IS PROHIBITED BY SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING. These principles are . . .

A. We must live by faith

1. *Explanation: 2 Corinthians 5:7*, "we walk by faith, not by sight."
Hebrews 11:6, "without faith it is impossible to please Him, . . ."
 - a. How do we obtain faith? "By hearing the word of God" (*Romans 10:17*)
 - b. Since we must live by faith, and since faith comes by hearing the word of God, then it follows that we should live by the word of God. *Matthew 4:4*, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."; *1 Corinthians 4:6*, "that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written . . ."
2. *Example: Cain made an offering to God (Genesis 4:1-7). However, . . .*
 - a. He did not offer by faith (*Hebrews 11:4*) which was evil (*1 John 3:12*).
 - b. His offering was rejected (*Genesis 4:5*).
 - c. Woe to those who live like Cain (*Jude 11*).
3. *Application:*
 - a. Major premise: Faith comes by hearing . . . the word of God (*Romans 10:17*)
 - b. Minor premise: Instrumental music in worship is not mentioned in the word of God.
 - c. Conclusion: Therefore, the use of instrumental music in worship is not in accordance with faith (*Romans 14:23; 1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 John 9*).

B. We must worship in truth

1. *Explanation: John 4:24*, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him."
 - a. What is truth? God's word is truth (*John 17:17*).
 - b. Since we must worship in truth, and since God's word is truth, then we must worship in accordance with God's word.
2. *Example: Nadab and Abihu offered incense to God (Leviticus 10:1-2). However,*
 - a. They offered it with unholy fire, such as he had not commanded them.
 - b. They were killed by fire that came from the Lord.
3. *Application:*
 - a. Major premise: Those who worship God must worship him in truth (*John 4:24*)
 - b. Minor premise: Instrumental music in worship is not a part of the word of truth.
 - c. Conclusion: Therefore, the use of instrumental music in worship is not in accordance with truth, and is therefore unacceptable in worship to God.

C. We must abide in the doctrine of Christ

1. *Explanation: 2 John 9*, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.”
 - a. What is Christ’s judgment about worship practices not commanded by God. *Matthew 15:8-9* and *Mark 7:6-7* declares that such worship is in vain! “This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”
2. *Example: Pharisees transgressed the commandments of God for the sake of traditions of men (Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23).*
 - a. Pharisees substituted their practice of “Corban” for the commandment to “Honor your father and your mother.”
 - b. Pharisees thus worshipped God in vain.
 - c. Pharisees then had the judgment of hell upon them (*Matthew 23:33*).
3. *Application:*
 - a. Major premise: We must “abide in the doctrine of Christ” (*2 John 9*)
 - b. Minor premise: Instrumental music in worship is not a part of the doctrine of Christ.
 - c. Conclusion: Therefore, we cannot abide in the doctrine of Christ while using the mechanical instrument of music in worship.

III. ANSWERS TO OBJECTIONS . . .

A. What about the use of church buildings, hymnals, tuning forks, etc.? If these are optional, why is not the use of an instrument of music also optional and thus allowed in worship?

1. *Answer:* God’s commandments include both generalities and specifics. The specifics do not allow options, whereas the generalities do.
2. *Answer illustrated and explained.*
 - a. God commanded Noah to make an ark of gopher wood (*Genesis 6:14*).
 - 1) God specified gopher wood. Had Noah substituted mahogany for gopher, or used mahogany in addition to gopher, he would not have obeyed God’s commandment. Noah had no choice of the kind of wood to be used.
 - 2) God did not specify the size planks to be used. Noah had a choice to use whatever size he thought best.
 - b. God commanded Naaman, through the prophet Elisha, to go and wash in the Jordan seven times (*2 Kings 5:10*).
 - 1) God specified (a) go (b) wash (c) in the Jordan (d) seven times. Naaman had no choices in these matters. He did not mind going, nor washing, nor even seven times, but he did object to the Jordan until his servant admonished him to do as he was told (*2 Kings 5:12-13*).
 - 2) God did not specify (a) the manner of going (b) the procedure for washing (c) the place to enter the Jordan (d) the duration of each time. Naaman could do in these matters whatever his judgment dictated.
 - c. God commands that we not forsake the assembling of yourselves together (*Hebrews 10:25*).
 - 1) God specified that we assemble.
 - 2) God did not specify (a) the time of day (b) the place of meeting. We are left to our own judgment regarding the time of day and the place of meeting.
 - d. God commands that we sing (*Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16*).

- 1) Since God specified that we sing, then, if we remain silent or if we add the instrument of music for accompaniment, we do not obey God's specific commandment to sing for we have added to or taken away from God's commandment.
 - 2) God has not specified (1) our manner of singing, i.e., whether in unison or in four-part harmony; or whether we guess at the key for beginning a song or use a pitch-pipe; or whether we have memorized the words and musical notes or use a hymnal.
 3. Thus, we must obey God, doing nothing more and nothing less; obeying God in whatever manner of our own choosing, just as long as it is in total obedience, without addition, deletion, substitution or other alteration of God's commandments.
- B. Did God not approve of instrumental music in the Old Testament? Did not David use instrumental music in acceptable worship to God? If so, then why is the use of instrumental music not acceptable today?
1. It is true that instrumental music was not only used but was also authorized by God for acceptable worship in the Old Testament. **2 Chronicles 29:25**, "And he stationed the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, with stringed instruments, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for thus was the commandment of the LORD by his prophets." **Psalms 92:1-3**, "It is good to give thanks to the LORD, And to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; ²To declare Your loving kindness in the morning, And Your faithfulness every night, ³On an instrument of ten strings, On the lute, And on the harp, With harmonious sound."
 2. However, the New Testament replaced the Old Testament. **Hebrews 8:13**, "In that He says, A new covenant, He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (see also **Ephesians 2:14-15**; **Colossians 2:14**).
 - a. Moreover, the Psalms were considered a part of the law, for
 - 1) Jews recognized Psalms as law. **John 12:34**, "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever . . ." (This is a citation from Psalms 110:4.)
 - 2) Jesus recognized the Psalms as law. **John 10:34**, "Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, 'I said, You are gods'?" (This is a citation for Psalms 82:6.) **John 15:25**, "But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, 'They hated Me without a cause.'" (This citation is from Psalm 35:19; Psalms 69:4.)
 - b. Therefore, authorization for the use of instruments of music in worship was done away when the Law of Moses was annulled. And since the use of instruments of music for worship is not authorized in the New Testament, then their use for Christian worship is not appropriate.
- C. Cannot the Greek word *psallo* be translated as to sing praise with a musical instrument? Does not the word *psalmos* mean a song of praise (on an instrument)? If so, then does not this authorize the use of instruments of music in Christian worship?
1. Living languages (such as modern English or the ancient Greek) change word meanings.
 - a. That these terms in ancient Greek could mean to sing accompanied with a musical instrument, none will deny. The question is, Did these terms mean to sing with the instrument during New Testament times, by New Testament writers?

- b. M. C. Kurfrees said, "The Greek word *psallo* once meant to pluck the hair, twang the bowstring, twitch the carpenter's line, and touch the chords of a musical instrument, but had entirely lost all of these meanings before the beginning of the New Testament period, and therefore the word is never used in the New Testament period, nor in contemporaneous literature, in any of these senses. At this time it not only means to sing, but that is the only sense in which it is used, all the other meanings having entirely disappeared" (*Instrumental Music in Worship*, p. 44).
 - c. However, Greek lexicons, grammars, encyclopedias, and commentaries are divided. While a majority of excellent scholars declare that *psallo* did not mean to sing with an instrument during New Testament times, yet some very worthy authorities affirm the opposite. Therefore, the argument cannot be settled by an appeal to expert opinions.
2. The meaning of a word is determined by usage, not by lexicons, etc. What then is the historical evidence for usage of instrumental music in church worship during New Testament times? (Note these authorities cited by *Restoration Quarterly*, Vol. 10. No. 2, pp. 99-104).
 - a. "We know that instruments performed an important function in the Hebrew temple service and in the ceremonies of the Greeks. At this point, however, a break was made with all previous practices, and although the lyre and flute were sometimes employed by Greek converts, as a general rule the use of instruments in worship was condemned" (Edward Dickinson, *Music in the History of the Western Church*, 1902, p. 54).
 - b. "The New Testament documents contain but little material bearing directly upon the question at issue here. Yet critical scholarship, applying itself to the study of the incidental information that does emerge . . . has been able to reconstruct tentatively at least certain of the broader outlines of the use of music in the crucial formative years of the Christian movement. So far as we can tell, the music of the early church was entirely vocal, Christian usage following in this particular the practice of the Synagogue, in part for the same reasons" (Carl Kraeling, *Ancient and Oriental Music*, *New Oxford History of Music*, I, 303).
 - c. "Many musicologists, while acknowledging that early church music was predominantly vocal, have tried to find evidence that instruments were employed at various times and places. The result of such attempts has been a history of misinterpretations and mistranslations. The assumption that there must have been exceptions to the general rule of vocal performance seems founded on the basic misconception that there was a controversy over the use of instruments in the early church. . . . Now a careful reading of all patristic criticism of instruments will not reveal a single passage which condemns the use of instruments in church. The context of the condemnation may be the banquet, the theater, or the festivities accompanying a marriage, but it is never the liturgy. . . . The implication for the performance of early Christian music is obvious. Not only was it predominantly vocal, but it was so exclusively vocal that the occasion to criticize the use of instruments in church never arose" (James McKinnon, "The Meaning of the Patristic Polemic Against Musical Instruments," *Current Musicology*, Spring, 1965, pp. 69-82, author of doctoral thesis, *The Church Fathers and Musical Instruments*, at Columbia University).
3. Grammatical usage of *psallo* and *psalmos* in the New Testament prohibits that they be understood to require, or even to allow, instrumental accompaniment to singing.

- a. *psallo* is used five times in four verses. (Translated as “sing psalms”, **James 5:13**; “sing”, **Romans 15:9**, and twice in **1 Corinthians 14:15**; and “making melody,” in **Ephesians 5:19**)
 - 1) **James 5:13**, “Is any cheerful? Let him sing praises” (RSV). sing psalms (KJV) (*psalleto*)
 - a) If the instrument is to be used, the translation must read, “Is anyone, who can play an instrument, merry? Let him sing praises to musical accompaniment.”
 - b) Moreover, such is possible only if their instrument is handy!
 - c) Yet, Jerome said, “the plow man at his plow sings his joyful hallelujahs, the busy mower regales himself with his psalms, and the vine-dresser is singing one of the songs of David.” And Eusebius said that under persecutions at Thebais, “they continued to their latest breath to sing psalms and hymns and thanksgivings to the God of heaven” (Lyman Coleman, *The Apostolic and Primitive Church*. 2nd ed. 1844, p. 373). Note: Such conditions would prohibit the use of mechanical instruments of music.
 - 2) **Romans 15:9**, “as it is written: ‘For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, And sing (*psallo*) to Your name’”
 - a) This quotation from Psalms 18:49 indicates that when David is read among the Gentiles, he sings, praising God to them.
 - b) The passage has no reference to what we under the New Covenant should do in Christian worship.
 - 3) **1 Corinthians 14:15**, “I will sing (*psallo*) with the spirit, and I will also sing (*psallo*) with the understanding.”
 - a) Can anyone play a mechanical instrument with his spirit or with his understanding?
 - b) **1 Samuel 16:23**, David would take a harp and play it with his hand. The expressions “with his hand” in the Old Testament and “with the spirit” in the New Testament show the differences between their respective meanings and usages. (This is also indicated in **Ephesians 5:19**.)
 - 4) **Ephesians 5:19**, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,”
 - a) The Greek word for singing in this passage is *odontes*, not *psallo*.
 - b) Making melody is from the present participle of *psallo*, and has the idea of playing a musical instrument. The instrument named here is your heart. The heart played or plucked furnishes the accompaniment, not a mechanical instrument.
 - c) If a mechanical instrument of music is present in this verse, what then does “with your heart” modify? Are we to render it playing an instrument with your heart? That’s absurd!
 - 5) If a mechanical instrument of music is present in these verses, then *each person* who sings *must* also *play an instrument*, rather than one person play the instrument while others sing along with it.
- b. *Psallo* is used seven times in the New Testament
 - 1) Four times the word has reference to one or all of the psalms of David.

Luke 20:42, “Now David himself said in the Book of Psalms.”

Luke 24:44, “. . . that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of

Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.”

Acts 1:20, “For it is written in the book of Psalms.”

Acts 13:33, “As it is also written in the second Psalm”

- 2) The other three instances are . . .

1 Corinthians 14:26, “Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm (*psalmos*), has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

Ephesians 5:19, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,”

Colossians 3:16, “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.”

- 3) If the leading idea of *psalmos* is a musical accompaniment according to the exponents of instrumental music in church worship, then . . .
- a) Wrapping up such instrumentation into a book of songs (Book of Psalms) could not be very real!
 - b) Translators of KJV, ASV, & RSV have all mistranslated for non-Greek readers, for they should surely have put the leading ideas explicitly into their translations. Thus, for example, **Ephesians 5:19** should read, “speaking one to another in songs accompanied with mechanical instruments, and hymns and spiritual songs,” etc.
 - c) Instrumental music is not optional, as its exponents declare, but obligatory, for Paul wrote by the commandments of the Lord (**1 Corinthians 14:37**).

IV. INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN WORSHIP IS OF NON-APOSTOLIC ORIGIN, A HUMAN INNOVATION, AND A DEPARTURE FROM THE SPIRITUAL TO THE CARNAL.

A. Instrumental music in Christian worship is NOT of Apostolic origin.

1. Lyman Coleman (a Presbyterian) 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” (*The Primitive Church*, p. 370-371).
2. Joseph Bingham (a most learned scholar of the Church of England) wrote, “Music in the church is as ancient as the apostles, but instrumental music is not” (*Antiquities of the Church*, Vol. 2, p. 482).

B. Instrumental music in Christian worship is a human innovation.

1. “In ecclesiastical history, pope Vitalian I figures as the introducer of the organ, and the date assigned is A. D. 666” (*McClintock & Strong*, VII, 425). However, “the only trustworthy account is that of the one sent as a present by the Greek emperor, Constantine Copronymus, to Pepin, King of the Franks in 775” (*American Encyclopedia*, XII, 668) . . . who “had it put in the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle. . . . The Latin church introduced it pretty generally, but not without protest of eminent men, . . .” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, IV. 439).
2. Even then, no evidence exists that any instrument except the organ was played in church.
 - a. “The organ did not accompany but played before and after singing. The liturgical use of other instruments was rare before 1500” (*Restoration Quarterly*, IX, 1, p. 41).

- b. Thomas Aquinas (mid-13th century), after noting that the church did not make use of harps and psalteries for fear of seeming to imitate the Jews, stated, “In the Old Testament instruments of this description were employed, both because the people were more coarse and carnal – so that they needed to be aroused by such instruments as also by earthly promises – and because these material instruments were figures of something else” (*Summa Theologica*, Part II, Question 91.)
 3. The Greek Catholic church has never accepted instrumental music in worship. When the Protestant-Episcopal Church in the United States accepted instrumental music, it did so with only one majority vote. Not until the mid-19th century did instrumental music become common in Presbyterian church worship.
- C. Instrumental music in Christian worship is a departure from the spiritual and an acceptance of the carnal.
 1. Testimonies of Reformers and Evangelicals
 - a. **John Calvin**, “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 other shadows of the law” (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 33rd Psalm).
 - b. **John Wesley**, “I have no objection to the organ in our chapels provided it is neither seen nor heard” (Clarke’s *Commentary*, IV, 686).
 - c. **Charles Spurgeon**, “I would as soon to pray to God with machinery as to sing to God with machinery.”
 - d. **Adam Clarke**, “I have never known instrumental music to be productive of any good in the worship of God and I have reason to believe that it has been 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. This is the abuse of music and I here register my protest against all such corruption in the worship of that Infinite Spirit who requires his followers to worship him in spirit and in truth” (*Clarke’s Commentary*, IV. 686).
 2. Restoration Movement Notations
 - a. The first recorded use of instrumental music in a church proclaiming the restoration of New Testament Christianity was at Midway, KY in 1859, where a melodeon was regularly used, according to L. L. Penkerton, and it was the basis for considerable friction within the church.
 - b. The issue was discussed by brotherhood publications before and after the civil war, but no real brotherhood disturbance occurred until ...
 - c. “The church in St. Louis in 1878 began using the \$3,000.00 organ they had acquired with the purchase of an Episcopal building, congregations throughout the brotherhood, over the protests of members, began purchasing organs” (*Restoration Quarterly*, XX, 3, 175).
 - d. Many recognized the problem was one of the worldly, sensual, prideful nature of man overcoming the spiritual nature of man.
 - 1) **Alexander Campbell**, “So to those who have no real devotion or spirituality in them, and whose animal nature flags under the oppression of church service, I think . . . that instrumental music would be not only a desideratum, but an essential prerequisite to fire up their souls to even animal devotion. But I presume, to all spiritually-minded Christians such aids would be as a cow bell in a concert” (*Millennial Harbinger*, I, 10, 581-582).

- 2) **Robert Richardson**, “The introduction of a musical instrument into a church is a triumph of the sensual over the spiritual. The innovation once affected, the sensual mind seeks to justify the act by plausibility’s, as any error may be sustained, and to trust to Christian forbearance of those who are unconvinced, until the habit of hearing the instrument shall at length silence their scruples.”
- e. Other objections and objectors
 - 1) **Moses E. Lard**, “The question of instrumental music in the churches of Christ involves a great and sacred principle . . . That principle is the right of men to introduce innovations into the prescribed worship of God. This right we utterly deny” (*Lard’s Quarterly*, IV. 4.)
 - 2) **J. W. McGarvey**, Earl West quoted McGarvey, but preceded his quote with these comments, “Some felt that a worship without an instrument was all right in a society that was accustomed only to the backwoods, but new standards of respectability were now set up, and the church to be progressive must meet these standards. So McGarvey wrote: ‘This question of instrumental music is becoming a serious one. There are many who favor it, and who will listen to no argument against it. By the cry of progress and conformity, it is making its way over the heads and hearts of our best brethren and sisters . . .’” (Earl West, *Search for the Ancient Order*, II. 83-84, quoting J. W. McGarvey, *Millennial Harbinger*, XXXIX, 4, p. 216).

Summary and Conclusion:

1. The New Testament teaches that we are to sing. The New Testament says nothing specifically about the use of instrumental music in Christian worship.
2. The objectives of singing cannot be accomplished by the playing of mechanical instruments of music.
3. Certain principles of the Christian faith – that we must live by faith, that we must worship in truth, that we must abide in the doctrine of Christ – are violated by the use of instruments of music in Christian worship.
4. Aids to singing are allowable whenever such causes us neither to do more nor less than sing. In such matters human judgment is expected.
5. Usage of musical instruments in the Old Testament was proper then for that was under another covenant. Christians live under the New Covenant that does not authorize mechanical instruments of music.
6. The Greek words *psallo* and *psalms* did not mean in New Testament times, indeed grammatically could not mean, the use of mechanical instruments in accompaniment of singing. If it did, then every singer must also be required to play on an instrument.
7. Use of mechanical instruments of music is non-Apostolic in origin; a human innovation, stoutly resisted whenever initiated; and constitutes a departure from the spiritual to the gratification of the carnality’s of the flesh.

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