

MUSIC IN WORSHIP

Introduction

1. Congregational singing in worship without instrumental music is one of several uncommon common convictions among us.
2. We are convinced that we must worship God on His terms (Lev. 10:1-3; John 4:20-24; Col. 3:17; Heb. 11:4; 12:28-29).
3. We are equally convinced that the use of instrumental music in Christian worship is unauthorized.

Discussion

- I. The Presence of Instrumental Music in Jewish Worship
 - A. Instrumental music in temple worship was not a human innovation or a mere expedient; it was authorized and commanded by God (2 Chron. 29:25-30; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:44-45; Ps. 81:2-4; 92:1-3).
 - B. Instrumental music in temple worship was worship; it was not an aid to worship (1 Chron. 23:5; Ps. 33:2-3; 43:4; 150:3-6).
- II. The Absence of Instrumental Music in Christian Worship
 - A. God didn't place instruments in Christian worship.
 - i. Musical instruments occur in the New Testament as part of everyday life (Matt. 9:23; 11:17; Rev. 18:22) and as illustrations (1 Cor. 13:1; 14:7-9), but they are never mentioned as part of the assemblies of the church or accompanying Christian religious music.
 - ii. If God wanted instruments in Christian worship, it's reasonable to conclude that He would have specifically placed them there through His apostles, just as he did in temple worship through David.
 - iii. Since God didn't place any musical instruments in Christian worship, we are convinced that we shouldn't bring any in.
 - B. God told us to sing in Christian worship.
 - i. When the worship of the church is associated with music, only singing is mentioned (1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 13:15; Jas. 5:13; cf. Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; Rom. 15:9 [Ps. 18:49]; Heb. 2:12 [Ps. 22:22]).
 - ii. Since God has specified singing as the kind of music He desires in Christian assemblies, we are convinced that we should not offer Him something different.
- III. The Surprising Testimony of Church History
 - A. Though our commitment to *a cappella* music in Christian worship puts us in the minority in the 21st century, a survey of church history demonstrates that the majority, not the minority, believed that vocal praise without the use of musical instruments belongs in Christian worship.
 - i. Vocal music was the norm in early Christian assemblies.

- a. About A.D. 110, **Pliny the Younger**, the Roman governor of Bithynia, included the following words about Christians in a letter to the Roman Emperor Trajan: “. . . they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath” (*Epistles* 10.96).
 - b. At the beginning of the fourth century, **Eusebius**, a venerated church historian, described Christian assemblies in his *Commentary on Psalms* 65:10-15: “Throughout the world—in cities, in villages, and in the country—in all the churches of God the people of Christ, who have been chosen out of all the nations, send up, not to the native gods nor to demons but to the one God spoken of by the prophets, hymns and psalmody with a loud voice so that the sound of those singing can be heard by those standing outside.”
- ii. Vocal music rather than instrumental music was promoted in early church history.
- a. **Eusebius** (early 300s) wrote in his *Commentary on Psalms* 91:2-3: “Of old at the time those of the circumcision were worshiping with symbols and types it was not inappropriate to send up hymns to God with the psalterion and kithara and to do this on Sabbath days We render our hymn with a living psalterion and a living kithara with spiritual songs. The unison voices of Christians would be more acceptable to God than any musical instrument. Accordingly in all the churches of God, united in soul and attitude, with one mind and in agreement of faith and piety, we send up a unison melody in the words of the Psalms.”
 - b. **Niceta** (early 400s), bishop of Remesia in what is now Yugoslavia, wrote the following in response to those who would banish singing altogether from Christian worship: “It is time to turn to the New Testament to confirm what is said in the Old, and, particularly, to point out that the office of psalmody is not to be considered abolished merely because many other observances of the Old Law have fallen into desuetude. Only the corporal institutions have been rejected, like circumcision, the Sabbath, sacrifices, discrimination in foods. So, too, the trumpets, harps, cymbals, and timbrels. For the sound of these we know have a better substitute in the music from the mouths of men. The daily ablutions, the new-moon observances, the careful inspection of leprosy are completely past and gone, along with whatever else was necessary only for a time—as it were, for children. Of course, what was spiritual in the Old Testament, for example, faith, piety, prayer, fasting, patience, chastity, psalm-singing—all this has been increased in the New Testament rather than diminished” (*On the Utility of Hymn Singing* 9).

- c. Like Niceta, **Theodoret** (early 400s), bishop of Cyrhus in Syria, responded to those who wondered if all music, including singing, should be abolished from Christian worship: “It is not simple singing that belongs to the childish state, but singing with lifeless instruments, with dancing, and with clappers. Hence the use of such instruments and the others that belong to the childish state is excluded from the singing in the churches, and simple singing is left. For it awakens the soul to a fervent desire for that which is described in the songs, it quiets the passions that arise from the flesh, it removes the evil thoughts that are implanted in us by invisible foes, it waters the soul to make it fruitful in the good things of God, it makes the soldiers of piety strong to endure hardships, it becomes for the pious a medicine to cure all the pains of life” (*On the Healing of Greek Afflictions* 7.16).
- iii. Prominent voices from different religious backgrounds in later church history rejected the use of musical instruments in Christian worship.
 - a. In A.D. 1250, **Thomas Aquinas** (1225-1274), the most influential Roman Catholic theologian of the Middle Ages, observed: “The Church does not use musical instruments such as the harp or lyre when praising God, in case she should seem to fall back into Judaism . . . For musical instruments usually move the soul more to pleasure than create inner moral goodness. . . .”
 - b. English reformer **John Wycliffe** (c. 1328-84) favored unaccompanied singing, as also did **John Huss** (c. 1369-1415) of Bohemia, who supported congregational singing.
 - c. Though Martin Luther (1483-1546) was apparently indifferent to the use of instruments in worship, other notable reformers, such as **Huldreich Zwingli** (1484-1531), **Heinrich Bullinger** (1504-75), **John Calvin** (1509-64), and **Theodore Beza** (1519-1605), opposed using musical instruments in worship.
 - d. Both **John Wesley** (1703-1791), the founder of the Methodist Church, and **Adam Clarke** (1762-1832), a noted Methodist preacher, opposed the use of instruments in worship.
 - e. **Charles Spurgeon** (1834-1892), a renowned Baptist preacher and prolific writer, makes the following statement in his commentary on Psalm 42: “David appears to have had a peculiarly tender remembrance of the singing of the pilgrims and assuredly it is the most delightful part of worship and that which comes nearest to the adoration of heaven. What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettiness of a quartet, the refined niceties of a choir, or the blowing off of wind from inanimate bellows and pipes! We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it” (*The Treasury of David* 2:301).

- B. While the New Testament is *the* source of authority for Christian beliefs and practices, the testimony of church history should not be dismissed out of hand.
 - i. The evidence of early church history on this particular issue confirms the reading of the New Testament that is found among those who oppose musical instruments in Christian worship.
 - ii. As Everett Ferguson observes, “Where the early historical evidence is full—in this case virtually universal, uniform, and unanimous—about the church’s practice, there is a strong presumption about apostolic practice and the New Testament teaching” (*The Instrumental Music Issue* 98).
 - iii. Furthermore, except for a couple of isolated incidences, Christians retained vocal-only music in their assemblies until the early 1300s.

IV. Common Objections to Vocal-Only Music in Christian Worship

- A. “They used instruments in Old Testament worship, so why can’t we?”
- B. “Didn’t Jesus and His apostles worship where instruments were used? If they did it, why can’t we? Do we not have a precedent here?”
- C. “Could it be that the non-use of instruments in first-century Christian assemblies was simply based on certain factors that are no longer extant today?”
- D. “Doesn’t the Greek word *psallo*, translated “make melody” in Ephesians 5:19, mean ‘to pluck strings’? If so, would this not give us the authority to play instruments in worship?”
- E. “The New Testament doesn’t say, ‘Don’t use musical instruments in worship,’ so would this not provide us with a green light to use them?”
- F. “Is worship even regulated in the New Testament? Do we really need authority for what we practice in worship? Isn’t this debate much ado about nothing?”
- G. “The Book of Revelation seemingly pictures God’s people worshiping with instruments, so would that not be all we need to sanction their use in Christian worship?”
- H. “You use songbooks and sound systems that are not mentioned in the New Testament, so what would be wrong with using a piano or other instrument(s) to accompany or aid our singing in worship?”
- I. “Some people have musical talent. Are you saying that they cannot use that talent for God?”
- J. “Wouldn’t the use of musical instruments in our worship assemblies increase and enhance our ability to reach out to the lost in our culture? Isn’t that our overarching mission: the salvation of souls? Shouldn’t we do everything we can to save the lost? Shouldn’t we be willing to adapt to our culture in this area to maximize our soul-saving capabilities?”

Conclusion

1. To use musical instruments in Christian worship is presumptuous at best and disobedient at worst; neither of these realities pleases God, the One we should aim to please (John 8:28-29; 2 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:7-10; Col. 1:9-10; 2 Tim. 2:4; 1 John 3:22; Heb. 13:15-16).

2. *A cappella* singing, however, is clearly a legitimate and authorized mode of musical expression suitable for Christian worship.

Selected Works

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