

# **TOPICAL STUDIES**

## **USING INSTRUMENTS OF MUSIC IN WORSHIP**



**SUMMARY:** The object of this lesson is to help the reader list and explain five reasons why the use of instruments of worship in worship to God is not God's plan for Christian worship.

### INTRODUCTION:

The question of using instruments of music in Christian worship is widely debated and has been for centuries. While the majority of "Christian" churches today use instruments, less than two hundred years ago, many in churches using it today were opposing its use. Of course, the answer to this question does not lie in who does or does not use instruments today, but lies, rather, in what the scriptures reveal about our worship of God.

Before answering the specific question of what music we should use in worship, it is helpful to set this question in the broader context of the meaning of Christian worship and how to participate in it. Then we can better answer the question of just what we should or should not do in worship.

- A. The word most commonly translated "worship" in the New Testament is a Greek word rooted in the concept of "kissing the ground before." Obviously if one kisses the ground or falls prostrate before something, he is seeking to honor the object before which he bows. So the word "worship" means to offer a message of respect, contrition, or praise to an object of worship. To respect this meaning, any effort to worship God, then, must include the sense of "bowing in submission to offer praise."
- B. Jesus uses this word in John 4:23-24 when speaking to the woman at the well. He said God seeks people to "worship" Him, to bow in praise to Him. In explaining this to the Samaritan woman, Jesus emphasizes that since God is "spirit" He wants us to worship Him "in spirit." Jesus explains that in the New Covenant, worship is not restricted to a special place. Since God is "spirit," He is everywhere and may be worshipped anywhere as we approach Him in our "spirits." Christian worship, then, is "spirit to Spirit"-- my spirit reaches out to contact the Great Spirit and on this spiritual level worship takes place. The Jewish worship had required the right place, the right offering, the right priest, and the right ritual, but Christian worship will be different--it is direct. My spirit reaches the Great Spirit, who is everywhere.

Jesus also tells the Samaritan woman that another change in the new worship is that it will be "in truth." Since He is still contrasting His new system of worship with the old, "truth" here suggests not only that in worship Christians must follow the truth of God's Word, as did the old, but Christian worship is also "in truth" or reality in contrast with the types and shadows of the Jewish worship.

My worship flows out of my life with God. Only if I have a close personal relationship with Him in my daily life and am walking in His ways can I worship Him well. Worship, then, is to be a way for those living the Christian life to make contact with their Maker and Father.

- C. But worshipping God must be more than just man's desire to reach out to God. God, the object of our worship, has always specified why we should worship Him and how we are to worship Him. From the very first recorded attempt at worship, that of Cain and Abel, it is clear that not everyone who seeks to worship God pleases Him. There are probably as many cases of failed worship recorded in the Bible as cases of successful worship. God seeks us to worship Him but He also tells us why and how.
- D. We might summarize the reasons to worship God (scriptural ends) in four words: proclaim, adore, communicate, and edify. Paul said taking the Lord's supper affords us an opportunity to "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

First, our worship, then, is to proclaim and announce, to testify to others, both in the church and in the world around us, of our faith and commitment. In our hearts, then, as we worship, there should be a sense of declaration that we believe in God and Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Second, our worship should be to express our adoration, praise, and honor to God. Our worship is to Him and for Him (Hebrews 13:15). God is the object of our worship and our primary aim is to please Him.

Third, worship is to communicate, to send a message to God. Our worship should tell God of our love for Him and express our thanksgiving to Him. Worship is also a time to communicate to Him our confession of sins and our commitment to do better. The very word worship, as we have seen, means to send a message of contrition and honor. Obviously we will have feelings and emotion in our communication with God as suggested by Ephesians 5:19: "make melody in your heart to the Lord." If we are not communicating with the Lord as we sing, pray, and take the Lord's Supper, then we are not actually worshipping.

Fourth, worship is to edify our brethren. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul makes this point repeatedly. While our primary object is to honor God, a secondary purpose is to build up our brethren. We do "only what is good for edifying" (v. 26). In this regard, we come primarily to give edification to others. The very nature of worship means that it is not selfish--I do not come to please myself. I worship to give to God and to give to others. That I receive a blessing is, of course, important but it comes only if I do not make that my primary goal. So we must have the scriptural ends or purposes for our worship.

- E. But not only must our worship flow from our Christian lives toward God as we worship with the right purpose and "in spirit" and "in truth," we must also worship God by doing the right things. God has never left the choice of what to do in worship up to His people. From the very beginning, He has specified how He wanted to be worshipped--by animal sacrifice, by keeping the Passover, through a priest wearing special garments and doing special things. In fact, some of the worst consequences God has

sent on people was for their not worshipping Him in the way He had specified. So we must have the right means for worshipping God--using those methods of worship which He has commanded. For Christians, for example, He has told us to pray, sing, and take the Lord's Supper.

- F. God has made worshipping Him to be a very important part of what He expects from His people. It has always been so. We must both do the right things and do them in the right ways. With this laid as a foundation, we are now ready to approach the question of whether we should use instruments of music in Christian worship

### **REASONS NOT TO USE INSTRUMENTS IN WORSHIP**

This lesson will give five reasons the author suggests for not using instruments in our worship today. Others could be given but these will be helpful to you as you are explaining this point to those you are teaching.

#### **1 CHRISTIANS MUST WORSHIP ONLY AS GOD HAS COMMANDED.**

God has always given commands to His people about how they were to worship Him and has given strong retribution to those who have gone beyond His commands. Note these examples from scripture.

- A. God specified a way to get the fire for burning incense in the tabernacle. When Nadab and Abihu, however, sons of Aaron, were offering incense God struck them dead because they offered it with "strange fire." The Bible says they obtained their fire in a way different from the way God had commanded. He commanded one way and they used another (Leviticus 10:1-2).
- B. God specified that only those of the priestly line could offer sacrifices to Him, but when Samuel, a priest, was late, Saul, a king, offered the sacrifice. God was very specific to tell him that the kingdom would be removed from him because he had departed from the way God said to worship (1 Samuel 13:13).
- C. God specified a way to move the ark of the covenant--using poles on the shoulders of priests. When David was moving the ark, however, he thought it would be more convenient to place it in an ox cart. Uzzah was riding in the cart and reached out to steady the ark. When he touched it he died (2 Samuel 6:3). David was angry about this but later said he "did not seek him according to the ordinance" (1 Chronicles 15:13).
- D. God's expectation that we worship as He has commanded is no less in the New Testament. Jesus quotes Isaiah, "In vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the teachings of men" (Matthew 15:9). If our teachings about worship or other subjects is not what God has specified, our worship will be vain. In 1 Corinthians 4:6 Paul emphasizes that we are not to "go beyond the

things that are written." Paul's experience with the Corinthians is particularly appropriate here. When they changed the practice about how to take the Lord's Supper from what Paul had prescribed, he reminded them that what he gave them he had received from the Lord. He added that those who did not follow this instruction would be "eating and drinking damnation to themselves" (1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

- E. The worst sins imaginable have been committed in the name of worship: drunkenness, fornication, murder of innocent women and children. When people are left to their own, they devise ways to worship a god that are sinful. So God specifies how He wants to be worshipped and we are to worship exactly as He has instructed.

So not only must we worship as God has commanded but we must refrain from doing as worship what He has not commanded.

## **2 INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP IS NOT COMMANDED.**

- A. Singing is commanded for Christian worship.
- B. While all of these verses mention singing, none of them mentions the use of instruments in Christian worship, nor does any other verse in the New Testament. Instruments were available, but their use was not commanded for Christian worship.
- C. Some Old Testament verses speak of using instruments in Jewish worship, 2 Samuel 6:15, Psalm 150:3-5, and 2 Chronicles 29:25, for example. But these verses are speaking of the worship that had animal sacrifices, burning of incense, and sprinkling of blood on the altar. To use such verses as authorization of instruments in Christian worship is as inappropriate as to use the verses that authorize the other Jewish practices.
- D. So far, then, we have seen that God is very clear that we are to worship Him only as He commands and that God does not command us to use instruments in Christian worship.

## **3 THE CHURCH, WHEN UNDER APOSTOLIC DIRECTION, DID NOT USE INSTRUMENTS IN WORSHIP.**

- A. The early church, when under the leadership of the apostles, did not use instruments in their worship. This is clear from several points of evidence. First, there is no mention of instruments in Christian worship when Christian worship is described in the New Testament. Secondly, the voice of church history and music history is very clear on this point: early church music was vocal only. The Jews and the pagans used instruments in worship and the culture was filled with instruments of many kinds. Yet, when these people became

Christians, they never used them in their worship to God. The word "a cappella," which we use today to designate unaccompanied singing, is a Latin word that means "according to the chapel or church." Thus, the "church way" to sing is unaccompanied. Third, there are strong denunciations of the use of instruments among the church fathers, but always directed toward their use in pagan settings. Never did they speak against their use in the church for such was, to them, unthinkable. (See Milo Hadwin, pp. 55ff.) Fourth, it was more than a thousand years after the church began when the first use of instruments began to creep in Christian worship.

- B. Several conclusions may be drawn.
- 1 That early church music was purely vocal.
  - 2 That the vocal nature of early church music was intentional because it was so counter-cultural.
  - 3 That unaccompanied singing was the church music approved by inspired apostles. No such authority, however, approves instruments for worship.
  - 4 That those who seek to follow the teaching and practice of the church New Testament times will sing without accompaniment.
- C. The practice of the apostolic church, then, corresponds precisely to the first two points of this lesson: (1) Christians must worship only as commanded and (2) instrumental music in Christian worship is not commanded.

**4 INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC CANNOT BE CONSIDERED AS MERELY AN AID IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP.**

Some would suggest that instruments may be used in Christian worship because they are not worship, in and of themselves, but are only an aid to the worship in singing. Since we may use a songbook as an aid, then we can use an instrument as an aid.

- A. In the worship of the Jews, instruments of music were played as a specific means of worship. Psalm 150:3, for example, says "Praise him with trumpet sound." Under the Old Testament system, then, instruments were an act of worship just as were animal sacrifices and incense. Instruments are capable, then, of being a means of expressing one's worship to God just as might be offering incense or a burnt offering. To take this "stand alone" means of worship, used in the Old Testament, and to bring it into New Testament worship calling it only an aid to singing, is not reasonable. A song book can be

an aid because it can never be a means of expressing ones thoughts and feelings to God. The same is true of a public address system or air conditioning. These are aids that are not capable of being a means of worship in their own right. Not so with instruments.

- B. Secondly, we should not consider instruments as just an aid because that is not how they are typically used. Often in the services of those who use them they are played when no one is singing and frequently complete musical numbers are played by instrumental combos or orchestras as part of a worship service. Such could certainly not be considered as an aid and such use is really crossing the line into substituting audience "entertainment" for audience "participation," which is contrary to the spirit of New Testament worship.
- C. Thirdly, we should not consider instruments as merely an aid because the command to sing excludes the use of other types of music in our worship.

It is important to note at this point something important about commandments. Every commandment has built within it an innate level of specificity. The very nature of the wording of the command means that it includes some things and excludes others. Things equal to or greater than the commanded action are excluded while lesser things are included. Thus, a prescription does not allow a change in the medicine specified but allows choice in the size, shape, and type of bottle to put it in. A blueprint excludes anything not specified but allows some flexibility in who will build and, to some extent, the order in which things will be done. A wife who asks her husband to go to the grocery store will likely say, "Get two, 2-litre bottles of de-caffeinated, diet Coke, and don't pay more than \$1.25 each. Such a statement naturally excludes Dr. Pepper or Pepsi, caffeine, 3-litre bottles, and one that costs \$1.30. Within the allowance, however, would be the particular store he uses, how he gets there, and whether he uses money or a credit card. In every command, then, there are understood inclusions and exclusions. Silence prohibits what would be the same as or greater than the commanded element while silence allows what would be less than the commanded element.

God's commands are the same. They both include and exclude. The command to use fruit of the vine and unleavened bread in the communion excludes other foods but leaves open the method of distribution to the people. The command "go" allows any method of transportation but the command to teach what has been revealed when we go, excludes teaching anything but what has been revealed.

In the same way, the command to sing both includes and excludes. It excludes the use of other types of music (instrumental) but allows us to sing in unison or parts, various types of songs, using a book or a projector.

- D. We should not, then, justify instruments as just an aid to worship. They have been and are often today used as a means of worship. In addition, they do not usually aid singing for the singing is typically better where people sing without them.

**5 INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC HAS BEEN BOTH A CAUSE OF DIVISION AND DEPARTURE WHEN IT HAS BEEN USED.**

- A. As mentioned above, instruments were never used in the apostolic church and this prohibition continued for over a thousand years. Even as late as 1250, Thomas Aquinas, the famous Catholic theologian, opposed their use, expressing strong opposition. Not until about 1400 A.D. did their use become widespread.
- B. Leaders of the Protestant Reformation also opposed their use. John Calvin opposed it and so did John Wesley and Adam Clarke. Charles Spurgeon, famous Baptist preacher, would not permit them in his service in London. The Greek Orthodox Church did not permit instruments at all until the late twentieth century.
- C. The use of instruments, then, has been widely opposed and often has been a point of division among professing Christians. It was, in particular, a point of division between what is now known as churches of Christ and Christian churches. Those who sought to restore New Testament Christianity in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus, divided, in part, over this issue.
- D. A study of this split reveals not only that the use of instruments has been divisive but that those who justify it, saying "it is not condemned in scripture" have, because of that argument, made other changes based on that same philosophy. A position of accepting the instrument, then, has become the basis for accepting other differences in the practice and teaching of the apostolic church. Thus, when one opens the door for the instrument by adopting the philosophy that "whatever is not specifically condemned is acceptable," he/she is laying a foundation which will eventually lead to accepting many other unscriptural practices because they are "not specifically prohibited."

This article is provided by Dr. Stafford North and is from his book HOW TO EXPLAIN SIXTEEN BASIC CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES, Lesson 14.

Note: Instrumental music was added into the church in A.D. 667, by Pope Vitalian (the organ)

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- Jimmy Jividen, Worship in Song. Ft. Worth: Star Bible Publications, 1987.
- Milo Richard Hadwin, "What Kind of Music Does God Want," Directions for the Road Ahead (Jim Sheerer and Charles L. Williams (eds.)). Chickasha, Oklahoma: Yeomen Press, 1998, pp. 54-67.