

## Music in the Church

Psalm 33:1-3

Studies in the Psalms #34

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I want to do something a little different this morning. Obviously there are 150 Psalms. Obviously there are so many verses that stick out. Obviously there are so many themes we could pursue that it I could spend my entire life's ministry in the Psalms. Because of this I've opted to go through the Psalms one at a time unless something sticks out. We spend two sermons on Psalm 22—that famous Psalm of our Lord death and resurrection. Besides that it's been one per Sunday. As we come to Psalm 33 on this Sunday that celebrates the Protestant Reformation, the first three verses give us an opportunity to pause and reflect on music in the church.

I joked with some of you this week that while I was writing this sermon I was also writing my obituary because music is the most divisive issue in American church life. You know that, right? Believe me when I say that what so many of us are used to from previous churches or what we know of other churches out there is idiosyncratic in the history of the holy catholic universal church. The American church has been conformed to the spirit of the American culture in terms of entertainment. So I know what I say is no

doubt going to offend someone. I ask your forgiveness ahead of time as I do not want to be offensive and I do not want to vex your conscience. I just want to be faithful to the Word and sensitive to applying it to our life together so that we bring glory to our Triune God of grace. Amen?

Psalm 33:1–3 gives us this opportunity to assess what we see out there, what we are doing in here, and most importantly, what Scripture teaches about music in public worship. You see, while we've seen in Psalms 4, 5, and 6 instruments mentioned in the titles of these Psalms, Psalm 33 is the first Psalm that mentions instruments in the text of the Psalm itself. It sticks out, so let's examine why.

## **The Reasons for Rejecting Instruments**

Let me add a point at the top of your sermon notes page to add some perspective: *reasons for rejecting instruments*. Some of us have family in various Orthodox churches and some of us have friends—and I have colleagues—in Presbyterian churches where they sing *a cappella*, without any instruments.

One reason that many ancient church fathers gave against the use of instruments was that they are worldly and lead to emotion that interferes with meditation on heavenly things. Of course, they had to admit that even

the voice is an instrument! So no one actually is against *all* instruments unless they are against all singing because the voice is an instrument. I believe this has more to do with Platonic philosophy than with Scripture. Even our own John Calvin said similar things even quoting Plato:

...there is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men...Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us and in no way pernicious...the melody...pierces the heart much more strongly [than the words], and enters into it; in a like manner as through a funnel, the wine is poured into the vessel; so also the venom and the corruption is distilled to the depths of the heart by the melody.<sup>1</sup>

The main argument, though, that our Reformed forefathers and our current brothers and sisters in the Lord give is that instruments were a part of the ceremonial shadows of the temple's sacrificial system.<sup>2</sup> And since Christ has come as the substance of the temple, its priesthood, and their sacrifices, all this has been fulfilled and has ceased. One text they turn to is 2 Chronicles 29 when Hezekiah restored temple worship. The text says that instruments were played only when the sacrifices were being offered; and when the sacrifices were completed, the music stopped (vv. 25–28).

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<sup>1</sup> *Preface to the Psalter.*

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Calvin on Psalms 33:2, 71:22, 81:3, and 92:1. *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* John L. Girardeau (Richmond, VA: Whittet and Shepperson, 1888).

Let me say in response, briefly, that 2 Chronicles 29 also says that while the sacrifices were offered that there was singing and that it stopped when the sacrifices ended. And we know elsewhere that prayer was offered with sacrifices. So if instrumentation is abolished because Jesus is the final sacrifice, then singing and praying should be abolished too!<sup>3</sup> Even more there is nothing about the tabernacle or temple or sacrifices in our Psalm. In fact, this is a call to sing and do so with music because the Lord is the Creator of all things as verses 4 and following say.

### **Theses on Music**

But it's not enough just to respond negatively to another's position. I think this political season has reminded us of that. It's not enough to say when asked why you are qualified to serve in office that the other person is horrible. You have to have your own positive case. So let me offer five short *theses on music*.

**First, we were created to sing and make music.** As our psalm says, **praise *befits* the upright** (v. 1). This means it is fitting for us to praise the

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<sup>3</sup> Time doesn't permit an investigation into the differences between David's tent on Mount Zion, the tabernacle at Gibeon, and later the tabernacle as it was transformed into the temple on Mount Moriah (2 Chron. 3:1). David appointed some of the Levites at the Gibeon tabernacle to sacrifice and to give thanks with instruments (1 Chron. 16:41-42). He also appointed special priests at Zion to praise and play (1 Chron. 16:4-6). So when the prophets looked for the latter days, they spoke of the restoration of Mount Zion, where David's tent was, not the resoration of Gibeon or Moriah.

Lord with voices and music because we were made to do this. Martin Luther said it well:

I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music, which is a precious, worthy, and costly treasure given to mankind by God.

...next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits...

A person who...does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs.<sup>4</sup>

*Second*, since we were created to sing **instruments are a part of God's common grace gifts to humanity that he sanctifies for holy use.**

We see them first mentioned in Genesis 4:21 as a cultural achievement of the ungodly line of Cain as Jubal is called “the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe.” But we see in our Psalm the Lord sanctifying their use.

*Third*, as those created to sing and make music **instruments harmonize with our voices to give God praise.** Note the parallel lines in this Psalm: ***Shout for joy in the LORD, O you righteous! Praise befits the upright*** (v. 1). This is paralleled with: ***Give thanks to the LORD with the***

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<sup>4</sup> “Foreword” to Georg Rhau, *Symphoniae iucundae*.

**lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings!** (v. 2) And then in verse 3 they both come together: **Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.** Luther again said,

...we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance, where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress and embrace.

Some say if the Psalm commands the **lyre** and **harp** (v. 2) then you can only use *these* instruments. But these were the instruments available at that time in that culture.

**Fourth, if the Psalmist could sing along with instruments in anticipation of the Lord's coming, how much more we since the Lord has come in Jesus Christ!** If the Psalmist could say **shout for joy** (v. 1), then how much more so that this joy was incarnate in Jesus? If the Psalmist could say **give thanks...make melody** (v. 2), then how much more so that Jesus, whom Paul calls God's "inexpressible gift" (2 Cor. 9:15), has come? If the Psalmist could say **sing to him...play skillfully...with loud shouts** (v. 3), how much more so now that he who is the giver of music and the object of our music has come to us in Christ?

*Fifth, earthly worship is a participation in heavenly worship, where instruments are used.* We read in Revelation 5:8 that the elders in heaven each held harps and golden bowls of incense that were the prayers of the saints as they sang to the Lamb. We read in Revelation 15:2 that those who conquered the beast and entered heaven had harps as they sang the song of the Lamb. Our worship participates in their worship as we are united to the same Lamb of God who has taken away our sins!

### **The Matter of Wisdom**

Music with the voice and with instruments is God's own gift to us that we might show gratitude to him. "But American cultural music so influences churches that it's indistinguishable." Yes, and this leads to a final concluding point: *the matter of wisdom*. I would argue from all this that we can't say pianos are okay in worship but drums aren't. In Africa, drums are what they have! What I would say is given where we're at in our culture and given what certain instruments communicate, what instruments we use is a matter of godly wisdom. We need wisdom so that our worship is in reverence and joy. We need wisdom so that our focus is on hearing the Lord's voice in his Word and responding in praise. And music, whether *a cappella* singing or accompanied song can be a hindrance or a help.