

15 Reasons for not using Instrumental Music in Public Worship

“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:19)

Recently I preached a sermon on “Twenty Reasons for singing only Psalms in Public Worship”. It was based on the words of Paul to the Colossians: “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” (Col.3:16). We noted that the term “spiritual” almost always in Scripture means produced by the Holy Spirit. Twenty-five times it is used for the Holy Spirit. There is only one exception in the New Testament, “spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph.6:12) where it refers to the evil spirit, Satan. The term in the Bible never means simply “religious”. So “spiritual songs” are not merely religious songs, but songs inspired by the Spirit and the only such songs we have today are to be found in the Bible. We know what Psalms are, the Book of Psalms. The term hymn is used in the title of six of the Psalms in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was in current use in the days of Paul. The name hymn is also used of the song sang at the passover (Mark 14:26) which everyone accepts as Psalm 118, the Hallel. The terms used here too are simply a reference to the book of Psalms, “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”.

The subject I would like to deal with today is musical instruments in worship. Music has always had a place in human society since the days on Jubal a descendant of Cain who invented them (Genesis 4:21). After the Israelite victory over the Egyptians at the Red Sea, Moses’ sister Miriam and other ladies played timbrels and danced. David was a skilful harp player and used his musical ability to bring calmness to Saul when he was tormented by an evil spirit. Instrumental music has a huge place in the worship of many churches today. Indeed often the music is more important than the preaching. You may get an hour of music and singing and perhaps 15 minutes of a superficial sermon. Paul makes plain in 1 Corinthians 14 that there is nothing more important than instruction and edification.

While instrumental music has a large and important place in our lives and society I would like to give fifteen reasons why it should have no place in the public worship on God.

1. There was no Instrumental Music in the churches began by the Apostles.

This is fundamental. There was no instrumental music in the New Testament Churches. Christ’s commission to His apostles was, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matt.28:18-20). The apostles were authorised by Christ and laid the foundation and set the pattern that churches from that time were to follow till Christ returned. Christ builds His church through them. If Christ wanted instrumental music in His church He would have instructed them to that effect. There is no mention of instrumental music in worship in the New Testament. Some might say that an argument from silence is weak but we also have the fact that the early church fathers unanimously spoke against introducing instruments into the public worship. They would not have been unanimous in this matter if the earliest churches had instruments. Others might argue that the apostles were missionaries and they could not carry instruments round with them. But there was a settled situation in places like Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus and Corinth. Plenty instruments were available in these cities yet there is no evidence of them being used in public worship.

2. There was no Instrumental Music in the churches till 1000 years after the founding of the church

Thomas Aquinas, the most famous and respected theologian of the Middle Ages wrote in 1250, "Our church does not use musical instruments as that would be judaising". Many things had come in: altars, the sacrifice of the mass, incense, candles, the priestly office and vestments which all could be seen as judaising the church. Organs began to be introduced on ceremonial occasions in the tenth century and by the 1400s were firmly established. So these things only came into the Church during what is called the Dark Ages. Interestingly, the Eastern Orthodox Church does not use instrumental music to the present day.

3. There are no directions in the New Testament regarding musical instruments in worship

There are many directions concerning worship in the New Testament but not one hint about the use of instrumental music. In most modern churches instrumental music dominates the worship. How could the Apostles not give instructions regarding instrumental music if it was employed in the churches they planted?

4. Many gifts of the Spirit are mentioned in the New Testament but there is no reference to that of playing instruments

We are told about apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers (Eph.4:11) but no mention is made of musicians or worship directors. We read of the "word of wisdom" and the "word of knowledge", faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues, helps, governments etc (1 Cor.12), but no reference to musical gifts for playing instruments.

5. The Regulative Principle of Worship

This principle is drawn from the second commandment and states that we should have nothing in our worship but what is commanded by God. The Roman Catholic Church believes that it is up to the Church and the Pope to decide what should be in the worship. The Lutherans and Anglicans who could be viewed as half-reformed believe that anything is acceptable which is not explicitly forbidden. Those who follow the Reformed faith believe in the Regulative Principle of worship which states that nothing should be in the worship but what God commands in Scripture.

6. Instrumental music was only used in temple worship

Talking about the Regulative Principle and what is commanded some might say there are many commands in the Psalms to use instruments. For example, we have commands such as, "Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals" (Psalm 150:3-5). In Psalm 92 there is an instruction, "To shew forth thy lovingkindness in the morning, and thy faithfulness every night, upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the psaltery; upon the harp with a solemn sound" Psalm 92:2-3). However, what we must remember is that this playing of instruments only took place in temple worship and, furthermore, that the instruments were played only by the Levites, the priestly tribe. In the commands in the Psalms we are told to come with sacrifices and incense. We recognise that this is the ceremonial law and obviously does not apply to today. But, actually, all that was involved in the temple passed away with the death of Christ when the vail of the temple was rent in two. The temple itself survived a few more years till the Romans destroyed it. It was no longer needed or relevant. Temple worship was symbolical and typical. The woman of Samaria asked Jesus whether they should worship in the Samaritan temple on Mt Gerizim or in the Jerusalem temple. Jesus replied, "Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him" (John 4:21-23). The divine mandate for musical instruments in worship passed away with the death of Christ and the destroying of the temple. Jesus said to the Jews, "Destroy this

temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). The new spiritual temple has no sacrifices, nor Levites nor instrumental music.

7. Musical instruments were never part of the regular worship of God

For most Jews the temple was far away. They went there only on feast days which were held three times in the year. The regular Sabbath worship was carried on in the synagogues in the towns and villages. They gathered there each week and prayers were offered, the Scriptures were read, the Word was preached and Psalms were sung unaccompanied. This way the day was kept holy to the Lord. No musical instruments were played.

8. New Testament Churches grew out of the Synagogues

Wherever Paul and the other early missionaries went they first entered the synagogue and preached there and only when cast out of the synagogues did they meet independently. They continued the same pattern of worship as was observed in the synagogue. Prayers were offered, the Psalms were sung unaccompanied, and the Word was read and the gospel preached. To the present day in Orthodox Jewish synagogues no musical instruments are used.

9. We are commanded to make melody in our hearts

Christians today are of course required to worship God with music but it is to be with singing and the music of their hearts. Paul commanded the Christians in Ephesus to be "singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord" (Eph.5:19). They were literally to pull the harp strings of their hearts. They were to sing Psalms with their mouths and the only accompaniment they were to have was the joyful music of their hearts.

10. The Reformers rejected musical instruments

With the coming of the Reformation the judaizing traditions and accretions of Rome were rejected. There was no place for the sacrifice of the mass, for incense, candles, vestments etc. Similarly musical instruments were got rid of. Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, was an accomplished musician but there was no way that he would countenance allowing musical instruments to remain in the churches. Similarly Calvin, Beza and Knox rejected organs. The Puritans similarly would not allow instrumental music in the public worship. The conservative Dutch churches today are very fond of their organs, but their early Dutch Reformers were also against musical instruments. The famous theologian Voetius (1589-1676) wrote against organ music in church. Even the great nineteenth century Baptist preacher C H Spurgeon rejected the organ as a "kist o whistles".

11. The Westminster Directory of Public Worship has no place for Instrumental Music

The Standards of the Presbyterian Churches were drawn up by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in the seventeenth century. Neither the Westminster Confession of Faith nor the Directory of Public Worship has any place for instrumental music, but rather lays down that only unaccompanied Psalms be sung in public worship.

12. Musical Instruments only came into the Presbyterian Churches with Arminianism and Liberalism

In the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland since the time of the Reformation worship was with unaccompanied psalm-singing. Theological weakening took place in the 1860s with the importing of liberal theology from Germany, which denied the authority and inspiration of the Bible. In the 1870s Moody and Sankey came from America to conduct their Arminian campaigns and weakened the attachment of the churches to the Reformed faith. They promoted hymns and musical instruments in worship. Organs came into the Church of Scotland in the 1870s and into the Free Church in the 1880s.

13. The Warning of Nadab and Abihu

Nadab and Abihu stand as stark warnings to those who introduce into worship that which God has not commanded: "And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the Lord, and devoured them, and they died

before the Lord" (Levit.10:1-2). Aaron was not allowed to mourn for his sons. What they had done was seen by God as a serious affront to Him. They had offered strange fire to the Lord which He had not ordained and so had dishonoured God.

14. Musicians too often parade their gifts to please man

People plead that music attracts the young, but the purpose of worship is not to attract man but to glorify God. Contemporary worship is often more like a nightclub than a church. Musicians display their gifts and their performances glorify man. Musical directors lead the service with a short slot for a preacher. For Paul instruction and edification was vital for Paul. He stated, "I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue" (1 Cor.14:19). Contemporary music takes the emphasis away from edification.

15 Worship is to be simple and spiritual

Jesus asserted, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). In the temple all was ornate and physically attractive, gold, silver, precious stones, carved wood and embroidery. There was drama. Priests in vestments offering sacrifices and burning incense. These were types pointing forward to Christ. The musical instruments were types of Christian joy. But now the worship must be simple and spiritual. Men and woman are called to meet with God in reverence and awe. Man disappears as God is glorified. Even the preaching is to be without any outward show. Paul states: "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor.2:1-4). God loves the simple pure worship of the heart, "let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name" (Heb.13:15).

Conclusion

Let us get back to the kind of worship which the Apostles instituted in the churches of the New Testament. They laid the foundation and let us build upon it. Let our worship be pure, simple and spiritual. Let us follow the God-ordained pattern. It is a sin to introduce musical instruments without divine warrant. Like the early church and the church of the Reformers and Puritans let us glorify God by singing Psalms and making melody in our hearts to Him.