

A Catechism on Instrumental Music In the Church

This will be a provocative paper, but I trust entirely Biblical and historical.¹ Church leaders must determine whether they wish to be apostolic in their practice, or follow the traditions of men and the spirit of the age. This cannot be ignored by suggesting that no church is ever perfect. Surely we are all seeking to obey the Lord, the builder of the church, and establish perfect, i.e. Biblical, assemblies? Dare we excuse personal sin by saying that we can never be perfect? God doesn't think so.² Neither should we deliberately satisfy ourselves with less than perfect churches.

The impact of the world in the church is a travesty, and the beginning of undoing the work of grace. The damage caused by emotionalism is equally dangerous. Both are accelerated by over emphasising instrumental music (and I speak as a musician). It is much better to be obedient and obey the apostolic practice of a cappella singing.

Is instrumental music ever mentioned in the New Testament?

No, there is no mention of any kind. There are two references to harps (*kithara*) in Rev 14:2 and 15:2 but these are symbolic figures, in a highly symbolic book, for the praise of the saints using the image of the national instrument of Israel. In a similar way, golden bowls are stated to represent the prayers of the saints, there are no physical bowls or harps in heaven.

Did Jesus ever sing praise to God accompanied by musical instruments?

No. Jesus attended the synagogue which had no instrumental music.

Did Jesus ever command us to use musical instruments in worship?

No.

Do the apostles ever instruct us in the use of instrumental music?

Never. There is no teaching on this matter, but much about sung praise.

Do the apostles ever apply the Old Testament temple references to instrumental music to encourage similar forms of worship in the church?

No. The forms of Old Testament temple services are consistently applied spiritually, just as the temple offerings of bulls and goats are applied to Christ's redemption. In fact, apostolic teaching sharply focuses attention on a disjunction between what occurred under the Old Covenant to what prevails under the New Covenant administration. The format of the old is said to be annulled, cancelled, obsolete. This format includes musical instruments. [Heb 7:19, 8:13, 9:8-10; 2 Cor 5:17]

¹ Much of the material here is covered in greater depth in my book *Worship - Getting it Biblical*.

² Matt 5:48, Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect. Jn 17:23, That they may be made perfect. Rm 12:2, And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Col 1:28, Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. Col 4:12, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

Are there any references in the New Testament to the apostles using musical instruments in the historical narrative of Acts?

None whatsoever.

Are there any examples of New Testament churches ever using instrumental music?

No; not at all.

Did the early church use musical instruments in worship after the death of the apostles?

No it did not.

When did musical instruments start to appear in church services?

There are records which imply that some churches began to copy pagan services and introduced musical instruments in the third century AD. This appearance was severely criticised by church fathers such as Chrysostom who regarded it as a stimulation of fleshly emotions that was undesirable.

What did the church Fathers say about instrumental music?

- Augustine (354-430): *Musical instruments were not used [since] the pipe, tabret, and harp here associate so intimately with the sensual heathen cults as well as with the wild revelries and shameless performances of the degenerate theatre and circus.* [Augustine 354 A.D., describing the singing at Alexandria under Athanasius.]
- Chrysostom (344-407): *David ... had a lyre with lifeless strings, the church has a lyre with living strings. Our tongues are the strings of the lyre ... much more in accordance with piety. Here there is no need for the cithara, or for stretched strings, or for the plectrum, ... or for any instrument.* [Chrysostom, 347-407, *Exposition of Psalms* 41, (381-398 A.D.)] *God hates the worship paid with kettledrums, with lyres, with harps, and other instruments?* [John Chrysostom: *Adversus Judaeos*, Homily I, VII:2]
- Clement of Alexandria (155-220) *Musical instruments must be excluded from our wingless feasts, ... for the tongue is a harp of the Lord ... the mouth as a lute moved by the Spirit as the lute is by the plectrum; ... we make use of one instrument alone: only the Word of peace by whom we a homage to God, no longer with ancient harp or trumpet or drum or flute which those trained for war employ.* [Clement, *The instructor, Fathers of the church*, p. 130]
- Eusebius (265-339): *It was not inappropriate to send up hymns to God with the psalterion and cithara and to do this on Sabbath days... We render our hymn with a living psalterion and a living cithara with spiritual songs. The unison voices of Christians would be more acceptable to God than any musical instrument.* [Commentary on *Psalms* 91:2-3]
- Origen (185-254): *The organ is the church of God composed of contemplative and active souls. The pleasant sounding cymbal is the active soul captured by the desire for Christ.* [Commentaries on the *Psalms*]

When did the introduction of musical instruments become more widely practised?

This is debated by church historians and records are patchy. Some say that musical instruments (essentially the organ alone) were widespread by the 700s, while others say that they was not a general practice until the late 13th century. In about 1250 AD Thomas Aquinas stated that, *'the church does not use musical instruments to praise God ... pipes are not to be used for teaching, nor any artificial instruments, as the harp, or the like'*.³

³ Thomas Aquinas in Bingham's *Antiquities*, Vol. 3, page 137.

Instrumental music (organ) was initially introduced into Roman services by Pope Vitalian in 671 AD (then removed). What is certain is that there was virtually no use of musical instruments in church services for 250 years, and even then in very few places. There was no widespread practice of using instruments for over 700 years, and even then in only the Roman Catholic church, but even this was not ratified or widespread until after 1250 AD.

What does scripture emphasise?

It emphasises the importance of vocal contributions in worship. The church is called together to offer up spiritual sacrifices (1 Pt 2:5) and these are specifically stated to be the fruit of the lips giving thanks (Heb 13:15).

How do Christians worship God?

Worship is obeisance to the king, the yielded obedience and sacrificial presentation of one's life to God's service; an inner consecration and submission. It is something done throughout one's days and has nothing primarily to do with music or even singing at all. Jacob worshipped leaning on his staff at home (Heb 11:21). We can (and should) worship as part of our normal family life.

Worship is actually stated to be logical, the very opposite of passivity and being 'lost in God'. The 'reasonable service' of Rm 12:1 means 'rational worship'. It is intelligent service to God by the sacrifice of our lives.

Christian worship is thus manifested in a number of practical ways. It is spiritual service expressed by the presentation of our bodies in obedience to God; the outworking of a life submitted to God in reverence and godly service.

How do Christians praise God?

Praise is the outward testimony of our lives in honour of God, spiritual sacrifices, (Eph 1:12; Phil 1:11) and this can be by doing good works (such as financial giving, Heb 13:16; Phil 4:18), speaking praise or by singing (Heb 13:15). Sung praise to God is the expression of the heart of a believer in a new song to God. Praise needs no music but it does require a voice.

Isn't instrumental music the expression of praise and worship to God?

No. Firstly there is no divine command to use instruments, thus we have no right to introduce them. Secondly, instruments are the expression of the flesh, of human wisdom and skill, of human emotion. The cleverness of musical skill is not acceptable to God under the New Covenant. It is an important NT principle that God is not worshipped by the actions of men's hands (Acts 17:25). Neither is the emotional stirring caused by instrumental music beneficial to the church.

What about the widespread use of musical instruments in the Old Testament?

In the Old covenant some men were gifted by the Spirit to perform artistic works and craftsmanship in order to build items used in worship. This is no longer the case since worship is now done in spirit and truth (Jn 4:24). There is no need for any artistry – worship is spiritual. Artistry includes music.

Music was used in the temple services at the morning and evening offerings, but music was never used in weekly synagogue worship. This was where the main life of the worshipper was conducted, even before the exile to Babylon (Ps 74:8) and was where Levites were despatched to hold teaching services (Num 35:1-7; Jos 21). Music also had no place in the

Tabernacle in the wilderness, God's original pattern for public worship.⁴ After God allowed Israel to have a king like the nations, he allowed them to have a temple like the nations, but his original purpose was different. Tribes distant from Jerusalem only came to the temple for the three great feasts, the normal life of the worshipper was in the local synagogue. Thus, temple worship with its music was exceptional, not the norm for most worshippers.

Even in the temple, music was used with restraint. Of the nine types of Jewish instruments, only four were used in the temple: the 12 stringed harp or lyre, harp, cymbals and trumpet and these could only be played by Levites or priests at certain prescribed times to draw attention to the blood sacrifice. Sung worship continued after this but instrumental music stopped.

What about the instruments mentioned in the Psalms?

Open-air civic services (e.g. to celebrate victory in war or national thanksgiving) used other instruments as well, such as tambourines or flutes. Some Psalms (such as 150) mention these additional instruments for use outside the temple in national events. Psalm 150 is not an apologetic for bands in the church today; indeed, it does not even refer to instruments used in the temple, but to national events outside. These instruments would not be used in temple services.

Are the musical instruments used in the temple not to be used in the church at all?

No. In the old covenant, synagogue worship was the universal, teaching based focus for a believer's religious life and this became the basic model for local churches. Temple worship was unusual, established in Jerusalem only, ritualistic and thus full of symbolic types that foreshadowed New Covenant truth. When Christ established the New Covenant, the types of Old Covenant symbolism were cancelled. Thus instrumental music was eradicated along with mediatorial priests, priestly garments, sacrifices of animals, external rituals and religious buildings.

What do the OT instruments symbolise?

Music bears the same relation to praise as incense does to prayer, the one accompanied the other in temple services (1 Chron 23:5 with 13). Incense pictured the rising up of prayers to God (Ps 141:2; Lk 1:10; Rev 5:8, 8:3,4), while music spoke of the sounding forth of God's testimony. Saints under the Old Covenant needed the encouragement of the symbols, as they did not have the fulness of the Spirit or the full benefits of the cross (1 Pt 1:10). We no longer need these external figures as we have the Spirit indwelling us. Instrumental music and incense were superseded by the sacrifice of Christ.

Why are instruments not fitting in New Covenant worship?

Musical instruments have no life of their own (1 Cor 14:7) and thus have no place in being offered to God in worship. Worship is done in Spirit and truth, in life; it's something from the heart, the offering of spiritual sacrifice. The use of instruments is spiritually dead. We do not worship through music; we worship by the Spirit. If we have the Spirit, we need no music.

What does instrumental music represent?

Music is also associated with merry-making, partying, revelry, carousing (Isa 24:8). It is not appropriate to bring the components of human partying into the worship of God's people. The things that stimulate the flesh to party should not be used to inspire the heart

⁴ Apart from the silver trumpets (shofar) to proclaim new year, Sabbath days etc.

to spiritual worship. The music of partying is also connected to harlotry (Isa 23:16) and is thus entirely inappropriate to church life.

Intense music has always been a feature of pagan idolatrous worship (Dan 3:15) and is singled out as being an aspect of Babylon fit for judgment (Rev 18:22). Music has not merely been a feature of demonic religious faith, but has always been an integral and vital element in generating a false sense of spirituality; indeed, scripture implies that Satan was skilled in music (Ezek 28:13).

Music also engenders false mysticism and has been used by the occult and mystics for centuries. It is used to enhance a felt communion with the spirit world through establishing a loss of self, intellectual passivity or an altered state of consciousness. In this vulnerable state where self-control is neutered, demonic forces can invade a willing compliant seeker and impose their will. To help the deception they will often impart some kind of 'religious' experience: a vision, a revelation, a feeling of ecstasy or a satisfied settled state. The engendering of passivity is the basis of occultism and is thus the foundation of all mystical religions, whether they are modern New Age ideas or ancient Gnosticism and Hinduism. Music is almost always a vital component part in this process, both in stimulating frenzy and inculcating passivity because music is a very powerful tool to touch the heart of man directly.

Doesn't music help us to feel worshipful?

Worship does not consist in singing songs, it is spiritual service. Worship is also not enhanced by singing songs to emotional instrumental performances – indeed stirring music may detract from true worship. Music stimulates the flesh, but worship is in spirit and truth.

What about drums?

Drums are never mentioned as being used for God's worship in scripture. However, drums have always been a strong focus of pagan worship because they are so powerful in directing emotions. This is why armies use drums to generate resolve in a fighting force. Drums quickly stimulate the flesh in the direction set by the leader of a unit. In pagan worship they engender passivity and abandon through dance.

But doesn't the use of the Greek word *psallo* ('making melody') suggest playing (plucking) a stringed instrument?

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

Firstly, it would be a foolish person who would overturn apostolic silence on a subject on the basis of an obscure Greek word. There is no clear instruction to use instruments in worship in the New Testament. Secondly, by Paul's time the Greek word had come to mean only unaccompanied singing. There was no connotation of plucking a musical instrument. It retains this meaning today. Thirdly, even in ancient texts, the word's meaning was determined by the context, just as one can *ride* a horse, a car, a plane, a train or a boat. *Psallo* did not always imply an instrument, but could mean plucking hair or a bowstring. If Paul only meant 'to pluck a stringed instrument' by using *psallo*, then there is no place for using keyboards, or flutes, or trumpets. Plus, everyone has to use a harp or such like since the command is universal. No, even if the word meant 'play' instead of 'sing', Paul would be suggesting that we use the human heart, as opposed to the Old Covenant where saints used

instruments; worship is inward and spiritual, not external and physical. The use of *psallo* here and elsewhere means 'to sing'.⁵

But haven't strong church leaders always condoned the use of music?

No, quite the contrary. Until the last century, most good men have felt that music is not allowed since there is no mention of it in the New Testament. This is still the position of traditional Presbyterian churches, strict Baptists and older Brethren groups. The Reformers, for instance, did not condone the use of music, condemning organs and instrumental music as: *'ludicrous things, by which the word and worship of God are exceedingly profaned'* (Calvin). The basis of their sung worship was Biblical Psalms sung a cappella, although Luther wrote his own hymns as well. Many other good men later introduced hymns and only gradually did the use of some musical support for these become popular.

Often local rural churches had no means of accompanying the songs anyway. Not until the development of the piano could congregational singing be adequately accompanied by a cheap popular instrument, and this was not invented until 1710. Before this, only large, rich, institutional churches could afford to build pipe organs, although some institutional churches probably had foot-pedal wind organs. Smaller 'portative' organs were known as far back as the Middle Ages, although music for them has not been discovered dating before the 15th century. It is possible that some early Celtic churches used stringed instruments but there is scant evidence.

What did the Reformers say about instrumental music?

- John Calvin (1509-1564): *Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law.* [John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalm 33*]
- Theodore Beza (Calvin's successor in Geneva, 1519-1605): *If the apostle justly prohibits the use of unknown tongues in the church, much less would he have tolerated these artificial musical performances which are addressed to the ear alone.* [John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music*, p 166]
- Martin Luther (1483-1546): *The organ in the worship is the insignia of Baal... The Roman Catholics borrowed it from the Jews.* [Martin Luther, McClintock & Strong's *Encyclopedia*, Volume VI, p 762]

What did later church leaders say about instrumental music?

- CH Spurgeon (Baptist, 1834-1892), *One can make melody without strings and pipes. We do not need them. They would hinder rather than help our praise. Sing unto him. This is the sweetest and best music. No instrument like the human voice. ... What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettiness of a quartet, bellows, and pipes. We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it.* (*Treasury of David*, Commentary on Psalm 42).
- Adam Clarke (Methodist, 1762-1832), [Should musical instruments] *be used in Christian worship? No; the whole spirit, soul, and genius of the Christian religion are against this; and those who know the Church of God best, and what constitutes its genuine spiritual state, know that these things have been introduced as a substitute for the life and power of religion; and that where they prevail most, there is least of the*

⁵ See the excellent paper, *Psallo*, by Daniel H King, *Truth Magazine* XXIV: 20, pp.325-328 May 15, 1980. Also available on <http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume24/TMO24122.htm>

power of Christianity. ... to no such worship are these instruments friendly. [Clarke's *Commentary on the Bible*, Vol. II, pp. 690-691.]

- John Girardeau (Presbyterian, 19th c), *The church, although lapsing more and more into deflection from the truth and into a corrupting of apostolic practice, had not instrumental music for 1200 years (that is, it was not in general use before this time); The Calvinistic Reform Church ejected it from its service as an element of popery, even the church of England having come very nigh its extrusion from her worship. It is heresy in the sphere of worship.* (John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music*, p. 179)
- Schaff (German Reformed Church, 1819-1893) *The custom of organ accompaniment did not become general among Protestants until the eighteenth century.* [*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, (1953) Vol 10, p 257]
- John Wesley (Anglican, founder of Methodism 1703-1791), *I have no objection to instruments of music in our worship, provided they are neither seen nor heard.* [quoted in Adam Clarke's *Commentary*, Vol. 4, p685]

What is the instrument God chooses?

Singing is music that is produced from the spirit without any mechanical aid. The voice expresses what is in the heart through the use of words. Singing is thus the communication of thoughts mixed with emotional colour from the heart. Like rational speech, singing is of divine origin whereas instrumental music stems from an invention of fallen man; indeed from Jubal of the line of Cain (Gen 4:21). All three members of the Godhead sing. The Father sings over his people (Zeph 3:17); the Son sang with his disciples (Matt 26:30) and also sings with his people (Heb 2:12); the Holy Spirit sings within the hearts of the elect (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16).

The human voice is the focus of practical apostolic directions, 'each one has a psalm, a hymn a spiritual song', because the voice is the means of edification in the gathered church. Since the key reason for gathering is edification (1 Cor 14:26; 1 Thess 5:11; Rm 14:19), the voice has a prime role within the assembly, for it is by the voice that others are edified. Also, an aspect of praise is the fruit of lips giving thanks. So the voice is vital since it is the means of sharing what the Spirit gives us in spirit and truth. This means that the voice is the pre-eminent means of physical expression and nothing must detract from it. Music is a distraction from the human voice in singing. Nothing is purer than an unaccompanied song.

What about music in Charismatic services?

The Charismatic notion is that worship is a mystical ascent up a ladder of musical entertainment. The idea is that worship begins with loud, vibrant, exuberant songs repeated and strung together without pause, using intense musical activity to overwhelm the senses; followed by reflective, quiet emotional songs leading to an increasing sense of passivity and suggestibility. This is entirely unbiblical and pagan.

What about prophetic music?

The idea arises from a misunderstanding of 1 Chron 25:1-3:

Moreover David and the captains of the army separated for the service some of the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals. And the number of the skilled men performing their service was: Of the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah, and Asharelah; the sons of Asaph were under the direction of Asaph, who prophesied according to the order of the king. Of Jeduthun, the sons of Jeduthun: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiiah, Shimei, Hashabiah, and Mattithiah, six, under the direction of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with a harp to give thanks and to praise the LORD.

These singing Levites prophesied with instruments not prophesied on instruments. The act of playing a harp or cymbal was not prophetic. These men were to proclaim the glory of the Lord in singing and such an act was considered a prophetic work, an act of declaration, a proclamation or preaching of God's glory in song. 1 Chron 15:17-19 explains that they ministered as singers first and musicians second 'the singers, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan, were to sound the cymbals of bronze'. These men are designated as singers (2 Chron 5:12) musicians (1 Chron 16:5) and prophets (2 Chron 29:30; 35:15). Their function in the temple was to sing the praises of God and give thanks. This was a prophetic task which they undertook whilst playing instruments. Their prophetic function was to do with what they said, not what they played. There is no injunction for us to endeavour to raise emotional fervour in people by using music and then consider this a prophetic activity. In fact, this is exactly what occult religions do.

Should we never use any form of music then?

Ancient nations and some modern ethnic peoples, were used to communal singing. It was part and parcel of their culture. They would have been able to simply sing praises and join in with no difficulty; just as the tribes of Israel went up to Jerusalem singing as they went without music. Western cultures have lost this ability with their over-dependence upon technology and passive enjoyment of entertainment. Before television, even in the 1950's, most UK families would have owned pianos and would have been familiar with community sing-alongs. This has been lost. This means that in order to have any sensible singing at all, modern churches may need some sort of simple, basic musical accompaniment to assist and support corporate singing without intrusion. Hopefully, as a congregation learns to develop in the use of song, they could gradually be weaned off any musical support and learn the benefit and beauty of the human voice alone. Amplification is never necessary in a truly Biblical house-church.

A final word

Although stating these truths comes across to many folk as radical, extreme or unnecessarily provocative, a moment's reflection shows that the teaching given here is thoroughly Biblical, true to historical Christian experience and supported by godly theologians. Apostolic teaching does not endorse instrumental music, and the earliest churches didn't use musical instruments at all. Instruments were only used as the church imported pagan ideas into services hundreds of years after the apostles died. This happened with a raft of other unspiritual innovations.

Using music to control and generate emotions is a pagan concept and it is dangerous. It stimulates the flesh and leads the heart away from God. In its worst expressions (where there is repetition of choruses alongside loud bands) it can lead to passivity and loss of control of the mind, thus opening the person to temptation, suggestibility and manipulation. This is exactly how occult groups use music in shamanistic religions.

What individual churches do with this information is between them and God, but clearly some consideration is necessary if they wish to be Biblical and obedient. My recommendation is that churches strip back music to minimal levels at low volumes; if possible without amplification. An acoustic piano, a solo guitar or a quiet electric organ is all that is required to help the people sing. Leaders should then teach what the Bible says about music and worship with a view to weaning the congregation away from reliance

upon external forms at a later date. This would also necessitate encouraging a song leader to set the key to sing so that songs are not ruined and order is maintained.

Now all of this may sound daunting to groups that meet in large buildings, but we should remember that the New Testament church met in homes where the logistic problems of large numbers did not exist; but that is a matter for another time.

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