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Introduction

Perhaps the subject has become moot in the religious world today, but the debate still rages on whether instrumental music should be included in the worship service of God. It is a debate that has lost much of its steam because of the widespread use of instruments in worship, but a look at the history of instrumental music along with the various arguments for and against it offer some startling facts that probably most in the religious world fail to consider. This short treatise will attempt to “rediscover” in scripture and in history why the question of “Scriptural Music” in the worship ever became a debate over instrumental music.

Perhaps the best way to begin is to look at the only religious body that consistently takes a stand against instrumental music in worship:

Many religious people today [think that] the churches of Christ are a little strange, perhaps peculiar, for opposing instruments of music in worship. So far as we know from the Bible, not a single New Testament Christian ever heard the sound of an instrument in worship. (Highers – Sword, 21-22)

Using the Bible to support such an argument may be the best approach, but for many, the issue transcends (perhaps wrongly so) the Scriptures:

...here is the whole premise upon which the instrument has been moved into New Testament worship. “I like it. I want it. I move it in. It’s not wrong within itself and I got it at the music store, so I moved it in.” (Wallace, 8)

Clearly, there is a lack of interest on what God has said (or some may say has not said) on this particular subject. Such changes in what God has ordained as worship are not based in Scripture and set a sinful precedence.

In this modern era, many worship as they wish, with no regard for Scriptural authority on how should worship. Even various congregations of the churches of Christ have accepted the “I

like it, I want it, I move it in” mentality concerning the introduction of instrumental music in worship:

FIVE URBAN CHURCHES [of Christ], including the second largest in the nation have added or are adding instruments to their worship services. Are such actions isolated and inconsequential or deeply significant? What does it mean that five urban churches affiliated with churches of Christ have added instrumental worship services since the spring of 2001? Could such reflect even more important shifts in attitudes within churches of Christ toward Scripture and doctrine? Leaders in church growth and church statistics are not of one mind on the matter. (Adams, 1)

As Adam clearly shows, this mentality is not the exclusive realm denominations but has even crept into the church of Christ. Although perhaps a small percentage of the church, these urban congregations show an alarming growth and dissention among men and women who often alone fought the introduction of instruments into the scriptural music of worship. The question of scriptural music in worship is no longer focused on a cappella (without instrumental accompaniment) singing (which none consider sinful in any way) but whether the adding of instruments is sinful. Although a modern question today, such is not a modern issue. Christian history has much to say on the subject.

Part 1 – Review of Historical Thoughts on Instrumental Music in Worship

Most people in the religious world “would be shocked to learn that some of the greatest scholars of the ages, including some of their own religious leaders and founders, took exactly the same position as the churches of Christ” – that instrumental music does not belong in the scriptural music of worship service (Highers – Sword, 21). In his article *Instrumental Music Is Not Authorized*, Highers has researched and put together many quotes of such leaders concerning this issue. His original sources for the following are fully listed in his article:

James W. McKinnon, Roman Catholic Scholar – McKinnon wrote his Ph.D. dissertation in 1965 at Columbia University on the subject, *The Church Fathers*

and Musical Instruments. He points out that not only did early writers oppose the use of instruments, but also the simple fact is “they were not used in the partristic period.” Adam Clarke, Methodist – Clark was a noted Methodist minister who lived from 1762 to 1832. “I never knew them [musical instruments] productive of any good in the worship of God; and have reason to believe they were productive of much evil.” John Calvin, Founder of Presbyterianism – John Calvin (1509 – 1564) is decidedly one of the most influential theologians who ever lived. “Musical instruments in celebrating praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of other shadows of the law. Charles H. Spurgeon, Baptist Minister – Spurgeon (1834 – 1892) arguably was the greatest Baptist preacher who ever lived. “What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettinesses of a quartet, the refined niceties of a choir or the blowing off of the wind from inanimate bellows and pipes. We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it.” David Benedict, Baptist Historian – In *Fifty Years Among the Baptists*, Benedict revealed, “Staunch old Baptist in former times would as soon have tolerated the Pope of Rome in their pulpits as an organ in their galleries...” (Highers, 22-24)

Each of these great men of their particular religions and others not quoted in Higher’s article knew historically that instrumental music was an almost hated attempt to supplant the beauty and simplicity of the a cappella worship of God. These men are not members of the church of Christ and differ with it on numerous doctrinal issues; yet, their ridicule of those who would introduce instruments in worship clearly show a decided bias against such attempts to change what scriptural music should be, a cappella singing by the congregation. These denominational leaders would certainly be surprised at the rampant use of instrumental music within their religious affiliations today. Their thoughts are not the only opposition to instruments in worship that history records.

Most would agree that scriptural music was practiced by the first century church as described in the Bible; however, what does history say this “scriptural music” consisted of?

Certainly it did not include instrumental music:

Historically, no mechanical instruments of music were used in Christian worship till the seventh century, despite the fact of such instruments having been known

and used throughout the whole world at the time of the beginning of Christianity and for centuries prior to that time. (Coffman, 380)

It is thus obvious that the early Christians were familiar with its use. Justin, Tertullian and Origen all speak of singing in the early church, and Eusebius quotes Irenaeus and Meliton concerning the songs sung in praise to God, but not one of them mentions the use of instrumental music in the worship. Among later writers Ambrose, Basil and Chrysostom all admonish Christians to praise God in song. Only Basil mentions instrumental music and he condemns it as ministering to the depraved nature of man. It must be generally admitted that the early church used not instrumental music. (Mattox, 154)

These early Christian writers did not have to continually write against an issue that was not yet affecting the church systemically. Basil's condemnation of instrumental music in the congregation's worship service reveals early church thought – that the use of instruments in worship was “associated throughout history with pagan worship” (Coffman, 380). Early Christian (as Christians should now) through a cappella singing were clearly distinguished from “the Jews” who “used instrumental music, and the Greeks” also who “in their idol worship sang to the accompaniment of instruments” (Mattox 154). Historically, Christians distanced themselves from the use of instrumental music, not because they could not afford them, but because “instruments of music were conspicuously associate with pagan worship and for the first six and one-half centuries of the Christian faith on earth, they were just as conspicuously omitted from Christian worship” (Coffman, 207).

Part 2 – Arguments Concerning Scriptural Music

Unfortunately, it is much easier to review the arguments presented by those members of the churches of Christ (yes this is quite ironic) who advocate the adding of instruments to worship and some thoughts on how to refute them. Three such arguments throughout history dominated the debate. The fourth argument may be a logical application of the Scriptures explaining what the instrument cannot possibly accomplish in worship service. There may be

many other arguments for and against instrumental music, but these should suffice to cover the important areas of the debate.

Perhaps the earliest (mid 1800's) modern "argument for the introduction of the instrument was on the basis of expediency." What is strange is that Isaac Errett, who originally offered this argument as editor of *The Christian Standard* opposed "the introduction of the instrument because he foresaw that it would lead to division" in churches of Christ and rightly so. By "expediency," some members of the church of Christ suggested "that the instrument was simply and incidental in carrying out the command to sing" as recorded in Scripture. To sing, "one has to have pitch, keep rhythm or time, just as he has to have a tune and words." Instruments are equal in use "to the hymn book and the pitch pipe" (Roberts, 38). In *The Wallace – Hunt Debate*, Hunt expresses well the various thought of this argument:

You have to decide that whether a thing aids you. God has not decided it for you. ...Has God decided that a tuning fork aid Brother Wallace? Who decided that? He says it aids...Why then should he fall out with me deciding that instrumental music aid me?...a person can use and aid if it does not change the law, or if it does not usurp authority over it, or if it is not wrong within itself...Where in the Bible do you find a command for a song book...for a tuning fork...we use the piano for about the same reason as he uses the tuning fork. Only the piano is a much better aid. (Wallace, 21-23, 27)

Although this argument seems sound on the surface, the "sound" of instruments throughout the singing is probably the major flaw of this argument. The song book, pitch pipe, and tuning fork are aids to singing without any doubt, but most importantly, they are "silent" aids at the very moment singing begins, unlike instruments. Such aids were never meant to be part of the singing, unlike instruments that usurp the congregation's ability to sing to one another because of the noise. Furthermore, if instruments are to be used in worship service, one must immediately wonder why every member does not play an instrument for each other. It is easy to see that the

use of instruments is somewhat selfish, fickle (if musicians are sick will service continue), and only for those who are gifted players. Singing is all-inclusive, instruments – only for the select few. The most important question still remain, “Can one have a complete worship without instruments?” Hopefully, the answer will become obvious.

The second argument for the use of instruments has frankly fallen by the wayside because it is shallow at best, but its attempt shows how very important any scriptural argument is to instrumentalists in the churches of Christ. The “Psallo” argument finds its roots in the verbs “making melody” or “sing praises” in Ephesians 5:19 and James 5:13 respectively or in the noun translated psalms in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, the common Scriptures in the New Testament used to show the commandment for scriptural music in worship:

Most of us are aware that there have been attempts at different times to justify the use of the instrument in worship by the Greek words *psallo* or *psalmos*. It was not until the argument over the instrument had been going on for many years that anyone used it. It is not clear who first did. (Roberts, 38)

This argument is easily refuted. “The original meaning” of psallo was “pluck” or “play” a “string instrument” and this persisted for a time.

In view of early Christian resistance to mystery cults, as well as Pharisaic aversion to musical instruments in worship, it is likely that some such sense as *make melody* is best here. Those who favor ‘play’ may be relying too much on the earliest meaning of psallo. (Arndt, 891)

In the N.T. to *sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song*. (Thayer, 675)

Although the words were used to denote playing usually a stringed instrument, the use of the by the first century church clearly meant singing exclusively. The difficulty of trying to use such an argument in apparent in that many would not be able to “psalm” as required by Scripture according to the use of the earliest meaning of the word:

if ...right and the command psallo had an instrument as an inherent part of its meaning, then (1) it was a necessity and one could not worship without it [a view

none using the argument was willing to make] and (2) everyone worshipping would have to play a hard because the command to do this is in the plural and addressed to all. (Roberts, 39)

Once introduced, such an argument is historically and logically difficult to defend.

Intricate to the discussion of the first two arguments is the third, the argument from scriptural authority and scriptural silence. Four Scriptures encompass the command to sing in the New Testament:

What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. (1 Corinthians 14:15).

Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:19)

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. (Colossians 3:16)

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. (James 5:13)

No one argues that all are required to sing and none will argue against a cappella singing because they would foolishly be arguing against Holy Scripture. What is disturbing is that some convincingly argue that since there is not one New Testament Scripture that teaches against the use of instruments, it must not be sinful. This ripped apart the churches of Christ in America:

Does silence permit or exclude? The debate, as everyone knows, resulted in the great split of the late 19th century. The “silence-allows-group” brought pianos and organs into the worship assemblies; the “silence-excludes-group” continued a cappella singing in. (McBride, 30)

Those who are “silence-allows” fail to admit that:

there is no divine authority for instrumental music in New testament worship. There is no command for it, no example of it, no record of it in scripture, no support for it in history, and no mention of it in religious services for hundreds of years after the New Testament era. (Highers – Sword, 25)

Some might suggest that “you cannot limit worship service to five expression or acts that we perform on the Lord’s day,” but singing, preaching, praying, communion, and giving are all described and commanded in the New Testament, not instrumental music (Wallace, 23). If God wanted it in worship, we would be able to find it in the Scriptures.

Ephesians 5:15-21 and Colossians 3:12-17 are two important biblical passages. The first asks us to *Walk in Wisdom*, serving God in the correct way. According to the Ephesians passage, we are to do these things whenever possible, not just during worship. The second passage from Colossians is a plea for *The Character of The New Man Now Wise in Christ*. Every Christian - without exception - is required to do this anytime they come together on the Lord's day and may do this outside of that day for such action is to become a part of who they are. We have authority for "singing" in Christian worship, but instrumental music in Christian worship is not authorized – although it is not directly condemned.

The final argument is perhaps the most devastating to instrumental music in worship. The key phrases of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 - speaking, teaching, making melody in your heart, with grace in your hearts - indicate clearly why only a cappella singing is acceptable in worship. You sing words that you believe that teach you and those who hear you sing. Singing together also causes each Christian to feel he or she is part of a group that is in agreement, sharing the teachings of Christ. Can an instrument “sing in words that could be understood” by all in attendance (Winters, 193)? Musical instruments, though they sound wonderful, in no way have the ability to teach through words (excluding of course computer synthesizers that actually can put together strings of word – but that’s technically not instrumental music) and they are clearly not part of the heart where the grace and melody are to reside while the action is taking place. Instruments do not express in clear words the Christian’s

mental acknowledgement of the various teachings God has left us in the Bible. Instruments sound good, but they cannot speak, teach, or share the Gospel of Christ to an unbeliever so that they must know exactly what to do to be saved. A good Christian song can do that. Clearly, the words are important and necessary, and even one must admit that musical instruments are neither necessary or important to have a full worship with God. That is also what the Bible teaches. Hunt makes a good point about the instrument when he says:

The piano does not produce one single sound. It cannot play itself. It is a person's mind, his feelings, his ability, and his will that is producing the sound. If this recording machine can produce a sound of Brother Wallace - why cannot the piano also - a man reproduces its own sound, or his mind, or his feelings through and instrument? There can be no difference in that whatsoever. (Wallace, 26)

Musical instruments cannot teach a message because a human cannot make a piano, drum, organ, etc. speak words. Music, no matter how brilliant, cannot present a discourse on religion. It can only, at best, tap into man's emotion being. Clearly, singing fits the Scriptures because it is able to do all that is commanded.

Part 3 – Important Conclusions

The use of instrumental music in the worship service adds an element and act of worship that is not required nor commanded in the Scriptures of the New Testament. If used, it is the kind of addition to God's holy word that is prohibited in Revelation 22:18 - 19 by clear implication. Instrumental music divides brethren, those who follow the Scriptures, and those who follow their desires for this addition to worship:

A hundred years ago churches of Christ were in turmoil over instrumental music in worship...The division has persisted despite many discussions, prayers and unity efforts. We [member of a cappella churches of Christ] are deeply concerned that the leadership in some churches is oblivious to the divisive effect of a decision to introduce instrumental music at either a "seeker" service or a Sunday worship service...The *Chronicle* firmly supports the rich tradition of a cappella

music because we believe God rejoices only in the sincere gift – whether song, prayer, money, service or praise – of a humble, dedicated heart moved by faith. (McBride, 30).

It is the very nature of instrumental music in worship to divide the church, and that is clearly sinful. Is that then a suggestion that instrumental music in worship may cause some to lose their souls? Only Bible study will be able to answer that question, but here are some thoughts on the issue:

When asked if the uses of instrumental music in worship is a salvation issue, we must answer in the affirmative because (1) it involves the worship of the church of God which must be directed by truth (Jn. 4:24); (2) it violates the authority principle that we must do all in word or deed in the name, or by the authority, of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17); (3) it is an addition to the word of God in contradiction to many passages and principles such as found in 2 John 9; (4) multiplied efforts to defend its use have relied upon false arguments, erroneous concepts, and twisted scriptures; (5) it has been a source of division in the body of Christ contrary to the doctrine which we have learned (Rm. 16:17). (Highers – Freed, 117)

Anything divisive to the church cannot be considered leading to salvation. Such acts are considered sinful, and such is the nature of instrumental music in worship.

The Bible is the only authority for learning about God and how to worship him in "Spirit and Truth" (John 8:24). This is also suggested in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, John 5:39, and 1 John 3:22. Anyone who suggests that one may worship God in any way you feel (and not according to the commandments of God in the Scriptures) has not accepted the teaching of Scripture. The Bible teaches against that - Colossians 2:20-33, Matthew 15:9, Act 17:23, Colossians 3:17, John 17:17, Revelations 22:18 – 19. When it comes to worship, Biblical Authority matters. Understand the obligation that true worship of God begins with his word that is able to make one complete - mature in the faith, fully equipped to do God's will. Scriptural music in worship will only be found in the Bible and in the church that practices what the Bible teaches.

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