

# Instrumental Music in Worship

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For many years, the faithful churches of Christ have been perceived as despising mechanical instruments of music. Coupled with that poor understanding is an idea that God hates instruments. However, neither is true. To the contrary, Scripture indicates God commanded the use of instrumental music in the Old Testament, and many of our brethren are accomplished musicians. Mechanical instruments of music are not used in faithful churches of Christ, as the New Testament commands us, but the reasons for forbidding their use are much deeper than just some idea that God doesn't like them.

First of all, does God allow mechanical instruments, or not? Many times in the Old Testament, God *commanded* – not just suggested or allowed – that instruments be used in just about every situation: War, celebration of victory, and calming the troubled heart are just a few instances (see II Chronicles 29; I Samuel 16, ; II Samuel 6;). God further commanded instruments to be used on special occasions such as the New Moon and various Feast days, (Psalms 81, Leviticus 23, Numbers 10). A veritable host of other references show that God was very often behind the use of instruments in worship and praise to Him in the Old Testament.

*Mismore* was a Hebrew word translated into Greek as the word *psallo*. *Mismore* properly means "to pluck...to twang the strings of a musical instrument." The Greek word is a bit different. It means to sing a hymn, or to celebrate the praise of God (Thayer's Greek Lexicon). *Mismore* was used only in the Psalms where it took on the connotation to celebrate in song and music. The Psalms of David were to be *sung*, not just played on a harp or trumpet. It is only in the lyrics of a song that we can be sure of its message. One man said, "Only in the singing is there a message." Music played on an instrument may speak to one person a certain way while speaking differently to another. So instrumental music gives a different message to different people, and therefore does not have certain sound (I

Corinthians 14:8). Consider the song the people sang after crossing the Red Sea and seeing the defeat of Egypt in Exodus 15:2-21. This song begins in verse 11: “I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.” In verse 20, Miriam, Moses and Aaron's sister, took a tambourine and begin to sing and dance. Had she just suddenly picked up a tambourine and begun playing, how could the people have known what to sing? There were words set to the music. The message of praise was not in the tinkling beat made by the tambourine; it was in the words sung by Moses, Miriam and the people.

Although this was a collective expression of worship, it was individuals doing the singing. We begin to see that the act of singing in worship is an individual act, even when done corporately. God has always had a musical element in his worship. The Israelites assembled they sang, played and danced, but is that what He intended for His New Testament people? Should there be instrumental music in the corporate assemblies of God's New Testament church? Without regard to persecution or ridicule, the faithful churches of Christ have always held that a resounding "NO!" should be the answer.

Instruments in “Christian” worship is a relatively modern occurrence. The first dependable record of mechanical instruments used in the church is not found until the 7th Century. It is recorded in the annals of Catholic history that Pope Vitalian first approved the use of an organ in the worship in 666 AD. In fact, one of the modern differences between the Greek Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches is the use of musical instruments in worship. Many “church reformers,” reputed authorities on religion, vehemently opposed the use of mechanical musical instruments in worship:

- John Calvin – 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 other shadows of the Law. The papists therefore have foolishly borrowed this as well as many other things from the Jews. Men who are fond of outright pomp may delight in the noise. But the simplicity which God commands us by the apostles is far more pleasing to Him.
- Martin Luther – The organ in worship is an ensign of Baal.
- John Wesley – I have no objection to the organs in our chapels, as long as they are neither seen nor heard.
- Adam Clarke – In a representative system of religion, such as the Jewish, there must have been much outside work, all emblematical of better things: no proof that such thing should be continued under the Gospel

dispensation, where outsides have disappeared, shadows flown away, and the substance alone is presented to the hearts of mankind. He must be ill off for proofs in favor of instrumental music in the Church of Christ, who has recourse to practices under the Jewish ritual.

- Charles Spurgeon – I would just as soon pray to God with machinery, as to sing to God with machinery.

While falling short in many points of doctrine, these men have nevertheless proven themselves serious Bible scholars who speak across several centuries and manmade religious institutions. It would behoove the serious student of the Bible to consider what these renowned scholars had to say about this important subject, especially in the light of the modern era of praise bands and choruses sung by performers on stage.

There are three main reasons mechanical instruments should not be used in the worship assemblies of the New Testament Christians. Let us examine them closely – and bear in mind that while God approved, and often commanded the use of mechanical instruments in corporate worship in the Old Testament, **THE LAW CHANGED.**

The worship of the Old Testament is not the same as the worship of the New Testament. This should be a point easily grasped by all. There are many glaring changes in the law between the Testaments. We do not justify candles in the assembly simply because there was a lampstand in the temple; we do not justify the use of the burning of incense in the New Testament dispensation just because there was the burning of incense in the Old Testament. The same could be said of feast days, animal sacrifices, making of vows and so on. We understand those things were a pattern of what was to come. The Old Testament offering of a blood sacrifice for sin was a pattern or shadow of the offering of Jesus on the cross for the remission of sin. So it is in our worship. The Old foreshadows the New. We live in the New, and the Old is done away with. In Hebrews 9:1, the writer here points back to that which foreshadowed the coming law: “the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.” In Hebrews 9:24, he says, “Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true.” And in 10:1: “the law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming; not the realities themselves.” The Old Testament law has passed away, and its modes of worship passed along with it. Those who serve God today are under a new covenant, or law. And as a result of this change, God no longer approves or allows mechanical instruments of music in His worship.

One of the major voices in the cry against the use of mechanical instruments of music in Christian worship in the 19th Century was that of J.W. McGarvey, who asked "can that be wrong in the Christian congregation which was acceptable to God in the Jewish congregation? I answer, it may be. The offering of victims, the sprinkling of blood, the burning of incense, and the perpetual light of burning lamps were acceptable to God in Jewish worship; but they are not in Christian worship, and so may instrumental music not be."

In consideration of the fact that the Law changed, it should be noted that Old Testament worship was often vicarious; however, **worship is never vicarious in the New Testament** dispensation. There were a number of things in the Old performed by the priest or other officials. The sacrifice was actually offered by the priest for an individual, and sometimes the entire congregation. Priests performed temple maintenance on behalf of the people. Likewise, when the ram's horn was blown, or the singing was accompanied, not everyone blew the horn or played the harp. There were those put in charge whose job it was to play the music well. They did in the place of those who didn't or couldn't.

When we worship today, no one can worship for us. This is one reason why it is so important to not forsake the assembly (Hebrews 10:25). Worship is an individual act done in the assembly. In New Testament worship, we do not rely on another person to make the praise offering for us. We are responsible to do it ourselves. We are all priests, we all make up the temple, and we all must offer our own bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2). When we commune around the Lord's Table, we each break the bread and partake of the cup for ourselves. We cannot, and dare not, do it for another. When we pray, we each pray for ourselves. We cannot fulfill the command to pray in the assembly unless we personally enter into the work. When we receive instruction from God's word through faithful preaching, it is an individual, personal work of worship to listen, learn and be edified while the lesson is delivered. Likewise, when Paul commanded us to sing, we are to sing to the best of our ability. No one can fulfill that inspired command for another person. A person playing a piano, guitar, drum set or any other instrument cannot sing from his heart for another person. It must be done individually.

Finally, **mechanical instruments have no message**. While they may and often do inspire emotion, they do not and cannot impart knowledge. There are two main verses regarding not using mechanical instruments:

- Ephesians 5:19 – Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;

- Colossians 3:16 – 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.

Scripture tells us the music element in New Testament worship must carry a message. What message do mechanical instruments carry? Yes, the melodic sounds of a piano or organ well played often stir emotion, but they invoke different emotions in different people. The same tune can be played and cause ecstasy and joy for some, and depression and mourning for others. Proponents of mechanical instruments often praise God (and rightly so) for His constancy. Why in all matters of dealing with men would the Almighty be consistent except this one? Is He a man that He should be allowed a fault? Those who employ mechanical instruments of music in worship must think so. Their approach would require that He give different messages to different individuals at different times. The musical element in our worship must always carry a message. And it should always be the same.

The message is in the singing, not the playing. For in the playing, the heart of mankind can be moved in various directions at various times. Thus in New Testament times God has ordained the instrument of the disciples heart to be used in worship. It is from the heart of man that praise is to spring, not from some manmade machine.

Also, it needs to be understood that the Bible is the limit of our faith, rather than only the rule of our faith. As David Lipscomb said, "This is the distinctive difference between us and other religious bodies. Others accept the New Testament as their rule of faith, but do not make it the limit of their faith. They add other things as articles of faith and acts of worship than those contained in the Bible. We seek for things authorized, they for things not prohibited. Our rule is safe; their rule is loose and latitudinarian. Ours confines us to God's appointments. Theirs opens the worship and service of God to whatever will please men. Our rule limits man's worship to the exercises approved of in the Bible."