

Instrumental Music In Worship

by Casey Head

The first thing that most people notice when they attend the worship services of a faithful church of Christ is the lack of instrumental music. There is no piano up front, nor are guitars strummed and plucked. To most people, this may appear to be very strange, as they have grown up with instrumental music in church worship. In fact, many churches are unable to sing without the accompaniment of a piano.

Some may initially think that we just prefer not to use mechanical instruments, that we enjoy a capella singing better. Others may conclude that we don't have a piano simply because we can't afford one, or that we have no one in our congregation who is able to play it. However, these conclusions are all false. We enjoy listening to instrumental music in our own personal lives, and we could certainly afford to have a guitar or piano if we wanted them. It is also true that we have many talented people in the congregation who can play various instruments. So why is it that we do not have them? The answer is simple- the New Testament does not authorize them!

When the New Testament writers mention music, it never involves mechanical instruments. We do, however, have clear authority to sing with our voices. In Ephesians 5:19, Paul says, "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *singing* and making melody in your heart to the Lord." We are also instructed in 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." Both of these verses pertain to music, but neither one of them authorizes instruments. We are simply told to sing over and over again. Consider also Hebrews 2:12, "Saying, I will declare Thy name unto My brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto Thee." Does it say here, "In the midst of the church will I sing *and play mechanical instruments* unto Thee?" No. Once again, we simply have authority to sing. Furthermore, in James 5:13, it says, "Is any among you afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing psalms." Here is a question- can you find any authority anywhere in the entire New Testament for the church to incorporate mechanical instruments into its worship? If you cannot, then we must be content to sing praises to God without the "help" of pianos, guitars and the like.

Some people want to argue, "Well the Bible doesn't say not to," as if the silence of the scriptures authorizes their instrumental music. But does God have to say "Thou shalt not," in order for us to know that it is unacceptable? Of course not. When a specific thing is commanded, then everything else is excluded. For example, when the Lord commanded Noah to build the ark, He ordered the use of gopherwood, and that is exactly what Noah used. But did God have to say, "Thou shalt not use hickory, or maple, or oak, or redwood, or cypress, or elm..." Did He have to condemn every other kind of wood? No. When God commanded gopherwood, that automatically excluded everything else. We are told in 1 Peter 4:11, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." In other words, speak where God speaks but not where He is silent. God has commanded singing, and so until New Testament authority is presented to authorize the use of mechanical instruments in worship, we must recognize that they are sinful.

Others will argue, "Well David used them." That's right, he did; but he was commanded to. We are not. Notice 2 Chronicles 29:25, "And he set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psaltries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: *for so was the commandment of the Lord by His prophets.*" While instruments were clearly commanded under the Old Testament, we must recognize that a new covenant has been established by Christ (Col 2:14-16; Heb 8:13; 9:15), and that for us to return to any part of the old law is to fall from grace (Gal 5:1-4). Besides, David also offered animal sacrifices and supported the Levitical priesthood, and burned incense. Are those people that make this argument willing to do ALL that David did? Of course they are not. This argument does not in any way support the use of mechanical instruments in worship.

Did you know that mechanical instruments of music were not incorporated into the worship of the Catholic church until the sixth century? This tells me several things- one, that the early church didn't use them, and two, that they were not, nor are they now, authorized by God. Even when the Catholic church brought the organ into the cathedral, there was great opposition by very well-known "church fathers." But as time passed, the organ was gradually accepted. And then once the law of God was transgressed, why not incorporate other instruments such as pianos and guitars? Suddenly, instruments and styles of music that never would have been condoned are acceptable. But does time make what is wrong, right? Not at all. If God didn't authorize mechanical instruments in the first century, and if He expected those early Christians to simply sing praises to Him, then He expects the same today (Mal 3:6; Heb 13:8).

While there are certainly several other arguments made in an attempt to justify the use of mechanical instruments, these are some of the most common ones. We must recognize that under the new covenant, God has only authorized singing. Let us be content to sing only. Sure, there may be some churches that don't sing very well, and a pretty tune on a piano or guitar may really give us a good feeling, but remember that we are here to worship God, not ourselves. Let us abstain from that which is not commanded.