

Lesson 12--USING INSTRUMENTS OF MUSIC IN WORSHIP

Lesson Text

Objective: The student can define worship, draw a diagram illustrating the New Testament concept of worship, and list four factors that make worship effective.

Objective: The student can list and explain five reasons why the use of instruments of music in worship to God is not God's plan for Christian worship.

Introduction:

The question of using instruments of music in Christian worship is widely debated and has been for centuries. While the majority of "Christian" churches today use instruments, less than two hundred years ago, many in churches using it today were opposing it. Of course, the answer to this question does not lie in who does or does not use instruments today, but lies, rather, in what the scriptures reveal about our worship of God.

Before answering the specific question of what music we should use in worship, it is helpful to set this question in the broader context of the meaning of Christian worship and how to participate in it. Then we can better answer the question of just what we should or should not do in worship.

- A. The word most often translated "worship" in the New Testament is the Greek word proskuneo which is rooted in the concept of "kissing the ground before." Obviously if one kisses the ground or falls prostrate before something, he is seeking to honor the object before which he bows. So the word "worship" implies offer a message of respect, contrition, or praise to an object of worship. To correspond with this definition, any effort to worship God must include the sense of "bowing in submission to offer praise." True worship, then, is intentional, not accidental. It happens only at those moments when we purposely cast ourselves in thought before the Lord to communicate with Him. And, whenever we are in such a moment, wherever we are, we are worshipping and must follow the Lord's instructions about this activity.
- B. Jesus uses this word in John 4:23-24 when speaking to the woman at the well. He said God seeks people to "worship" Him, to bow in praise to Him. In explaining this to the Samaritan woman, Jesus emphasizes that since God is "spirit" He wants us to worship Him "in spirit." In the New Covenant, He says, worship is not restricted to a special place. Since God is "spirit," He is everywhere and may be worshipped anywhere when we approach Him in our "spirits." Christian worship, then, is "spirit to Spirit"-- my spirit reaches out to contact the Great Spirit and on this spiritual level worship takes place. The Jewish worship had required the right place, the right offering, the right priest, and the right ritual, but Christian worship will be different--it is direct. My spirit can reach directly to the Great Spirit, who is everywhere.

Jesus also tells the Samaritan woman that another element in the new worship is that it will be "in truth." Since He is still contrasting His new system of worship with the



old, "truth" here suggests not only that Christian worship must follow the truth of God's Word, as did the old, but that Christian worship is also "in truth" or reality, in contrast with the types and shadows of the Jewish worship.

In addition to being in spirit and truth, my worship must also flow out of my life with God. If I have a close personal relationship with Him in my daily life and walk in His ways, then I can come to Him in those special times to send Him a message. God rejected the worship of those who mistreated others while coming with their sacrifices (Isaiah 1:10-17). Thus, worship is a way for those living the Christian life to make contact with their Creator and Father.

- C. But worshipping God must be more than just man's desire to reach out to God. God, the object of our worship, has always specified why we should worship Him and how we are to worship Him. From the very first recorded attempt at worship, that of Cain and Abel, it is clear that not every one who seeks to worship God pleases Him. The Bible records about as many cases of failed worship as successful ones. God seeks us to worship Him but also tells us why and how to worship Him. Only those who follow God's instructions about worship, then, will please Him with their worship.
- D. We might summarize the reasons to worship God (spiritual ends) in four words: proclaim, adore, communicate, and edify.

Paul said taking the Lord's supper affords us an opportunity to "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again (1 Corinthians 11:26). First, then, our worship is to proclaim, to testify to others, both in the church and in the world around us, of our faith and commitment. In our hearts as we worship, there should be a sense of declaration that we believe in God and Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Second, our worship should be to express our adoration, praise, and honor to God. Our worship is to Him and for Him (Hebrews 13:15). God is the object of our worship and our primary aim is to please Him.

Third, worship is to communicate, to send a message to God. Our worship should tell God of our love for Him and express our thanksgiving to Him. Worship is also a time to communicate to Him our confession of sins and our commitment to do better. The very word "worship," as we have seen, means to send a message of contrition and honor. Feelings and emotions should be involved in our communication with God as suggested by Ephesians 5:19: "make melody in your heart to the Lord." If we are not communicating with the Lord as we sing, pray, and take the Lord's Supper, then we are not actually worshipping. No communication, no worship.

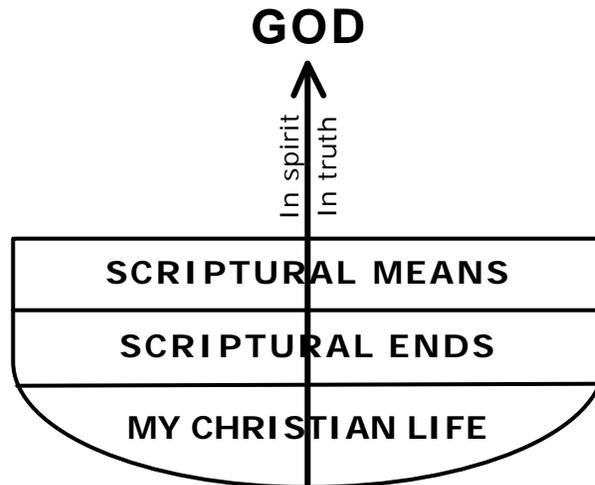
Fourth, worship is to edify our brethren. In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul makes this point repeatedly. While our primary object is to honor God, a secondary purpose is to build up our brethren. We do "only what is good for edifying" (v. 26). In this regard, we come to give edification to others. The very nature of worship means that it is not selfish--I do not come to please myself. I worship so I can give to God and to give to others. I receive a blessing, of course, but it happens only if I come primarily to serve God and others. So we must have the scriptural ends or purposes for our worship.

- E. Our worship, then, must flow from our Christian lives and is our expression to God as we worship with the right purpose and "in spirit" and "in truth." But we must also worship God by doing the right things. God has never left the choice of what to do in worship up to His people. From the very beginning, He has specified what He wanted His worshippers to do--offer animal sacrifices, keep the Passover, have a priest who wears



special garments and does special things. In fact, some of the worst consequences God has sent people was for their not worshipping Him in the way He had specified. So we must have the right means for worshipping God--using those methods of worship which He has commanded. Christians, for example, are told us to do such things as pray, sing, and take the Lord's Supper.

F. We might summarize this view with the following drawing:



From my Christian life, then, flows the sentiment of wanting to reach out to God. To achieve this, I must seek God's purposes (ends) for worship and use His means as I direct my thoughts to Him in spirit and in truth.

G. God has made worshipping Him to be a very important part of what He expects from His people. It has always been so. He has always asked His people to do both the right things in worship and do them in the right ways. With this laid as a foundation, we are now ready to approach the question of whether we should use instruments of music in Christian worship.

Reasons To Sing without Instruments of Music in Christian Worship.

This study gives five reasons the author suggests for singing without instruments in our worship today. Others could be given but these will be helpful to you as you explore this issue and explain it to others.

1. Christians Must Worship Only As God Has Commanded.

God has always given commands to His people about how they are to worship Him and has sent strong retribution to those who have gone beyond His commands. Note these examples from scripture.

A. God specified a way to get the fire for burning incense in the tabernacle. When, however, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu were offering incense, God struck them dead



because they offered "strange fire." The Bible says they obtained their fire in a way different from the way God had commanded. He commanded one way and they used another (Leviticus 10:1-2). Notice the wording. They did what "God commanded them not." That is, he commanded one way to get the fire and they chose another. He had not told them not to get fire that way. He just specified the way to get the fire and that excluded all others.

B. God specified that only those of the priestly line could offer sacrifices to Him, but when Samuel, a priest, was late, King Saul offered the sacrifice. God was very specific to tell him that the kingdom would be removed from him because he had departed from the way God said to worship (1 Samuel 13:13). God never said kings could not offer sacrifices, but when He specified only those from the Levites, that naturally excluded any others.

C. God specified a way to move the ark of the covenant--priests were to use poles to carry it on their shoulders. When David was moving the ark, however, he thought it would be more convenient to place it in an ox cart. Uzzah was riding in the cart and reached out to steady the ark. When he touched it, he died (2 Samuel 6:3). David was very angry about this but later said he "did not seek him according to the ordinance" (1 Chronicles 15:13). God did not provide a list of how not to move the ark. Rather, He specified how to move it and that excluded all other ways.

D. God's expectation that we worship as He has commanded is no less in the New Testament. Jesus quotes Isaiah, "In vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the teachings of men" (Matthew 15:9). If our teaching about worship or other subjects is not what God has specified, our worship will be vain. In 1 Corinthians 4:6 Paul emphasizes we are not to "go beyond the things that are written." Paul's experience with the Corinthians is particularly appropriate here. When they changed the practice about how to take the Lord's Supper from what Paul had prescribed, he reminded them that what had given them was instructions he had received from the Lord. He added that those who did not follow this teaching would be "eating and drinking damnation to themselves" (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). Christians, then, like those in the Old Testament, are to worship only as God has specified.

E. The worst sins imaginable have been committed in the name of worship: drunkenness, fornication, murder of innocent men, women and children. When people are left to their own, they devise ways to worship a god that are sinful. So God specifies how He wants to be worshipped and we are to worship exactly as He has instructed.

So not only must we worship as God has commanded but we must refrain from doing as worship what He has not commanded.

2. Instrumental Music in Christian Worship is Not Commanded.

A. Singing is commanded for Christian worship. Ephesians 5:19 commands Christians to sing and make melody in their hearts. Colossians 3:16 commands us to teach and admonish one another with songs. In 1 Corinthians 14:15, Paul exhorts the Christians to be sure the singing in their assemblies is done with the spirit and the understanding. James 5:3 says those who are joyful should sing and Acts 16:25 describes Paul and Silas as praying and singing in the Philippian prison at midnight.

Clearly, God wants us to sing as part of our worship to Him. Singing is commanded for Christians. The Corinthians were doing it in their assemblies and Paul and Silas sang in their private worship to Him.



B. While all of these verses mention singing, none of them mentions the use of instruments in Christian worship, nor does any other verse in the New Testament. Instruments were widely available, but their use was not commanded for Christian worship.

C. Some Old Testament verses speak with approval of instruments in Jewish worship, 2 Samuel 6:15, Psalm 150:3-5, and 2 Chronicles 29:25, for example. But these verses are speaking of the worship that had animal sacrifices, burning of incense, and sprinkling of blood on the altar. To use such verses as authorization of instruments in Christian worship is as inappropriate as to use the verses that authorize other Jewish practices that were never part of Christian worship.

D. So far, then, we have seen that (1) God is very clear that we are to worship Him only as He commands and (2) that He never commands us to use instruments in Christian worship.

3. The Church, When Under Apostolic Direction, Did Not Use Instruments in Worship.

A. The early church, when under the leadership of the apostles, did not use instruments in their worship. The evidence on this point is absolute. First, there is no mention of instruments in Christian worship when it is described in the New Testament. Secondly, the voice of both church history and music history are very clear on this point: early church music was vocal only. The Jews and the pagans used instruments in their worship and the first-century culture was filled with instruments of many kinds. Yet, when these people became Christians, they never used them in their worship to God. The word "a cappella," which we use today to designate unaccompanied singing, is a Latin word that means "according to the chapel or church." Thus, the "church way" to sing is unaccompanied.

Third, there are strong denunciations of the use of instruments among the church fathers, but always directed toward their use in pagan settings. Never did they speak against their use in the church for such was, to them, unthinkable. (See Milo Hadwin, pp. 55ff.) James McKinnon, a Roman Catholic, has studied music in the early church for a quarter of a century. He has concluded that music in Christian worship was purely vocal through the fifth century and that if anyone had sought to introduce it, there would have been very strong opposition (Ibid.) As late as 190 A.D., Clement of Alexandria said that Christians used "but one instrument, the word of peace alone by which we honor God" and then he lists musical instruments others use which Christians do not. Fourth, it was more than a thousand years after the church began when any widespread use of instruments began in Christian worship.

B. Several conclusions may be drawn.

1. Early church music was purely vocal.
2. The vocal nature of early church music was intentional because it was so counter-cultural. Had they done what they were used to doing in Judaism or paganism, they would have used instruments. Had they done what was culturally acceptable, they would have used instruments. Yet, they did not. Such a counter-cultural practice must have been by direction of those where were their inspired leaders.
3. Unaccompanied singing was the church music taught by inspired apostles. One can find scriptural authority for singing. No such authority, however, directs us to use instruments for worship.
4. Those who seek to follow the teaching and practice of the church New



Testament times will sing without accompaniment. To do otherwise is to leave the principle of seeking to worship as did those under apostolic direction.

5. The practice of the apostolic church corresponds precisely to the first two points of this lesson: (1) Christians must worship only as commanded and (2) instrumental music in Christian worship is not commanded.

4. The Command to Sing Excludes Other Types of Music

It is important to note something important about instructions and commandments from those in positions of authority. Every command has built within it a level of specificity. The very nature of the wording of the command means that it both includes some things and excludes others. Things equal to or broader than the commanded action are naturally excluded while lesser things are included or allowed. If, for example, a doctor writes a prescription specifying a particular brand of medicine, the pharmacist is excluded from dispensing any other medicine. If the size of the bottle or cost is not specified, he has some liberty about these but in regard to the specific thing specified (medicine) he can only give what the doctor ordered. The doctor does not, of course, list all the medicines the pharmacist cannot use. Such would be impossible. When the doctor specifies one medicine, all others are excluded. Similarly, if an architect specifies a particular brand of hardware for the doors, the builder is not at liberty to use another.

Of course these are not exact parallels because we are dealing with human instructions as compared to those from God. But the point is that even in our everyday use, in every command or instruction there are understood inclusions and exclusions. Silence prohibits anything that would be more than the specified item silence allows what would be less than or included in the commanded element.

Consider some Bible cases of this. In Hebrews 8:4 and 7:14, for example, the writer says that Jesus could not be a priest under the Law because he was from the tribe of Judah, and "in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests." That is, when Moses said priests were from the tribe of Levi, and was silent about other tribes, other tribes were excluded. God did not have to give a list of the tribes from which priests could not come. Naming one tribe naturally excluded all other tribes. When Nadab and Abihu, likewise, were told where to get fire for burning their incense, every other source for fire was excluded. When God specified that priests were to offer the sacrifices, that excluded anyone not a priest, like King Saul. When God said priests were to move the ark by carrying it on their shoulders, all other means for carrying the ark were eliminated. Many other examples could be cited: God specified gopher wood for the ark and Noah knew that all other woods were excluded; God specified specific animals for particular types of sacrifices and only those animals were to be used; God gave highly specific plans for the tabernacle and building it any other way of building it was excluded. To give a New Testament example, when God specified that baptism after Jesus' death must be "in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins," John's baptism was then excluded. And so when Paul found twelve men in Ephesus who had recently been baptized with John's baptism, he told them their baptism was not valid--it had been excluded--and they must be baptized properly (Acts 19).

Commands, then, both include and exclude. The command to use fruit of the vine and unleavened bread in the communion excludes other foods but leaves open the method of distribution. The command to teach what Christ commanded, excludes teaching anything



else but allows a variety of methods.

In the same way, the command to sing both includes and excludes. It excludes any music other than singing. This is parallel to naming Levi as the tribe for priests which excludes any other tribe or naming unleavened bread and fruit of the vine for the Lord's Supper which excludes other foods for partaking. But so long as we sing and do not use an excluded type of music, we are allowed to sing in unison or parts, use various types of songs, or use a book or a projector to get the words. These are not parallel to the item specified, that is a type of music.

5. Instrumental Music Has Been Both a Cause of Division and Departure When It Has Been Used.

A. As mentioned above, instruments were never used in the apostolic church and vocal music only continued for nearly a thousand years. There may have been very limited use of instruments as early as the sixth century in Africa or Spain but the main body of the Catholic Church was then opposing it. Gregory the Great, who added to existing church music about 600 A.D., prohibited the use of instruments. As late as 1250, Thomas Aquinas, the famous Catholic theologian, was against their use, expressing strong opposition. Not until about 1400 A.D. did the use of instruments in worship become widespread.

B. Many leaders of the Protestant Reformation also opposed their use. Martin Luther called the organ an "ensign of Baal." John Calvin opposed instruments and so did John Wesley and Adam Clarke. Charles Spurgeon, famous Baptist preacher, would not permit them in his service in London. The Greek Orthodox Church did not permit instruments at all until the late twentieth century.

C. The use of instruments, then, has been widely opposed and often has been a point of division among professing Christians. It was, in particular, a point of division between what is now known as churches of Christ and Christian churches. Those who sought to restore New Testament Christianity in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus, divided, in part, over this issue.

D. A study of this split reveals not only that the use of instruments has been divisive but that those who justify it by saying "we may do anything not condemned in scripture" have, because of that argument, made other changes based on that same philosophy.

Following the principle that "we can do anything not forbidden" is very different from saying "we can do only what is commanded." Think how long a list the Lord would have to give for what not to use on the Lord's table instead of just saying to use the unleavened bread and fruit of the vine. How much longer, even, would the list be of what the Lord does not want us to do in worship? Obviously, as God has revealed to us how to worship Him, He has chosen the method of telling us what to do rather than telling us what not to do. Throughout the Bible story, God told His people what to do in worship and, whenever they departed from that, He was displeased. Never do we find any case in scripture of His people saying, "You didn't say not to," and God saying, "Then that is acceptable."

Accepting the instrument, then, has become the basis for a different approach to answering the question, "What is acceptable to God in worship?" And this philosophy leads to accepting other differences from the practice and teaching of the apostolic church. Thus, when we open the door for the instrument by adopting the philosophy that "whatever is not specifically condemned is acceptable," we lay a foundation which eventually leads to accepting many other unscriptural practices because they are "not specifically prohibited."



And history clearly bears out this conclusion.

Conclusion:

The question of instrumental music in Christian worship is important from many points of view. There is first the question of whether God is pleased with such an offering in worship when He has not commanded it. Surely it is not worth taking that risk. Second, there is the risk of the different approach to scripture one takes if he/she justifies instruments on the basis of "They are not forbidden." Thirdly, there is the question of how firmly we wish to stand on the principle of doing only what the Bible authorizes in our faith and practice. For many who have decided to use the instrument, this has become only the first step of many away from following the plan of first century Christianity. If we believe that our best hope of salvation is to follow the teaching and practice of the inspired leaders of the first century church, then we will not want to depart from their model in worship. And finally, the use of instruments has become a dividing wedge between many professing Christians, resulting in splits and disharmony among the people of God. Shall I face God in judgment knowing that on a matter many of God's people sincerely oppose, I have pushed to do what all agree is never required and, in so pushing, have divided God's people?

The use of instruments is, at the least, a divisive and unwise practice. At the worst it is an affront to God by departing from His revealed plan for worshipping Him. How He will judge those who choose to use instruments in Christian worship is a decision He alone can make. There are, however, valid reasons to worship without instruments as the early church did and this is surely the better course to follow.

References:

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