

Musical Instruments in Worship

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1. A Strange Phenomenon

It has become increasingly difficult to find churches that exclude musical instruments from their worship. In more traditional churches, it will be a single organ or piano; in more ornate churches, other classical instruments might be added; in modern churches it could be drums, guitars and whole rock bands. Apart from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which never accepted instruments, rare nowadays are the churches of any kind which sing God's praise *a cappella* [1]; – with the voice only, without the accompaniment of any mechanical device. The use of instruments in Christian worship has grown into an epidemic of international proportions.

This is strange, very strange. It is strange because singing without musical accompaniment was the almost-universal practice of all Christendom for the greater part of the first millennium of its existence. From Justin Martyr in the second century, the uniform voice of the Church fathers was against the use of instruments. Even Aquinas in the first half of the thirteenth was against them. G I Williamson summarises the indisputable history: in worship, “the first recorded instance of the use of such [musical instruments] was in the eighth century, but they did not become common until the thirteenth”. [2]

John Girardeau, in his classic work on the subject, traces it further: “The organ, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, steadily made its way towards universal triumph in the Romish Church”. [3] John Price, in a recent book on the subject, shows the position before the Reformation: “By the early 1500s, an organ was found in almost every important church of Europe, and its use became one of the distinguishing traits of the Roman Catholic liturgy”. [4] The plethora of musical instruments today among Protestants as well as Romanists, is indeed a strange phenomenon.

If it is strange to find instrumental music in almost all worship calling itself Christian, it is stranger still to find it so prevalent in the majority of churches claiming to be reformed. For the purest stream of the Reformation cast them out along with other trappings of Popery.

In Calvin's Geneva, Psalms were sung without musical instruments. He comments on Psalm 71:22: "To sing the praise of God upon the harp and psaltery unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law, and of the service of God under that dispensation of shadows and figures; but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving." [5] On Psalm 33:2, he wrote: "Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the 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 outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to Him." [6]

In Knox's Scotland, musical instruments were cast out from the beginning. His views are clear. Urging people to attend the public means of grace regularly, he wrote: "I mean not to hear piping, singing, or playing, nor to patter upon beads or books whereof they have no understanding. . . . For with such will I neither join myself in common prayer, nor in receiving external sacraments; for in so doing I should affirm their superstition and abominable idolatry." [7] Knox was a great advocate of congregational singing; it was the passive "hearing" of others "singing" to the congregation that he was condemning, along with the playing of musical instruments, pipes and all.

Nowhere was the Reformed principle of worshipping God only as He has appointed in His Word implemented more thoroughly than in Scotland. Unaccompanied singing has distinguished conservative Presbyterianism in Scotland and elsewhere ever since, and has been most strenuously contended for as an essential part of the crown rights of Christ. He alone, speaking in Scripture, has the right to put musical instruments into His Church's worship.

The history of the Netherlands, where so much of the Reformed faith has been preserved, is especially significant, given that for more than three centuries the organ has regrettably been prominent in the Reformed churches of Holland. In what is now Belgium, at the Reformation, many organs were removed from the churches, but in the northern parts of the Low Countries, the large church organs had assumed a major role in Renaissance society as well as in Romanist worship, and they were largely preserved. This was to prove too great a temptation. The civil magistrate felt that they could not lie unused. At first, he required that recitals be played before and after worship, even on the Sabbath. From there it could be easily foreseen, given the fascination with these instruments, that they would find their way back into worship.

The Church made some attempts to swim against the tide. In 1574, the Synod of Dordrecht required that “the playing of the organ in the church . . . must be entirely abolished”. [8] However, four years later the same Synod had to plead that “the organs, which have been tolerated for a time, must by all means be removed from the church”. [9] The 1581 National Synod of Middleburg and the 1594 Synod of Holland and Zeeland resolved “to obtain of the magistrate the laying aside of organs, and the singing with them in the churches, even out of the time of worship, either before or after sermons: so far are those Synods from bearing with them in the worship itself”. [10] Clearly the state was usurping a role in church worship never given to it by Scripture, and the Church was acquiescing in this. No wonder it was a losing battle. A minister at Arnhem, having preached against the organ, “was brought before the magistrate . . . and informed that he had gone too far”. [11]

During the opening decades of the seventeenth century, the controversy raged within the Church between those for and those against, until in 1638 the Synod of Delft “took the middle road and decided to leave the decision up to each individual congregation” by stating that “organ playing is held to be a neutral subject (not a matter of principle) and as such is left to the freedom of the churches”. [12] This dishonourable compromise was opposed by a few, but by the middle of the seventeenth century, “organised resistance to the organ in the worship service now collapsed”. [13]

The contrast between Scottish zeal for purity of worship and Dutch practice can be seen clearly in the testimony of Scottish Covenanter and martyr James Renwick, who said: “I testify and bear witness against the vast and sinful toleration of all error and sectaries in the Belgian Church [he means those adhering to the Belgic Confession] . . . and also against all their superstitious customs, such as, their observing of holy feast days, as they call them, the organs in their churches, and the like; all which they have as the relics of idolatry”. [14]

It is not so strange that churches in the Lutheran and Anglican stream of the Reformation should have preserved musical instruments. Their view of worship was never as Reformed as their doctrine. They asserted that, provided an element of worship had not been expressly forbidden in Scripture, it was allowable if the Church thought it expedient. Under the wings of that unscriptural principle, a multitude of innovations can enter into worship. But it is strange indeed, that Churches of Presbyterian or Dutch Reformed heritage should fall prey to the use of musical instruments. These Churches claim to

believe in the regulative principle: that only what Scripture positively requires should be brought into worship.

That leads us to the strangest aspect of all. Although today almost all churches professing to believe in the finished work of Christ use musical instruments, Scripture shows that they were part of the elaborate ceremonial of Old Testament worship, and never to be part of the gospel simplicity of New Testament worship. The types and symbols of the old economy ended when Christ fulfilled them in His coming 2000 years ago. From that point, the types were to vanish from worship. Properly understood, and it is in a future article that this will be demonstrated, musical instruments have no more right to a place in Christian worship than animal sacrifices and altars, Aaronic priests and their garments, and thrice-yearly visits to a temple in Jerusalem. There is not the slightest hint in the Bible that musical instruments were to continue into Christian worship. What a strange phenomenon it is that their presence should have become almost universal!

In order to interpret the Scriptural evidence about musical instruments rightly, we have first to establish the basis upon which that evidence is to be assessed. Contrary to the loose approach to worship manifest in churches of Lutheran and Anglican descent and many modern churches, whereby anything may be admitted into worship provided it is not expressly forbidden, Scripture teaches that the only things to be done in worship are those which God requires in His Word. This regulative principle of worship, as it is called, is rooted in the Second Commandment. *The Shorter Catechism* asserts that we are forbidden to worship God, not only by physical graven images, but also “in any other way not appointed in His Word” (Ans 51).

The Westminster Assembly was following Scripture’s own exposition of the Second Commandment. Abel’s sacrifice was “more excellent” than Cain’s, not only because blood-shedding spoke of Christ’s death, but also because it was offered “by faith” (Heb 11:4) – that is, in accordance with what God had appointed, for faith can lean only on what God has revealed. Nadab and Abihu’s worship was rejected as “strange fire before the Lord” because it was that “which He commanded them not” (Lev 10:1). Uzzah was slain because the Ark of the Covenant was not brought to Jerusalem “after the due order” (1 Chr 15:13). Jeroboam received the infamous epitaph that he caused the children of Israel to sin, not only because he set up literal graven images (the golden calves), but also because he ordained a feast of his own without God’s appointment, “in the month which he had devised of his own heart” (1 Ki 12:33).

In the New Testament, the regulative principle still applies. Only what God has appointed is to be done in worship. Christ condemned the Pharisees for adding their own traditions to worship, such as ceremonial hand-washing. As a result, He said, “In vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mk 7:7). When commissioning His Church to make disciples of all nations, Christ prescribed clear limits: “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Mt 28:20). The Church is not to teach or observe worship that He has not appointed. Paul was afraid that his gospel labours in Galatia had been in vain, not only because they were requiring circumcision but also because they were observing “days, and months, and times, and years” (Gal 4:10) which had been appointed by God only for ceremonial worship under the Mosaic economy of the Old Testament, but never for Christian worship. Likewise in Colosse, to follow “the doctrines and commandments of men” is condemned as “will worship” (Col 2:22-23) – that is, worship according to man’s will, not God’s will.

The Regulative Principle must be applied to the question of musical instruments in Christian worship. No element of worship, whether instrumental music or any other, is the “neutral” matter the Dutch approach declares it to be or the open matter the Lutheran/Anglican approach thinks it is. Either it is to be used, if God’s Word says so; or it is not to be used, if God’s Word gives no warrant for it. God willing, the next article will demonstrate that instrumental music was part of the ceremonial and typical system of the Old Testament. When that temporary system was abrogated in the coming of Christ, its typical rituals were abrogated too, so instrumental music no longer has God’s sanction for inclusion in His worship. It is extraordinarily strange that the vast majority of those claiming to follow Scripture refuse to follow Scripture when it comes to instrumental music, which they intrude on Christ’s house without any sanction from the Word.

2. Their Use in Old Testament History

Musical instruments were invented in an entirely secular context, for it was Jubal, seven generations from Adam and son of ungodly Lamech, who “was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ” (Gen 4:21). So neither Adam nor Eve in the sinless worship of Eden, nor men like Abel and Enoch in their spiritual worship afterwards, could have used them. Neither do we have any record of subsequent patriarchs such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph using them in worship.

Yet instruments were used for secular purposes. Ungodly Laban chided Jacob for leaving without a family celebration: “Wherefore didst thou flee away secretly, and steal away from me; and didst not tell me, that I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabret and harp?” (Gen 31:27). Job speaks of carnal men at harvest time, who “take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ” (Job 21:12). But for two and a half millennia – more than half of the Old Testament dispensation – no musical instrument was used in God’s worship!

Instruments were used to express patriotic joy at times of national deliverance. “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances” (Ex 15:20). She was celebrating Israel’s recent deliverance at the Red Sea, not engaging in formal worship, nor setting a pattern for it. For only women were involved, whereas Israel’s public worship was always to be conducted by men. Also they danced as well as used these percussion instruments called timbrels; and dancing was never appointed for the solemn worship of God.[15]

Instruments and worship were not brought together until the time of Moses. In Numbers 10:1-2, “The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Make thee two trumpets of silver”. In addition to secular uses,[16] the Lord appointed them to be used in worship: “Ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings” (Num 10:10). This being the first time instruments were to be used in worship, the lessons are vital.

1. The first use of instruments in worship was expressly instituted by God. He did not leave it to men to introduce them. Prescribing elements of worship is always God’s prerogative; only He has the right to do it, and that includes the use or non-use of instruments. This sets a precedent. God does not leave His Church, at any period of its existence, to decide whether instruments should be used in worship. We may use them in Christian worship only if Scripture shows that this is His will.

2. God specified the exact number and kind of instruments that were to be used: two trumpets, made of silver. Even when God did require instruments in worship, He did not leave men to choose what instruments to use. The idea that God has left the Christian Church free to choose the instruments that it thinks most suitable, whether an organ or anything else, is unscriptural.

3. From their very first use in worship, instruments were to be used only in connection with animal sacrifices – “over your burnt offerings, and over the

sacrifices of your peace offerings". This connection with sacrifice remained throughout the rest of the Old Testament dispensation. When Christ sacrificed Himself on the accursed tree, thereby putting an end to animal sacrifices, that necessarily brought an end to the use of instruments in worship. To go on using them now is contrary to the finished nature of Christ's work.

4. Only the priests were to play the trumpets. "The sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow with the trumpets" (v8). This reinforces the connection with the typical service of the Old Testament. Playing instruments in worship was a priestly activity, and when the priesthood ended with the sacrifice of Christ, the great High Priest, the instruments ended too.

5. The first use of instruments in worship did not accompany congregational singing of praise. The Mosaic ritual gives no warrant for using instruments to accompany singing as is done in many Christian churches today.

From Moses until David, we have no record of instruments being used in worship in any other way, not even during the four degenerate centuries of the Judges, when "every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Jdg 17:6). We have Saul meeting "a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp, before them" who prophesied (1 Sam 10:5); and, later, the prophet Elisha asking for a minstrel to play an instrument, and then prophesying (in 2 Ki 3:15-16). Neither of these were part of formal, congregational worship. Both involved only prophets, not priests, without any connection to the tabernacle or temple. The prophetic office was temporary, pointing to the temporary nature of instruments in the things of God. No one was singing, so this lends no support for using instruments to accompany congregations today in their singing of praise.

It is not until David's time that we meet with instruments in worship on a grander scale. Significantly, for those who find it hard to conceive of singing praise without musical accompaniment, by that time only about one quarter of the Old Testament dispensation remained. The best harpist in Israel, David, was chosen to play for the King. "David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him" (1 Sam 16:23). This secular use of music to lift Saul's mood had nothing to do with worship.

It took two attempts to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The first failed because it was not done according to God's appointed will. Referring to

the death of Uzzah, David confessed, “The Lord our God made a breach upon us, for that we sought Him not after the due order” (1 Chr 15:13).

On the second, successful, attempt, “all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the cornet, and with trumpets, and with cymbals, making a noise with psalteries and harps” (1 Chr 15:28). This use of instruments was strictly regulated: “David spake to the chief of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers with instruments of music, psalteries and harps and cymbals, sounding, by lifting up the voice with joy” (v16). David was now painstakingly careful to follow the “due order”, doing exactly and only what God had revealed to him: even down to the very instruments used.

As always, the instruments were used on that occasion only in connection with typical, temporary institutions: not only the ark and the Levites, but also sacrifice, for “it was so, that when they that bare the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed oxen and fatlings” (2 Sam 6:13); and when they reached their destination, “they offered burnt sacrifices and peace offerings before God” (1 Chr 16:1). There was shouting too. If this gives authority for using instruments today, then churches should shout as well as sing, and have numerous instruments, not one, including crashing cymbals.

Matthew Henry comments: “This way of praising God by musical instruments had not hitherto been in use. But David, being a prophet, instituted it by divine direction, and added it to the other *carnal ordinances* of that dispensation, as the apostle calls them (Heb 9:10). The New Testament keeps up singing of psalms, but has not appointed church-music.”[17]

With the ark safely installed in Jerusalem, David ordered the worship connected with it: “He appointed certain of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, and to record, and to thank and praise . . . with psalteries and with harps . . . Asaph made a sound with cymbals; Benaiah also and Jahaziel the priests with trumpets continually before the ark of the covenant of God” (1 Chr 16:4-6). This worship, centring on the ark, the Levites and the priests, was ceremonial. Again, instrumental music is part of the typical system of the Old Testament, which was brought to an end with Christ’s finished work.

God instructed David exactly how the temple was to be built and its worship conducted. “David gave to Solomon . . . the pattern of all that he had by the Spirit, of the courts of the house of the Lord . . . also for the courses of the priests and the Levites, and for all the work of the service of the house of the

Lord All this, said David, the Lord made me understand in writing by His hand upon me, even all the works of this pattern” (1 Chr 28:11-13,19). Everything David introduced was expressly sanctioned by God, including the musical instruments. None of it came from his own imagination. What he had, he “had by the Spirit”. His understanding was “by His hand upon me”. The whole pattern was from the Lord.

The temple was dedicated to the Lord with worship that included instruments: “Also the Levites which were the singers, all of them of Asaph, of Heman, of Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, being arrayed in white linen, having cymbals and psalteries and harps, stood at the east end of the altar, and with them an hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets . . . the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord; and . . . they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord” (2 Chr 5:12-13).

Although the “trumpeters and singers were as one”, this is not a blueprint for instruments to accompany congregational singing in New Testament Churches. This accompanied singing was a function of the temporary, Levitical priesthood, on this occasion in their ceremonial attire of “white linen”. “Four thousand” of them were appointed, who “praised the Lord with the instruments which I made, said David, to praise therewith” (1 Chr 23:5). Just as the Levitical priesthood was brought to an end by the finished work of Christ, so of necessity was Levitical playing of instruments.

For the next millennium, until the advent of the Saviour, the worship of God was to continue just the way that David left it. The instruments that he introduced, the manner in which they were to be used, who was to play them, and at what times, remained constant.

After Jehoshaphat’s victory over the Ammonites, the Israelites “came to Jerusalem with psalteries and harps and trumpets unto the house of the Lord” (2 Chr 20:27-28). That house was of course the temple, with its ceremonial service. Again, they were “Levites, of the children of the Kohathites, and of the children of the Korhites, [who] stood up to praise the Lord God of Israel with a loud voice on high” (2 Chr 20:19). This was not a case of instrumental music accompanying the whole congregation singing, as is done in so many churches today.

Hezekiah restored God’s worship. “He set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, 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. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt offering upon the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued until the burnt offering was finished" (2 Chr 29:25-28). "So the service of the house of the Lord was set in order" (2 Chr 29:35).

As before, instruments were used only as previously instituted by God, which we now learn had been revealed by God through His prophets Gad and Nathan, as well as David. None of the instruments had been introduced into God's worship at David's personal whim, but only by the express appointment of God. Again, the connection with the temporary, sacrificial system is emphasised. The instruments, played by certain Levites, were sounded only during the actual offering of the sacrifices. Both the singing and the instruments fell silent as soon as the sacrifices were ended (see 2 Chr 29:28). We think there was something illustrative in that. The singing of God's praise is to continue to the end of time, but singing accompanied with musical instruments was to finish as soon as Christ's sacrifice was finished.

When the Jews returned from captivity, they began work on a replacement temple. "When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel" (Ezra 3:10). They used their instruments in accordance with what God had appointed through David – the appointed people using the appointed instruments in the appointed context.

When Jerusalem's wall was rebuilt, again the celebration included the use of instruments: "At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps" (Neh 12:27). Instruments were to be used in this worship; so the Levites had to be gathered. It was connected with the temple and sacrifices, for they "gave thanks in the house of God" (Neh 12:40) and "that day they offered great sacrifices" (Neh 12:43). All was expressly "according to the commandment of David, and of Solomon his son" (Neh 12:45).

This brief review of Old Testament history has established that musical instruments were used in worship only when expressly appointed by God, and are always mentioned in the closest possible connection with the typical, ceremonial aspects of that dispensation. We would expect, therefore, that when the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices at the temple were finished, at the coming of Christ, the instruments were also to finish. In the next article, God willing, we will go to the New Testament, where we will find it confirmed that musical instruments are no longer to be used in worship. In Christian worship, God's praise is to be offered with the voice alone.

3. The Evidence of the New Testament

The four Gospels and the Book of Acts often take us into the worship services of the Jewish synagogue. It was not possible for all Israel to go up to worship in the temple at Jerusalem every Sabbath. That was done three times a year in connection with the prescribed feasts. For the rest of the year, the Jews congregated for public worship in their local synagogues throughout the land. What happened in the synagogues is highly significant, because Christian worship grew, under divine direction, out of the synagogues, not the temple.

Unlike temple worship, with its elaborate ceremonies, what strikes the reader of the New Testament about synagogue worship is its plain and unadorned character. We read of solemn gatherings for prayer, Scripture reading and exposition. The synagogue knew of no separation into a holy and a most holy place, with a veil dividing the two. We look in vain for an ark, a mercy seat, and representations of cherubims with outstretched wings. We find no altar, and we see no animal sacrifices offered there.

Instead of the temple's brazen altar with its blood and fire, synagogue worshippers heard the Old Testament read, setting forth the significance of the sacrifice of Christ. Instead of gazing on the gorgeous garments of the high priestly sons of Aaron, synagogue worshippers heard from the Word the descriptions of Christ's priestly work. Instead of seeing the high priest enter the most holy place once a year with sacrificial blood, those present at synagogue worship heard the Scripture prophecies of Christ entering into glory on the basis of the work that He would accomplish on earth.

Likewise, in the synagogues we meet with no Levitical choirs singing praise to the accompaniment of multiple instruments. Instead of listening to the tuned voices of divinely appointed professionals, synagogue worshippers would themselves have sung the praise of God, unadorned by the sound of

instrumental accompaniment. Secular literature confirms this. “Instruments of music were not used in synagogues until modern times. Orthodox Jewish synagogues still do not use them because, as they still testify, this ‘serves to distinguish the synagogue from the temple’.”[18]

The New Testament evidence regarding synagogue worship gives no support then to the advocates of instrumental music in Christian worship. Synagogue services were not ceremonial and typical like those in the temple; they contained no priestly or sacrificial elements. Therefore they did not include the typical ceremony of playing musical instruments. They sang God’s praise from the Psalms, but they sang without accompaniment. Like the synagogues, churches are to worship God “in spirit and in truth”, without the burden of Old Testament ceremonies. Therefore churches are to have no instruments to accompany their singing of God’s praise.

Of course, neither do the New Testament accounts give any indication that there was singing in synagogue worship. But the positive warrant for the unaccompanied singing of psalms in New Testament worship is not based on the accounts of synagogue worship. Rather, it is based on passages like those in Ephesians and Colossians (dealt with below) that expressly require it. There are no such texts to give any positive warrant for using musical instruments in the worship of the Christian Church. In matters of worship, silence speaks loudly. Musical instruments were not used in synagogue worship, neither before nor after Christ’s work was accomplished. Therefore there is no justification for using them in Christian worship.

Christ “sung an hymn” with His apostles after instituting the Lord’s Supper (see Mt 26:30). This is accepted to be the “Hallel”, the six Psalms from 113 to 118, which the Jews ordinarily sang at the Passover. No mention is made of instruments being used at any point in that first sacramental celebration of Christ’s death. Clearly, especially in the pressing circumstances of that night in which Christ was betrayed, the singing in that upper room was without accompaniment. It is strange that many include in their worship connected with the Lord’s Supper an organ or piano which the Lord neither appointed nor Himself used. As there is no warrant in God’s Word for using a musical instrument in Christian worship in general, so there is no warrant for using it in connection with the Lord’s Table.

In Philippi’s prison, “Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God” (Acts 16:25). They had been suddenly and violently arrested, whipped with many stripes, thrown into the deepest part of the prison and had their feet secured

“fast in the stocks”. It was now the darkness of midnight. Yet they were singing praise. These had to be some of the sweetest praises the Saviour ever received. Yet no one would suggest that they used musical instruments. The circumstances made that impossible. The lesson is clear: musical instruments are altogether unnecessary for Christian praise. Paul and Silas did not need them. Singing without accompaniment was natural to these two New Testament Christians. Even in a prison cell, they were perfectly at home praising the Lord, because singing without accompaniment was no strange thing.

There were serious problems in the church at Corinth. Paul’s first epistle addressed many of them. In chapter 14, he emphasised that everything in worship must be done for edification, and that meant it must be understandable. Therefore he ruled out the use of unknown tongues unless they were interpreted into a language that the congregation could understand. The only sounds admissible in Christian worship are those which convey meaning to the human understanding. “When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation” (1 Cor 14:26). Not a musical instrument, notice! No one in Corinth was bringing an instrument along to worship.

Paul uses the idea of instruments to illustrate his teaching. “Even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” (1 Cor 14:7,8). In certain contexts, such as an army preparing to enter battle, distinct previously agreed sounds blown by the army’s trumpeter have meaning. Musical instruments used in general for accompanying New Testament praise cannot have that specific, meaningful significance. They are “things without life”. Bringing them into the spiritual life of New Testament worship is an unwarrantable intrusion.

Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor at Geneva, applied the point: “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, and seldom strike the understanding even of the performers themselves”.^[19]

Paul told the Ephesians: Be “speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:19). Because the Greek word translated “making melody”, *psallo*, is drawn

from the idea of twanging a stringed instrument, some say this gives warrant for using instruments in New Testament worship. Such reasoning must be rejected. The word *psallo* was used in Greek literature in contexts where instruments were clearly not involved.[20] In Scripture too, evidently instruments were not in view when Paul used the word twice to say, “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Cor 14:15). He was speaking about the words he would sing, not wordless instruments to accompany the singing.

Besides this, the Apostle requires this music to be made “in [or with] your heart”. This is not an instrument that can be held in the hands! It is to be a spiritual exercise within the soul. This is “not the music of the lyre, but the melody of the heart”, as it has been put.[21] The believer’s soul must be like a well-tuned instrument as he praises his Lord and Saviour. The heart, tuned by grace, is the only instrument to be played in New Testament worship. Anyone having this must surely look on an unfeeling machine (which at best is all an instrument can be) as an unworthy accompaniment, and even as an unwelcome imposter, in the spiritual worship of the New Testament dispensation.

Paul’s teaching to the Colossians was the same: “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” (Col 3:16). When Christians sing psalms to the Lord, they are to sing, not with carnal instruments, but with the spiritual instrument of the heart moved by grace: “singing with grace in your hearts”. When they sing praise, “the word of Christ” is to dwell within their souls “in all wisdom”, not accompanied by some musical instrument, however skilfully it is played. The result is to be mutual “teaching and admonishing”, which can be achieved only by the intelligible words of the psalms they sing, not by the unintelligible sounds produced by a musical instrument.

Nowhere is the transition to new dispensation worship asserted more explicitly than in the Epistle to the Hebrews. There we read: “By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name” (Heb 13:15). Christians are not to offer blood sacrifices, but the bloodless sacrifice of praise. Equally, they are not to use mechanical instruments when they offer that praise, but only “the fruit of our lips” – the sound of their own unaccompanied voices. New Testament spiritual sacrifices of praise are not to be accompanied by mechanical instruments, as the Old Testament blood sacrifices were. The “therefore” refers to the context:

in the light of the doing away of ceremonial elements like the altar, let Christians offer praise without the instruments that were always and only ceremonial and typical. Rather, let them use their lips alone. They live in the age of fulfilment. “By Him” – that is, by Christ who has come and fulfilled all the types and ceremonies, including musical instruments – they have access to bring spiritual sacrifices to God.

Peter supports this teaching. Christians are “a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5). Unlike the priesthood of the Old Testament, which depended on being part of the “house” or family of Aaron and was confined to the Levites, all Christians have been made priests spiritually, through the Holy Spirit’s work setting them apart to God by the mediation of Christ. Christians have sacrifices to offer, but these are not the physical sacrifices of animal blood offered during the Old Testament. Christian sacrifices are “spiritual”. Linked with the texts already mentioned, there is no room in Christian worship for mechanical instruments. Christians are to use only spiritual instruments in their praises. Using mechanical instruments in Christian worship is effectively a denial of one of the New Testament dispensation’s greatest privileges – its spirituality, contrasted with the “carnal ordinances” imposed on Old Testament believers.

James asks, “Is any merry?” His advice to such a person is clear: “Let him sing psalms” (Jas 5:13). During the Old Testament period, a chief purpose of playing instruments was to express joy. “With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King” (Ps 98:6). But James does not tell the joyful New Testament believer to use an instrument. He tells him to sing – only to sing. Now that the New Testament fulness of joy has arrived, its joy is to be expressed with the voice, not typified with an instrument.

The Book of Revelation speaks of trumpets (Rev 1:10, Rev 4:1, Rev 8:13, Rev 9:14), and harps (Rev 5:8, Rev 14:2, Rev 15:2). But it also speaks of what are obviously ceremonial aspects of worship such as an altar (Rev 6:9), incense (Rev 8:4), the ark (Rev 11:19) and the Lamb (Rev 5:6). The truth is, “none of these are to be taken literally”[22] – not the altar, not the incense, not the ark, nor the lamb – not the trumpet, nor the harp either. The trumpet in Rev 4:1 is said to be a “voice . . . as it were of a trumpet”. Along with the harps in Rev 5:8, there are “golden vials full of odours”, which are said to be “the prayers of saints”. The references to instruments in Revelation are symbolic. Never do they refer to the literal worship of the Christian Church on earth. The final book of the Bible uses the language of old covenant worship to describe both

the spiritual worship of the new covenant Church and the celestial worship of heaven.

This review of the Biblical evidence shows clearly that the use of musical instruments in the worship of God was always confined to the ceremonial and sacrificial worship of the Old Testament. With the types fulfilled in the coming of Christ, musical instruments have no place in Christian worship. The New Testament gives no precept or example for using them.

Those who want to use musical instruments raise objections against this teaching of Scripture. We will seek to answer those now.

4. Objections Answered

Musical instruments were introduced and used in the worship of God only as and when God Himself appointed them. As the Old Testament's ceremonial system grew more elaborate, especially with the building of the temple in Jerusalem, so did the instrumental accompaniment to God's praise. But when Christ came and finished His work, the whole ceremonial system was abolished, including the use of musical instruments. Accordingly, the New Testament makes no provision for their use in the worship of the Christian Church.

However, many churches today include instruments in their worship. They seek to justify their practice by raising objections against the teaching of Scripture outlined so far. This article seeks to answer those objections.

1. Some people *appeal to the Psalms as a warrant for using instruments*. Is it not arbitrary, they say, to sing Old Testament Psalms and reject the musical instruments often mentioned in the same Psalms? "Praise the Lord with harp: sing unto Him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings" (Ps 33:2). "Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery" (Ps 81:2). "Sing unto the Lord with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm" (Ps 98:5). Even some who rarely or never use the Psalms in their praise are ready to resort to such verses to justify using instruments.

The answer to this is clear. The Psalms, written during the age of types and ceremonies, naturally employ typical and ceremonial language. Some mention Jerusalem and the temple: "I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord's house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem" (Ps 116:18-19). Some speak of animal sacrifices and the altar: "Then shalt Thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with

burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon Thine altar” (Ps 51:19). Some refer to the feasts: “Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day” (Ps 81:3).

All these things have been abolished in the New Testament. The Christian Church is not to base her worship on the temple in Jerusalem, offer blood sacrifices on an altar, or keep the Jewish feasts. Although mentioned in the Psalms, these ceremonies were temporary, being withdrawn when Christ completed His work. Musical instruments are precisely the same. Even though mentioned in the Psalms, their physical use in worship was connected with the temple in Jerusalem and the priestly sacrifices; so they too were brought to an end in Christ.

Psalm 150 is a favourite for those who advocate instruments in Christian worship. However, the Hallelujah psalms which close the Psalter are full of symbolism. Psalm 148 would have sun, moon, stars, fire, hail, snow, wind, mountains, trees, animals and birds, all praising the Lord! Psalm 150 itself would have everything that breathes joining in the praise (Ps 150:6). Clearly, this final Psalm’s list of trumpet, psaltery, harp, timbrel, stringed instruments, organs and cymbals should not be pressed too literally.

In any case, if Psalm 150 is a blueprint for Christian worship, then a single organ or piano would not suffice. Instruments would have to be multiplied: not one organ but “organs”, in the plural, along with all the rest. That would make music groups, or even whole orchestras, more Scriptural than a single organ or piano! Likewise, it would require dancing as well as instrument playing, for the same Psalm says, “Praise Him with the timbrel and dance” (Ps 150:4). Clearly, appealing to such a Psalm to justify the use of instrumental accompaniment in New Testament praise would prove far too much for many of its advocates.

2. Some assert that *musical instruments improve the worship of the New Testament Church*. To them, the singing of God’s praise sounds better when accompanied with instruments than unaccompanied.

The first and altogether sufficient answer to this is that it is irrelevant what men think sounds good. In worship, the only sound that pleases God comes from worship that He has appointed. For Christian worship, that is the whole congregation singing with the unaccompanied human voice – for that is the only “instrument” that He tells us to use in the the New Testament age (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16).

In effect, those who voice this objection are setting their own personal taste against the revealed will of God. They want musical accompaniment because in their opinion it improves the worship, regardless of the fact that the Lord has not required it in His Word. "What then, is the improvement? It resolves itself into this – many like it, and therefore they must have it." [23]

3. Some argue that *a mechanical device, such as an organ or piano, is necessary for orderly, tuneful singing, especially in larger congregations.*

In reply to this, if musical instruments really were necessary for the human voice to sing in an orderly manner, surely the God of order, who is "not the author of confusion" (1 Cor 14:33), would have thought of that and authorised their use. But also, it is false to say that congregations, even large ones, cannot sing appropriately without the help of a musical instrument. At the annual Mbuma Zending meeting in Holland, a congregation of some 5000 people sing unaccompanied without any problem at all. Back in the days when thousands gathered in the open air to communion seasons in Scotland, there were a number of precentors scattered through the large congregation. Where there's a will, there's a way. If any Christian congregation cannot sing suitably yet, the solution is for them to learn to do it, not to resort to a method unauthorised by God.

4. Some say that *the sound of the organ or some other instrumental accompaniment helps them to worship, by putting them into a spiritual frame.* It sets the mood, they say, for singing God's praise with the right attitude.

This is mystical and therefore invalid. Inanimate noise cannot in and of itself produce worship that is "in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:23). The best way to set the mood for singing the psalm in an appropriate way is for the one leading the worship to read the words before they are sung. It has rightly been said, "Devotional feelings cannot be produced but by conveying spiritual devotional thoughts to the soul, and those are not producible by the pipes of an organ". [24]

5. Some point to *the absence in the New Testament of an express statement to the effect that musical instruments are not to be used in Christian worship.* It is argued that if Christians were not to use instruments, surely they would have been expressly told this. Usually, this point is raised only by those for whom instrumental music is a vital element of their worship.

We accept that the New Testament contains no express statement abolishing musical instruments in worship. But it is far from silent about abolishing the ceremonial system of worship that prevailed in the Old Testament. Musical instruments were part and parcel of that system; so when the system went, they went too, along with all its constituent elements.

6. Some argue that *musical instruments are a mere circumstance of worship rather than a real element of worship itself*, and therefore they can be used or not used as the Church sees fit, according to the common activities of men all over the world when they sing.

In reply, we agree with the *Westminster Confession* when it acknowledges that there are such circumstances: “There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God . . . common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed” (1:6).

However, God Himself did not treat instruments as mere circumstances surrounding worship, but as elements of substance in it. They had no place in Old Testament worship until He put them in it by His express command. When their presence increased in connection with temple worship, again it was only by His express appointment. In other words, God exercised total control over the matter; He did not leave it to His worshippers to bring in instruments “by the light of nature”. In exercising that control over instruments in His worship, God never put them into New Testament worship.

In addition, to class something as a mere circumstance rather than a substantial element of worship, it must be common to human society and also necessary. Appointing a suitable time and place to meet for public worship is a circumstance of worship, because without that no gathering of people could be possible, and is done for all orderly public meetings. But accompanying singing with instruments is not necessary: it may be done, but it does not need to be done.

7. Some point to *musical instruments as symbols of joy*. Therefore they say that, in the Christian dispensation, which affords more joy to believers than under the Old Testament, instruments should have a part in worship, and indeed a more prominent part.

It is true that instruments were used in temple worship to represent spiritual joy, at least in part. “With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise

before the Lord, the King” (Ps 98:6). As part of ceremonial worship, musical instruments were types of that gospel joy, the increase of which was reserved for the New Testament dispensation. But that is not the same as saying that joy should still be expressed in the Old Testament way.

Musical instruments were part of the system of “carnal ordinances” (Heb 9:10). A carnal, or fleshly, joy can come from the sound of musical instruments. This is not the same as the spiritual joy experienced by a sincere Christian enjoying fellowship with his Saviour. Instruments, along with all the rites and ceremonies of the Old Testament, were “imposed on them until the time of reformation” (Heb 9:10). Christians are free of that yoke. It is part of their greater privileges and freedoms that they worship without instruments.

In the New Testament dispensation, Christians have the joy itself, not the symbols of it. Only two symbols have been appointed for New Testament worship: the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It is not for the Church to add others. The gospel day has arrived; let Christians rejoice and be glad in it, by singing praise from their hearts, not by imitating it by using mechanical devices that were just a picture of it, and always meant to pass away. “Is any merry?” asks James in his Epistle (Jas 5:13). The reply could not be more characteristic of New Testament worship: “Let him sing psalms” – not play instruments!

8. Some say that *it does not matter, and that musical instruments in Christian worship should not be made an issue*. For the sake of unity, it is argued, let the issue just be dropped.

For one thing, it is at best only a specious form of unity that can be achieved by ignoring differences in worship. It is *disunity*, and a breach of Christian unity, when one church worships one way, and another church worships another way. True Christian unity is unachievable without Biblical uniformity in doctrine, worship and government. All must agree on musical instruments. Either all must accept them, or all must reject them. Until then, there is a Scriptural duty to contend for the truth.

This last objection also fails to comprehend the importance to the Lord of the regulative principle of worship. For the honour of the Head of the Church, pure worship must be contended for most earnestly. It matters to Christ; therefore it should matter to us. Nadab and Abihu found to their cost that the Lord takes it very seriously when people intrude things into His worship “which He commanded them not” (Lev 10:1). Musical instruments in the worship of the

Christian Church are an equivalent to that strange fire. It is no love to fellow professing Christians to fail to warn them.

To conclude, when these objections are seen for what they are, none of them can overthrow or undermine the position that there is no Scriptural warrant for the use of musical instruments in New Testament worship. The Christian Church should never use them and we should never involve ourselves in their use.

1 *A cappella* is an Italian musical notation, meaning “according to the way of the chapel”. This shows the degree to which unaccompanied singing was historically associated with the Church’s way of singing.

2 G I Williamson, *Instrumental Music in Worship: Commanded or Not Commanded?*, downloaded on 29 January 2016 from <http://www.westminsterconfession.org/worship/instrumental-music-in-worship-commanded-or-not-commanded.php>.

3 John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, Richmond VA, 1888, p 162.

4 John Price, *Old Light on New Worship*, Simpson Publishing Company, 2005, p 86. Price is a Reformed Baptist, and provides a thorough and helpful review of the history of instrumental music in Christian worship. His work is marred, not only by the use of modern versions of the Bible, but also by a futile attempt to claim unity between those who exclude instruments altogether and those who use only one instrument to “aid the pitch and meter in singing” (p 15), arguing that they “share the same theological convictions and a high regard for the regulative principle of worship” (p 16). According to Price, it seems that the only real problem is to have more than one instrument. Rather, the Second Commandment is broken by using even one.

5 *Calvin’s Commentary*, Baker Book House, 1984, vol 5, p 98.

6 *Calvin’s Commentary*, vol 4, p 539.

7 *The Works of John Knox*, ed David Laing, Edinburgh, 1895, vol 3, p 103, English updated.

8 Henry Bruinsma, *The Organ Controversy in the Netherlands Reformation to 1640*, in *The Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol 7, no 3 (Autumn

1954), p 207.

9 Bruinsma, p 208.

10 Hickman, *Apolog. pro Ejectis in Anglia Ministris*, quoted in editor's note, Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, Philadelphia, 1815, vol 4, p 87.

11 Bruinsma, p 209.

12 Bruinsma, p 210.

13 Bruinsma, p 212.

14 *A Choice Collection of Very Valuable Prefaces, Lectures, and Sermons by Rev James Renwick*, Glasgow, 1804, p 641, English updated.

15 It was the same later when Jephthah's daughter "came out to meet" her victorious father "with timbrels and with dances" (Jdg 11:34); and when David killed Goliath and "the women came out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of music. And the women answered one another as they played" (1 Sam 18:6,7).

16 "For the calling of the assembly, and for the journeying of the camps" (Num 10:2), and "if ye go to war" (Num 10:9).

17 *Matthew Henry's Commentary* on 1 Chronicles 15:1-24.

18 G I Williamson, *Instrumental Music in Worship: Commanded or Not Commanded?*, downloaded on 29 January 2016 from <http://www.westminsterconfession.org/worship/instrumental-music-in-worship-commanded-or-not-commanded.php>. The quote is from Gilbert and Tarcov, *Your Neighbour Celebrates*, p 93.

19 Quoted in John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, Richmond VA, 1888, p 166.

20 "This attempt to fix the meaning of the word as implying playing instead of singing, as used by the New Testament writers, was thoroughly set aside by Dr Porteous, by a variety of evidence, one part of which is thus concluded: 'From these quotations from the Greek fathers, the three first of whom flourished in

the fourth century – men of great erudition, well skilled in the phraseology and language of Scripture, perfectly masters of the Greek tongue, which was then written and spoken with purity in the countries where they resided; men, too, who for conscience sake would not handle the Word of God deceitfully, it is evident that the Greek word *psallo* signified in their time singing with the voice alone’.” James Begg, *The Use of Organs*, quoted in John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music*, pp 116,117.

21 “The contrast is between the heathen and the Christian practice, ‘Let your songs be not the drinking songs of heathen feasts, but psalms and hymns; and their accompaniment, not the music of the lyre, but the melody of the heart’ [Conybeare and Howson]” (*Jamieson, Fausset and Brown’s Commentary*, Hartford, nd, on Ephesians 5:19).

22 G I Williamson, *Instrumental Music in Worship: Commanded or Not Commanded?*.

23 John M’Donald, *Instrumental Music in Religious Worship*, in James Kerr & John M’Donald, *The Voice of His Praise*, James Begg Society reprint, 1999, p 24.

24 John M’Donald, *Instrumental Music in Religious Worship*, in *The Voice of His Praise*, p 24.