

Discussions on Instrumental Music in Worship (Part 2)

Examining the Scriptures

By Byron Fike
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Review of the Plan

1. Last week (February 12), we examined why the topic of instrumental music in worship is difficult to discuss. Basically it is because it is part of our identity as a Church of Christ. We are the non-instrumental Churches of Christ, and that distinguishes us as something a little different than other groups. I really think that is the primary reason this is such a tricky topic for us to consider.
2. Tonight (February 19), we are going to talk about the scriptures. We will survey the Old Testament, glance at three passages in Revelation, spend more time in the New Testament, and then take a quick look at church history.
3. Next Week (February 26), we are going to pull all this information together and talk about relevance. What do we do with all of this? And, where do we go from here?
4. On March 4, our topic will be, “The Voice of the Congregation.”

“Does someone have an agenda?” Yes. Our agenda is that we can have meaningful dialog on a difficult topic. Whether any changes take place, or whether we are all just better informed about things; if we have honest, loving discussions with one another, we will have achieved our goal.

Book Recommendations

1. Rubel Shelly, *Sing His Praise! A Case for A Capella Music as Worship Today*. This book was written in 1987, early in Shelly’s transformation from strict conservative to progressive. Around the same time, he wrote a transitional book, *I Just Want to Be a Christian*. During this period of his life, Shelly is thinking through and modifying his understanding of Christianity. A friend of his described *I Just Want To Be a Christian* as having been written by “a legalist trying to think his way out of legalism.” In *Sing His Praise!*, Shelly presents some traditional arguments that have been used by Churches of Christ for singing Acapella. He does this without sinking into judgmental and sectarian attitudes that have often come to characterize such presentations. I don’t know if he would agree today with the conclusions he wrote in 1987, but he presents his case in a kind and loving way.
2. Everett Ferguson, *A Capella Music in Public Worship of the Church*. This is an older book written in 1972 but reprinted several times. Ferguson is a first-rate scholar and is highly respected in the academic community. This particular book is quoted more often than any other book I know of by those writing on the topic of Acapella vs. Instrumental music in worship.
3. Danny Corbitt, *Missing More Than Music: When Disputable Matters Eclipse Worship and Unity*, 2008. Danny was campus minister at University of Texas for many years and now worships with a church that combines instrumental and Acapella praise. His book was written to challenge traditional arguments.

I benefitted by reading each of these books, but found the conclusions were not always consistent with the evidence they presented. The book I would really like to recommend

has not been written or perhaps I just haven't found it yet, but if you were to read all of these books, you would have a pretty good balance. If you were just going to read one, I would recommend Corbitt's book. In his preface, he mentioned that he had to self-publish because, although he found Church of Christ publishers who agreed with his conclusions, they simply could not publish the work. In a footnote he wrote, "*One publisher would not read my manuscript because 'church politics would never allow me to print it.'* A former publisher explained that it would be 'commercial suicide' for anyone in the restoration movement to publish my work." I wanted to give you that footnote because that is precisely why we need to have these discussions. Anytime we are afraid to see our traditions challenged, that's a problem. I think we need to be honest and open and listen when people have things to say that might disagree with what we have historically believed and practiced.

Silence of the Scriptures

Historically, the pressing issue on this matter has been authority. The question has been phrased, "*Are instruments authorized to be used in the worship of the church?*" The discussions have centered on Scriptural silence. Instruments are used throughout the Old Testament as you will see in a moment. When you come to the book of Revelation, harps are pictured in the hands of saints around the throne of God, but in the other 26 New Testament books, no instruments are mentioned in connection of worship to God. Singing is mentioned, but there is no mention of instruments being used. You will not find a prohibition in the New Testament against using instruments, but there is also no statement telling us to use them. It is silent.

Last week, we talked about our traditional hermeneutic. A hermeneutic is a way to interpret scripture. Historically we used a particular hermeneutic to determine scriptural authority. To do this we looked for: Direct Commands, Approved Examples and Necessary Inferences. This approach was like reading the Bible through a grid to help us determine what was authorized and what was not. We took our interpretive grid and put it over the topic of instrumental music in worship and discovered:

- There is no direct command in scripture to use instruments
- There are no examples of instruments being used
- There is nothing necessary about using instruments because plainly you can sing without them.

Thus, the New Testament is silent on the question. As Shelly has written,

"The use or non-use of instrumental music in worship relates to a hermeneutical method (i.e. how to interpret the so called 'silence' of Scripture) rather than a difference of view concerning the sufficiency and authority of the Bible." (Rubel Shelly, Sing His Praise: A Case for A Capella Music as Worship Today, p. 20)

This is an important distinction to make. In talking about this issue (or any other issue), just because someone reaches a different conclusion than you do does NOT mean they do not believe the Bible. Rather, they may simply be using a different way of understanding the Bible than you do; hence, a different hermeneutic. People can be committed to the

authority of Scripture and reach different conclusions. In this case, the conclusion you reach will be determined by the way you interpret silence.

A Better Way to Read Scripture

Our tri-fold hermeneutic causes us to ask the question, “*Is silence prohibitive or permissive?*” I want you to think just a moment about the assumptions of that particular question. The underlying assumption is that silence has a purpose. When we believe this, every issue that involves silence becomes an “either, or” issue. Thus, every discussion turns into a debate with a right side and a wrong side. There is a better way to read scripture. The New Testament is not a constitution for the church as Thomas Campbell wrote in Declaration and Address many years ago. The New Testament is instead a collection of letters written, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to people and churches with real needs that needed some real answers. When you understand the New Testament like this, silence may be nothing more than saying that a particular issue is not under discussion. That is a better way to interpret silence.

Someone asked last week what hermeneutic I would recommend if we don’t use command, example and inference. We have to learn to read scripture in a way that enables us to hear what the original authors meant to communicate, rather than imposing a grid that will answer the questions we want answered. What was it that they were saying? What is their message? The last book I will recommend is *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth* written by two scholars, Fee and Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All it’s Worth* gives basic teaching on how to interpret different types of literature found in the Bible. You don’t read a letter, for instance, in the same way you read a Psalm. You don’t read prophecy the same way you read Law. You don’t read parables the same way you read historical narratives. Fee and Stuart will help you develop some ways to read different types of literature so that you can understand what the author was seeking to communicate. That is what I mean by a better way to read scripture.

Quick Survey of Old Testament

When one considers the Bible as a whole, one cannot say it is silent on the topic of instrumental music in worship. We are going to quickly survey the Old Testament and then we will look at the New Testament.

- The first mention of musical instruments in scripture is in connection with **Jubal**, son of Lamech. “*He was the father of all who played stringed instruments and pipes.*” (Genesis 4:21) There is no indication if this creation was good or bad, it’s just a matter of fact.
- The first mention of instruments used in worship was after God’s miraculous deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian army.

*“Then **Miriam** the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.’” (Exodus 15:20-21)*

It appears that the celebration was a spontaneous outpouring of praise and thanksgiving for God's salvation.

- When the timid Benjaminite **Saul** was privately anointed king of Israel by Samuel, he was told he would soon meet some prophets. The way he would recognize them was the multitude of musical instruments he would see and hear.

“As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, timbrels, pipes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come on you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person.” (1 Samuel 10:5-6)

There is no indication that instruments were commanded to be used. There is also no indication that God had any displeasure with them being used.

- When the ark of God was brought to Jerusalem, **King David** ordered instruments to be played and also that choirs sing as the ark approached the city.

“David told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their fellow Levites as musicians to make a joyful sound with musical instruments: lyres, harps and cymbals...” (1 Chronicles 15:16)

“Kenaniah...was in charge of the singing of the choirs...So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouts, with the sounding of rams' horns and trumpets, and of cymbals, and the playing of lyres and harps.” (1 Chronicles 15:27-29)

- In the **Psalms**, singing and playing musical instruments was strongly encouraged as an appropriate way to praise God.

“Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the LORD with the harp; make music for him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.” (Psalm 33:1-3)

- During **King Hezekiah's** reformation, he purified the temple so it could be used again in the worship of God. The Biblical writer casually mentions that God himself commanded the use of instruments in temple worship.

*“He stationed the Levites in the temple of the LORD with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet; **this way was commanded by the LORD through his prophets.**” (2 Chronicles 29:25)*

- **Amos** condemned the use of instruments, but not because their use was sinful; rather it was because the hearts of the worshippers were so corrupt.

“Woe to you who are complacent in Zion... You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments.” (Amos 6:1, 4-7)

“You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph. Therefore you will be among the first to go into exile, your feasting and lounging will end.” (Amos 6:6-7)

Exile to Babylon Changed How Israel Worshipped

In 586 B.C., the temple was destroyed and the Israelites were scattered. It was during this time that synagogues arose for the purpose of instructing people in the way of God. It appears that instruments of music were not used in the earliest synagogues. There may not have even been singing since their primary purpose was instruction in the Scriptures. There is some evidence that the exiles did not consider joyful singing to be appropriate under their circumstances.

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for song, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:1-4)

Survey of Revelation

Revelation is a highly symbolic letter written to seven deeply troubled churches near the end of the 1st century. There are three passages that present heavenly worship to include instruments:

- *“And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. And they sang a new song...” (Revelation 5:8-9)*
- *“And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne....” (Revelation 14:2-3)*
- *And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast They held harps given them by God and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb...” (Revelation 15:2-3)*

Nobody believes these are literal images. Some would argue that this shows God desires instruments in worship as this would be consistent with Old Testament practices. Others

say, no this is only to be interpreted symbolically. The golden bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints and the harps represent the songs of the saints. God no more wants harps than he wants golden bowls of incense in worship. Basically when it comes to these passages in Revelation; whatever you bring to them is what you will read out of them in regard to whether or not one should use instruments in Christian worship. As in all the New Testaments writings, the matter is simply not under discussion in these texts.

Survey of New Testament

Ten passages mention singing in the New Testament. In all of them there is no reference to a musical instrument begin used in Christian worship.

1. *“When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26)*
2. *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” (Acts 16:25)*
3. *“As it is written: ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of your name.’” (Romans 15:9, quoting Psalm 18:49)*
4. *“I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.” (1 Corinthians 14:15)*
5. *“What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” (1 Corinthians 14:26)*
6. *“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ...” (Ephesians 5:18-19)*
7. *“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” (Colossians 3:16)*
8. *“So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says, ‘I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.’” (Hebrews 2:11-12, quoting Psalm 22:22)*
9. *“Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.” (Hebrews 13:15)*
10. *“Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise.” (James 5:13)*

A Closer Look at Three Passages

Two texts, Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 have historically been used as proof texts for singing Acapella. The third text we will consider adds additional perspective to this discussion. As you read the texts below, ask yourself, “What is the author emphasizing?”

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make

music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:15-20)

This text is not specifically addressing a Christian worship assembly; rather it is talking about how to live in community with one another. Some might argue that singing to one another implies an assembly and I wouldn't disagree with that. But the emphasis is living the Christ-like life. Singing somehow is to help us live as the community of Christ.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

This passage has the same emphasis as the Ephesian text. We are to live in the community of Christ by growing in Christ-likeness. Paul does not appear to be concerned with instruments but with content. **What** we sing is more important than **how** we sing. We are to proclaim the richness of the message.

What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

This passage is obviously addressing a Christian assembly. Again, what is the emphasis? The author tells us everything must be done for edification or, in other words, building up the body of Christ. Interestingly, the New Testament never plainly instructs us to sing congregationally. This might be inferred from Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16 but even if those texts are related to assemblies, they don't necessitate congregational singing. Singing to one another could be one person singing to others. It could be a small group singing. We just don't have enough information to know exactly what type of singing occurred at these early assemblies.

This passage appears to be talking about a solo. The emphasis is not how the songs are sung, but the fact that edification must be occurring! That is the emphasis throughout the whole chapter of 1 Corinthians 14. Edification is not making people feel good; rather, it's working to develop faith, hope, and love (which Paul says are the greatest things of all). These are the things the New Testament authors are concerned about.

Letting these three passages (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; 1 Corinthians 14:26) speak to us, will take us much deeper than simply discussing whether we should use instruments or sing only Acapella. **The use or non use of instruments is a peripheral issue.** It is not at the heart of New Testament worship. If we will listen to the New Testament writers and let them speak to us, they will take us to the heart, and then we can begin to think more theologically. We will learn to ask questions, like:

- How well does our church music ground us in the faith?
- How adequately do our songs equip us in living the Christian life?

Why Did They Not Use Instruments?

It appears from our study of the New Testament that instruments were not used in the earliest Christian gatherings. If that assessment is true, it still does not tell us why they did not. The New Testament never gives us the answer, but there are some possibilities that people have proposed. Look over the list below and see which one's make sense to you.

- Instruments in worship were part of the “shadow” of the first covenant (along with animal sacrifice, incense, and special garments).
- Acapella music is more consistent with the nature of Christian worship than singing accompanied by instruments.
- Early Christians adopted the structure of the synagogue service. Instruments were forbidden to be used on the Sabbath since tuning an instrument constituted work. Thus, no instruments were used in the synagogues. Temple worship, where tuning an instrument was allowed on the Sabbath, was an exception to this general rule. This was because the Sadducees, who were in charge of the Temple, disagreed on this issue with the Pharisees who controlled the synagogues. If early Christians adopted the structure of the synagogue service they would have been non-instrumental. However, it is possible (probable?) they might have adopted the structure without accepting the Pharisees' arguments opposing the use of instruments.
- Instruments had a close connection with paganism which made them difficult for early Christians to use in worship

Historical Analysis

It appears that the earliest churches did not use instruments in worship. Early writers after the time of the New Testament wrote about singing, but they did not mention singing with instrumental accompaniment in their assemblies. There is no explanation for why they did not use them, and there is also no opposition to instruments mentioned in these early writings.

Ferguson has written that there is only one passage from the early church fathers which speaks unambiguously in favor of Christians playing a musical instrument. It's worthy of note because it's so obscure. A man by the name of Clement of Alexandria, who lived in the late 2nd century, wrote:

*“The Lord is now our congenial guest, for the Apostle adds again,
'teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms,*

hymns, and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatsoever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the father through him.’”

“This is our grateful revelry, and if you should wish to sing and play to the cithara and lyre, this is not blameworthy; you would imitate the just Hebrew king giving praise to God. ‘Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous! Praise befits the upright’ says the prophecy. ‘Praise the Lord on the cithara; make melody to him on the psaltery of ten strings! Sing to him a new song’.”

Ferguson interprets this passage to mean “one can sing even psalms to an instrument at home.” He adds, “Clement’s statement concerns what is done at a banquet in the home, not at a church service or even at an agape (love feast).” This is an interpretation because Clement nowhere explicitly states the occasions he is writing about. Corbitt challenges Ferguson’s interpretation,

“... If Clement believed that God condemned the use of instruments in praise, it is hard to argue that he would condone them anyway in certain worship contexts. Furthermore, the Biblical citations that Clement makes do not easily lend themselves to restricted settings.”

By late 4th century, writers began condemning the use of instruments in worship. Chrysostom writes,

“Many people take the mention of these instruments allegorically and say that the timbrel required the putting to death of our flesh, and that the psaltery requires us to look up to heaven. But I would say this, that in olden times they were thus led by these instruments because of the dullness of their understanding and their recent deliverance from idols. Just as God allowed animal sacrifices, so also he let them have these instruments, condescending to help their weakness.”

In the early 5th century, Theodoret (bishop of Cyrrhus in Syria) criticized instruments when he wrote,

“It is not simple singing that belongs to the childish state, but singing with lifeless instruments, with dancing, and with clappers. Hence the use of such instruments and the others that belong to the childish state is excluded from the singing in the churches, and simple singing is left.”

Concerning Old Testament practice, Theodoret, writes,

“Of old the Levites used these instruments as they hymned God in his holy Temple, not because God enjoyed their sound but because he accepted the intention of those involved. We hear God saying to the Jews that he does not take pleasure in singing and playing: ‘Take away from me the sound of your songs; to the voice of your instruments I will not listen’.”

“He allowed these things to happen because he wished to free the Jews from the error of idols. For since they were fond of play and laughter, and all these things took place in the temple of the idols, he permitted them...thus avoiding the greater evil by allowing the lesser.”

Theodoret goes so far as to call instruments in worship, “evil.”

It appears that instruments were not widely used in Christian worship until perhaps the 10th century. This was around the time the church split into east and west. The Western branch of Christendom, known as the Roman Catholic Church, used instruments. The Eastern Orthodox branch continued to be non-instrumental.

The reformers were also split over what to do with instrumental music in worship. Lutheran and Anglican churches continued to use instruments. Martin Luther had many positive things to say about their use. The Reformed and Anabaptist churches considered it a Catholic corruption. Today, most reformed churches have accepted instruments in worship.

Making Sense of it All

What conclusions do we draw? People can look at the same information, the same scriptures and reach different conclusions. To some, the historical argument is very persuasive. They might argue that we should follow the example of the early Christians. Others might read the Old Testament texts and be persuaded that instruments are a wonderful way to worship God. Still others might be persuaded by the arguments of the 5th century opponents that instruments never really pleased God, he simply permitted them for a time until the new covenant could be established.

Conclusions, by themselves, say nothing about motives, love for God, or desire to reach out to the community. Thus, we cannot judge one another simply because we might reach different conclusions.

After surveying the Scriptures, here are some things we can know for sure about instrumental music in worship:

- God never directly speaks against it
- There is no specific anti-instrument argument found in Scripture
- There is no direct statement that early Christians did not use instruments