

## The Use of Musical Instruments in Worship

### Introduction

1. There are many ‘churches’, including those claiming to belong to the Lord, that practice the use of mechanical instruments in public worship; believing it to be approved of God.
2. They justify their use in various ways: (i) it has a good and worthy objective, (ii) it was a feature of Old Testament worship, and, (iii) their use is not explicitly condemned in the New Testament.
3. As convincing as these arguments may sound, there is the question of authority - does the New Testament authorize the church to worship God with instruments in accompaniment to singing?
4. In this lesson we want to, firstly, show what the scriptures teach concerning the use of instruments in OT worship; secondly, to consider what is said, or not said, about their use in NT worship, and, thirdly, to note and to respond to the main arguments used in their defense.

### I. Mechanical Instruments and Old Testament Worship

- A. The use of instrumental music was instituted as part of organized public worship at the time of King David with the transportation of the Ark to the tabernacle (1 Chronicles 15 & 16).
  1. This was the second attempt by David and Israel at carrying the Ark after properly consulting with the prescribed order as laid down by God in the Law of Moses (15:11-13 cp. 2 Sam. 6:1-8; Dt. 10:8; Num. 3:31; 4:15).
  2. It is here that the office of Levites as singers and players of musical instruments was instituted with the help of David. To “appoint” is to “select to office” (15:16-17, 19-24; 16:4-6 cp. Num. 10:8).
    - a. It is clear from the passage that the playing of instruments in company with singing was to be a new feature of OT worship and that this was to be a new function of the Levites.
    - b. “Singing had long been recognized as appropriate to religious ceremonies... but this is the first occasion on which we find the duty of conducting musical services expressly laid on the Levites; henceforth, the services of the tabernacle and the temple were regularly choral, and a considerable section of the Levites was trained in musical knowledge, and set apart to conduct this portion of the national worship” (Barnes).
  3. The role David played in the institution of musical instruments as part of national worship also included the provision of the instruments and songs (16:7-8 cp. 2 Sam. 23:1; 2 Chron. 7:6; 8:14).
    - a. “Then on that day David delivered first this psalm to thank the LORD into the hand of Asaph and his brethren” (KJV). “Then on that day did David first ordain to give thanks unto Jehovah, by the hand of Asaph and his brethren” (ASV). “Then on that day David first made the giving of praise to the Lord the work of Asaph and his brothers” (BBE).
    - b. K&D’s commentary observes “‘At the beginning,’ ‘at first,’ to bring out the fact that liturgical singing was then first introduced”.
    - c. “Whereby it is implied, that after this he delivered many other psalms successively into their hands, to be sung by them to the praise of God in his public service” (Poole).
- B. The institution of musical instruments as part of OT worship was not accepted by God by the hand of David but directly authorised by God (2 Chronicles 29).
  1. However admirable his motives, David (together with the Levites) would have acted presumptuously and instruments in worship would have been an innovation introduced into God’s established system of worship; an addition to God’s word (cp. Dt. 4:2; 12:32 cp. Matt. 28:20).
  2. When Hezekiah restored the music aspect of the worship of temple to that commanded by David it was because he recognised the command had originated with God (29:25-28 cp. 1 Ch. 21:9 cf. Matt. 21:23-27).
    - a. “Hebrew: by the hand of the Lord, by the hand of the prophets” (TSK). “The Targum is, ‘for by the word of the Lord was the commandment by the hand of the prophets’ (Gill).
    - b. “The Levites were appointed to sing, ‘according to the command of David’; but this command was...given by His prophets...David had consequently made this arrangement at the divine suggestion, coming to Him through the prophets” (K&D).
- C. In summary: we have demonstrated three things about the use of instrumental music in the OT worship:
  1. Its institution as part of national worship can be traced to a specific time and occasion.
  2. It was the function of the Levites; an office of singers and players of instruments.
  3. This was *not* an innovation of man sanctioned by God; but directly commanded and authorised by God.

## II. Mechanical Instruments and New Testament Worship

A. The evidence provided in the New Testament is that the worship of the church did not involve the use of mechanical instruments; there is not one command, example or an inference that can be legitimately drawn that authorises the use of instrumental music. This is in contrast to the evidence for vocal music.

1. The command (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16 cf. James 5:13).
2. Example (Acts 16:25).
3. Inference (1 Corinthians 14:26 – psalms were sung).

Note: while these are not all instances of public worship, they demonstrate that every instance of music in relation to worship by Christians and by the church was vocal.

B. One argument put forward by those that defend the use of instrumental music is based on the definition of the Greek word *psallo* from which is formed the phrase “making melody” in Ephesians.

1. The word means, “primarily, ‘to twitch, twang’, then, ‘to play a stringed instrument with the fingers,’ and hence, in the Sept., ‘to sing with a harp, sing psalms,’ denotes, in the NT, ‘to sing a hymn, sing praise’” (Vine’s).
2. “The question is not, however, how the word was used in classical Greek but how it is used in the Koine Greek of the New Testament... Thayer said that ‘in the NT, to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song’ is the correct meaning. Every major translation bears that out. No recognised Greek authority to my knowledge insists that the NT language necessarily implies mechanical instruments” (Caldwell, Truth Commentaries, Ephesians, pg.258).
3. If this word necessarily implies the use of an instrument, it would mean that as well as singing we should *all* be playing an instrument?
4. Clearly, the instrument that is identified is the heart of grace or thankfulness that should accompany our singing to the Lord (cp. psalms 98:5).

C. Another argument put forward in defence of mechanical instruments is the argument from silence: both that nothing is said on instruments in worship and that they are not condemned.

1. Firstly, the fact that the NT is silent on the matter of instrumental music is not the same as the NT is silent on the question on the music of church worship – it is vocal!
2. Secondly, arguing from the silence of scripture amounts to exceeding the bounds of divine revelation which we are forbidden to do (1 Cor. 4:6, 16; 2 Pt. 1:3 cp. Heb. 7:14 cf. Lev. 10:1; Gen. 6:22).
3. Thirdly, we can only know the will of God by what He has revealed by His Spirit through the apostles and prophets (Heb. 1:1-2; 1 Cor. 2:9-13; Eph. 5:17).
4. Finally, there are only three ways of establishing Biblical authority: commands, apostolic approved examples and necessary inferences; none of which supports the use of musical instruments in worship.

### Conclusion

1. The attraction of musical instruments in worship has meant that their use by many ‘churches’ in public worship, including many churches of Christ (cp. 1 Cor. 7:19).
2. The issue is not their appropriateness to the worship of God; or that their sole purpose is to glorify God; but it is a question of authority. Does God through the scriptures of the New Testament authorise their use (Col. 3:17)?
3. We have shown that the use of instruments in worship in the OT was authorised by commandment from God; in the NT the only authorisation is for vocal music, equally by commandment from God.