

MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

One of the first things people say when they learn you are a member of the Church of Christ is "Aren't you the ones that don't use instrumental music?" We are something of an oddity in that regard in the modern American landscape, but you will learn in this paper, if you do not know already, that *a cappella* music (singing without instruments) is the historical norm for Christian worship. In other words, historically speaking, the groups that use musical instruments in worship are the oddity.

I suspect that most people in churches of Christ have no idea why we do not use instruments in worship. They think it is some strange practice conceived by nineteenth-century Restorationists and followed today simply for the sake of tradition. In fact, it has gotten to the point that we almost are embarrassed by our practice, and many wish we would "get with the times" and start using musical instruments.

Unfortunately, some in our churches are pushing that agenda. They see it as their duty to free our congregations from the shackles of what they perceive as *a cappella* traditionalism. They are not withdrawing from congregations to begin new ones; rather, they are working, oftentimes covertly, to change the practice of existing *a cappella* congregations.

In an article titled "Sounds of Change: Church of Christ explores use of musical instruments in worship," Helen Parmley wrote in the June 3, 1995 edition of the *Dallas Morning News*:

In the past few years, some members [of the Church of Christ] have begun to question the teaching that musical instruments in worship are evil and disruptive. Now, Dallas-area congregations are on the cutting edge among the churches in exploring the use of instruments.

Steven Polk, 26, was named music minister in 1991 by the Farmer's Branch Church of Christ. He was one of the first, if not the very first, full-time Church of Christ ministers of music in the country.

"God is blessing our ministry," said Polk, who has introduced instrumental music in the children's programs and special events in the church's large and growing ministry.

Other Church of Christ ministries in the Dallas area have begun to gradually incorporate instrumental music into special programs, but some

ministers and music directors are reluctant to talk about it for fear of alienating older, more traditional-thinking members.

"We are moving ahead," offered the music director of a large Dallas church who asked that he not be named. "The banning of musical instruments is more of a tradition than something based on Scripture."

Lindy Adams reported in the September 19, 2003 issue of the *Christian Chronicle* "that five urban churches affiliated with churches of Christ have added instrumental worship services since the spring of 2001." These included the 3,800 member Oak Hills church in San Antonio, where Max Lucado preaches, and (no surprise) the Farmer's Branch church that had been easing into the practice since 1995. I am aware of at least one sizeable church in Florida that within the last few years started having an instrumental worship service.

In this paper, I do my best to explain why musical instruments should not be used in Christian worship. This is one of those issues that to address properly requires one to take a broader theological scope. And I think that is part of the problem. We have tended to substitute short answers that understate the strength of the *a cappella* position. As a result, we have left people ill equipped to assess claims that our practice is a mere tradition. I may tend toward overkill here (in terms of a paper of this sort), but if so, understand that I am compensating for what I believe has been a slighting of this subject.

So you will know where I am headed, here is a sketch of the case I present:

1. Musical instruments were used on all sorts of occasions in first-century Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures and were especially prominent in religious activities, but they were universally absent from Christian worship for at least the first 600 years of the church and probably for 900 years.

2. The best explanation for the early church's nonuse of musical instruments is that Scripture teaches that instrumental music was a divinely prescribed part of temple worship that was superseded by the higher worship inaugurated by Christ.

3. Singing continued in Christian worship despite its association with temple worship because it differs from playing instruments in spiritually significant ways.

4. There is no indication in the New Testament that God desires or accepts worship from Christians in the form of instrumental music and thus there is nothing to dispel the conclusion from Scripture and church history that instrumental music was a part of temple worship that was superseded by the higher worship inaugurated by Christ.

5. Since it is certain that worshiping God with heartfelt singing is pleasing to him, whereas worshiping him with instrumental music has, at the very least, a significant potential of being displeasing to him (as worship according to a superseded shadow), the person devoted to pleasing God will worship him by singing without instrumental music.

6. If one accepts instrumental music in worship on the theory that whatever is not expressly prohibited is acceptable, then all forms of worship not expressly prohibited must be accepted.

Though I believe it is wrong to use musical instruments in Christian worship, I do not believe those who disagree with me on the issue are for that reason bound for hell. That does not mean the issue is unimportant; no aspect of God's will is trivial. It simply means that, in my opinion, this is one of the many issues regarding which God will forgive the Christian's sincere error. If every incorrect belief consigns one to hell, we are all in trouble. I could not worship with a group that uses musical instruments, as it would offend my conscience, but I still consider them my brothers and sisters in Christ. Some in churches of Christ would disagree with me here, but that is how I see it.¹

If you already are convinced that instrumental music in Christian worship is acceptable to God, all I can ask is that you give me a fair hearing on the subject. If nothing else, I hope you will gain a new respect for the *a cappella* position.

I quote many scholars and oftentimes provide in footnotes information about their academic qualifications. I do that so you will know the number and caliber of sources on which I rely in making certain assertions. I do not always follow technical citation conventions, but I provide sufficient bibliographic information in the first citation of a source to permit verification of all the references.

ABSENCE OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS FROM CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Musical instruments were common in the first century and were used on all sorts of occasions in Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures. Everett Ferguson² writes in *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 98: "Music was found at banquets and other entertainments, at weddings and funerals, at official occasions, and as an accompaniment to sacrifice and other ritual acts in cultic practice. These uses in the Greek and Roman cultures were also present in the Jewish." In the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 787 he adds (cites omitted): "Music was especially prominent in religious activities. Ancient authors claimed that music was pleasing to the gods and could be used to invoke their presence."

¹ A case can be made that the *use* of instruments in the assembly (as opposed to the *belief* that their use is appropriate) divides the church and for that reason warrants exclusion from Christian fellowship. See, e.g., Jimmy Jividen, *Worship in Song* (Fort Worth, TX: Star Bible, 1987), 139-147. But I am not convinced that the failure to jettison every worship practice one considers optional and with which someone disagrees is a damning form of divisiveness. For example, I do not believe it is damningly divisive not to surrender the practice of using multiple cups in the Lord's Supper.

² Ferguson has a Ph.D. in church history from Harvard and served as editor of the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. For many years he was a professor of church history at Abilene Christian University.

Ramsay MacMullen³ states in *Paganism and the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 16:

Typically, [worshippers of Cybele] played pipes made with reeds like oboes or bagpipes, ah! bagpipes of a shrill and carrying note. The cithara belonged especially to Apollo; to Isis, the rattle (*sistrum*), along with other instruments. Censorinus [a third-century A.D. Roman] writes, "If it [music] were not welcome to the immortal gods, theater spectacles would not have been instituted to conciliate the gods, the horn player would not be used in all sacrifices in sacred temples, nor would triumphal parades be conducted with the horn or bass-horn player in honor of Mars, with the cithara for Apollo, with the pipes for the Muses. . . ." The picture Censorinus offers, of accompaniment suited to the god honored, may be too schematic, but in its broad assertion of the habitual place of music in worship it is certainly true to life.

The use of musical instruments in Jewish culture is evident in the New Testament. There was music and dancing at the celebration of the Prodigal's return (Lk. 15:25), flute-players were at the ruler's house for a dead girl's funeral (Mat. 9:23), and the children in Jesus' parable complained, "We piped to you and you did not dance" (Mat. 11:17; Lk. 7:32). Eric Werner⁴ writes in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:459:

The Jews consider themselves a particularly musical people, as we learn from their literature. Indeed, there is external evidence to affirm this strange belief. An Assyrian bas-relief's inscription praises the victory of King Sennacherib over King Hezekiah and relates the latter's ransom and tribute. It consisted, aside from precious metals, of Judean musicians, male and female. In Ps. 137 we read that the Babylonians demanded from their Hebrew prisoners "songs of Zion." To ask for musicians as tribute and to show interest in the folk music of a vanquished enemy was unusual indeed.

In keeping with the requirements of the Old Testament, musical instruments also were used in worship at the Jewish temple. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 576-577 states:

Indeed, the Israelites excelled in music, perhaps more than any of their contemporaries, and nowhere more so than in their corporate worship. From the beginning, music and song were at the heart of temple worship (2 Sam. 6:5, 14; 1 Kings 10:12; 1 Chron. 15:15-16), a tradition that continued when the second temple was built (2 Chron. 29:25; 35:15; Neh.

³ MacMullen is the Dunham Professor of History and Classics at Yale University.

⁴ Werner was a renowned Jewish historian of music. He was the founder of the School of Sacred Music of Hebrew Union College at the Jewish Institute of Religion in Manhattan, where he was professor of liturgical music from 1939 to 1967.

7:1; 12:27-43). The scale on which this took place was impressive (1 Chron. 15:19-21; 16:4-6, 39-42; 23:5-8; 2 Chron. 5:12; Ezra 3:10-11). There were string, wind and percussion instruments.

James McKinnon⁵ states in an article originally published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association of London 1979-1980* and reprinted in *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), chapter III, 77:

We are remarkably well-informed about the liturgy of the Second Temple at Jerusalem in the years which preceded its destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70. . . .

The musical portion of the service came at its climax. It consisted in the singing by the Levite musicians of the proper psalm for the day as the sacrificial lamb was consumed on the altar fire and the libation of wine was being poured out. The limbs of the lamb had just been cast upon the fire, and two priests gave three blasts on their silver trumpets, . . . a plain, a broken, and a plain blast. The High Priest's deputy, the *Segan*, waved a cloth and the Temple official who was 'over the cymbals' clashed them together. Then as the libation was poured out the Levites sang the psalm of the day from a platform, the *duchan*, situated near the people at the eastern end of the inner Temple court. They accompanied themselves with *nebel* and *kinnor*, string instruments which in all probability can be identified with harp and kithara respectively.

Despite this prevalence of musical instruments in first-century life and religion, they were universally absent from Christian worship for at least the first 600 years of the church and probably for 900 years and then came to be used only in the Western church (which at that time was, of course, the Roman Catholic Church). The Eastern churches have never allowed instruments.

That is why singing without instrumental accompaniment is called *a cappella*. "A *cappella* comes from the Latin by way of Italian and means 'in the style of the church,' 'as is done in the church.'" Everett Ferguson, *A Cappella Music*, rev. ed. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988), 84. The classical form of church music is unaccompanied song.

As Wendy J. Porter notes in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 712, "[m]ost scholars . . . think that singing [in the early church] was unaccompanied." For example, George W. Stewart⁶ states in *Music in Church Worship* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926), 214: "In the early Christian

⁵ McKinnon is an internationally known historian of music and liturgy. His doctoral dissertation at Columbia University in 1965 was "The Church Fathers and Musical Instruments." He since has published many works in the field of early music, including the 1987 book *Music in Early Christian Literature*.

⁶ Stewart was a reverend in the Church of Scotland. References to this work are from secondary sources. This quote is from Rubel Shelly, *Sing His Praise!* (Nashville: 20th Century Christian, 1987), 89.

Church there was, however, a strong feeling against the use of instruments in divine worship."

Theodore M. Finney⁷ states in *A History of Music*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947), 43, 89: "The early Christians refused to have anything to do with the instrumental music which they might have inherited from the ancient world," and "We have seen that at the very beginning of the Christian period the Church eschewed all use of instruments in its service."

Hugo Leichtentritt⁸ states in *Music, History, and Ideas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 34: "Only singing, however, and no playing of instruments, was permitted in the early Christian Church."

In *Ancient and Oriental Music*, which is volume 1 of *The New Oxford History of Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), Eric Werner states (p. 315) that in the primitive Christian community "instrumental music was thought unfit for religious services; the Christian sources are quite outspoken in the condemnation of instrumental performances. Originally, only song was considered worthy of direct approach to the Divinity."

James McKinnon writes in an article originally published in *Current Musicology* in 1965 and reprinted in *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter IV, 69-77 (emphasis supplied):

The antagonism which the Fathers of the early Church displayed toward instruments has two outstanding characteristics: vehemence and uniformity. (p. 69)

...

... The attitude of opposition to instruments was virtually monolithic even though it was shared by men of diverse temperaments and different regional backgrounds, and even though it extended over a span of at least two centuries of changing fortunes for the Church. That there were not widespread exceptions to the general position defies credibility. Accordingly, many musicologists, while acknowledging that early church music was predominately vocal, have tried to find evidence that instruments were employed at various times and places. The result of such attempts has been a history of misinterpretations and mistranslations. [footnote states: A misunderstanding of the Church Fathers' allegorical exegesis of the instruments of the Psalms accounts for most misinterpretations.] (p. 70)

⁷ Finney was head of the Department of Music at the University of Pittsburgh.

⁸ Leichtentritt was a Professor of Music at Harvard University.

. . . [A] careful reading of all patristic criticism of instruments will not reveal a single passage which condemns the use of instruments in church. The context of the condemnation may be the banquet, the theater, or the festivities accompanying a marriage, but it is never the liturgy. (p. 71)

. . .

The implication for the performance of early Christian music is obvious. *Not only was it predominately vocal, but it was so exclusively vocal that the occasion to criticize the use of instruments in church never arose. . . .* (p. 73)

. . .

. . . If it had ever occurred to Christian communities of the third and fourth centuries to add instruments to their singing, indignation over this would have resounded throughout patristic literature and ecclesiastical legislation. One can only imagine the outburst the situation would have evoked from, say, Jerome or Chrysostom. (p. 77)

In his article on the music of the early Christian Church published in volume 4 of the 20-volume work, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Washington, DC: Macmillan, 1980), Christian Hannick⁹ writes (p. 368):

The religion of classical Greece and the Jewish Temple liturgy both used musical instruments extensively, as literary descriptions and artistic representations show (see the illustrations by Quasten, 1930). By contrast, early Christian music excluded them completely. There is much evidence for this prohibition.

Everett Ferguson states in *The Instrumental Music Issue* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1987), 79: "The testimony of early church history is clear and strong that early Christians employed vocal music but did not employ instrumental music in their assemblies."

Edwin M. Good¹⁰ writes in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 536:

Music, expected to dispose the mind to truth and open the heart to pious feelings, was subordinate to words. Thus, though the psalms refer to instruments, and secular music freely used them, Christian liturgy was purely vocal until the thirteenth-century revival of the organ to accompany

⁹ Hannick is a professor at the Bavarian University in Germany and the director of the Institute for Liturgical Studies at the Ukrainian Catholic University.

¹⁰ Good is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Stanford.

singing. The organ, known from Hellenistic times, had been used earlier for ecclesiastical processions, and organs were known in some European churches well before the thirteenth century.

W. Robert Godfrey¹¹ writes in an article titled "Ancient Praise" in *Reformation and Revival* 4 (Fall 1995), 62: "Another feature of ancient praise which is rather certain is that the ancient church did not use musical instruments in its worship services. That may come as a major surprise to most modern Christians, but the evidence is very strong."

In his book *Foundations of Christian Music* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 80-81, Edward Foley¹² acknowledges the absence of musical instruments in Christian worship from the beginning. He writes, "The reasons for the absence of instrumental music (probably even the *shofar*) from Christian worship are complex." He concludes:

The absence of instrumental music in the primitive Christian community, therefore, is not simply due to its having no other option. Rather, it seems intimately wed to the embrace of democratic forms of worship, a rejection of Temple priesthood and sacrifice, and to the process of spiritualization that marked the emerging cult.

Hughes Oliphant Old¹³ states in *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 40: "It was only at the beginning of the ninth century that the church began to use organs. Up until that time, there was no instrumental music in Christian worship."

J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca¹⁴ write in *A History of Western Music*, 7th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 28-29: "Although Christians may have used lyres to accompany hymns and psalms in their homes, instruments were not used in church. For this reason, the entire tradition of Christian music for over a thousand years was one of unaccompanied singing."

As for the length of time before instruments were used, Ferguson writes in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 789:

The Christian heritage of vocal music was transmitted to the Middle Ages in the west by way of the Gregorian chant, or plainsong. . . . The organ appears to have moved from the court ceremony of the emperor to the church, but only in the west, and it is debated whether this occurred in the seventh century or the tenth.

¹¹ Godfrey is President and Professor of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, California.

¹² Foley is professor of liturgy and music at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

¹³ Old is John H. Leith Professor of Reformed Theology and Worship at Erskine Theological Seminary.

¹⁴ Burkholder is Distinguished Professor of Musicology at Indiana University; Grout was Professor of Musicology at Cornell University; and Palisca was Professor Emeritus of Music at Yale University.

Bernhard Lang¹⁵ writes in *Sacred Games: A History of Christian Worship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 56:

The Christian emperors, like their pagan predecessors, were acclaimed with a great deal of noise and sometimes with ordered shouts and solemn music from the organ whenever they appeared in public. Music gradually became part of the ceremonial proceedings of the imperial court at Constantinople. It soon made its appearance at the papal court in Rome as well as at the Frankish court at Aachen. Musical homage and entertainment could be heard and enjoyed at receptions for guests. During the eighth or ninth century, instruments were introduced into the liturgy, so that music did not remain a privilege of worldly and ecclesiastical courts. Benedictine monasteries seem to have been the first to introduce organs in tenth-century northwestern Europe, as can be seen from an elaborate poem that deals with the dedication in 993 of the enlarged Benedictine abbey-church of Winchester, England. By 1300, all major churches in Western Europe owned an organ and had musicians practiced in playing it.

David W. Music¹⁶ writes in his book *Instruments in Church* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 43:

The vehement and unanimous objections of the Church Fathers to musical instruments apparently succeeded in suppressing their use in Christian worship for many centuries. . . .

. . . Organs began appearing in religious settings no later than the tenth century, by which time Christianity had been the dominant cultural force in Europe for over six hundred years.

The claim that the organ was admitted into the church in the seventh century by Pope Vitalian is rooted in a history of the popes that was written by Bartolomei Sacchi (known as Platina) and first published in 1474. As Peter Williams¹⁷ explains in *The King of Instruments: How churches came to have organs* (London: SPCK, 1993), 44-46, Platina relied on the earlier Italian historian Tolomeo of Lucca, whose ultimate source was the "Life of St. Gregory" written around 880 by Johannes Hymmonides (known as John the Deacon). However, the phrase in Johannes's work that has been taken as connecting Vitalian with organs – *modulationis organum* – meant "surely not some kind of instrument (*organum*), nor even vocal counterpoint (*organum*), but most probably the approved chant itself and/or its text." In other words, "the whole story [of Vitalian's introduction of the organ] seems to be based on a misunderstanding."

¹⁵ Lang is Professor of Religion at the University of Paderborn, Germany.

¹⁶ Music is Professor of Church Music at Baylor University.

¹⁷ Williams is Distinguished Professor of Music at Duke University.

The spread of instrumental usage was quite slow. Williams writes (*The King of Instruments*, 1-2):

If in the early seventh century, on the eve of the Muslim advance, a traveller had crossed Christendom from Iona in Scotland to Basra on the Persian Gulf, or from Georgia down through Asia Minor and across the Mediterranean to Spain, or from the lands of the Copts to those of the Angles, he would have found no organs in churches anywhere. Not in the great churches of Jerusalem or Constantinople, not in the basilicas of Rome or the monasteries of Syria, and of course not in the hermitages on the banks of the River Nile or Shannon, would one have heard the sound of organs. . . .

. . .

If on the eve of the First Crusade nearly half a millennium later (1095) the same journey had been made – but now including northern Christendom, with central-eastern Europe and the western steppe – there would still have been no church organs anywhere *except* in one particular area: that sector or northwest quarter of a circle radiating from Rome and stretching as far north as the English Wash.

Even in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, the most respected theologian of the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, accepted the premise (as part of an objection he was answering) that "the Church does not make use of musical instruments such as harps and psalteries, in the divine praises, for fear of seeming to imitate the Jews." *Summa Theologica* (Second Part of the Second Part, Question 91, Article 2, Objection 4, online at <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>). In response, he pointed out that the usage of these instruments in the Old Testament was "both because the people were more coarse and carnal--so that they needed to be aroused by such instruments as also by earthly promises--and because these material instruments were figures of something else."

The conclusion of scholars that the early church did not use musical instruments in worship is based on the New Testament and on the noncanonical writings of early Christians. The following samples of those writings are illustrative.

In chapter IV of Book II of his work *Paedagogos* ("Instructor"), the Christian writer and teacher Clement of Alexandria addresses how Christians are to conduct themselves at banquets or feasts. This writing is generally dated to A.D. 190 - 200, and even though it is not dealing with a worship assembly, it implies clearly that musical instruments were not used in those assemblies. (The translation is from Vol. 4 of *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867], which is available online at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-instructor-book2.html>.)

Clement first describes the sensuous music of pagan entertainment:

Let revelry keep away from our rational entertainments, . . . For if people occupy their time with pipes, and psalteries, and choirs, and dances, and Egyptian clapping of hands, and such disorderly frivolities, they become quite immodest and intractable, beat on cymbals and drums, and make a noise on instruments of delusion; for plainly such a banquet, as seems to me, is a theatre of drunkenness.

And then, in contrast to that, he quotes from Psalm 150 and gives it an allegorical interpretation. (Recall McKinnon's remark, "A misunderstanding of the Church Fathers' allegorical exegesis of the instruments of the Psalms accounts for most misinterpretations.")

The Spirit, distinguishing from such revelry the divine service, sings, "Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet"; for with the sound of the trumpet He shall raise the dead. "Praise Him on the psaltery"; for the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. "And praise Him on the [kithara]." By the [kithara] is meant the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum.¹⁸ "Praise with the timbrel and dance," refers to the Church meditating on the resurrection of the dead in the resounding skin. "Praise Him on the chords and organ." Our body he calls an organ, and its nerves are the strings, by which it has received harmonious tension, and when struck by the Spirit it gives forth human voices. "Praise Him on the clashing cymbals." He calls the tongue the cymbal of the mouth, which resounds with the pulsation of the lips. Therefore He cried to humanity, "Let every breath praise the Lord," because He cares for every breathing thing which he hath made. For man is truly a pacific instrument; while other instruments, if you investigate, you will find to be warlike, inflaming to lusts, or kindling up amours, or rousing wrath.

After noting that the trumpet, the pipe, the pectides, the lyre, the flute, the horn, the drum, and the cymbal all are used by various groups in warfare, Clement writes:

The one instrument of peace, the Word alone by which we honour God, is what we employ. We no longer employ the ancient psaltery, and trumpet, and timbrel, and flute, which those expert in war and contemners of the fear of God were wont to make use of also in the choruses at their festive assemblies; that by such strains they might raise their dejected minds.

At one point, Clement makes a statement that some claim expresses approval of the use of two specific instruments, the kithara and lyre. But as McKinnon states in *Music in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 33:

¹⁸ The translation by William Wilson in Vol. 4 of *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* incorrectly translates "kithara" here as "lyre." See, James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 32 ("kithara" and "cithara" are different transliterations of the same word).

Here in a frequently quoted passage, 'if you should wish to sing and play to the cithara and lyre, this is not blameworthy,' Clement seems to contradict all that goes before and to condone the use of these instruments. But surely the immediate context of the passage as well as Clement's views in general suggest that it is to be read allegorically.

An allegorical reading of the passage is supported by the fact Clement earlier in the same essay allegorizes the kithara as meaning the mouth struck by the Spirit and identifies the lyre as an instrument of war that contrasts with the one instrument of peace, the Word alone, by which Christians honor God; and immediately after the statement in question he allegorizes the psaltery as referring to Jesus. In addition, in an earlier work titled *Protrepticus*, Clement described Jesus as "scorning the lyre and kithara as lifeless instruments."

Assuming Clement was making an exception for the kithara and lyre, he is speaking of conduct in a banquet or feast, not in a worship assembly. So even under that interpretation one could not conclude that these instruments were present in the church (especially in light of the other evidence of their absence). It simply would mean that one could not make from Clement an *a fortiori* argument for the *absence* of instruments in the church (the argument that if they were not used in banquets then certainly they were not used in church) because the predicate for that argument, their total exclusion from the banquet, would have been undermined.

However, apart from the *a fortiori* argument, Clement's statements still suggest the absence of instruments from the worship assembly. As Charles H. Cosgrove¹⁹ explains in "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14:3 (2006) 269:

Beyond this fleeting reference to the synaxis [a Christian gathering for worship], we are dependent on Clement's descriptions of music in other settings as a guide to his views about music in corporate worship. That evidence strongly suggests that music in the synaxis was purely vocal, without instrumental accompaniment. . . . His preference for calm, vocal music at the dinner party implies that he expected the same kind of song in church and probably found it there.

Eusebius, a Greek-speaking Christian theologian who wrote the first history of the church around A.D. 325, wrote the following in his commentary on the Psalms (translation from Ferguson, *A Cappella Music*, 61):

Of old at the time those of the circumcision were worshipping with symbols and types it was not inappropriate to send up hymns to God with the psalterion and kithara, . . . We render our hymn a living psalterion and a living kithara, with spiritual song. The unison of voices of Christians would

¹⁹ Cosgrove is Professor of New Testament Studies and Christian Ethics at Northern Seminary.

be more acceptable to God than any musical instrument. Accordingly in all the churches of God, united in soul and attitude, with one mind and in agreement of faith and piety, we send up a unison melody in the words of the Psalms. We are accustomed to employ such psalmodies and spiritual kitharas because the apostle teaches this saying, "in psalms and odes and spiritual hymns."

Niceta, a Latin-speaking leader in the Western church, wrote in the early fifth century (translation from McKinnon, *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter IV, 76-77):

Only what is material [from the Old Testament] has been rejected, such as circumcision, the Sabbath, sacrifices, discrimination in foods; and also trumpets, kitharas, cymbals, and tympana, which now understood as the limbs of a man resound with a more perfect music. Daily ablutions, new moon observances, the meticulous inspection of leprosy, along with anything else which was temporarily necessary for the immature are past and over with. But whatever is spiritual [from the Old Testament], such as faith, devotion, prayer, fasting, patience, chastity, and psalm-singing has been increased rather than diminished.

Theodoret, a Greek-speaking leader in the Eastern church, wrote in the 400's, a bit later than Niceta (translation from McKinnon, *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter IV, 75):

It is not singing in itself that is characteristic of immaturity, but singing to lifeless instruments and with dancing and rattles. Therefore, the use of these instruments is excluded from the song of the churches, along with other things which characterize immaturity, and there is simply the singing itself.

It is inconceivable that the church in the centuries after the apostles would uniformly and vehemently condemn musical instruments if those instruments had been used in worship in apostolic churches. If such a reversal of viewpoint had occurred, certainly some discussion of the issue would be preserved in the literature of the early church, but there is nothing. The only reasonable conclusion is that it was not necessary for later writers to explain the use of instruments in apostolic churches in light of their condemnation of them because instruments never were used in Christian worship.

Even in the Roman Catholic Church there were periodic complaints about the use of musical instruments, and a vestige of its *cappella* heritage remains to this day. In *Papal Legislation in Sacred Music 95 A.D. - 1977 A.D.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), R. F. Hayburn provides the following quote from Aelred, the twelfth-century Cistercian (an order of monks) head of a monastery in Yorkshire, England (p. 19):

We are not now considering those who are openly bad, we will speak to those who cloak their sensual delights with the pretext of religion; who turn to the service of their own vanity what the ancient Fathers religiously exercised as a figure of future things. But now the types and figures are come to an end, how comes it that the Church has so many organs and cymbals? To what purpose is that terrible blowing of bellows, imitating rather the crash of thunder than the sweetness of the human voice?²⁰

Problems relating to instrumental music were debated at various Councils of the Catholic Church in the 1500's and in 1903. In 1903, Pope Pius X acknowledged that "the proper music of the church is only vocal, nevertheless the accompaniment of an organ is allowed." Laurence James Moore, *Sing to the Lord a New Song: A Study of Changing Musical Practices in the Presbyterian Church of Victoria, 1861-1901*, 28 (master's thesis submitted in January 2004 to Australian Catholic University, which is online at <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/digitaltheses/public/adt-acuvp29082005.53/02whole.pdf>). The Papal chapel never acquired an organ and still includes only unaccompanied singing (Ibid.), and the great organ in St. Peter's cathedral in Rome is played only on Christmas and not at regular services. Ferguson, *A Cappella Music*, 83.

The use of instruments in worship initially was rejected by both major branches of the Protestant Reformation, Lutheran and Reformed. Moore, *Sing to the Lord*, 28-31. Luther's attitude is more difficult to pin down because he "hardly mentioned the instrument," but "when he did he was almost always critical (e.g., LW, xlii, p.89)." Robin A. Leaver and Ann Bond, "Luther, Martin" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 11:368. It seems that, until the end of the sixteenth century, the singing in Lutheran churches was unaccompanied, though in some congregations an organ was used prior to the singing to establish the pitch or to remind the congregation of the melody about to be sung. Robin A. Leaver, "Lutheran church music" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Macmillan, 2001), 15:370.

The introduction of musical instruments into Reformed churches was very contentious. In fact, there are still Reformed, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches (in addition to the Eastern churches) that reject the use of instrumental music.

So it is no wonder that in his book *A Cappella Music* church historian Everett Ferguson concludes the section on the history of instrumental music in worship with the following (p. 84):

²⁰ Williams cautions (*The King of Instruments*, 65-66):

And yet despite the effectiveness of his words, it is not clear from them whether Ailred had actually experienced either organs or theatres, whether indeed either were there to be seen or heard in twelfth-century Yorkshire. More likely is that he was merely invoking the Church Fathers and their attitude to the *theatrum* (which is referred to in the same section of the treatise), for much of what he writes recalls the Cistercian rhetoric of St Bernard criticizing church-decoration (PL 182.914-15).

The classical form of church music is unaccompanied song. To abstain from the use of the instrument is not a peculiar aberration of “a frontier American sect”: this was easily, until comparatively recent times, the majority tradition of Christian history. Virtually no one has said it is wrong to worship *a cappella*, whereas many have thought instrumental music in worship is wrong. It may not appear to be true today, but against the whole sweep of Christian history *a cappella* music is the truly ecumenical ground to occupy.

REASON FOR THE ABSENCE OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS FROM EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Given that musical instruments were inexpensive, portable, and used widely in Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture and especially in religious activities, why were they universally absent in early Christian worship? As Ferguson asserts in *The Instrumental Music Issue*, 98-99:

Where something was available and every assumption would seem to favor Christian adoption of the practice and yet there is complete evidence of the rejection of the practice in the post-apostolic period, there is every reason to look to a deliberate choice made in the apostolic age. A person must have a very good explanation in order to think that instruments were authorized in the New Testament but were not used by Christians for many centuries after the New Testament.

I first address two inadequate explanations for the absence of instrumental music in the early church, and then, in the third subsection, argue that the best explanation is that instruments were understood correctly to be excluded by the teaching of the New Testament.

Reaction against association with paganism or Judaism

Some have suggested that the absence of musical instruments in the worship of the apostolic church was not because of any theological objection to their use but because the church opted not to use them in light of their widespread use in paganism, both in religious practices and dissolute celebrations, and in Judaism. In other words, it was merely a preference driven by the church's desire to distinguish itself from paganism and Judaism in the circumstances of the first century. There are good reasons to doubt that explanation.

Regarding association with paganism, I have established that instruments were prevalent in temple worship and Jewish life, so they were not especially linked to paganism. Indeed, one could make the case that, certainly in the mind of the original Jewish disciples, they were especially linked to Judaism. Since they were not especially linked to paganism, use of them would no more associate the church with paganism and its accompanying immorality than with Judaism. Therefore, fear of being associated with

paganism does not explain why early Christians did not use instruments. To illustrate the point, since driving cars is not especially associated with Texans, if somebody abstains from driving a car there is no reason to think he is doing so to avoid being considered a Texan.

Regarding association with Judaism, the church had no qualms about accepting some practices of Judaism as optional Christian practices (e.g., lifting hands in prayer, circumcision). So if instruments were theologically permissible, fear of a Jewish taint cannot explain why early Christians did not use them. The early church certainly was not averse to all things Jewish.

Regarding association with either paganism or Judaism, it is hard to believe that the same preference would be exercised for 900 years in all the various cultures to which the church spread, especially given that instruments ceased to be a part of Jewish worship after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. In addition, the early writers do not indicate that the nonuse of instruments was merely a preference to avoid association with paganism or Judaism. Rather, as shown in the following subsection, they often appeal to deeper theological realities.

Inherited synagogue practice

Some scholars believe the early church simply inherited the worship practices of the Jewish synagogue which, unlike the Jewish temple, used no musical instruments. In other words, they believe the absence of instruments in early Christian worship was not because early Christians thought there was anything wrong with using them. Rather, the earliest Christians, who were Jewish, simply did what they were used to doing in the synagogue and then this Jewish preference became standard Christian practice. So instruments were not rejected; they were not used out of Jewish habit. There are good reasons to doubt that explanation.

First, there is no evidence of singing in the early synagogue. The first evidence for that comes centuries after the New Testament era. This is important because if there was no singing in the early synagogue, then obviously the early church added singing to whatever it may have inherited from the synagogue; and if the early church added singing to whatever it may have inherited from the synagogue, then the absence of instruments in the synagogue does not explain their absence in the church (because instruments could have been added as easily as singing).

Ralph Martin acknowledged over 30 years ago in *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 41 "that there is some doubt as to the extent to which the singing of divine praises had developed in the Palestinian synagogues of the first century."

Noted historian of music and liturgy James McKinnon declared in an article originally published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association of London*

1979-1980 and reprinted in *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter III, 84-85:

But what of psalmody? To state it as simply as possible, there was no singing of psalms in the ancient Synagogue; the psalmody of the early Synagogue is a myth fostered by a curious coalition of Anglican liturgists and Jewish musicologists. One hastens to add that Jewish liturgical scholars have contributed little if anything to its development. They have had virtually nothing to say on one side or the other on the issue because the primary sources offered them no occasion for doing so. The Anglican liturgical scholars, on the other hand, needed no primary sources; figures like Oesterle, Dix and Dugmore, sympathetic to the idea that the origins of the Christian liturgy were to be sought in the Synagogue, simply assumed that Christian psalmody must have stemmed from Synagogue psalmody. Whatever it was that motivated the claims of the Jewish musicologists, one notes that Werner, without benefit of primary sources, gave precise indications of the specific psalms to be sung at the various Synagogue services.

He ignored the primary sources with good reason. Throughout the entire Talmud there is no indication of daily psalmody in the Synagogue. There is, it is true, evidence that the *Hallel* came to be recited in the Synagogue during the period, primarily on the same festive occasions when it was sung in the Temple. The references, however, give much more the impression of a simple recitation than a melodious psalmody. Daily psalmody is not evidenced until the tractate Sopherim, redacted probably in the eighth century and reflecting liturgical developments of the post-Talmudic period, that is, after about 500.

Another specialist in the field, P. F. Bradshaw, comments that "liturgical and musical historians have tended to assert confidently that psalmody was a standard part of the early synagogue. . . . There is, however, an almost total lack of documentary evidence for the inclusion of psalms in synagogue worship." *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 713.

Likewise, Edward Foley writes in *Foundations of Christian Music*, 52: "It is often suggested the psalmody played a central role in synagogue worship at the dawn of Christianity. This is not, however, demonstrable from the earliest sources."

The second reason to doubt that unaccompanied singing in Christian worship was a mere preference inherited from the synagogue is that the church in Scripture is analogized to the temple not the synagogue. This is apparent in 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:15; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:4-5. (The use of *sunagōgē* in Jas. 2:2 carries its general meaning of meeting or assembly.) As Bruce Chilton states in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 1180, one sees in primitive Christianity "the claim that a church at worship took the place of the temple." So it seems that if any Jewish worship practices

were to be continued simply out of habit, it would be those of the temple rather than the synagogue.

The third reason to doubt the inherited-from-the-synagogue explanation is the uniformity of the practice. The apostles refused to bind on Gentiles deeply held Jewish practices that were rooted in the old covenant (e.g., circumcision and food laws), so they would not bind on Gentiles what was merely a preference of the synagogue. On the other hand, if unaccompanied singing was not something bound on the Gentiles, then certainly some of them would have introduced instrumental music into their worship. So it seems there must have been some objection to the use of instrumental music and it must have been something other than mere synagogue preference. That leads to the fourth reason to doubt the explanation.

The fourth reason to doubt that unaccompanied singing in Christian worship was a mere preference inherited from the synagogue is that early explanations of the practice do not mention the synagogue. When early Christians addressed the issue of why they did not use instruments when God had prescribed them for worship in the temple, they did not say, "Our nonuse of them simply is a personal preference inherited from the synagogue." On the contrary, they said, among other things, that instruments are unsuitable for worship in the new covenant because they are part of the more sensual, external worship of the old covenant which was a mere shadow or type of the higher spiritual worship of the new covenant.

I already have given some examples of this, but I will repeat them in this context and add a couple others. Eusebius, who wrote the first history of the church around A.D. 325, wrote the following in his commentary on the Psalms (translation from Ferguson, *A Cappella Music*, 61):

Of old at the time those of the circumcision were worshipping with symbols and types it was not inappropriate to send up hymns to God with the psalterion and kithara, . . . We render our hymn a living psalterion and a living kithara, with spiritual song.

Niceta, a Latin-speaking leader in the Western church, wrote in the early fifth century (translation from McKinnon, *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter IV, 76-77):

Only what is material [from the Old Testament] has been rejected, such as circumcision, the Sabbath, sacrifices, discrimination in foods; and also trumpets, kitharas, cymbals, and tympana, which now understood as the limbs of a man resound with a more perfect music. Daily ablutions, new moon observances, the meticulous inspection of leprosy, along with anything else which was temporarily necessary for the immature are past and over with. But whatever is spiritual [from the Old Testament], such as faith, devotion, prayer, fasting, patience, chastity, and psalm-singing has been increased rather than diminished.

Theodoret, a Greek-speaking leader in the Eastern church, wrote in the 400's, a bit later than Niceta (translation from McKinnon, *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter IV, 75):

It is not singing in itself that is characteristic of immaturity, but singing to lifeless instruments and with dancing and rattles. Therefore, the use of these instruments is excluded from the song of the churches, along with other things which characterize immaturity, and there is simply the singing itself.

John Chrysostom, a leader of the church in Antioch and perhaps the greatest preacher of his day, wrote in the late fourth century (translation from Ferguson, *A Cappella Music*, 56):

I would say this [about the mention of instruments in Psalm 149], 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.

Another early fifth-century writer, Isidore of Pelusium, put it this way (translation from McKinnon, *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter IV, 76): "If God accepted even sacrifice and blood because of the immaturity of men at that time, why are you surprised at the music of the kithara and the psalterium?"

Thus, Ferguson writes in *A Cappella Music*, 31:

Instrumental music, therefore, was an important feature of the temple worship, and it was closely associated with its sacrificial system. Here may be a significant clue explaining the absence of instrumental music in early Christian worship. Early Christianity saw the sacrificial system and temple worship as superseded by the sacrifice of Christ and the worship of the church. When the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial cultus were abolished, naturally its accompaniments were too.

And Edward Foley writes (*Foundations of Christian Music*, 81): "I would suggest there was an element of 'rejection' in Christianity's earliest assessment of instrumental music: a rejection wed to a growing rejection of the type of priesthood, cult, and religious view embodied in the Temple."

Scripture teaches that instruments are part of the external, ceremonial aspects of temple worship that have been superseded by the higher worship inaugurated by Christ

Neither a desire to distinguish itself from paganism or Judaism nor the habit of the synagogue is sufficient to explain the early church's nonuse of musical instruments in

worship. Rather, the early church understood correctly that instruments were excluded implicitly from Christian worship by the teaching of the New Testament.

John 4:19-24 is the starting point for appreciating that the new covenant abrogated the external, ceremonial worship rituals of the Jewish temple. It reads (NIV):

"Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that he is ushering in the time when people will worship "in spirit and truth." So there is a contrast between prior worship and Christian worship. What went before was not worship in spirit and truth *in the sense Jesus means*. Leon Morris states in *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 239:

It is probable that in [4:23] Jesus is pointing to the new way that he would inaugurate. "A time is coming and has now come" is a reference to a crisis, to something new. . . . Jesus has already spoken of the destruction of the temple (2:19ff.). Primarily he referred to the destruction of the temple of his body, but, as we saw there, there is probably also a reference to a new system of worship that Jesus would inaugurate, a system not tied to any particular holy place.

These are the kind of worshipers God seeks, and this kind of worship is necessary for true worship because God is spirit. It is a worship that is somehow more commensurate with the fact God is a spiritual rather than a material being. As Andreas J. Köstenberger points out in *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 156 (parenthetical comments omitted): "'God is spirit' does not refer to the Holy Spirit – much less to the human spirit – but identifies God as a spiritual rather than material being."

Worshipping in spirit and truth is inconsistent with worship that is restricted to or focused on a sacred site, whether Jerusalem or Mount Gerizim. Since worship in spirit and truth is necessary because God is a spiritual being and worship in spirit and truth is inconsistent with worship that is restricted to or focused on a sacred site, worship that is restricted to or focused on a sacred site is inconsistent with the fact God is a spiritual being. In other words, the more fitting worship of a spiritual being is worship not dependent on an external, material circumstance like the existence of a physical holy site.

That means that localized worship in the Jerusalem temple was an accommodation to the Jews not the divine ideal.

That raises the question of whether other aspects of worship under the old covenant also were accommodations to the spiritual immaturity or physical/sensual orientation of the Jews and not the divine ideal. Specifically, were the external, material elements employed in the suboptimal worship at the physical temple (vestments, animals, musical instruments, incense) likewise suboptimal, mere shadows of a higher, more pleasing form of worship inaugurated by Christ? That certainly seems to be the case.

The writer of Hebrews makes clear that, along with the old covenant itself, the ceremonies of old covenant worship – the external, material elements of that worship – have been superseded by the higher worship inaugurated by Christ. In Hebrews 7, the writer makes the point that, because there has been a change in the priesthood from Aaron's line (Aaron being a descendant of Levi) to Christ (who, legally speaking, descended from Judah rather than Levi), there necessarily has been a change in the law; it has been set aside. Under Jesus' priesthood, there is no need to offer sacrifices since he offered a sacrifice once for all when he offered himself.

In Hebrews 8 we are told that the Levitical priests on earth who are offering gifts (sacrifices and burnt offerings) according to the law of Moses are serving a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. The new covenant that Christ instituted rendered the Mosaic covenant obsolete.

In Hebrews 9 we are told that the first covenant, the one that has been rendered obsolete, "had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness." Those regulations have been rendered obsolete (and therefore unfitting for new covenant worship) along with the covenant of which they were a part. The actions of the priests under the old covenant in performing their ritual duties, specifically the fact only the high priest enters the Holy of Holies once per year, had a symbolic meaning for the present age.

In Hebrews 10 we are told that the law, including its sacrificial system of worship, is a shadow of the realities that have come in Christ. In a related vein, Paul writes in Col. 2:16-17: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Scripture is clear that musical instruments were a divinely prescribed part of the external, ceremonial worship rituals of the Jewish temple and were closely associated with the offering of sacrifices. As the ark of the covenant was brought to the place David had prepared for it in Jerusalem, David made clear, after the disastrous first attempt in which Uzzah was killed, "that no one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, for the Lord had chosen them to carry the ark of the Lord and to minister to him forever" (1 Chron. 15:2). He realized that the reason God's anger had broken out against them the first time was because the Levites did not carry the ark (1 Chron. 15:13). David

commanded that Levites be appointed to sing and play instruments as the ark was brought to Jerusalem, and sacrifices were offered by the priests along the way (1 Chron. 15:16-28). The ark was placed in a tent, and David appointed Levites to minister regularly before the ark by playing sacred songs on their instruments (1 Chron. 16:4-7, 37-42).

David made preparations for building the temple in Jerusalem and charged his son Solomon to build it (1 Chronicles 22). David organized the Levites for the service in the temple that Solomon was to build and appointed 4,000 of the 38,000 Levites to "offer praises to the Lord with instruments [he had] made for praise" (1 Chron. 23:5). And then David gave to Solomon his plan for the temple, including his plan "for the divisions of the priests and of the Levites, and all the work of service in the house of the Lord" (1 Chron. 28:13), all of which v. 19 says was from the hand of the Lord. This was from God, not David. And David specifically charged Solomon to "behold the divisions of the priests and the Levites for all the service of the house of God" (1 Chron. 28:21).

As Solomon brought the ark to the temple, countless sheep and oxen were sacrificed (2 Chron. 5:6). When the priests came out from having put the ark in the Holy of Holies, the Levitical musicians, in accordance with their *duty*, played their instruments, and the temple was filled with the glory of the Lord (2 Chron. 5:11-14). At the dedication of the temple, 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep were offered in sacrifice, and the Chronicler notes, "The priests stood at their posts; the Levites also with the instruments for music to the Lord that King David had made for giving thanks to the Lord" (2 Chron. 7:4-6).

When Hezekiah restored temple worship after King Ahaz's idolatry, Scripture says "he stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to the commandment of David and of Gad the king's seer and of Nathan the prophet, for the commandment was from the Lord through his prophets" (2 Chron. 29:25). Again, it is clear that musical instruments were a divinely prescribed part of Levitical ministry in temple worship; they were an inherent part of the Jewish cult.

2 Chronicles 29:26-28 indicates that the musical accompaniment began with the burnt offering and ended when that sacrifice was finished (ESV, emphasis supplied):

²⁶ The Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. ²⁷ Then Hezekiah commanded that the burnt offering be offered on the altar. *And when the burnt offering began, the song to the Lord began also, and the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David king of Israel.* ²⁸ The whole assembly worshiped, and the singers sang and the trumpeters sounded. *All this continued until the burnt offering was finished.*

In the singing commanded thereafter, there is no mention of instrumental accompaniment. At the very least, the connection of instruments with sacrifice is emphasized.

Ezra 3:10 makes clear that after the exile, more than 400 years after David's death, the Spirit-inspired instructions David had given regarding worship still were followed. Musical instruments were used to praise the Lord "according to the directions of David king of Israel."

This connection between musical instruments and the sacrificial worship of the temple remained in later Jewish practice. To repeat a quote from James McKinnon in *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter III, 77 (emphasis supplied):

We are remarkably well-informed about the liturgy of the Second Temple at Jerusalem in the years which preceded its destruction by the Romans in A.D. 70. . . .

The musical portion of the service came at its climax. It consisted in the singing by the Levite musicians of the proper psalm for the day as the sacrificial lamb was consumed on the altar fire and the libation of wine was being poured out. The limbs of the lamb had just been cast upon the fire, and two priests gave three blasts on their silver trumpets, . . . a plain, a broken, and a plain blast. The High Priest's deputy, the *Segan*, waved a cloth and the Temple official who was 'over the cymbals' clashed them together. Then *as the libation was poured out* the Levites sang the psalm of the day from a platform, the *duchan*, situated near the people at the eastern end of the inner Temple court. They *accompanied themselves with nebel and kinnor*, string instruments which in all probability can be identified with harp and kithara respectively.

Daniel G. Reid provides essentially the same description in his article "Sacrifice and Temple Service" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 1041:

The priests at the altar could now offer the pieces of lamb as well as the flour, cakes and wine. . . . As the wine was poured out, the Levites broke out in song (one of the set psalms determined by the day of the week), accompanied by stringed instruments. At pauses in the singing the trumpets blasted, and the people fell prostrate (m. Tamid 7:3). Thus began the day of temple service, and the work of offering the people's individual sacrifices was underway.

The Rabbis understood instrumental music to be an essential part of temple worship by virtue of its connection to the sacrifices. As McKinnon explains in *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter III, 82:

The evidence suggests strongly that to play a musical instrument was indeed a violation of the Sabbath. The central passage is a long discussion in the tractate Sukkah of whether or not the *halil* might be played in the Temple on the Sabbath. The basic premise to the question is that work

which is essential to the Temple service, the lighting of fires to take an obvious example, overrides the Sabbath prohibition. The playing of musical instruments in conjunction with the sacrifice is another legitimate example of such work. And therefore playing of the regular Temple instruments such as the cymbals, the *nebel* and the *kinnor* is not questioned, only the *halil* which as we have seen was added on twelve special occasions each year. The conclusion is that the *halil* when played in conjunction with the sacrifice is essential and does override the Sabbath, but when played at the Water-Drawing during the festival of Sukkah is a mere expression of rejoicing and does not override the Sabbath.

A number of other scholars have commented on the close connection between instrumental music and the Jewish sacrificial system. Eric Werner writes in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 3:459:

It is important to bear in mind that all music of the temple, regardless of the period, was nothing but an accessory to its sacrificial ritual. Without sacrifice the music loses its *raison d'etre*. What was the inherent connection between the sacrifices and its accompanying music? This is an unsolved puzzle.²¹

Everett Ferguson states (*A Cappella Music*, p. 31): "Instrumental music, therefore, was an important feature of temple worship, and it was closely associated with the sacrificial system."

Edward Foley states in *Foundations of Christian Music*, 41:

The singing of religious texts appears to have followed the offering of sacrifices (2 Chron. 29:20-30) and trumpet blasts often accompanied the

²¹ Perhaps, as G. I. Williamson, a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, wrote in "Instrumental Music in the Worship of God: Commanded or Not Commanded?" in Edward A. Robson, ed., *The Biblical Doctrine of Worship* (Beaver Falls, PA: Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, 1974), 7-8 (reference is from Brian Schwertley, *Instruments in the Public Worship of God*, online at <http://www.reformed.com/pub/music.htm#r66>):

The whole system of ceremonial worship served as a '*shadow of heavenly things*' (Heb. 8:5). It was '*a figure for the time then present*' (9:9), but a figure of something better in the future. In plain words, here the drama of the redemption was enacted symbolically. We use the word 'drama' because this Old Testament ceremonial worship was only a representation of the real redemption which was to be accomplished, not with the blood of bulls and goats, but with the precious blood of Christ. That is why this impressive assembly of musicians was needed. In a similar way, a motion picture is a pale thing in comparison with the reality depicted. That is why sound effects, and a musical background are so important! It helps His Old Testament people (as children under age, Galatians 4) sense something more in these animal sacrifices than was actually there. So, as the sacrifice was offered, the emotions of God's people were stirred by this great cacophony of music.

sacrifices (Num. 10:10). Later rabbinic literature as well as the writings of Josephus (d. ca. 100 C.E.) further note the connection between instrumental music and sacrifice in the Temple.

Many theologians throughout history have recognized the significance of the new covenant's abrogation of ceremonial temple worship on the use of musical instruments in Christian worship. I already have quoted several from the early centuries of the church. Here are just a few from the Reformation and after:

John Calvin wrote in his *Commentary on the book of Psalms*, vol. 1, tr. Rev. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981 [reprint: 1557]), 539:

I have no doubt that playing upon cymbals, touching the harp and the viol, and all that kind of music, which is frequently mentioned in the psalms, was part of the education; that is to say the puerile instruction of the law: I speak of the stated service of the temple. . . . But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of the 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 simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to him.²²

John Girardeau, a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, wrote in the late nineteenth century in *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1888), 79:

Those who have urgently insisted upon [Old Testament authorization for musical instruments in worship] have acted with logical consistency in importing priests into the New Testament church; and as priests suppose sacrifices, lo, the sacrifice of the Mass! Instrumental music may not seem to stand upon the same foot as that monstrous corruption, but the principle which underlies both is the same; and that whether we are content with a single instrument, the cornet, the bass-viol, the organ, or go on by a natural development to the orchestral art, the cathedral pomps, and all the spectacular magnificence of Rome. We are Christians, and we are untrue to Christ and to the Spirit of grace when we resort to the abrogated and forbidden ritual of the Jewish temple.²³

Brian Schwertley, a modern-day Presbyterian minister, writes in *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God* (taken from the online edition at <http://www.reformed.com/pub/music.htm>):

²² This reference is from Moore, *Sing to the Lord*, 35-36.

²³ Page citation is from Moore, *Sing to the Lord*, 35, but the quote is from the online edition at <http://www.covenanter.org/Girardeau/Instrumental/chapter2.htm>.

The glory of the temple with its visible display and audible grandeur no doubt stimulated the senses and inspired awe, but now that Christ has come and instituted New Testament ordinances our focus is to be wholly upon Him—the reality. The simple unadorned worship of the gospel era brings us into the presence of the greater temple—Jesus Christ—as we sing divine songs, hear the word of God, listen to the preaching, and feast spiritually upon Christ's body. Putting shadows, incense, musical instruments, vestments, altars, etc., into new covenant worship merely serves to hide Christ and His glory under obsolete externalities.

SINGING DIFFERS FROM PLAYING INSTRUMENTS IN SPIRITUALLY SIGNIFICANT WAYS

Singing is continued in Christian worship despite its association with temple worship because it differs from playing instruments in spiritually significant ways. Specifically, singing, like all speech, is an internal, immediate expression of the rational element of the inner man, the spirit, whereas instrumental music is an external, noncommunicative sound made through an inanimate, manmade object.

That singing is to be part of Christian worship is apparent from 1 Cor. 14:15, 26; Eph. 5:18-20; and Col. 3:16. This is confirmed by numerous early writers: E.g., Pliny's letter to Emperor Trajan (A.D. 112) and the writings of Justin Martyr (mid-second century); Tertullian (late second century); Clement of Alexandria (late second century), Basil of Caesarea (mid-fourth century), and John Chrysostom (late fourth century). Ferguson, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 788-789.

Singing is a "spiritual sacrifice" that Christians, as a holy priesthood and a spiritual temple, are to offer to God (1 Pet. 2:4-5, 9; Heb. 13:15). Early Christian writers understood this. For example, Justin Martyr wrote in the mid-second century (translation from McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 20):

We have been instructed that only the following worship is worthy of him, not the consumption by fire of those things created by him for our nourishment but the use of them by ourselves and by those in need, while in gratitude to him we offer solemn prayers and hymns for his creation and for all things leading to good health.

Tertullian wrote some fifty years later, in a passage on spiritual sacrifice (translation from McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 44): "This prayer . . . we must bring amid psalms and hymns to the altar of God, and it will obtain from God all that we ask."

Recalling that new covenant worship is worship that is more suitable for offering to a spiritual being (Jn 4:19-24), it is noteworthy that *words* and *spirit* are associated in Scripture. Job expresses the fact words are vocalizations of the spirit when he asks in Job

26:4, "Who has helped you utter these words? And whose spirit spoke from your mouth?" Elihu says in Job 32:18-19, "For I am full of words, and the spirit within me compels me; inside I am like bottled-up wine, like new wineskins ready to burst." And most importantly, Jesus says in Jn. 6:63, "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."

The same concept is present in Mat. 12:34 (and Lk. 6:45; see also, Mat. 5:18) where Jesus says "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." As noted in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:119, "*Pneuma* [spirit] is used several times in the New Testament in the sense of *the inward person or heart* (e.g., Mark 2:8; 8:12; Matt 5:3; Luke 1:47, 80; John 11:33; 2 Cor 2:13)." See also, Ps. 71:23 ("My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have redeemed").

In Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 Paul refers to singing and making music "in your hearts"²⁴ to God/the Lord. This shows the inner aspect of Christian singing, the fact it originates in the heart/spirit (inner man) and is an expression of the entire person. That is why it is so fitting for worship of a God who is spirit. Musical instruments, on the other hand, he describes as "lifeless" (1 Cor. 14:7). They are inanimate, manmade, mechanical devices.

John Mark Hicks, a professor of theology at Lipscomb University, expresses the distinction this way in his article *In Defense of A Cappella Music* (online at <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=8946>): "A *cappella* music derives its emotional and spiritual vigor from the heart which sings rather than from the instrument which generates emotional response from external sources. This is the contrast between extrinsic and intrinsic generation of worship emotion."

Everett Ferguson captures the idea beautifully in *A Cappella Music*, 90:

Vocal expressions are peculiarly well suited to the expression of spiritual worship, to the expressing of what comes from the human spirit and through the Spirit of God. They are rational, not in the sense of non-emotional, but as proceeding from and appealing to the highest of human nature. The whole self (including the emotions) is involved in Christian worship, but the mind (reason) is to be in control. Instrumental music can express feelings and emotions. Vocal music can express the will and intellect. The latter is better suited for the communion of spirit with Spirit. In vocal music there is an immediate contact. In instrumental music there is an intermediary. The voice is much more a matter of one's self than any

²⁴ "The phrase ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν ('in your hearts') [in Col. 3:16] is often connected with ἐν τῇ χάριτι, giving the sense of 'with gratitude [or grace] in your hearts' (NIV, NRSV; cf. NASB), but it most naturally modifies the participle that immediately precedes it. Thus, the phrase should read, 'singing in your hearts.'" David F. Detwiler, "Church Music and Colossians 3:16," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (July-September 2001), 364.

other gift of praise can be. Vocal music thus best corresponds to the nature of one's relationship to God.

Charles Spurgeon, the famous nineteenth-century Baptist preacher, made the point more colorfully in *Treasury of David*, Ps. 42:4 (taken from the online edition at <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/TreasuryofDavid/>): "What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettiness of a quartet, the refined niceties of a choir, or the blowing off of wind from inanimate bellows and pipes! We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it."

Related to the preceding point, singing is a form of speaking (Eph. 5:19) in that it is verbal communication. The words of praise that are sung are understandable and thus are able to build up the gathered saints. According to 1 Corinthians 14, the reason tongues are forbidden in the worship assembly, unless they are translated, is that noncommunicative speech cannot edify others. To those who do not understand the language, tongues simply are sounds that convey no message. The same holds for instrumental music. It is sound that, however beautiful, conveys no message. According to George W. Stewart (*Music in Church Worship*, 230), Luther and other Reformers understood this principle to preclude using an organ, "which spoke to the ears but not the understanding." Moore, *Sing to the Lord*, 28.

Singing also is ideally suited for expressing the priesthood of all believers in that all members of the community of faith can offer that spiritual sacrifice. Instrumental music, on the other hand, can be offered only by musicians.

THERE IS NO INDICATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT THAT GOD DESIRES OR ACCEPTS WORSHIP FROM CHRISTIANS IN THE FORM OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

The foregoing makes clear that the use of musical instruments in the Old Testament is not an indication that God desires or accepts their use in Christian worship. On the contrary, Scripture and church history suggest that instrumental music was a divinely prescribed part of the Jewish sacrificial system that was rendered obsolete by Christ. So the question becomes whether there is anything in the New Testament to dispel that suggestion, whether there is any indication in the New Testament that God does indeed desire or accept worship from Christians in the form of instrumental music. There is not. There is no command to use instruments in worship and no biblical record of any Christian doing so. In theological context, that silence is deafening.

The use of instruments was not inherent in the word *psallō* (the word translated "sing" in 1 Cor. 14:15 and Eph. 5:19) in the first century; it simply meant "sing." Ferguson shows this conclusively in *A Cappella Music*, 1-27. See also, Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1096. Besides, if it were the case that the use of instruments was inherent in *psallō*, then the use of instruments would be mandatory rather than optional, which no one claims. That

certainly would be a difficult case to argue given that the early church did not use instruments.

Passages in Revelation do not indicate that God desires or accepts worship from Christians in the form of instrumental music. In the first place, it is doubtful that instrumental music is used for worship in the heavenly visions of Revelation.

The kithara (often translated harp) is mentioned in three verses: Rev. 5:8, 14:2, and 15:2. Regarding 5:8, it says that each of the twenty-four elders, who probably are angelic beings, had a harp and a bowl full of incense, which things are the prayers of the saints. Most assume, based on Rev. 8:3-4 and Ps. 141:2, that it is the *incense* that represents the prayers of the saints, but it is just as likely, if not more so, that it is both the harp and the bowls of incense that represent the prayers.

In 8:3-4, the incense is not used metaphorically for the prayers. It is offered *with* the prayers; it does not *represent* the prayers. As David Aune notes, "Rev. 8:3-4 distinguishes between incense and prayer and does not treat the former as a metaphor for the latter, . . ." David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 358. This completely undermines Beale's contention that the plural relative pronoun ("which") refers only to the incense and not to the harps "since 'the prayers of the saints' in 8:3-4 is clearly identified only with the incense." G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 357-358. A song is identified with prayer in Ps. 42:8, so it would not be out of place for a both the harp and bowls of incense to represent prayers. Indeed, many Psalms are sung prayers (see, e.g., Ps. 4:2, 5:2, 6:9, 39:12, 54:2, 55:1, 61:1, 69:13, 80:4, 84:8, 86:6, 88:2, 102:1, 141:2; also Hab. 3:1).

The fact the relative pronoun ("which") in 5:8 is feminine plural in form means, by the standard grammatical rule of concord, that it refers either to the *bowls* of incense (rather than the incense itself) or to both the harp and the bowls of incense. It is possible that the pronoun refers to the incense itself and is feminine plural by attraction to "the prayers," which is feminine plural. But apart from the dubious assumption that it must be the incense rather than the bowls containing it that represent the prayers, there is no need to appeal to attraction.

The description of the twenty-four elders as having both a harp and a bowl full of incense suggests that the harp, like the bowl, is a static symbol of something, as it certainly could not be played by one holding a bowl. And, in fact, there is no indication that they are played. It is a stylized depiction of a worship scene with an explanation of the symbolic meaning of the objects – they represent the prayers of the saints.

Regarding 14:2, the only verse that mentions *playing* of the harp, the voices of the heavenly singers are said to be *like* "the sound of harpists playing their harps," probably meaning they are melodious. The redeemed (or angelic host) are singing not worshipping with instruments.

As for 15:2, John sees the victorious ones standing beside the glassy sea "having harps of God." The Greek word *echō* can mean holding something, which is why some translations insert the word "hands," but it also can mean "having" in the sense of being equipped with. It often is used of a person having hands, feet, ears, and eyes.

These victors are not said merely to have "harps" but "harps of God." I submit that, rather than a picture of victors holding harps given to them by God, this is a metaphorical reference to the human voice animated by the human spirit under the direction of the Spirit of God. That is "God's harp" because it is, for the reasons I have outlined, the music that is especially fitting for the worship of a God who is spirit.

Note that in Rev. 14:2 singing was said to be like the sound of harpists playing their harps. So there already is an association in Revelation between the voice and a harp. Moreover, Revelation is apocalyptic literature, so this kind of description would not be out of place. In fact, about a century after Revelation was written, Clement of Alexandria described the tongue as "the psalter of the Lord" and said the kithara (harp) was "the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum." It was Athanasius, the fourth-century church leader in Alexandria, or Hesychius, the fifth-century monk in Jerusalem, who identified the command in Psalm 150 to "Praise him with psalterion and kithara" as meaning "hymning him with the grace of the Holy Spirit with heart, tongue, and your lips." Ferguson, *The Instrumental Music Issue*, 97.

In addition, there is no mention of these harps being played. The text merely reports that those having God's harps are singing. Given that the church never used musical instruments in worship and saw the human voice as the instrument best suited for worshipping a God who is spirit, it would be primed to understand "God's harps" as a metaphor for the singing capacity of the Spirit-filled Christian.

It is true that one does not see a voice, but John knew by the victors' triumph and singing (15:3-4) that they possessed harps of God, human instruments ready to extol him in heartfelt song. His description reflects that knowledge.

Even if instrumental music was used for worship in the heavenly visions of Revelation, it would not mean instrumental music is appropriate for the earthly worship of the church. In Revelation there is incense in golden bowls and golden censers (5:8, 8:3), a golden altar (8:3), a temple (11:19), and the ark of the covenant (11:19), but almost no one believes it would be appropriate to introduce these items into Christian worship. The fact heavenly worship is depicted by heavenly analogs of the earthly, old covenant cult does not mean the earthly, old covenant cult is an ideal or perpetual form of worship. On the contrary, that cult specifically is shown in the New Testament to be suboptimal and temporary.

The earthly forms of the old covenant cult are mere shadows of the heavenly reality. It is that shadow that has been superseded by the worship inaugurated by Christ. The heavenly reality cannot be replicated on earth, at least not prior to the earth's

redemption, so it is a mistake to read Revelation as authorization to revert to the obsolete shadow.

Finally, the New Testament does not support the notion that the form of one's worship always is irrelevant under the new covenant, that the God of the New Testament is concerned *only* with the worshiper's heart. For example, regardless of one's motive and sincerity, one cannot participate in idol feasts (1 Cor. 10:18-22), cannot publicly pray while ignoring cultural sex distinctions in attire (1 Cor. 11:3-6), cannot speak in tongues in the assembly without an interpreter (1 Cor. 14:28), and, in the case of women, cannot prophesy in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:33b-36). Therefore, it is misguided to rest the defense of instrumental music on that foundation.

ONE DEVOTED TO PLEASING GOD WILL CHOOSE TO WORSHIP HIM BY SINGING WITHOUT INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

We know that worshiping God with heartfelt singing is pleasing to him, whereas worshiping him with instrumental music has, at the very least, a significant potential of displeasing him (as worship according to a superseded shadow). The person devoted to pleasing God will choose the first approach because it guarantees offering acceptable worship.

This choice is not based on a legalistically warped concept of God, seeing him as an angry king waiting to destroy erring subjects. The motivation is not fear but a desire to please. We do not value the exercise of our musical ability or personal taste more than we value being sure of giving God what he desires. This attitude certainly is more in keeping with the injunctions to worship with reverence and awe (Heb. 12:28) and to do everything in faith (Rom. 14:23; 2 Cor. 5:7), to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31), and in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17).

Conditioning worship practices on an indication in Scripture that God desires or accepts them is not inconsistent with Christians using such things as pews, song books, tuning forks, and projectors. Those things help believers to worship in ways that have been commanded. Just as using a crescent wrench is approved implicitly by a general command to change a tire (but would not be approved by a specific command to change it with a lug wrench), so using tools that help accomplish the general commands to assemble, sing, and teach are approved implicitly by those commands. There is no reason to believe that using them is contrary to the will of God.

Instrumental music cannot be justified on the same basis because there are good reasons for believing it was part of the Jewish sacrificial system that was rendered obsolete by Christ and thus that using it is contrary to the will of God. The claim that instrumental music helps the church to sing no more justifies using it in worship than the claim that animal sacrifice helps the church to teach would justify sacrificing bulls each Lord's Day. Whatever ancillary benefit those Jewish worship rituals may have cannot be separated from the divine choice to supersede them, as though those benefits were outside of God's contemplation. The divinely willed obsolescence of musical instruments in worship ought

not be nullified by a rationale that permits them to be used in precisely the same way as if they had not been rendered obsolete. The fact they were not used in Christian worship for centuries confirms the point.

In addition, musical instruments are in fact not used to aid congregational singing. As in the Old Testament (1 Chron. 23:5; 2 Chron. 5:12-13, 7:6, 29:27-28), they are used for worshiping. This is obvious from the fact they are played when no one is singing, during entire songs or parts of songs. Even when there is vocal accompaniment, the instruments are used for their own contribution to the performance, not to facilitate the singing. This is evident from the fact the sounds they emit are far more complex than is necessary for aiding singing. Clearly, the goal is to produce a musical hybrid that is considered superior to a purely vocal rendition.

The truth of the matter is that instrumental music often has an adverse effect on congregational singing. The congregation tends to become an audience at a concert rather than participants in praise. As John Hudson wrote in the *Gospel Advocate* in 1938, after having visited instrumental churches in Australia and New Zealand, "The argument that instrumental music is an aid in singing is unsound. It is not an aid but a hindrance. It is a broken crutch." Earl West, *The Instrumental Music Issue* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1987), 77.

LOGICAL CONSEQUENCE OF ACCEPTING INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN WORSHIP

If one accepts the practice of worshiping with musical instruments on the theory that whatever is not expressly prohibited is acceptable, then all forms of worship not expressly prohibited must be accepted (e.g., sacrifices; burning objects; using beads, rattles, or incense; cutting or flagellating oneself; dancing). There is no logical basis for objecting to any of them. Reformed theologian Edmund Clowney frames the issue this way in *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 126:

Perhaps we can best recognize the distinctiveness of the elements the Lord has appointed for worship by reflecting on one that has not been appointed: the act of sexual union. The marriage bed is honoured in God's Word; the union of man and wife is made a symbol of the union of Christ and the church. The Word of God blesses sexual union; indeed, it forbids continued abstinence on the part of married couples. Can this human activity, so absorbing for the whole person, so profound in its emotional roots, be made an element in corporate worship? It is quite feasible to do so; other religions have incorporated into worship sacred prostitution or the joint celebration of conjugal union. Something of the sort has been done in certain Christian communes; where in the Bible is it forbidden?²⁵

²⁵Objections about immodesty could be met by having an enclosure for the couple.

The simple answer to any proposal to use sex as an element of public worship is that God has not told us to do so. Further, it does indicate a difference between what we may do to the glory of God and what we do in the special activity of worship.

Many Evangelicals are acutely aware of the danger of cutting worship loose from the mooring of biblical authorization. In his chapter in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), John MacArthur, Jr. states (p. 181):

My concern is this: The contemporary church's abandonment of *sola Scriptura* as the regulative principle [i.e., its abandonment of worshiping only in ways that are authorized by Scripture] has opened the church to some of the grossest imaginable abuses – honkytonk church services, the carnival sideshow atmosphere, and wrestling exhibitions.

Those who deny the need for biblical authorization in worship wind up leaving the form of worship to human arbiters. Only those forms of worship that the congregational leaders find personally acceptable are allowed; those they consider eccentric or unworthy are prohibited. For example, in the early 1990's a television preacher was asked what to do about a member of a church who was using a police whistle to worship God, claiming he was doing so "by the Spirit." The preacher simply declared that he would put a stop to it! The question he never answered is, On what basis?

CONCLUSION

I cannot improve on Everett Ferguson's conclusion in *A Cappella Music*, 97:

There are good historical, theological, and musicological grounds to engage only in *a cappella* music in public worship. This is safe, ecumenical ground that all can agree is acceptable. Instrumental music cannot be confirmed as authorized in the text of the New Testament. It did not exist in Christian worship for centuries after the New Testament. Vocal music is more consistent with the nature of Christian worship. Instrumental music in comparison to vocal music (as incense in comparison to prayer) is, as the church fathers said, a falling back to a lower level (Old Testament level) of religious expression. It introduces into the human relationship to God an act lacking specific apostolic authorization.