

The Elgin Hills

Examiner

“...examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so”
(Acts 17:11)



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Does confusion over instrumental music in worship amount to “little more than personal preference” and “traditional practice,” or is it a matter of the faith?

Many read the recent series of articles from the Florence *Times Daily* on how religion influences the Shoals. Most of it was written from a neutral to liberal viewpoint. Several were quoted including Joe VanDyke, “minister at Magnolia Church of Christ in Florence.”

Appearing in the February 11 issue was the article, “Traditional vs. Contemporary,” subheaded, “Many churches wrestling with the idea of new worship styles.” In this article VanDyke says, “It is a difference in philosophy and how one interprets the identity and mission of the church in today’s world...There has always been tension in this area, and much of this confusion amounts to little more than personal preference or traditional practice.”

Therefore, bro. VanDyke believes it doesn’t matter whether a church uses instrumental music or not – they are simply “preferences” and have no more authority than a “traditional practice.” However, the New Testament says something about singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, so God has spoken on this matter, and it therefore is a matter of the faith.

When one does not have respect for Bible authority, issues such as having instrumental music, bands, praise teams, hand clapping, and other identifying marks of “contemporary” worship do not matter.

Whatever draws the largest crowds and makes people feel the best is the course to pursue. However, this thinking not only contradicts Bible teaching, it also counters church history, and the teaching of many religious leaders of various churches for the last 500 years.

Bible Teaching

It is obvious that during the *Old Testament* God’s people worshipped Him using instruments of music. However, this is not true in the *New Testament*.

The following passages include every reference to the “kind” of music used in the New Testament church and by Jesus during His ministry. Such makes it plain what “kind” of music is authorized.

1. “*And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mt. of Olives*” - Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26.
2. “*And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God*” - Acts 16:25.
3. “*For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name*” - Romans 15:9.
4. “*I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also*” - 1Cor 14:15.
5. “*Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord*” - Eph 5:19.

6. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" - Col 3:16.
7. "In the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee" - Heb 2:12.
8. "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms" - James 5:13.

When God specifies the "kind" of anything to be used in service to Him, every other "kind" of that subject is eliminated. When God specified that from the tribe of Levi priests were to come, He did not have to say people from every other tribe were excluded; His specifying Levi excluded all other tribes (see Heb. 7:11-14). Similarly, while there are many "kinds" of music such as singing only, instrumental only, and instrumental plus singing, the only "kind" God ever authorized in worship to Him is singing.

Church History

Instrumental music is not only *not* mentioned as being used among God's people in the New Testament, *there is no record of its being used for several hundred years after the death of the last apostle*. In fact the only references made to it are denunciations written against its use by prominent religious leaders. The earliest dates of its use from any existing records put its beginning at about the sixth century, and that varied given different localities. The reasons they were not used had nothing to do with their not being in existence or inability of Christians to afford them. Notice the following quotations from reliable historians.

1. "Pope Vitalian is regarded to have first introduced organs into some of the churches of Western Europe about 670; but the earliest trustworthy account is that of one sent as a present by the Greek emperor Constantine Copronymus to Pepin, King of Franks in 755" (*The American Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7, p. 688).
2. "The organ is said to have been introduced into church music by Pope Vitalian in 666 A.D" (*Chambers Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7, p. 112).
3. "In the Greek church the organ never came into use, but after the eighth century it became common in the Latin church, not, however, without opposition from the side of the Monks...the reformed church discarded it; and though the church of Basil very early introduced it, it was in other places admitted only sparingly and after long hesitation" (*The Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 2, p. 1702).
4. "The Greeks, as well as the Jews, were wont to use instruments as accompaniments in their sacred songs. The converts to Christianity accordingly must have been familiar with this mode of singing; yet it is generally believed that the primitive Christians failed to adopt the use of instrumental music in their religious worship" (*McClintock and Strong Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 6, p. 759).
5. "Both the Jews in their temple service, and the Greeks in their idol worship, were accustomed to sing with the accompaniment of instrumental music. The converts to Christianity, accordingly, must have been familiar with this mode of singing...but it is generally admitted, that the primitive Christians employed no instrumental music in their religious worship...Such musical accompaniments were gradually introduced; but can hardly be assigned to a period earlier than the fifth and sixth centuries" Lyman Coleman, Presbyterian scholar and author, *The Primitive Church*, pp. 370-371, 376-377).
6. "The church, although lapsing more and more into defection from the truth and into a corruption of apostolic practice, had no instrumental music for 1200 years," (that is, it was not in general use until that time, Professor John Girardeau, Presbyterian Professor in the Columbia Theological Seminary in *Music in the Church*, p. 179).

7. "We have no real knowledge of the exact character of the music which formed a part of the religious devotion of the first Christian congregations. It was, however, purely vocal" (Dr. Frederic Louis Ritter, *History of Music from the Christian Era to the Present Time*, p. 28).

Numerous other encyclopedias and early church histories indicate the same as above, that the use of instrumental music, bands, etc., were available to first century Christians, but were never used in worship to God.

Teaching of various religious leaders

Religious leaders do not constitute divine authority, but their testimony for the last five hundred or so years should cause the thoughtful student to understand that the use of instrumental music in worship is of recent origin, even among churches that use it now, and was met with considerable opposition when it began! The following religious leaders did not think that its use was "little more than personal preference or traditional practice."

1. "*Musical instruments in celebrating the praise of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, 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*" (John Calvin's *Commentary*, Ps. 33. He was one of the founders of the *Presbyterian Church*).
2. "*I am an old man, and an old minister; and I here declare that I never knew them (musical instruments) productive of any good in the worship of God; and have had reason to believe that they were productive of much evil. Music, as a science, I esteem and admire; but instruments of music in the house of God I abominate and abhor. This is the abuse of music; and here I register my protest against all such corruptions in the worship of the Author of Christianity*" (Clarke's *Commentary*, Vol. 4, p. 684. Adam

Clarke is considered one of the greatest commentators among *Methodists*).

3. "*I have no objection to instruments of music in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen*" (John Wesley, founder of the *Methodist Church*, as quoted by Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, Vol. 4, p. 684)
4. *Martin Luther* is quoted to have "*called the organ an ensign of baal*" (McClintock and Strong's *Encyclopedia*, Vol. 6, p. 762).
5. *Charles H. Spurgeon*, recognized as one of the greatest *Baptist* preachers that ever lived, who preached for 20 years to thousands of people weekly in the Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle, London, England, did not have musical instruments in the worship (M.C. Kurfess, *Instrumental Music in the Worship*, p. 196).
6. In their commentary, *Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, two famous scholars of the *Church of England*, Conybeare and Howson, stated this about Eph. 5:19, "*Make melody with the music of your hearts, to the Lord...let your songs be, not the drinking of heathen feasts, but psalms and hymns; and their accompaniment, not the music of the lyre, but the melody of the heart*" (Vol. 2, p. 408).
7. J.W. McGarvey, well-known preacher, teacher and writer among *churches of Christ* stated, "It is manifest that we cannot adopt the practice without abandoning the obvious and only ground on which a restoration of Primitive Christianity can be accomplished" (*What Shall We Do About the Organ?* p. 4).

Even if no religious leader ever taught that the use of instrumental music in worship to God was not authorized, it would not change New Testament teaching nor make it acceptable to God today. It does however indicate that the cream of the crop of Bible scholarship both in and out of the Lord's church for several hundred years is agreed on this subject.

Final Observations

By definition, worship is God-centered, not man-centered. It logically follows that the

worshiper should want to worship God the way He wants, not how man wants, regardless of our feelings or how it “sounds.”

Second, the nature of God-ordained music in the church not only involves praise to God, but also *instruction* to each other. Both involve *words* – *words* which *teach* and *admonish* (Col. 3:16). “*Speaking* one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19) involves *words*. Instruments do not use words and cannot speak, teach or admonish. Therefore, instruments not only do not do what God positively commands, they actually “drown out” or “muffle” efforts of worshippers to do what God commanded. While they may “sound” good to us, their use does not accomplish what God positively commands and they actually get in the way.

Third, God designed assemblies for our spiritual *edification* (I Corinthians 14). This means that we should leave an assembly knowing more about God and His will for us and being encouraged to do it, not simply having a warm, fuzzy feeling after being in an audience and hearing a “great band.” Paul said that “in the church I had rather *speak five words* with my *understanding* (his being understood by the listener, p.o.), that I might *instruct* others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue (which few could understand, p.o.)” (I Cor. 14:19). Paramount in assemblies both in oral teaching as well as singing is the ability to “understand” what is taught and sung. It is in this same context that Paul says we should “sing with the spirit,” and “with the understanding also” (vs. 15). Loud bands, pianos and organs make this difficult and sometimes impossible.

I have been in a crowd many times when the national anthem was played by a marching band and sung by the crowd. Very few words are “understood.” The same is true in a religious assembly when instruments are played.

Fourth, while instrumental music is not authorized, singing from the “heart” is (Eph.

5:19). Just because instrumental music is not authorized does not mean that singing should be something “thrown together.” A well thought out singing service that is from joyful and cheerful hearts (James 5:13) can be more “edifying” and move people closer to God than any tune musical instruments could ever produce. Such accomplishes for us *spiritually* what *physical* instruments are not made to do and can not do.

No, this is not “little more than personal preference or traditional practice,” but rather a matter of Divine revelation, that which is from “the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

– *Phillip Owens*