

Instrumental Music

Statement of Belief

The Scriptures teach that Christians are to sing in praise of their God:

...speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord ([Ephesians 5:19](#)).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God ([Colossians 3:16](#)).

Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise ([James 5:13](#)).

The Scriptures make no mention of the use of instrumental music for Christians.

Silence Considerations

Many who use instrumental music first defend their practice by saying, "Well, God never said **not** to use instruments!" Do the Scriptures establish this as a legitimate defense?

We must always remember the purpose of God's Word. The Word of God is our guide to life; within its pages, we have all of the knowledge that we need to live a life pleasing to God, as shown in [2 Timothy 3:16-17](#):

Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.

The Bible does not, however, lay out explicitly every little thing that is sinful. The Law was good at demonstrating what the Jews were not to do; however, thanks be to God, we are no longer under that bondage, for we are freed in Christ Jesus from such a Law ([Colossians 2:14-17](#), etc.). We have an important principle established in [Romans 14:23](#):

But he that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; and whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

Note that Paul does not say that whatsoever is not of sin is of faith; indeed, what is not of faith is sin. We recognize the nature of faith from [Hebrews 11:1](#):

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen.

Faith is not just some “feeling”; proper faith will have some substance and assurance. If we are going to engage in a practice, we need some legitimating evidence from the Scriptures. Therefore, we are to do what we see in the Bible according to valid principles. Nevertheless, some will question whether or not the idea of God’s silence as being prohibitive is a valid principle. For them we appeal to [Hebrews 7:13-14](#):

For He of whom these things are said belongeth to another tribe, from which no man hath given attendance at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord hath sprung out of Judah; as to which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priests.

In this situation, we see that God previously had made a specific command that the tribe of Levi officiate as priests (cf. [Numbers 3:6-9](#)). Christ, therefore, cannot be a priest according to the tribe of Levi because He descended from the tribe of Judah. God did not speak about the tribe of Judah officiating as priests because He gave commandment of the tribe of Levi, and to no other. Likewise, we have been given a specific command to sing; to use instrumental music would be adding where God has not said to add, and using the principle demonstrated in [Hebrews 7:13-14](#), we see that the practice is wrong.

Others will say that God’s silence shows indifference toward practices. In some cases, this can be true: when God has made a command to do something, but not about how to go about fulfilling the command, we have liberty to perform the command in any way we wish. A good example is assembling: we see that we are commanded to assemble ([Hebrews 10:25](#)), but God never said specifically where we were to assemble. The early Christians met in various places as they could. Thus, we are left to conclude that where Christians meet is of no consequence to God, as long as they are meeting.

This condition does not exist with instrumental music, however, since God has made a specific command to sing. Since the specific command has been given, we must not add anything to it, as shown above. We can establish, then, that when God establishes generic authority and is silent about specific means, there is liberty; where God establishes specific authority and is silent about any other practice, there is prohibition.

Old Testament Considerations

Argument: David used instruments, and David found favor with God, so instruments are acceptable.

Answer: This would be so, if it were not for the change of covenant that divides David and us as Christians today.

We read in [Colossians 2:14](#) that the Law was nailed to the cross and in [Galatians 3:24-25](#) that the Law was a tutor, no longer necessary when we have the fullness of Christ. [Hebrews 7:12](#) is very specific on the subject:

For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law.

[Hebrews 9:15](#) captures the essence of the distinction:

And for this cause he is the mediator of a new covenant, that a death having taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant, they that have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

We can see, therefore, that a change of law has occurred. When change occurs, the change runs throughout the law: if there is a practice performed in the Old Testament that is not done in the New, we have no right to perform that practice. This goes for the Sabbath as well as for instrumental music. Until we see a verse in the New Testament that shows that instrumental music is authorized, we must assume that it was done away with at the cross.

Retort: David's use of instruments was not commanded by the Law; we can therefore use instruments today.

Answer: While many try to present this view, the Scriptures actually show that God did provide commands for the use of instruments in the Temple, as can be seen from [2 Chronicles 29:25](#), among other places:

And he set the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for the commandment was of the LORD by his prophets.

While some may attempt to say that the command comes from David, the text is very specific that the command is prompted by the LORD Himself. We must not consider this command to be against the Law or adding to it, for Miriam the sister of Moses used a tambourine to praise the LORD in [Exodus 15:20](#), and instruments seem to be an aspect of service to the LORD in the old covenant.

The argument is not valid, nevertheless, even if instruments were not directly commanded. David lived under the covenant between God and Israel; his actions are either legitimated or condemned by the terms of that covenant. We are under a new covenant, as seen above from [Hebrews 9:15](#). Our actions will be legitimated or condemned by the terms of this new covenant between God and all mankind through Christ Jesus. Even if a given practice is not specifically required by the Law of Moses, it nevertheless is authorized or unauthorized under the terms of the covenant between God and Israel, and cannot be forced onto the new covenant. We have as much right to use instrumental music as we would to slaughter Philistines, to offer a heifer without blemish on an altar, or to require circumcision; just because God approved something under a previous covenant does not mean that we today have the right to do the same!

New Testament Considerations

Argument: Paul says that we are to sing psalms. Psalms were sung with instruments, therefore, instruments are acceptable.

Answer: This argument posits an inference that may not be in the text. While psalms were certainly sung with instrumental accompaniment in the Old Testament, where do we see any such thing in the New?

Although uninspired, we have the witness of Clement of Alexandria, who lived a century after the Apostles, and explains an interpretation of David's statements in the Psalms:

If people occupy their time with pipes, psalteries, choirs, dances, Egyptian clapping of hands, and such disorderly frivolities, they become quite immodest...Let the pipe be resigned to the shepherds, and the flute to the superstitious ones who are engrossed in idolatry. For, in truth, such instruments are to be banished from the temperate banquet...Man is truly a peaceful instrument. However, if you investigate, you will find other instruments to be warlike, inflaming to lusts, kindling up passion, or rousing wrath...The Spirit, distinguishing the divine service from such revelry, says, "Praise Him with the sound of trumpet."

For with the sound of the trumpet, He will raise the dead. "Praise Him on the psaltery."

For the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. "And praise Him on the lyre."

By the lyre is meant the mouth struck by the Spirit (The Instructor, 2.4).

Here we see early witnesses that interpreted the Psalms in a way that rendered them usable for the voice and the voice only. Since early Christians could obviously sing psalms without using musical accompaniment, nothing hinders us from doing the same.

Argument: [Ephesians 5:19](#), [Colossians 3:16](#), and [James 5:13](#) are all talking about playing instruments in the Greek.

Answer: The Greek word translated "sing" is the word *psallo*. *Psallo* meant "to pluck" when it was first used by the Greeks, but later the meaning of the word shifted, so that by the time of Christ, the term meant "to sing." All translators and Greek scholars confirm this fact. A more modern example of the shift in meanings of word can be seen with "gay". A term that once was used to describe one who is happy, by various means, now more often is used to describe one who is a practicing homosexual. Words, therefore, can often change in meaning as time goes on, and therefore we have every confidence that the translators of the New Testament have it right.

Argument: Early Christians met in the Temple ([Acts 2:42-46](#)), and we know that instrumental music was played in the Temple ([Psalm 150](#), [Ezra 3:10](#)). Therefore, early Christians praised God with instruments.

Answer: While it is true that early Christians did meet in the Temple, a significant leap is required to establish that they used instruments in their praise to God. First of all, the Temple was a vast complex encompassing a large part of the city; it is unlikely that the sounds of instruments could be heard in every part of it. Furthermore, the presence of instruments in another part of the Temple does not mean that the early Christians were actively using them or working with them to praise God. This inference is not required from the account in Acts, and there is no good reason to believe that the Christians in Jerusalem used instruments in their praise to God.

Argument: Instruments are used in Revelation, so they are authorized.

Answer: The texts in question:

And when he had taken the book, the four living creatures and the four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints ([Revelation 5:8](#)).

And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire; and them that come off victorious from the beast, and from his image, and from the number of his name, standing by the sea of glass, having harps of God, ([Revelation 15:2](#)).

Notwithstanding that no one is actually "playing" a harp in these texts, but merely holding them, we must recognize that the book of Revelation is full of figurative language. If we are to be consistent in literalizing the passage, the harps that would be held in the assembly must be held by beasts, or one must stand on a sea of glass mixed with fire. Who, however, would argue that such could be done? Instead, just as the incense in [Revelation 5:8](#) represents the prayers of the saints, we can posit that the harps would represent the praise of the saints. The figurative language of the Revelation in no way authorizes any New Testament practice; even if the harps are used in Heaven, when did God make any comment on their usage here on Earth?

Retort: The examples in Revelation show that God obviously approves of instruments in these happy examples. You must show where God disapproves of instruments.

Answer: Does God show His approval of instruments using Revelation? In [Revelation 8](#), we read of trumpets heralding eight events, of which five bring about death and destruction to the Earth. Now, the destruction will be just and right, but can any Christian who purports to love his fellow man say that the destruction is positive or happy? No real pronouncement as to the feelings of God toward instrumental music can be made because of the figurative nature of the language of Revelation, let alone the varying ways in which instruments are used. Otherwise, if figurative language can be used to justify a practice, should we plunder the strong man's house, as Jesus alludes to in [Matthew 12:29](#)? By no means! Therefore, let us keep figurative language exactly as it is, as figurative, understanding the spiritual message that is being proclaimed and not reading too much into the physical examples used to present them.

As for showing disapproval of instruments, where in the Scriptures do we see that God must show approval or disapproval of practices to make them right or wrong? We see in [Matthew 19:7-8](#) that God allowed the Jews to divorce their wives, even though God

hates divorce ([Malachi 2:16](#)). God disapproved of the practice, yet it was allowed. Furthermore, do we read anywhere of God showing disapproval of observing the Sabbath under the Law of Moses? Only when the people were otherwise disobedient (cf. [Isaiah 1:10-18](#))! Yet we do not observe the Sabbath today, not because God disapproves of it, but because the covenant has changed, and the Sabbath rest is now our hope laid up in Heaven ([Hebrews 4:1-11](#)). Likewise, God does not need to explicitly disapprove of instrumental music for us to recognize that it comes without authority.

Other Considerations

Argument: We still fulfill the command, because we sing: we just have an instrument accompanying the singing.

Answer: If you tell me to go to the store to get bread, and I get bread and a candy bar, did I fulfill your command?

I certainly did what you asked me to do, but I did more than that, and thus violated your commandment. The same goes for the instrument: you may still be singing, but the singing is no longer akin to singing in the New Testament, for it is done with an addition concerning which He spoke nothing. We are to make melody with our heart, not with a piano.

Furthermore, the "addition" is hindering the God-given purpose for singing. In [Ephesians 5:19](#) and [Colossians 3:16](#) we see that our singing is to represent speaking to, teaching, and admonishing one another. How do instruments assist in our "conversation" with one another? It adds nothing to the substance of the message; it only aids in production. Where in the Scriptures do we see that the focus of singing is on the production? God is more pleased with a joyful noise done to build up according to [Ephesians 5:19](#) and [Colossians 3:16](#) than a perfect performance that does not lead to teaching and admonishment. Those who would emphasize instruments seem to put production over the message, and reverse God's established priorities!

Argument: Well, if instrumental music is an addition, what about songbooks, song leaders, and pitch pipes?

Answer: There is a fundamental difference between an expedient and an addition. An expedient helps to facilitate the completion of a commandment, while an addition changes the nature of the completion.

Song books, song leaders, and pitch pipes are all used to fulfill the command to sing, and that it should be done orderly, as seen in [1 Corinthians 14:40](#):

But let all things be done decently and in order.

Without a song leader, who would determine when we begin singing and at which tempo and pitch? Without the songbook, how would we know what we are singing? And without the pitch pipe, how will the song leader know what pitch to use? None of these changes the command given to us in the Scriptures, but rather help us fulfill the command. Instrumental music alters the purity of the human voice praising its Creator, and is done without God having spoken to its effect.

Argument: Well, God gave me the talent to play instruments; why can't I use that talent He gave me?

Answer: God gives talents, yes, but does He give specific talents?

For instance, does a con man get the ability to deceive others from God? Should he engage in deceptive behaviors for God? Should a thief do so for the Lord, since God gives talents?

I am sure that there is agreement that God gives us talents, and that we can use them in proper and improper ways. There is, however, a proper way to use all talents; a con man, which generally is very persuasive, could change his life and persuade people to follow Christ. Likewise, one who has a talent playing an instrument has some music ability, and thus could sing and lead singing very well. God gives talents, and we need to use them as He has directed, not according to our own whims.

Early Witnesses Concerning Instrumental Music

I have added this section to provide earlier witnesses to the lack of instrumental music within "Christian" churches. It must be remembered that instruments were only first used in the seventh century and were only popularized in the nineteenth. I do not present this material thinking that its authors are infallible, nor should it be assumed that I accept all things that these individuals wrote. The following represent witnesses to the practices of the early "Christendom."

The one instrument of peace, the Word alone, by whom we honor God, is what we employ. We no longer employ the ancient psaltery, trumpet, timbrel, and flute. For those expert in war and scorners of the fear of God were inclined to make use of these instruments in the choruses at their festive assemblies (Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 2.4).

What trumpet of God is now heard— unless it is in the entertainments of the heretics? (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 5.24.13).

One imitates the hoarse, warlike clanging of the trumpet. Another with his breath blowing into a pipe regulates its mournful sounds...Why should I speak of...those great tragic vocal ravings? Why should I speak of strings set with noise? Even if these things were not dedicated to idols, they should not be approached and gazed upon by faithful Christians (Novatian, *On the Public Shows*, 7).

[Satan] presents to the eyes seductive forms and easy pleasures, by the sight of which he might destroy chastity. He tempts the ears with harmonious music, so that by the hearing of sweet sounds, he may relax and weaken Christian vigor (Cyprian, *Treatise X: On Jealousy and Envy*, 2).

It would be tedious, dearly beloved, were I to recount every episode from the history of the Psalms, especially since it is necessary now to offer something from the New Testament in confirmation of the Old, lest one think the ministry of psalmody to be forbidden, inasmuch as many of the usages of the Old Law have been abolished. For those things that are carnal have been rejected, circumcision for example, and the observance of the Sabbath, sacrifices, discrimination among foods, as well as trumpets, citharas, cymbals, and tympana (all of which are now understood to reside in the bodily members of man, and there better to sound). Daily ablutions, observance of new moons, the meticulous examination of leprosy, or whatever of this sort was necessary at the time for children, have clearly ceased and gone their way. But the remaining practices that are spiritual, such as faith, piety, prayer, fasting, patience, chastity, and praise in song; these have been increased rather than diminished (Nicetas of Remesiana, On the Benefit of Psalmody 9).

Sometimes I avoid [the error of listening to melodies more than the words] in an intemperate fashion, and I err by an excess of severity. Then I strongly desire that all the melodies and sweet chants with which David's psalter should be banished from my ears and from the Church itself. Then I think that the safer course is what I remember has often been related to me about Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria. He made the reader of the psalm utter it with so slight a vocal inflection that it was more like speaking than singing (Augustine, The Confessions, 16.33.50).

I am inclined rather to approve the practice of singing in church, although I do not offer an irrevocable opinion on it, so that through the pleasure afforded the ears the weaker mind may rise to feelings of devotion. However, when it so happens that I am moved more by the singing than by what is sung, I confess that I have sinned, in such wise as to deserve punishment, and at such times I should prefer not to listen to a singer... (Augustine, The Confessions, 16.33.50).

While such persons are not inspired, their collective witness demonstrates clearly that the use of instruments in the assembly was foreign to "orthodox Christianity" in its first few hundred years. The practice, therefore, does not originate either in the New Testament or in early Christianity.