

# BEYOND THE ARGUMENT FROM SILENCE: A COVENANTAL VIEW OF A CAPPELLA WORSHIP

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## Preface

This paper, with periodic modifications, has been online for years with the title "Music in Christian Worship." I taught a series on this subject at the end of 2017, which led me to revise and reorganize it substantially. I changed the title to better reflect the approach on which I focus and to distinguish it from the more common argument that is made in churches of Christ against the use of instruments in Christian worship. I retained the URL of the prior version (which includes Dec2016) so that links in other sources would still function.

## 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 as you will learn in this paper, if you do not know already, *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. I provide a lengthy review of one such effort in [Review of Missing More Than Music](#). 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 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, the theological equivalent of soundbites, 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 covenantal view of *a cappella* worship, the view on which I focus:

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 many centuries, probably for the first 900 years of the church.

2. The best explanation for the early church's nonuse of musical instruments is that instrumental music was a divinely prescribed part of the sacrificial worship of the Jewish temple, which worship system God revealed was a shadow that had been superseded by the higher, more spiritual worship instituted by Christ.

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

Here is a sketch of the more common argument against instrumental worship, which I explain in an excursus:

1. God cares about, is particular about, the way in which he is worshiped.
2. God has revealed ways of worshiping that he desires or accepts from Christians.
3. Given the above, it is more reverent to worship God only in ways he has indicated he desires than to worship him in whatever ways he has not affirmatively prohibited.
4. Christians are to exhibit utmost reverence toward God in their worship.
5. Therefore, Christians are to worship God only in the ways he has revealed he desires or accepts.
6. Worship with musical instruments is not among the ways of worship God has revealed he desires or accepts from Christians.
7. Therefore, Christians are not to worship God with musical instruments.

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## Prevalence of Musical Instruments in Culture and Worship of First Century

Musical instruments were common in the first century and were used on all sorts of occasions in Greek, Roman, and Jewish cultures. Everett Ferguson<sup>2</sup> writes in *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> 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*, 2<sup>nd</sup> 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." Ramsay MacMullen<sup>3</sup> states in *Paganism and the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 16, says of a statement by Censorinus, a third-century A.D. Roman, "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 Werner<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> MacMullen is the Dunham Professor of History and Classics at Yale University.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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. 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 McKinnon<sup>5</sup> 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.

## **Absence of Musical Instruments from Christian Worship**

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 almost certainly 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.

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

## ***The Scholarly Consensus***

As Jan Michael Joncas<sup>6</sup> acknowledges in "Liturgy and Music" in Anscar J. Chupungco, ed., *Handbook for Liturgical Studies: Fundamental Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 288, "There seems to be scholarly agreement that Christians did not employ instrumental music at their worship during this [early patristic] era." Wendy J. Porter<sup>7</sup> in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 712, concurs on the state of scholarly opinion: "Most scholars also think that singing [in the early church] was unaccompanied." Ferguson put the matter more forcefully in "[Congregational Singing in the Early Church](#)" (p. 24), a paper presented at a symposium in June 2007: "It probably goes without saying in this context that the singing in the early church was unaccompanied by instrumental music. This fact is recognized by nearly all historians of church music and of Christianity in the ancient and early Medieval periods."

For example, Frederic Ritter<sup>8</sup> states in *The Student's History of Music*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: William Reeves, 1892), 24: "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. Instrumental music was excluded at first from the church service."

Joseph Otten<sup>9</sup> states in "Musical Instruments in Church Services" in Charles G. Herbermann and others, eds., *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913), 10:657, "For almost a thousand years Gregorian chant, without any instrumental or harmonic addition, was the only music used in connection with the liturgy."

In the article "Music" in that same volume (p. 651), Gerhard Gietmann<sup>10</sup> states, "Although Josephus tells of the wonderful effects produced in the Temple by the use of instruments, the first Christians were of too spiritual a fibre to substitute lifeless instruments for or to use them to accompany the human voice."

George W. Stewart<sup>11</sup> states in *Music in Church Worship* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1926), 214: "In the early Christian Church there was, however, a strong feeling against the use of instruments in divine worship."

Theodore M. Finney<sup>12</sup> 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

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<sup>6</sup> Joncas is a liturgical theologian who teaches at the University of St. Thomas and the University of Notre Dame.

<sup>7</sup> Porter is now Director of Music and Worship at McMaster Divinity College in Ontario.

<sup>8</sup> Ritter was Professor of Music at Vassar College.

<sup>9</sup> Otten was a church musician educated at the Liege Royal Conservatory of Music in Holland and with Albert Becker in Berlin.

<sup>10</sup> Gietmann was Teacher of Classical Languages and Aesthetics at St. Ignatius College in Holland.

<sup>11</sup> 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: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Christian, 1987), 89.

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 Leichtentritt<sup>13</sup> 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."

Ilion T. Jones<sup>14</sup> states in *A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 254:

Instruments have not always been used in Christian worship. In the days of Jesus the chief religious music was the singing of psalms. Apparently this was done antiphonally and, at least in the Temple, was accompanied by wind, string, and percussion instruments. But no musical instruments are mentioned in connection with worship in the New Testament. Apparently through the early centuries, certainly throughout the medieval period, the chants, recitatives, responses, and chorus music were unaccompanied by musical instruments.

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

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<sup>12</sup> Finney was head of the Department of Music at the University of Pittsburgh.

<sup>13</sup> Leichtentritt was a Professor of Music at Harvard University.

<sup>14</sup> Jones was Professor of Practical Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary.

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)

[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 Hannick<sup>15</sup> 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. Good<sup>16</sup> 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

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<sup>15</sup> Hannick is a professor at the Bavarian University in Germany and the director of the Institute for Liturgical Studies at the Ukrainian Catholic University.

<sup>16</sup> 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 Godfrey<sup>17</sup> 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 Foley<sup>18</sup> 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 Old<sup>19</sup> 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."

Paul Westermeyer<sup>20</sup> states in *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005), 23: "We do know that for the first millennium musical instruments were not used in church – and still are not used in the Orthodox Church." He states in "Music" in John Bowden, ed., *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 805, "For a thousand years the church in the East and West followed this example of being purely vocal."

J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca<sup>21</sup> write in *A History of Western Music*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 25: "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."

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<sup>17</sup> Godfrey is President and Professor of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, California.

<sup>18</sup> Foley is professor of liturgy and music at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

<sup>19</sup> Old is John H. Leith Professor of Reformed Theology and Worship at Erskine Theological Seminary.

<sup>20</sup> Westermeyer is professor of church music at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

Benno Zuiddam<sup>22</sup> states in *Hope & Disillusionment: A Basic Introduction to the History of Christianity* (Netherlands: Importantia Publishing, 2010), 42:

Most people would be surprised to learn that the early Church did not use musical instruments to accompany congregational singing. . . . The New Testament Church worshipped in Spirit and in truth, using the biblical psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. She considered that a Spirit filled human voice was sufficient and that she was no longer in need of the musical crutches of the Old Testament dispensation of shadows.

Andrew McGowan<sup>23</sup> states in *Ancient Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 124: "This robustly noninstrumental tradition, which was to remain characteristic of Christian churches into the Middle Ages (and beyond, in the East), is in any case clear as a feature of ancient Christian worship, even if its roots remain at least partly mysterious."

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.

Some scholars place the first introduction of instruments somewhere between those two temporal poles. For example, Bernhard Lang<sup>24</sup> writes in *Sacred Games: A History of Christian Worship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 56, "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."

David W. Music<sup>25</sup> 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.

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<sup>22</sup> Zuiddam is associate professor extraordinary of Church History at the Theological Faculty of North West University (South Africa).

<sup>23</sup> McGowan is dean and president of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University and professor of Anglican studies.

<sup>24</sup> Lang is Professor of Religion at the University of Paderborn, Germany.

<sup>25</sup> Music is Professor of Church Music at Baylor University.

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 Williams<sup>26</sup> 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."

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 [here](#)). 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."

### ***Basis of Scholarly Consensus***

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, writings of early Christians that are not part of the New Testament. As for the New Testament, musical instruments, musicians, or instrumental music are never mentioned as being part of Christian worship, though singing is mentioned on multiple occasions.

Matthew and Mark report that Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn after he instituted the Lord's Supper, and Paul and Silas sang while in stocks in prison (Acts 16:25). Nothing is said about instruments, musicians, or instrumental music.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul addresses and regulates the worship assembly in Corinth. He mentions singing but says nothing about musical instruments, musicians, or instrumental music as part of their worship. When he mentions the flute and harp in 14:7 as part of his illustration of the inappropriateness of speaking in tongues in the assembly without an interpreter, he describes them disparagingly as "lifeless."

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<sup>26</sup> Williams is Distinguished Professor of Music at Duke University.

Paul speaks of singing in Christian assemblies (implied) in Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 but again says nothing about musical instruments, musicians, or instrumental music. Indeed, in Eph. 5:19 there seems to be a perfect opportunity to mention instrumental accompaniment if it existed, as Paul refers to their addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and then speaks of them singing and *making music to the Lord*. But instead of saying they make music to the Lord with a flute, harp, lyre, or some other instrument, he says they make music to the Lord *with their heart*.

This New Testament evidence creates, at the very least, a suspicion that instruments were not used in the worship of the apostolic church, but that is not the only evidence relevant to the question. The suspicion that arises from the New Testament is *confirmed* by later Christian writers, as we will see shortly. Their testimony informs our understanding of the New Testament evidence, illuminates that evidence, and allows one to conclude, as has the vast majority of scholars, that instrumental music was in fact not used in worship in the early church.

That conclusion that the apostolic church did not use instrumental music in worship is very significant because it demands an answer as to why. Why were instruments not used in Christian worship when everything would lead one to expect they would be? That question becomes the elephant in the room, and seeking to answer it, which will be the focus of this paper, leads to a deeper or additional understanding of why it is wrong to worship God with instrumental music.

When I say it leads to a deeper or additional understanding of why it is wrong, I mean it leads to an understanding that is deeper than or in addition to the argument against the use of instruments in Christian worship that one commonly hears in churches of Christ. I will sketch that more familiar argument in the Excursus below and then devote my attention to the covenantal view of *a cappella* worship.

## ***Excursus: Summary of More Common Objection to Use of Instruments***

1. God cares about, is particular about, the way in which he is worshiped. (It is not true that he cares only about the worshiper's heart or motivation so that the manner of worship is a matter of indifference to him.)

a. The second commandment (Ex. 20:4-5a; Deut. 5:8-9a) prohibits worshiping God, Yahweh, *by means of images*, in addition to prohibiting the worship of any false gods by means of images. It is an expression of God's particularity regarding the manner of his worship. The classic violation of this aspect of the commandment was the golden calf that Aaron fashioned in Ex. 32:4 which was intended to represent Yahweh.

b. In Deut. 12:4 and 12:31 God tells Israel expressly that they are not to worship him *in the way* the Canaanites worshiped their gods. He has his own way of being worshiped, his own desires for how his creatures are to worship him.

c. And God continues to care about the way in which he is worshiped in the New Testament. For example, Jesus makes clear in Jn. 4:21 that in the new covenant God no longer wants worship to be at a centralized location, whether Jerusalem or Gerizim, and in 4:24 he makes clear that the manner of worship must be "in spirit and truth." I say more about this text later, but the point for now is that, whatever "worship in spirit and truth" means, it is a New Testament limitation on *how* one is to worship. The manner of worship continues to matter to God. That is why the Hebrew writer exhorts us in Heb. 12:28 to "worship God in an acceptable way, with reverence and awe."

d. We see elsewhere in the New Testament that God continues to have objective desires regarding the manner of his worship. It is not the case that anything goes as long as the worshiper means well. For example, if a woman prayed in the Corinthian assembly without a head covering, she would be worshiping God contrary to his will, regardless of her heart or motives (1 Cor. 11:2-16). And if a tongues-speaker used his miraculous gift to praise God in an assembly in which there was no interpreter, he would be worshiping God contrary to his will, whatever his subjective intentions or state (1 Cor. 14:28). The worshiper's heart or motive does not baptize every form of worship; it does not trump God's desires for how he is to be worshiped.

2. God has revealed ways of worshiping that he desires or accepts from Christians.

a. Christians are commanded to worship God corporately with singing (Eph. 5:19-20; Col. 3:16; cf. 1 Cor. 14:15-16, 26; Jas. 5:13), praying (1 Tim. 2:1-2, 2:8; cf. Acts 2:42, 12:12; 1 Cor. 11:2-5, 14:15-16), observing the Lord's Supper (Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:17-34; cf. Acts 2:42, 20:7), teaching/preaching (1 Cor. 14:26; Col. 3:16; 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2; cf. Acts 2:42, 20:7; 1 Cor. 14:19, 1 Tim. 2:11-12, 5:17), and Scripture reading (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13), which is usually part of teaching/preaching, and we see them doing so in the New Testament. And they are instructed to contribute funds voluntarily on the Lord's Day for use in a God-glorifying work (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

b. So we can be certain that worshiping God in these ways is pleasing to him (assuming, of course, that it is heartfelt), as is contributing financially to good works. He has revealed that he desires and accepts them.

3. Given that God cares about the way in which he is worshiped and has revealed ways of worshiping him that he desires, it is more reverent to worship God only in ways he has indicated he desires than to worship him in whatever ways he has not affirmatively prohibited. Put differently, it is more reverent, more respectful of his greatness and glory, to stick with what God has revealed he wants in terms of worship than to risk giving him something he does not want by innovating, by worshiping in ways he has not revealed he wants.

a. The risk of displeasing God that is inherent in worshiping in ways he has not revealed he wants seems obvious, but it can be illustrated simply. If I ordered a hot dog with ketchup and mustard, and the vendor, acting according to his personal preference,

gave me a hot dog with ketchup, mustard, *and* mayonnaise, I would not be pleased. I may appreciate that he meant well, but that would not alter the fact he had given me something I did not want.

b. To risk displeasing God needlessly (given that he has revealed desired ways of worship) for the sake of your personal worship preference says that displeasing him is less important than you not being able to express yourself in worship in the way you want. That shows less reverence for God than foregoing one's desires regarding worship to ensure he is pleased with the offering. If a woman knowingly risked a miscarriage by insisting on behavior she enjoyed, she would be showing less respect and appreciation for her baby than a woman who abstained from such behavior to avoid that risk. The latter's behavior says the baby's life and health are too valuable to be put at risk by her personal preferences.

c. In addition to the limitation on the manner of worship that arises from the nature of reverence, there are confirming indications in Scripture that God opposes this kind of human presumptuousness in worshiping him, opposes humans worshiping him however they see fit, as though he is obligated to accept and be pleased with worship in whatever form we wish to give it.

(1) You see that in his displeasure with Nadab and Abihu in offering fire "which he had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1). They were killed not for violating a specific prohibition, though some claim that, but for presuming to worship God in a manner he had not indicated was acceptable. (In Lev. 10:1 the NIV misleadingly says "contrary to his command" instead of "which he had not commanded them.")

(a) As Gordon Wenham comments in *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 155, "What really mattered is [that] it was fire *which he had not commanded them*. The whole narrative has led us to expect God's ministers to obey the law promptly and exactly. Suddenly we meet Aaron's sons doing something that had not been commanded.

(b) The point is echoed by Timothy Ashley in *Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 77:

Nadab and Abihu offered incense in an improper manner before Yahweh and were consumed by fire from his presence. The problem was not that they offered incense when they were not qualified to do so. Ch. 8 relates their ordination as priests with all the rights and privileges of priests. The problem was that they offered incense "that Yahweh had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1). They made this offering on their own, of their own free will, not in response to God's command. Thus the fire was *unacceptable* or "unauthorized."

(c) John Currid states in *Leviticus*, EP Study Commentary (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2004), 125, "The point is simple: Nadab and Abihu draw near to

God in an aberrant manner, one that is not in accordance with this Word. It is, therefore, a deliberate disobedience. In place of God's Word they thrust self-will and personal caprice."

(2) God's opposition to human presumptuousness in worship is also seen in the implied condemnation of Jeroboam for, among other things, establishing a religious feast "in the month that he had devised from his own heart" (1 Ki. 12:32-33). Dale Ralph Davis remarks in *1 Kings* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 143, "That is the writer's point about Jeroboam's religion: it is sheer invention – why lend it any credence at all? Worship either rests on the prescription of divine revelation or on the preferences of the human heart. It sound's simplistic, but it's scriptural."

4. Christians are to exhibit utmost reverence toward God in their worship. This is implicit in the injunctions 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), but it is made express in Heb. 12:28-29: *Therefore, since we are receiving an unshakeable kingdom, let us have gratitude, with which let us worship God in an acceptable way, with reverence and awe,*<sup>29</sup>*for indeed our God [is] a consuming fire.* Charles Spurgeon, the greatest Baptist preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, said in his sermon on this text titled "Acceptable Service" (January 15, 1882) in *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon, Volume 28: Sermons 1637-1697* (Harrington, DE: Delmarva Publications, 2013), No. 1639:

Knowing that God is to be served in his own way, and in that alone, there ought to be a godly fear as to whether we are walking in his ordinances or are following the traditions of men. God does not care for worship which he has never required at our hands. If a man invents a ceremony, he may think it helpful and instructive; but he has no right to practice it if God has not appointed it. If any of you are practicing rights and ceremonies which are not according to God's word, I charge you cease from such will-worship, for the spirit which leads you to practice these things is the spirit of Rome, and of antichrist. If God has not commanded it, God cannot accept it. Not only are we to worship the true God only, which is the law of the first commandment; but we must worship the true God in his own way, which is the spirit of the second commandment. The second commandment as it forbids all worshipping of God through images does in the spirit of it forbid all worshipping of God in any other way than he has prescribed. Therefore when thou standest before the Lord ask thyself, "Did he require this service of me? Is this thine way in which he would be worshipped?" for if not it is no better than idolatry, and cannot be accepted by the living God. Oh, what fear and trembling, what solemn awe, what sacred carefulness should fall upon the man who draws near to serve and worship the Lord our God.

5. Therefore, Christians are to worship God only in the ways he has revealed he desires or accepts (since that is more reverent than risking displeasing him for the sake of our preference).

6. Worship with musical instruments is not among the ways of worship that God has revealed he desires or accepts from Christians. (Two claims to the contrary – based on the use of *psallō* in the New Testament to refer to Christian singing and texts in Revelation – are addressed later.)

7. Therefore, Christians are not to worship God with musical instruments.

a. This argument excludes from worship not only instrumental music but all human innovations in worship, all ways of worshipping God that he has not revealed he desires in the new covenant. It precludes applauding God or clapping to him during the singing of songs, flagellating or cutting oneself, burning objects or incense, shaking rattles, whistling, stamping feet, dancing, or countless other things.

b. If one accepts the practice of worshipping 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. There is no logical basis for objecting to any of them.

(1) 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?<sup>27</sup>

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.

(2) 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

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<sup>27</sup> Objections about immodesty could be met by having an enclosure for the couple.



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?  
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I think this more common, better known argument has significant weight, but the case for a *cappella* worship is broader and stronger than that. It is not only the *absence* of any indication that God desires or accepts instrumental worship, not simply *silence* about the use of instruments (in the context of God having revealed he cares about the way in which he is worshiped); there also is a positive case for their exclusion. That is why I titled the paper "Beyond the Argument from Silence: A Covenantal View of A *Cappella* Worship."

As I indicated, the key to this covenantal view of a *cappella* worship is the conclusion that the apostolic church did not use instrumental music in worship. Of course, the more common argument I just outlined recognizes that instruments were not used, but that fact is not *central* to that argument. It relies instead on the fact there is *no indication* they were used, and thus *no authorization* for their use – that's what is central – rather than focusing on the fact they were not used and seeking an explanation for that nonuse.

As I have said, the conclusion of the vast majority of scholars that the early church did not use instrumental music in worship is based on the New Testament and on the testimony of later Christian writers. The former creates, at the very least, a suspicion that instruments were not used, and the latter confirms that suspicion rendering it a reasonably established fact.

What is this additional evidence, these later sources, that confirm the suspicion created by the New Testament that instruments were not used in the early church? Here are some of them.

The first source is pagan not Christian. In about A.D. 112, Pliny the Younger, while governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan asking for advice on how to deal with Christians in his territory. He recounts information he had gathered about Christians from those who had defected from the faith under threat of death. He says in that letter, written in Latin, that on a specified day before sunrise, the Christians were accustomed to gather "to sing [*dicere*] in turn songs to Christ as to a god." *Dicere* means to utter or vocalize and thus, when referring to songs, means to chant or sing. So again, as with the New Testament, there is no mention of instruments, musicians, or instrumental music, and this from a pagan reporting to the Emperor what he had learned about the Christian gatherings.

Around A.D. 155, Justin Martyr wrote his *First Apology* in which he said (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.

Note there is no mention of instrumental music.

In the late second century (around 190), we have an affirmative and definitive indication from Clement of Alexandria that the church did not use musical instruments in its worship. Clement was a Greek-speaking theologian who headed a Christian school in Alexandria, Egypt. He says he studied under various Christian teachers from Greece, Italy, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, and he insisted they had faithfully preserved the apostolic tradition they had received.

He writes in a work titled *Protrepticus*, which is also known as *Exhortation to the Greek/Heathen*, "And He who is of David, and yet before him, the Word of God, despising the lyre and kithara, which are but lifeless instruments, and having tuned by the Holy Spirit the universe, and especially man--who, composed of body and soul, is a universe in miniature, makes melody to God on this instrument of many tones." Note his echo of Paul's description of instruments as "lifeless" and the clear pejorative connotation of that description. Christ despises the kithara and lyre, as they are but lifeless instruments.

In his work *Paedagogos* ("Instructor"), he addresses how Christians are to conduct themselves at banquets or feasts. Though it is not dealing with a worship assembly, it implies clearly that musical instruments were not used in those assemblies.

In a section of the work, Clement first describes the sensuous music of pagan entertainment, and then in contrast to that, he quotes from Psalm 150 and allegorizes the references to instruments in keeping with the noninstrumental nature of Christian worship. That was a common practice among the Church Fathers, and according to James McKinnon, misunderstanding their allegorical exegesis of the instruments in the Psalms accounts for most of the erroneous claims that musical instruments sometimes were used in Christian worship.

Referring to the Psalm, Clement says (McKinnon, 32-33):

- "the tongue is the psalter of the Lord"
- the kithara is "the mouth, played by the Spirit as if by a plectrum"
- "'Praise him on strings and the instrument' refers to our body as an instrument and its sinews as strings . . . and when strummed by the Spirit it gives off human notes."
- "'Praise him on the clangorous cymbals' speak of the tongue as the cymbal of the mouth which sounds as the lips are moved."

Clement writes (McKinnon, 33): "For man, in truth, is an instrument of peace, while the others, if one investigates them, he will find to be instruments of aggression,

either inflaming the passions, enkindling lust, or stirring up 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, he says:

We, however, make use of but one instrument, the word of peace alone by which we honor God, and no longer the ancient psaltery, nor the trumpet, the tympanum and the aulos, as was the custom of those expert in war and those scornful of the fear of God who employed string instruments in their festive gatherings, as if to arouse their remissness of spirit through such rhythms.

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 James McKinnon states (p. 33), "surely the immediate context of the passage as well as Clement's views in general suggest that it is to be read allegorically." After all, 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 the earlier work *Protrepticus*, Clement described Jesus as "despising the lyre and kithara as lifeless instruments."

But even if Clement's reference was intended literally, he is speaking of conduct in a banquet or feast not in a worship assembly, so one could not conclude that these instruments were present in the church (especially in light of the other evidence of their absence). As McKinnon states in *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), chapter IV, 71 (fn. 4), "If [Clement's statement] was meant to be a real toleration of these instruments, *it was intended for extra-liturgical devotion rather than for liturgical singing* and probably to accompany a non-Biblical metrical hymn rather than a psalm" (emphasis supplied).

As I already noted, Clement would have been well aware of Christian practices being the head of a Christian school in Alexandria and having been taught by orthodox Christians from across the Empire. That makes it all the more significant that he declares that Christians do not use instruments in worship without qualification, equivocation, or fear of contradiction and without feeling any need to address or to explain away some contrary practice. He simply states it as a given, not a matter of debate anywhere. And that dovetails with the absence of instruments in Christian worship in the New Testament.

Eusebius was one of the early church's greatest scholars and an advisor to Emperor Constantine. He was a Greek-speaking theologian who was very knowledgeable about the church's history and practice, having from A.D. 300 – 325 written several editions of the first history of the church. He 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 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."

Many fourth-century Christian writers spoke disparagingly of musical instruments. Arnobius asked if God sent souls to earth "so that these members of a holy and noble race should here practice music and the arts of the piper." John Chrysostom said, "Where aulos-players are, there Christ is not" and referred to cymbals and auloi, along with dancing, obscene songs, and drunkenness, as "the devil's heap of garbage" (*The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter IV, 69-70). Gregory of Nazianzus commanded Christians to celebrate a feast not "surrounded by the sound of aloi and percussion" and to "take up hymns rather than tympana." Ambrose contrasted those engaging in prayer and the singing of hymns and psalms with those who chose carousing at the same hour by asking condemningly, "Hymns are sung, and you grasp the cithara? Psalms are sung, and you take up the psaltery and tympanum?" (*Music in Early Christian Literature*, 71, 128-129). The attitude by the fourth century was so extreme that there was a widespread legal tradition that denied baptism to aulos and kithara players and an Alexandrian law that called for the excommunication of a precentor or cantor in the church who persisted in playing the kithara (*The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant*, chapter IV, 69; *A Cappella Music*, 79).

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 fifth century, 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 the use of musical instruments if they had been used in worship in apostolic churches or in the early second century. If such a complete reversal of viewpoint had occurred, a shift from apostolic acceptance to universal church rejection, certainly some discussion of the switch would be preserved in the literature of the early church, but there is nothing. The most reasonable conclusion is that it was not necessary for later writers who condemned the use of instruments to explain the use of instruments in apostolic churches because instruments never were used in Christian worship. The record is one of continuity of rejection not initial acceptance and reversal.

Most proponents of instrumental worship acknowledge the uniform absence of instrumental music from Christian assemblies, but a few, largely on the internet, deny the scholarly consensus. They claim there is abundant evidence of Christians worshiping with musical instruments throughout the church's first millennium. That is not true. In my online paper "[Assessing the Evidence Offered for the Use of Musical Instruments in Early Christian Worship](#)," I address 21 alleged indications of instrumental usage in worship in the first 700 years of the church and show that none of them support that claim. Indeed, if there was persuasive evidence of instrumental worship in the early church, the current scholarly consensus that the church did not use instruments for centuries would not exist.

It is worth noting that even in the Roman Catholic Church there were periodic complaints about the use of musical instruments. For example, Aelred, a 12<sup>th</sup>-century monk who headed a monastery in Yorkshire, England, said the following (R. F. Hayburn, *Papal Legislation in Sacred Music 95 A.D - 1977 A.D.* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979], 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?

Problems relating to instrumental music were debated at various Councils of the Catholic Church in the 1500's and again in 1903.

The four major theologians of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant Reformation were Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Knox. Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox all rejected the use of musical instruments in Christian worship. Luther's position is more difficult to pin down, as he hardly mentioned instruments and was usually critical of

them, but it seems he was more open their use. By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there is evidence of an organ being used in Lutheran churches to accompany hymn singing (Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008], 131-132), but it took centuries for instruments to be introduced into churches rooted in the Reformed branch of the Protestant Reformation. And their introduction in those various groups was highly contentious. In fact, there are today Reformed, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches (in addition to the Eastern Orthodox churches) that reject the use of instrumental music. Churches of Christ are not the only ones.

In the English Reformation, the Anglican Church separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the first part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Henry VIII. They retained the Roman Catholic use of instrumental music, but the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Methodists, who initially sought to reform the Anglican Church, rejected their use.

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):

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 Absence of Musical Instruments**

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 will address two inadequate explanations for the absence of instrumental music in the early church, and then will argue that the best explanation is that instruments

were understood correctly to be excluded by the teaching of Christ and the apostles that came to be expressed in the New Testament documents.

### ***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 and in Judaism. In other words, their nonuse was a preference, an optional judgment, driven by the church's desire to distinguish itself from paganism and/or Judaism in the circumstances of the first century. There are good reasons to doubt that explanation.

As for avoiding an association with paganism, I have shown 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 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. That would only make sense if driving cars was a "Texan thing."

As for avoiding an 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, abstaining from non-kosher food). 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.

As for avoiding an 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. If it was a judgment call, a matter of preference rather than an aspect of God's will, certainly in one of those places at one of those times a church would have had a different perception of the associations of musical instruments or weighed the negative connotations of those associations differently, especially given that instruments ceased to be a part of Jewish worship after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. The fact instruments were uniformly absent in all those times and places suggests something other than a preference was at work. Indeed, as some of the quotes I have provided (and will soon repeat) show, the early Christian writers often gave a theological rationale for their rejection of instrumental worship that is rooted in the shift from the old to the new covenant.

### ***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 custom 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, contrary to what you may have heard, 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 cannot explain their absence in the church (because instruments could have been added as easily as singing).

Ralph Martin acknowledged over 40 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." D. A. Carson put the matter more generally in *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Paternoster, Carlisle, 1993) 14-15: "It has been repeatedly shown that all the evidence for liturgy in the Jewish synagogue system is considerably later than the New Testament documents: we simply do not know what a synagogue service looked like in 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."

Paul Bradshaw, Emeritus Professor of Liturgy at the University of Notre Dame, 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." Michael Peppard<sup>28</sup> states in "Music" in John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow, eds., *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 977, "there is no positive evidence that even a *cappella* singing occurred in the ancient synagogue; none of the

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<sup>28</sup> Peppard is an assistant professor of theology at Fordham University.



meager descriptions of ancient synagogue services refers to the performance of music (Philo, Josephus, Luke-Acts)."

The second reason to doubt that unaccompanied singing in Christian worship was an optional practice 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 *synagōgē* 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 *a cappella* 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 certainly would not bind on Gentiles what was merely an optional practice of the synagogue. And yet, if unaccompanied singing was not something bound on the Gentiles, if it were an optional practice, then no doubt some of them would have introduced instrumental music into their worship. So the use of instrumental music must not have been an option, which would not be true if the *a cappella practice* was merely an inherited synagogue preference. This leads to the fourth reason to doubt the explanation.

The fourth reason to doubt that unaccompanied singing in Christian worship was a 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 an optional practice 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.

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.

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.

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."

Quentin Faulkner<sup>29</sup> states in *Wiser Than Despair: The Evolution of Ideas in the Relationship of Music in the Christian Church* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 63:

As soon as Christianity moved beyond its earliest stage as a Jewish sect, then, Christians rejected the idea and practice of temple worship entirely, discarding at the same time its sensuous, emotional and spectacular character and its use of instruments in the liturgy. Thus, while Christian rejection of pagan customs discouraged the use of instruments in general, the doctrine of spiritual sacrifice eliminated them specifically from Christian worship. Christian writers often asserted that God had allowed the use of instruments under the old covenant merely as a concession to human weakness.

Josief Lössl<sup>30</sup> states in *The Early Church: History and Memory* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 142, "Church fathers argued against the use of musical instruments such as lyres, flutes, harps, trumpets, systra, cymbals and drums, and several church councils banned them. This was not only because of the association of these instruments with traditional pagan cults, but also because they tended to be seen as 'Judaizing' elements."

Benno Zuiddam states in *Hope & Disillusionment: A Basic Introduction to the History of Christianity* (Netherlands: Importantia Publishing, 2010), 42, "[The New Testament Church] considered that a Spirit filled human voice was sufficient and that she was no longer in need of the musical crutches of the Old Testament dispensation of shadows."

### ***Instrumental Worship Superseded by Worship Inaugurated by Christ***

The starting point for appreciating that the new covenant did away with the material, external worship rituals of the Jewish temple is John 4:19-24. It reads (ESV):

<sup>19</sup> The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup> Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman,

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believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.<sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.<sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

The first thing to recognize is that worship in spirit and truth *in the sense Jesus means* is something new, something he is in the process of instituting that was not true of worship under the old covenant. This is clear from the fact he tells the woman in v. 21 that the *hour is coming* when God's people will worship him neither on Mount Gerizim nor at the temple in Jerusalem. He's referring to a time when the practice of worship will be changed.

He speaks of that same time in v. 23 when he says the *hour is coming*, repeating the identical phrase, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. The statements are parallel; the future hour when people will worship neither on Mount Gerizim nor at the temple in Jerusalem is the future hour when true worshipers will worship in spirit and truth. The parallels are readily apparent:

v. 21 – the hour is coming when  
you will worship the Father  
neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem

v. 23 – the hour is coming . . . when  
the true worshipers will worship the Father  
in spirit and truth

The fact Jesus in v. 23 follows the repeated phrase "the hour is coming" with the new phrase "and now is here" does not mean he is distinguishing the coming time when people will worship neither on Mount Gerizim nor at the temple in Jerusalem from the coming time when people will worship in spirit and truth. He is merely adding the fact that the future time to which he is referring has already begun to be ushered in by his life and ministry. The one who institutes the new way of worship is already on the scene.

He does the same thing in Jn. 5:25 when speaking of the resurrection of the dead. He says there, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an *hour is coming*, and *is now here*, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." Jesus makes clear in Jn. 5:28-29 that he is referring to the bodily resurrection of the dead at his return. As Colin Kruse remarks (TNTC, 153), "Jesus could say not only that this hour was coming but also that it had 'now come', because through his life (and imminent death and resurrection) he had set things in motion that would culminate in the resurrection of the dead."

Since this new practice of worship to which Jesus refers in John 4, what he labels worship in spirit and truth, is still something future that is only now being ushered in by him, whatever went before was *not* worship in spirit and truth in the sense Jesus means.

Since the worship that went before, worship under the old covenant, was *not* worship in spirit and truth, we can be sure that worship in spirit and truth means something *other than* worshiping with a sincere heart and in accordance with God's directives (which is how we often take it). We can be sure of that because worshiping with a sincere heart and in accordance with God's directives was not anything new; God always required that of his worshipers.

- Deuteronomy 6:5, cited by Jesus as the greatest command, says, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."
- Deuteronomy 26:16 states, "This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul."
- Proverbs 15:8 declares, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him."
- Texts like Isa. 1:10-17, 66:1-4, and Amos 5:21-24 speak powerfully of God's revulsion over hypocritical worship, worship that is not heartfelt.
- In Mat. 15:7-9 (and Mk. 7:6-8) Jesus cited Isaiah's rebuke of hypocritical worship: "You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

So again, since God's people always were required to worship with sincere hearts and in accordance with God's directives, and since worship in spirit and truth represents a change, something new that Jesus is bringing about, it cannot refer to worshiping with sincere hearts and in accordance with God's directives. We, of course, *need* to worship with sincere hearts and in accordance with God's directives, but that is not what Jesus is talking about in John 4.

The next thing to see is that worship in spirit and truth is worship that is not restricted to a physical holy site. As I already noted, Jesus says in v. 21 that the *hour is coming* when God's people will worship him in a way that is not restricted to a physical holy site, neither Mount Gerizim nor the temple in Jerusalem. By the parallel statement in v. 23, he identifies that coming hour as the time when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. He notes in v. 23b that the Father is seeking such people to worship him. In other words, he tells them that God is now recruiting such true worshipers through Jesus' ministry. His disciples are the true worshipers whose worship

will not be restricted to a physical holy site. Rather, their worship will rightly be done in whatever city, town, or village they are located.

The next thing to glean from the text is that worship in spirit and truth is required by the fact God is spirit. Verse 24 states, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The assertion "God is spirit" is not a random interjection that is unrelated to the remainder of the sentence. Rather, it gives the reason or basis for the statement that God must be worshiped in spirit and truth.

This relationship is widely recognized. For example, Andreas Köstenberger writes in *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 56, "*Because* God is spirit, proper worship must be performed 'in spirit and truth'." Robert Mounce says in "John" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (eds. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 10:413, "It is *because* 'God is spirit' that those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." D. A. Carson says in *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 225, that God is spirit "serves as further explication and grounding for the reiterated truth that God's *worshippers must worship in spirit and truth.*" One could add Gary Burge, Edward Klink, and others.

In fact, verse 24 could be translated, "God is spirit, and [so] those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (see, e.g., Heb. 3:19; BDAG, 495). The conjunction can carry that meaning.

Since the fact God is spirit requires worship to be in spirit and truth (to be ideal), and since worship in spirit and truth cannot be restricted to a physical holy site, the fact God is spirit requires that worship not be restricted to a physical holy site (to be ideal). The logic can be set out this way:

- Because God is spirit, worship must be in spirit and truth (to be ideal).
- Worship in spirit and truth cannot be restricted to a physical holy site.
- Because God is spirit, worship cannot be restricted to a physical holy site (to be ideal).

How is the requirement that worship not be restricted to a physical holy site related to the fact God is spirit? The first step in answering that is to identify what is meant by the statement "God is spirit." I am with those commentators, ancient and modern, who understand that statement to mean that God the Father is a spirit-being, that he is a nonmaterial, nonphysical entity.

Ancient commentators expressing this view include Origen (third century), Didymus the Blind (fourth century), Hilary of Poitiers (fourth century), John Chrysostom (fourth century), and Theodore of Mopsuestia (fourth/fifth century) (see *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture New Testament IVa*, 160-161 and Homily 33 of Chrysostom's Homilies on the Gospel of John). Among modern commentators, Andreas Köstenberger states in his commentary (p. 156), "'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. The spiritual nature of God is taught clearly in the OT (cf. Isa. 31:3; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26-27)."

Leon Morris writes in *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 240, "[Jesus'] meaning is 'God's essential nature is spirit.' . . . We must not think of God as material, or as bound in any way to places or things." Craig Keener states in *The Gospel of John A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:618, "[John] merely intends that God is not physical. . . . God's nature is spirit rather than flesh." Merrill Tenney states in "John" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:56, "Jesus was endeavoring to convey to the woman that God cannot be confined to one place nor conceived of as a material being." And J. Ramsey Michaels says in *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 253, "To say 'God is Spirit' is not so different from saying God is invisible (1:18; 6:46), incorruptible, not to be worshiped in the form of idols or images (Rom. 1:22; Acts 17:29), and that God does not live in temples made with human hands (Acts 7:48-49; 17:24)."<sup>31</sup>

As some of the quoted remarks indicate (as do several ancient comments I did not quote), because God is a spirit-being he is not confined to any physical location. So worship that is restricted to a physical holy site is suboptimal, less than ideal, because *it does not fit or correspond to God's nature as well as worship that is not so restricted*. The more fitting worship of a spirit-being is worship not dependent on an external, material circumstance like the existence of a physical holy site.

John Henry Bennetch, quoting Marcus Dods, states in "John 4:24a: A Greek Study," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 107:425 (1950), 72-73, "What does Christ mean by talking as He does to the Samaritan? The primary meaning seems obvious enough. 'God has not a body,' He is saying, 'and consequently is subject to none of the limitations and conditions to which the possession of a body subjects human persons. He needs no local dwelling place, no temple, no material offerings.'"

D. A. Carson states in *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word, Volume 1* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 14, "This means: (1) With the coming of Christ Jesus and the dawning of the new covenant, appropriate worship will no longer be tied to a specific geographical location. Implicitly, this announces the obsolescence of the temple. Worship will be as geographically extensive as the Spirit, as God himself who is spirit (4:24)." Andreas Köstenberger states in *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 429, "Worship in spirit and truth, then, is superior to worship at physical locations such as the temple for a number of reasons. (1) Such spiritual worship

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<sup>31</sup> See also, Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 88; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 267; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 186-187; and Ben Witherington III, *The Indelible Image Volume Two* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 336.

is commensurate to God's nature as spirit." Jo-Ann A. Brant states in *John*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 86, "Jesus continues to develop this theology by pointing out that 'God [is] spirit,' that is, God is not a physical being and so has no need for a physical building or temple worship, 'and it is necessary for those worshiping him [as spirit] to worship in spirit and truth' (4:24)."

So Christ's work marks a shift in the kind of worship God accepts. The worship that is required in the new covenant, worship "in spirit and truth," is worship *that is more consistent with the spiritual nature of God than the worship that was prescribed under the old covenant*, worship that is here typified by its dependence on the external, material circumstance of the temple in Jerusalem. It is worship that is decoupled from Jewish temple worship. Colin Kruse remarks in *John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 134, "Worship 'in spirit and truth' is easy to understand negatively: worship is no longer tied to sacred sites."

This more fitting, more desirable worship is called worship "in spirit and truth." The same preposition governs both spirit and truth which suggests the words encompass a single idea (even though they are probably not a formal hendiadys). It is worship in spirit and truth because it is worship in a "spirit manner," a manner that accords with the truth God is spirit. Morris writes in *The Gospel According to John* (p. 239, n. 56): "The linking of the two nouns under a single preposition shows that they belong together. There is one complex idea. E. C. Blackman takes the expression as demanding worship 'conformable to the divine nature which is spirit, and determined by the truth which God has made available concerning himself.'"

This means that, even though it was specifically commanded by God (e.g., Deut. 12:1-14), the localized worship in the Jerusalem temple was not the divine ideal but an accommodation to the spiritual immaturity or physical/sensual orientation of the Jews of that time. That was not worship in spirit and truth, not the worship that God ultimately desired, but a temporary manner of worship.

The fact the first Christians often were present in the temple courts (Acts 2:46-47, 3:1-3, 5:19-25, 5:42) need not mean they were still devoted to the temple cult. Referring to the presence of Christians in the temple in the early chapters of Acts, Craig Blomberg states in "The Christian and the Law of Moses" in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 402:

Not one word of the text ever refers to the sacrifices, and what is mentioned adequately accounts for the references to temple and time. (1) The temple courts were the only place of adequate size in Jerusalem for so large a public gathering (note the contrast between 'temple courts' and 'homes' in 2:46). (2) It was an optimal site for witness and proclamation, as the unfolding events of chapter 3 demonstrate (see esp. v. 11). (3) 3 p.m. was also one of the fixed times of prayer, which is mentioned in the text (3:1), and which all would have participated in (vs. only a few who



offered sacrifices on any given day). Pesch and Schneider are correct: 'According to Luke, "the temple for Christians is not a place of sacrifice, but, as for Jesus, a place of teaching and prayer" (cf. Luke 19:46f; Acts 2:46)'.

*If* they were participating in the temple cult, it would mean they were slow to grasp the implications of the Lord's teaching and sacrifice not that the temple cult remained viable in the new covenant. Hebrews leaves no doubt about the matter.

The fact the localized worship in the Jerusalem temple was not the divine ideal but a temporary accommodation 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 instituted 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 instituted 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. They were "*regulations of flesh* imposed until the time of [the] new order" (v. 10). 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."

Various theologians of the early church saw that Christ's words in Jn. 4:24 not only removed geographical restrictions on worship but implicitly abrogated the system of sacrificial worship that was bound to the Jerusalem temple. For example, Origen in the middle of the third century wrote in Book VI, Chapter LXX of *Against Celsus* (translation from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*):

And because the prescriptions of the law were obeyed both by Samaritans and Jews in a corporeal and literal manner, our Saviour said to the Samaritan woman, "The hour is coming, when neither in Jerusalem, nor in this mountain, shall ye worship the Father. God is a Spirit; and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." And by these words He taught men that God must be worshipped not in the flesh, and with fleshly sacrifices, but in the spirit.

In the late fourth century, John Chrysostom wrote in Homily II of his *Homilies on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (translation from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*):

For the Gentile is both fleshly and in error, and the Jewish is true indeed, yet even this is fleshly. But that of the Church is the opposite of the Gentile, but more lofty than the Jewish by a great deal. For the mode of our service is not with sheep and oxen and smoke and fat, but by a spiritual soul, which Christ also shows in saying that "God is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth."

Scripture is clear that musical instruments were a divinely prescribed part of the external, material worship rituals of the Jewish temple and were closely associated with the offering of sacrifices. The ark of the covenant represented the presence of God and was housed in the "holy of holies," the most sacred space around which the entire temple area was constructed. Indeed, the temple was "God's house" in that it housed the ark which represented God's special presence. As that ark was being brought to the place David had prepared for it in Jerusalem, before the construction of the temple by Solomon, David commanded that Levites be appointed to sing and play instruments during the procession, and sacrifices were offered along the way (1 Chron. 15:16-28; 2 Sam. 6:13-15). 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 28:19 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):

<sup>26</sup> The Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. <sup>27</sup> 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.* <sup>28</sup> The whole assembly worshiped, and the singers sang and the trumpeters sounded. *All this continued until the burnt offering was finished.*

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.

According to the ancient rabbis, the reason musical instruments could be played in the temple on the Sabbath without violating the Sabbath prohibition against work was because playing them was an *essential part* of temple worship. Work that was essential to the temple service, such as the lighting of fires, was understood to be outside the Sabbath prohibition. And what made the playing of instruments *essential* to the temple service was their association with 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.

The close association of instruments with the Jewish sacrifices is evident in Homily XI (section 5) of John Chrysostom's *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. He says that Christians are to bring to God the kind of sacrifices that can be offered on the heavenly altar, not sacrifices of sheep and oxen or blood and fat. Referring to Jn. 4:24, he says that Christian offerings are those made through the soul or spirit, which he contrasts to Jewish temple sacrifices by saying "things which have no need of a body, *no need of instruments*, nor special places."

A number of modern 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.

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 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.

As for Werner's "unsolved puzzle," his question about the inherent connection between sacrifices and instrumental music, one possible answer was suggested decades ago by G. I. Williamson, a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He 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](#)):

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.

Many theologians throughout history have recognized the significance of the new covenant's abrogation of temple worship on the use of musical instruments in Christian worship. I already have quoted several from the early centuries of the church (Eusebius, John Chrysostom, Niceta, Theodoret, and Isidore of Pelusium). Here I will give 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.<sup>32</sup>

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 poms, 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.<sup>33</sup>

Brian Schwertley, a modern-day Presbyterian minister, writes in [\*Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God\*](#):

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

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<sup>32</sup> This reference is from 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), 35-36.

<sup>33</sup> Page citation is from Moore, *Sing to the Lord*, 35, but the quote is from the online edition [here](#).

instruments, vestments, altars, etc., into new covenant worship merely serves to hide Christ and His glory under obsolete externalities.

## Singing Differs from Playing Instruments

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. So the former is ideally suited for worship of God, who is spirit, whereas the latter is not.

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. In 1 Pet. 2:4-9 Peter says that their incorporation into the new temple through faith in Christ is with the purpose of their being a holy priesthood that offers to God spiritual sacrifices rather than the physical sacrifices of the Jewish priesthood under the old covenant. These spiritual sacrifices are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. No offering is acceptable to God if it is made by one who has not been set apart as God's own through participation in Christ's atoning work.

The nature of the spiritual sacrifices Peter has in mind is indicated in v. 9 where he says that the purpose of their being a royal priesthood is to *proclaim the praises* of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. As Michaels states (p. 110), quoting D. L. Balch in part (English versification in brackets):

"in contexts where ἐξαγγέλλω refers to 'proclaiming' the praises, deeds, righteousness, or works of God, the proclaiming always is to God in worship" (cf. Pss 9:15 [14]; 55:9 [56:8]; 70 [71]:15; 72 [73]:28; 78 [79]:13; 106 [107]:22; 118 [119]:13, 26; Sir 18:4; also Philo, *De Plant.* 128).

. . . Whatever else they may imply, the "spiritual sacrifices" are first of all the praise of God by his people.

Edmund Clowney comments in *The Message of 1 Peter, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 95-96:

Peter says that we have been brought from *darkness* to *light* and made a *priesthood* so that we may show forth God's *praises*. This spiritual

worship has no earthly altar or ark; it has transcended the elaborate ceremonials of Old Testament worship. It is vain to imitate in pageantry the ceremonies that ended when the veil of the temple was torn in two. Yet worship remains the central calling, not only of the Christian, but of the Christian church. . . . It finds its burning focus in lifting the name of God in adoration. This function of the priesthood cannot be delegated. God's praises must rise from the lips of all his people, assembled before his face and joining with the festival assembly of the saints and angels.

This is similar to Heb. 13:15, which states, "Through him, then, let us always offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips praising his name." William Lane remarks in *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1999), 524 (see also p. 551) that here "[t]he writer [of Hebrews] draws upon a tradition of a song of praise which the community offers to God." David DeSilva writes (p. 505): "This text [Heb. 13:15] identifies the 'fruit of our lips' as the appropriate tribute to 'give back to God' for the good things God sends . . . Within the setting of the community addressed by the author of Hebrews, this response would no doubt include the offering of praise and worship in the setting of the Christian assembly."

Early Christian writers understood that singing is a "spiritual sacrifice" that Christians are to offer to God. 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, some fifty years later (*On Prayer*, Chapter XXVIII), held up prayer, in contrast to the fat of rams and the blood of bulls and goats, as the kind of sacrifice that qualifies as worship in spirit and truth. He says, "This *victim*, devoted from the whole heart, fed on faith, tended by truth, entire in innocence, pure in chastity, garlanded with love, we ought to escort with the pomp of good works, *amid psalms and hymns*, unto God's altar, to obtain for us all things from God" (translation from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*).

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 "with/in your hearts"<sup>34</sup> 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. Chrysostom wrote in his *Homily on Psalm 146:2-3 (A Cappella Music, 68)*:

David at that time was singing [*epsalle*] in the Psalms, and we today with David. He had a kithara of lifeless strings; the church has a kithara arranged of living strings. Our tongues are the strings of our kithara, putting for a different sound yet a godly harmony. For indeed women and men, old and young, have different voices but they do not differ in the word of hymnody for the Spirit blends the voice of each and effects one melody in all . . .

The soul is an excellent musician, an artist; the body is an instrument, holding the place of the kithara and aulos and lyre . . . Since it is necessary to pray unceasingly, the instrument is always with the artist unceasingly.

John Mark Hicks, a professor of theology at Lipscomb University, expresses the distinction this way in his article *In Defense of A Cappella Music*: "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.

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<sup>34</sup> "The phrase *en tais kardiis humōn* ('in your hearts') [in Col. 3:16] is often connected with *en tē chariti*, 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.

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 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 [here](#)): "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."

Karl Barth, who was perhaps the most famous theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote:

The Christian community sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression. It is to such extreme expression that the *vox humana* is devoted in the ministry of the Christian community.

It is for this that it is liberated in this ministry. It is hard to see any compelling reason why it should have to be accompanied in this by an organ or harmonium.

Singing is also distinctly suitable for worshiping God because it is verbal communication, a form of speaking (Eph. 5:19). The words of praise that are sung are understandable and thus can build up the gathered saints as God desires. 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; it speaks to the ears not the mind.

And one could add that singing 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.

## **Some Claims of Proponents of Instrumental Worship**

Before concluding, it may be helpful to address some of the claims that are made by those who promote the use of musical instruments in Christian worship. After I address those, I will say a word about the relevance of Romans 14-15 to this and other matters of worship and about my use of early Christian writers.

### ***Majoring in Minors***

First, one who teaches that using instrumental music in Christian worship is wrong, contrary to God's will, sometimes will be accused of *majoring* in minors, of *focusing* on a relatively insignificant topic. Whether one is *majoring* or *focusing* on the subject depends, of course, on how much time one devotes to it. Instrumental music can no doubt become a hobbyhorse, a pet issue, that one rides incessantly, but the danger in the modern church is neglect of this subject not obsession over it. As I said, my experience has been that we almost never teach on this topic, and comments some of you have made indicate that has been your experience as well.

The truth of the matter is that some of these critics do not want *any* teaching that instrumental music is unacceptable in Christian worship, so they use the charge of majoring in minors to discourage people from tackling the subject. Not teaching about it plays into their acceptance and promotion of instrumental worship because it implies it is insignificant to God, not anything worth teaching. But if, as I have endeavored to explain, instrumental worship is indeed contrary to God's will, then we must teach it regardless of accusations that doing so reflects a warped spiritual perspective. We cannot allow those who do not like the message to silence us by impugning our spirituality.

### ***Being Divisive***

Second, one who teaches that using instrumental music in Christian worship is contrary to God's will sometimes will be accused of being divisive. But as I have explained, the *a cappella* position is the historical stance of the church, and it is one that *excludes no one*, as all agree that it is acceptable to praise God without instruments. Instrumentalists, on the other hand, are relative newcomers whose practice excludes those who believe it is contrary to God's will to worship with instrumental music. So who is being divisive? One would think that if the instrumentalists were as passionate about unity as they claim to be they would surrender their use of instruments to achieve it. After all, for them it is an optional practice, a mere preference, but for us it is a matter of God's will and conscience. Instead, they cling to the use of instruments, evangelize about it, introduce instruments in churches, and then accuse people like me of dividing the church when I explain why I think they are wrong. By my lights, the "divisive shoe" is on the other foot.

### ***Use of Psallō Establishes Acceptability of Instrumental Music***

Third, one sometimes hears the claim that the use of the Greek word *psallō* in the New Testament to refer to Christian singing (Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 14:15 [twice]; Eph. 5:19; Jas. 5:13) indicates that instrumental music is acceptable in Christian worship. That is incorrect. Though the word originally referred to plucking a stringed instrument, Ferguson (*A Cappella Music*, 1-28) and others have shown conclusively that by the first century the word could mean simply sing without any implication of instrumental accompaniment. That is why it is defined in the standard Greek lexicon (BDAG, 1096) as meaning "to sing songs of praise, *with or without* instrumental accompaniment." That

means the word can have *either* connotation, depending on the context, not that it must have *both* connotations in every context.

Perhaps an illustration will help make the point. In American vernacular, "hot dog" refers to a smooth-textured sausage of minced beef or pork *with or without* a bun. A request for me to pick up some hot dogs when I am on my way to a meat market refers to the item *without* a bun, whereas a request for me to pick up some hot dogs when I am on my way to a concession stand refers to the item *with* a bun. The context determines whether the bun is included in the meaning. To press the point in terms of instrumental worship, if I belonged to a group that was opposed to eating grain products like buns and in a letter to my fellow members I referred to their eating hot dogs, it would be silly for someone to argue that our group accepts eating buns because hot dog refers to a smooth-textured sausage *with or without* a bun. My reference would mean they were eating them without a bun not that they were eating them both ways.

In the context of early Christian worship, *psallō* is rightly understood to refer to singing without accompaniment. As Andrew Lincoln says in *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 346, "Although its original meaning involved plucking a stringed instrument, *psallō* here means to make music by singing (cf. also 1 Cor 14:15; Jas 5:13), so that there is no reference in this verse to instrumental accompaniment (cf. the discussion in BAGD 891; *pace* Barth, 584)." Clinton Arnold likewise remarks in *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 354, "[S]ome have argued that [*psallō*] implies the use of stringed instruments. It is true that the original meaning of the verb (*psallō*) referred to the plucking of strings, but it certainly does not carry that meaning into all of its usages."

The absence of any implied acceptance of instruments in the New Testament uses of *psallō* is evident from the fact the Church Fathers vehemently and uniformly rejected instrumental music in worship. These Greek-speaking theologians obviously did not take the uses of *psallō* as an indication that using instruments was acceptable, or else they would have been obliged to explain how they opposed the practice in light of the inspired writers' acceptance of it.

### ***Texts in Revelation Establish Acceptability of Instrumental Music***

Fourth, one sometimes hears that passages in Revelation indicate that God desires or accepts worship from Christians in the form of instrumental music, but that is incorrect. Indeed, if God expressed approval of instrumental worship by Christians in Revelation, then certainly some early Christian theologians would have recognized that fact, but instead the Church Fathers vehemently and uniformly condemned instrumental music. They obviously did not think Revelation was contrary to their opposition to instruments.

The kithara (often translated harp) is mentioned in three verses in Revelation: 5:8, 14:2, and 15:2. In the heavenly vision in Revelation 5, when the Lamb who appeared to have been slain took the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, who probably are angelic beings, fell down before the Lamb. *Each* of the prostrate twenty-four elders are said in Rev. 5:8 to have a harp and bowls of incense. The plural "bowls" can be understood as being distributed among the elders so that each holds only one bowl (e.g., NJB), but each one has at least a harp and one bowl. They obviously are not playing the harps, as they are on the ground and are holding one or more bowls in addition to the harp.

The last clause of v. 8 explains what these objects symbolize: they are the prayers of the saints. The prayers are pictured in the vision as being put before the Lamb by these prostrate heavenly beings. Many people claim that it is only the incense that symbolizes the prayers, but I think that is incorrect. Not only would restricting the explanatory clause to the incense leave the harp without an explanation of what it symbolizes, but the fact the relative pronoun that is used ("which things") is feminine plural in form means by the standard grammatical rule of concord (agrees with its antecedent in gender and number) that it refers either to the *bowls* of incense (rather than the incense itself, which is neuter) or to both the harp and the bowls of incense.

If one *assumes* that the incense rather than the bowls and harp must represent the prayers, then one could appeal to a grammatical exception to the rule of concord and argue the relative pronoun is a feminine plural instead of a neuter plural (as would be expected if it referred to the incense) by attraction to "the prayers," which is feminine plural. But that assumption is dubious and unnecessary. Certainly incense *could* symbolize prayers, but so could bowls full of incense and a harp.

The claim that Rev. 8:3-4 demonstrates it is the incense that represents the prayers is misguided because there 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. Moreover, in some manuscripts the pronoun is the neuter plural form (*ha*), which may mean a later scribe mistakenly thought the feminine plural form was an earlier copyist's error and changed it to refer to the incense (Smalley, 108). If so, he did not consider attraction a solution to the issue.

I think it is better to understand the bowl of incense and the harp that these prostrate beings set before the Lamb as symbols of the saints' prayers in both their spoken and sung forms. A song is identified with prayer in Ps. 42:8, and Ps. 72:20 declares "the *prayers* of David, the son of Jesse, are ended," implying that his preceding songs were prayers. Indeed, many Psalms, which were sung, are identified as prayers (see, e.g., Ps. 4:1, 5:2, 6:9, 17:1, 39:12, 54:2, 55:1, 61:1, 69:13, 84:8, 86:6, 88:2, 90:1, 102:1, 118:25, 141:2, 142:1, 143:1; also Hab. 3:1).

You say, "Why would God use a harp to symbolize Christian prayers if the use of musical instruments was not acceptable in Christian worship?" Presumably for the same reason he used bowls of incense to symbolize those prayers despite the fact it is widely agreed that burning incense to God is not acceptable in Christian worship. Their symbolism does not require their actual use. Incense is a pleasing aroma and thus symbolizes that the prayers of the saints were received gladly by God; a harp symbolizes the harmony of voices raised in song to God.

Indeed, in Rev. 14:2, the only verse that mentions *playing* of the harp, John writes, "And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The sound I heard was *like* the sound of harpists playing on their harps." The sound from heaven that John hears in 14:2 was very loud, being like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. It also was melodious, being *like* "the sound of harpists playing their harps." It was *not* harpists playing their harps but was *like* it. This loud, melodious sound is identified in 14:3 as the *singing* of the redeemed (or the angelic host); there is no mention of any instruments being played. Ian Boxall comments:

The sound (φωνή), from heaven here is probably a heavenly sound (contrast 4:1; 6:6; 9:13; 10:8; 11:12; 12:10; 14:13; 16:1, 17; 18:4; 19:5; 21:3), loud, as one has come to expect from the heavenly realm, but melodious nonetheless, for it is like that of harpists playing on their harps. Many waters describes the voice of 'someone like a son of man' at 1:15, and the loud thunderclap has hitherto described the divine Presence (4:5; 8:5; 11:19; see also 16:18). But the sound of heavenly worshippers, rather than God himself, is more appropriate here (cf. 19:6, where the Hallelujahs of a great multitude will be described in this way). These heavenly beings making this heavenly music were singing something like a new song before the throne and the four creatures and the elders.

Since singing is analogized to harp music right here in Revelation, using a harp as a symbol for sung prayers in 5:8 seems perfectly natural.

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.

As I just noted, there already is an association in Rev. 14:2 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 psaltery 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.

### ***Position Inconsistent with Allowing Pews, Song Books, Etc.***

Fifth, it is sometimes asserted, in response to the more common argument against instrumental worship, that the *a cappella* position is inconsistent in excluding instrumental music while allowing the use of such things as pews, song books, pitch pipes, and projectors. The claim is that those things are allowed despite the absence of any authority for their use in the New Testament, so musical instruments likewise should be allowed despite the absence of authority for their use. This claim misunderstands the implicit authority that accompanies general commands.

A command to do something that does not include any specification of the way to do it implies that all ways of doing it are acceptable. Such a general command authorizes implicitly the use of whatever tools may assist in carrying it out. For example, a general command to change a tire leaves open the manner of doing so whereas a command to change it with wooden tools does not. Because the commands to assemble, sing, and teach are general commands, commands for which no manner of accomplishment has been specified, using tools like pews, song books, pitch pipes, and projectors to accomplish those directives is approved implicitly. But the command to worship is different in that ways of doing so have been specified and do not include the use of musical instruments. So their use is not authorized implicitly.

In an attempt to outflank this fact, it sometimes is alleged that instrumental music is not an additional way of worshipping but merely a way of singing, a way of carrying out the general command to sing. As such, it is as acceptable as using song books, a pitch pipe, or four-part harmony. The problem, of course, is that this is a counterfactual characterization. Song books, pitch pipes, and four-part harmony all leave the group offering only singing, whereas instrumental music is nonvocal and therefore is distinct from singing. As in the Old Testament, instruments are their own contribution to the worship (1 Chron. 23:5; 2 Chron. 5:12-13, 7:6, 29:27-28). 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.<sup>35</sup>

In any event, instrumental music cannot be justified as a manner of singing because, as was made clear in the presentation of the covenantal view of *a cappella* worship, it was part of the Jewish sacrificial system that was rendered obsolete by Christ, and thus using it in the new covenant is contrary to the will of God. In that light, 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.

## Relevance of Rom. 14:1-15:13

For those who remain unpersuaded, who continue to believe instrumental worship is acceptable to God, it is important to keep in mind Paul's teaching in Rom. 14:1-15:13. Assuming I am incorrect and instrumental worship is indeed a matter of indifference to God, Paul makes clear in Rom. 14:1-15:13 (and in 1 Cor. 8:7-13) that love for one's brothers and sisters who are not likewise convinced, whose consciences would be offended by worshipping with instruments, requires one to abstain from the practice in their presence. The rationale is that by engaging in the practice in their presence one puts undue pressure on them to go along with it before they are truly ready, before they have the consent of their conscience. And when they succumb to that pressure they violate their conscience and thereby sin, which can lead to a hardening and ultimately to their destruction. In other words, even if instrumental worship was morally neutral, a matter of indifference to God, because those brothers or sisters feel it is wrong it would be wrong for them to engage in it. (This is presented in more detail in [Rom. 14:1-15:13 – The Strong and the Weak](#).)

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<sup>35</sup> 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.



So one cannot properly engage in instrumental worship in an assembly that includes brothers and sisters who have moral qualms about the practice, who are not convinced that engaging in it is acceptable. It is unloving to do so.

With some limitations that I explain in the above-referenced paper, this goes for any practices about which one's brothers or sisters have moral qualms (not differences of preference), including other worship practices such as clapping during songs, whistling, stomping, etc. That is why in Rom. 14:22a Paul tells those with a broader conscience to keep the convictions they have *to themselves before God* and why in 1 Cor. 8:10 he speaks of the one who *sees you* eating in the temple. They cannot practice their wider consciences in their brothers' faces because it is potentially destructive and therefore unloving to do so.

## **Use of Early Christian Writers**

As for my use in the class of early Christian writers, it is true, of course, that noncanonical writers are not inspired and therefore are not authoritative for Christian practice. But that does not mean they have nothing to contribute to our understanding of God's will. They are useful in their proper place.

In this particular case, they are important evidence of the fact that, contrary to all expectations, the early church did not use musical instruments in worship for many centuries. That fact serves to corroborate or reinforce the indications in the New Testament that instruments were not used in the apostolic church and to corroborate or reinforce the understanding of the New Testament that the new covenant instituted by Jesus included a spiritual worship that was incompatible with the instrumental worship under the old covenant. The early writers further confirm that understanding by attributing their nonuse of instruments to the change of covenants. That says that they saw in the New Testament the same things we are seeing. Scripture remains the authority, but historical evidence can aid in our understanding of it.

So if someone claimed I was being inconsistent in taking as authoritative the early church's rejection of musical instruments but not taking as authoritative other elements of the early church's testimony or practice, I would say I take none of it as authoritative. I simply use it as historical data that can be relevant to one's understanding of Scripture, that can shed light on its meaning. To illustrate with a different example, I understand Scripture to teach that a person is saved by grace through faith in or at the time of baptism, but that understanding is corroborated or reinforced by the fact the early church likewise understood the effect of baptism. Historical evidence does not have to be authoritative to be of value.

## Conclusion

I think Everett Ferguson's conclusion in *A Cappella Music*, 97 serves nicely as a conclusion to this study:

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.