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## WHY WE WORSHIP WITHOUT INSTRUMENTS

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*A scriptural, historical, and practical case for congregational singing alone*

Built to argue from the New Testament first, while using history only as supporting confirmation.

- This paper begins with the positive case before answering objections.
- It distinguishes between what God commanded, what man may not add, and what history later introduced.
- It treats history as secondary evidence. Scripture is the final authority.

### 1. The controlling question

The real question is not, 'Do instruments sound good?' They often do. Many sincere people use instruments in worship. The question, however, is not whether they are sincere, but whether the New Testament authorizes the practice.

That question matters because many people begin with taste, emotion, habit, or what they grew up around. But worship is not built on personal preference. In Scripture, worship is built on God's will. Jesus said true worshipers must worship 'in spirit and truth' (John 4:24, NKJV), and Paul taught that whatever we do must be done 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Colossians 3:17, NKJV), that is, by His authority.

So the issue is not whether instruments can stir emotion. The issue is whether the New Testament gives the church authority to add instrumental playing to the music God specified for the assembled church.

## 2. The positive case for singing without instruments

### A. The New Testament tells the church to sing

When the New Testament addresses Christian worship, it repeatedly speaks of singing. Ephesians 5:19 says, 'speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.' Colossians 3:16 says, 'teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.' Hebrews 13:15 calls praise 'the fruit of our lips.' James 5:13 says, 'Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.'

That is a striking pattern. The command given to churches is to sing. The passages say nothing about a congregation playing, hiring players, or accompanying itself with instruments. If God had wanted the church's music to include both singing and instrumental playing, those were simple words He could have used. Instead, He told Christians to sing.

### B. God specified the kind of music, not just the general idea of music

A common mistake is to treat 'music' as the command and then let man choose any form of music he likes. But the New Testament does not merely command music in the abstract. It specifies singing. Once God names the kind, man does not have the right to broaden the category.

The principle is easy to see in other settings. If a doctor says, 'Take this tablet with water,' he has not authorized coffee, juice, and whatever else the patient prefers. If a recipe says flour, eggs, and milk, the absence of the words 'do not add motor oil' does not make motor oil acceptable. Specific instruction narrows the field.

The same principle applies here. When the Lord said sing, that instruction already ruled out changing the kind of music into singing plus mechanical playing.

### C. The passages themselves point the melody to the heart and the teaching to the congregation

Ephesians 5:19 does more than say sing. It also says where the melody is to be made: 'in your heart to the Lord.' Colossians 3:16 shows the congregational purpose of the action: Christians are 'teaching and admonishing one another.' The emphasis is on understandable, participatory, heart-engaged congregational song.

That matters because a mechanical instrument does not teach, admonish, confess, pray, or praise with understanding. It can accompany human singing, but it cannot do the commanded act. A piano does not 'speak to one another.' A guitar does not offer 'the fruit of our lips.' The commanded action belongs to people, not machines.

### D. An aid helps obey the command; an addition changes the command

This is where many discussions get muddy. A songbook, screen, pitch pipe, or microphone can help a congregation do the commanded action of singing. They assist the act without creating a second kind of music. An instrument is different. It does not merely help the singing happen. It adds another musical act: playing.

That distinction is critical. A microphone helps me speak. It does not create a second form of speech beside mine. But a trumpet beside my voice would add another sound-producing act. In the same way, a book helps me sing the words; a piano produces its own music in addition to the congregation's singing. One is an aid. The other is an addition.

## **E. Old Testament instruments do not automatically carry into New Testament church worship**

Yes, the Old Testament mentions harps, cymbals, trumpets, and other instruments. But it also includes incense, animal sacrifices, Levitical priesthood, temple ritual, and other covenant-specific features. We do not move temple practices straight into the church without New Testament authority.

In fact, when people appeal to the Psalms alone to justify instruments in church worship, they usually do so selectively. If Psalm language by itself settles the worship question for the church, then why stop at harps? Why not incense? Why not priestly garments? Why not temple sacrifices? The reason is obvious: Christians understand that we worship under the new covenant, and new-covenant worship must be learned from new-covenant teaching.

So the question is not whether instruments once existed in temple worship. The question is whether Christ authorized them for His church. The New Testament answer is singing.

### **The plain-reading test**

A simple test helps cut through the confusion: What would a neutral reader conclude if he read the New Testament passages on church music without already belonging to a tradition that used instruments? He would conclude that Christians are to sing. He would not naturally conclude that the church is free to add pianos, organs, bands, or orchestras whenever it wishes.

That is why this issue is not really driven by the text alone. Most defenses of instrumental worship do not come from the plain wording of Ephesians 5, Colossians 3, Hebrews 13, or James 5. They come from bringing in outside assumptions and then reading them back into the text.

## **3. Historical note: the church's music was vocal long before instruments became common**

History does not decide doctrine, but it can confirm whether a position is ancient or novel. On this question, the broad historical picture is remarkably consistent.

Scholarly summaries of early Christian worship note that instruments were understood to have no place in public Christian worship and that the church's music was vocal. Encyclopedic treatments of religious music and liturgy describe the early church as following a vocal pattern and record that instruments entered church use only gradually and much later.

The timeline matters. Standard historical references note that by the 8th or 9th century organs were being used in some Christian churches in Europe, apparently at first in limited or even nonliturgical ways, and that their association with church life became established later. The Catholic Encyclopedia likewise notes that for nearly a thousand years Gregorian chant, without instrumental or harmonic addition, was the music used in the liturgy.

So the historical point is not that instruments were present from the beginning and later refined. The point is the opposite: vocal praise was the norm, and mechanical instruments were a later development.

## Representative voices from outside the churches of Christ

Again, these voices are not our authority. They simply show that opposition to instruments in worship was not a strange restorationist invention.

**Adam Clarke**, a major Methodist commentator, wrote on Amos 6:5 that instruments in the house of God he 'abominate[s] and abhor[s].' In that same comment he reports **John Wesley's** famous line that he had no objection to instruments in Methodist chapels 'provided they are neither heard nor seen.'

**Charles H. Spurgeon**, the well-known Baptist preacher, criticized replacing congregational song with what he called choir prettiness and 'machinery,' and said, 'We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it.'

Whether one agrees with every argument those men made or not, their testimony matters for one limited point: many respected denominational leaders once recognized that instrumental worship was not self-evidently part of apostolic Christianity.

## 4. Seven common objections and misunderstandings considered

These are often raised by sincere people who truly want to honor God. For that reason, they deserve patient and careful answers. The goal here is not to misrepresent anyone, but to ask whether the New Testament authorizes instrumental music in the worship of the church.

### 1. 'The New Testament never says not to use instruments.'

This is a common concern because it feels simple and fair. Yet in Scripture, God does not always provide a separate prohibition for every possible addition. Often He tells His people what He wants, and that instruction itself supplies the boundary.

A simple example helps. If a father tells his son, 'Go to the store and buy milk,' he does not also have to add, 'Do not buy ice cream, batteries, motor oil, or fishing hooks.' The instruction already identifies what is wanted. The same principle appears in Scripture. When Noah was told to build the ark from gopher wood, God did not need to list every other kind of wood that was excluded. The specified material ruled out the rest.

That is the point here. When the New Testament tells the church to sing, it tells the church what kind of music to offer. God does not need to add a separate sentence saying, 'and do not add a piano.' The burden is not to find a verse forbidding every possible addition one by one. The burden is to respect what the Lord actually authorized. So the better question is not, 'Where does it say not to?' but, 'Where does the New Testament authorize instrumental music in the worship of the church?'

This is also why examples like Nadab and Abihu remain instructive. Their problem was not that God had failed to provide a long enough list of forbidden options. Their problem was that they offered what He had not commanded. In the same way, the question here is not whether every possible addition has been individually forbidden, but whether instrumental music has actually been authorized for the church's worship.

## **2. 'The Psalms command instruments, so the church should use them too.'**

Yes, the Psalms mention instruments repeatedly. They do so in the setting of temple worship, priestly service, sacrifice, and the covenant life of Israel.

Under the old covenant, instruments belonged to a temple system. Under the new covenant, Christians do not gather at a temple with Levites offering sacrifices. We gather as the church under Christ, and the apostolic writings tell the church how to worship. In those writings, the church is told to sing.

So the Psalms should be received gratefully, but with covenant context in view. They teach reverence, gratitude, joy, lament, and praise. The New Testament then tells the church how to offer that praise under Christ.

## **3. 'The Greek word psallo means pluck, so instruments are implied.'**

This question deserves a careful answer because word studies can be useful when handled responsibly. At earlier points in history, psallo could carry the idea of plucking. But words are defined by usage in context, not by remote etymology alone.

In the New Testament context, the passages direct the music toward singing, teaching, admonishing, and making melody in the heart. That is why the heart is named as the place of melody in Ephesians 5:19.

And if psallo by itself required a mechanical instrument, then every Christian commanded to psallo would need one. Yet the passages do not say that. The safer conclusion is that the New Testament usage points to vocal praise, with the inward instrument being the heart.

## **4. 'There are harps in Revelation, so instruments must be acceptable in worship.'**

Revelation is apocalyptic literature, full of symbols and vivid imagery: lampstands, bowls, beasts, crowns, incense, and more.

If someone treats the harps of Revelation as a binding worship pattern for the church, the same consistency would require treating many other symbolic details the same way. That is not how Christians normally read the book.

The teaching passages written to churches tell Christians to sing. Symbolic heavenly imagery in Revelation should not be used to overturn the plain pattern given in those passages.

## **5. 'An instrument is just an aid, like a songbook, projector, or microphone.'**

This comparison can sound persuasive because aids do have a proper place. An aid helps carry out the commanded action without changing its nature. A songbook helps the congregation sing the right words. A projector helps everyone see the lyrics. A pitch pipe helps start on key. A microphone helps the congregation hear the leader.

A mechanical instrument is different because it does more than assist the congregation's singing. It introduces another form of music alongside the singing. In that sense, it is not simply helping the same act; it is adding to the act.

That is the difference between eyeglasses and a second voice. Glasses help me read. They do not add a new kind of reading. In the same way, a songbook helps singing; an instrument adds playing.

## **6. 'This is just a preference issue or a style issue, not a question of authority.'**

If the New Testament had said, 'Use any style or combination of music you find helpful,' then this would be a preference question. But it did not say that. It said sing.

Once God's word specifies an act, respecting that specification is not legalism; it is submission. We do not call the method of baptism a mere style question. We do not call the elements of the Lord's Supper a mere style question. We do not call prayer to the Father through Christ a mere style question. In the same way, the music of the church is not outside the realm of authority.

Many churches regard instruments as harmless because they are familiar. But familiarity by itself does not answer the question of authority. If the Lord specified singing, then the church should be content with what He specified.

## **7. 'If instruments help people worship, reach visitors, or feel more engaged, why oppose them? God cares about the heart.'**

This concern often comes from good motives. People want worship to be heartfelt, edifying, and accessible. Those are worthy desires. Still, good motives by themselves do not establish authority. The question remains, "Did the Lord authorize it?"

It is true that God cares about the heart. Precisely for that reason, the heart should ask, "What did the Lord say?" rather than only, "What seems most effective or moving to us?"

The New Testament model of singing is already rich and substantial. It involves truth-filled lyrics, mutual teaching, congregational participation, sincere praise, and melody in the heart. When worship feels thin, the better answer is not automatically to add what the text does not authorize, but to deepen the congregation's understanding and participation in the worship God did authorize.

Practical benefit alone is not a sufficient guide in worship. Something may feel effective and yet still go beyond what is written. The issue is not whether instruments can move people, they can and do. The issue is whether Christ told His church to use them.

## 5. Is this a “salvation issue”?

This question deserves a measured answer, because people often mishandle it in two opposite ways.

On one side, some speak as though using an instrument is a very small matter because it is 'just music.' That answer is too light. Worship is important, and the authority of Christ in worship is important. If a practice is unauthorized, then the deeper issue is not merely a piano or an organ, but whether we are willing to remain within the teaching of Christ.

On the other side, some answer so bluntly that they sound as though they personally know the eternal state of every individual in every instrumental congregation. That answer goes too far. God judges hearts, knowledge, opportunity, and accountability perfectly. We do not.

So the careful answer is this: the use of instruments in worship is not a trivial preference matter. It is an authority matter, and authority matters touch salvation because they reveal whether we are willing to abide in the teaching of Christ. At the same time, we should be humble about judging individual souls. We can say the practice is unauthorized without pretending to possess God's omniscience about every person involved.

A good way to say it is this: the question is serious enough that no one should brush it aside. If the Lord specified singing and man added playing, that is not harmless. But the final judgment of persons belongs to God. Our duty is **not** to rewrite the standard. Our duty is to obey it, teach it clearly, and urge others to do the same.

## 6. Conclusion

The case for a cappella worship does not rest on one obscure technicality. It rests on a straightforward chain of reasoning:

- Christ's authority governs worship.
- The New Testament repeatedly commands Christians to sing.
- Those passages describe heart-based, understandable, congregational vocal praise.
- Instruments are not the commanded act, nor are they a mere neutral aid to it.
- Old Testament temple instruments do not create New Testament church authority.
- History confirms that instrumental worship entered gradually and later, rather than appearing as the apostolic norm.

For that reason, we worship without instruments not because we hate music, not because we are trying to be difficult, and not because we enjoy being different. We do it because we believe the safest, clearest, and most submissive course is to do what the New Testament actually says: sing.

## Source notes for the historical material

1. Encyclopedia.com, 'Music: Religious Music in the West,' summary of early Christian public worship as vocal and non-instrumental.
2. Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Organ' and 'History of the Organ to 1800,' on organs appearing in some churches by the 8th or 9th century and becoming associated with church life later.
3. Catholic Encyclopedia, 'Musical Instruments in Church Services,' on Gregorian chant standing without instrumental or harmonic addition in the liturgy for many centuries.
4. Adam Clarke, commentary on Amos 6:5, for Clarke's own protest against instruments in Christian worship and for his report of Wesley's remark.
5. Charles H. Spurgeon, Treasury of David on Psalm 42:4, for Spurgeon's critique of replacing congregational praise with 'machinery.'