

Instrumental Worship: Where Can We Find It?

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AM Worship

Introduction:

Most people who visit with us for the first time have an immediate question. If you are a first time guest, you may have already asked the question yourself. "Where is the piano?" Pianos, guitars and drums have become such an integral part of worship for so many churches, people are amazed that anyone would refrain from using them, let alone claim it is sinful to use them to worship God. In fact, this so amazes us that even among Christians we begin to question whether or not there really is anything wrong with worshipping God through instrumental music. Perhaps we are being stubborn and silly. It really does seem such a small thing in the big picture. With that in mind we might begin searching for ways to bring instrumental music into our worship. Therefore, it is important to ask, "Many others have found instrumental worship and decided it is ok, where can we find it?"

Discussion:

- I. Many find instrumental worship in the Old Testament.
 - A. Perhaps the first place people go to find instrumental worship is the Old Testament. The first line of defense is often, "David worshiped with instrumental music. So can we." There is no doubt instrumental worship was authorized under the Old Covenant. Read **Psalm 150:3-5** for just one example. Some have suggested the use of instruments under the Old Law was a concession that God never really wanted. However, **II Chronicles 29:25** says the use of instrumental music in Old Testament worship was a command "from the Lord through His prophets."
 - B. However, we are not under the Old Law. **Hebrews 7:12** explained when the priesthood changed from Aaron to Jesus, the law changed. **Galatians 3:24-25** explained clearly we are not under the Old Law, the tutor to bring us to Jesus Christ. The very frightening thing about turning to the Old Law as our authority for how to serve Christ is demonstrated in **Galatians 3:10-14**. If we want to submit to the Old Law, we are submitting to a curse. Further, in **Galatians 5:2-4**, Paul, speaking of circumcision, pointed out if we go back to the Law to govern us, Christ becomes of no effect to us. We will be severed from Christ and fall from grace.
 - C. The long and short of it is this, we can certainly find instrumental worship in the Old Law, but do we really want the consequences of using that as our authority to justify the way we worship?
- II. Many find instrumental worship in symbolic pictures of Heaven.
 - A. The second place to which people turn to find instrumental worship is Heaven in **Revelation 5:8; 14:2; 15:2**. The thought from many is this: If God allowed worship through instruments of music under the Old Law and then is going to allow it in Heaven, why would we claim it is not allowed in the church today?
 - B. The question is whether or not these images in the book of **Revelation** actually provide equipping for instrumental worship for us living under the New Covenant. The first problem is taking these pictures of worship in Heaven at face value. Consider **Revelation 5:8**. The elders who held the harps are the ones mentioned in **Revelation 4:4, 10**. These elders are dressed in white and wearing golden crowns. They bow before the throne of God, casting away their golden crowns. Further, they have the golden bowls of incense. Does this literally describe the worship we participate in today? Are we supposed to wear white garments and crowns that we throw down? Certainly not. Those pictures are symbolic of purity and humility before God. And what about that burning incense? The text explains that the bowls of incense are not literal but represent the prayers of the saints. Can we, in this book so full of symbolism, take the symbols as authority for what we do today? Certainly not. Rather we must consider what these symbols represent. The bowls of incense represent prayer. We must pray, not burn incense.
 - C. Additionally, when we consider the context of **Revelation 15:1-5**, we find these symbols are borrowed from Old Testament worship, not because this was how New Testament Christians worshipped, but because the readers were familiar with Old Testament scriptures. If we use these pictures as authority for our worship, we are actually bringing the instruments into our worship from the Old Covenant, not from Heaven. We have already demonstrated the dangers of that.

III. Many find instrumental worship in New Testament silence.

- A. Many, banking on the use of instruments in the Old Testament, ask this question, “When did God take away the use of instruments in worship?” Others will simply ask, “When did God condemn the use of instrumental music in worship?” Because they cannot find any specific condemnation, they believe instruments must be allowed. This is arguing from biblical silence.
- B. Do you remember what we read in **Hebrews 7:12**? We are under a new law. We are not waiting for God to take away instruments under the New Law, we have to look for where God brought them into it. Additionally, we need to remember what God said in **II Timothy 3:16-17**. God points out that scripture will teach us, reprove us, correct us and train us in righteousness. Then it says the scripture will equip us for every good work. It does not say scripture will condemn every bad work. The New Testament is silent about instrumental worship. Does that provide permission? On the contrary, it does not. We have to look for equipping to use instruments under this new law and we cannot find it. If we are going to bring it in from silence, we have to realize we are bringing it in to our worship and God’s New Covenant law is not.
- C. Consider this illustration: if you were walking through a friend’s house and in one room you found all kinds of musical instruments, piano, harp, guitar, trumpet, saxophone, flute, drums, etc., and then you walked into another a room that had absolutely no instruments, would you think that accidental? Of course not, you would think the owner of the house had done so on purpose. We come into the Bible and we walk through the Old Testament, finding instrumental worship all over the place. Then we move into the New Testament and find it completely devoid of it. Is that accidental? Of course not. We have to think God did that on purpose. We cannot bring instrumental worship in on the basis of silence, but respect the fact that God never provided permission for it under His New Covenant law.

IV. Many find instrumental worship in post-biblical ancient Christians.

- A. There are some interesting quotes from ancient post-biblical Christians that, on the surface, seem to suggest instrumental music was an integral part of their worship. One example comes from Clement of Alexandria who lived from 153-217 AD:

“For the apostle adds again, ‘Teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to God.’ ... And even if you wish to sing and play to the harp or lyre, there is no blame. Thou shalt imitate the righteous Hebrew king in his thanksgiving to God. ‘Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; praise is comely to the upright,’ says the prophecy. ‘Confess to the Lord on the harp; play to Him on the psaltery of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song.’ And does not the ten-stringed psaltery indicate the Word Jesus, who is manifested by the element of the decad?”¹

- B. Surely those who lived so close to the actual time of the apostles would know the practice of the apostles’ worship habits, even if they were not specifically recorded in scripture. Certainly, on the surface, a quote like this suggests post-biblical Christians used instruments to worship God. However, digging below the surface we actually find an opposite picture. Consider another quote from the same ancient Christian:

“And He who is of David, and yet before him, the Word of God, despising the lyre and harp, 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; and to this instrument—I mean man—he sings accordant...”²

- C. How do these two quotes correspond? Clement did not use instruments of music in worship. He believed the great instrument of music was the individual Christian singing unaided by mechanical musical instruments. In other passages, Clement actually records that he believes the reference to mechanical instruments of music in the psalms were symbolic of the different parts of God’s great instrument—man.
- D. However, that is really beside the point. We can argue all day long about what those early post-biblical Christians did and we will not be any closer to doing what we ought to do. Do you remember what we read just earlier in **II Timothy 3:16-17**? God gave us scriptures to equip us for

¹ Clement of Alexandria; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Hendrickson Pub., 1995, Vol II, p. 249.

² *Ibid.* p. 172.

every good work. He did not give us scripture plus the testimony of Christians from a later time to equip us for good work. Further, we can look in passages such as **I Corinthians 11:17-34** and find that even Christians living in the time of the apostles strayed from God's approved practice and had to be corrected by the apostles. How much more might the Christians and churches stray from God's pattern after the apostles died? We cannot use the example of any Christians as our guide unless the scriptures demonstrate God's approval.

V. Many find instruments in their personal logic.

- A. A lot of people dispense with trying to find specifically scriptural reasons and bring in the instruments from personal logic. The thought is generally, "I simply cannot see why God wouldn't accept instruments of music in worship." Or "I don't see any harm in it." Or "I think God wants us all to use our talents in worship." There are numerous ways in which people justify the use of instrumental music in worship from their opinion.
- B. Frankly, if we were to follow my "druthers," we would use them. I love instrumental music. I took piano lessons as a kid (though I can hardly play it now). I was in my junior high and high school band. I enjoy playing the guitar and the drums even now. I would love to be able to worship God in a jam session with you.
- C. However, there are a few Bible verses that draw me up short on taking this approach. As much as I would like to, I know we cannot simply follow our personal reasoning. According to **Jeremiah 10:23**, it is not in man to direct his own steps. According to **Proverbs 14:12; 16:25**, when we follow our own path it leads to death. We are walking on dangerous ground any time our justification for an action is, "I just can't see anything wrong with it." The question is not whether we like it or we can see anything wrong with it. The question is can I find where the scripture shows us what is right with it.

VI. No one finds instrumental worship in the worship of New Testament churches or Christians.

- A. I appreciate the work of so many who have shown us all the places in which we can find instruments of music and bring them into our worship. They have shown us that we can get it from the Old Testament, from symbolic images of Heaven, from New Testament silence, possibly from ancient post-biblical Christians, from our personal reasoning. However, as these stack argument on top of argument to allow us to use instruments of music to worship God, they bring out one amazing point in stark relief. We can go to all kinds of places to bring instruments into our worship; we just cannot go to the teaching of the New Testament writers or the example of the New Testament Christians. For all of the teaching about worshipping God in the New Testament and for all the examples of it, we never once find instruments of music taught either by explicit statement, practical example or necessary implication.
- B. What do we find in the New Testament? We find singing taught and exemplified. Consider **Acts 16:25; I Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; James 5:13**. We even find in one of these passages a reference to the instrument that we should use to make the melody for our singing. **Ephesians 5:19** claims the instrument with which we should make the melody for our singing is the heart.
- C. When we remember **II Timothy 3:16-17** we are forced to draw one conclusion. The New Testament law equips us to sing. Singing is a good work. However, for all the places we may go to try to find equipping for worshipping God with instruments of music as a congregation or as individual Christians, we cannot find one single verse in the New Testament that equips us to do so. The only conclusion is instrumental worship is not a good work. We must not use it.
- D. While we cannot go to the Old Testament to authorize and govern how we worship God. These stories are written for our learning (**Romans 15:4**) and as examples of how God expects His covenant people to respect His covenant and law (**I Corinthians 10:11**). In other words, **Leviticus 10:1-3** does not provide example for how we are to worship God under the New Covenant. However, the example of how God dealt with those who disregarded the laws of His Old Covenant shows how God will deal with those who disregard the laws of His New Covenant. **Leviticus 10:1-3** demonstrates that we are only worshipping God and treating Him as holy when we are worshipping Him the way He has authorized. As much as we may like pianos, guitars and drums, when we use them to worship God, we are like Nadab and Abihu who offered strange

fire which He had not commanded them. Their sin was not that they did something God commanded against. Their sin was doing something God had not commanded them to do. We must not be guilty of the same transgression in following God's New Covenant pattern for worship. God will not strike us down immediately as He did with Nadab and Abihu. He will give us time to repent. But in the end, we will come into God's presence to be judged. It will not be enough for us to be sincerely religious. The question will be did we follow the will of God that He revealed for us in the New Testament (**Matthew 7:21-23**).

Conclusion:

The conclusion of the matter is this: there is only one place that God equips the New Testament Christians and churches regarding how to worship Him. That is the New Testament. For all the places we can go to equip ourselves to worship God with instruments of music, the New Testament is the one place where we cannot find any equipping. Therefore, we must refrain or suffer the wrath of God.