

Music in Worship

By Mark Mayberry
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Introduction

In this lesson, we ask, “What kind of music in worship should we offer unto God? Does it matter? Should we use instruments of music? Should our praise be expressed exclusively in song?”

The practice of New Testament disciples is set forth in the following verses (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12; James 5:13). What did early Christians do? They sang songs of praise and petition to God. They taught and admonished one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

Someone might object, saying, “Instruments of music were used in the Old Testament. What about David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, who wrote many psalms that were intended to be sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments? If it was good enough for David, a man after God’s own heart, it should be good enough for us!”

David lived in a different age, and was subject to a different covenant. The Old Testament was then in force; the New Testament is today authoritative. He was accountable to the Law of Moses, while we answer to the Gospel of Christ (Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 2:9-17).

However, certain brethren answer, “Yes, God allowed David’s use of instrumental music, but didn’t actually like it.” Some think that God only grudgingly tolerated instrumental music in the Old Testament. This view is based upon an erroneous interpretation of Amos 6:5, which condemns the indolent Israelites “who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for yourselves musical instruments like David” (NKJV).

Old Testament Worship

Terminology

Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary says MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE BIBLE were “mechanical implements or devices used to produce harmonious sounds. Musical instruments used by the Hebrew people were of three types: (1) stringed instruments, which used vibrating strings to make sounds; (2) percussion instruments, which were struck to produce musical sounds; and (3) wind instruments, which made sounds either by passing air over a vibrating reed or by forcing air through the instrument.” These include the bagpipe, bell, bugle, cornet, cymbals, dulcimer, fife, flute, gong, harp, horn, lute, lyre, organ, pipe, psaltery, ram’s

horn, reed-pipe, sackbut, shophar, sistrums, tabret, tambourine, timbrel, triangle, trigon, trumpet, viol, zither, etc.

Examples

Moses & Miriam used instruments to celebrate Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Exod. 15:20-21). David organized the musical worship of Israel, and Solomon employed such at the dedication of the temple (1 Chron. 23:3-5; 2 Chron. 5:11-14; 7:4-7). Many Psalms were accompanied by instruments of music (cf. Psa. 4, 6, 54, 55, 61, 81, 92, etc.).

Commands

The use of instrumental music was commanded by Moses (Num. 10:1-2, 10). The use of instrumental music was commanded by David (2 Chron. 29:25-27). The use of instrumental music was commanded in the Psalms (Psa. 81 & 150).

New Testament Worship

As stated earlier, the practice of New Testament disciples is set forth in a select group of verses (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12; James 5:13). Let's look at these in more detail, considering the Greek words that are used therein, along with their meaning.

Terminology

The Greek verb **humneō** means to sing a song of praise. Thomas defines ὑμνέω [humneō] as derived from humnos [a hymn], meaning "to sing to, to laud" [5214]. BDAG say it means "to sing a song in a cultic [i.e., religious, MM] setting, especially of praise and celebration; (a) sing in praise to, sing in praise of; (b) sing (a hymn)." This word occurs 4x in the NT (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; Heb. 2:12).

The noun **humnos** refers to a song of praise. Thomas defines ὕμνος [humnos] as "a hymn" [5215]. BDAG say it refers to "a song with religious content, hymn/song of praise, especially in honor of a deity." This word occurs 2x in the NT (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

The verb **psallō** means to sing songs of praise. Thomas defines ψάλλω [psallō] as derived from psalō [to rub], meaning "to pull, twitch, twang, play, sing" [5567]. BDAG say ψάλλω "in our literature, in accordance with O.T. usage, [means] to sing songs of praise, with or without instrumental accompaniment, sing, sing praise... The original meaning of ψάλλω was 'pluck', 'play' (a stringed instrument); this persisted at least to the time of Lucian. In the LXX ψάλλω freq. means 'sing', whether to the accompaniment of an instrument (Psa. 32:2; 97:5; al.) or not, as is usually the case (Psa. 7:18; 9:12; 107:4; al.). This focus on singing continued until ψάλλω in Modern Greek means 'sing' exclusively... Although the NT does not voice opposition to instrumental music, in view of Christian resistance to mystery cults, as well as Pharisaic aversion to musical instruments in worship, it is likely that some such sense as make melody is best

understood in this Ephesian passage. Those who favor ‘play’ may be relying too much on the earliest meaning of ψάλλω...” This word occurs 4x in the NT (Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19; James 5:13).

The noun **psalmos** refers to a psalm. Thomas defines ψαλμός [psalmos] as derived from psallō [to pull, twitch, twang, play, sing], meaning “a striking (of musical strings), a psalm” [5568]. BDAG say it refers “in our literature [to] only song of praise, psalm in accordance w. O.T. usage; (a) of OT Psalms; (b) of Christian songs of praise.” This word occurs 7x in the NT (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

The verb **adō** means “to sing.” Thomas defines ᾄδω [adō] as derived from aeidō [to sing], meaning “to sing” [103]. BDAG say it means “sing (in praise).” This word occurs 5x in the NT (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3).

The noun **ōdē** refers to a song. Thomas defines ᾠδή [ōdē] as a contraction from aoidē [a song], from the same as adō [to sing], meaning “a song, ode” [5603]. BDAG say it refers to a “song, in our literature only of sacred song, a song of praise to God.” This word occurs 7x in the NT (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Rev. 5:9; 14:3 [2x]; 15:3 [2x]).

Examples

On the night of His betrayal, after meeting in an upper room, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26). Around midnight, after having been beaten and cast in prison at Philippi, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God (Acts 16:25). In the Book of Revelation, saints surrounding the throne of God sang songs of praise to God and the Lamb (Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3).

Commands

Some commands regarding singing have general application, being applicable to private settings and public worship (Rom. 15:8-11; Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16; James 5:13). Other passages are directly associated with collective worship offered in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:13-19, 26-33; Heb. 2:11-12).

Conclusion

Why was instrumental music (i.e., stringed, percussion or wind instruments) used in worship during the Old Testament? Because God commanded it. Why is a cappella music (i.e., singing) used in worship during the New Testament era? Because God commanded it.

If God had wanted us to use instruments of music today, He would have said so! Instead, through approved example and by direct command, He specified singing as the type music that Christians offer in worship. For those who respect Bible authority, that settles the issue.