



The organ and the organist

The highlight of our daily life must be Sunday. It is the Queen of the Week. And the highlight of our Sunday is the opportunity given to attend the worship service. In the next few installments I would like to look at the various parts of the worship service. Providing that the organist is not too late or we are too early, one of the first things we confront when we come to church is the sound of music swelling from the organ. And this is what I would like to reflect on in this article. Not that I am an expert on organs and organists. I have sat behind the one and beside the other, but that does not make me an expert. So I write this as a "layman," so to speak.

As Reformed people we have come to love our organ music. The ideal of every congregation is to have a genuine pipe organ. But if that is not affordable, then next on our list is a digital organ which reproduces to varying degrees of success the sound of a pipe organ. And for some of the smaller congregations a piano, a trumpet or a recorder must suffice.

Did you realise that the pipe organ has not always been a welcome part of the worship service?

*"The prototype of the modern instrument was invented about 250 BC. ... It seems to have been used in the Spanish Churches as early as AD 450, but probably for singing classes in the cloisters rather than in public worship. Pope Vitalian (657-672) introduced the organ to churches in Rome in order to improve the singing by the choir... Although there is ample evidence of the existence of instruments in churches from the 8th century onwards, they were only gradually introduced into the service proper. Modern organ-playing is said to have begun in Italy with Francesco Land-mo (died 1390), organist of St Lorenzo in Florence. The church organ had hitherto been used to lead out the plain song in unison only... In the next century we find that organists of repute begin to appear."*¹

In the Netherlands it took somewhat longer before the organ found its place in the worship service.

*"The great organist Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621) did not accompany a single psalm during his entire life in the city of Amsterdam. The idea of accompanying the singing of a psalm was foreign to the people of the Netherlands at that time. The well-known theologian Voetsius (1589-1676) was also an opponent of the organ in the church. It was not until Constantyn Huygens (1596-1687) made a plea for the organ in 1641 that there came a number of changes in attitudes and practices."*²

The question arises whether it is indeed permissible to use an organ in the worship service. We become so accustomed to some things that we no longer question them. But not all agree that instruments may be used in the worship service. In the eastern churches no instruments are used. And some western churches who follow the principles of the Reformation are also opposed to their use in the worship service (e.g. the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia).

Those who are opposed to use of instruments follow the principle called *Purity of Worship*, which maintains that only what is prescribed in Scripture is permissible in the church service. Now they do not doubt that instruments were used in the old dispensation.

*But these instruments had a ceremonial and thus a prophetic character, similar to the other ceremonial laws of the old dispensation."The instrumental accompaniment was prophetic too. The analogy from the nature of the types and shadows of the ceremonial law leads us to think of the accompaniment as a use of physical and material things to portray spiritual things. There is some difference of opinion over just what it was prophetic of, but we will not be far wrong if (sic) seeing it as expressive of the joy and exultation of the believer in the provision of Christ as the atoning sacrifice."*³

Like the passing away of all the other ceremonies of the old dispensation, so the use of instruments has also passed away in the new dispensation. Therefore the New Testament is silent about the use of instruments in the worship service, except in the book of Revelation which uses Old Testament imagery and symbols.

Now it is true that the New Testament is silent about the use of music in the worship service. But it is dubious to argue from silence, since silence can be interpreted either way. Take the example of infant baptism about which we have no express command or clear example. This silence is understood by some to mean that infant baptism is forbidden, since it is not clearly prescribed. Yet we understand this silence to indicate the maintenance of *the status quo*. Unless something is clearly abolished, we continue what was practised in the old dispensation. Since children received the sign and seal of the covenant in the old dispensation and we read nothing to indicate a change, we maintain the position that children should still receive the sign and seal of the covenant in the new dispensation. The same could be applied to the matter of instruments. Unless something is clearly abolished, we in the new dispensation continue to do as our forefathers did in the old dispensation.

Furthermore, it is doubtful that the use of instruments was ceremonial. The ceremonial law regarding worship (days of worship, sacrifices that had to be offered, and how they had to be manipulated, etc.) was laid down in the books of Moses. Yet nowhere in these books is there any reference to the use of musical instruments in the temple (except the trumpet which was used as a means of summons rather than for music.) This already indicates that the use of instruments was not an essential element of worship in the tabernacle.

We read of the introduction of instruments in the old dispensation in 1 Chronicles 15:16,

"Then David spoke to the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers accompanied by instruments of music, stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals, by raising the voice with resounding joy."

We do not read that God demanded the use of instruments, as He did demand the other ceremonies given through Moses. It is possible that the use of instruments arose from David's own love for musical accompaniment with singing. While still a shepherd boy, David played his harp as he composed psalms of praise to God. This does not deny the possibility that God did give such orders to David. But even then it is difficult to maintain that the use of instruments belong to the ceremonial law given so many centuries before.

If the use of instruments does not belong to the ceremonial law (which has been abolished), the New Testament church is free to use it as did the church of the old dispensation. Not that it must. Just as instruments were not used in the church early in the old dispensation, but were introduced later, so the church early in the new dispensation did not use instruments in worship, but introduced them later. The use of instruments is left to the freedom of the church. It is not prescribed, nor is it an essential element in the worship service. We can worship without it, but we may worship with it.

The next question is: *"Why do we use the organ (or other instruments) in the worship service?"*

We do so for at least two reasons: to support and adorn the singing.⁴ Some would dispute the first reason.

"If people need an instrument to assist their singing praise, surely there is something amiss spiritually – either the heart is out of tune with God or the music is over-ornate in a manner ill-befitting a Christian congregation."⁵

We could agree for a great part with this statement. There are a few in the congregation who simply cannot sing; they are tone-deaf. But they are few and far between. The congregational singing is not hampered by these few individuals. A congregation that cannot sing in the worship service without musical accompaniment likely consists of families who do not sing at home. If singing the psalms does not live among us during the week, there will not life in the singing on Sunday either. As it is, most of our congregations are able to sing very well without an organ. We do this often enough in Catechism classes, study evenings, at the graveside and in church when either the power or the organ fails.

The organ can be useful, however. Consider the fact that we have 124 melodies for the 150 Psalms. It is a known fact that a suitable occasion to sing some of the psalms arises less frequently than to sing others. Thus some melodies are better known than others. I am grateful for the accompaniment and even the leadership of the organ when these lesser known psalms are sung. (We could overcome this problem if we made the melodies of these lesser known psalms interchangeable with the melodies of the better known psalms.)

Furthermore, each psalm has its own "mood," and often the mood changes from one stanza to the next. A sensitive organist is able to read through the psalms prior to the church service, to determine this mood and then play accordingly. For the sad or sorrowful psalms, he will play softer and more slowly, but for the joyful psalms he will play a little louder and more quickly. I think of Psalm 130, of which the beginning is a psalm of mourning, but the end of which breaks forth in the joy of hope and assurance of redemption. With good leadership from the organist, the mood of the congregation is put into harmony with the mood of the psalm so that our singing fits the thoughts. Such sensitive playing induces the congregation to sing from the heart.

The organ not only supports the singing; it also adorns it. Music is a God-given means of glorifying God just as much as our voices. To be sure, God is pleased with the praise of the lips, but there is no dilemma. It is not either musical instruments or praise of our lips, but both, even as it was during the old dispensation. At the same time a measure of modesty and competency in playing the organ is necessary. As far as volume is concerned, the organ should blend with the voices, not drown them out. As far as the playing itself is concerned, the church service is neither a training ground nor a concert recital. I have great patience with someone who is learning I have accompanied my son to many simple recitals where mistakes are made, and I clap enthusiastically. I also appreciate good organists, and the artistic talents displayed in playing intricate pieces of music. I have attended quite a few organ recitals. But the church service is neither a training ground nor a concert recital. The organist should never draw attention to themselves and away from the words the congregation is singing, which sometimes happens when the organist is either incompetent or overly competent. Concerning the latter, it has happened that some very talented organists accompanying the singing in church have walked away with more glory than God.

The organ also serves to prepare us for worship. We do well to arrive at church sometime before the worship service starts, and to read the text and meditate upon it, thereby putting our mind and heart into "reception mode" putting our organist can also assist in this by playing some of the psalms and hymns which will be sung during the service (or arrangements of them). For these psalms are chosen with intent. They reflect the message of God's Word which will be delivered during the church service. (I would not rule out other spiritual songs, providing that the words are both Scriptural and known to the congregation.) While I love classical organ music and attend concerts from time to time, I do not think such music prepares the congregation for worship. In fact I am convinced that it distracts those who come to worship and leaves them less prepared. If the choice is between classical music or no music, I would prefer silent contemplation.

Enough from a layman! Let me close with a note of appreciation to the many men and women who busy themselves in preparing and accompanying the singing. I have a great deal of appreciation for their dedicated service.

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¹ Ward, RS., *The Psalms in Christian Worship*, PCEA, 1992, pp. 58-59.

² Deddens, K., *Where Everything Points to Him*, Inheritance Publ., 1993, pp. 128-129.

³ Ward, op.cit., pg. 31.

⁴ Van Rongen, G., *Zijn Schone Dients*, pg. 151.

⁵ Ward, op. Cit., pg. 59.