



Instrumental Music in Worship?

Very little thought is given these days to the question of the propriety of using instrumental music in public worship services. It is not questioned. The fact that instrumental accompaniment was more or less unknown in the Presbyterian Church in Scotland up to the end of the 19th Century comes as a surprise to people, as does the knowledge that the great Baptist preacher of the Victorian era, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, never used instrumental accompaniment in the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. To this day the Eastern (Orthodox) Church eschews the use of instruments. In the Scottish context only a few of the more-conservative Presbyterian bodies maintain the practice of unaccompanied praise in their services, though the prohibition of instruments in worship has recently been questioned in the majority Free Church of Scotland. The question is: is there a principle here? Is there a sound argument for the exclusion of instrumental accompaniment in public worship services? It has been and is still a principle in the smaller conservative Presbyterian churches. The majority Free Church of Scotland, and the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) require this statement to be made at all ordinations of new ministers:

'It is my duty to explain to you, and also to the Congregation here present, with reference to that part of the question which will be put to you as to 'Purity of worship as presently practised in this Church' that, in 1910, the General Assembly reaffirmed the legislation of the Church as to uniformity in public worship going back to the year 1707; and that in accordance with that legislation, it is the present practice of the Free Church to avoid the use, in public worship, of uninspired materials of praise, as also of instrumental music. Such present practice determines the purity of worship to the maintenance of which the Ordinand pledges himself'.

The matter of unaccompanied praise is therefore seen to be part of the Church's principles on purity of worship. The burden of this article is to provide some basis in Scripture for this position.

1. The Basic Approach

For all elements of worship — as argued elsewhere, with reference to the singing of Psalms — it is necessary for any church to establish that its practice derives from divine appointment and not merely the wit and wisdom of men. In connection with instrumental music there are certain things, superficially, that appear to be in its favour, and these have to be addressed:

- 1) Instrumental music was used and appointed to be used in Old Testament times. Why should that not apply also for the New Testament?
- 2) Instrumental accompaniment greatly aids the singing by keeping the pace up and providing a perfect pitch
- 3) The use of an instrument provides the potential for a wider variety of musical forms for the songs that may be sung
- 4) In any case the use of a mere instrument, or instruments, doesn't encourage or spread error, as the words of songs admittedly might do. Is it not a thing 'indifferent'?

The most ardent advocate of the no instrumental accompaniment in public worship position has no bone of contention with instrumental music *per se*. Musical *appreciation* is not the issue. The potential of instrumental music for example to stir emotions is not questioned, nor are the God-given talents of those who compose music or play instruments. But the question is: Is instrumental

accompaniment to praise warranted positively in the New Testament and are there sound reasons for *not* employing such accompaniment *in public worship services*?

2. The Old Testament position

1. The earliest references to instruments in relation to praise are found in connection with the Exodus from Egypt under Moses. In Exodus 15 after the Red Sea deliverance we have the instance of Moses' sister, of whom we read: *'Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea'* (Ex. 15:20-21). There is here, however, no specific reference to public worship, but simply spontaneous or 'patriotic' praise from among the women. After all, it was men alone (Levites) who were appointed to lead the entire worship of the Tabernacle service (Num. 3:5-10). It was only later, indeed, that the whole form of worship that the Lord required of His people in the wilderness was revealed to Moses at Sinai (Ex. 25:40; Heb. 8:5).
2. In Psalm 81 it is doubtless a call to celebrate the Passover or Feast of Tabernacles that is spoken of. The Psalm refers back to the Exodus period but clearly relates the praise to what God Himself appointed: *'Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob. Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery. Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day. For this was a statute for Israel, and a law of the God of Jacob. This he ordained in Joseph for a testimony, when he went out through the land of Egypt: where I heard a language that I understood not'* (1-5). However, the actual reference to the instruments was contemporary Temple worship.
3. It was by the command of God that Moses appointed trumpets to be blown in certain circumstances, such as at times of burnt offerings and other sacrifices, and special occasions (Num. 10:1-10). These were to be blown by the sons of Aaron (Num. 10:8; 1 Chron. 15:24). In the nature of the case the trumpets, whether straight (silver) or curved (rams), would be monotonal and were not intended to accompany sung praise. Other instruments were introduced also (2 Chron. 7:6; 29:25-26) and these too were played by the Levites. They were not used for the accompaniment of Psalm-singing at the morning and evening sacrifices.
4. In the period of the Exodus and subsequently before settlement in the land of Canaan the centre of worship was the Tabernacle. It had no fixed place of residence until sometime after the conquest of Canaan. In Solomon's time it was replaced by the Temple. In both cases the specifications for the structures and their functions and services were specifically appointed and determined by the Lord, in great detail. There is no evidence that instrumental music was common in the Tabernacle when it was not fixed in one position. When the Levites were no longer required for moving the Tabernacle they were deployed to various duties, including 4,000 to praise the Lord with stringed instruments (1 Chron. 23:4-5; see also 1 Chron. 25 for further details). The arrangements latterly in the Tabernacle clearly carried over subsequently to the Temple worship. The following should be noted of the use of instrumental music in the Tabernacle and Temple:
 - 1) The instrumental music employed in the Tabernacle was divinely ordained and not just a whim of King David (or any of the priests or Levites) (1 Chron. 28:11-13, 19).
 - 2) When the Temple was built and the order of services instituted, it was also a matter of divine commandment (2 Chron. 29:24-26).
 - 3) Instrumental music would not have constituted an element in Temple worship without the express authority of God (2 Chron. 5:13-14; 8:14).

- 4) We read: *'when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded; and all this continued until the burnt offering was finished. And when they had made an end of offering, the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves, and worshipped. Moreover Hezekiah the king and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped'* (2 Chron. 29:27-30). The musical accompaniment lasted as long as the burnt offering, and so what we read in verses 29 and 30 in relation to sung praise was unaccompanied. We can understand therefore that all the elements associated with the offerings, including the instrumental music, were typical or symbolic.

There is no evidence for instrumental music accompanying praise outside the Tabernacle/Temple worship. And all the worship of the Tabernacle and Temple was necessarily in types, symbols and shadows, pointing forward to fulfilment in the later work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is clear from Hebrews. The priests simply *'serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things'* (8:5). The worship was *'a figure for the time then present'* (9:9). The sacrifices were limited and merely pointed forward to a once-for-all perfect sacrifice offered by Christ: *'For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? Because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins'* (10:1-4). What takes away sin? The sacrificial work of Jesus: *'But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God'* (10:12).

- 5) All this indicates that instrumental music, being appointed and ordained for the typical, symbolical and shadowy worship of the Old Testament, would also be an element, like the priesthood and the sacrifices, which would be fulfilled in the New Testament and therefore serve no further purpose.
- 6) Mention is often made of the content of Psalms such as Psalm 150 which make references to all sorts of musical instruments. These references may be understood, however, perfectly well in relation to the elements of the instrumental music which were typical or symbolical of their New Testament fulfilment. Thus, on the supposition that the use of musical instruments pointed forward to the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament era (principally), then such Psalms in fact become far clearer to the Christian church than they would have been even to the Old Testament church.

3. The New Testament position

1. We have spoken already of the passing of the Old Testament ceremonies, types, symbols and shadows with the work of Christ and pouring out of the Holy Spirit. It stands to reason — and is agreeable with Biblical revelation — that those things which anticipated the New Testament era must of necessity be abolished (Mt. 27:51). It also stands to reason, however, that there will be an element of continuity or at least evident replacement of elements of the Old Testament services. This applied, for example, to the sacraments, baptism replacing circumcision as a sign of the covenant (Mt. 28:19-20), and the Lord's Supper replacing the Passover (Mt. 26:17-30; 1 Cor. 11:23-34).
2. Thus, the positive sanction for the instruments in the Tabernacle or Temple does not carry over to the New Testament any more than the priesthood or sacrifices did. That is not to say that there will not be aspects of the Temple services which will have their analogy in New Testament worship. We have that, for example, with the singing of Psalms (Eph. 5:19;

Col. 3:16) and the offerings (2 Cor. 8). But it is the fruit of the lips that praises Him, not the sounds of instruments in His worship: *'By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name'* (Heb. 13:15).

3. The principal question is whether or not there is any direct and express warrant in the New Testament for the accompaniment of sung praise. If the Temple and its services must be recognised as fulfilled and therefore obsolete; and if the instrumental music was expressly appointed as a type or symbol of something fulfilled in the New Testament age, then it is unwarranted simply to adopt such instrumental music without having a clear warrant to do so from the Lord's Word in the newer Testament.
4. Whatever may have been the origins of the local Synagogues as meeting places for the worshippers under the older Testament, they were clearly consistent with the application of the 2nd and 4th commandments and the basic need of people to devote time on the weekly Sabbath to public praise, as exemplified by the Lord Himself (Lk. 4:16). There is every reason to believe that there were no instruments in the Synagogues. There appear to be the simple elements of prayer and praise and preaching. This much is suggested by the several instances in the gospel and Acts in which we have glimpses into the worship patterns within the Synagogues. It is clear from the Acts that Synagogues became the first centres for collective Christian congregational worship (Acts 17:10-12).
5. There is no question that the Old Testament with its elaborate system of ritual and sacrifices presented a more carnal, outward aspect of religion than what we find in the New Testament. It is clear that in the New Testament a veil was lifted (2 Cor. 3:14-15) and the worship was more simple, spiritual and experiential than visual. This is understandable, given the uniqueness of the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). Jesus Himself indicated this contrast in speaking to the woman at the well in Samaria: *'Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth'* (Jn. 4:21-24).
6. In a sense this answers an obvious question: If all the worship that was adopted in the Tabernacle/Temple was typical or figurative of a fulfilment in the New Testament era, what was it specifically of which the instrumental music was typical? We can understand all the sacrifices and the priesthood as being fulfilled in Christ and His work. This much seems very clear in the letter to the Hebrews. But what in the Old Testament points forward to the Holy Spirit's work, conjointly with Christ's? We read in Hebrews: *'For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?'* (Heb. 9:13-14). There seems good reason for affirming that it is precisely the instrumental music element of the Temple worship that pre-figured the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament era.

4. Conclusion

1. It must come as no surprise that churches of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, conscientiously seeking express commandment and appointment, directly and by good and necessary consequence from Scripture, generally came to the conviction that instrumental music was inappropriate and without divine warrant for New Testament worship. The adoption of instruments, mostly organs, but more recently a whole range of instruments and styles of music, derives for the greater part from the mid-to-late 19th century, certainly in Scotland. Typically legislation was passed of a permissive sort. Thereafter in local congregations its introduction and development depended largely upon mere supportive majorities. The Free Church of Scotland allowed instrumental music in 1883 though after

little or no discussion of the principle. The legislation that allowed instrumental accompaniment was repealed and repudiated by the post-1900 continuing Free Church between 1905 and 1910.

2. Initially the motive for the adoption of instrumental music lay in the desire to improve praise. The preference was for organs, the so-called 'queen of instruments'. However, as we have argued, Biblical warrant for such a thing is weak in the extreme. What is more, once it is admitted there is little prospect of restricting the types or numbers of instruments used. There are simply no Biblical criteria to say what instruments may — or may not — be adopted. It may be said to be retrogressive in worship in that the use of instrumental music radically shifts the focus of worship from the individual engaged in praise from his own heart and lips to the 'music' as that which drives it all along and may so readily become an element in itself as a 'performance' or merely producing ambient noise before, during or after services. This is not to excuse poor singing or carelessness about the leading of the unaccompanied praise. Nor does it involve accusations of heresy. But there is an argument for eschewing musical instruments in New Testament worship because of the evident lack of direct warrant and the concern there ought to be to avoid that which smacks of being essentially '*after the commandments and doctrines of men*' (Col. 2:22).

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