



## Musical Instruments in the Public Worship

How important are musical instruments for our public worship? Does Scripture mandate them? If not, are they forbidden or do we have the freedom to choose whatever instrument we wish to have in our worship service? These kinds of questions were raised in the Reformed Music in Worship Conference in Burlington on October 25, 2014. The conference was positively stimulating and got me thinking.

Now on one level it seems obvious that Scripture mandates that we have musical instruments in church. Do we not sing, for example, in Psalm 150 that we are to praise God with the sounding of the trumpet, the harp, the lyre, the tambourine, the flute, and with resounding cymbals? But, in the history of the church some have asked, is it that simple? Do such and similar passages in the Old Testament actually command the church today to include these instruments in public worship? The New Testament is virtually silent on the use of instruments in worship and on that basis there are churches, such as the Free Church of Scotland, which up until recently did not allow instruments in their church service on the Lord's Day. This exclusion of instruments is done according to the regulative principle of worship which, in John Calvin's words, means that *"God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by his Word."*<sup>1</sup> And so Calvin refused to allow musical instruments in worship since there was no direct command from God that these should be included in the New Testament church. The use of these instruments belonged to the Old Testament *"dispensation of shadows and figures."*<sup>2</sup> *"Musical instruments were among the legal ceremonies which Christ at his coming abolished; and therefore we, under the Gospel, must maintain a greater simplicity."*<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting and of benefit to listen to the arguments of Calvin and his spiritual heirs on this point before we consider our own use of musical instruments in our worship services.

### No musical instruments

To understand Calvin's opposition to musical instruments it is helpful to be aware of his interpretation of John 4:23-24.<sup>4</sup> In this passage the Lord Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that *"a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."* In his commentary on this passage, Calvin basically explains this passage to mean that in light of the fulfilment of the worship prescribed by the law, our worship should be unencumbered with outward ceremonies and crutches and be spiritual and therefore simple, focussing on the inward reality of worship. For Calvin that includes the exclusion of musical instruments from congregational worship. This is evident from his commentaries on the Psalms.

When Psalm 33:2 says: *"Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten stringed lyre,"* Calvin comments that such use of instruments was part of *"the puerile instruction of the law."* Of Roman Catholic usage of instruments he then writes: *"When they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law."* A little later he comments, with reference to 1 Corinthians 14:16 that *"the voice of man, although not understood by the generality, assuredly excels all inanimate instruments of music."* Elsewhere, in his comments on Psalm 92:4, Calvin acknowledges that music was *"useful as an elementary aid to the people of God in ancient times,"* but *"now that Christ has appeared, and the*

*Church has reached full age, it were only to bury the light of the Gospel, should we introduce the shadows of a departed generation."*

The result of Calvin's view was that the Reformed churches in The Netherlands banned the playing of the organ in the worship service. Its use in church was considered a Roman Catholic leaven that must be done away with since the organ functioned in their elaborate liturgy in which congregational singing was virtually absent.<sup>5</sup> Also in Scotland the usage of the organ in the worship service ceased.

It is interesting to note some of the rationale for the banning of the organ, beyond simply using the regulative principle of worship.<sup>6</sup> Of all the references to musical instruments in the Old Testament, the only ones that really matter in this discussion are those that specifically mention musical accompaniment in official worship. Such use of music was established by David when he organized the elaborate temple worship. What is noteworthy is that the Levitical musicians stood near the altar (2 Chron 5:12). Indeed, the sacrifice on the altar was the reason for the music. This is especially clear when Hezekiah restored temple worship. We read in the account that *"the Levites stood ready with David's instruments, and the priests with their trumpets. Hezekiah gave the order to sacrifice the burnt offering on the altar. As the offering began, singing to the LORD began also, accompanied by trumpets and the instruments of David king of Israel. The whole assembly bowed in worship, while the singers sang and the trumpeters played. All this continued until the sacrifice of the burnt offering was completed"* (2 Chron 29:26-28; cf. 23:18). Indeed, it has been said that all temple music *"was nothing but an accessory to its sacrificial ritual. Without sacrifice, the music loses its **raison d'être**."*<sup>7</sup> All this music-making is fittingly described as a *"ministry of prophesying"* (1 Chron 25:1). After all, the Old Testament sacrifices pointed to the coming of the fulfilment of the sacrificial ministry with the coming of Christ. Today, with the sacrificial service fulfilled, can we still insist on the music that accompanied this Old Testament shadow (Heb 8:5)? Those opposed to instrumental music in worship answer that we cannot. The music making has lost its reason for existence. We will be returning to this passage.

Coming to the New Testament, the silence with respect to instruments in worship is remarkable. Only in the book of Revelation do we find references to musical instruments. But opponents of instrumental music point out that it is difficult to draw conclusions from their usage in this book since much of the language is symbolic, modelled after Old Testament types. The heavenly scene in Revelation 5 is full of symbolism. The twenty-four elders dressed in white are probably symbolic of the Old Testament saints. The Old Testament symbolism continues with the incense being the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8). The twenty-four elders holding harps remind one of twenty-four orders of Levites, commissioned to sing and prophesy to the accompaniment of the harps and cymbals (1 Chron 24:7-18; 25). None of all this amounts to a directive much less a command for the church to have musical instruments. The same is the case with Revelation 15:1-4 where a prophecy of the victorious coming of God's kingdom is described in terms of Old Testament symbolism, including the sea of glass, the laver of Solomon's temple, the exodus out of Egypt, and also the harps.<sup>8</sup> Trumpets are also mentioned in Revelation; however, not in the context of worship but of important announcements and warning (Rev 8; cf. Exod 19:16-19).

Those who would see the New Testament direct us to use musical instruments in church sometimes claim support for their view by saying that Ephesians 5:19 shows that musical accompaniment took place in apostolic times. This passage literally reads: *"Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and psalming."* The Greek root of this last word (psalming) historically, in view of its origin, literally means to pluck or play the strings of an instrument. In the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament it means to sing with or without musical accompaniment. However, experts agree that in the New Testament the meaning of this verb is best understood without such accompaniment. For this reason it is not surprising that to my knowledge there is no official Bible translation of this passage that indicates musical accompaniment. The early church sang (1 Cor 14:26; Col 3:16), but there is no evidence that they had accompaniment with musical instruments. Indeed, the post-apostolic church sang a capella and also understood Ephesians 5:19 as such.<sup>9</sup>

The absence of any directive for the use of instrumental music in worship means that the New Testament stresses the human voice. The people of God are his new temple both individually and collectively (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19) and the music that fills the air is in the first place that of the most beautiful musical instrument possible, the human voice. The life of thankfulness is full of music and song, moulded by the Spirit (Col 3:16). Not surprisingly in view of the above, the early church did not use musical instruments in their worship and even today the Eastern or Greek Orthodox Church officially continues to have no musical instruments in worship.

In view of all this evidence, the question arises: Do we err by having an organ or other instruments in church?

## **Musical Instruments in Church**

With Calvin's opposition to musical instruments in church and above all without clear biblical precedent in the apostolic church, how did we end up with musical instruments in our worship services? In our own Dutch heritage, it appears that practical considerations played an important part in allowing the organ to function in the church service. It became increasingly difficult to keep the massive congregational singing on track without the help of the organ. As a result some churches such as those in Arnhem and Delft introduced organ playing in 1632 and 1634 respectively.<sup>10</sup> The result was a gravamen to the 1638 Provincial Synod of Delft requesting the synod to judge whether the playing of the organ during the worship service in the Reformed churches during the singing of the psalms was edifying. The synod judged that this is a middling matter and is therefore left in the freedom of each church whether to do it for 'edification.' Notice that this synod did not make this a matter of principle but of edification.<sup>11</sup> If in the judgment of a particular church the organ playing would result in better congregational singing then such usage of the organ should be permitted. Each church should judge for itself. The result was that gradually the use of the organ spread. By the eighteenth century the use of the organ in church services was generally accepted and by 1910 even the Reformed Church in Urk had an organ installed in spite of protests.<sup>12</sup>

Although there were strong protests as the transition was made to the use of the organ, sometimes by very prominent scholars such as Gisbertus Voetius, the change was made. Obviously Calvin's reasoning did not convince in the long run. Why was that? Probably because there is no clear command in Scripture one way or the other respecting musical accompaniment in the church service. The matter is thus best left up to the wisdom of the church in question. The regulative principle of worship goes too far by insisting that Scripture is clear on not permitting musical accompaniment in worship. We confess with respect to the second commandment that we are not to worship God *"in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word"* (HC, Q/A 96). There is no specific command regarding the use or non-use of musical instruments. We therefore need to understand the biblical principles of worship that hold true for all times and places and apply them to our situation. These principles are also found in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament teaches us that singing praises to God is pleasing to him. The Book of Psalms is an eloquent testimony to that. Furthermore, it can be shown that Psalms had musical accompaniment (e.g., Ps 4, 5). They functioned in worship and in the temple liturgy, as the association of Levites such as Asaph and the sons of Korah to the Psalms makes clear (Ps 42-49, 73-83). One example touched on earlier in this article shows that singing and musical accompaniment took place with the sacrifice of the whole burnt offering (2 Chron 29:27-30). This liturgy was according God's directives (2 Chron 29:25). Now all the sacrifices that took place were fulfilled in Christ (Heb 9-10). But there is no biblical evidence to suggest that the musical accompaniment was fulfilled in Christ and thus has no place in a church service. To the contrary. If Israel was grateful and excited about the forgiveness of sins as pictured in the sin offering that had taken place prior to the sacrifice of the whole burnt offering (2 Chron 29:21-24), should we not be all the more full of thankfulness since *the* sacrifice has been offered for all our sins? Indeed, we are now to offer ourselves *"as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God"* (Rom 12:1)! Just as in the Old Testament, singing is in order and if musical accompaniment can enhance the praise what

biblical justification is there to forbid this? It is noteworthy that the singing of the redeemed before God's throne is accompanied with harps (Rev 14:2).

Now it is understandable that Calvin, given the times in which he lived, reacted to Roman Catholic rituals and pomp by constructing a biblical liturgy from scratch as it were and not allowing musical accompaniment due to its abuse in the medieval church. But could he insist on it as a biblical principle for the church at all times and places? The evidence is wanting. And so a church is free to have an organ or whatever appropriate musical accompaniment is available if they so desire in order to enhance the singing.

But we can learn from Calvin and the following point is what I appreciate about his stance and those of his spiritual descendants. The singing is what counts. *The* musical instrument that *is* highlighted in the New Testament is the human voice. We must never forget that it is the only musical instrument created by God himself and we do well to honour him by using that instrument! The accompaniment by man-made tools can be very useful, but it must serve the sung praises of the congregation for they are what really matter. Think of passages such as: "*Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name*" (Heb 13:15) and "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God*" (Col 3:16). The stress in the Psalter is also on the voice and singing. The verb for singing pervades it. "*Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song*" (Ps 95:1-2).

There is a trend in our days toward what Dr. de Visser has called the "*musification of worship*."<sup>3</sup> This occurs when performances by musical instruments tend to dominate worship, for some at least, to make worship more appealing. This current evangelical trend we have to avoid. All music produced in church should be subservient to our worship and not be an end in itself. With respect to our song it should therefore support and enhance our praises and not interfere with them. Happily this was also a dominant focus and emphasis at the conference. It was good to have been there.

In the meantime let us do much singing and praising God. Not only in our worship in church but also in our homes. Singing psalms and hymns provides great blessings and is pleasing to the Lord. It is also a great preparation for being in the very presence of God himself in glory where the redeemed sing a new song before the throne (Rev 14:2)!

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### Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises* (Torrance edition, 1958) 1:128; also see The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 21.1. For a recent treatment, G.I. Williamson, "The Regulative Principle of Worship" in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Churches. June 20-27, 2001, Philadelphia, U.S.A.*, 213-234.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin in his *Commentary on the Psalms*, 3:98 (on Ps 71); see also 1:539 (on Ps 33:2).

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 1:263 (on Exodus 15:20).

<sup>4</sup> A point made by W. David O. Taylor, "John Calvin and Musical Instruments" *Calvin Theological Journal* 48 (2013) 251.

<sup>5</sup> See H. Hasper, *Calvijns beginsel voor de zang in de eredienst* (1976), 720.

<sup>6</sup> I have benefited for what follows from G.I. Williamson, "Instrumental Music: Commanded or Not?" *Blue Banner Faith and Life* 27 (1972) 60-67; also available at <http://www.westminsterconfession.org>. A classic work is John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (1888).

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<sup>7</sup> E. Werner, "Music," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), 3:459.

<sup>8</sup> See G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (1999) 323-324, 357, 789.

<sup>9</sup> H.G. Little, R. Scott, H.S. Jones, *A Greek English Lexicon* (with supplements to 1998), 2018, F.W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (2000) 1096; G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (1961) 1539; H.W. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (2002) 711-712.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Peter Grijp, Aggie Langedijk; et al, *Een muziekgeschiedenis der Nederlanden* (2001), 366-367.

<sup>11</sup> W.P.C. Knuttel, ed., *Acta der Particuliere Synoden van Zuid Holland 1621-1700* (6 vols.; 1908-1916) 2:175.

<sup>12</sup> Grijp, Langedijk et al, *Een muziekgeschiedenis*, 367; Joost Langeveld, "A Mighty Instrument (2)," *Reformed Music Journal* 9 (1997) 127.

<sup>13</sup> A. de Visser, "Church Music in Calvin's Tradition" (Part 3 of 3) *Clarion* 58 (2009) 622.