

Why We Sing Without Instruments by Stafford North

Purpose: To convince the audience that singing without instruments is the way God has asked us to worship so they will not favor using an instrument.

Introduction:

A. In Revelation 4, John pictures God's throne room. There God sits in dazzling brilliance on his throne in the center of everything. Four cherubim stand around the throne continuously crying out "Holy, holy, holy" is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come." Around them, twenty four elders on thrones join in the worship saying, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things." Then the angelic hosts join in the praise.

As God's people on earth, we can provide a similar chorus of praise to God as we gather each Lord's Day to worship. In fact, making this public declaration of God's greatness and of our faith in Him, is one of the most important things we do. Peter says all of us are part of a holy priesthood that we may "declare the praises" of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). Our assembly for worship, then, is a most solemn moment. Like those in heaven, we engage in declaring praise to the great God of the universe who made all things.

- B. The Bible is filled with stories of people who worshipped God—sometimes in ways that pleased him, and sometimes in ways that did not.
1. Abel pleased God but Cain did not.
 2. The people of Israel in the wilderness pleased God when they sang to the Lord, praising Him for their deliverance from Egypt, but he was displeased when they introduced a golden calf into the worship.
 3. God was pleased when Moses and Aaron and his sons did as the Lord commanded to dedicate the tabernacle with offerings, but he was displeased when two of Aaron's sons brought unauthorized fire to burn incense, adding fire from some other source than God had authorized.
 4. God was pleased when Samuel offered fellowship offerings before the Lord as Saul became king, but was displeased when Saul disobeyed, offering sacrifices himself when God had not authorized his tribe, Benjamin, to offer sacrifices.
 5. At the dedication of the temple of Solomon, the worship pleased God, but in Isaiah's time God said he was weary of their sacrifices because their hearts were not right before Him.
 6. King Hezekiah led in a restoration of the proper worship to God using the priests and Levites in their proper roles, but King Uzziah wanted to offer the incense himself even though he was of the tribe of Judah. Eighty priests warned him not to do so since God had said nothing about one from the tribe of Judah offering incense, but had specified those from Levi. Uzziah disrespected the silence of God about Judah,

however, and proceeded to offer the incense, and God struck him with leprosy for the rest of his life.

7. In the New Testament, the story continues. God was pleased when Christians in Jerusalem met to praise God on the release of Peter and John from prison. Paul, on the other hand, told the Corinthian church how to take the Lord's Supper, according to what he received from the Lord. But they added other things to what Paul had told them, and he said to do this would make them "guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" and "eating and drinking judgment on themselves."

- D. All these stories make two things very clear: (1) God wants His people to worship Him and (2) God wants His people to worship Him exactly as He has told them to do it.

Let us turn, then, to ask of scripture, "How Christians are to worship God with music?" What does the Bible teach us? Are we to sing? Are we to accompany this singing with instruments?

Subject Sentence: Here are four statements that will help us understand the God wants us to worship in song.

- I. The Early Church Sang but Did Not Use Instruments in Christian Worship.
 - A. Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 call on us to teach one another by the songs we sing. In 1 Corinthians 14, where Paul gives many instructions about Christian worship, he tells the Corinthians to sing with the spirit and with the mind (v. 15). We must understand and mean what we sing. Hebrews 13:15 tells us to offer God a sacrifice of praise by "the fruit of lips that confess his name." The early Christians, under the direction of divinely guided apostles, then, sang in their worship but did not use instruments. There is no place in scripture that either tells Christians to use instruments in their worship or tells of Christians who did. Instruments of music were part of the Jewish worship and part of the worship in pagan religions, but contrary to these, early Christians never used them.
 - B. J. W. McKinnon did a doctoral dissertation at Columbia University to determine when instruments were first introduced into Christian worship. The first occasion he could find was in the tenth century. So for nearly a thousand years, Christians did not use instruments in their worship, and they were not commonly used by any churches until the fourteenth century.
 - C. The very word used today to describe singing without instruments is the word "*a cappella*," a word which means to sing like they do in the church—voice only with no instruments.
 - D. If we are committed to the ideal of restoring the New Testament church, to following their teaching and example, then we will sing in our worship, but will not play instruments. This is a very important point. Those who use instruments in worship, even though they know the church did not use them in the first century or for a thousand years, will find it difficult to persuade others

to use the New Testament church as their model in other matters since they do not follow their model about unaccompanied singing.

- E. But, someone says, more people would come to our services if we had instruments. Some churches who have added them have grown and some have lost in number. Of course we want to bring people to Christ and need to do more to bring them. But leaving the plan of following the New Testament church to add to worship what they did not do, should not be the path on which we want to lead people.
- F. If we are going to worship as the early Christians did, we will sing to God and with each other, but we will not use instruments.

II. God Commands Us to Follow His Directions in Christian Worship.

- A. If we learn anything about worship from all the stories and verses about worship in the Bible, it is that God expects us to worship as He directs, and not according to our own desires. Whether we look at Cain, Nadab and Abihu, King Uzziah, or the church in Corinth, the message is the same. If you want to please Me with your worship, then worship as I have directed. God has never left men to worship Him according to their own plan. Worship must always be according to His plan. After all, if it is God we are trying to please with our worship, it makes sense to worship so we can be sure to please Him.
- B. But, sometimes people say, there is no scripture that says we cannot use the instrument. True, there is no scripture that uses exactly those words, but there are scriptures which teach that sentiment. In 1 Corinthians 11:23, for example, Paul condemns the Corinthians because they have added other things to what he told them to do in taking the Lord's Supper. He says, "I received of the Lord what I also passed on to you." In other words, I told you the Lord's instructions about what to do in worship, and you have sinned by adding other things to it." He says such changes will make them "guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord," and that they are eating and drinking judgment on themselves. They didn't say to Paul, "But, you didn't tell us not to do those things." But if they had, we can be sure his response would have been, "When I tell you what to do in worship, that excludes adding other things." And so it has been throughout the scriptures. When God has told people what to do in worship, He expects them to follow His instructions, and not worship Him in other ways.
- C. We recognize this principle in many other situations. A pharmacist does not fill a prescription for Zocor with Milk of Magnesia and tell his customer that the doctor didn't say not to use Milk of Magnesia. The architect prescribes concrete of a certain strength, and the builder does not mix it to a lesser strength and then, when it breaks, say "You didn't tell me not to make it of lesser strength." If a person invites you to dinner at six p.m., you don't come at 9 saying, "You didn't tell me not to come at 9."
- D. In the same way, when God specifies the use of vocal music in Christian worship, we can be sure we are pleasing him only if we limit ourselves to singing as He specified.

III. Many Religious Leaders Have Opposed Using Instruments in Christian Worship.

- A. The list of those opposing instruments is quite impressive. The information below is summarized from John Price, a Baptist preacher, in his 2005 book called *Old Light on New Worship*, pages 87-121. After his study of this question, his church removed all instruments from their worship.
1. The Catholic theologian of 1250, Thomas Aquinas, thought the use of instruments was a movement toward Judaizing, and so opposed it.
 2. Most of the leaders in the Reformation Movement opposed instruments, including John Wycliff, Jon Hus, Huldreich Zwingli, and John Calvin. Calvin said that to bring in such “childish elements” as musical instruments is “to bury the light of the Gospel” and to “introduce the shadows of a departed dispensation.”
 3. John Knox, who led in the founding of the Presbyterian Church, viewed “the New Testament as regulative for worship of the church,” and so opposed the use of instruments. Though Price does not mention it, John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, did not approve of their use, nor did Adam Clarke, famous Methodist commentator.
 4. Both English and American Puritans rejected instruments in worship. Their position was that the Old Testament worship with its outward ceremonies had been abolished, so the church must look to Christ and His apostles alone for ordinances of worship. They said that in the New Testament we find neither command nor example of any musical instrument in worship, and so have no warrant for their use.
 5. Matthew Henry, famous for his commentary, opposed the use of instruments because the New Testament passages on worship only mentioned singing.
 6. The great hymn writer, Isaac Watts, was opposed to the use of instruments, as was Charles Spurgeon, the most famous of Baptist preachers.
 7. And Price mentions many more.
 8. The Greek Orthodox Church still does not use instruments in its services.
 9. Primitive Baptist churches do not use instruments today and one of the strongest statements against them comes from Zack Guess, one of their elders.
- B. What men say is not as important as what the Bible says, but it is interesting to note that so many religious leaders from so many different religious groups have opposed the use of instruments. Such opposition makes two things clear: opposition to the use of instruments has been widespread, and the use of instruments in any church except the Catholic Church is of fairly recent origin.

- IV. We Can Be Sure that Singing is Acceptable in Christian Worship.
- A. Sometimes the question is asked, “Do you think the matter of using instruments in Christian worship is a salvation issue?” We know for sure that for some who brought unauthorized elements into worship of God, it was a salvation issue. Does anyone want to stand with Nadab and Abihu in the day of judgment? Or with Corinthians who, if they continued to go beyond what Paul said to do in worship, were eating and drinking judgment to themselves.
 - B. God does not assign to us, however, the task of passing final judgment on individuals. There is too much we don’t know. Just how God will judge every situation, He has not revealed. And that is just the point. No one can be certain that the use of instruments is *not* a salvation issue. While our place is not to judge, our place is to teach. So how will you teach someone to worship God in a way that you know will please Him? Would you tell them to offer animal sacrifices? Or burn incense? Or worship with a golden calf? Of course not. If you want to teach someone to worship God properly, you will guide that person to do exactly what God has specified for Christian worship. Why would you teach people to do something they could not be certain Pwas acceptable? We can teach people to sing and know it pleased God during the days of the apostles when they were under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Since they told us to sing we will sing, but since they did not tell us to play instruments, we will not play instruments.

Conclusion:

- A. There is much more to worship, of course, than just doing the authorized actions and avoiding unauthorized ones. We need to make our worship a true proclamation of God’s praise (1 Corinthians 11:26), a real expression of adoration for Him (Hebrews 13:15), a time when we communicate with Him the deep feelings and thoughts of our hearts (Ephesians 5:19), and a time for encouraging one another (1 Corinthians 14:26). We need to be studying more about how to make our worship more pleasing to God and more strengthening to each other. We will not improve our worship, however, by doing those things that God has not asked us to do for Him. We can improve it, however, by learning how to do more effectively those things God has told us to do.
- B. To summarize our lesson, we have seen that singing is based on the command of scriptures, while using instruments is not. Singing is in harmony with the principle of restoring the church of the New Testament, while instruments are not. Many church leaders over the centuries agree that singing is following God’s command, while using mechanical instruments is not. Singing is safe, while we can have no such assurance about instruments. Many have observed, in addition, that more in a congregation engage in the singing when it is without instruments. In some cases the instruments overpower the singing so that it cannot be heard at all. Surely this is not the way to admonish one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.
- C. Once two men were in a public debate about the use of instruments. The one favoring instruments was an excellent pianist. The one opposing instruments said to him, “There is a piano on the stage here. Would you play Amazing

Grace for us.” So the man did. When he finished, the opponent of instruments said to him, “Why didn’t you sing.” To which the one favoring instruments said, “You didn’t ask.” The other man replied, “I rest my case. We don’t use instruments in the worship because God didn’t ask.”

- D. Let’s just worship in song as the scripture specifies and leave off the instruments which it does not specify. Surely it is better to follow the path we can be sure is God’s way.