

TEN REASONS

WHY WE SING THE
PSALMS EXCLUSIVELY

&

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WHY WE DO NOT USE
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
IN WORSHIP

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The sins forbidden in the second commandment are, all devising, counselling, commanding, using, and any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God Himself... corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretence whatsoever...

Westminster Larger Catechism (109)

TEN REASONS WHY WE SING THE PSALMS EXCLUSIVELY

1

It is commanded of God that we sing the Psalms. It is divinely commanded in the inspired words of the apostle Paul: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in **psalms** and **hymns** and **spiritual songs**, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col 3:16 cf. Eph 5:19).

We believe that Paul is referring to the Spirit-inspired Psalms not only because there were no 18th century hymns or 20th century songs during those days, but because the original readers of the letter would, no doubt, understand that Paul is referring to the Psalms since the three terms occur repeatedly in the titles of

the Greek translation (Septuagint) of the Psalms which the apostles preached from.

In sixty-seven of the titles, the word “psalm” occurs; in six, the word “hymn” is used; while in thirty-five, “song” appears. But even more conclusively, the Septuagint of Psalm 67 and 76 use all three terms in their title! The title of Psalm 67 reads “*Εἰς τὸ τέλος, ἐν ὕμνοις· ψαλμὸς ᾠδῆς*”. It may be translated literally, “Unto the end, in hymns, a psalm and a song.” The title of Psalm 76 likewise reads: “*Εἰς τὸ τέλος, ἐν ὕμνοις· ψαλμὸς τῷ Ἀσαφ, ᾠδὴ πρὸς τὸν Ἀσσύριον*.” Literally translated it reads: “Unto the end, in hymns, a psalm for Asaph; a song for the Assyrian”. Even without a knowledge of Greek, it is not difficult to see that the three terms are the same used by the apostle Paul in Colossians 3:16 (“*ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς*”; cf. Eph 5:19). The different endings of the words reflect the different cases in which they are used.

Paul adds that these psalms, hymns and songs are “spiritual” (*πνευματικαῖς*) simply because they are Spirit-inspired or Spirit-given (e.g. Rom 1:11). It is clear that Paul is commanding the singing of inspired Psalms.

2

We are not commanded to sing anything else in worship except the Psalms. While it may be argued that in Old Testament days, before the Psalter was finalised, some other (inspired) songs might have been used, we have neither command nor indication that God’s people should continue to sing them.

While it may be argued that in Revelation some of the songs sung are not from the Psalms, there is neither command nor indication that God intends for the Church to sing those songs in worship. By contrast, apart from Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19, we have a couple more instructions to sing the

Psalms. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, Paul says: “When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying”.

We do not believe that by “psalm” Paul means anything other than the Psalms of David, for those are the only songs that the congregation could sing together with whoever is moved to present it. Paul could easily have used “hymn” or “songs” if he meant any other kinds of songs. If, supposing, Paul is not referring to the Psalms, then he must be referring to directly inspired songs being sung solo! This is still a far cry from the uninspired songs that those who would not sing the Psalms are arguing for.

Similarly, we have no reason to think that James could be referring to anything other than the Psalms of David when he says: “Is any among you afflicted?

let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms” (Jas 5:13).

3

The Lord Jesus and His disciples sang the Psalms, no doubt, exclusively. Almost every commentator will agree that the “hymns” that the Lord Jesus sang with His disciples at the Last Supper (see Mt 26:30; Mar 14:26) was from the part of the Psalter which the Jews call the Egyptian Hallel (Ps 113–118).

Adam Clarke, not a psalm-singer, says in his commentary on Matthew 26:30: “As to the hymn itself, we know, from the universal consent of Jewish antiquity, that it was composed of Psalm 113 ...[to] 118.”

The Dispensational Bible Knowledge Commentary remarks on Mark 14:26 that “The Hallel (praise) Psalms were sung or chanted antiphonally in connection with the Passover—the first two (Pss 113–114)

before the meal, the remaining four (Pss 115–118) after it to conclude the evening observance. Such verses as Ps 118:6–7, Ps 118:17–18, Ps 118:22–24 gain added significance on Jesus’ lips just before His suffering and death”.

4

We have no assurance that God is pleased to receive uninspired songs in worship. Speaking to the Samaritan woman, the Lord Jesus says: “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 4:23–24). The word “must” (δεῖ) means “it is necessary”. It must not be interpreted as “it is better” or “it is preferable.” And we have no doubt that the Lord is not talking about sincerity of worship, but about worship in and through the Holy Spirit and

worship according to God's objective truth as it is in Jesus. At the very least, worship must be according to the manner that God has appointed, for He says in the context of worship: "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it" (Dt 12:32) and the apostle John says: "He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 Jn 2:4). Moreover, since the Lord Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (Jn 14:6), we know that worship in accordance to God's truth is worship through Christ. Only by singing the Psalms with joy and understanding can we have any assurance that our worship is in Spirit and in truth.

5

The Book of Psalms is the only divine collection of inspired songs available to us. There are other inspired

songs in the Scripture, but they are neither collected in an inspired hymn book as the Psalms are, nor presented in such a way as to make it clear that they are intended for the church to sing rather than to read. We think of the song of Moses in Exodus 15:1–19. This is obviously intended to be read as part of the Exodus account rather than sung at worship services. The same is true of the prayer of Habakkuk (Hab 3:1–19). If it were intended for God’s people to sing congregationally today, shouldn’t it be collected together with the Psalms?

As for New Testament songs, we do not think there are any recorded in the Gospels or the epistles. That a paragraph appears to be poetic (e.g. Phil 2:5–11; 1 Tim 3:16) does not imply that it is a song. The so-called songs recorded in the Gospels are not really songs since they were “said” (ἔπρω, Lk 1:46; λέγω, Lk 1:67, 2:13) rather than sung. There is no indication in Scripture that Mary or Zacharias burst out singing

Bollywood style. As for the songs recorded in Revelation, there is no indication that they are appointed for the church on earth to sing. Revelation 5:9–14 is sung by the beasts and the elders (see v. 8, 11)! Revelation 14:3 cannot be learned by anyone except the 144,000! The Song of Moses and of the Lamb (Rev 15:3–4) is sung by glorified saints with the accompaniment of harps! Besides, the content of this song is found everywhere in the Psalms (eg. Psalm 85; 99; 100; 145; etc.).

6

There is no warrant in Scripture for the church to write uninspired songs. All the songs indicated as “new songs” in the Scriptures are inspired songs. And besides, the call to “sing a new song” (cf. Pss 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1, etc.) does not imply a command to write a new song, for invariably, the content of the “new song” to be sung is given in the following verses!

The same is true of the records of singing “new songs” in Revelation (Rev 5:9; 14:3). It is doubtful that the Holy Spirit intends for us to understand the “new” in “new songs” as expressing the newness of their composition. Rather the “new” is to be understood in terms of the newness of the situation depicted or the newness of the new order in the case of Revelation. New Testament believers singing the Psalms that are self-introduced as new songs must sing them with renewed gratitude that they are enjoying the blessing indicated in the Psalm with a clarity that is confirmed in a “new and living way” (Heb 10:20) in Christ.

7

The Psalms are intensely and pervasively Christological. Although we do not sing the name of Jesus in the Psalms, we believe that every Psalm is about Christ. We believe this is the case for five reasons:

(1) There are Psalms that are clearly Messianic due to their content and their use in the New Testament and are therefore recognised as such by most commentators. We think of Psalms 2, 16, 22, 45, 72, 110, 118.

(2) There are Psalms which do not appear to be Messianic but are taken to be so in the New Testament. We think of Psalm 8 (cf. v. 4–5 with Heb 2:5–9), Psalm 19 (cf. v. 4 with Rom 10:17–18) and Psalm 102 (cf. vv. 25–28 with Heb 1:10–12).

(3) There are Psalms, which were clearly written upon particular occasions in David's life, which are also clearly Messianic. Think of Psalm 18 (see title; cf. v. 49 with Rom 15:8–9); or Psalm 41 (cf. v. 9 with Jn 13:18).

(4) The Imprecatory Psalms are also Messianic. We think of Psalm 69 which is one of the most quoted Psalms in the New Testament (cf. v. 4 with Jn 15:25; v. 9 with Jn 2:17, Rom 15:3, Col 3:16; v. 21 with Mt 27:34; vv. 23–25 with Mt 27:34).

(5) Even the Penitential Psalms can be interpreted Messianically. We think of Psalm 40 (cf. vv. 6–8 with Heb 10:5–7) and Psalm 69 which are clearly appealed to as Christological in the New Testament. In these Psalms are penitential statements such as: “For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me” (Ps 40:12); and “O God, thou knowest my foolishness; and my sins are not hid from thee” (Ps 69:5). Surely it is unreasonable to say that these could not be taken as the words of Christ in the first person when the New Testament appears to take the whole Psalm as Christological. If these two Psalms are Christological, then those two statements and a host of others may be owned by Christ. If that is the case, what is there to stop us from believing that Christ could take Psalm 51 upon Himself seeing that He has taken our curse upon Himself?

The Psalms are the only songs regarding which we can have confidence that Christ will sing with us as our Worshipper-in-Chief. Although Christ has ascended to heaven, it is clear from Hebrews 2:12 that we are to think of our worship as being led and mediated by Christ. He says: “I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee” (Heb 2:12; cf. Psalm 22:22).

It is only when we think of Christ worshipping with us and leading us in worship that we can make sense of Psalms such as Psalm 24 where we are given to sing: “Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully” (Ps 24:3–4). Who but Christ has clean hands and a pure heart? Who but Christ is qualified to bring us through the

gates of heaven whether in worship or in person on the day of our glory? (see Ps 24:7–10; Eph 2:6, 4:8, etc.). It is no wonder then that many of the Psalms have Christ speaking or singing in the first person (e.g. Pss 22, 69, 102, etc.). Indeed a case may be made that in most of the Psalms the first person singular pronoun is most meaningfully understood as Christ rather than as David or as whoever sings the Psalm (think of Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, etc.). This is in sharp contrast with almost all the uninspired songs that have been written for Christian worship. None of them has Christ in the first person! Why? No doubt, because they are written with a very different idea in regard to worship that totally misses the mediatorial role of Christ.

9

The Psalms are the only truly ecumenical worship songs across space and time. They are the only songs

that both the Old and New Covenant Saints might sing. If we believe in the unity of the Old and New Covenants and that they are different administrations of the Covenant of Grace, then we would surely want to sing what our fathers in the faith also sang. Yet we sing them with a more complete knowledge that was lacking in the hearts of our fathers in the faith, since God has “provided some better things for us, that they without us should not be made perfect” (Heb 11:40).

Furthermore, the Psalms are the only songs that all Christian denominations and cultures should be able to sing without quarrel, for they are, after all, songs appointed by Christ our King for us to use in worship. The Psalms then, are meant to promote true Christian unity, even a unity that Christ prayed for (Jn 17:22). Uninspired songs on the other hand have through the ages, from Gnostic times to the present

shallow evangelicalism, been used to promote denominational distinctives including heretical ones. If the Church of Christ were to be truly united in Christ, we must begin to sing the Psalms exclusively.

10

The Psalter is the only hymnbook that does not contain theological errors or is imbalanced in any direction. As mentioned, uninspired hymnody has been the vehicle to promote errors. A few examples which are typically found in modern hymn books suffice.

Think of how the all-time favourite, *Love Divine* by Charles Wesley, has been used to promote a form of Wesleyan perfectionism by teaching us to expect to be “perfectly restored” before we take our place in heaven. Another favourite, *And Can It Be That I Should Gain*, teaches the Arminian doctrine of universal atonement and promotes a form of kenosis theory in which Christ during His incarnation had none

of His divine attributes but love. Could this be why John Wesley insisted that “one who was sanctified by the blood of Christ may nevertheless go to hell” (Works 10.297)? If Christ did not die as the God-Man, it follows that His atonement would be inefficacious.

Or consider the “Reformation Sunday” favourite: *Faith of our Fathers* by Frederick W. Faber. The shocking fact is that Frederick Faber was a Protestant who apostatised to Roman Catholicism. And not only that, but he made it his life’s mission to write hymns that promote the history and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. *Faith of our Fathers* was written after his apostasy. He wrote it to remind his fellow Roman Catholics of their leaders who were martyred during the reign of King Henry VIII in the early days of the establishment of the Anglican Church in England. It was always Faber’s hope that someday England would be brought back to the papal fold. This

hymn first appeared in 1849 in the author's collection, *Jesus and Mary; or Catholic Hymns*. One of the original stanzas from the hymn which is omitted in Protestant hymnals reads:

Faith of our fathers! Mary's prayers

Shall win our country

back to thee;

And through the truth that

comes from God,

England shall then indeed be free.

Faith of our fathers, holy faith!

We would be true to

thee till death.

How ironic that Protestants should sing this hymn, and to sing it on "Reformation Sunday"! It is no wonder that Protestants are no longer protesting. If we can use the words of an apostate in the worship of God, there is no more reason for protesting.

What a different effect the faithful and joyful singing of the Psalms should produce in the church? For the Psalms alone reveal the heart and mind of Christ without the filter of fallible human agents. The Psalms alone promotes Christ-likeness and the unity that comes with it (Phil 2:2). The Psalms alone are balanced and infallible.

In Summary

There are perhaps a few more reasons why we sing the Psalms exclusively in worship, but here are ten reasons in brief: (1) It is commanded of God that we sing the Psalms; (2) We are not commanded to sing anything else in worship except the Psalms; (3) The Lord Jesus and His disciples sang the Psalms, no doubt, exclusively; (4) We have no assurance that God is pleased to receive uninspired songs in worship; (5) The Book of Psalms is the only divine collection of inspired songs available to us; (6) There is no warrant in

Scripture for the church to write uninspired songs; (7) The Psalms are intensely and pervasively Christological; (8) The Psalms are the only songs regarding which we can have confidence that Christ will sing with us as our Worshipper-in-Chief; (9) The Psalms are the only truly ecumenical worship songs across space and time; and (10) The Psalter is the only hymnbook that does not contain theological errors or is imbalanced in any direction.

When we consider all these, we cannot help but agree with John Calvin that "...that which St. Augustine has said is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God except that which he has received from him. Therefore, when we have looked thoroughly, and searched here and there, we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through Him". This is the chief reason why we do not sing uninspired songs in worship. The Psalter is more than

sufficient. Let us continue to sing the Psalms exclusively in worship and pray that many other churches may begin to do so. But let us also pray that we and our children may more and more understand and love what we sing for the glory of Christ our King. Amen.

[T]he acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

Westminster Confession of Faith 21.1

TEN REASONS WHY WE DO NOT USE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN WORSHIP

1

Scripture suggests that New Testament praise should be solely with the voice. The Apostle Paul urges us to “[speak] to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph 5:19). The Greek word for “making melody” is *psallô* (ψάλλω), which literally means “to pluck the string of an instrument”. Thus, Paul is saying “pluck the strings of your hearts to make music”. Your heart, in other words, should be the musical instrument. This is probably also the reason why the apostle to the Hebrews tells us to “offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” (Heb 13:15). We are no longer to

offer animal sacrifices nor instrumental music to the Lord today.

2

During Old Testament times, musical instruments were generally used in conjunction with sacrifices. The LORD instructed through Moses: “Ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings” (Num 10:10). So, at the time of King Hezekiah, we read of how 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” (2 Chr 29:27). “All this continued”, we are told, “*until* the burnt offering was finished” (2 Chr 29:28)! When the offering was completed, then “the king and all that were present with him bowed themselves and worshipped” (2 Chr 29:30), and the Levites “sang praises

with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped” (2 Chr 29:29). It is hard to interpret the text as saying anything else other than that when the sacrifices were completed, then the worship and singing were not accompanied by instruments. It is for this reason that musical instruments were not used in Jewish synagogues until modern times, for sacrifices were only carried out in the temple!¹ Indeed, Orthodox Jewish synagogues still do not use instruments today as they still testify that this “serves to distinguish the synagogue from the Temple.”²

3

Since Christian worship was patterned after synagogue worship rather than temple worship, the early church did not use musical instruments. Musical instruments, moreover, were regarded as part of Old Testament typical liturgy, having no place in the New Testament Church since Christ has fulfilled the types.

The early church father, Clement of Alexandria (150-215 A.D.) says in his book, *The Instructor*:

*The one instrument of peace, the Word alone by which we honour God, is what we employ. We no longer employ the ancient psaltery, and trumpet, and timbrel, and flute.*³

John Chrysostom (348–407 A.D.) who lived about 350 years after Christ said:

*In ancient times, they were led by these [musical] instruments owing to the dullness of their thinking and their recent conversion from idols. So, just as he permitted them sacrifice, in like manner he also let them have these things, out of considerateness for their limitations (Comm. on Ps 149:3).*⁴

And he adds:

As he [the Psalmist] urges the Jews to praise God with all the instruments, so he urges us to do so

with all our bodily parts—eyes, tongues, hearing, hand. As Paul likewise indicated as well in the words, ‘Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, your reasonable worship’ (Comm. on Ps 150:3ff; cf. Comm. on Ps 144:9).⁵

A generation later, Theodoret of Cyrrihus (393–460 A.D.), apparently wrote a catechism answer that states:

Plain singing is not childish, but only the singing with lifeless organs, with dancing, and cymbals, &c. Whence the use of such instruments, and other things fit for children, is laid aside and plain singing only retained.⁶

4

The Eastern Orthodox Church, despite assimilating many unbiblical traditions such as the veneration of icons, has resisted, from apostolic times, the introduction of musical instruments into their worship.⁷

The Western (Roman Catholic) Church was also slow to adopt musical instruments into worship, no doubt, because of the almost unanimous rejection of them by the early church fathers.

It is not entirely clear exactly when musical instruments entered into Church worship. It appears that in the 7th century, the Roman Catholic Pope Vitalian (657-672 A.D.) introduced organ accompaniment to Latin singing.⁸ But Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.), who was the most respected Medieval theologian, suggests that even in the 13th century, musical instruments were not in popular use in the Church. He says:

The Church does not make use of musical instruments such as harps and psalteries, in the divine praises, for fear of seeming to imitate the Jews. [And] as the Philosopher says... "Teaching should

not be accompanied with a flute or any artificial instrument such as the harp or anything else of this kind: but only with such things as make good hearers.” For such like musical instruments move the soul to pleasure rather than create a good disposition within it. In the Old Testament instruments of this description were employed, both because the people were more coarse and carnal—so that they needed to be aroused by such instruments as also by earthly promises—and because these material instruments were figures of something else.⁹

6

The Reformers who led the Church out of Romish bondage in the 16th century Protestant Reformation sought to return her worship to its apostolic purity. While Luther’s attitude towards musical instruments

in worship has been debated by scholars,¹⁰ John Calvin (1509-1564) was definitely adamant against their use. He remarks:

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 other shadows of the law. The Papist, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things from the Jews (Comm. on Psalm 33).

This rejection of musical instruments in worship persisted for more than three centuries in the Protestant Church! Even John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of the Methodist movement apparently stated: "I have no objection to the instruments of music in our chapels, providing they are neither Heard nor Seen."¹¹

Adam Clarke (1760-1832) the great Methodist commentator who followed in his footsteps continued to object to the use of musical instruments in worship. He declares:

But were it even evident, which it is not, either from this or any other place in the sacred writings, that instruments of music were prescribed by Divine authority under the law, could this be adduced with any semblance of reason, that they ought to be used in Christian worship? No: the whole spirit, soul, and genius of the Christian religion are against this: and those who know the Church of God best, and what constitutes its genuine spiritual state, know that these things have been introduced as a substitute for the life and power of religion; and that where they prevail most, there is least of the power of Christianity. Away with such portentous baubles from the wor-

*ship of that infinite Spirit who requires his followers to worship him in spirit and in truth, for to no such worship are those instruments friendly.*¹²

Likewise, the great Baptist Preacher, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) makes his position clear by saying:

*What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettinesses of a quartette, the refined niceties of a choir, or the blowing off of wind from inanimate bellows and pipes! We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it.*¹³

Need we quote the Puritans and the Reformed Presbyterians who have continued to reject the use of instruments in worship even today?

Though the Scriptures do not directly condemn the use of musical instrument in worship today, its use is not appointed and therefore forbidden. This is the point that was probably missed by the Lutheran, Methodist and Baptist ministers cited above, which eventually led the churches they represented to open the door to musical instruments. After all, their objection appears to be mainly that instruments were not used since the time of the apostles and that the use of instruments seems to go against the spirit of Christian worship.

But these arguments quickly lose their efficacy as new generation leaders begin to rebuff the earlier assertions: "But the New Testament does not forbid their use; and they help the congregation to sing and do generate pious feelings amongst worshippers which surely glorify God!" So we quoted these ministers only to show that the almost unanimous use of

musical instruments in Christian worship is really a recent phenomenon.

But the more foundational reason why we do not use them is because the Scripture teaches us that God must be worshipped only in the way that He has appointed. This is known as the Reformed *Regulative Principle of Worship*. This doctrine is taught both in the Old and New Testaments. For example, Deuteronomy 12:31-32 reads,

Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.

The LORD is telling His people not to imitate the ways of the pagans. The pagans in ancient days

thought that they could win their gods' favour by sacrificing their children. But the LORD would not have His people do anything more or anything less than what He requires of them in His worship. We are not to take initiative to try to show how devoted we are to Him! We are to worship Him in the way that He has appointed. Or to put it in another way, all the elements of worship must be appointed by Him. If they are not, we must not use them.

Sincerity is not a sufficient ground for deciding what we may or may not do in worship. Cain was the first to be taught this principle when his sincere offering of the fruit of the ground was rejected by the LORD. The same principle is reiterated in the New Testament, for the LORD Himself says: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24). To worship God in truth is essentially to worship Him according to His appointment. To worship Him instead according to what we

feel to be good is to engage in “will worship” (Col 2:23).

Thus the apostle to the Hebrews declares: “let us have grace, whereby we may serve [i.e. worship] God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28-29; cf. Dt 4:23-24). And in case, we should think that God no longer expects us to worship acceptably according to His appointment, the apostle adds shortly, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever” (Heb 13:8).

Although the mode of worship has changed, what was true by way of principles in the Old Testament remains true in the New Testament. God’s attitude towards His own worship has not changed. The acceptable mode of worship remains the mode that God has appointed. So, in New Testament worship, we should only have Scripture-reading, prayer, benediction, preaching, psalm-singing, baptism, the

Lord's Supper, and covenant-taking. But the use of instruments is not appointed (unlike in the case of the Old Testament), and therefore it is forbidden.

If we would even honour human kings by greeting them according to their customs, why would we insist on honouring God by worshipping Him according to our own ways and customs, especially when He has specifically warned us against doing so? Thus, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 21, Paragraph 1b declares:

...the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

Old Testament songs (which we still sing today), apparently recommend the use of musical instruments in worship, but do not, in fact, do so.

Think of Psalm 150. Examined carefully, one will see that it is teaching us what our attitude should be in worship, rather than what instruments we should use in worship. One clear indication is in verse 4,—“Praise him with the timbrel and dance...” Never was the timbrel (or tambourine) and dance used in the temple even when the sacrifices were conducted! It is possible that the psalmist is describing how we should praise God in our day-to-day life rather than in the temple, for the timbre and dance were indeed used by the people in informal situations of rejoicing (Ex 15:20, Jdg 11:34). But it appears more likely that the reference to the musical instruments and dance is metaphorical rather than literal, especially since the

last verse reads: “Let everything that hath breath praise the LORD” (Ps 150:6). How do animals praise the LORD? Surely the Psalmist must be talking about the zeal and happiness that must accompany worship whether formal or informal.

We must notice how often the Psalmist speaks in metaphorical terms involving musical instruments when he speaks of worship. Look, for example, at Psalm 108:2, which reads, “Awake, psaltery and harp: I *myself* will awake early” (italics as original). In the first place, surely we know that David could not be speaking to the string instruments and telling them to awake from their slumber to start playing! In the second place, notice that the word “myself” is inserted by our translators. Surely this verse is about exciting our musical disposition to praise the LORD,—making melody with our heart. Indeed, it is instructive to note that Paul is probably paraphrasing Psalm 108:1 when

he calls upon the Church to sing and make melody in our heart (cf. Eph 5:19 and LXX of Ps 108:1).

9

The argument that musical instruments may be regarded as part of the circumstance of worship rather than a worship ordinance and therefore not forbidden by the Regulative Principle of Worship is flawed.

Those who make this argument may claim, for example, that just as a printed Psalter provides visual aid, we could use musical instruments to provide audio aids for singing. This is the argument of some Reformed Churches which continue to use musical instruments. However, it is flawed on three counts:

First, the specific way in which musical instruments were spoken of in the Old Testament, including what instruments may or may not be used in worship and when they may be used, suggest that in God's

mind, musical instruments are not mere circumstances. The Church Fathers and the Reformers would not have been so vehement against their use if they thought that Scripture is neutral about their use.

Secondly, if musical instruments are truly audio aids to singing, then they should not be used when there is no singing, such as when the Lord's Supper is served. But how many churches would really abide by that restriction once the camel's nose is in the tent?

Thirdly, those who root for musical instruments as accompaniment for singing will usually allow only a piano or an organ. But they really have no objective argument to prevent the introduction of violins, trumpets or electric guitars and drum sets. Churches which use these kinds of instruments or use an entire orchestra do not generally start with these. They always start with the 'conservative' piano or organ.

Despite claims to the contrary by modern Presbyterians, the Westminster Assembly was not indifferent to the use of musical instruments in worship. It is true that there is no direct reference to musical instruments in the standards. However, this omission must not be overhyped.

In the first place, although there is no explicit reference to the prohibition, it is clear that the Assembly would never have condoned the use of instruments in worship. The clear instruction on the Regulative Principle of Worship in the Standards testifies of that. “What is forbidden in the Second Commandment?” asks the 51st question of the Shorter Catechism. The answer is as succinct as it is unambiguous, “The Second Commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, *or any other way not appointed in His Word.*”

In the second place, there is a perfectly understandable reason why the divines omitted any mention of the prohibition. The reason is that by the time that the Assembly met, the English parliament had already taken authoritative steps to eradicate the remnant of popery, including the organs from the churches of England. This fact is explicitly noted in a letter which commissioners from Scotland sent back to their General Assembly on 20 May 1644. Among other things, they noted that “the great organs at Paul’s and Peter’s in Westminster” had been “taken down”.¹⁴ So thorough was this purgation that the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* concludes that “at the Revolution, most of the organs in England had been destroyed”.¹⁵

Thus, when the Assembly addressed itself on the subject of worship, it was in the context of an ecclesiastical scene which had almost universally accepted

the singing of psalms without musical accompaniment, and therefore none of the members apparently thought it necessary even to raise the subject. The total lack of debate on the issue at the assembly bears eloquent testimony of this notion.

In Summary

Here then are ten reasons, amongst others, why we believe that the Church should not use musical instruments in worship. We offer these not because we believe that so long as we sing the psalms without musical accompaniment, our worship will be pleasing to the Lord. We offer them because the Lord Jesus declares: “the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (Jn 4:23). We believe that the Father is pleased to receive worship that is in accordance to His appointment when we do so in wholehearted sincerity. Or to put it in another way, we believe that sincere

worship does not automatically make worship acceptable, especially when it is according to the traditions and doctrines of man, for the Lord Himself asserts: “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt 15:9).

So contentious is this subject, that we deem it fit not to conclude as we usually do, with a reiteration of the arguments proffered, but rather with a series of queries raised by the Methodist commentator Adam Clarke, who despite being not a Reformed Commentator, and being unsound in many areas, saw clearly how important it is for the Church to return to the old paths in this aspect of worship:

Query, Did God ever ordain instruments of music to be used in his worship? Can they be used in Christian assemblies according to the spirit of Christianity? Has Jesus Christ, or his apostles, ever commanded or sanctioned the use of them? Were

they ever used anywhere in the apostolic Church? Does the use of them at present, in Christian congregations, ever increase the spirit of devotion? Does it ever appear that bands of musicians, either in their collective or individual capacity, are more spiritual, or as spiritual, as the other parts of the Church of Christ? Is there less pride, self-will, stubbornness, insubordination, lightness, and frivolity, among such persons, than among the other professors of Christianity found in the same religious society? Is it ever remarked or known that musicians in the house of God have attained to any depth of piety, or superior soundness of understanding, in the things of God? Is it ever found that those Churches and Christian societies which have and use instruments of music in Divine worship are more holy, or as holy, as those societies which do not use them? And is it always found that the ministers which affect and recommend them to be used

in the worship of Almighty God, are the most spiritual men, and the most spiritual and useful preachers? Can mere sounds, no matter how melodious, where no word nor sentiment is or can be uttered, be considered as giving praise to God? Is it possible that pipes or strings of any kind can give God praise? Can God be pleased with sounds which are emitted by no sentient being, and have in themselves no meaning? If these questions cannot be answered in the affirmative: then, query, Is not the introduction of such instruments into the worship of God antichristian, and calculated to debase and ultimately ruin the spirit and influence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? And should not all who wish well to the spread and establishment of pure and undefiled religion, lift up their hand, their influence, and their voice against them?¹⁶

¹ “Qorbanot are not offered today because there is no Temple” (<http://www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.htm>; last assessed 4 Dec 2017).

² Arthur Gilbert & Oscar Tarcov, *Your Neighbor Celebrates* (New York: Friendly House Publishers, 1957), 93.

³ *Ante-Nicean Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, 2.05.11.

⁴ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, translated by Robert Charles Hill (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 2.377-8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.382, cf. *ibid.*, 2.328.

⁶ *Quaestiones et responsiones ad orthodoxos*, 107; cited as wrongly attributed to Justin Martyr in Brian Schwertley, *Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God* (Reformed Witness, 1999), 87.

⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 4:439. See also *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Eastern Orthodox worship”; last accessed on 4 Dec 2017.

⁸ James Hasting, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 9, s.v. ‘Music (Christian)’. The same article also notes, however, that “Organs seem to have been in common use in the Spanish churches in a.d. 450, according to Julianus, a Spanish bishop.”

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2.2.91.2; *italics mine*.

¹⁰ Luther had apparently called the organ “an ensign of Baal” (John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* [Harper & Brothers, 1883], vol. 6, 762); but this assertion has been disputed as it seems contrary to much of Luther’s published comments on musical instrumentation.

¹¹ Cited by Adam Clarke in his commentary on Amos 6:5—“Music, as a science, I esteem and admire: but instruments of music in the house of God I abominate and abhor. This is the abuse of music; and

here I register my protest against all such corruptions in the worship of the Author of Christianity. The late venerable and most eminent divine, the Reverend John Wesley, who was a lover of music, and an elegant poet, when asked his opinion of instruments of music being introduced into the chapels of the Methodists said, in his terse and powerful manner, ‘I have no objection to instruments of music in our chapels, provided they are neither Heard nor Seen.’”

¹² Adam Clarke, Comm. on 2 Chr 29:25

¹³ Charles Spurgeon, comm. on Ps 42:4 [In *Treasury of David*]. See also his comments on Ps 33:2, where he says “Israel was at school, and used childish things to help her to learn; but in these days, when Jesus gives us spiritual manhood, we can make melody without strings and pipes. We who do not believe these things to be expedient in worship, lest they should mar its simplicity, do not affirm them to be unlawful, and if any George Herbert or Martin Luther can worship God better by the aid of well-tuned instruments, who shall gainsay their right? We do not need them, they would hinder than help our praise but if others are otherwise minded, are they not living in gospel liberty?”

¹⁴ See *Acts of Assembly of Church of Scotland (1644)*; cited in John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1888), 72.

¹⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Organ”; cited in Girardeau, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Adam Clarke, *comm.* on 1 Chr 16:42.

AFTERWORD

Many have commented that worship in a church that uses no instruments feels so bare and empty—almost completely devoid of glory and utterly unappealing to the senses. This is intentional, not because we do not enjoy instrumental music, but because we believe that this is exactly God's intention for what New Testament worship should be like.

In 2 Corinthians 3, the Apostle Paul describes the Old Covenant as one that was so intensely glorious that the Israelites could not bear looking into the glowing face of Moses (3:7). What is surprising is that he goes on to describe the New Covenant as that which is so exceeding and far-surpassing in glory that, in comparison, the Old Covenant was without glory (3:9–10). But what is the glory of the New Covenant? For certain, it is not the glowing face of its ministers. It is not in the presence of a grand temple,

the multitude of skilled musicians, or the fragrance of sweet incense and animal sacrifices.

Paul gives us a clue in verse 11 when he mentions the reason the glory of the New Covenant surpassing the Old is due to the former's abiding power. Conversely then, the lack of glory of the Old Covenant relative to the New is due to its fading quality. What had faded away from the Old Covenant was precisely the outward glory of its many and very sense-oriented ordinances, as a covenant written visibly on tables of stone but was largely not written on the invisible tables of the heart, and which was a covenant so ineffectual in bringing salvation that Moses calls it a ministry of death and condemnation (3:3, 7, 9). The New Covenant, however, is one that lifts that veil of Moses and singularly focuses on the glory on the invisible but eternal things of the heart—the working of the Holy Spirit through the plain preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Word of God by which we are

transformed from glory to glory into his image (3:12, 18; 4:18). This is the substance of the Covenant of Grace which remains after the glory of the Old Covenant had been abolished.

It is for this reason that Reformed worship has been stripped of everything but the Word of God read, preached, and sung—either you meet with God and see the glory of Christ in his word or you leave empty. That is worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). No more mountains, temples, or instruments. Nothing to appeal to the flesh and prop up your worship to make you feel “closer to God”, just the plain preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified, the wisdom and power of God unto salvation. Everything else is a veil and a distraction.

I once attended a very well-known church led by a very well-respected expositor of the Scriptures. Worship each week often included a full orchestra

with a sizeable choir, at times even featuring a professional opera singer. One week, a comment was made from the pulpit (referring to the quality of the music) to the effect that “there is no better worship elsewhere”. The intention was somewhat self-serving, although not particularly malicious, but it made me question if musical excellence was what God was looking for in our worship. I was eventually convinced of the very opposite truth of what was expressed—that God does not care one bit for the outward magnificence of our worship but, as he who looks not on the appearance but in the heart, desires and delights simply in the sincere praise and thanksgiving of a saint who is looking unto Jesus, walking with Jesus, singing the songs that Jesus himself sang, and becoming like Jesus, however appalling his singing may seem to others who may be listening to him, because nothing to God can be more glorious than one who has been made like his Son.

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