

Introduction:

If you are a guest here today, I hope the first thing you noticed was a friendly welcome. You are our honored guest. We are very glad you are here and want you to know that. If that isn't what you noticed first, please let us know on the Connection Card you received in your program this morning. We want to correct that. However, if you are like many of our first time guests, the second thing you noticed is we have this huge stage but no band to put on it. There is no piano, organ, guitar, harpist, or any other form of instrumental accompaniment to our singing. Despite the fact that for the majority of history everyone who called themselves Christians refrained from using instruments as part of worshipping God, they have become so integral to the worship of most churches, people are amazed that anyone would continue to refrain from using them. I know that was my reaction when I first attended churches that took this stand.

As I've told many of you before, I grew up in the Southern Baptist denomination until my early teen years. Some of my earliest church memories were of my dad leading the choir while my mom played the piano. When my dad was restored to his biblical Christianity roots after my mom died, I was livid. How could he take us to a church that refused to have a piano? How could he take us to a church that dared to claim what my mom had done for so many years was unscriptural? There had to be something very, very wrong about that. I love instrumental music. I took piano lessons in my youth, was a drummer in the band in middle and high school, played trumpet as second instrument, and have fiddled with the guitar for most of my adult life. I promise you, if it were up to me, we'd have a band on this stage, and I'd be trying to get in it.

However, when I left the denominational world in order to become just a Christian, I had to make a decision. Was worship going to be up to me? Or was it going to be up to God? Deciding to be just a Christian had some consequences for me. The first of which was recognizing that a Christian puts God in the beginning of everything, including our worship. For me, that eventually came to mean I would worship God, whether publicly or privately, with singing and not with playing. While I came to that recognition years ago, not a year goes by that I don't question it. I'll be honest with you, I want a band up here. There is part of me that looks around and sees that so many good people who love the Lord want one too that I begin to wonder if I'm just being stubborn and silly. It really does seem like such a small thing in the big picture. I mean, I'm certain Jesus died to save me from sin, not from pianos. So, I've asked a question. I've asked it again and again. And I'm here this morning to get you to ask this same question. I don't necessarily expect you to have my same answer as me at the end of this lesson, but I hope to give you something to chew on as you answer the question for yourself. Perhaps we'll be able to talk more about it after this lesson is over. Here's the question I ask, "Many good people have found instrumental worship and decided it was ok; where can I find it?"

Discussion:

- I. I find instrumental worship in the Old Testament.
 - A. The first place I go to find instrumental worship is the Old Testament. After all, that's Bible. David worshiped with instrumental music. Surely we can too. There is no doubt instrumental worship was authorized under the Old Covenant. Read **Psalms 150:3-5** for just one example. Some have suggested the use of instruments under the Old Law was a concession that God never really wanted. However, **II Chronicles 29:25** says the use of instrumental music in Old Testament worship was a command "from the Lord through His prophets."
 - B. However, the problem is I want to be a New Testament Christian, not an Old Testament Jew. According to **Hebrews 7:22**, Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant than the one made through Moses which has a different law (cf. **Hebrews 7:12**). **Galatians 3:24-25** explained clearly we are not under the Law, which was a guardian to bring us to Jesus Christ. We are, rather, under the Faith. The very frightening thing about turning to the Law as our authority for how to serve Christ is demonstrated in **Galatians 3:10-14**. If we want to submit to the Law, we are submitting to a curse. Further, in **Galatians 5:2-4**, Paul, speaking of circumcision, pointed out if we go back to the Law to govern us, Christ becomes of no effect to us. We will be severed from Christ and fall from grace.
 - C. The long and short of it for me is this, I can certainly find instrumental worship in the Law, but do I really want the consequences of using that as my authority to justify the way I worship?

II. I find instrumental worship in symbolic pictures of heaven.

- A. The second place I find instrumental worship is in the pictures of heaven in **Revelation 5:8; 14:2; 15:2**. Surely, if God allowed worship through instruments of music in Israel and is going to have it in heaven, why would I claim it is not allowed in the church today?
- B. However, I can't help but ask whether these images in the book of **Revelation** actually provide equipping for instrumental worship for me as I live and serve God under the New Covenant. The first problem is taking these pictures of worship in heaven at face value. Consider **Revelation 5:8**. The elders who held the harps are the ones mentioned in **Revelation 4:4, 10**. These elders are dressed in white and wearing golden crowns. They bow before the throne of God, casting away their golden crowns. Further, they have the golden bowls of incense. Does this literally describe the worship we participate in today? Are we supposed to wear white garments and crowns that we throw down? Certainly not. Those pictures are symbolic of purity and humility before God. And what about that burning incense? The text explains that the bowls of incense are not literal but represent the prayers of the saints. Can we, in this book so full of symbolism, take the symbols as authority for what we do today? Certainly not. Rather we must consider what these symbols represent. The bowls of incense represent prayer. We must pray, not burn incense. Interestingly, in **Revelation 14:2**, the harps are actually a picture of the voice of God. If His voice sounds like many harps, is it possible these harps are symbolic of the voices of the saints just as the incense is symbolic of the prayers of the saints?
- C. Additionally, when I consider the context of **Revelation 15:1-5**, I find these symbols are borrowed from Old Testament worship, not from New Testament worship. God used these images because the readers were familiar with Old Testament Scriptures and Old Testament tabernacle/temple worship. If I use these pictures as authority for my worship today, I'm actually right back to where I was with my first point, justifying my worship with the Law.

III. I find instrumental worship in New Testament silence.

- A. So, I was thinking one day. If God allowed instrumental worship in His covenant with Israel, where did He take away the use of instruments in His covenant with His church? Or as others often simply ask, "When did God condemn the use of instrumental music as worship?" Because they cannot find any specific condemnation, they believe instruments must be allowed. This is arguing from New Testament silence. However, I have a couple of problems with this.
- B. First, I realize the New Testament is not actually silent about this as many try to claim. It is true, I don't find an explicit prohibition against instrumental worship. I don't find a "Thou shalt not." However, I do find several commands about worshipping God with music. He isn't silent about that at all in the New Testament. We will note more in a later point, but just two examples are **Ephesians 5:19** and **Colossians 3:16**. To say God is silent about instruments in the New Testament is a lot like saying God was silent about oak and cypress with the Ark when He instructed Noah in **Genesis 6:14**. We are actually not dealing with an issue of silence, but with an issue of exclusion. That is, God specified what He wanted which excludes other options.
- C. A second concern with this idea stems from **Hebrews 7:12**. I am under a different law from the Israelites. It is not an update. It is not a modification. It is a different law. **Jeremiah 31:31-32** explains God was going to establish a New Covenant that was not like the one He had made with Israel. In other words, the covenant I'm in with Him is fundamentally different than the one Israel had with Him. That means I'm not looking for where God takes away instrumental worship from that Old Covenant, but actually need to look for where God brings it in to this New Covenant.
- D. Additionally, I am constantly aware of what God said in **II Timothy 3:16-17**. Scripture teaches us, reproves us, corrects us and trains us in righteousness. Scripture will equip us for every good work. It does not say Scripture will condemn every bad work. The New Testament is silent about instrumental worship. Does that provide permission? On the contrary, it does not. I have to look for equipping to use instruments under this new covenant law and I cannot find it. If I am going to bring it in from silence, I have to realize I am bringing it in to my worship and God's New Covenant is not doing so. When I read **John 7:18**, this scares me. I want to glorify God, not me.
- E. One time, when I was asking these questions, my father-in-law offered me an illustration. He said, "Edwin, if you were walking through a friend's house and in one room you found all kinds of musical instruments: piano, harp, guitar, trumpet, saxophone, flute, drums, etc., and then you walked into another a room that had absolutely no instruments, would you think that was an accident or was it done on purpose?" Of course I replied, "That is obviously done on purpose." He then explained, "We come into the Bible and walk through the Old Testament, finding instrumental worship all over the place. Then we move into the New Testament

and find it completely devoid of it. Is that accidental? Of course not. We have to think God did that on purpose.” I have to agree with my father-in-law. Since God clearly knew how to include instruments in the worship I read about in the Old Testament, I have to think it was purposeful that the New Testament pictures of worship are completely devoid of them.

IV. I find instrumental worship in post-biblical ancient Christians.

- A. There are some interesting quotes from ancient post-biblical Christians that, on the surface, seem to suggest instrumental music was an integral part of their worship. I’ve seen many people argue in favor of instrumental worship using these quotes. One example comes from Clement of Alexandria who lived from 153-217 AD:

“For the apostle adds again, ‘Teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your heart to God.’ ... And even if you wish to sing and play to the harp or lyre, there is no blame. Thou shalt imitate the righteous Hebrew king in his thanksgiving to God. ‘Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; praise is comely to the upright,’ says the prophecy. ‘Confess to the Lord on the harp; play to Him on the psaltery of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song.’ And does not the ten-stringed psaltery indicate the Word Jesus, who is manifested by the element of the decad?”¹

- B. Surely those who lived so close to the actual time of the apostles would know the practice of the apostles’ worship habits, even if they were not specifically recorded in Scripture. Certainly, on the surface, a quote like this suggests post-biblical Christians used instruments to worship God. However, digging below the surface I actually found an opposite picture.

Consider the following which can be found in the previous two paragraphs to the one most commonly quoted above:

“‘Praise Him on the psaltery;’ for the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. ‘And praise Him on the lyre.’ By the lyre is meant the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum. ‘Praise with the timbrel and the dance,’ refers to the Church meditating on the resurrection of the dead in the resounding skin. ‘Praise him on the chords and organ.’ Our body He calls an organ, and its nerves are the strings, by which it has received harmonious tension, and when struck by the Spirit, it gives forth human voices. ‘Praise Him on the clashing cymbals.’ He calls the tongue the cymbal of the mouth, which resounds with the pulsation of the lips. Therefore He cried to humanity, ‘Let every breath praise the LORD,’ because He cares for every breathing thing which He had made.”²

“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, which those expert in war and contemners of the fear of God were wont to make use of also in the choruses at their festive assemblies; that by such strains they might raise their dejected minds.”³

Consider another quote from the same ancient Christian:

“And He who is of David, and yet before him, the Word of God, despising the lyre and harp, which are but lifeless instruments, and having tuned by the Holy Spirit the universe, and especially man,—who, composed of body and soul, is a universe in miniature, makes melody to God on this instrument of many tones; and to this instrument—I mean man—he sings accordant...”⁴

- C. How do these quotes correspond? Clement did not use instruments of music in worship. He believed the great instrument of music was the individual Christian singing unaided by mechanical musical instruments. Further, he saw the Old Testament passages that spoke of instruments as fulfilled not by instrumental worship under the New Covenant, but Christians tuned as God’s instruments to sing His praises. That makes me think of the point we made about **Revelation 14** and the symbolic use of harps there to refer to God’s voice. In other passages, Clement actually records that he believes the reference to mechanical instruments of music in the psalms were symbolic of the different parts of God’s great instrument—man.
- D. However, while all of that makes for an interesting historical argument and debate, it is really all beside the point. I can argue all day long about what those early post-biblical Christians did and I will not be any closer to doing what I ought to do. Do you remember what we read earlier in **II Timothy 3:16-17**? God gave the Scriptures to equip me for every good work. He did not give me Scripture plus the testimony of Christians from a later time to equip me for good work. As much as I may want to, I cannot use the example of any Christians outside of Scripture as my guide unless the Scriptures demonstrate God’s approval.

¹ Clement of Alexandria; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Hendrickson Pub., 1995, Vol II, p. 249.

² *Ibid.* p. 248.

³ *Ibid.* p. 249.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 172.

- V. I find instruments in my personal logic and personal desire.
- A. Sometimes I get frustrated with trying to find a specifically scriptural reason and bring in the instruments from my personal logic. Part of me says, "I simply cannot see why God wouldn't accept instruments of music as worship. I don't see any harm in it. I mean, God gave us these talents, surely He wants us to use them to worship Him."
 - B. Frankly, if I were to follow my "druthers," we would use them. As I said earlier, I love instrumental music. I love to sit around with folks and pick at the guitar and sing songs. I'd love to worship God in a jam session with you.
 - C. However, there are a few Bible verses that draw me up short on taking this approach. As much as I would like to, I know I cannot simply follow my personal reasoning. According to **Jeremiah 10:23**, it is not in man to direct his own steps. According to **Proverbs 14:12; 16:25**, when I follow my own path it leads to death. I am walking on dangerous ground any time my justification for an action is, "I just can't see anything wrong with it." The question is not whether I like it or I can see anything wrong with it. The question is can I find where the Scripture shows me what is right with it.
- VI. I cannot find instrumental worship in the worship of New Testament churches or Christians.
- A. I appreciate the work of so many who have shown me all the places in which I can find instrumental worship. I can find it in God's Old Covenant with Israel. I can find it in symbolic images of heaven in **Revelation**. I can find it in the silence of the New Testament. Though it is debatable, I can possibly find it in ancient post-biblical Christians. And I can definitely find it in my personal reasoning and desire. However, as argument stacks on top of argument trying to get me to use instruments of music to worship God, one amazing point is brought out in stark relief. I can find instrumental worship in all kinds of sources; I simply can't find it in the one source I need to. I cannot find it in the teaching of the New Testament writers or the example of the New Testament Christians. For all of the teaching about worshipping God in the New Testament and for all the examples of it, I never once find instruments of music taught either by explicit statement, practical example, or logical conclusion.
 - B. What do I find in the New Testament? I find singing taught and exemplified. Consider **Acts 16:25; I Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; James 5:13**. I even find in one of these passages a reference to the instrument that I should use to make the melody for my singing. **Ephesians 5:19** claims the instrument with which I should make the melody for my singing is the heart.
 - C. When I remember **II Timothy 3:16-17**, I am forced to draw one conclusion. The New Covenant equips me to sing. Singing is a good work. However, for all the places I go to find equipping for worshipping God with instruments of music as a congregation or as an individual Christian, I cannot find one single verse in the New Testament that equips me to do so. The only conclusion I can draw is instrumental worship is not a good work. I must not use it.

Conclusion:

Like I said, if it were up to me, there would be a band on this stage. But it isn't up to me. I can find instrumental worship in a lot of places. I just can't find it in the one place that allows me to actually participate in it. So, I don't and I won't.

After all this, you may still be saying, "Edwin, it sure seems like you're making a mountain out of a molehill." You may still be wondering why this matters at all. And you may be wondering why I'm talking about this now of all times. **John 7:18** is why. What we do here is about God's glory and honor. It isn't about mine. And if I can't actually find God's authority for something and I do it anyway, I'm getting it from my own authority. That means I'm glorifying me. I don't want to do that. I want to glorify God. How about you?