

MECHANICAL INSTRUMENTS OF MUSIC

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About the author...

Terry was baptized at the age of 13 in 1958. As a teenager he preached monthly for two rural congregations. He was married in 1965 to Mary Herbst. They have two grown children, Shelley (married with four sons) and Brett (still single). Terry graduated in 1967 from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale with a bachelor's degree in education. He taught mathematics and physics in public schools in St. Louis County from 1967 to 1977. During that time he became a deacon at the Lemay church of Christ in St. Louis County, working with evangelism and youth. He was hired in 1975 to work more in depth with the youth and evangelism. In 1977 he was hired to work full time with the church and began full time preaching there in 1979. In 1997 began working with the Collinsville church of Christ in Collinsville, Illinois where he now preaches. Terry has preached in youth rallies and gospel meetings in Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Virginia, and West Virginia. He has preached in and directed crusades to Jamaica, West Indies. He has also preached and participated in work in Murmansk, Russia, the largest city in the world above the Arctic Circle.

Introduction

A century ago, in the United States, there was a great problem in the church which had been stirring for several decades. That problem eventually led to a division which brought about the denominations called the Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ. That monster continues to raise its ugly head today. The controversy that caused that division centered around the music of the church — whether a capella singing in the worship of God is a matter of tradition and opinion, or of doctrine.

The controversy over the use of mechanical instruments of music in the worship of the church was not, however, a new one that arose in the United States in the late 19th century. There is no evidence of the use of such instruments in the early church. However, as the church fell into apostasy, according to F. W. Mattox, “By the fifth century some mechanical music began to be introduced. Organs were not used until the eighth century” (156). In the apostate Roman church, the use of mechanical instruments was not officially sanctioned until Pope Vitalian in the seventh century, and it was not immediately received with universal favor. It was even abolished, for a time, by Pope Gregory in 1074 (Brumback 75-76).

Since this has been a controversy for centuries, and is an on going controversy, it is necessary that all Christians be prepared to give an answer regarding this matter (1 Peter 3:15).

A Matter of Authority

In all things there is a need for guidance, direction, and authority. Can you imagine the chaos that would be in this world if there were no authority, no laws? I cannot imagine what the major intersections of downtown Kansas City would be like if that were the case.

So it is with religion. The chaos in religion today because of denominations and world religions comes as a result of not recognizing authority. There is a need for authority in religion just as there is in all things. In Christianity, there must be authority for all teaching, practices, and worship. The

possible sources of authority is revealed by Jesus when he was questioned by the chief priests and the elders in the temple regarding His teaching. When asked by what authority He taught, He turned the question back to them when He asked, *“The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven or from men?”* (Matthew 21:25)? Jesus thus revealed that authority for any matter comes either from God or from man. If it is of man, that authority has either been usurped by man or given him by God. Truly, all authority rests in Christ (Matthew 28:18). Paul wrote, *“And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”* (Colossians 3:17). To do something in the name of another clearly means to do so by that one’s power, or authority (Acts 4:7). Therefore, when man authorizes that which has not come from God, he is in error and sins against God. Man is not to add to what God has authorized, nor take away from it (Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18-19). Man is not to go beyond what God has written (1 Corinthians 4:6) He is to continue in the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9). He is to walk by faith (2 Corinthians 5:7), that system of faith given in Christ (Jude 3).

With regard to worship, one is to worship not only in spirit, but in truth (John 4:23-24). To do so is to worship according the word of God (John 17:17), or in other words, by that which God authorizes.

With regard to music in the worship of the church, God says we are to have it. Singing, a form of music, is authorized by the word of God. After instituting the Lord’s Supper, Jesus and the apostles sang as they went out unto the mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30). In the context considering the assembly of the saints at Corinth, Paul wrote, *“What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also”* (1 Corinthians 14:15). Paul also wrote that we are to speak, teach, and admonish one another by singing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 2:16). This is ample evidence that singing is authorized as an act of worship to God.

The purpose of this lesson, however, is not to consider singing, but the use of mechanical instruments of music in praising and worshiping God. In doing so, an attempt will be made to examine and refute some of the arguments made by those who want to authorize the use of mechanical instruments of music.

The No Authorization Needed Argument

Given O. Blakely, in his debate with Alan Highers, said, “I question that there is such a thing as <authorized worship>” (40). He added, “As we think about the knowledge of God, remember we have affirmed throughout this debate that the worship of God cannot be regulated” (150).

I contend, however, that there is such a thing as authorized worship and that worship of God is regulated by God Himself. Jesus, in His dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well, said, *“But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth”* (John 4:23-24). Mr. Blakely said, regarding this, “That text, verse 24, can mean one of two things...a great number of people...are of the persuasion that it means God has a legal requirement that men worship him in spirit and Truth. That is not my position” (216-17). Regardless of Mr. Blakely’s position, we must ask, “What is the position of God?” Jehovah is the God of truth (Psalm 31:5). He keeps truth forever (Psalm 146:5-6). He wants man to worship in truth

(John 4:23). His word is truth (John 17:17). Therefore, man, to worship as God has ordained and regulated, “**must** worship him in...truth” (John 4:24 — emphasis TLM), which is according to His word (John 17:17). The term, “must,” from the Greek, “dei,” means, according to Thayer, “it is necessary, there is need of, it behooves, is right and proper” (126). Therefore, that **must**, that **necessity**, indicates regulation which is according to truth, or to God’s word.

It should be understood that we are under law. The apostle Paul, in his writings, refers to the law of faith (Romans 3:27), the law of the Spirit (Romans 8:2), and the law to Christ (Galatians 6:2). James, in his epistle, writes of the law of liberty (James 1:25, 2:12) and the royal law (James 2:8). That law, of course, is that which is written in God’s word, His truth.

One of the problems of today is that we have entered into the entertainment arena. It is thought that if it makes me feel good, if I like it, it is all right with God. That is the only authorization one needs — the feel good authorization.

A former campus minister from Mississippi, Ray Notgrass, has observed...”What must be guarded against is (1) thinking that we are drawn closer to God when, in fact, we are disobeying him...; and (2) being emotionally uplifted by music...and actually being drawn closer to that than to God under the allusion that, if it makes me feel better, it must be God-approved” (Freed-Hardeman Forum 19).

Yet, as we have seen above, regardless of one’s feelings or opinions, one must worship as authorized by God’s word.

The Old Testament Argument

Given O. Blakely affirmed that “The employment of instruments of music in singing of praise does not transgress the law of God...” (17). The specific law that he referred to, however, was the Law of Moses. He said, “the law was the nature of God compressed into ten succinct statements, and written with his finger upon tablets of stone” (150). Others have, also, looked to the Old Testament for authorization to use mechanical instruments of music in worship to God. Passages can be cited where timbrels were used in connection with singing to the Lord. The psalms frequently refer to harps, timbrels, psaltery, and other instruments in connection with praise to God and singing praises. It is even found that mechanical instruments of music were incorporated into the religious services in the temple, as initiated by David. Yet, Amos spoke of the presumptuous act of David when he declared, “*Woe unto them...that sing idle songs to the sound of the viol; that invent for themselves instruments of music, like David*” (Amos 6:1-5).

However, regardless of how many citations from the Old Testament can be made and regardless of what authorization is found in the Old Testament, that has no bearing on New Testament Christians today. We are no longer under the authority of the Old Testament. Paul made it clear that the Law of Moses was to be in effect until the seed, which is Christ, should come (Galatians 3:16-19). In His death upon the cross, Christ abolished that law (Ephesians 2:14-16), nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:14).

Whatsoever we do in worship is to be in the name of, by the authority of, Christ — not Moses, not the patriarchs (Colossians 3:17). Otherwise, we would have authority for the burning of incense

and offering burnt offerings in worship to God. Why do we not do these today? Because they are not authorized by Christ and His law. Mechanical instruments of music should not be used for the same reason.

The Not Specifically Condemned Argument

Many have said that the mechanical instrument is acceptable to God because it is not specifically condemned. It is true that it is not specifically condemned. Yet, if it was required that God specifically mention everything *not* acceptable to Him, the earth could not hold the volumes of books that would be necessitated.

This is such a shallow argument that even the smallest child understands otherwise. Gather together any group of children and have them play the game, *Simon Says*. They understand that they are to do only what Simon says in order to stay in the game. Send a child to the store for milk, and he knows immediately that he is to return with milk and milk only. If specific directions are given to go to the neighborhood store down the street, he immediately understands that he is not to go all the way across town to purchase the milk. If the child returns with no milk, or with milk and ice cream, he knows he has disobeyed. Why is it so difficult to apply that same principle, that is so readily understood by children, to religion and to worship in particular. As has been pointed out already, God has authorized singing in New Testament worship. If that is eliminated, we sin. If anything unauthorized is added, we sin.

This principle was illustrated quite well with the story of Nadab and Abihu, as found in Leviticus 10:1-2. They were authorized to burn incense in worship (Exodus 30:7). When burning incense, coals of fire from off the altar were to be used (Leviticus 16:12; Numbers 16:46). They were specifically instructed *not* to use *strange incense* (Exodus 30:9), but no similar instruction is found regarding the fire. One might understand their hesitancy of approaching the altar to get coals to use for the burning of incense because of what had just happened prior to this incident (Leviticus 9:24cf). However, that was no excuse. We read that they offered strange fire “*which he had not commanded them*” (Leviticus 10:1 — emphasis TLM), and they were punished for doing so. God had given a specific command regarding the fire to be used, coals from the altar. He did not have to say not to use any other fire.

This principle is so easily understood. Why, then, do people want to argue otherwise when it comes to music in the church? God has authorized singing. No other music has been authorized. Mechanical instruments of music have not been authorized. God did not have to say, “Do not use any other music in worship to Me.” He did not have to say, “Do not use mechanical instruments of music in worship to Me.”

The Psallo Argument

Some say that the instrument is inherent in the term “make melody” translated from the Greek, *psallo* (Ephesians 5:19). According to *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, to be inherent means, “involved in the constitution or essential character of something” (435). If the instrument, then, is inherent in the term, *psallo*, it is an essential — it cannot be removed or changed.

Let us observe Ephesians 5:18-21. In this passage there is a positive command, “*be filled with*

the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). Following the command there are five present participles. This indicates the action which is to accompany or to result from the command. These present participles are "speaking," "singing," "making melody," "giving thanks," and "subjecting." Roy Deaver notes that "singing" and "making melody" are connected by the conjunction, "and." This indicates the essentiality of each. Therefore, if mechanical instruments are inherent in *psallo*, it is not just authorized, but **mandatory** (*The Psallo*...18). In other words, it would be compulsory for everyone to both sing and play a mechanical instrument. There would be no choice. Can you imagine what a mess that would be? There is not one instrument that I could even begin to play.

However, it is not inherent. According to Vines, *psallo* means "primarily to twitch, twang, then, to play a stringed instrument with the fingers, and hence, in the Sept., to sing with a harp, sing psalms, denotes, in the N.T., to sing a hymn, sing praise" (Volume III:58). Thayer defines *psallo* as being from the root word which means to

rub, wipe; to handle, touch,...a. to pluck off, pull out...b. to touch or strike the chord, to twang the strings of a musical instrument so that they gently vibrate; to play on a stringed instrument, to play the harp...to sing to the music of the harp; in the N.T. to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song... (675).

It can be seen, then, that, as with many words, there was a progression of meaning over the centuries. Originally, it meant merely to pluck, such as a hair, bowstring or carpenter's line. It came to be used to touch the chords of a musical instrument. Yet, by the time of Jesus and the apostles, it had come to mean to touch the chords of the human heart in song. Thus, in Ephesians 5:18-19, the positive command to "*be filled with the Spirit*" followed by the present participle "*making melody*" actually **demands** an instrument — that something be touched. We are to sing and make melody **with the heart**. The heart is the instrument, used figuratively. David Lipe indicated that the translation of the Hebrew word *zamar* by the Greek word *psallo* in the Septuagint version is always followed by the preposition and the name of the instrument (Freed Hardeman Forum:80). He cites Psalm 98:5 and Psalm 149:3 as examples. He went on to say, "In Ephesians 5:19, the instrument on which the melody is made is the heart" (Freed-Hardeman Forum 81). Roy Deaver points out that some insist "singing" and "making melody" are distinct, with making melody being accompanied with the heart. However, as was pointed out in the introduction, the early church did not understand it as so (*The Singing*...16).

Deaver continues by pointing out that "with your heart" is in the instrumental case. Thus, the heart is the means or instrument by which the "making melody" takes place. The "making melody" is not distinct, complete within itself, separate from the heart (*The singing*...16).

One can, therefore, see, that the mechanical instrument is not intrinsic to the term *psallo*. The term does, however, demand that something be plucked or touched. That instrument to be plucked is not a mechanical instrument, but it is the heart, used in a figurative sense.

The Found in Heaven Argument

There are those who, not being able to find authorization in the literal commands of the New Testament for mechanical instruments of music in worship, turn to the highly figurative writing of John's Revelation. John recorded that there were those in heaven that had harps (Revelation 5:8).

There was, also, an angel with a trumpet (Revelation 9:14). Therefore, it is concluded that mechanical instruments of music are authorized in New Testament worship.

This is an extremely weak argument, and there are several matters that should be kept in mind. First, Revelation does not deal in any way with the worship of Christians here on this earth. Therefore, even if those in heaven literally use mechanical instruments of music, that does not authorize one to do so in worship to God on earth. Second, there are many things found mentioned by John as being in heaven that are not included in the worship of Christians, such as the burning of incense and the wearing of white robes. If mechanical instruments are so authorized, why are not these and other matters so authorized. Third, Revelation is quite figurative. Others, such as premillennialists, have taken such figurative language literally in order to make false assumptions. It is quite dangerous and questionable to take from such a figurative document and assume something is literal without some other basis for doing so. Actually, one should question the idea that there are or will be literal mechanical instruments in heaven, just as one would question the literal picture John gives of streets of gold and gates of pearl. Did not Paul indicate that corruption does not inherit incorruption (1 Corinthians 15:50)? Can there be anything in heaven, literally, that is corruptible? I believe the implication is that there will be nothing in heaven of a corruptible nature. That includes mechanical instruments of music, or any other literal mechanical device.

The Aid Argument

Finally, there are those who argue that the instrument is merely an aid, as are public address systems and tuning forks. The instrument, they would argue, merely aids in the singing of songs of praise. An aid “provides with what is useful or necessary in achieving an end; gives assistance” (*Webster’s* 19). As an aid, therefore, the instrument would be an expedient. It would be something necessary or helpful in achieving the end of singing. Is that what the instrument does when incorporated into worship?

Does the instrument provide what is necessary to achieve the end of singing? Can one not sing without an instrument? I dare say if one would ask any famous opera vocalist if he/she can sing *without* the use of an instrument, the answer would be, “Yes.” The instrument is not necessary to achieve the singing of praises in worship.

Does, then, the instrument merely assist in the singing? Again, I dare say if one would ask any musician of some famous orchestra if he/she merely provided assistance to a vocalist, the answer would be, “No.” The use of an instrument provides a *different kind* of music.

Conclusion

As stated before, the real issue is that of authority. The use of a mechanical instrument of music in worship to God is merely evidence of the problem. Do we allow anything? Is worship regulated? Is there a need for authority in worship?

As has been seen, we are under law. We do need authority in all that we do, including worship. Singing is authorized as an act of worship. Yet, there is no authority to play a mechanical instrument of music in worship to God.

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