

536 Why Don't You Have a Piano?

Phil Sanders

God's Answers to Life's Questions

Every preacher in churches of Christ has heard the question, "Why don't you folks have a piano in your auditorium?" Some think perhaps we can't afford one. Others think it's really a strange that we only sing. Many people expect a big production at church with several instruments and believe that somehow we are cheated that we merely sing our praises. Some self-proclaimed prophets have even said that all our churches will die if we don't get with the times and follow what others are doing. So why don't churches of Christ use instruments of music?

Worship is important to God and to His people. Those who love God want to worship in spirit and in truth, just as Jesus instructs us in John 4:24. They want to please Him in every way. Many people think of David playing his harp while he sang psalms in the Old Testament. Of course, the worship of the Temple was filled with musicians singing and playing songs of worship to God. But the question we ask is how did Christians worship the Lord in song? Did the early church use instruments or did they merely sing. The New Testament gives us this answer.

There are a handful of passages in the New Testament that describe the worship of Christians. Two identical passages in Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26 say, "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." Nothing about an instrument. In Acts 16:25 Paul and Silas (with their feet fastened in stocks) "were praying and singing hymns to God." Of course they had no access to instruments. In Romans 15:9 Paul quotes from Psalm 18:49, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." Here we have all vocal activity, no instruments.

In 1 Corinthians 14:15, Paul said, "I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also." Paul is emphasizing singing with understanding in a context where some were singing in tongues others could not understand. One is better off never to worship with a means where the mind does not understand what it is saying.

In 1 Cor. 14:26 Paul said, "When you come together, each one has a hymn..." In the early days people inspired of the Spirit taught hymns to other members of the church, so that they could all worship together. This chapter doesn't answer our question. It merely says they sang.

Paul taught the Ephesians how they should worship in song in Ephesians 5:18-19, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." Here the emphasis is on speaking and words. The melody to be made is not on an instrument but upon the heart itself. There is no mention of any musical instrument here, rather the instruction to have the heart and words work together.

In a similar passage in Colossians 3:16, Paul said, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Again there is no mention of a harp or any instrument. The emphasis is on words, teaching and admonishing one another. Thank-fulness is to be in the heart! In Hebrews 13:15 the writer said, "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." God desires a sacrifice from our lips.

Again no mention of the instrument! Why? Why do we have no command of to use instruments? Why did no apostle or evangelist ever use them? Why is there not even an inference of their use?

It wasn't because Jews never used them. It wasn't that they did not know how to play them. Why is the New Testament silent about

any Christian ever singing praise to God with an instrument? The teachings of Jesus and the example of the church show that they were ignored. The worship of the early church was centered on simple, meaningful words of praise to God.

Now, if the Lord had wanted pianos, orchestras, and stringed instruments, surely there would be something in the Scripture to tell us to use them or an example of Christians in the New Testament using them. But there is nothing! *Now the question turns with this fact. Does the fact that the Bible nowhere speaks of instruments mean that we should or should not use them? Does God approve our actions when there is no authorization, example, or instruction for that action?* Sometimes people are silent because they never thought about it, but the New Testament is not that way.

The New Testament claims to be complete, final, and the authority for all people in all places for all time. Jesus promised to guide the apostles in the first century "into all the truth" (John 16:12-13). Jude wanted Christians to contend for "the faith" which was once for all time delivered to the saints (Jude 3). We have been granted all things that pertain to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). And the Scripture is able to furnish or equip us "for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). We are not lacking any truth God wants us to know, but there is nothing about instruments in worship.

We do know that when people in all ages have acted presumptuously, without any instruction, they have disobeyed the teaching of God. King Saul acted without authority when he offered a burnt offering at Gilgal in 1 Samuel 13. Samuel was to make the offering, but Saul did not wait. Samuel said, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the Lord your God, with which he commanded you" (13:13). For this presumptuous act of worship, the Lord decided to give the kingdom of Israel to a man after his own heart, which in time was David.

When prophets spoke in the days of Jeremiah, they often spoke presumptuously from their own imaginations rather than from God. Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 23:16, "Thus says the Lord of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord." We cannot act on our own authority, do our own thing, and expect that this will please God. God asks, "who has paid attention to his word and listened?" (23:18) What God desires is that we listen to what He has said and do His will, not adding to it or changing it.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day ignored the Word of God to keep their human traditions. They got caught up in doing what their fathers had done and lost sight of the commandments of God. Jesus said about them in Matthew 15:13-14, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." You see acting without authority, doing things without instructions, does not have the blessing of God. We simply have no authority for using instruments.

Jesus said in John 8:31-32, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Our relationship with the Lord is tied to our willingness to "abide in" or remain in, continue in His word. To be true disciples we must follow His teaching rather than follow popular opinions or our own desires. Being a Christian means belonging to Christ and following Christ, not the crowd, not popular religion, and not traditions of men. Since the New Testament has no instruction about instruments, it would be presumptuous to go ahead and use them.

It might surprise you to know that churches did not use any instruments of music in worship for hundreds of years. In fact, early church leaders opposed them vigorously.

Augustine (354-430 AD) displays the general attitude of the early church against instruments of music for any purpose. "Let no one's heart revert to the instruments of the theatre."

As late as 1250 AD, Thomas Aquinas said, "Our church does not use instruments, as harps and psalteries, to praise God withal, that she may not seem to Judaize." Martin Luther called the organ in worship an "ensign of Baal."

John Calvin: "It is no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of tapers, or revival of other shadows of the law."

John Wesley: "I have no objection to the organ in our chapels provided it is neither seen nor heard."

The Greek Orthodox church, which knows Greek better than anybody, does not use instruments of music in their worship because they find no instruction in the New Testament.

You see, when you examine history, the use of instrumental music in worship is actually a very late innovation, or change from Scripture to what people popularly wanted.

Do you really want to adapt a practice in your worship that was introduced several centuries after the time of Christ? Or would it not be safer, wiser, to "abide" in the practice that all the early churches understood to be the will of God?

Someone says, "Well, David played the harp!" Are we to follow David of the Old Testament or Jesus and the apostles of the New Testament? If we follow David, will we also offer animal sacrifices, burn incense, and keep the Sabbath? We are Christians under the new covenant or New Testament, not Jews under the old Law.

Someone says, "Phil, don't you know that the word 'make melody' in Ephesians 5:19 comes from *psallo*, which meant to play an instrument?" Yes, I'm aware of that, but the instrument of Ephesians 5:19 is specified, and that is the heart. If *psallo*, "make melody" means we are to play instruments, why didn't the early church, including the Greek Orthodox Church, not play them? The reason is the word *psallo* by the first century had come mainly to mean "sing" without any thought of an instrument—as they did in the synagogue. In the only occasion where the word did not mean sing, the idea was to make melody not on an instrument of music but on the heart!

So that's what we do, we sing from our hearts words of love, praise, and thanksgiving. We offer to God a sacrifice of praise with our lips. Our interest is in pleasing and praising God in the way that He prescribes. We don't want to add to His instructions or take away from them. We simply want to be New Testament Christians doing Bible things in Bible ways. Jesus said in John 14:31, "so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me." We ought to do the same, to do what we have been instructed, to sing.

Our task is simply to do what the Lord wills. It is so much better to listen to the teaching of Scripture and simply follow it. We know that singing is approved of God, but we cannot find any evidence that playing is approved or that early churches used instruments. Let us sing with love and thanksgiving from our hearts, for we know that will please the Lord.

The Bible has boundaries for the worship of God. God condemned Israel for worshiping in a way that He had not commanded, a way that never entered His mind (Jer. 7:31). The word "transgression" means "going beyond the prescribed limits." The Hebrew writer said, "For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Heb. 2:1-3) Let us respect the teaching of our Lord and not add our own forms of worship, which He did not command.

This week we are offering a free pamphlet that explains in greater detail about our music in worship. It tells why we sing "a cappella," that is "according to the chapel or church." We'd love to send to you free of charge. Write us and ask for "Musical Worship in the New Testament Church" or go to our website: www.God-answers.org and look under online tools to texts and sermons. This booklet will answer most of the questions you've asked about this matter. Our whole desire in all of this is to please our Father in heaven who loves us to the uttermost.

If you are not going to church anywhere, why not visit one of the churches of Christ near you. They would love to have a visit from you and to study the Bible with you. If you have a Bible on the shelf that you haven't read in a while, why not begin reading it. If you haven't prayed much lately, why not take some time to talk to the Lord. Ask him to help you find the truth. Don't get sidetracked by the pop psychology religions or the Christian entertainment industry, go to the Bible to find the truth.

Copyright 2005, Phil Sanders
Concord Road Church of Christ
8221 Concord Rd., Brentwood, TN 37027
1-877-226-5747
phil@God-answers.org www.God-answers.org