

Musical Instruments in the Public Worship of God, Chapter 2

The Regulative Principle and Musical Instruments in Public Worship

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Now that the scriptural foundation of the regulative principle of worship has been clearly established, let us examine a worship practice common today and see if it has biblical authorization. Remember, it is not enough that a practice is not forbidden by Scripture. There must be a divine warrant (i.e., biblical proof) for *every* worship practice in the church.

The use of musical instruments in public worship today is almost universal. Pianos and organs have been used for generations to set the “proper” mood during the service and have been used to accompany the singing of hymns. Today many churches have adopted the use of full-fledged bands with electric guitars, electric bass, keyboard, horns, and drums. Rock, pop, and country style bands are used as tools of church growth. Church growth materials argue that having a good band with upbeat music and worship songs will attract visitors and keep people coming back. Although musical instruments are powerful tools in the arsenal of emotional manipulation, does God’s word authorize their use in public worship in the new covenant era? A study of the use of musical instruments in the Bible reveals that the use of musical instruments in worship is connected to the sacrificial system and is an aspect of the ceremonial law. A brief survey of the use of musical instruments in the Bible will prove this assertion.

1. The Invention of Music

Adam and Eve, who worshiped God before the fall, used only their voices in the praise of Jehovah. This assertion is proven by the fact that musical instruments were not invented for another eight generations. “And Adah bore Jubal. He was the father of all those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother’s name was Jubal. He was the father of all those who play the harp and the flute” (Gen. 4:20-21). “Jubal was the ‘father’ of all who play the harp and flute. It goes without saying that these instruments were still very primitive. Although these were greatly refined in later times, Jubal was the first to employ musical instruments for the purpose of making music.”¹ God records that the ungodly line of Cain took the initiative in the development of culture: Jabal: husbandry; Jubal: music; Tubal-Cain: metallurgy.²

2. Personal Pleasure

There are a number of instances in the Bible of musical instruments being used for the purpose of personal pleasure or entertainment. After Laban caught up with Jacob, who had slipped away at night, he said, “Why did you flee away secretly, and steal away from me, and not tell me; for I might have sent you away with joy and songs, with timbrel and harp?” (Gen. 31:27). Job refers to the use of music for family entertainment purposes: “They send forth their

¹ G. C. Aalers, *Bible Students’ Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), Vol. 1, p. 131.

² The fact that these developments were made by the ungodly line should not in any way reflect negatively upon these cultural developments. Unbelievers often excel in the development of culture (the arts, medicine, technology, etc.). As a postmillennialist, the author believes that Christians will inherit the achievements of the heathen and then use them to God’s glory.

little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They sing to the tambourine and harp, and rejoice to the sound of the flute” (Job 21:11-12). Music also was used to accompany drunken feasts and parties, much like today. “The harp and the strings, the tambourine and flute, and wine are in their feasts” (Isa. 5:12; cf. 24:8-9; Amos 6:5-6). These instances obviously do not refer to public worship.

3. Victory Celebrations

Musical instruments are also used for victory celebrations. After God’s deliverance of the people of Israel from the armies of Egypt, the people celebrated and sang the song of Moses. “Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels³ and with dances. And Miriam answered them: Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider He has thrown into the sea!” (Ex. 15:20-21). It was the common practice of Israel to celebrate great victories with women dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments. “Now it had happened as they were coming home, when David was returning from the slaughter of the Philistine, that the women had come out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with joy, and with musical instruments. So the women sang as they danced” (1 Sam. 18:6-7). After the Lord delivered the people of Ammon into Jephthah’s hands it says, “When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing” (Jud. 11:34). The prophet Jeremiah spoke of the resettlement of the Israelites in their own land in terms of great joy and celebration: “Again I will build you, and shall be rebuilt, a virgin of Israel! You shall again be adorned with your tambourines, and shall go forth in the dances of those who rejoice” (Jer. 31:4).

These passages have a number of things in common. First, only the women played the instruments and danced. They are segregated from the men. Second, the use of instruments is *always* used in conjunction with dancing; the two are *never* separated. Third, in each instance there is a procession or forward movement. Fourth, each occasion is a direct response to a great national or local victory; that is, these are extraordinary celebrations and not set times of worship (however, there was annual dancing among the unmarried daughters of Shiloh, cf. Judges 21:19-23). Fifth, these celebrations were outdoor events; that is, they never occurred in the tabernacle, temple, or synagogue.

Do these national and local victory celebrations with women dancing, singing, and playing taborets justify the use of musical instruments in public worship? No, not at all. Although these celebrations by God’s people were done to the glory of God, there are a number of reasons why they should not be classed as formal public worship assemblies. First, although we repeatedly encounter (in the biblical record) groups of women dancing, singing, and playing instruments at outdoor celebrations, we *never* encounter women dancing and playing instruments in the tabernacle, temple, or synagogue. Second, the Bible says that everything required for God’s worship in the wilderness was shown to Moses on the mountain (Ex. 25:40; Heb. 8:5). Yet there are no instructions in Scripture giving women the authorization to dance and play

³ “The Hebrew name of this musical instrument is *toph*. The timbrel, tymanum, or tambourine, was used chiefly by women, and was employed in choral dances, or occasions of religious or festal processions. The principle [character] of the *toph*, or timbrel, was that of a prepared skin stretched upon a hoop or frame” (James Anderson, *Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms*, Vol. 5, p. 310, footnote 3). The timbrel was very similar to the modern tambourine. It was struck with the hand, small batons or with a knotty whip with many thongs.

instruments in the tabernacle. Third, in the biblical account Miriam leads a group of women in song, dance, and tambourine playing. Yet the tabernacle service that was prescribed by God was led and conducted only by *male* Levites. The use of musical instruments in the temple (as noted below) also was reserved for the Levitical priesthood, all of whom were males. Fourth, these passages are really useless for those who are seeking a divine warrant for the use of pianos and organs in new covenant public worship; for even if they could be applied to new covenant formal worship they would prove that: only *women* could play musical instruments, *only* in conjunction with female dancing. Such a practice may be acceptable at a modern charismatic rock and roll jam-fest, but is simply unacceptable to most conservative Presbyterians. The author does not know any Bible-believing Presbyterian pastors or elders who allow women to dance, leap, and play tambourines in the aisles of the church during the worship service. “The dance was an essential ingredient in the service in which instruments were used and cannot by any course of reasoning, or any evidence yet obtained, be excluded. If instrumentation on this occasion furnished a warrant for the use of instruments in the worship of the present dispensation, and that instrumentation was for the purpose of leading the dance, there is no escape from the conclusion that the dance has at least as emphatic a warrant in New Testament worship as has the instrumentation.”⁴

4. *The Trumpets of Announcement*

In Numbers 10:1-10, God commanded the making and use of two silver trumpets. The use of these trumpets was carefully prescribed by God. The only persons authorized to blow these trumpets were “the sons of Aaron, the priests” (v. 8). When both trumpets were blown, the whole assembly of people was to gather at the door of the tabernacle of meeting (v. 3). When only one trumpet was blown, only the leaders were to gather (vs.4). The trumpets were used to “sound the call” for the Israelites to begin their journeys (vv.5-7) and were blown to “sound an alarm” to go to war. The trumpets were also blown “over” or during the sacrifices of the tabernacle.

Since the trumpets were not played during congregational or Levitical singing, and since their purpose throughout chapter 10 was to announce something or to sound an alarm, it is likely that the trumpets’ purpose during the sacrifice was to *announce* to the people the precise moment that the sacrifices were occurring. This, no doubt, would emphasize the solemnity and importance of the sacrifice. “But even if someone would insist that these trumpets were used, in some sense, as instruments of music in worship, it would still be true that this became true only when—and because—a divine command was then given. If this be the beginning of the use of instruments in worship, in other words, then it is noteworthy that it was a commanded beginning.”⁵ Furthermore, it should also be noted that *only* priests (the sons of Aaron) were permitted by God to play the trumpets; and their use (during the religious assembly) occurred *only* during the sacrifice. Thus, they were directly associated with the ceremonial rituals.⁶ The ceremonial

⁴ D. W. Collins, *Musical Instruments in Divine Worship Condemned by the Word of God* (Pittsburgh: Stevenson and Foster, 1881), p. 38.

⁵ G. I. Williamson, *Instrumental Music in the Worship of God: Commanded or Not Commanded?*, p. 5.

⁶ “No psalmody was employed when the trumpets were first introduced, but when a psalmody was prepared and formally introduced into the temple service by David, the trumpets were employed conjointly with the voice and the instruments as employed by the Levites. The connexion of the three—the trumpets, the voice and the instruments—was so essential that in every instance in which the voice and the instruments are noted as being employed in the psalmody of the temple, the use of trumpets is specified also. It is specially noted on the occasion of the dedication of the temple that the four thousand singers and players on the instruments of the Levites, together with the one

playing of these trumpets during the sacrifice in the tabernacle could be considered the bud that would expand and flower during the more grand ceremonial order instituted by David for the temple. Instead of two solitary trumpets during the sacrifice in the tabernacle, the temple also had a Levitical choir, cymbals, harps and lyres playing all at once. Both were Levitical and ceremonial and both occurred only during the sacrifice.

5. Musical Instruments and the Early Prophets

There are two instances of the use of musical instruments by prophets. The first instance is the company of prophets in 1 Samuel 10:5: "After that you shall come to the hill of God where the Philistine garrison is. And it will happen, when you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with a stringed instrument, a tambourine, a flute, and a harp before them; and they will be prophesying." The second instance is Elisha's prophecy against Moab: "'But now bring me a musician.' And it happened, when the musician played, that the hand of the LORD came upon him. And he said, 'Thus says the LORD: Make this valley full of ditches'" (2 Kings 3:15-16). In these two instances the use of musical instruments was intimately connected with prophesying.

Do these passages justify the use of musical instruments in public worship? No, for these examples were not public worship. In the instance regarding Elisha it is clear that he was not singing praise to God but *speaking* the word of the LORD. In the example of the prophets coming down the hill there is no way that one can tell if they were singing or not. Even if they were singing, this instance would not be an example of a public worship service but of a festal procession. If this rather unusual instance in 1 Samuel 10 did justify the use of musical instruments in public worship, it would only authorize their use in accordance with prophecy or direct revelation. Since the prophetic office ceased with the close of the New Testament canon, this passage is not applicable to the new covenant church. Furthermore, given the fact that musical instruments were only used by priests and Levites during the temple service and were *not* used in the Jewish synagogues until A.D. 1810 in Germany, one can safely conclude that the Jews themselves did not regard this instance in 1 Samuel 10 as a justification for musical instruments in public worship.

What purpose did music serve in these examples? Many commentators mistakenly argue that instruments were used to induce a state of ecstasy or to produce a certain mindset suitable to receiving divine revelation. However, the Bible teaches that the prophets spoke because the Holy Spirit moved them (2 Pet. 1:21). Furthermore, the majority of prophets prophesied without music. Therefore, the ecstatic inducement theory should be rejected. Music may have been an outward sign of the Spirit's working. Whatever the purpose of musical accompaniment to prophecy was, it certainly does not provide a foundation for the use of musical instruments in public worship today.

hundred and twenty trumpeters of the priests, were *as to make one sound*. The great feature of this one sound was that of the trumpets which, in the hands of the priests, was ceremonial. So in 1 Chron., XXV, 5, it is said 'All these were the sons of Heman, the king's seer in the words of God *to lift up the horn*.' The horn is the trumpet, and the Levites are here represented clearly as acting in that ceremonial relation to the priests designated by their original consecration" (D. W. Collins, pp. 60-61).

6. The Introduction of Music into Public Worship

Besides the trumpets of silver introduced by God into the tabernacle service under Moses, God appointed additional instruments toward the end of King David's reign.⁷ These instruments were likely introduced in anticipation of the completion of the temple under Solomon. A careful study of the use of musical instruments in worship in the old covenant reveals that musical instruments were *only* played by certain authorized classes of Levites. Non-Levites never used musical instruments in public worship. The musical instruments that were used were not chosen arbitrarily by man but were designed by King David under divine inspiration. Also, musical instruments were *only* used in conjunction with animal sacrifices. During the temple service, musical instruments were *only* played during the sacrifice. An objective study of instrumental music in public worship in the old covenant proves that the use of musical instruments in public worship was ceremonial. This argument is considerably strengthened by the historical fact that musical instruments were *not* used in synagogue worship or the apostolic church.

The first recorded instance of musical instruments being used in public worship occurred during the festivities and ceremonies when the ark of God was moved to Jerusalem. "Then David and all Israel played music before God with all their might, with singing, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on cymbals, and with trumpets" (1 Chron. 13:8). This attempt to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem failed because the people involved did not follow the "proper order" (15:13). The people did not do what God had commanded.⁸ In other words, they violated the regulative principle. "God smote Uzzah, not merely as a judgement upon him for his rash and unlawful act in taking hold of the ark, but as a rebuke to David, the priests, the Levites and all the people; and as an admonition to all future generations to take heed to the divine command in all the affairs of divine worship. In this act he gave single proof that the whole proceeding was wrong. Had the offence consisted simply in placing the ark upon the cart, and Uzzah's taking hold of it, the remedy was at hand. The priest and Levites were present with the multitude, and could have been immediately directed to take charge of the ark, but the whole service was rejected by God as dishonoring to Him. David afterwards frankly acknowledges the disorder of the whole proceeding."⁹ "For because you [the Levites] did not do it the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not consult Him about the proper order" (1 Chron. 15:13).

⁷ "David stands as the central figure between Moses and Christ, and the very epoch for the introduction of the grand ceremonial order, which he gave to the worship of God, was significant of the greater perfection and glory of the New Testament Church. For it was the millennium of the Jewish Church and the height of the glory of the Nation" (D. W. Collins, p. 66).

⁸ "David proceeded irregularly, because he was without scriptural authority. Thus, instead of consulting the priests and Levites to whose custody the ark belonged, he 'consulted with the captains of thousands and hundreds, and every leader' [1 Chron. 13:1]; that is, with political and military advisors. This, in modern times, would be regarded as an Erastian interference of the magistrate *in sacris*. The result in David's case implies a permanent inhibition of introducing any religious observance without divine authority. If David could not do this, how can it, without sinful responsibility, be done by men in the nineteenth century? Instead of allowing the ark to be borne by Levites, he had it placed on a cart—which he doubtless thought was done 'decently and in order.' This, however, was not appointed, and therefore he erred in doing it" (James Glasgow, *Heart and Voice: Instrumental Music in Christian Worship Not Divinely Authorized*. C. Aitchison; J. Cleeland, Belfast, Northern Ireland, no date, p. 48.). Furthermore, if the people in general played upon musical instruments (1 Chron. 13:8) and not the Levites alone, this also would have been a violation of Scripture. During the second and successful attempt at moving the ark, it is carefully noted that only the Levites played upon musical instruments (1 Chron. 15:16-24).

⁹ D. W. Collins, *Musical Instruments in Divine Worship*, pp. 51-52.

The second and successful moving of the ark to Jerusalem gives more details regarding the use of instruments at that time. “So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves to bring up the ark of the LORD God of Israel. And the children of the Levites bore the ark of God on their shoulders, by its poles, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD. Then David spoke to the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers accompanied by instruments of music, stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals, by raising the voice with resounding joy. So the Levites appointed the singers Heman, Asaph, and Ethan, [who] were to sound the cymbals of bronze. Obed-Edom, Jeiel, and Azariah, to direct with harps on the Sheminith; a Chenaniah leader of the Levites, was an instructor in charge of the music, because he was skillful. Zechariah, Benaiah, and Eleazar the priests were to blow the trumpets before the ark of God” (1 Chron. 15:14-17, 19, 21-22, 24).

Note that only the Levites were appointed to play the musical instruments. In fact, the use of specific musical instruments was restricted to certain groups of Levites. Later revelation reveals that these appointments were not arbitrary but based upon the commandment of God (2 Chron. 29:25). By divine appointment, Levitical priests used musical instruments in connection with the ark of the covenant. The events were also accompanied by sacrifices and offerings. Since at this time in Israel’s history there was no functioning tabernacle or temple, the ark alone was the place of God’s special presence and thus the central place of sacrifice and burnt offering.¹⁰ Thus, the Levitical use of musical instruments was an aspect of ceremonial worship.

The Bible teaches that the introduction of musical instruments into the public worship of God was by divine appointment. “Then he stationed the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, with stringed instruments, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, of Gad, the king’s seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for thus was the commandment of the LORD by His prophets” (2 Chron. 29:25). Note, that the regulative principle of worship was strictly followed. Musical instruments were not used until God commanded their use. No one, not even kings, had the authority to introduce an innovation in worship without instructions from God to do so.

King David himself was a prophet and received detailed plans from God concerning the pattern of the temple and its worship:

Then David gave his son Solomon the plans for the vestibule, its houses, its treasuries, its upper chambers, its inner chambers, and the place of the mercy seat; and the plans for all that he had, he had by the Spirit, of the courts of the house of the LORD, of all the chambers all around, of the treasuries of the house of God, and of the treasuries for the dedicated things, also for the division of the priests and Levites, for all the work of the service of the house of the LORD. “All this,” said David, “the LORD made me understand in writing, by His hand upon me, all the works of these plans” (1 Chron. 28:11-13, 19).

The Holy Scripture emphasizes that David received the plans, divisions, and assignments relating to the temple by divine inspiration.¹¹ Nothing relating to the temple and its worship originated in man’s imagination.

¹⁰ “The first acceptable use of instruments in the praise service of the church was in the initiation of the temple worship by David, and it was exclusively employed in that worship. We have not another instance on record to the close of the canon of Scripture of its being used apart from the peculiar form given to it in its inauguration by David” (D. W. Collins, p. 55).

¹¹ As Moses received the pattern of the tabernacle and its vessels by divine inspiration (Ex. 25:9, 40; 27:8), so the chronicler, while giving David the credit for preparing the plans for the Temple, declares that Yahweh was the

Whenever new worship practices were introduced, God made it very clear that He--not man--was the source of the new additions. Thus, when additions were made under the administration of Moses, we are explicitly told that these additions came by way of divine inspiration (Ex. 25:9, 40; 27:8). The additions that came under the reign of King David also came by way of divine revelation.¹² The system of temple worship set up by God during David's reign receives no additions or alternatives until the death of Jesus Christ. The fact that new revelation was needed for the introduction of musical instruments into public worship is further proof that for thousands of years, from Adam to the latter part of David's reign, true and acceptable worship was offered to God *without* the accompaniment of musical instruments.

In the old covenant musical instruments in public worship were *always* a function of the Levitical priesthood. Why? Because their use was intimately connected with the animal sacrifices. In fact, during the temple service the instruments of music were *only* played during the sacrifice. When the sacrifice was not in progress, they sang praise *without* the accompaniment of the musical instruments. "Then he [King Hezekiah] stationed the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, with stringed instruments, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, of Gad, the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for thus was the commandment of the LORD by his prophets. The Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. Then Hezekiah commanded them to offer the burnt offering on the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song of the LORD also began, with the trumpets and with the instruments of David king of Israel. So all the congregation worshiped, the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded; all this continued until the burnt offering was finished" (2 Chron. 29:25-28). When the sacrifice began, the use of musical instruments by the Levites began. When the offering was completed, the use of musical instruments also ceased.

Is it not obvious to the unbiased interpreter that the instrumental music served a ceremonial function?¹³ That it typified something regarding the perfect sacrifice to come?¹⁴ The

source of David's knowledge. "The hand of Yahweh upon" is a frequent expression for divine inspiration (cf. 2 Kings 3:15; Ex. 1:3; 3:14, etc.). (Edward Lewis Curtis and Albert Alonzo Madsen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Chronicles* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976 (1910)], p. 229).

¹² "This way of praising God by musical instruments had not hitherto been in use. But David, being a prophet, instituted it by divine direction, and added it to the other carnal ordinances of that dispensation, as the apostle calls them (cf. Heb. 9:10). The New Testament keeps up singing of psalms, but has not appointed church music" (Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* [T&T Clark], Vol. 2, p. 875).

¹³ "The Levites, under the law, were justified in making use of instrumental music in the worship of God; it having been his will to train his people, while they were yet tender and like children, by such rudiments, until the coming of Christ. But now when the clear light of the gospel has dissipated the shadows of the law, and taught us that God is to be served in a simpler form, it would be a foolish and mistaken part to imitate that which the prophet enjoined only upon those of his own time. From this, it is apparent that the Papists have shown themselves to be very apes in transferring this to themselves" (John Calvin, *Commentary on The Book of Psalms*, (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1981) Vol. 2, p. 312).

¹⁴ Determining exactly what the ceremonial use of instruments in public worship typified is not easy. Southern Presbyterian theologian John L. Girardeau writes, "The instrumental music of temple-worship was typical of the joy and triumph of God's believing people to result from the plentiful effusion of the Holy Ghost in New Testament times.... [It] pleased God to typify the spiritual joy to spring from a richer possession of the Holy Spirit through the sensuous rapture engendered by the passionate melody of stringed instruments and the clash of cymbals, by the blare of trumpets and the ringing of harps. It was the instruction of his children in a lower school, preparing them for a higher" (*Instrumental Music in The Public Worship of the Church*, pp. 60-63). Girardeau's view was held by a number of the older Reformed writers. Given the fact that under normal circumstances the instruments were only played during the sacrifice, another possibility is that their use prophesied the dramatic supernatural events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ. The moment Christ died: "the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split, and the graves were opened" (Matt. 27:51-52). Luke writes,

ceremonial worship of the temple through audible and visible representations taught the people of God various things regarding the perfect redemption of their future Messiah. Thus the Holy Scripture says that the Levities were set apart to “prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals” (1 Chron. 25:1). G. I. Williamson writes,

The whole system of ceremonial worship served as a “*shadow of heavenly things*” (Heb. 8:5). It was “*a figure for the time then present*” (9:9), but a figure of something better in the future. In plain words, here the drama of the redemption was enacted symbolically. We use the word ‘drama’ because this Old Testament ceremonial worship was only a representation of the real redemption which was to be accomplished, not with the blood of bulls and goats, but with the precious blood of Christ. That is why this impressive assembly of musicians was needed. In a similar way, a motion picture is a pale thing in comparison with the reality depicted. That is why sound effects, and a musical background are so important! It helps His Old Testament people (as children under age, Galatians 4) sense something more in these animal sacrifices than was actually there. So, as the sacrifice was offered, the emotions of God’s people were stirred by this great cacophony of music.¹⁵

Since the New Testament teaches that all the ceremonial aspects of temple worship have been abolished, the passages that speak of the use of musical instruments in public worship, under the old covenant, do *not* provide biblical warrant for the use of musical instruments in public worship today. Jesus Christ rendered the whole ceremonial Levitical system obsolete with the perfect sacrifice of Himself on the cross (cf. Heb. 7:27, 9:28). The inferior (Heb. 9:11-15), the shadow (Heb. 10:1; 8:4-5), the obsolete (Heb. 8:13), the symbolic (Heb. 9:9), and the ineffectual (Heb. 10:4) have been replaced by Jesus Christ and His work. Christians have no more business using musical instruments in public worship than using priestly vestments, candles, incense, altars, and a sacerdotal priesthood.¹⁶ Roman Catholics are simply being

“And it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. Then the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two” (Luke 23:44-45). The cacophony of sound *during* the sacrifice in the central sanctuary was dramatic and awe inspiring. The supernatural events surrounding the sacrifice of Christ were awesome and terrifying. “Now when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’” (Matt. 27:54).

¹⁵ G. I. Williamson, *Instrumental Music in the Worship of God: Commanded or Not Commanded?*, pp. 7-8. “Let it be understood in the outset, that if we fail to show to the satisfaction of the instrumentalists the particular *thing* typified by instrumental music, the argument for the ceremonial feature of it by no mean fails. For we affirm that the definite meaning of many ceremonial rites and things has never been satisfactorily determined, either by modern Jewish, or Christian learning. Typology is a system of prophecy. Types ‘prefigure, while prophets foretell,’ the same things, and if the definite meaning of many prophecies cannot be ascertained, much less can that of many of the types” (D.W. Collins, pp. 57-58). Fairbairn writes, “We are far from pretending to master every difficulty connected with the practical management of the subject, and reducing it all too clear and undoubtful certainty. No one will expect this who rightly understands its nature and considers either the vastness of the field over which it stretches, or the peculiar character of the ground which it embraces” (cited by Collins, p. 58).

¹⁶ John Calvin concurs, “I have no doubt that playing upon cymbals, touching the harp and the viol, and all that kind of music, which is so frequently mentioned in the Psalms, was a part of the education; that is to say, the puerile [i.e., immature] instruction of the law: I speak of the stated service of the temple. For even now, if believers choose to cheer themselves with musical instruments, they should, I think, make it their object not to dissever their cheerfulness from the praises of God. But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which

consistent when they incorporate all the abrogated ‘shadows’ into their system of worship. Girardeau writes, “Those who have most urgently insisted upon it [musical instruments in public worship] have acted with logical consistency in importing priests into the New Testament church; and as priests suppose sacrifices, lo, the sacrifice of the Mass! Instrumental music may not seem to stand upon the same foot with that monstrous corruption, but the principle which underlies both is the same; and *that* whether we are content with a single instrument, the cornet, the bass-viol, the organ, or go on by a natural development to the orchestral art, the cathedral pomps, and all the spectacular magnificence of Rome. We are Christians, and we are untrue to Christ and to the Spirit of grace when we resort to the abrogated and forbidden ritual of the Jewish temple.”¹⁷

Reformed Christians should note that even if these Old Testament passages did authorize the use of musical instruments in the new covenant era they would only authorize certain instruments and no others. Silver trumpets were specifically authorized by God in the days of Moses (Num. 10:1, 2, 10); and stringed instruments, harps, and cymbals (the instruments of David, 2 Chron. 29:26) were authorized for use under King David (1 Chron. 15:16; 23:5; 28:13, 19; 2 Chron. 29:25-27, etc.). Some scholars (based on passages such as 2 Samuel 6:5 and Psalm 150) also include the pipe or flute. The Bible indicates that the choice of these instruments and even their design was not arbitrary. The Levites had to use only those instruments chosen by God. Nowhere in the Bible can one find authorization for pianos, organs, violins, bass guitars, six-string guitars, drum sets, and so on. If one wants to infer from the Levitical use of stringed instruments that guitars, banjos, violins, and bass guitars are permitted in public worship, then he has a major problem. Why? Because the two stringed instruments that God authorized for public worship (the *kinnôr* and the *nêbel*) had ten (cf. Ps. 33:2; 92:3; 144:9) eight (according to the titles to Psalm 6 and 12), and possibly 12 (according to Josephus) strings, not four or six. Furthermore, modern basses and guitars bear no resemblance to these ancient instruments. If (as noted above) the instruments of David were introduced and designed under divine inspiration, then churches that claim to adhere to the regulative principle (that point to the Levitical use as justification for the use of instruments today) should make a serious attempt to reproduce these ancient instruments.¹⁸

God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to him” (*Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Vol. 1, p. 539).

¹⁷ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, p. 79.

¹⁸ The two types of stringed instruments used in public worship by the Levites were the *kinnôr* and the *nêbel*. The names of musical instruments in the Bible are the torment of translators. The word *kinnôr* is translated various as: “lyre” (RSV, NIV); “harp” (KJV, NKJV, NEB) and “psaltery” (KJV, NKJV). *Nêbel* is translated as “harp” (NIV, RSV), “Lute” (RSV, NEB, KJV, NKJV), “psaltery” (KJV) and “viol” (KJV). “According to Josephus the *kinnôr* had ten strings and was played with a plectrum [i.e., a small piece of metal, ivory or horn which a musician uses to strike the strings of an instrument] but David played his lyre ‘with his hand’ when comforting Saul (I Samuel 16:23) which suggests that the *kinnôr* was also plucked in order to produce a softer, more soothing sound. The pictorial remains show lyre players with and without plectra, and the Greek *kithera* was played both ways. The *nêbel* is virtually always mentioned together with the *kinnôr*-lyre, and must have had a similar or at least complementary character. Comparing the two, the Mishna states that the strings of the *nêbel* were made of a sheep’s large intestine, those of the *kinnôr* of its small intestine (Kinnim iii. 6). Having thicker strings, the instrument’s register was therefore presumably lower and its sound possibly louder than that of the *kinnôr*.... According to Josephus...the *nêbel* had twelve tones and was played with the finger. □ Sukkah 5:6 states merely that the *nêbel* had more strings than the *kinnôr*.... The term *asôr*, lit. ‘ten’, appears only in Psalms, twice describing the *nêbel* (33:2; 144:9)” (D. A. Foxvog and A. D. Kilmer in “General Education,” Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986 [1915]), Vol.3 pp. 441-442). Given the scriptural and historical evidence there may have been two versions of the *kinnôr* (eight- and ten-string) and two versions of the *nêbel* (ten- and twelve-

All Old Testament Examples of the Use of Musical Instruments in Public Worship are Ceremonial

Those seeking a divine warrant for the use of musical instruments in public worship certainly cannot appeal to their Levitical, priestly, ceremonial use in the temple during the sacrifice as a justification for their use today. But, are there not instances of the use of musical instruments in public worship outside of the temple? Yes. A careful examination of the Old Testament reveals only *five* recorded instances of the lawful use of musical instruments in public worship outside of the temple:

1. The moving of the ark of God to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15:14-28).
2. The dedication ceremony held at the completion of Solomon's temple (2 Chron. 5:11-14).
3. The dedication ceremony held at the completion of the foundation of the second temple (Ezra 3:10-11).
4. The dedication ceremony held at the completion of the wall of Jerusalem (Neh. 12:27-43).
5. The triumphal procession to Jerusalem and the temple after the Lord's miraculous defeat of the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir (2 Chron. 20:27-28).

These instances are the *only* hope for those who seek a scriptural warrant for musical instruments from the Old Testament.¹⁹ Can one find a non-ceremonial, non-Levitical use of musical instruments in these instances? No. There are a number of reasons why the use of musical instruments in these instances must be considered ceremonial. First, note that in each instance only the Levites were permitted to play the instruments (1 Chron. 15:16-24; 2 Chron. 5:12-13; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:35-36).²⁰ Second, the priests and Levites only played instruments that were authorized by God: the silver trumpets of Moses and the instruments of David (1 Chron. 15:16, 28; 2 Chron. 5:12; 20:28; Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:27, 36). Third, each instance was either connected with the ark, the temple, or the wall protecting the central sanctuary. The victory procession recorded in 2 Chronicles 20 ended at the temple (v. 28). The dedication ceremonies with the

string). Or there may have been three versions of the *nêbel* (eight-, ten-, and twelve-string). If the strings of the *kinnôr* were struck with a piece of ivory or metal, it would more resemble the modern harpsichord than a guitar.

¹⁹ The author has not included the crowning of Joash: "Now when Athaliah heard the noise of the people running and praising the king, she came to the people in the temple of the LORD. And when she looked, there was the king standing by his pillar at the entrance; and the leaders and the trumpeters were by the king. There were all the people of the land, rejoicing and blowing trumpets, also the singers with instruments of music and those who led in praise. So Athaliah tore her clothes and said, "Treason! Treason!" (2 Chron. 23:12-13). Although this event occurred at the temple and the Levites played musical instruments and sang, this event does not appear to be a worship service but a public coronation of some sort. Furthermore, it is not clear if the people were just praising the new king, or praising the king and then praising Jehovah. What is clear is that the thesis of this book is supported by 2 Chronicles 23:18, "Also Jehoiada appointed the oversight of the house of the LORD to the hand of the priests, the Levites, whom David had assigned in the house of the LORD, to offer the burnt offerings of the LORD, as it is written in the Law of Moses, with rejoicing and with singing, as it was established by David." Those Old Covenant saints (unlike most modern Presbyterian denominations and seminary professors) held to a rigid, strict, uncompromising view of the regulative principle of worship.

²⁰ The only exception is that of King David who dressed in the linen ephod and robe of the priest (1 Chron. 15:27), played music (15:29), and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings with the priests (1 Chron. 16:1-2). David (in a more unique manner than other Old Testament kings who offered sacrifice) became a priest for the occasion. "David seemed to be the leader in the service, and, therefore, put on the garb of a priest, perhaps indicating that he had the divine commission to introduce the new ingredients into the temple service, of which this was a part, as Moses introduced the original service of the tabernacle" (D. W. Collins p. 29).

Levitical use of instruments never occurred outside of Jerusalem, the site of the temple—the central place of sacrifice. Fourth, the dedication services involved sacrifices and burnt offerings (1 Chron. 16:1-2; 2 Chron. 7:1, 5-6; Neh. 12:43). In fact, the burnt offerings and peace offerings were the climaxes of these services. Furthermore all of these instances occurred in unique historical circumstances. They were extraordinary services involving the civil magistrate, the Levitical priesthood, the whole nation, and were all intimately tied to the temple cultus. These instances of the use of musical instruments in public worship are obviously ceremonial,²¹ and thus are of no use to those seeking warrant for pianos, organs and guitars.

The account of the use of musical instruments in the book of Ezra proves that godly Jews followed the regulative principle of worship. “When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the ordinance of David king of Israel” (Ezra 3:10). Note that over 400 years after the death of King David the Spirit-inspired instructions that he gave regarding worship are still in force and strictly followed. Not only were the Levites using the same instruments ordered by God under David, but the Levitical family of Asaph was still in charge of using the cymbals (cf. 1 Chron. 15:19). Fensham writes,

In these verses the celebrations are described after the foundation had been laid. The leading role was played by the priests and Levites. The priests were clad in their typical vestments (cf. Ex. 28; 2 Chron. 5:12; 20:21) and they blew the trumpets. The Levites played on the cymbals (cf. Ps. 150:5), which consisted of two metal plates with which they gave the beat (cf. 2 Chron. 15:16, 19; 16:5; 25:1-6; 2 Chron. 7:6). According to the author this was done as David prescribed. He was at this stage regarded as the most important figure who initiated music in the cult.²²

The account in Ezra is indisputable proof that the civil and religious leaders of the Jewish nation regarded the introduction of musical instruments into public worship as commanded by God and a permanent aspect of the temple system.

²¹ Of all the instances cited, 2 Chronicles 20:28 is the best hope for those seeking a non-Levitical use of instruments for we are not specifically told who played the instruments. The passage does not even specifically say that the instruments were played. However, the context clearly implies that the instruments were played by the Levites. In chapter 20 Judah faced a grave crisis, for a great multitude from these nations was coming to attack Judah (vv.1-2). The king and all Judah gathered at the temple to fast, pray and seek the LORD (vv. 3-13). The Lord answered through Jahaziel, a Levite of the sons of Asaph (v. 14 ff.). The Lord’s instructions were very specific (v. 16 ff.). After the LORD spoke through Jahaziel, the king and people bowed before the LORD and the Levitical singers (the Kohathites and Korahites, the sons of Korah, who was a grandson of Kohath [cf. 1 Chron.6:7, 22; 20:37f.]) stood and praised the LORD. The next day the people arose early and proceeded from Jerusalem and the LORD Himself defeats the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir. What is interesting is that the Levites go before the army singing praise (v. 21). After the LORD kills all their enemies, they return to Jerusalem and the temple “with stringed instruments and harps and trumpets.” The whole chapter reads as though the temple worship continues before the army, leaves Jerusalem and then after the battle returns to the temple. It is as though God leaves His holy house crushes Judah’s enemies, and then returns to His house. Those who don’t think that the singers were Levites should note that verse 21 says the king appointed “those who should sing praise to the LORD.” This is an obvious reference to the guild of Levitical singers. Furthermore, verse 28, which implies the proceedings ended at the temple, names only those instruments appointed by David for use by the Levites and priests for the temple worship. This is not coincidence. Whatever one’s interpretation of chapter 20 is, these unusual events are clearly not normative for our New Covenant congregational singing anyway.

²² F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], p. 64.

Synagogue Worship

If one wants to find a non-Levitical, non-ceremonial use of musical instruments in public worship, the most logical place to look would be the worship conducted in the synagogue. Why? Because unlike the temple worship, which contained much that was ceremonial, typical, and temporary, the worship of the synagogue was *non-typical* or symbolic. “The reading and exposition of the divine Word, *hortatory*, addresses the singing of psalms and the contribution of alms as elements of worship which cannot be regarded as types foreshadowing substantial realities to come. They belong to the class: essential and permanent.”²³ “The worship of the synagogue was very different from that of the Temple, in that it had no sacerdotal rituals and supported no sacrosanct priesthood.”²⁴ Since synagogue worship did not involve any of the ceremonial rituals of the temple, and since a study of the use of musical instruments in public worship in the old covenant shows that their use was ceremonial and Levitical, one would expect that synagogue worship would be practiced *without* the use of musical instruments. Indeed, that is exactly the case!²⁵ The Jews did *not* use instruments in public worship but sang psalms *a cappella* because they regarded instrumental music in worship as belonging to the temple. “In his great work *On the Ancient Synagogue*, Vitringa shows that there were only two instruments of sound used in connection with the synagogue, and that these were employed, not in worship or along with it as an accompaniment, but as *publishing signals*—first, for proclaiming the new year; secondly, for announcing the beginning of the Sabbath; thirdly, for publishing the sentence of excommunication; and fourthly, for heralding fasts. These were their sole uses. There were no sacrifices over which they were to be blown, as in the tabernacle and temple. And from the nature of the instruments it is plain that they could not have accompanied the voice in singing. They were only of two kinds—trumpets (*tubae*), and rams’ horns or cornets (*buccinae*). It had but one note, and was so easy to blow that a child could sound it. Further, they were, for the most part, used not even in connection with the synagogue buildings, but were blown from the roofs of houses, so as to be heard at a distance.”²⁶

Instrumental music was not introduced in synagogue worship until the nineteenth century.²⁷ The argument used to introduce music into synagogue worship by the Jews supports

²³ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, p.48.

²⁴ W. White, Jr., in Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), Vol. 5, p.556.

²⁵ M. C. Ramsay writes, “Those who maintain that Jewish worship had associated with it instruments of music fail to appreciate the facts; and some of the facts are as follows: The ordinary worship of the Jew was that of the synagogue, and it was *always* unembellished. The men of Israel were commanded to attend the temple worship only thrice annually. Throughout the remainder of the year, Sabbath by Sabbath, they met for worship in their synagogues. Their wives and children attended regularly the synagogue where the services were marked by simplicity. In the synagogue where there was congregational singing, there was no musical instrument” (*Purity of Worship*, Presbyterian Church of East Australia, 1968, p.11).

²⁶ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, pp.39-40.

²⁷ “Some Christians direct attention to the fact that in many Jewish synagogues in these days, instrumental music accompanies the congregational singing. In this connection the following statements of Rabbi R. Brasch of Sydney should prove helpful. ‘There are no definite records as to the actual introduction of instrumental music into the synagogue until 1810, when Reform Temples in Germany did so for the first time.... In the present-day world, orthodox synagogues still abstain from instrumental music...but every Liberal and Reform Temple accompany the congregational singing and the choir on an organ.’ It is both interesting and informative to notice that the instruments of music were first used in synagogues at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that is, about the same time as they began to be introduced into Protestant [i.e., Presbyterian] churches” (M.C. Ramsay, *Purity of Worship*, p 12).

the position that the use of music in public worship in the Bible is ceremonial. The Jews who introduced music in synagogue worship argued that music was played during the sacrifice in the temple. But since the temple has been destroyed (A.D. 70), God accepts the prayers of His people as a sacrifice, as atonement. Thus, in their minds, music should be in the house of prayer just as it accompanied the animal sacrifices. Although this argument is unscriptural and is based on human merit as a replacement for blood atonement, it at least recognizes the connection between instrumental music and the sacrificial cultus. The more strict Jews (the Orthodox) still do not use musical instruments in their worship because they recognize that it was restricted to the Levitical-temple system of worship.

The fact that the temple used musical instruments while the synagogues did not is significant, for the first Christian churches were closely patterned after the synagogue. “The most important legacy of the first century synagogue was the form and organization of the apostolic Church.”²⁸ In fact, with the large numbers of Jews who were saved and baptized in Jerusalem in the early days of the church, it is likely that some synagogues became Christian churches.²⁹ “Thus, it comes as no surprise to find no musical instruments in the worship of the early Christian church. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the witness to this ‘rejection of all musical instruments is consistent among the Fathers.’”³⁰ “The early Christians followed the example of the synagogue. When they celebrated the praise of God in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, their melody was the fruit of their lips.”³¹

Musical Instruments and the Psalms

Most people who argue for the use of musical instruments in public worship today do not use the passages from the Chronicles for justification of their practice, but instead quote the references to musical instruments from the book of Psalms.³² The problem with this approach is

²⁸ W. White, Jr., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5, p. 556. “The term ‘synagogue’ is used in the gospels over thirty times while an even greater frequency appears in Acts. It is assumed in both the Talmudic literature and the N.T. that this was the valid leadership and execution of Judaism, no matter whether it was in Jerusalem or in Corinth” (*ibid.*). Although the beginning of synagogue worship is shrouded in mystery, the fact that Jesus Christ and the apostles worshiped in various synagogues and even expounded the word in them proves that God recognized their legitimacy (i.e., they had divine warrant).

²⁹ According to the Talmud there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the second temple (A.D. 70). If women and children are factored in, there were probably over 15,000 converts in Jerusalem within a few weeks after Pentecost. However, most of the converts in Jerusalem would soon be dispersed by a severe Jewish persecution of Christians.

³⁰ G. I. Williamson, *Instrumental Worship in the Worship of God: Commanded or Not Commanded?*, p. 11.

³¹ Robert B. McCracken, *What About Musical Instruments in Worship?* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, n.d.), tract.

³² For example Gordon H. Clark writes, “On one occasion I attended a Covenanter church for several Sundays. The auditorium was filled to capacity. The singing was vigorous. The preaching was superb. At the end of the service the congregation burst forth with Psalm 150. It was all new to me, and I could hardly refrain from laughing. Read Psalm 150 and compare, or contrast, what the Psalm commands and what the Covenanters did not do. Not that I wish to ridicule the Covenanters: I wish other denominations were half so good” (*Ephesians* [Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985], pp. 181-182). Clark’s statement reveals that he is not really familiar with the biblical arguments against the use of musical instruments in public worship. The fact that Gordon H. Clark, a conservative Presbyterian, an ordained minister and excellent scholar, did not know the arguments regarding instrumental music in worship shows the declension of modern conservative Presbyterianism in the area of biblical worship. Furthermore (as noted above), the denominations that use pianos, guitars, and organs are certainly not obeying Psalm 150, even if it did apply to today for these modern instruments are not mentioned in the Psalms.

that the Psalms often speak of the worship of Jehovah using ceremonial types. The Psalms speak of offering sacrifice (Ps. 20:3; 54:6; 107:22; 118:27), burnt offerings (Ps. 20:3; 50:8; 51:19; 66:13, 15), the altar (Ps. 26:6; 43:4; 51:19; 118:27), God's house—the temple (Ps. 101:2; 122:1). The Psalms speak of walking within God's house (Ps. 101:2), of going into the house of Jehovah (Ps. 122:1), of worshiping toward God's holy temple (Ps. 5:7; 138:8), and of inquiring in God's temple (Ps. 27:4). Orthodox Christians do not use the passages in the psalms that speak of sacrifices and burnt offerings as proof texts for offering sacrifices in church because they know from other portions of Scripture that these duties belonged to the Levitical priesthood and were part of the ceremonial temple system that has been fulfilled and superseded by Christ. Likewise, the clear historical passages of Scripture that discuss the use of musical instruments in public worship teach that their use was ceremonial.³³ Therefore, the Psalm passages that speak of music in public worship do not justify their use today. For if they did, the passages that speak of burnt offerings could be used to introduce animal sacrifices into today's worship. Their "argument from the Psalms proves too much and is therefore worthless."³⁴ Girardeau writes, "If, now, the argument holds good, which is derived from the Psalms in support of the use of instruments in the public worship of the Christian church, it equally holds in justification of the offering of bloody sacrifices in that worship. The absurdity of the consequence completely refutes the argument."³⁵ Their only hope would be to prove from the synagogue worship that instruments also had a non-ceremonial worship function or to find warrant for musical instruments in public worship in the New Testament. The synagogue worship (as noted above) did not involve any musical instruments at all. The New Testament does not authorize the use of musical instruments in Christian public worship.³⁶ G. I. Williamson writes, "The fundamentalists speak of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, and thus take seriously the fact that this Old Testament worship was commanded by God. If we are going to revive ceremonial worship, in other words, then let us at least be careful to restore it exactly as it was commanded. Let us not pick and choose as we will.

³³ "We may go further, and not only admit, but affirm, that the terms 'sing' and 'song' are terms which, as used by the Jews, and especially by David in introducing the praise service for temple use, included the whole service of the trumpets, harps, cymbals, psalteries, and the voice. It is the language describing the one sound—the lifting up of the horn, as clearly the symbolical expression of praise as the incense was the symbolical expression of prayer. When the Psalmist says, 'I will sing with a psaltery,' he no more means the literal and personal use of the psaltery, apart from its ceremonial character, than when saying, 'I will sacrifice,' he means that he would offer sacrifices apart from their ceremonial use, or than that he himself would burn incense when he says, 'I will offer unto thee burnt sacrifices of fatlings with incense.' We repeat, that the whole system of ceremonial allusions, including their lyrical feature, was necessarily interwoven with the Psalms, and imbedded in them, as the result of their having been ceremonially employed" (D. W. Collins, p.65).

³⁴ John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, p. 77.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.78.

³⁶ John Calvin also argues that the discussion of musical instruments in the psalms refers to a ceremonial use. His commentary on Psalm 71:22 says, "In speaking of employing *the psaltery* and *the harp* in this exercise, he alludes to the generally prevailing custom of that time. To sing the praises of God upon the harp and psaltery unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law, and of the services of God under that dispensation of shadows and figures; but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving" (Vol. 3, p.98). Regarding Psalm 92:3, Calvin says, "In the [third] verse, he more immediately addresses the Levites, who were appointed to the office of singers, and calls upon them to employ their instruments of music—not as if this in itself was necessary, only it was useful as an elementary aid to the people of God in these ancient times. A difference is to be observed in this respect between his people under the Old and under the New Testament; for now that Christ has appeared, and the Church has reached full age, it were only to bury the light of the Gospel, should we introduce the shadows of a departed dispensation" (Vol. 3, pp. 494-495). His comments on Psalm 149:3 concur: "The musical instruments he mentions were peculiar to this infancy of the Church, nor should we foolishly imitate a practice which was intended only for God's ancient people" (Vol. 5, p. 312).

That the fundamentalist is mistaken, however, in expecting a restoration of that which is passed away is perfectly plain.”³⁷

The section of Scripture most often alluded to as a justification for the use of instruments in new covenant public worship is Psalm 150: “Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; praise Him with the lute and harp! Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; praise Him with stringed instrument and flutes! Praise Him with loud cymbals; praise Him with high sounding cymbals!” (vs. 2-5). People who appeal to Psalm 150 as a justification for the use of musical instruments in new covenant worship violate a number of standard interpretive procedures. First, what did this Psalm mean to the original old covenant Jewish audience? Did the Jews use this Psalm and other such Psalms as a justification for the introduction of musical instruments in their synagogue worship? No. They most certainly did not. Jewish synagogues did not use musical instruments in praise until 1810.

Second, this scripture can only be used as a justification for new covenant worship if it is isolated from the rest of the Bible. Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture. The broad context of Scripture teaches that: dancing and taboret playing were performed outdoors during festive occasions by women (Ex. 15:20; Jud. 11:34; 21:21; 1 Sam. 18:6; 22:11; 29:5; Jer. 31:4); only priests were authorized to play trumpets in worship (Nu. 10:8,10; 2 Chron. 5:11-14; 29:26; Ezra 3:10; and, harps, lyres and cymbals were only authorized to be played by Levites (1 Chron. 15:14-24, 23:5, 28:11-13, 19; 2 Chron. 5:11-14; 20:27-28; 29 :25-27; Neh. 12:27, etc.).³⁸ To completely ignore the Old Testament teaching regarding the use of instruments in worship when referring to Psalm 150 as a proof text for new covenant praise is sloppy exegesis and an illegitimate method of using a proof text.

Third, people who use this passage as authorization for musical instruments also ignore the immediate context. Is this passage meant to be taken literally? Or is it a poetic way of speaking of God’s people offering dedicated, fervent praise throughout the earth? If one takes this passage literally, then not only does it blatantly contradict the rest of the Old Testament’s teaching regarding musical instruments in worship, but it also teaches that every believer should play musical instruments during worship (an absurd notion). Furthermore, it would teach that the heathen and brute creatures also are to praise Jehovah. Regarding Psalm 150:3, Calvin writes, “I do not insist upon the words in Hebrew signifying the musical instrument [in other words they may just be poetic metaphors exhorting believers to great praise]; only let the reader remember that sundry different kinds are here mentioned, which were in use under the legal economy, the more forcibly to teach the children of God that they cannot apply themselves too diligently to the praises of God.”³⁹

Given the fact that Psalm 150 incorporates the instrumentation of the temple, the taboret playing and dancing of victory celebrations as well as instruments only used upon secular

³⁷ G. I. Williamson, *Instrumental Worship: Commanded or Not Commanded?*, pp. 9-10.

³⁸ It should be noted that the Old Testament does use ceremonial types to prophetically describe the non-ceremonial-spiritual worship in the new covenant era: “for from the rising of the sun, even to the going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations.” (Mal. 1:11). “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” (Isa. 2:2-3). These passages are mentioned to dispel the notion of some that Psalm 150 is prophetic of the “celebrative” worship that will be worldwide in the new covenant era.

³⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 5:320.

occasions (e.g., v. 4: “stringed instruments” [*minnim*] and “flutes” [*‘ugabh*]); coupled with the exhortation for everything that breathes to praise Jehovah it should be rather obvious that this Psalm was not meant to be used as a literal instruction guide for public worship. Psalm 150 is an exhortation expressed in poetic language, teaching that everyone in heaven and on earth should praise Jehovah with every fiber of his being. (Furthermore, as noted above, the Jews of the old dispensation did not regard Psalm 150 as authorizing the use of instruments in public worship outside of the Temple.)

Those who seek authorization for musical instruments in Psalm 150 should also take note of the word sanctuary in verse one: “Praise God in His sanctuary.” If one is going to use Psalm 150 as proof for the use of musical instruments in new covenant public worship, then one has an obligation to use all the specific instruments commanded and one must also use liturgical dance. Presbyterian pastors who appeal to this Psalm as authorization cannot (according to their own use of it) forbid taboret (tambourine) playing and dancing in the aisles during their worship services.

A biblical view of Psalm 150 is more readily found in the older Presbyterian and Reformed commentators. The Covenanter David Dickson writes of verse 3 through 5: “Here are other six exhortations, teaching the manner of praising God under the shadow of typical music, appointed in the ceremonial law. Whence learn. 1. Albeit the typical ceremonies of musical instruments in God’s public worship, belonging to the pedagogy of the church, in her minority before Christ, be now abolished with the rest of the ceremonies; yet the moral duties shadowed forth by them, are still to be studied, because this duty of praising God, and praising him with all our mind, strength, and soul, is moral, whereunto we are perpetually obliged.”⁴⁰ Matthew Henry writes,

In what manner this tribute must be paid, with all the kinds of musical instruments that were then used in the temple-service, v. 3-5.... Our concern is to know...that, various instruments being used in praising God, it should be done with exact and perfect harmony; they must not hinder, but help one another. The New Testament concern, instead of this, is with one mind and one mouth to glorify God, Rom xv.6.... He began with a call to those who had a place in his sanctuary and were employed in the temple-service; but he concludes with a call to all the children of men, in prospect of the time when the Gentiles should be taken into the church, and in every place, as acceptably as at Jerusalem, this incense should be offered, Mal. i.2.”⁴¹

The Reformed Baptist scholar John Gill writes, “Praise him with the psalter; to which songs were sung. And harps which were instruments, both were used in divine worship under the former dispensation; and in which David was well skilled and delighted and appointed proper persons to praise with them, 1 Chron. xv. 20,21. They were typical of the spiritual melody made in the hearts of God’s people, while they were praising him in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, under the Gospel, Ephes. v.19.”⁴²

The New Testament and Musical Instruments

Thus far it has been noted that the use of musical instruments in Old Covenant public worship was Levitical and ceremonial. It was intimately connected with the tabernacle and

⁴⁰ David Dickson, *The Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1959 [1653-5]) 2:536.

⁴¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, N.D. [1710]) 3:788-789.

⁴² John Gill, *Exposition of the Old Testament* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1979 [1910]) 4:327.

temple. It was also noted that the public worship that occurred weekly in the Jewish synagogue occurred *without* musical accompaniment. The Jews until modern times considered the use of musical instruments to belong solely to the worship of the temple. Since the Bible explicitly teaches that every element of worship must have divine warrant, those who use musical instruments in public worship must find warrant in the New Testament. Does the New Testament authorize instrumental music in public worship? No. There is not a shred of evidence in the New Testament for the use of musical instruments.⁴³ Their use is not commanded nor is there even one historical example of their use in the apostolic church. This should come as no surprise, given the fact that the new covenant church was closely patterned after the synagogue, which did not use musical instruments, and the overwhelming Old Testament evidence that musical instruments served as ceremonial types.

Although the New Testament does not authorize the use of musical instruments in public worship, it is not silent regarding the worship of God. The author of Hebrews says, “Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name” (13:15). “Animal sacrifices had been rendered forever obsolete by the sacrifice of Christ, but the sacrifice of thanksgiving might still be offered to God, and indeed should be offered to Him by all who appreciated the perfect sacrifice of Christ. No longer in association with animal sacrifices, but through Jesus. The sacrifice of praise was acceptable to God.”⁴⁴ Since Christians praise God through Christ and His perfect sacrifice and not with ceremonial types (e.g., incense, candles, musical instruments), they are to speak “to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, *singing and making melody in your hearts to the LORD*” (Eph. 5:19). “The Greek word for ‘make music’ is *psallo*, which means originally ‘to pluck the strings of an instrument.’ This gives a beautiful picture of what true and acceptable praise of God really is. Since the word *psallo* cannot be separated from the word ‘heart,’ it literally means ‘plucking the strings of your heart to the LORD.’ When the music of the heart is expressed through lips that confess the LORD’s name, there is no need for supporting instruments.”⁴⁵ “The Levitical rites required God’s earthly people to provide material offerings: but the Christian’s ‘sacrifices’ are entirely spiritual in their character.”⁴⁶ D. W. Collins writes,

It may be proper to remind the reader that the Apostle has shown the Hebrews that their ceremonial system has passed away, and that he incidentally refers in the ninth verse to the sacrifices offered at the altar, and affirms in the tenth verse that we have an altar in the present dispensation of which they have no right to partake, who cling to the ceremonial dispensation. As the bodies of beasts whose blood was used in the sanctuary or temple were burned without

⁴³ “To account for the silence of the New Testament respecting the use of instruments in worship, we think it clear that they were appointed for the temple, and as a companion to the sacrifice; that with these they were connected, and with these they ceased; in fact, that when ‘the tabernacle of David’ fell [Amos 9:11; Isa. 16:5; Acts 15:15-17, etc], the Davidic appointment of Levites fell with it. In reply, attempts are made to show that this instrumental service has a place in the synagogue. But this involves an immense difficulty—that as the synagogue furnished the general platform of ecclesiastical order in the Christian Church, if instruments belonged to the former, they should have had their place in the latter. But this is not accordant with the fact that the apostolic Church did not use them, nor the post-apostolic Church for several centuries. For the use of musical instruments in the synagogue the evidence is very evanescent—is indeed nothing. It is certain that the New Testament supplies none” (James Glasgow, *Heart and Voices: Instrumental Music in Christian Worship Not Divinely Authorized*, [Belfast: C. Aithchison; J. Cleeland, N.D.], p.12).

⁴⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p 405.

⁴⁵ Robert B. McCracken, *What About Musical Instruments in Worship?*.

⁴⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), p. 1217.

the camp, so Christ suffered without the gate—turned His back upon the ceremonial service, as no longer profitable. The Hebrews are, therefore, exhorted to follow Him by forsaking the literal Jerusalem, with all its ceremonial associations—going forth without the camp, bearing His reproach. No doubt this reproach, in the experience of a Hebrew, would be his forsaking the ritual, which was the pride of the Jews, and accepting the simple service of the gospel, which distinguished the followers of Jesus.⁴⁷

All the types of the temple (the continual burning of incense, the sacrificing of animals, the playing of musical instruments during the sacrifice, etc.) have been put away by the reality—Christ. Therefore, Christians pray and praise without the incense and musical instruments but with the lips alone.

The glory of the temple with its visible display and audible grandeur no doubt stimulated the senses and inspired awe, but now that Christ has come and instituted New Testament ordinances our focus is to be wholly upon Him—the reality. The simple unadorned worship of the gospel era brings us into the presence of the greater temple—Jesus Christ—as we sing divine songs, hear the word of God, listen to the preaching, and feast spiritually upon Christ’s body. Putting shadows, incense, musical instruments, vestments, altars, etc., into new covenant worship merely serves to hide Christ and His glory under obsolete externalities. “To do so would be a grievous dishonour to the Lord Jesus, for it would indicate a greater appreciation of the type than of the glorious archetype, the Savior Himself.”⁴⁸

Some believers have attempted to find divine warrant for the use of musical instruments from the book of Revelation. The book does mention the use of harps (Rev. 5:8; 14:2; 15:2) in heaven. The problem with this approach is that Revelation frequently uses Old Testament types and symbols to dramatically portray new covenant realities. John continually refers to Jesus Christ as “the lamb” (Rev. 5:6, 8, 12- 13; 6:1, 16; 7:9- 10, 14; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1, 4, 10, etc.). He refers to the Church as “the temple” (3:12; 11:1-2) and the “New Jerusalem” (3:12; 21:2, 10). John mentions the “ark of His covenant” (11:19) and even describes an altar (6:9; 8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7). Is John speaking of a literal altar? No. Philip Hughes writes, “Furthermore, when he says that he saw them *under the altar* [v. 9], this should not be taken to mean that there is a literal altar in the heavenly realm. The altar of sacrifice in the Mosaic system with its priesthood and offerings, pointed forward typologically to the altar of the cross, where Christ, both High Priest and Victim, offered Himself up for us sinners.”⁴⁹ The book of Revelation mentions incense (8:4), but John specifically says that the incense is *symbolic* of the prayers of the saints. John refers to the use of trumpets (1:10; 4:1; 8:13; 9:14), but in each instance the trumpets symbolize voices or announcements of judgment. “John did not hear a literal trumpet, but the sound of a voice likened to the sound of a trumpet (4:1). Similarly, the music that John heard (14:2, Greek text) was not the sound of harps. It was the sound of human voices likened to harpers harping with their harps.”⁵⁰ As incense represented the prayers of God’s people, the harps represented the praise of the saints. “The very employment of these ceremonial symbols—taken, as they are, from an abrogated system—further confirms the fact that they are not any part of New Testament worship.”⁵¹ Therefore, the book of Revelation no more authorizes the use of musical instruments in public worship than it does incense, altars, trumpets, or sacrificial

⁴⁷ D. W. Collins, *Musical Instruments in Divine Worship*, p. 77.

⁴⁸ M. C. Ramsay, *Purity of Worship*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of the Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 88.

⁵⁰ G. I. Williamson, *Instrumental Music in the Worship of God*, p. 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

temples. One cannot arbitrarily accept one without accepting the others also. Popery is at least consistent in accepting all the types.

Conclusion

An examination of God's scriptural law of worship and the use of musical instruments in public worship in the Bible can lead to only one conclusion. The use of musical instruments in the public worship of God in the new covenant era is without biblical authorization and is unscriptural. The biblical evidence that the use of musical instruments in public worship was Levitical, ceremonial, and typical is crystal clear and overwhelming. It is a tragedy that many Christians think they are worshipping God acceptably when they are engaging in worship practices that are not of divine appointment, which therefore cannot please Jehovah. "[T]here is nothing which God, in His blessed word, defends with more exquisite jealousy than his worship; as there is nothing that he rebukes with more severity than the impertinent assumption of man to determine forms of worship for himself."⁵²

This conclusion will not be acceptable to many in Reformed circles today. To such people we ask: please produce divine authorization for the use of musical instruments in public worship; show us even one command or historical example that is not ceremonial and typical. We are not prejudiced against musical instruments and their use at appropriate times; we simply cannot find a shred of biblical evidence that they are to be used in new covenant public worship.

Some will simply wrench a few references to musical instruments from the Psalms out of their biblical and historical context as a pretext, but most will attack the scriptural law of worship itself. They will either openly abandon it by relegating it to a former dispensation,⁵³ or they simply redefine it, rendering it virtually useless to hold back human autonomy and innovations in worship. This attack is wicked Scripture twisting, but logical for those in love with human traditions. Why? Because the regulative principle (biblically understood) is the foundation of true Reformed and Presbyterian worship. Abandon it, or redefine it, and declension is inevitable. Why? Because all men, even regenerate men, are sinners, who if left to themselves will eventually pollute and corrupt the worship of God. The history of Israel and the Christian church prove this point. "The great lesson taught by the history of image-worship and the reverencing of relics is the importance of adhering to the Word of God as the only rule of our faith and practice,

⁵² Thomas E. Peek, *Miscellanies* (Richmond, VA: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1895), Vol. 1, pp. 68-69.

⁵³ Douglas Wilson (in *Credenda/Agenda*) has argued that the regulative principle applied only to the temple and thus has no bearing whatsoever on Christian worship. Such an argument however, completely ignores the scriptural testimony regarding both old and new covenant worship. The clearest statement in Scripture of the regulative principle (Deut. 12:32) is a very broad command and is not in any way restricted to the tabernacle. Furthermore, it is obvious from the many passages discussed in this book that the regulative principle was applied to situations that had nothing to do with the tabernacle or temple (e.g., Gen. 4:3-5; Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 1 Kings 12:26-33; Matt. 15:1-3; Col. 2:20-33). Jesus applied the regulative principle to the Pharisees for adding ritual washings to God's law that took place in the home and had nothing to do with the temple (Matt. 15:1-3). The apostle Paul believed in the abiding validity of God's regulative principle and even applied it explicitly to the Colossian church (Col. 2:20-33). The Jews who returned from Babylon believed that the regulative principle was to be applied beyond temple worship for they applied it specifically to the synagogue worship. They did not use musical instruments in the synagogue because they recognized that they were only authorized for the temple worship. Pastors and scholars who advocate musical instruments in public worship, extra-biblical holy days (e.g., Christmas) and uninspired hymnody find themselves in the precarious position of having to defend what is scripturally indefensible. The result is brilliant scholars engaging in sloppy exegesis, fallacious reasoning and appeals to sentimentality.

receiving nothing as true religion but what the Bible teaches, and admitting nothing into divine worship which the Scriptures do not either sanction or enjoin.”⁵⁴

Others who object to the thesis of this book will claim that the use of musical instruments in public worship is a discretionary matter—that is, it is just a mere “circumstance of worship common to human actions and societies.”⁵⁵ Such an assertion must ignore the whole Old Testament where it is clearly established that the use of instruments in worship was by divine authority. The use of musical instruments, their very design, and the various Levitical families who played them all were appointed by express commandment. This point is unquestionable. But, it is argued, could not the use of instruments be of divine appointment for the temple and be discretionary for the public worship in the synagogue and the Christian assemblies? No. The regulative principle was never limited to the temple (cf. footnote 53). Furthermore, something incidental to worship *by nature* is incidental or discretionary in all circumstances. The fact that the Jews in biblical times (indeed until 1810) regarded musical instruments as needing divine warrant for the synagogue should dispel the music-as-circumstance argument. “If, as some imagine, the apostles employed instruments of music in public worship, their instruments must have been buried along with them. They had a considerably protracted entombment, for they had no resurrection until at least seven or eight centuries afterwards. They did not reappear in Christian worship until the dark ages of Popery when, by unauthorized additions to the worship of the Church, men had greatly marred the divine beauty and simplicity of pure New Testament worship.”⁵⁶

Sadly, the bottom line is that we are living in a time of serious declension regarding worship and doctrine. Many people are not interested in reform. Too many church leaders are content to defend the status quo. (But, a non-reforming church is a deforming one.) When confronted with the biblical evidence regarding the use of musical instruments in the public worship (also, unauthorized holy days and exclusive psalmody) the response usually is: “*I don’t want to hear it. Who cares? That’s interesting but I love the sound of musical instruments in worship. This issue could be divisive, so just drop it*”. These answers reveal an unscriptural, anti-reformed attitude. “Is it not evident—painfully evident—that they are really arrogant words? ‘Who cares what God wants,’ such people say in effect: ‘So long as I have what I want! I am the important one!’ This is the very antithesis of true religion.”⁵⁷ Human traditions have the ability to pull the heartstrings. That is why they are so dangerous to the purity of gospel worship. Our hope and prayer is that the Holy Spirit would bring revival to His church and destroy these innovations, root and branch. It is not a time to be arrogant but to be humble, to pray, and to work for reformation. Let us return to the simple, unadorned worship of the apostolic church and

⁵⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), Vol.3, p.3. “The question occurs: How does this want of spiritual life manifest itself in reference to the worship of God? History inspired and uninspired furnishes but one answer—by *discontent* and *restiveness* under the simplicity of divine appointments in that worship” (D. W. Collins, p. 93).

⁵⁵ Many argue that musical instruments are a practical necessity such as lighting, chairs, church buildings, and so on. This argument ignores the fact that Jewish synagogues did fine without musical instruments for more than two thousand years. Christian congregations did not use them for the first seven centuries. Presbyterian churches did fine without them for over 250 years. There are still a number of small Presbyterian bodies that do not use them. Furthermore, if instruments were just a matter of practical necessity, their use in worship would not have had to wait for divine authorization.

⁵⁶ James Glasgow, *Heart and Voice*, p. 9.

⁵⁷ G. I. Williamson, *Instrumental Music in the Worship of God*, p. 15.

our Calvinistic forefathers. May God have mercy on His Church and return it to the landmarks of the Reformation.

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