

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN WORSHIP

It is difficult to find churches that exclude musical instruments from their worship. In more traditional churches, it will be a single organ or piano; in more ornate churches, other classical instruments might be added; in modern churches it could be drums, guitars and whole rock bands. Apart from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, which never accepted instruments, rare today are the churches which sing God's praise *a cappella*¹ – with the voice only, without the accompaniment of any mechanical device.

This is strange because singing without musical accompaniment was the almost-universal practice of all Christendom for the greater part of the first millennium of its existence. From Justin Martyr in the second century, the uniform voice of the Church fathers was against the use of instruments. Even Aquinas in the first half of the thirteenth was against them. The indisputable history shows that in worship, “The first recorded instance of the use of such was in the eighth century, but they did not become common until the thirteenth.”²

Southern Presbyterian, John Girardeau, in his classic work on the subject, traces it further: “The organ, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, steadily made its way towards universal triumph in the Romish church.”³ A recent book shows the position right before the Reformation: “By the early 1500s, an organ was found in almost every important church of Europe, and its use became one of the distinguishing traits of the Roman Catholic liturgy.”⁴

It strange indeed to find it so prevalent in the majority of churches claiming not only to be Protestant but also Reformed. For the purest stream of the Reformation cast them out along with other trappings of Popery.

In Calvin's Geneva, Psalms were sung without instruments. He comments on Psalm 71:22: “To sing the praise of God upon the harp and psaltery unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law . . . but they are not now to be used.”⁵ On Psalm 33:2, he wrote: “Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of 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 God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to Him.”⁶

In Knox's Scotland, musical instruments were cast out from the beginning.⁷ Nowhere was the Reformed principle, that God should be worshipped only as appointed in His Word, implemented more thoroughly than in Scotland. Unaccompanied singing has distinguished conservative Presbyterianism ever since, and has been contended for as an essential part of the crown rights of Christ.

The history of the Low Countries is especially significant, given that for more than three centuries the organ has reigned supreme in the Reformed churches of Holland. In what is now Belgium,

many organs were removed from the churches at the Reformation, but in more northern parts, the large church organs had assumed a major role in Renaissance society as well as in Romanist worship, and they were largely preserved. This was to prove too great a temptation. At first, the civil magistrate required that recitals be played before and after worship, even on the Sabbath. From there it could be easily foreseen, given the fascination with these instruments, that they would find their way back into worship.

The church made some attempts to resist. In 1574, the Synod of Dordrecht required that “the playing of the organ in the church . . . must be entirely abolished”.⁸ But four years later the same Synod was still having to plead that “the organs, which have been tolerated for a time, must by all means be removed from the church”.⁹ The 1581 National Synod of Middleburg and the 1594 Synod of Holland and Zeeland resolved “to obtain of the magistrate the laying aside of organs, and the singing with them in the churches, even out of the time of worship, either before or after sermons: so far are those Synods from bearing with them in the worship itself.”¹⁰ Clearly the state was usurping a role in church worship never given to it by Scripture, and the Church was acquiescing. No wonder it was a losing battle. A minister at Arnhem, having preached against the organ, “was brought before the magistrate . . . and informed that he had gone too far”.¹¹

During the opening decades of the seventeenth century, controversy raged until in 1638 the Synod of Delft “took the middle road and decided to leave the decision up to each individual congregation”, stating that “organ playing is held to be a neutral subject (not a matter of principle) and as such is left to the freedom of the churches”.¹² This dishonourable compromise was opposed by a few, but by the middle of the seventeenth century, “organised resistance to the organ in the worship service now collapsed”.¹³

The contrast between Scottish purity of worship and Dutch practice can be seen in the words of Scottish Covenanter James Renwick, martyred in 1688, who said: “I testify and bear witness against the vast and sinful toleration of all error and sectaries in the Belgian Church [he means those adhering to the Belgic Confession] . . . and also against all their superstitious customs, such as, their observing of holy feast days, as they call them, the organs in their churches, and the like; all which they have as the relics of idolatry”.¹⁴

It is not so strange that churches in the Lutheran and Anglican tradition should have musical instruments. Their view of worship was never as Reformed as their doctrine. To them, provided an element of worship had not been expressly forbidden in Scripture, it was allowable if the Church thought it expedient. Under the wings of that unscriptural principle, a multitude of innovations can enter in. But it is strange indeed that Churches of Presbyterian or Dutch Reformed heritage should use musical instruments. These Churches claim to believe in the regulative principle: that only what Scripture positively requires should be brought into worship.

That leads us to the strangest aspect of all. Although today almost all churches professing to believe in the finished work of Christ use musical instruments, Scripture shows that they were part of the elaborate ceremonial of Old Testament worship, and never to be part of the gospel simplicity of

New Testament worship. The types and symbols of the old economy ended when Christ fulfilled them in His coming 2000 years ago. From that point, they were to vanish from worship. Instruments have no more right to a place in Christian worship than animal sacrifices and altars, Aaronic priests and their garments, and thrice-yearly visits to a temple in Jerusalem. There is not the slightest hint in the Bible that instruments were to continue into Christian worship.

Contrary to the loose approach to worship manifest in most Churches, whereby anything may be admitted into worship provided it is not expressly forbidden, Scripture teaches that the only things to be done in worship are those which God requires in His Word. This Regulative Principle of Worship is rooted in the Second Commandment. *The Shorter Catechism* asserts that we are forbidden to worship God, not only by physical graven images, but also “in any other way not appointed in His Word” (Ans. 51).

The Westminster Assembly was following Scripture. Abel’s sacrifice was “more excellent” than Cain’s, not only because blood-shedding spoke of Christ’s death, but also because it was offered “by faith” (Heb. 11:4) – that is, in accordance with what God had appointed, for faith can lean only on what God has revealed. Nadab and Abihu’s worship was rejected as “strange fire before the Lord” because it was that “which He commanded them not” (Lev. 10:1). Uzzah was slain because the ark of the covenant was not brought to Jerusalem “after the due order” (1 Chr. 15:13). Jeroboam received the infamous epitaph that he caused the children of Israel to sin, not only because he set up literal graven images (the golden calves), but also because he ordained a feast without God’s appointment, “in the month which he had devised of his own heart” (1 Ki. 12:33).

In the New Testament, the Regulative Principle still applies. Only what God has appointed is to be done in worship. Christ condemned the Pharisees for adding their traditions to worship, such as ceremonial hand-washing. As a result, He said, “In vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mk. 7:7). When commissioning His Church to make disciples of all nations, Christ prescribed clear limits: “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20). The Church is not to teach or observe worship that He has not appointed. Paul was afraid that his gospel labours in Galatia had been in vain, not only because they were requiring circumcision but also because they were observing “days, and months, and times, and years” (Gal. 4:10) which had been appointed only for ceremonial worship under the Mosaic economy, but never for Christian worship. Likewise in Colosse, following “the doctrines and commandments of men” is condemned as “will worship” (Col. 2:22-23) – that is, worship according to man’s will, not God’s will.

No element of worship is the “neutral” matter the Dutch approach declares instrumental music to be or the open matter the Lutheran/Anglican approach thinks it is. Either it is to be used, if God’s Word says so; or it is not to be used, if God’s Word gives no warrant for it.

Reviewing the Old Testament, until Moses we have no record of instruments in the worship of God. Adam, Abel and Enoch certainly could not have used them, for it was Jubal, seven generations from Adam and son of ungodly Lamech, who “was the *father* of all such as handle harp

and organ” (Gen. 4:21). Instruments were used for secular purposes,¹⁵ but for two and a half millennia – more than half of the Old Testament dispensation – there is nothing to suggest any instrument being used in worship!

Instruments were used to express patriotic joy at times of national deliverance. This was the case with Miriam, Jephthah’s daughter and when David slew Goliath. Women celebrated with dancing and percussion instruments called timbrels.¹⁶ This was not formal worship, for only women were involved, whereas Israel’s worship was always to be conducted by men; and dancing was never appointed for the solemn worship of God. Likewise, when “David took an harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him” (1 Sam. 16:23), that secular use of music to lift Saul’s mood had nothing to do with worship.

The first time instruments and worship were brought together was in Numbers 10:1-2. “The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Make thee two trumpets of silver”. In addition to secular uses,¹⁷ the Lord said: “Ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings” (v. 10). This being the first time instruments were to be used in worship, the lessons are vital.

Firstly, the first use of instruments in worship was expressly instituted by God. He did not leave men to introduce them. Prescribing elements of worship is always God’s prerogative; only He has the right to do it, and that includes the use or non-use of instruments.

Secondly, God specified the exact number and kind of instruments that were to be used: two trumpets, made of silver. The idea that God has left the Church free to choose the instruments that it thinks most suitable, whether an organ or anything else, is unscriptural.

Thirdly, from their very first use in worship, instruments were to be used only in connection with animal sacrifices – “over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings”. This connection remained constant throughout the Old Testament. When Christ sacrificed Himself on the accursed tree, thereby putting an end to sacrifices, that necessarily brought an end to the use of instruments in worship. To go on using them now is contrary to the finished nature of Christ’s work.

Fourthly, only the priests were to play. “The sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow with the trumpets” (v. 8). This reinforces the connection with the typical service of the Old Testament. Playing instruments in worship was a priestly activity, and when the priests ended with the coming of Christ, the great High Priest, the instruments ended too.

Fifthly, the first use of instruments in worship did not accompany congregational singing of praise. The Mosaic ritual gives no warrant for using instruments to accompany singing as is done in many Christian churches today.

From Moses until David, instruments were not used in worship in any other way.¹⁸ We have Saul

meeting “a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp, before them” who prophesied (1 Sam. 10:5), and later, the prophet Elisha asking for a minstrel to play an instrument, and then prophesying (in 2 Ki. 3:15-16). Neither of these were formal, congregational worship. The prophetic office was temporary, pointing to the temporary nature of instruments in the things of God. No one was singing, so this lends no support for using instruments to accompany congregations today in their singing of praise.

It is with David that we meet with instruments in worship on a grander scale. Significantly, for those who find it hard to conceive of singing praise without musical accompaniment, by that time only about one quarter of the Old Testament dispensation remained.

It took two attempts to bring the ark to Jerusalem. The first failed because it was not done according to God’s appointed will. David confessed, “The Lord our God made a breach upon us [in the death of Uzzah], for that we sought Him not after the due order” (1 Chr. 15:13). On the second, successful, attempt, “all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the cornet, and with trumpets, and with cymbals, making a noise with psalteries and harps” (1 Chr. 15:28). This use of instruments was strictly regulated: “David spake to the chief of the Levites to appoint their brethren to be the singers with instruments of musick, psalteries and harps and cymbals, sounding, by lifting up the voice with joy” (1 Chr. 15:16). David was now painstakingly careful to follow the “due order”, doing exactly and only what God had revealed to him: even down to the very instruments used and the people who played them (Levites only, not “all Israel” (1 Chr. 13:8) as on the first attempt).

The instruments were used on that occasion only in connection with typical, temporary institutions: not only the ark and the Levites, but also sacrifice, for “it was so, that when they that bare the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed oxen and fatlings” (2 Sam. 6:13); and when they reached their destination, “they offered burnt sacrifices and peace offerings before God” (1 Chr. 16:1). There was shouting too. If this authorises instruments today, then churches should shout as well as sing, and have numerous instruments, not one, including crashing cymbals.

Matthew Henry comments: “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, Heb. 9:10. The New Testament keeps up singing of psalms, but has not appointed church-music.”¹⁹

With the ark safely installed in Jerusalem, David ordered the worship connected with it: “He appointed certain of the Levites to minister before the ark of the Lord, and to record, and to thank and praise . . . with psalteries and with harps . . . Asaph made a sound with cymbals; Benaiah also and Jahaziel the priests with trumpets continually before the ark of the covenant of God” (1 Chr. 16:4-6). This worship, centring on the ark, was ceremonial. Only certain Levites, the priestly tribe, were to play. Again, instrumental music is part of the typical system of the Old Testament which was abrogated in the New Testament.

God instructed David exactly how the temple was to be built and its worship conducted. “David gave to Solomon . . . the pattern of all that he had by the spirit, of the courts of the house of the Lord . . . also for the courses of the priests and the Levites, and 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, even all the works of this pattern” (1 Chr. 28:11-13, 19). Everything David introduced was expressly sanctioned by God, including the musical instruments. None of it came from his own imagination. What he had, he “had by the Spirit”. His understanding was “by His hand upon me”. The whole pattern was from the Lord.

The temple was dedicated to the Lord with worship that included instruments: “Also the Levites which were the singers, all of them of Asaph, of Heman, of Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, being arrayed in white linen, having cymbals and psalteries and harps, stood at the east end of the altar, and with them an hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets . . . the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord; and . . . they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the Lord” (2 Chr. 5:12-13).

This is not a blueprint for instruments to accompany congregational singing in New Testament churches. Only Levites sang, and only Levites played instruments, on this occasion in their ceremonial attire of “white linen”. Accompanied singing was always a function of the Levitical priesthood, which was only temporary. “Four thousand” of them were appointed, who “praised the Lord with the instruments which I made, said David, to praise therewith” (1 Chr. 23:5). The Levitical priesthood was done away with in Christ, so of necessity so was Levitical singing and Levitical playing of instruments.

For the next millennium, until the advent of the Saviour, the worship of God was to continue just the way that David left it. The instruments that he introduced, the manner in which they were to be used, who was to play them, and at what times, remained constant. No changes were to be made.

After Jehoshaphat’s victory over the Ammonites, the Israelites “came to Jerusalem with psalteries and harps and trumpets unto the house of the Lord” (2 Chr. 20:27-28). That house was of course the temple, with its ceremonial service. Again, they were only “Levites, of the children of the Kohathites, and of the children of the Korhites, [who] stood up to praise the Lord God of Israel with a loud voice on high” (v. 19). This was not the whole congregation singing to musical accompaniment, as is done in so many Churches today.

Hezekiah restored God’s worship. “He set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king’s seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt offering upon the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David . . . And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this continued

until the burnt offering was finished” (2 Chr. 29:25-28). “So the service of the house of the Lord was set in order” (v. 35). Instruments were used only as previously instituted, which had been commanded by God through His prophets Gad and Nathan as well as David. Instruments were played only by certain Levites, and were sounded only during the actual offering of the sacrifices. As soon as the sacrifices were ended, even though other worship continued (see v. 29), the instruments fell silent. That was symbolic: as soon as Christ’s sacrifice was finished, instruments were no longer to be sounded in God’s worship.

When the Jews returned from captivity, they began work on a replacement temple. “When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel” (Ezra 3:10). They used their instruments only in accordance with what God had appointed through David.

When Jerusalem’s wall was rebuilt, again the celebration included the use of instruments: “At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps” (Neh. 12:27). The Levites had to be gathered, for only they could play the instruments. It was connected with the temple and sacrifices, for they “gave thanks in the house of God” (v. 40) and “that day they offered great sacrifices” (v. 43). All was expressly “according to the commandment of David, and of Solomon his son” (v. 45).

The Old Testament narrative shows that instrumental music was an integral part of the ceremonial worship of the temple, which was only temporary.²⁰ The New Testament confirms that when the temple, priesthood and sacrifices were finished at the coming of Christ, the instruments also finished.

The Gospels and Acts often show us the services of the Jewish synagogue. Never once are instruments mentioned, neither before nor after Christ’s work was accomplished. Synagogue services were not ceremonial and typical like those in the temple; they contained no priestly or sacrificial elements. Thus they did not include the typical ceremony of musical instruments.²¹ They sang the Psalms *a cappella*. Under divine direction, Christian worship grew out of the synagogues, not the temple. Like them, they are to have no accompanying instruments.

Christ “sung an hymn” with His apostles after instituting the Lord’s Supper (see Mt. 26:30). No instruments were used at any point in that first sacramental remembrance of His death. It is strange that many include in their worship connected with the Lord’s Supper an organ or piano which He neither appointed nor used.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul insists that everything in the Church’s worship must be understandable, thereby ruling out unknown tongues without interpretation. The only sounds in Christian worship are those which give an intelligible sound. “When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation” (1 Cor. 14:26). Not an

instrument, notice! Beza, Calvin's successor at Geneva, said, "If the apostle justly prohibits the use of unknown tongues in the church, much less would he have tolerated these artificial musical performances which are addressed to the ear alone, and seldom strike the understanding even of the performers themselves."²²

Ephesians 5:19 says: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord". Because the Greek word translated "making melody", *psallo*, has a root in twanging a stringed instrument, some say instruments should be used in New Testament worship. This must be rejected. In Greek literature²³ and Scripture itself, the word is used where instruments were clearly not involved. When Paul uses the word twice to say, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also" (1 Cor. 14:15), he is speaking of words, not instruments. Besides, Paul says to make this music "in your heart". You cannot hold this instrument in your hands! It is a spiritual exercise within the soul. The believer's heart must be like a well-tuned instrument as he praises his Saviour. This is the only instrument to be played in New Testament worship. Christians are to "offer up" only "*spiritual* [not blood] sacrifices to God (1 Peter 2:5). They are to use only spiritual instruments, not mechanical ones. Colossians 3:16 is similar: Christians are to sing psalms, not with carnal instruments, but with the spiritual instrument of the heart: "singing with grace in your hearts".

Nowhere is the transition to new dispensation worship asserted more explicitly than in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In 13:15, we read: "By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name". We are not to offer blood sacrifices, but the sacrifice of praise. Equally, we are not to use mechanical instruments when we offer that praise, but only "the fruit of our lips" – the sound of our own unaccompanied voices. New Testament sacrifices are not to be accompanied by instruments like the Old Testament sacrifices were. [Ceremonial elements like the altar have been done away, so let us offer praise without ceremonial instruments, using just our lips.]

The Book of Revelation speaks of trumpets (1:10, 4:1, 8:13, 9:14), and harps (5:8, 14:2, 15:2). But it also speaks of obviously ceremonial aspects of worship such as an altar (6:9 etc.), incense (8:4), the ark (11:19) and the lamb (5:6 etc.). The truth is, "none of these are to be taken literally"²⁴ – not the altar, not the incense, not the ark, nor the lamb – and not the trumpet, nor the harp either. The trumpet in 4:1 is said to be a "voice . . . as it were the sound of a trumpet". Along with the harps in 5:8, there are "golden vials full of odours", which are said to be "the prayers of saints". These references to instruments are symbolic; the language of old covenant worship is being used to describe the spiritual worship of the new. Never does it refer to the literal worship of the Christian Church.

Summarising, the Biblical evidence shows that instruments were always confined to ceremonial and sacrificial worship, which was brought to an end in Christ. Instruments therefore have no place in Christian worship. The New Testament gives no precept or example for using them.

Those who use musical instruments have their objections.

Firstly, is it not arbitrary to sing Old Testament Psalms and reject the instruments often mentioned in them? “Praise the Lord with harp: sing unto Him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings” (33:2). “Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery” (81:2). “Sing unto the Lord with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm” (98:5). Even those who rarely use Psalms in their worship may appeal to them to justify their use of instruments.

But the Psalms often use typical and ceremonial language. Some mention Jerusalem and the temple: “I will pay my vows unto the Lord now in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the Lord’s house, in the midst of thee, O Jerusalem” (116:18-19). Some speak of animal sacrifices and the altar: “Then shalt Thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon Thine altar” (51:19). Some mention the feasts: “Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day” (81:3).

These things are abolished in the New Testament. Christian churches are not to base their worship on the temple in Jerusalem, offer blood sacrifices on an altar or keep the Jewish feasts. Although mentioned in the Psalms, they were types, abrogated in Christ. Musical instruments are precisely the same. Even though mentioned in the Psalms, their literal use in worship was always connected with the temple in Jerusalem and the priestly sacrifices, so they too were abrogated in Christ. Even in Old Testament days, most Psalm-singing was unaccompanied, taking place in the synagogue and the home. The Psalms were sung with musical accompaniment only in the temple.

Psalm 150 is a favourite for those who advocate instruments in Christian worship. However, the Hallelujah psalms which close the Psalter are full of symbolism. Psalm 148 would have sun, moon, stars, fire, hail, snow, wind, mountains, trees, animals and birds, all praising the Lord! Psalm 150 itself would have everything that breathes joining in (v. 6). Clearly, its trumpet, psaltery, harp, timbrel, stringed instruments, organs and cymbals should not be pressed too literally. In any case, if it is a blueprint for Christian worship, then instruments would have to be multiplied: not one organ but “organs” in the plural, along with all the rest. That would make music groups more Scriptural than a single organ or piano! Likewise, it would require dancing as well as instrument-playing, for it says, “Praise Him with the timbrel and dance” (v. 4).

A second objection is that instruments improve worship. God’s praise sounds better when accompanied, say some. The altogether sufficient answer to this is simply that it is irrelevant what sounds good to men. In worship, the only sound that pleases God comes from worship that He has required. For Christian worship, that is the unaccompanied human voice – the only instrument that He tells us to use. If it is argued that an organ is necessary for orderly, tuneful singing, especially in larger congregations, surely God would have thought of that and authorised its use. Congregations must learn to sing *a cappella* if they cannot do it yet.²⁵

A third objection comes from those who say that the sound of the organ or other instrument helps to put them into a spiritual frame. It sets the mood, they say, for singing the psalm. This is mysticism; inanimate noise cannot in and of itself produce worship that is “in spirit and in truth”

(John 4:23). The way to set the mood for singing a psalm appropriately is for the words to be read before they are sung. It has rightly been said, “Devotional feelings cannot be produced but by conveying spiritual devotional thoughts to the soul, and those are not producible by the pipes of an organ. What then, is the improvement? It resolves itself into this – many like it, and therefore they must have it.”²⁶

Fourthly, some argue that if instruments are no longer to be used, why is there no express statement to this effect in the New Testament? Actually, no express abolition of instruments is needed. They were part and parcel of the Old Testament ritual, and the New Testament makes it very clear that the whole of that system, as far as it was typical and ceremonial, has been abolished in Christ.

Fifthly, some consider instruments to be a mere circumstance rather than a real element of worship, so the Church can use them or not, as it sees fit. That there are such circumstances the Westminster Confession acknowledges: “There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God . . . common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed” (1:6).

However, God did not treat instruments as mere circumstances. They had no place in Old Testament worship until He put them in it by His express command. And He has never put them into New Testament worship. Plus, to class something as a mere circumstance rather than an element of worship, it must be common to human society and necessary. Appointing a suitable time and place to meet for public worship is a circumstance of worship, because without that no gathering of people could be possible, and is done for all orderly public meetings. But singing with instruments is not necessary: it may be done, but it does not need to be done.

Sixthly, some use instruments to symbolise joy. It is true that their use in temple worship at least in part pictured spiritual joy. “With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King” (Psalm 98:6). Instruments were types of the gospel joy reserved for the Christian Church. But only two symbols have been appointed for New Testament worship: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It is not for us to add others. The gospel day has arrived; let us rejoice and be glad in it, not be symbolising it with mechanical devices that have passed away.

A seventh and final objection comes from those who say that none of this matters, and that it should not be made an issue. That fails to realise the importance to the Lord of the regulative principle of worship. For the honour of the Head of the Church, pure worship must be contended for most earnestly. If it matters to Christ, it should matter to us.

To conclude, it is clear that Scripture provides no warrant for the use of musical instruments in New Testament worship. The Christian Church should never use them and we should never involve ourselves in their use. If we are present at worship which uses them, even if it is the Psalms being sung, we ought not to sing, for then we are not singing *a cappella* as God has appointed, but with musical accompaniment as man has sinfully imposed contrary to Scripture.

1. *A cappella* is an Italian musical notation, meaning “according to the way of the chapel”. This shows the degree to which unaccompanied singing was historically associated with the Church’s way of singing.
2. G I Williamson, *Instrumental Music in Worship: Commanded or Not Commanded?*, downloaded on 29 January 2016 from <http://www.westminsterconfession.org/worship/instrumental-music-in-worship-commanded-or-not-commanded.php>.
3. John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, Richmond VA, 1888, p162.
4. John Price, *Old Light on New Worship*, Simpson Publishing Company, 2005, p86. Price is a Reformed Baptist, and provides a thorough and helpful review of the history of instrumental music in Christian worship. His work is marred, not only by the use of modern versions of the Bible, but also by a futile attempt to claim unity between those who exclude instruments altogether and those who use only one instrument to “aid the pitch and meter in singing” (p15), arguing that they “share the same theological convictions and a high regard for the regulative principle of worship” (p16). According to Price, it seems that the only real problem is to have more than one instrument. Rather, the Second Commandment is broken by using even one.
5. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentary*, Baker Book House, 1984, vol 5, p98. The full quote is: ““To sing the praise of God upon the harp and psaltery unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law, and of the service of God under that dispensation of shadows and figures; but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving.”
6. *Calvin’s Commentary*, vol 4, p539.
7. Knox’s views are clear. Urging people to attend the public means of grace regularly, he wrote: “I mean not to hear piping, singing, or playing, nor to patter upon beads or books whereof they have no understanding . . . For with such will I neither join myself in common prayer, nor in receiving external sacraments; for in so doing I should affirm their superstition and abominable idolatry” (*The Works of John Knox*, ed David Laing, Edinburgh, 1895, vol 3, p103, English updated). Knox was a great advocate of congregational singing; it was the passive “hearing” of others singing to the congregation that he was condemning, along with the playing of musical instruments, pipes and all.
8. Henry Bruinsma, *The Organ Controversy in the Netherlands Reformation to 1640*, in *The Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol 7, no 3 (Autumn 1954), p207.
9. Bruinsma, p208.
10. Hickman, *Apolog. pro Ejectis in Anglia Ministris*, quoted in editor’s note, Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, Philadelphia, 1815, vol 4, p87.
11. Bruinsma, p209.
12. Bruinsma, p210.
13. Bruinsma, p212.
14. *A Choice Collection of Very Valuable Prefaces, Lectures, and Sermons by Rev James Renwick*, Glasgow, 1804, p641, English updated.
15. As seen by Laban’s chiding of Jacob for leaving without a family celebration using “tabret” and “harp” (Gen. 31:27): “Wherefore didst thou flee away secretly, and steal away from me; and didst not tell me, that I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabret and harp?”. Job also speaks of carnal men at harvest time: they “take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ” (Job 21:12).
16. “Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances” (Ex. 15:20). Jephthah’s daughter “came out to meet” her victorious father “with timbrels and with dances” (Jdg. 11:34); and “the women came out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet king Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of musick. And the women answered one another as they played” (1 Sam. 18:6,7).
17. “For the calling of the assembly, and for the journeying of the camps” (v. 2) and “if ye go to war” (v. 9).
18. Not even during the four degenerate centuries of the Judges, when “every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Jdg. 17:6).
19. Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, James Nisbet, n.d., vol 3, p171.
20. John M’Donald summarises: “Instrumental music in religious worship was employed only in the temple – we have not a single instance of its being employed either in the synagogue or homes of the people; it was always rendered by a special class – the priests and Levites; and it was always rendered in connection with the offering of sacrifices to God . . . From all this it is most manifest that instrumental music was one element in an elaborate ceremonial and symbolic worship. We never find it by itself in isolated independence.” John M’Donald, *Instrumental Music in Religious Worship*, in James Kerr & John M’Donald, *The Voice of His Praise*, James Begg Society reprint, 1999, p22.
21. Secular literature confirms that “instruments of music were not used in synagogues until modern times. Orthodox Jewish synagogues still do not use them because, as they still testify, this ‘serves to distinguish the synagogue from the temple’”. G I Williamson, *Instrumental Music in Worship: Commanded or Not*

- Commanded?*, downloaded on 29 January 2016 from <http://www.westminsterconfession.org/worship/instrumental-music-in-worship-commanded-or-not-commanded.php>. The quote is from Gilbert and Tarcov, *Your Neighbour Celebrates*, p93.
22. Quoted in John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, Richmond VA, 1888, p166.
23. “This attempt to fix the meaning of the word as implying playing instead of singing, as used by the New Testament writers, was thoroughly set aside by Dr. Porteous, by a variety of evidence, one part of which is thus concluded: ‘From these quotations from the Greek fathers, the three first of whom flourished in the fourth century – men of great erudition, well skilled in the phraseology and language of Scripture, perfectly masters of the Greek tongue, which was then written and spoken with purity in the countries where they resided; men, too, who for conscience sake would not handle the Word of God deceitfully, it is evident that the Greek word *psallo* signified in their time singing with the voice alone.’” James Begg, *The Use of Organs*, quoted in John Girardeau, *Instrumental Music*, pp116,117.
24. G I Williamson, *Instrumental Music*.
25. Some of us have attended the Mbumba Zending annual meeting in Holland, where over 5000 sing *a capella* without any problem at all.
26. John M’Donald, *Instrumental Music*, pp23,24.