

*To Play*  
Or  
*Not to Play*

**That Is the Question**



By *Jefferson David Tant*

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Shakespeare's Hamlet pondered the question: "To be, or not to be. That is the question." In the following pages, we want to deal with the question: "To play, or not to play. *That* is the question." The question continues as it has through many centuries and divisions in the body of Christ as to whether or not it is acceptable to use instruments of music in worship to God.

This was a question that was often debated in the days of the Reformation, and many denominations refused to use instruments in worship even into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Those who are familiar with the Restoration Movement in the early 1800s know the story well. The Campbells, Stones and others who sought to restore simple New Testament Christianity in this nation shunned the use of instruments in worship. In 1849 there was a meeting of Christians in Cincinnati, Ohio from many areas. At this meeting the American Christian Missionary Society was formed, which was the visible sign of division which ultimately tore the body apart. Then in 1859 in Midway, Kentucky, L. L. Pinkerton introduced a melodeon into the worship of the church there.

He remarked: "So far as known to me, or, I presume, to you, I am the only 'preacher' in Kentucky of our brotherhood who has publicly advocated the propriety of employing instrumental music in some churches, and that the church of God in Midway is the only church that has yet made a decided effort to introduce it." He said the singing was so bad that it had degenerated into screeching and brawling and would "scare even the rats from worship." The venerated Alexander Campbell replied: "But I presume, to all spiritually-minded Christians such aids would be as a cow bell in a concert."

These two matters, the society and the instrument, eventually brought the division that produced the churches of Christ and the group known as the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ. This division was so definite that in 1906 the U.S. Religious Census recognized them as two separate bodies. In later years, the Christian Church and the Disciples of Christ have become separate bodies, with the more liberal Disciples group admitting that they are truly a denomination.

Churches of Christ, with a conservative view of Biblical authority, were few in number in 1900, and retained only about 10% of the churches. My father, Yater Tant (1908-1997) said there may have been only ten or twelve full-time preachers among them. Most did secular work to support their labors. My grandfather, J. D. Tant (1861-1941) struggled to support his family by farming, while doing so much preaching that it would put many full-time preachers to shame today.

The churches were pretty much in agreement during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but around 1950 issues began to arise over church cooperation. This had to do with whether or not one church could assume oversight of some program of work, with other churches sending money to the elders of the overseeing church. To many, this constituted a "missionary society" under the elders instead of under a separate board of directors. Other issues also came into discussion, as to whether or not the church could contribute to secular organizations. Debates were held, and much writing was done in various religious journals. In time the debates stopped, and the main organ among the more liberal churches, *The Gospel Advocate*, closed its pages and placed a "quarantine" on the "antis," as the more conservative brethren were branded.

In the ensuing years among the churches with a more liberal position on authority, many things have come about, including women elders, sports teams, pulpit exchanges with denominational preachers, and the use of instrumental music in worship. And now after some 50 or 60 years, there seem to be some among the conservative brethren that are not opposed to instrumental

music as a matter of authority. They may oppose it because of tradition, but will not make an authoritative argument based on Scripture.

It is the purpose of this writer to examine both the Scriptures and history to see if there is any reason why we should declare it a sin to use instruments in our worship to God. Not long ago, John Price wrote a book entitled “**Old Light on New Worship**.” His background is in the Reformed Baptist church, and he began to wonder why they only used the piano, when other churches employed a variety of musical instruments. This set him on a serious study of the matter, resulting in his definitive book, which was published in 2005, and revised in 2007.

I want to summarize his material, and include results of my own study on the matter, and I pray that what is written will be carefully considered.

## **REGULATIONS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Price pointed to three principles that are used as guidelines. (1) The Temple worship of the Old Testament has been abolished; (2) The model for us today must come from Christ and his apostles; and (3) “With no command, example, or any indication whatsoever from the Lord Jesus that He desires musical instruments in His church, we have no warrant for their use” (**Price, p. 17**).

Those with knowledge of the Old Testament are well aware that David introduced musical instruments into the worship of God. Was this of his own doing, or did this come from a higher source? We know that David was a skilled musician, so some might think this motivated David to enhance the worship of Jehovah. But some 300 years later we find King Hezekiah restoring the temple worship after many years of neglect.

“He then stationed the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, with harps and with lyres, according to the command of David and of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for the command was from the LORD through His prophets. The Levites stood with the musical instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. Then Hezekiah gave the order to offer the burnt offering on the altar. When the burnt offering began, the song to the LORD also began with the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David, king of Israel” (**II Chron. 29:25-27**).

Now we understand why David, and Hezekiah, did as they did. *It was the command of the Lord!* In other places, we learn that only certain skilled ones could participate in these activities, as it was not intended that all worshippers would be playing or singing. Only those specially trained from the tribe of Levi. Even the very instruments used were ordained by God, and neither David nor Hezekiah had the authority to add or subtract any sort of instrument.

We would assume that during the nearly 300 years between David and Hezekiah, culture would have changed, bringing new instruments and different tastes. Certainly in my own lifetime musical tastes have changed and new instruments have been invented. Some today would make that argument about instruments, but whenever any details are given concerning the temple worship over the next 600 years, no changes are noted, not even after living in the Babylonian culture for 70 years. God had specified what he wanted, and no alteration was allowed for music, animal sacrifices, feast days, or whatever.

When the Jews returned after their Babylonian captivity, in time they set about to rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army. "Now when the builders had 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 directions of King David of Israel" (**Ezra 3:10**). Notice that they followed the "directions" of David, who had received "directions" from God. They respected what had been given by the Lord hundreds of years previously. God alone has the right to say how he will be worshipped.

We must concede that instruments were not left up to the desires of men. They had been specifically ordained and regulated by God, even to the type of instruments that were used. Would any one argue that the Hebrew nation could have added a guitar to the music with God's approval?

## **REGULATIONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

When we approach the matter of music in the New Testament, "there are many who claim that God no longer holds musical instruments under His authority in the New Testament. They say he may have established His authority over them in the Old Testament but He has relinquished His authority in the New Testament. Those who make this claim must prove their case, not from human reasoning and evasion of the truth, but by the Word of God alone. They must go to their Bibles, as the final authority in all faith and practice, and show, by clear and convincing evidence, that God has actually relinquished His authority over musical instruments." (**Price, pp. 34-35**).

We are not free to "assume" matters that pertain to God. We are free to draw conclusions from a study of God's word. There is a vast difference between the two concepts. The God we read about in the Bible is the same God in both Old and New Testaments. We can ask "What does God want in our worship," and we know where to go to find the answers.

There are those who want to deemphasize the idea of "regulations" in our worship, as they deem them to be oppressive, and invoke ideas of "slavery" and "bondage." Frankly, I would put baptism for the remission of sins as a "regulation," but I have never considered obedience to the commands of God resulting in the forgiveness of my sins to be a matter of bondage.

With respect to the matter of regulations, the writer of Hebrews commented on this. "Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary" (**Heb. 9:1**). We know that the writer is showing the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old Covenant in many different ways, but he is not even hinting that we are without regulations.

If I told my 16-year-old daughter, "Look, even your 8-year-old sister knows how to make up her bed," what would the implication be? I am suggesting that the older sister has a greater ability and thus a greater responsibility to keep her room neat. Thus when the Hebrews passage says "even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship..." the implication is very strong that the second covenant has regulations concerning our worship, and we have even greater incentive to respect them.

We are well aware of the words of Christ in **Matthew 7:21-23**:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons,

and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'"

Would it be too far-fetched to paraphrase that to read “did we not play instruments in Your name, and in Your name do holy dancing...?” Where are instruments and dancing prohibited? Christ says they were practicing “lawlessness.” That word is from the Greek “nomia,” which means “lawful.” In English, we negate a word when we put “un” as a prefix. “Healthy” plus the prefix “un,” changes the meaning to “unhealthy.” “Lawful” plus “un” makes “unlawful.” It is the same in Greek, as an “alpha” when placed before a word changes its meaning to a negative. Thus in verse 23 we have “a-nomia” which means that which is lawless, or that which is without authority.

Various passages in the New Testament clearly indicate that the Old Law, including all of its regulations concerning Temple worship and its ceremonies has been removed. We are told in **Colossians 2:14** that Christ “canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” Then in **Hebrews 8:13**: “When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.”

One problem early Jewish Christians dealt with was the desire to bind parts of Moses Law not only on themselves, but on the Gentile converts. Circumcision was a major issue. Paul repeatedly dealt with this, and wrote to the Galatians that if they wanted to justify circumcision because it was in the Law, they would have to keep the whole law. “And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law” (**Gal. 5:3**). Thus, if those who insist instruments are authorized because they were in the Old Law, then by Paul’s reasoning, they have to accept *all* of the Law—sacrifices, priests, feast days, tithing, and all else that pertained to the Law. If not, why not? I believe Paul makes a good point in his reasoning.

If we had those who insisted that we should keep the “Feast of Tabernacles” today, would we be violating the sense of Paul’s statement by saying, “And I testify again to every man who receives the Feast of Tabernacles, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.” I think the reader can see where I am going with this line of reasoning. When some insist we can use instruments because they did in the Old Testament, then the following reading is logical: “And I testify again to every man who receives instruments of music, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.”

With respect to the instruments, we might ask the question: “To what do the instruments appeal—the ear or the heart?” I enjoy good music, whether it is a symphony by Beethoven, or something from the “Big Band” era by Tommy Dorsey or Glenn Miller. (I know the latter somewhat dates me, but at least I can understand the words, as opposed to the screaming and loud music that characterizes some modern music.) But this sort of music is designed to be pleasing to the ear. A piano, guitar or tuba does not speak to my heart or help me to draw nearer to God.

A consideration of worship in the Old Testament shows us that some emphasis was put on ceremonies and appearances, but Christ’s conversation with the woman at the well references a change in worship. “But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (**John 4:23-24**).

“The true worship of God under the gospel doth not consist in external pomp or ceremonies and observances, but is spiritual, simple and substantial; for they shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (George Hutcheson, *The Gospel of John*, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 1985, p. 65).

“The way of worship which Christ has instituted is rational and intellectual, and refined from those external rites and ceremonies which the Old Testament worship was both clouded and clogged. This is called true worship, in opposition to that which was typical... The gospel erects a spiritual way of worship” (**Matthew Henry Commentary**, Vol. 5, 906).

John Calvin agrees. “Now follows the latter clause, about repealing the worship, or ceremonies, prescribed by the law. When He says that ‘the hour cometh,’ or ‘will come,’ He shows that the order laid down by Moses will not be perpetual. When He says that ‘the hour is now come,’ He puts an end to ceremonies, and declares that the time of reformation, of which the apostle speaks, (Heb. 9:10), has thus been fulfilled” (*Calvin’s Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, Reprinted 1984, V. 17, 161).

It is noteworthy that the Roman Catholic Church was the obvious object of much criticism from the Reformers, in that it appeared that the church had adopted various aspects of the Old Testament Temple worship, including a separate priestly class, special robes, instrumental music, etc.

We are well aware that Christians can sing anywhere, and we do not need the aid of instruments in order to sing. But in the Temple worship, both singing and instruments were commanded. But in the New Testament, only singing is commanded. There must have been a reason why singing, and singing only, was revealed to the writers by the Holy Spirit.

In considering the various gifts that are listed in the New Testament, we note that there is no gift that is connected with instruments. **Romans 12:6-8** and **I Corinthians 12:4-11** refer to gifts of healing, tongues, wisdom, interpretations, prophecy, teaching, exhortation, etc. But nowhere is there mention of any gift of music. One does not need any gift or skill to sing, but such is needed to play an instrument. Those who participated in worship in music in the Old Testament were skilled and trained musicians. Obviously, some can sing better than others, and some are even tone deaf. But they can still sing from the heart words of praise and encouragement. God is more concerned with what comes from the heart than how good or pleasant the sounds are.

This would also speak against the common practice in denominations with their trained choirs. There is nothing wrong with congregations taking measures to see that their singing is uplifting, as God does want our best. But there is no indication that he wants our worship to be any sort of performance and entertainment experience. We can go to secular concerts if that is what we want. The words of **Ephesians 5:19** and **Colossians 3:16** are very clear as to what God wants.

“...speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (**Eph.**); “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (**Col.**)

The admonition is “sing,” not “listen to the choir.”

The Old Testament is filled with a multitude of passages referring to musical instruments in worship. The contrast with the New Testament's total lack of such mentions is telling us something. We have abundant authority for the use of instruments in the Old Testament. Where is the authority for their use in New Testament worship? There is none.

It is also interesting to note that there is no evidence that instruments were used in synagogue worship. Synagogue worship was characterized by reading and exposition of the Scriptures, and by acappella singing. Several scholars have verified this. Robert Douglas wrote about this in his book *Church Music Through the Ages*, p. 8: "Instrumental music is not known to have been used in connection with this worship."

By the time Christ came into the world, perhaps a majority of Jews had never visited the temple and observed the worship there. They had been scattered throughout the world in the Diaspora, but synagogue worship would have been very familiar to them, for where they were, there the synagogue was. Then after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. it appears that the use of instruments in Jewish worship disappeared altogether, just as the Temple disappeared.

## THE EARLY CHURCH

History is quite clear that the early church did not use instruments of music in worship. Who were the first converts? They were Jews, who were familiar with Temple worship. They are now worshipping the same God, so one might think they would continue some of their traditions. We know that many tried to prescribe circumcision, but the testimony is unanimous that musical instruments were not included in the worship of the early church. There must be a reason!

"The antagonism which the Fathers of the early Church displayed toward instruments has two outstanding characteristics: vehemence and uniformity" (James McKinnon, *The Temple, the Church Fathers and Early Western Chant*, p. 69). It is not that the New Testament writers just assumed that instruments were being used in the worship of Christians and made no mention of it. No, the evidence is clear that the use of instruments was opposed.

Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165) was a prominent leader in the early church who was martyred for his faith. He wrote, "The use of singing with instrumental music was not received in the Christian churches as it was among the Jews in their infant state, but only the use of plain song" (Quoted in *The Treasury of David*, Charles H. Spurgeon, Vol. 1, Part 2, 111). Clement of Alexandria (150-215) had this to say on the subject: "Leave the pipe to the shepherd, the flute to the men who are in fear of gods and are intent on their idol-worshipping. Such musical instruments must be excluded from our wineless feasts..." (*Christ the Educator*, translated by Simon P. Wood, p. 130).

We could go on by citing the works of Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35-107), Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254), Anobius of Sicca (d. ca. 300), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), and several others up into the 5<sup>th</sup> century. They are uniform in their rejection of instruments in worship.

We should note that in all the writings of these men, they were not debating other Christians over the use of the instruments, nor were they trying to correct abuses that had arisen. They were simply emphasizing the stand upon which church leaders were united. The conclusion is obvious that the use of instruments was neither commanded nor used in the early church.

## THE INTRODUCTION OF INSTRUMENTS

There is unanimous agreement among historians that the first musical instrument used in worship was an organ introduced by the Roman Catholic pontiff Vitalianus in 670. This was in the church in Rome. Thus we see that it was 637 years since the establishment of the Lord's church before the first instrument in worship came into use. It was not until 812, 138 years later, that Charlemagne had an organ made for the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Aix-la-Chapelle. By the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, instruments were becoming more common in England, but were still strongly opposed, and were not generally accepted until the late 1200s.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a prominent Catholic theologian who is still respected today for much of his writings. In 1260 he wrote, "The Church does not use musical instruments such as the harp or lyre when praising God, in case she should seem to fall back in Judaism..." (Nick Needham, "Worship Through the Ages," in *Give Praise to God*, 392).

"There is no evidence, but the contrary, to show that instrumental music was commonly introduced into the church until the thirteenth century... The church, although lapsing more and more into defection from the truth and into a corruption of apostolic practice, had no instrumental worship for 1200 years." (John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, Richmond: Whittier & Shepperson, Printers, 1888, pp. 156, 179).

Robert L. Dabney, a professor of theology and church history at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond for more than 40 years, wrote in *The Presbyterian Quarterly* in July, 1889, "Such has been the creed of all churches, and in all ages, except for the Popish communion after it had reached the nadir of its corruption at the end of the thirteenth century, and in its prelatric imitators." The "creed" Dabney referred to was that no instruments were used.

We could go on for several pages citing the writings of Cotton Mather (about 1700), Andrew Fuller, McClintock and Strong, Joseph Bingham, William D. Maxwell, and a host of others. Not one historian can be found to counter the claims of these writers who clearly state that the early church did not use instruments until many centuries had passed. We cannot overlook the significance of the unanimous agreement of these men with respect to the total absence of instruments of music in worship from the earliest days.

## THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

During the Middle Ages, the Roman church grew more sensual in an effort to appeal to the carnal senses of man. There were candles, ceremonies, idols, extravagant cathedrals, incense and the like. But in the midst of all these external showings, there were reformers who considered these things akin to idolatry. They were reminded of the words of Christ who told the woman at the well that "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (**John 4:24**). That meant that our worship was to be according to God's will, and not *according* to man's will in what man found pleasing,

John Wycliffe (1320-1384), was a leading light in the Reformation in England, and charged that the churches were full of those who "feed their senses to excess in religion... their eyes with the sumptuous spectacle of the Church's ornaments, their ears with bells and organs... not to mention many other sensuous preparations by which their others senses are moved, apart altogether from



religious feeling” (Professor Lechler, *John Wycliffe and His English Precursors*, London, The Religious Tract Society, 1904, p. 324).

John Hus (1369-1415) spoke out against similar practices in Bohemia and was put to death for his words against the Church. Charges against the church were not tolerated, as history records countless martyrs who defied the Pope. Huss and his followers forbade the use of instruments in their worship. Hus was condemned and burned at the stake July 6, 1415.

Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531) was a Reformation leader in Zurich, Switzerland. His view was that we were not at liberty to add anything that we could not learn from the Scriptures in matters of doctrine or worship. “Everything which is added to the true institutions of Christ is an abuse” (Garside, Charles Jr. *Zwingli and the Arts*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1966, 54)

“There were differences in the approach to the Scriptures by the Reformists Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531). In his early reformist years, Luther wrote, “Whatever is without the word of God is, by that very fact, against God.” He based this upon **Deuteronomy 4:2**: ‘You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God which I command you.’ In later years Luther changed his view, stating, ‘What is not against Scripture is for Scripture, and Scripture for it.’ The Swiss Zwingli taught that practices ‘not enjoined or taught in the New Testament should be unconditionally rejected.’”

“Luther’s view won the day, and his looser interpretation became the preferred practice as denominations developed and proliferated. If Zwingli’s view had been preferred, then the history of the religious world might be quite different. But Luther lived 15 years longer than Zwingli, and thus had a longer period of influence. Zwingli suffered an untimely death after a Protestant pastor was captured by a Catholic group, tried for heresy and sentenced to be burned. The Protestant Zurich government declared war against the Catholics, and in a subsequent battle, Zwingli was serving as a chaplain when he was wounded and died. It was October 10, 1531.” (Jefferson David Tant, *Biblical Authority and the Silence of the Scriptures*, p. 1).

Zwingli’s opposition to the instruments in worship did not stem from a lack of appreciation for music. He was a gifted musician and composer, having studied music for ten years at some of the great universities of his time.

An interesting side note is the fact that because instruments were sometimes played without being accompanied by singing, the argument was made that this was forbidden on the grounds that this was likened to the unknown tongues in **I Corinthians 14**, as they produced sounds that could not be understood.

Menno Simons (1496-1561), a leader among the Anabaptists (from whence also come the Mennonites), had the same view as Zwingli, that what is not expressly commanded in the New Testament is not to be permitted.

“There is not a word to be found in Scripture concerning their anointing, crosses, caps, togas, unclean purifications, cloisters, chapels, organs, choral music, masses, offerings, ancient usages, etc.; but under these things the lurking wolf, the earthly sensual mind, the

anti-Christian seductions and bloody abominations are readily perceived” (Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, Scottsdale, PA, Herald Press, 1956, p. 172).

Martin Mohler (1547-1606), German reformer and Professor of Theology at Munich, and William Zepperus (1550-1607), another leading Reformer, concurred with the idea that instruments were a part of the Jewish ceremonial law, which had been abolished.

Other names with the same views from this period in history include Robert Holgate (1481-1555), Robert Horne (1514-157), John Marbeck (1510-ca.1585)

In 1562 the English Convocation voted to remove all organs from the Church of England. It failed by one vote, but the following year in the second prayer book, organs were declared as “belonging to superstitious and idolatrous manners” and thus were “utterly abolished.” (Quoted in Scholes, Percy A., *The Puritans and Music*, London, Oxford University Press, 1934, p.221).

John Knox (1513-1572) is also well-known from the same period, and his influence continues even today in the Reformed Church of Scotland, as the churches forbid instruments in worship.

The Puritans, in both England and America, also rejected instruments in worship, holding to the familiar principles that (1) the Old Testament worship ceremonies had been abolished, (2) the church must look only to Christ to learn about worship, and (3) there is no command or example in the New Testament for their use, and therefore they are not authorized.

“The Puritans were not, of course, peculiar in their disapproval of instrumental music in church. They could quote Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, St. Chrysostom, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and others of the early Church Fathers in support of their opinion” (Henry Wilder Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940, p. 86)

Puritan leader Cotton Mather (1663-1728) penned the following words:

“Now there is not one word of instruction in the New Testament for instrumental music in the worship of God. And because the holy God rejects all that He does not command in His worship, He now therefore in effect says unto us, ‘I will not hear the melody of thy organs.’ . . . If we admit instrumental musick in the worship of God, how can we resist the imposition of all the instruments used among the ancient Jews:---yea, dancing as well as playing, and several other Judaic actions? Or, how can we decline a whole rabble of church officers, necessary to be introduced for instrumental music, whereof our Lord Jesus Christ hath left us no manner of direction?” (*The Great Works of Christ in America*. London, 1702, Reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1079, Vol. 2, pp. 266, 267)

Other names among Puritan leaders in agreement include William Perkins (1558-1602), Henry Ainsworth (1571-1622), and William Ames (1576-1633).

In the Church of England many complained about instruments in worship. When the Westminster Assembly of Divines met in 1643-1644 to write *The Directory for Worship*, they agreed that musical instruments were not to be used in Christian worship.

In the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Benjamin Keach and Hanserd Knollys were prominent among the Reformed Baptists, and were among the signers of the *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith*. Their opposition to instruments in worship is still followed today among Reformed Baptists.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the great hymn writer, wrote “we can never suppose the primitive church in those days had instruments of music” (*The Works of Isaac Watts*, London: John Barfield, Wardout Street, 1810, Vol. 4, p. 373).

As we come into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, we find objections to the instruments declining, even as happened over the centuries following the first use in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. But there was still strong opposition to the instruments among many. Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), perhaps one of the greatest preachers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Scotland, voiced his strong opposition.

John Gill (1697-1771), a noted Baptist theologian was another who spoke out against instruments in worship, claiming they were abolished under the gospel. Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) was a leading Baptist scholar who wrote, “Of priests, altars, sacred garments, and instrumental music in Christian worship, the New Testament ‘saith nothing.’ Is it improper then to infer that no such things were known in the times of the first Christians?” (*The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, And Co, 1851, p. 861). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we recognize the same principle, i.e. we respect the “silence of the Scriptures.”

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), the famous London Baptist preacher in the late 1800s, likewise had no place for instruments of music in worship, and more than once spoke out against them. His wide influence is noted in the fact that the Metropolitan Tabernacle, where he preached, would seat 5,000, with standing room for another 1,000, and even then people were turned away.

Spurgeon cites the great consensus among the Reformers and Puritans as to the use of instruments of music in worship.

“There was a typical signification in them; and upon this account they are not only rejected and condemned by the whole army of Protestant divines, as for instance, by Zuinglius, Calvin, Peter Martyr, Zepperus, Paroetus, Willet, Ainsworth, Ames, Calderwood, and Cotton; who do with one mouth, testify against them, most of them expressly affirming that they are a part of the abrogated legal pedagogy; so that we might as well recall the incense, tapers, sacrifices, new moons, **circumcision, and all the other shadows of the law into use again.**” (“How Shall We Sing?” *The Sword and the Trowel*, June 1, 1870, Reprinted in *C.H. Spurgeon’s Works as Published in His Monthly Magazine, The Sword and the Trowel*, Vol. 2, Part 1, p. 223)

It should be obvious to even the casual observer that modern churches have drifted far afield from the intent of the Reformers, who sought to go back to the primitive church. The elaborate performances, the grand organs and orchestras, intricate choral arrangements, “Christian rock,” are all designed to entertain and draw crowds. Nowhere in the Scriptures or early church history do we find anything even remotely resembling these innovations.

Is it that Christians two thousand years ago didn’t have the means or ability for these things? That is not the case. We are obviously aware of the several musical instruments in use in Old Testament worship, and we have references to music and dancing at festive occasions, so the

lack of opportunity is not why this was not in the early church. It should be evident that these things were not in the early church because God did not see fit to include them. When we see a church sign that says “Contemporary Worship,” we know what that means—“Entertaining Worship.”

Concerning musical instruments, Andrew Fuller wrote that they “originated in the dark ages of popery, when almost every other superstition was introduced under the plea of its according with the worship of the Old Testament” (*The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, London: Arthur Hall, Virtue, And Co., 1851, p. 861).

John Price noted that “This study reveals how far the modern evangelical church has drifted from the principles of the Protestant Reformation. In regard to the use of musical instruments, the modern church has come nearly full circle since the days prior to the Reformation. In many churches, the emphasis on music has once again become central in worship. The modern church is in desperate need of another reformation of its worship.” (Price, p. 142).

Price goes on to say:

“As we look back over the entire history of the church, there are only two periods in which musical instruments have had great prominence in worship. The first was the dark ages of Roman Catholicism in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the second is our own generation... In this sense, our modern situation is worse than before the Protestant Reformation. We have witnessed, in our own generation, the continuing advance of a man-centered theology and worship in our modern evangelical church. What God desires in His worship is hardly a consideration. What appeals to man and what makes him feel comfortable in church is the theme of countless books on worship. The increasing use of musical instruments and the sensuality of modern worship is a manifestation of this man-centeredness. This is what our Reformed brethren from the past are crying out to us about. The Reformers, the Puritans, and others since have seen the connection between the use of musical instruments and the sensuality of false worship. We have heard their words, and they warn us in the strongest terms that the use of musical instruments is part of the road back to the sensuality of Medieval worship” (Ibid. p. 143).

Can we afford to ignore the indisputable evidence of history? Although musical instruments were well known in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, how is it that their use in worship was basically shunned for over a thousand years?

In **1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14**, Paul deals with the problem in the church concerning the use of spiritual gifts. He uses the word “edify” in various forms four times in that one chapter. One of his main thoughts is directed to the speaking in tongues without an interpreter. In effect, he says that is just noise. He directs that the sounds, or words, that are heard must edify. In **verse 26** he writes: “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

In modern usage, we might add a word, so that it would read: What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, *has an organ solo*, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.” Who would be willing to agree to such? If not, why not? If instrumental music is approved of God in worship, what

violation would be done to the meaning of the passage? The question would be, “How does an instrument edify me? What does it teach me? How does it help me to better understand the will of God?” Sounds may be pleasant to the ear, but they cannot edify.

Back in **verses 3 and 4**, Paul tells us how one edifies—with *words!* “What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (**Col. 3:16**). “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord” (**Eph. 5:19**). How then do drums, guitars, pianos, etc. edify?

John Price quotes a passage from James Ramsey (1814-1871), an American minister about the emotional and sensational nature of man, and then goes on to say:

“Ramsey describes much of what we see today in the modern evangelical church all around us. Music is used to draw the crowds in and then manipulate their emotions. Vast numbers of unconverted sinners attend worship services simply because they enjoy the emotional experience created by the music. And while they remain unconverted, they are often led to believe they are Christians because they take pleasure in a service that is called worship but is dominated by music. At the same time, many Christians are deceived into believing that this emotionally charged atmosphere is the presence of the Holy Spirit. Not a few professing Christians have told me words to this effect, ‘when the music begins we can feel the Holy Spirit coming down.’ Such descriptions are testimony of the deceptive power of music over the emotional nature” (Ibid. p. 162).

This raises another question in my mind. If it requires the presence of instruments of music to bring the Holy Spirit down, then we must pity the poor Christians in the early centuries who did not have this advantage. This reminds me of the claims of modern day “prophets” such as Joseph Smith (Mormons) and Charles Taze Russell (Jehovah’s Witnesses) who claim that we cannot understand the Scriptures without their interpretation. Thus the poor souls that lived before these “prophets” were in utter darkness without any hope.

Peter Masters, recent minister at Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, has commented on the matter that relates to “contemporary worship.”

“The conscious, sound mind is the vital human organ of worship... Ecstatic worship is completely different. This aims at stirring the emotions to produce a simulated, exalted state. Ecstatic worship takes place when the object of the exercise is to achieve a warm, happy feeling, perhaps excitement, and even a sense of God’s presence through the earthly, physical aspects of worship such as music and movement. Among charismatics this is eagerly pursued, the programme being carefully engineered to bring worshippers to a high emotional pitch, and often to a mildly hypnotic state...” (Masters, Peter. *Worship in the Melting Pot*, London: The Wakeman Trust, 2002, pp, 23-24)

Later in his book, Masters goes on to warn us:

“Whether its advocates realize it or not, the contemporary worship movement is the instrument of the hour to pull down the doctrinal walls of Zion. How the arch-enemy of the churches of Christ and of human souls must be straining to bring about such a catastrophe~ the new worship scene is undoubtedly our enemy, not our friend. If we give new worship the smallest foothold it will ruin the highest activity entrusted to us—the reverent, intelligent and joyful offering of spiritual praise...it is very noticeable that wherever new worship has been embraced by evangelical, a perceptible loss of reverence, coupled with worldliness and shallowness, has set in” (Ibid., p. 136).

The Psalmist penned a Psalm for Thanksgiving. “Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; Come before Him with joyful singing” (**Psalm 100:1-2**). Joy should be one of the characteristics of our coming before our Creator in worship. But do we have to depend on mechanical devices to instill joy in our hearts? If so, does that mean that the early Christians were more or less joyless in their worship? Who would so claim? Paul references the joy of the Christians in Thessalonica: “You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (**I Thess. 1:6**). It would seem that the Word of God brought joy as well as the singing. Are people attracted to churches today to hear the Word of God, or to hear the beat of the band?

In reading the Old Testament, we are in awe at the splendor of the Temple and its furnishings. It is hard to imagine how the craftsmen of ancient times could build such a magnificent structure and carve out and mold such beautiful articles. The worship at the temple must have been awesome. But however glorious that was, we have a more glorious way given to us in the New Covenant. The writer of Hebrews emphasizes this over and over in seeking to keep Christians from going back to the Old Law and its ordinances and practices. In **Hebrews 8:6**, we are told that Christ “is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.” In fact, the author uses the word “better” some twelve times in the epistle. If things were “better” under the New Covenant worship without the instruments, why do some want to go back to the “inferior” practices under the Old Covenant?

Are we smarter than the 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians? Do we have more spiritual insight than they did? Were they deprived of truly spiritual worship because they didn’t use instruments? Who would claim such? The truth is that the worship of the early Christians was very simple, and that is evidently what God wanted, as the early church was guided by the apostles, who were in turn guided by the Holy Spirit, who inspired them with the very mind of God (cf. **John 16:12-14**). I believe we would all agree that God was quite pleased with the simple worship of the Christians who were meeting in secret in the catacombs in Rome, as well as those today in some Chinese house churches where they sometimes have to whisper their songs.

Price cites some ways in which Jesus Christ approved of and thus endorsed singing. (1) By his own example. When the disciples had finished the Passover meal and the institution of the Lord’s Supper, “After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (**Matt. 26:30**). (2) By singing with us when we are assembled together. “saying, “I WILL PROCLAIM YOUR NAME TO MY BRETHREN, IN THE MIDST OF THE CONGREGATION I WILL SING YOUR PRAISE” (**Heb. 2:12**). We recall Christ’s promise to his disciples in **Matthew 18:20**: “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” (3) By making singing a teaching ministry. “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,

singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (**Col. 3:16**). **(4)** By making singing a foretaste of heaven. “And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous and true are Your ways, King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy; For ALL THE NATIONS WILL COME AND WORSHIP BEFORE YOU, FOR YOUR RIGHTEOUS ACTS HAVE BEEN REVEALED’” (**Rev.15:3-4**).

## **ARGUMENTS FAVORING INSTRUMENTS IN WORSHIP**

Is there nothing that can be said in favor of instruments? Obviously, those who practice this would generally say that they have reasons as to why they think it is acceptable to God for them to use the instruments in worship.

### **“Circumstances of Worship”**

The 1689 Baptist Confession discusses what are called “Circumstances of Worship.” It mentions the things Christ has commanded—preaching, singing, the Lord’s Supper, etc. Then it goes on to say that there are “circumstances” surrounding these things, such as the number of songs, the length of the sermon, the time of meeting and whether members stand or sit. And among these circumstances would be the use of instruments.

But there is an obvious difference between things necessary to carry out a command, and adding something to the command. For example, in partaking of the Lord’s Supper, whether we use glass or plastic cups, or whether we use multiple cups or one cup, etc., are all “circumstances.” But if we add potato chips instead of, or in addition to, the unleavened bread, then we have added that which is not authorized, even though the text does not forbid it.

Can we partake of the bread without the potato chips? Obviously so. Can we sing songs of praise without the piano? Obviously so. Now, “some will say that instruments are necessary to singing with decency and propriety. If this is true, then we must accuse the church throughout the greater part of its existence of singing without decency and propriety” (Price, p. 194). Who would be willing to make that charge?

Truthfully, the instrument is not just an aid or accessory, but it is an unauthorized addition. In the Old Testament, instruments were not considered as an aid or accessory, but were commanded, and thus were *necessary* in order for the worship to be pleasing to God.

### **The Greek word “psallo”**

It is claimed that the Greek verb “psallo” (singing or making melody) and the noun “psalmos” (psalm or song) include the use of an instrument. Both of these forms are used in Ephesians 5:19. “speaking to one another in *psalms* and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and *making melody* with your heart to the Lord.”

The original definition of psalmos was “a striking, twanging, specifically, a striking of the chords of a musical instrument” (Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Henry Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1981, p. 675). Similarly, psallo’s original meaning was “to play on a stringed instrument, to play the harp.” (Ibid.)

There are sound reasons why this cannot be used to authorize instruments in worship under the New Covenant.

(1) As in any language, words change their meaning over time. For example, our word “paradise” once referred to a garden spot, as Adam and Eve were in paradise. In time the word came to refer to a cemetery, and eventually came to mean heaven, as Christ told the thief beside him on the cross, “Today, you shall be with me in Paradise” (**Luke 23:43**). We are well aware that in our time the word “gay” no longer has the connotation of “happy,” but refers to homosexuals.

By the 1<sup>st</sup> century, the words in **Ephesians 5:19** and elsewhere had also changed in meaning, as attested to by numerous lexicographers. By the time of the Greek Septuagint translation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., the meaning included both singing and playing, and thus no longer referred exclusively to playing on an instrument. Then by the time of the writing of the New Testament, it meant just to sing without an instrument. Thayer says: “in the New Testament, to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song, **James 5:13** (R.V. sing praise)” (Ibid).

Other scholars and lexicographers concur. These would include W. E. Vine, E. A. Sophocles, Harold K. Moulton, James Hope Moulton, George Milligan and others.

It is noteworthy that Sophocles, a native of Greece, and long professor of Greek at Harvard University, published a lexicon, the title-page of which is: "A Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods (from B.C. 146 to A.D. 1100)." It embraces the period of Jesus and his apostles." He enumerates the Greek writers embraced in, and bearing on, the period. In making a lexicon for that period he consulted all the writers of nearly two thousand years, embracing the New Testament and the Septuagint edition of the Old Testament.

During this period he did not find a single example of "psallo" being used to mean anything else, save to chant, to sing.

He defines "psallo" and its derivatives "'Psallo' ; to chant, to sing; 'psalmos' psalm; 'psalmodia' psalm singing; 'psalmodas' psalmist; 'psaltarion' psalter, or collection of, songs; 'psaltes' ; a chanter, church singer; 'psaltria' ; chantress; 'psaltos' played upon the psaltery, sung; 'psaltodeo' to sing to the harp.

**"Only "psaltos" carries the idea of playing on the instrument.**

"**Psaltodeo**" is composed of two words the "psalm" and the "**ode**." The ode refers to lyric poetry, or poetry to be sung with the lyre. Hence the two words **combined** mean to sing to a harp or instrument. This shows "**psallo**" **alone cannot refer to both the voice and the instrument**. Had he found "psallo" used in a different sense during this period by an accredited writer, he would have been dishonest not to give this additional meaning. I do not believe **an example of a different use of it can be found in the Greek literature of any age of the world.**

Consider this dilemma. If the instrument was included in **Ephesians 5:19** and **Colossians 3:16**, **then we could not sing without the instrumental accompaniment!** Whatever the word means in these passages, we are *commanded* to do it. If the legitimate translation of the word includes the instrument, then we could rightly translate **Ephesians 5:19** thusly: “speaking to one another in



psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and *making melody* with your heart *and the instrument* to the Lord.”

Or what about retranslating **I Corinthians 14:15**: “What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will *play on a stringed instrument* with the spirit and I will *play on a stringed instrument* with the mind also.” Frankly, I prefer to read it as the Holy Spirit caused it to be written: “What is the outcome then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will *sing* with the spirit and I will *sing* with the mind also.”

(2) Another problem would be that *each individual* would have to play an instrument. If each one is commanded to sing, then that same person is commanded to play. I cannot imagine the mass confusion that would ensue.

(3) And there is yet another problem. If the words dictated using an instrument, then the early church was in disobedience to God from the very beginning. We have pointed out that all scholars and historians are in complete agreement that the early church did not use instruments for many centuries. Now, these people understood Greek, the universal language. The apostles corrected many errors in their writings to the churches, but we find not one word of rebuke for this omission. It is an indisputable fact that the early church leaders strongly opposed the use of instruments in worship. *There must be a reason!*

(4) When we consider **Colossians 3:16**, we run into another problem. There Paul writes, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” The word “singing” there is not from “psalmos,” but from “ado,” which is clearly defined as “to sing,” which has no history of the inclusion of instruments in its usage. So, why would Paul command the Colossians to sing without instruments, while commanding the Ephesians to sing with instruments? It doesn’t make sense. We should also note that “ado” is used in **Ephesians 5:19** as well, as they are “*singing* (ado) and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”

The truth is there was an instrument used—the heart. Paul said they were to engage in “making melody *with your heart*.” We use the colloquialism about something “plucking the strings of my heart” in referring to some emotional reaction. That’s what they were doing when they were “singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”

(5) Furthermore, if the words include the instruments, then the Holy Spirit has changed the way he communicates the will of God, for in the Old Testament, not only were instruments included, they were *specified* as to which instruments were to be used. It is significant that no such instructions are given in the New Testament.

The conclusion is that the words cited did not include or permit the use of instruments, and the early church did not sin in not using them.

### **Spiritual emotions**

Others may claim that the music made by instruments produces spiritual emotions. This is purely subjective reasoning, and the same could be said for a symphony by Bach or Mozart. And some are moved to tears by a song from Justin Bieber. Yes, my emotions are stirred by a great musical

rendition, and even by bagpipes playing a lovely Scottish melody, but to equate this with worshipping God is a far stretch.

### Old Testament usage

Some argue that since God sanctioned the instruments in the Old Testament, that means he approved their use, and thus conclude that he would sanction their use in the New Testament. We have dealt with this in previous pages. We know that God has the right to change his will. He did this in replacing the Old Covenant with the New Covenant. The writer of Hebrews points this out clearly in many ways. We believe that God knows what he wants, and is able to clearly communicate that to us. As pointed out earlier, if we bring something in just because it was sanctioned in the Old Testament, then there is no reason not to bring in animal sacrifices, a separate priest-hood, feast days, the mandatory offering of 10% (which would surely go against what many “believers” today do), candles, incense offerings, stoning for adultery and juvenile delinquency (which might solve some problems in our society today), etc., etc. The old saying is, “That which proves too much proves nothing.”

### Harp in heaven

Then there is the “harps in heaven” argument. **Revelation 14:2**: “And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps.”

This argument is not valid for various reasons. In the first place, if there are literal harps in heaven, is there literal water there, and literal thunder? I was not aware that there was rain, lightning and thunder in heaven. They all go together. What does the text say? They “sound like.” When people describe a tornado, they often use the phrase, “It sounded like a freight train.”

Now, suppose there are actual harps in heaven. If we impose what is in heaven here on the earth, then we cannot marry (**Matt. 22:30**), nor will we experience many normal things of life, for **Revelation 21:4** says, “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” If we are going to make everything we read in Revelation literal, then so be it, and let us be consistent. And don’t forget the bowls of incense that accompany the harps. “When He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (**Rev. 5:8**). Gold is pretty expensive these days, so it might be a problem to buy them.

### The “pitch pipe”

Then the argument is made that since some song leaders use a pitch pipe to get the right key, if they are authorized, then so is the piano, guitar, organ, etc.

But we do not sing with the pitch pipe. We put no words with the tone that issues from the pitch pipe. It does not accompany our singing, neither is a solo composition played on the pitch pipe. Some song leaders simply hum the note before starting the song, as they have a good ear for the correct pitch. Those who would compare the pitch pipe to an orchestra or a “Christian” rock group playing guitars, drums, etc., surely must recognize that there really is no comparison.

## CONCLUSION

In reality, the burden of proof rests upon those who insist that instruments of music in worship are authorized in Scripture. If such can be produced *from the Bible*, then we can move the piano in tomorrow. But until then, I am content to remain within the bounds of Christ's answer to the lawyer who asked him about eternal life. "And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' And He said to him, 'What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?'" (**Luke 10:25-26**).

"Teacher, is it alright to play instruments of music in worship?"..."What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?"  
—*Jefferson David Tant, [jdtant3@juno.com](mailto:jdtant3@juno.com)*

(Credit must be given to John Price for the great deal of research that he did. It was a great help in writing this essay.)