

Musical Attitudes in the Church of Christ

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When John Grisham was doing research for his book, *The Last Juror*, he attended church services at every denomination in several Mississippi counties. His experiences are woven into the story-line of the novel. He summarized worship services at the church of Christ as (1) totally devoid of emotion; (2) a belief in not using musical instruments; (3) the belief that they were the only ones going to heaven. I don't consider Mr. Grisham an authority on church doctrine, but his observations as a non-Christian were disturbing nonetheless.

Let me say at the outset that this is not an endorsement for instrumental music in the Church of Christ. Nor is it a condemnation of mechanical music. It is not even a dissertation on whether or not scripture authorizes instrumental music (IM) in corporate worship. To the paper and ink already wasted on the subject, I add my two cents worth.

Offered here are thoughts garnered from both sides of the pulpit—from sermons I've preached and from those I've heard others preach on the subject. Consider these personal reflections seen in the church regarding *attitude* among its members.

How does music enter into the worshipper's attitude? In science, there are elements or conditions, that when introduced into a relatively benign environment, result in various consequences. Music is such an element. And because music appeals to the emotions, it can bring out various reactions, sometimes resulting in extremism on both sides.

Extremism is a form of prejudice. Those who adhere to one extreme or the other, do so, not so much out of biblical prescription, but out of stubborn belief. What they see as hard-core faith is no more than old-fashioned stubbornness. Every argument I've heard *against* instrumental music approaches the issue antithetically. In other words, the bible is used to support a position instead of the position being supported by the bible.

Having been a musician all of my life, my perspective on the subject is both objective and biased. Statements such as "instrumental music is an offense to God," or "it's a sin," or other such comments are disturbing, showing a carte blanche indictment on something the bible neither condemns nor condones. The Church of Christ has condemned IM in worship, due to legalistic interpretations. They have adopted the doctrine of anti-musical instruments into a "teaching of Christ." (2 John 9) Any member therefore refuting their position is in danger of dis-fellowship for "not abiding in the teaching of Christ."

With that intro, let's examine the spirits (and attitudes) to see if they be true, or at least worthy of consideration.

Why IM Should Not Be Used in Congregational Worship

I personally do not believe instrumental music should be used in public worship. However, most folks, both unbelievers and believers alike, have never considered it to be an issue. When they hear the arguments *against* instruments, most will look puzzled, and ask, “What’s the big deal?” They wonder why in the world it is even an issue.

Instrumental music has been in the human race since the beginning (Gen 4:21). Every nation that has ever existed has cultivated it. The Jews were prolific musicians, according to Josephus and other historical and biblical documents. As such, the use of music in religion, marriage, death, and other celebratory life events is as much a part of our humanity as other traditions. Music is a reflection of the inner person, an expression of desire and emotion. It is no wonder then that those who embrace a cold and dispassionate worship service also seek to suppress any expression of emotion through the use of instruments. Some in the church have even banned the use of pitch pipes,¹ which underscores a blatant ignorance of what even defines a musical instrument.

That said, IM brings its own set of baggage, baggage which should be left outside the assembly. What is currently practiced in public worship now is so far removed from what it should be, that adding IM just compounds the problem.

1. The Flesh Factor

Jesus taught that those who worship God need to do it “in spirit and in truth.” In Gary E. Gilley’s excellent book, *This Little Church Went To Market: The Church in the Age of Entertainment*, he shows how many are attracted to a church’s musical programs rather than to the truth of God’s word. Are these folks seeking to “worship God in spirit and in truth”?

The opposite of what is spirit is that which is fleshly. Thayer defines ‘flesh’ as being “related to what is seen,” as opposed to what is unseen (i.e., *spirit*). He defines it as earthly, external, and of human nature. It signifies the entire nature of man, sense and reason, *without the Holy Spirit*.²

In light of Thayer, instrumental music strikes at the emotional or fleshly nature. The old saw, “music soothes the savage beast,” is seen in the story of Saul and David, where David played his harp whenever Saul was in the grips of an evil spirit. (1 Sam 16:23)

A co-worker of mine told me that the main reason she liked the worship service at her church was because the music made her “feel” more like worshipping God. I’ve been told by people that they could not worship at a church that did not use musical instruments. These are folks who are not interested in worshipping God in spirit and in truth. They want to be like Saul, who are vexed by the world’s troubles, and expect a musical balm be applied to their emotions to make them “feel” better. Thayer’s interpretation of humanistic prescriptions done without the Holy Spirit serves as an indictment against this type of worship.

¹ A small, harmonica-like device that a person blows into to find the correct note on which to begin a song.

² Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Melancthon, Loci, edition of 1535, in Corpus Reform. xxi., p. 277

2. The Authority Factor

Suppose you have a small congregation, and the only person who knew how to play the church organ was a woman. According to most preachers, this would mean having a woman in a position of leadership, something forbidden by New Testament teachings. Although the context of Paul's admonition dealt with teaching (1 Tim 2:11-15), men in the church have sought to deny women to serve in most church duties.

Based on this rather chauvinistic interpretation, the primary purpose of the individual playing is to lead the congregation's singing, and keep them in tune and in tempo. In most churches, this is the person who also determines the songs to be sung. The only workaround is to have a male who is lacking in musical talent fumbling his way through the songs, a solution probably more annoying than remedial.

3. The "Fame" Factor

This is an area where I can speak with authority as a musician. Although there are truly humble musicians, they are limited to those who are naturally gifted in that area. Playing music comes as natural as breathing to them; ego does not drive their talent.

However, the music world is rife with egocentric, glory-seeking individuals. This attitude was extremely prevalent in the several rock 'n roll bands I was part of. It was intoxicating to see the high school sports jocks looking at me on stage in awe, simply because I sang and played in a rock band. Those who saw how quickly they gained female attraction by playing a guitar and strutting in front of a microphone honed their musical skills accordingly.

I have spoken to several church musicians whose sole reason for attending church was because of their status in the church band. This bespeaks that same desire to have others look at them as exalted beings sitting apart from the ranks of "common" folk sitting in the pews.

I met with a group of musicians in a Pentecostal band who had heard of my reputation on the organ. They invited me to the church, where they showed me a piano. I was totally unfamiliar with the piano, being used to the organ. My attempts at playing something were not very well received. In fact, these young men were quite vocal in their ridicule and sneering. I was then treated to a bit of musical dexterity by a youth who played that piano very well. I left under a hail of derisive laughter and embarrassment. So much for Christian attitude.

4. The Strife Factor

Suppose Joe has been the guitarist in your church band for 5 years. Joe has been doing an excellent job. However, Larry arrives to begin fellowship, and his guitar work makes Joe look like an amateur. The music minister breaks the bad news to Joe: he has to return to the pews, no longer a part of the elite church band.

Will Joe simply salute and leave the band with no ill feelings? If he is human, its doubtful that he would keep attending that church. Let's face it: you're dealing with human pride, and

musicians are generally consumed with it. In some cases, the pride far outweighs the musical skill. Therefore, circumstances such as the hypothesis seen in Joe and Larry are not conducive to “building one another up in Christian love.”

5. The Expense Factor

Although most musicians have their own gear, churches with large congregations have the financial weight to buy amplifiers, PA systems, drums, and keyboards. I’ve seen churches that have invested serious money into such equipment, equipment that runs tens of thousands of dollars. Equipping a full-sized band can approach the cost of a modest home. Some churches even have their own recording studios that host the latest in high-tech digital hardware. When one considers the cost of a professional mixing workstation—around \$200,000—you have to try and deduce the spiritual benefits to members who’ve shelled out for such an extravagance.

Such expenditure, merely to facilitate an emotional experience, is antagonistic to biblical teaching regarding sound stewardship of the Lord’s money.

5. The Crutch Factor

After being in the church of Christ, and singing *a capella* for so long, I find the use instruments annoying. The piano may be played with consummate skill, but in the denominations who employ it, I’ve found that the volume usually overpowers the singing. In some congregations, careful listening of the members’ singing reveals a lackluster effort on their part to “lift up their voices” in praise. In response to comments I’ve heard about the church of Christ’s “barnyard” harmonies, those who use instruments are in no better shape. They merely put frosting over their own bad singing by adding instruments.

In some churches I’ve attended, the band was so loud, that it was difficult to distinguish the experience from that of attending a rock concert. Again, to what spiritual purpose does this serve in worshipping God? God is not hearing-impaired. In fact, the emotional excitements produced by shrieking electric guitars and thundering bass lines has its roots in ancient cult worship.

5. The Division Factor

Unlike *a capella*, musical styles change with each generation. Even in Bach’s day, when the organ was first invented, people were railing against putting it into the church, calling it an “instrument of the devil.”

Today, there is conflict in many denominational churches over musical styles. The younger generation seeks to change the church music genre by incorporating hip-hop, techno, and “thrash” metal influences. This is upsetting older church-goers, who see music in worship as being necessarily traditional. Again, keeping up with musical fads has nothing to do with worshipping God, but is merely a human desire to drag worldly tastes into the church.

The Christian Church—a splinter movement from the Church of Christ—began with a piano and organ. Now, they too are caught up in the music fad wars, having gravitated toward a

cacphony of electronic synthesizers and drum machines, where young hands want to promote whatever genre is in style today.

This may come as a surprise to some, but there won't be digital drum machines and thousand-watt amplifiers for those golden harps in heaven.

The Non-Issue of Instrumental Music

Having painted such a negative picture of IM in the church, the reader may wonder if I can present the issue in such a way as to authorize its use in worship. Perhaps a rigid set of rules overseen by wise elders would prevent any of the extravagances mentioned?

To which, I say, no. Anything that causes division should be kept out of the assembly. While I do not see anything *wrong* with using instruments, it is a point of division, and should therefore be banned from the assembly. If a congregation one day decides to add instruments, it would be a sign of spiritual immaturity rather than an indication that they're all headed for damnation. I may question their fleshly nature, but not their salvation.

That said, let me get back to *attitude*. Bringing instruments into the worship is like everyone coming to church in wedding gowns and tuxedos—it just ain't appropriate. We don't "go to church" to entertain or to be entertained, but to worship God and build one another up in Christian love. A song sung badly is worth more to God than a pianist's skill on the ivories.

Where the church of Christ has embarrassed itself is in the area of scriptural understanding on the issue. Instead of being a "support and pillar of the truth," they've taken a *non-truth*—an issue that God is silent on—and made a lot of hullabaloo on it. They've written reams of material on a subject which the Holy Spirit has largely left alone. What God cares less about, we've turned into a matter of faith. Instead of being "imitators of God," and shutting out mouths, we've churned out libraries worth of sermons on the issue.

Those who argue, "It's not authorized," have simply not studied the issue. Being "in Christ" is not about rules and regulations, but attitude.

As stated earlier, the Church of Christ has misunderstood certain scriptural *principles*. As a result, rampant legalism runs through the brotherhood on this and other issues. Seeking to use the NT as another law book, where each and every act has to be authorized, they've fallen into the same trap as the scribes and Pharisees, whom Jesus soundly condemned.

1. On Matters of Importance, God Has Made It Abundantly Clear

When God told Noah to build an ark, He gave specific instructions as to its design. There was no room for doubt as far as Noah's understanding of what God required. This same principle is seen in the NT. Note:

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21) NIV

These words leave no doubt in the reader's mind as to what displeases God and will bring about His condemnation. Note this bit of "scripture":

The use of instrumental music in worship to God is strictly forbidden. I warn you, as I did before, that those who engage in it will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Obviously, there is no such statement anywhere in the bible. If IM was such a heinous sin, as some claim, God would have made it as plain as He did concerning the sins listed in Galatians.

Contrary to what some preach, God doesn't micro-manage what is to go on in the worship service. There are general guidelines. Unfortunately, the scribes and Pharisees, who nit-picked how every thing was to be done in Jesus' day, are still alive and well in the church today.

2. The Simplicity of Jesus' Teachings

When our Lord collided with the Jewish religious community, it was because they *misunderstood* God's word and failed to understand *principles* behind it. The reason for their errors was because of their convoluted *interpretations* of scripture. This is why our Lord says, "You have heard it said..." referring to certain scribal interpretations. In other words, "You've heard your *teachers* say XYZ, but *I* say to you..."

This mentality still exists today, where men have applied their understandings in order to deduce God's will. Consequently, they have misunderstood (and therefore mistaught) His will.

3. Twisting the Scriptures

One of the few passages church members point to when addressing music is Ephesians 5:19, where Paul writes, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." (NIV) The reference to singing "necessarily infers" that no instruments are to be used. But is this a legitimate interpretation?

Ripping scripture out of context is at the root of nearly all false teaching. Verse 15 says, "Be very careful then, on how you live..." Verse 18 says "don't be drunk on wine."

Living and staying sober have nothing to do with public worship. In fact, the whole context begins in 4:25, and deals with how a Christian is to conduct one's self in everyday life, none of which are worship-related. Yet when we get to 5:19, we say, "Aah, but *this* verse is dealing with worship." This is not "rightly handling the word of truth," and violates basic bible study rules.

4. Faulty Hermeneutics

Because of rampant division and denominationalism, well-intentioned men in the previous century devised methods of interpretation based on certain rules found nowhere in the bible. Although these rules were intended to counteract rampant false doctrine, others have used them to support all kinds of erroneous notions. These methods of interpretation, called hermeneutics,³ are (1) silence of the scripture; (2) command by apostolic example; and (3) necessary inference.

There is no exact science for interpreting the scriptures. The bible contains *facts* which then reveal *truth*. Yet truth is much more than a bunch of facts strung together. Cecil Hook, a graduate of Abilene Bible College and member of the church of Christ notes:

Our problem of interpretation begins with a legal concept of God's revelation and requirements for us. We have been more concerned about pleasing God by rituals than in establishing a personal relationship with him. Legalism demands patternism, for if there is law, there must be a pattern to follow in order to fulfil it. Then, when we fail to conform to the pattern, we must restore that pattern. *So, our infamous formula of legalism, patternism, and restorationism has resulted from our approach to interpretation* (emphasis mine). These have always been divisive and will always be so. The legalistic formula of command, example, and inference has been bent and twisted to justify each diverse course taken by those who try to follow it.⁴

5. Hypocritical Attitudes

There are those in the church who have no problem condemning a group to hell for their use of music in worship, yet themselves listen to worldly music of questionable taste. They do this with a clear conscience because they've been taught to see the worship service as "more important" in God's eyes than daily living. However, 90 percent of the NT emphasizes daily living, while only a very few scriptures concern worship practices. This was how Israel got into trouble with God. Believing that by satisfying the legalistic requirements of the temple, they were free to do whatever they wanted in their daily lives. Isaiah 1 provides an excellent dissertation on how God views such hypocrisy.

A case in point is when I used a narration of scripture on CD during a sermon. The commercial recording had very soft strains of synthesizer music in the background. One member ran out of the service as if God was going to strike us with a bolt of lightning. Others had comments about it. They took the stance that I was offering up worship to God using instrumental music, which left me absolutely speechless. Instead of focusing on the scripture being read, they only heard the music, and rendered judgment. Yet these same brethren had no problem listening to worldly music containing sexual innuendo.

³ The science of interpretation

⁴ Cecil Hook's writings can be found at www.freedomsring.org

6. Biblical Acknowledgement of Musical Instruments

If God took such a dim view of musical instruments, He wouldn't have made positive reference to them in the book of Revelation. Although the harps and trumpets found in Revelation are symbols, they contradict the idiotic notion that IM is a sin, or that it leads to other sins. If it were a sin, then we can accuse God of using sinful metaphors in describing spiritual blessings outlined in Revelation.

The old argument, "God never authorized it" is the only hook the church can hang its hat on, and that hook is tenuous. In fact, He *did* command it:

He stationed the Levites in the temple of the Lord with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet; this was commanded by the Lord through his prophets. (2 Chron 29:25)

Several OT examples are used to show how God struck people dead for disobedience, but disobedience to what? To *clearly stated* instructions He had given the people, not something on which He was silent.

It was David who introduced instruments in the tabernacle (1 Chron 15:16; 16:42; 23:5, etc).

Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the Lord (2 Chron 5:13).

I'm not trying to justify IM with the OT. The Jews at that time were under a covenant that addressed physical blessings. Christians are under a spiritual celebration. The point is, the practice is nowhere condemned in the OT.

Preachers use the story of Nadab and Abihu (Num 3) to support "unauthorized" practices. However, Nadab and Abihu violated *previously established law* concerning incense. Yet if God used the logic some preachers use, He would have rejected the instrument-based praise mentioned above.

In fact, Solomon called them the "*Lord's* musical instruments, which King David had made for *praising* the Lord" (2 Chron 7:6). At the end of the chapter, God speaks to Solomon, saying, "I have chosen this place for Myself as a temple for sacrifices" (2 Chron 7:12). You don't find God putting a disclaimer on it by saying, "Get rid of the instruments." I'm sure if some preachers had been there, they would have advised God on such a "sinful" issue.

In fact, scripture records that the Levites were "all skilled in playing musical instruments" (2 Chron 34:12). If the practice was so prevalent and yet so wrong, why didn't God say something? *Because His concern was for obedience to His Law.*

If the use of instruments was a "violation," why are there eight Psalms that begin with, "for the director of music—with stringed instruments"? Certainly, the Holy Spirit would have seen

such a presumptuous addition and eliminated such language! After all, this may “open the door” to other sins!

The Jews initiated various feasts that were never authorized by God. The synagogue form of worship was never authorized, yet Jesus and Paul participated there weekly. Even the Lord’s Supper was based on a human tradition that had been added to the Passover by the Jews. Yet in none of these things do we find mention of condemnation, lack of authority, necessary inference, etc. Why not? *Because they are non-essential issues.*

SUMMARY

Concerning any who would boast of having knowledge, Paul wrote, “If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him” (1 Cor 8:2ff).

While many regard the anti-music doctrine as a pious badge of honor, it is merely an empty belief that promotes little in its adherence and teaching. Brotherly love is the important thing which God sees rather than our being able to interpret what *we* consider to be rules and laws supposedly making up the law of Christ.

A more basic fear is that if the church of Christ adopts IM, it will lose its identity. We try so hard to *not* look denominational that we end up forgetting what Christianity is all about. Instead of trying to please God through active living, we stare forward in our pews, somberly convinced that our “authorized acts of worship” constitutes spirit and truth.

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