

The Case for a Capella

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Introduction.

- A. The world around us is filled with a riot of so-called "sacred music." Every form of music known to man now is now being used in a church somewhere in an attempt to worship God. Forget the hymnal-and-pipe-organ tradition; the religious-music repertoire now boasts Christian heavy metal music, Christian country and western, Christian rap, and a host of other genres. You can hear all of them on the radio every day.
- B. Interestingly enough, though, this has not always been true. Any religious scholar will tell you that the New Testament church did not use musical instruments. In fact, mechanical instruments of music first appeared in the worship of self-professed Christians in 658 AD, when a Catholic pope authorized the use of an organ during Mass. Other denominations have followed a similar path. 250 years ago, the Baptist church regarded the use of musical instruments as contrary to God's will. Today, almost all Baptists freely accept it.
- C. When we examine this phenomenon from a purely secular standpoint, it almost appears that the adoption of instrumental worship is part of the natural evolution of a church. Many denominations start out without instruments, but then, as time progresses, they become more enlightened and use them in the assembly.
- D. This begs the question: why aren't we evolving? Why don't we start using musical instruments? From this same secular point of view, such an adoption appears sensible. After all, just think of the evangelism opportunities! Just think of all the young people who would come to church to hear a free concert of their favorite kind of music! Now, this kind of logic might sound farfetched, but today, there are churches of Christ all over this country who are embracing instrumental music right now for exactly those reasons. Spend fifteen minutes on the Internet this evening, and you can find the websites where they talk about it.
- E. We cannot do that. We need to base our practice in worship not on what is easy, or what is popular, but on what is right. We need to keep our worship free from the use of instruments. We need to keep it *a capella*. Indeed, the word *a capella* itself tells us something significant about worship. Today, it refers to singing without instrumental accompaniment, but in Latin, the phrase literally means "in church," because when early Christians were in church, unaccompanied singing was the way they worshiped. God not only tolerates but demands this kind of worship. Let's examine His word, then, to flesh out the case for *a capella*.

I. Christians Are Commanded to Sing.

- A. In this study, we must first observe that Christians are commanded to sing. This is evident from any number of places and contexts. Let's begin by looking at Ephesians 5:18-19, one of the most important passages in the Bible for determining whether instrumental worship is acceptable to God. This two-verse context poses a contrast. First, it instructs Christians what they are not to do, which is to become drunk with wine. Instead, we are to seek a purer gladness than that which comes from drunkenness. We are to become filled with the Spirit. That is, we are to seek after the things of God. We are to love His word, and we are to love learning to be like Him, so that our relationship with God becomes a source of inexhaustible joy within our hearts.
- B. Indeed, our joy is supposed to move us to sing, telling our brethren about all that God has done for us and praising our Creator for His mighty deeds. This passage defines Christian congregational worship. In a similar way, James 5:13 describes the Christian's solitary worship. If we are glad, we are to sing.
- C. We see an example of first-century Christians singing to God in Acts 16, which describes the worship of Paul and Silas. This seems like an extremely unlikely setting for hymns of praise. Paul and Silas have just been condemned for a crime they didn't commit, beaten with rods, and handed over to the jailer of Philippi. Here, the story picks up in Acts 16:24-25. Even after Paul and Silas had been chained up in an inner prison, a hole if ever there was one, they still have such joy in their hearts that they worship God in song, much to the confusion of their fellow prisoners. This verse underscores the importance of song worship to the early church.

II. Christians Are Not Commanded to Use Instruments in Worship.

- A. From just so brief a study as this, it is obvious that commands for Christians to sing and examples of them singing are everywhere in the New Testament. Next to this wealth of authority, it comes as a complete surprise to most people that Christians are never commanded to use instruments in worship. Not by command, not by example, not even as something we must infer. It's just not there.
- B. Some scholars who wish to defend their denomination's use of the instrument disagree. They base their argument on a passage we just looked at, Ephesians 5:18-19. They go back to the Greek, and they pick out the Greek words that are translated here as "psalm" and "making melody." These Greek words are *psalmos* and its verb form, *psallo*. These Greek scholars say that in the time of Christ, *psalmos* was a hymn sung to musical accompaniment, and *psallo* was the act of singing to that accompaniment. Other scholars disagree.

- C. So where does that leave us? Do we just pick which set of scholars to believe about a language we don't speak and understand? Thankfully, things are easier than that, but to understand why, we need to understand how some of our newer translations of the Bible were translated. Translations like the New American Standard and the New King James are the product of dozens of different experts in Greek and Hebrew who hail from all over the religious spectrum: Catholics, Protestants, even atheists. The point of having these people with different beliefs translating the Bible is so that no one doctrinal point of view is allowed to influence the translation. Everybody's pet beliefs are held in check by the pet beliefs of everybody else, so that the end result is as true to the original as it can be. That's why the New American Standard and New King James are among the best out there. They aren't perfect, but they're more than accurate enough to get us to heaven.
- D. This high level of Biblical scholarship in translation is the reason why we need to be suspicious when somebody shows up with a doctrinal argument based entirely on his own translation of a Greek word. Now, it's one thing to use the Greek to refine our understanding of a point the English translation already makes, but it's totally another to start with the Greek and go from there. Here's why: generally, the only reason people base an argument totally on the Greek is that they've got some weird biased view of the Greek that the unbiased translators didn't agree with and didn't include in their translation.
- E. Sadly, that's exactly what's going on. None of the translations agree with the idea that *psalmos* means a hymn with musical accompaniment. I have fourteen Bible translations on my computer, and every one of them translates it as "psalm." If it meant something more, you'd think they'd have said. Things are even worse for the musical-instrument folks with *psallo*. Remember James 5:13? The verb in that verse is actually *psallo*. It really reads, "If anyone is glad, let him *psallo*." How is it translated? As "sing psalms." Never in any of my 14 translations is it translated as having anything to do with musical instruments, and, other than Ephesians 5:19, it always appears in the New Testament as "sing." The most significant Biblical scholars don't believe these words have anything to do with instrumental music, so why should we?

III. Old Testament Examples of Instrumental Worship Do Not Apply.

- A. The next thing that the instrumental-worship folks like to trot out is the idea that because the Israelites used musical instruments in Old Testament worship, we can too. The problem is that these Old-Testament examples of instrumental worship don't apply to us today. They're there, all right. Look at 2 Chronicles 29:25, which makes it clear that the Israelites were commanded to use musical instruments at the temple.
- B. The problem with this argument is that all those Old Testament commands and examples don't apply to us today because we are not under the Old Law. That's precisely the point of Galatians 3:24-25. Once the Old Law was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus, its usefulness ended, and it no longer governed human conduct. We're under the law of Christ, not the Law of Moses. It makes about as much sense to drag in instruments from the Law of Moses and use them as it does to sacrifice animals in worship because Moses did. I want all of those churches that use instruments to start putting altars with roasting animals on them in the middle of their assemblies. They'd still be wrong, but at least they'd be consistent!

IV. God's Silence Is Not Permission.

- A. 2 Chronicles 29:25 actually takes us to our next point, which is that God's silence on the subject of instrumental music is not permission to use it. What the Bible doesn't say is just as important as what it does say. We see from the Old Testament that God was perfectly capable of telling His people to use musical instruments when He wanted them to use them. If God doesn't do the same thing and tell us to use instruments today, that must mean that He doesn't want us to use them.
- B. There are a number of Scriptures that establish that the silence of the Scriptures is significant, but they're a lengthy study. For now, let's just use common sense instead. Let's say we send our kid off to the corner store to buy a gallon of milk. The kid comes back with the milk, but we also see that he used the change to buy himself a Snickers bar. Did he obey us? No! Even though we didn't specifically forbid him from buying a Snickers bar, he knew perfectly well that we wanted him to buy a gallon of milk and that's it. The same thing is true of God and instrumental music. God never specifically forbids us from using instrumental music, but that doesn't matter. We know perfectly well from His command to sing that He wants us to sing, and that's it.

V. We Want to Please God.

- A. At the end of the day, it all comes down to one question. Whom is our worship for, anyway? Are we doing it for ourselves, so that our highest goal is to pick the musical styles that please us the best? Or are we doing it for God, so that our highest goal is to do what pleases Him? It's obvious what God wants. He wants to be praised by the voices of His people without anything else. At the end of the day, that's what we want to do, because we want to please God. Look at 2 Corinthians 5:9, which expresses this point perfectly. Our ambition is not to gratify our musical tastes. It's not to pack this building by forsaking God's word. It's to do what God wants us to do, because we know that He is pleased not by beautiful music, but by obedience.

Conclusion. If you need to obey God's call to be saved, He will receive you gladly today.