

Chain Reference: Instrumental Music

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Introduction.

- A. For my most recent Sunday night sermon, I responded to some questions I'd had recently about studying with folks who believe that miraculous spiritual gifts still continue today. In this response, I set up what I have heard called a chain-reference study. Basically, it's a series of Scriptures linked to each other with marginal notes that if we follow them from beginning to end, will give us the Biblical truth about a particular topic.
- B. Several people expressed interest in the idea of more chain-reference studies, so I thought about it and decided that the use of musical instruments in worship would be another appropriate topic. As just about all of us know, our practice of singing praises to God without musical accompaniment is an extremely unusual one. By and large, the denominational world uses instruments in their church services. These instruments vary all over the map, from the pipe organs of very stuffy high-church denominations to the praise-and-worship rock bands that are so popular in today's megachurches. However, just about all of them use something.
- C. This means that as we are studying the Bible with people who come from backgrounds like these, we need to be able to explain the truth on the subject to them. Some of us can do this by citing chapter and verse off the top of our heads, but a lot of us can't. That means that this is an appropriate subject for another chain-reference study. Here's the way it's going to work. On a page in the back of your Bibles, underneath the "Spiritual Gifts" heading if you were here last time, write, "Instrumental Music," and then, next to "Instrumental Music," write Hebrews 13:15, because that's the first Scripture in this study. Then, once we're done looking at Hebrews 13:15, write Colossians 3:16, our second Scripture, in the margin next to it so that you know where to turn next when you're going through this with someone else. If you continue this process all the way through this sermon, by the end, you will have a chain reference on instrumental music.

I. The Case Against Instrumental Music.

- A. This chain reference begins, as we said just a moment ago, with turning to the back of your Bibles, writing down "Instrumental Music," and then next to that, writing down **Hebrews 13:15**. Once you're done with that, turn there. The point that this makes is that it explicitly says that praise must come from the lips. In other words, only the things that we say or sing qualify as praise to God. Certainly, many of us don't have voices that belong on *American Idol*. Certainly, it is possible to make music that is beautiful and moving using musical instruments. None of those things matter; God demands praise that is the fruit of lips.
- B. We see this idea confirmed in the next passage on our slate, **Colossians 3:16**. Write that down in the margins of your Bible next to Hebrews 13:15, and then turn there. Notice first of all that Colossians 3:16 confirms that our musical worship must be produced by the only instrument that God created—the human voice. We are commanded not to play instruments, or even to use them to accompany our song, but simply to sing. Also, though it's not part of the instrumental-music discussion, there's another point about worship to be made here. The text tells us that we are to teach and admonish one another. During our singing, all of us are to sing. Instead of just being a passive audience, we are to be participants in the worship.
- C. There are a couple of applications we should draw from this. First of all, it tells us that our worship services can't be about sitting quietly in the pews and listening to a gifted soloist or a talented choir. In such a case, they are teaching and admonishing us, but we are not teaching and admonishing them. Such a situation doesn't match the pattern that God has set out for us. Second, though, individually, each one of us has a responsibility to join in the singing and teach and edify our brothers and sisters. Simply because we don't have a pretty voice is no reason not to sing. Simply because we don't enjoy singing is no reason not to sing. God has commanded all of us to sing, and we need to join in the worship for the good of those around us.
- D. We see this pattern of every Christian singing played out in the only example of musical worship that we have in the time of the first-century church, in **Acts 16:25**. Write that one in your margins next to Colossians 3:16, and then turn there together with me. Strangely enough, this unusual event is the only time in the book of Acts, which chronicles the history of the early church, when the children of God devoted themselves to His musical praise. Notice, though, that despite the difficulty of their circumstances, both Paul and Silas easily shifted into the familiar mode of singing hymns together without musical accompaniment.
- E. This too tells us something about what our singing can be like. Although we invariably sing when we assemble together, the assembly is not the only time in which we are permitted to praise God in song. A small group of Christians, a family, or even a Christian by him- or herself may also sing to God in the knowledge that their worship will please Him. We can do this during times of difficulty, like Paul and Silas did, or even simply when we are particularly enjoying the day and want to praise God for the way He has blessed us. Throughout our lives, we should look for opportunities to be a thankful people by offering these sacrifices of praise.

- F. Now, to these commands and examples, someone might say, "OK, so the Bible doesn't say anything about musical instruments, but I want to use them in worshiping God because I like them." That's where the next passage in our chain comes up, and it's **1 Corinthians 4:6**. Write that one down in the margin next to Acts 16:25, and then turn there with me. In context, Paul is speaking of boasting in men, but the rule that he sets forth here applies generally. If we are truly disciples of Jesus, we must listen to and obey Jesus and His chosen teachers, and the record of their teaching is found only in the Bible. That means that if we want to devote ourselves to Jesus, our foremost goal must be to confine our teaching and practice to what is written as closely as possible. We must not go beyond what is written. If we do, we have rejected the authority of Jesus in favor of the authority of another or even just our own desires. That means that by choosing something as seemingly insignificant as the use of instruments in worship, we are actually rebelling against the kingship of Jesus, and on the day of judgment, Jesus will deal with us as kings deal with any rebels. We must obey.

II. Arguments against A Capella.

- A. That's what the New Testament says about musical instruments in our worship: nothing, and that nothing speaks as loudly as a hundred verses. However, there are plenty of folks who don't like that, who want to defend their own use of the instrument, and there are a couple of arguments that they will make in particular against what we've just said. The first is that throughout the period of the Old Testament, David and many others used musical instruments as part of their praise to God, so we get to use the instrument too. The first part of that argument is true. Musical instruments were used under the old covenant, and we see an example of this in **2 Chronicles 29:25**. Write that one down next to 1 Corinthians 4:6, then turn there with me. As this passage clearly shows, the Jews under the Law of Moses were commanded to use instruments, and that's exactly what they did. Notice, though, the difference between this very clear Scripture and the nothing we see in the New Testament. If God had wanted us to use instruments, He could have been just as clear with us.
- B. This passage, though, as clear as it is, does not shape our practice in worship in any way. We see the reason why in **Galatians 3:23-25**. That's the passage that goes in your margins next to 1 Chronicles 29:25, and then once you've got it written down, it's the passage we'll read together. As Paul tells us here, we are not under the Old Law. That Law was a tutor to bring us to Christ, but now that we have Jesus to believe in, we are not under the tutor anymore. That means that none of the laws of the Old Testament, from the Ten Commandments to the passages on song worship, apply to us unless that law is repeated in the New Testament. Nine out of the Ten Commandments, are, so we should follow them. They have been incorporated in the new covenant. However, the passages on musical instruments are not. They are not part of the law that God intends for us to follow, so we must not follow them. We must follow Jesus instead.
- C. That's the first argument. The second argument is a bit more subtle. It's based on the wording of **Ephesians 5:18-19**. That's our seventh passage, so write it down next to Galatians 3:23-25, then turn there to see what it says. Notice that in this text, we are commanded to sing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," and the argument for musical instruments focuses in on the word "psalms." In the original Greek, the word there is *psalmos*, and some commentators will argue that a *psalmos* was a psalm sung to instrumental accompaniment. Some clever folks will point to that and say, "See! We're supposed to use instruments in worship!"
- D. Now, just about all of us don't know Greek, myself included, and we might find that argument hard to deal with if we run into it unprepared. However, we don't have to spend years taking classes to address this position. Here's what we need to know: First of all, some commentators will make that claim about *psalmos*, but most Greek scholars won't, and you won't find a single English translation of the Bible that even implies here that we're supposed to use instruments in worship. That's strike one against that position.
- E. An even better argument, though, can be found in **James 5:13**, which is going to be our final Scripture for the evening. Write that one down next to Ephesians 5:18-19, and then turn there for the end of our chain reference. This is a very simple command, but what makes it interesting for our purposes is that the word translated as "sing" is the Greek verb *psollo*. In English, we have a lot of words that have both a noun form and a verb form. For instance, we can both put on a pair of skates—noun—and skate—verb—on the ice in winter. This is important because *psollo* is the verb form of that word *psalmos* back in Ephesians 5. This verse is actually saying, "If anyone is glad, let him *psalm*." This poses two big problems for the *psalmos* folks. First of all, I've never seen an English translation of the Bible that translates this word any other way than "sing." Folks, if the verb form of the word means "sing," the noun form of the word also just means "song."
- F. Second, though, let's say that an instrumental-music advocate really wants to stick to his guns here. Let's say that he continues to insist that both *psalmos* and *psollo* refer to songs sung with instrumental accompaniment. James 5:13 isn't a passage that refers to assembly worship. It's a passage that refers to individual worship. If *psollo* is about singing to the accompaniment of an instrument, then this text is commanding every Christian that he has to know how to play an instrument that he can sing along to, and that he has to employ that instrument when he sings praises to God. Folks, that's an absurd conclusion. I've never met or even heard of anyone who teaches that, but if we say that *psalmos* requires a musical instrument, that's where we end up.

Conclusion. Obedience to God, though, is about more than just music. He wants you to give your whole life to Him.