

# LIKE THE EARLY CHRISTIANS SHE WORSHIPS IN SONG

*By James M. Tolle*

In rejecting the use of instrumental music in worship, churches of Christ do not do so just to be peculiar nor because of any expense involved. To them it is a matter of principle rather than of expediency. They have sought out the correct answer to the all-important question: Does Jesus Christ authorize the use of instruments of music in the worship of God? From their investigation of the divine word, they have concluded that there is neither command, percept, nor example for this practice. See Matthew 17:5; 28:18; John 14:26; 1 John 4:6. Every single New Testament reference to music in divine worship pertains to singing only: Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; James 5:13.

## **LAW OF WORSHIP**

The New Testament law of worship is set forth in John 4:24, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth." No worship, according to this utterance of Jesus, can be right unless it is done in spirit and truth. What is the truth? "Sanctify them in the truth: thy word is truth" (John 17:17). Where does God's word expressed in the New Testament advocate the use of instrumental music in worship? Not anywhere; therefore this practice cannot be done in truth, for the "word is truth." We thus conclude that instrumental music in worship violates the law of worship expressed in John 4:24.

The opposite of true worship is vain worship. All forms of worship unauthorized by the New Testament are vain - void and useless. Jesus said in Matthew 15:9, "But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men." In the context of this statement, the Pharisees had remonstrated with the Lord because his disciples did not wash their hands before eating. The Pharisees taught that this practice was a direct service rendered to God and that those who failed to so act were spiritually defiled and displeasing to God. But, in fact, God had never commanded men to wash their hands before eating. This act was merely a precept of men, and the failure to practice it did no spiritual harm to the individual. See Matthew 15:20. Jesus Christ condemned this doctrine, along with all other man-made religious precepts, when he described it as "vain worship." Instrumental music in worship is vain because it originated with man and not with God.

But one may ask, "Is there anything really wrong with washing one's hands before he eats?" Morally, no; religiously, yes. An activity can be morally right and yet religiously wrong. Consider the following examples: (1) It is morally right to eat ham and eggs, but it is wrong to do so as a religious rite, as an act of worship. (2) It is morally right to apply water to an infant's body for the purpose of bathing it, but it is wrong to do so as a religious rite. (3) It is morally right to play on instruments of music for recreation and entertainment, but it is wrong to do so in the worship of God.

## **NOT AUTHORIZED BY OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES**

Old Testament examples of instrumental music in worship do not advocate its use in the Lord's church. The Old Testament is no longer binding on men as a system of religious doctrines and practices. It has been nailed to the cross in order that the New Testament might come into force (Heb. 10:9,10; Col. 2:14). Christ is the supreme authority in religion for the church, not Moses

(John 1:17; Heb. 8:6). Christ gives no authority for the use of instrumental music in worship, and faithful Christians reject this practice because of their respect for the Lord's will expressed in the New Testament.

The apostle Paul said, "Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?" (Galatians 4:21). If one appeals to the Old Testament to justify the use of instrumental music in worship, to be consistent he is obligated to accept all the other forms of worship found therein: burning of incense, offering of animal sacrifices, etc. But churches of Christ reject all these practices for the simple reason that they are not included in the teachings of the New Testament, the authority of Christ.

### **HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

There is not a solitary reference to the use of instrumental music in any congregation of the Lord's people during the entirety of the apostolic age.

The first appearance of instrumental music in worship was about the sixth century A.D. The exact date of its introduction varied in different locations. But we can safely conclude that it was not generally practiced until after the eighth century. The best of historical scholarship agrees that singing only, was the apostolic practice.

"Many centuries were to pass before instruments accompanied the sung melodies." 1

"Only singing, however, and no playing of instruments, was permitted in the early church." 2

"There can be no doubt that originally the music of the divine service was everywhere entirely of a vocal nature." 3

"At first church music was simple, artless, recitative. But the rivalry of heretics forced the orthodox church to pay greater attention to the requirements of art. Chrysostom had to declaim against the secularization of church music. More lasting was the opposition to the introduction of instrumental accompaniment." 4

"All the music employed in the services of the early Christians was vocal." 5

"Ambrose expresses his scorn for those who would play with the lyre and psaltery instead of singing hymns and psalms; and Augustine adjures believers not to turn their heart to theatrical instruments. The religious guides of the early Christians felt that there would be an incongruity, and even profanity, in the use of the sensuous nerve-exciting effects of instrumental sound in their mystical, spiritual worship. Their high religious and moral enthusiasm needed no aid from external stimulus; the pure vocal utterance was the more proper expression of their faith." 6

"Music in churches is as ancient as the apostles, but instrumental music not so. The use of instrument, indeed is much more ancient, but not in church service." 7

## **CONCLUSION**

With all the evidence at hand, the conclusion is inescapable: instrumental music in worship was never practiced by the primitive church. Churches of Christ today worship in song as the early Christians did. This is scriptural. This is safe. In everything we do in the worship of God, may we always explicitly follow the divine plan as set forth in the New Testament.

1 Kurt Pahlen, *Music of the World*, p. 27.

2 Hugo Leichtentritt, *Music, History and Ideas*, p. 34.

3 Emil Nauman, *The History of Music*, Vol. I, p. 177.

4 John Kurts, *Church History*, Vol. I, p. 376.

5 Frank Landon Humphreys, *Evolution of Church Music*, p. 42.

6 Edward Dickinson, *Music in the History of the Western Church*, p. 55.

7 Joseph Bingham, *Works*, London Edition, Vol. II, p. 482.