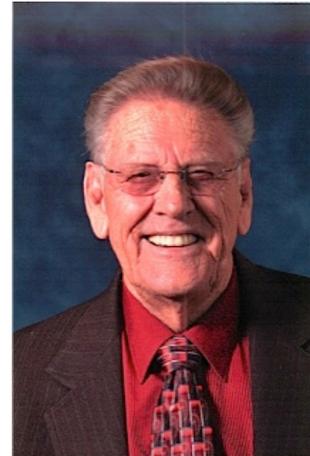


A HISTORY OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN DIVINE WORSHIP



By Gordon Wilson

Most of you are aware that I am a member of the Church of Christ. Possibly you think you are also a member of this church, even if its name does not describe the denomination or religious affiliation to which you belong. For we all recognize that in the New Testament the church of our Lord is composed of all saved people. I cannot add, “regardless of what denomination they are members of,” since there were no denominations in apostolic days. I am not here to dwell on that point. The church of which I am a member has a modern history as well as New Testament roots. A movement in the 19th century, known as the Restoration Movement, led to the planting of congregations of like faith and practice in the countries where the movement was active; mainly England and the United States. This movement divided in part over the issue of the use or non-use of instrumental music in its assemblies. I stand with those who do not use the instrument. I mention this in the interest of full disclosure, so that you will be able to decide for yourself whether I am reading my history from a bias.

I am not presently arguing the right or wrong of using instrumental music in divine worship, but taking a brief look at its history, and bringing this history up to the 19th century. Let me simply say that the people with whom I stand have considered and debated this issue publicly and privately for a long time, and feel that our stance is well supported by scriptural arguments. I have not abandoned the arguments that revolve around the necessity for Biblical authority. I accept them. I may say, however, that arguments pro and con do more to confirm our own beliefs than to convince others. My purpose in this paper is neither to confirm nor to convince anyone.

One more preliminary remark. As is the custom in our meetings, this paper will not be footnoted. Documentation is readily available in most standard works of church history. Most historians, especially those specializing in medieval and Reformation history, can judge the accuracy of my remarks instantly. You are invited to correct errors, if any, during our period of critique.

Where shall we begin? Certainly not with the use of various musical instruments in ancient pagan religions. Too much time would be required to develop that theme, even if we wanted to include the worship of the old Egyptians, Canaanites, Assyrians, and Babylonians under the rubric "divine worship." Instead, we shall begin with a brief visit to the Old Testament. The worship of faithful Israel was certainly divine worship, in that it was not only conducted by divine instruction, but was also directed to the only true and living God.

There can hardly be any dispute that instrumental music was a significant part of Israel's worship from about 1,000 BC onward. Players on instruments of several kinds were placed in the temple by God's command. He controlled their use in terms of what instruments were to be used, how many, and when they should be played. It cannot be doubted that their use was acceptable to Yahweh. What I am not so sure about is whether their use was truly pleasing to God, or was merely a concession to human desires. There are definitely things accepted, commanded, and regulated under the temporary

scheme of Old Testament Jewish religion that were not approved by God, but only permitted and tolerated.

God permitted and made rules concerning divorce, though divorce represented a declension from his original marriage law. He let Israel have an earthly king, and gave careful instructions about the kingship. This was in spite of the fact that the people in demanding a king were rejecting the direct rule of God in so doing; and that he gave them a king in his anger. Neither a king, nor, for that matter, a Levitical priesthood, would have been established had the people kept covenant with Yahweh, for that was the condition on which the people themselves would have been “a kingdom of priests.” These are examples of things God commanded without himself being pleased with them. Perhaps the use of instruments of music in worship was in the same class. I am not sure. But the instruments were there in the temple, and God accepted them. All of this is being noticed by way of background for what must now be discussed: the worship of God after Jesus Christ came and built his church.

The Christian church began with a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts chapter 2. Christians in Jerusalem, and often those from other regions, continued to visit the temple. But they soon realized that the place where sacrifices were made according to the old Mosaic law, with its rituals and its required pilgrimages on specified feast days, could not provide a pattern for the worship of Christians. Obvious not –since one perfect sacrifice for sin had already been made. But the Jewish people had long before, apparently during the Babylonian exile, made other arrangements for regular meetings. The word “synagogue” just means a gathering. Wherever, both in Jerusalem and in the lands of the Diaspora, ten Jewish men could be found to constitute a *minyan*, such assemblies were held. The worship of the synagogues consisted of the occasional singing of a hymn or psalm in praise to God; a scripture lesson read from the OT, perhaps one from the Torah and one from the prophets; prayers offered; and there was a treasury where money could be given to take care of the poor.

It is the synagogue, not the temple, that became a model for local churches under the leading of the apostles. Indeed, the word *synagoge* is a synonym of the word *ekklesia* when the local congregation is being considered. Both words mean an assembly or congregation of God's people. The former word, like the latter, is used in the NT for an assembling of disciples (Jas 2:2; Heb 10:25). When Paul and Barnabas, on their missionary journey through south Galatia, returned to the congregations they had established, they "appointed elders for them in each church" (Acts 14:23). How were they able to do this without the passage of years for the development of an eldership? Simply because mingled with the new Gentile converts were some Jewish believers, who were already familiar with the practice of having elders to rule in each synagogue. Other terms for local leaders, such as "overseer" (old English "bishop") came to be used later as more Gentiles were added to the church. The worship of each local church was patterned mainly after the synagogue, not the temple. When the NT refers to the church under the figure of a temple, the word used is not one that denotes the buildings of the Jerusalem temple.

The earliest Christian churches did not use instrumental music in their assemblies for worship. I think all historians agree to this. The temple had instruments, the synagogues did not. Throughout the New Testament every mention of musical praise to God speaks of singing, never of playing. The only instrument on which worshipers were directed to make melody (*psallo*, to pluck, as on the strings of a harp) was the heart filled with grace and praise to the Lord. I am sure that no respected historian who has written about the practices of the apostolic church will express any doubt that only *a cappella* singing was used in the beginning.

What happened after that? The apostles all died. A hundred years went by and congregations were being planted all over the Roman Empire and even beyond. So far as the historical record goes, not one of them used instruments of music. Another hundred years passed, with several significant changes taking place. Sacramentalism, ritualism, monarchical bishops, and other variations from apostolic times came to be accepted. Yet, there was still no use

of instrumental music in church meetings. We reach the time of Constantine the Great, first quarter of the fourth century, under whom Christianity became the Imperial religion. But we must keep going, for even as chapels and great basilicas were being constructed and filled with icons and artwork, no instruments of music were being installed.

We reach the seventh century. In AD 667, the bishop of Rome, Vitalian, known to Catholic historians as St. Vitalian, received an organ as a gift. He introduced the organ into one of the churches in Rome. Perhaps you remember what happened. The first time that organ was played in a worship service, a howl of anger and protest was heard, and did not desist until the organ was removed. The very first instrument of music used by Christians in divine worship was in the seventh century, but did not stay in because of the protest against it.

When we reach the 11th century we see the Great Schism that permanently (at least up till the present) divided the Roman Catholic Church from the Eastern Orthodox branch of the catholic church. In this paper we need not follow the Eastern development, since it did not, and in most places still does not, use instrumental music. Also, it is not the branch that gave rise to our Western denominations, sects, and movements. Let us first see what happened within Roman Catholicism, before we get to the churches growing out of the Protestant Reformation, and then move on to the 19th century, which is the period of our present concern in this study.

Eventually, of course, the organ, perhaps other instruments too, came to have their place in Catholic worship. For several centuries the instrument was found only in cathedrals, where the bishops had their thrones; not at all in parish churches. But changes gradually occurred, so that with the passage of time instrumental music is used in Catholic worship by the authority of Rome almost everywhere. But its introduction was not always peaceful. All along there was opposition by small, independent churches of Christ that had no instruments. Whether this was out of conviction or the result of poverty we cannot say for sure. But opposition came also for several

centuries from leading Catholic voices. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the great philosopher and Angelic Doctor of the Catholic church, refused to use the instrument, and in fact loudly insisted that the Church did not accept it! The early reformers, Catholics all (howbeit sometimes rebellious), rejected the instrument. Wycliffe and his Lollards spoke out against it. So did his follower, the Bohemian Hus. Of course, my Catholic colleagues will say that these were heretics and rightly turned over to the civil arm for punishment. But this will not be said of Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), the greatest humanist and Catholic scholar of the 16th century. He spoke out sternly against the use of instrumental music in the church.

Turning to the Protestant Reformation, we naturally encounter Martin Luther at the outset. Luther did not like instrumental music, and sometimes led his congregation in singing without it. But his interest was in the centrality of preaching, and he cared little for reforming the worship. Almost to the bitter end he tried to keep whatever he could of the old Catholic forms of worship. This even led him to retain images and clerical vestments, and other high church paraphernalia. This could not be said, however, for many of his followers. It was Carlstadt, Dean of the Theological Faculty at Wittenburg who conferred the doctorate on Luther. In Luther's absence from the city, Carlstadt removed many of the popular things, such as the images and vestments, and most students say, the organ also (but this is not quite certain). Luther, in pique, restored these things when he returned. So most Lutheran denominations have retained the instruments they received from their Catholic forebears.

Things were quite different across the border in Switzerland. Zwingli repeatedly wrote against the use of instrumental music in worship, and was able finally to remove the instrument from the Great Minster Church in Zurich, where he was pastor. His successor, Heinrich Bullinger, held the same attitude. And, of course, everyone knows what Calvin thought of instrumental music. It was not used in his church in Geneva, to which the popular saying, "Four bare walls and a sermon," has been applied. But we need not rely on what may be a pejorative. See instead Calvin's numerous remarks on the subject in his commentaries, still in print, on the Psalms.

We shall return to Calvin and his influence momentarily, but let us note just here that other, some more radical, reformatory movements also opposed the use of instrumental music in the church. Such was the case with the various Anabaptist sects, and this remains the attitude of many of them today. And we should think of John Knox, who returned to Scotland (the land of my ancestors) from his association with Calvin, and brought the Reformation with him. This resulted in the establishment of the Church of Scotland which did not use the instrument in early days, and some division occurred when it began to be used in very recent times.

There have been several branches of Calvin's descendants, religiously speaking. From the Church of Scotland there arose the Presbyterian Church, later divided into several denominations. At least one of those divisions was over the introduction of instrumental music; and one fairly sizeable branch of Presbyterianism still does not use the instrument. So far as I have been able to discover, none of them did until the 19th century. The Puritans, both in England and America, rejected the instrument; Baxter being the only one of note who thought instrumental music might be all right. This continued to be the case up till the 19th century, although an occasional Congregational Church did introduce the instrument in the 18th century. We must all recall the strong opposition to the practice on the part of Spurgeon, a Baptist, but without question the greatest representative of the Puritan spirit in the late 19th century. He commented, "We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it." Here I could pile up scores of great names who opposed the use of the instrument –Isaac Watt, Chalmers, the Mathers, et al—but you would then have reason to think I am speaking prejudicially. For it should be readily admitted that there were also great men who accepted its use.

Turning to the Anglican movement and its progeny, a few things can be noticed. In the Church of England, following the transfer by King Henry VIII of the headship of the church from the Pope to the sovereign of England, there was some division on our subject. But most churches used the organ, receiving it from the Catholic Church,

of which they still consider themselves a part. During the Commonwealth under the Protectorship of Cromwell, the instrument was cast out of all the churches of the realm. But it was restored with the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II. There has always been some variation of viewpoints on the subject within the worldwide Anglican fellowship, but this has not produced any general division.

A movement that was intended at first to be only a sanctification movement within the Church of England was Methodism. Their meetings grew, persecution ensued, and finally a denominational organization was formed. The Methodist Church has since divided into several denominations, some of which still do not use the instrument. None did until the 19th century. The founders of the movement were John Wesley, his brother Charles (the great hymn writer), and a few associates. These early leaders all are known to have opposed the use of the instrument in worship. John Wesley is reported to have said, "I have no objection to the organ in our chapels, provided it is neither seen nor heard." Charles Wesley wrote literally thousands of hymns, many of which are today sung in practically every fellowship. He was vehemently against any of his songs being sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument. The greatest commentator and theologian ever produced by the early Methodist Church was Adam Clarke. If you have his commentary, or have looked into it much, you know how negative he was toward the use of the instrument, believing it to be repugnant to God. He commented that he had never seen the use of the instrument in worship productive of any good, but had reason to consider it productive of much evil. I cannot say that I agree with the arguments Clarke made on some passages, for his exegesis was clearly faulty. But I am here showing how early Methodists thought.

Baptist Churches also grew out of the Anglican movement, although some of them had a Calvinist background (especially in Scotland), and some came from Anabaptist roots. Whatever their origin or their differences in doctrine, all excluded the instrument until the 19th century. Today, the Baptist denominations that are most deeply-dyed Calvinistic generally do not use the instrument in worship. This includes the Primitive Baptists (pejoratively called "Hardshells,"

although they whimsically apply this to themselves), and many congregations of Reformed Baptists. A major cause of division a little over one hundred years ago was the introduction of instrumental music; but the greater issue was over the retention of the Philadelphia Confession of Faith.

As the calendar was turned from the 18th to the 19th century, an influential movement began to take root in America. Already in the British Isles men were contending that division among Christians could be healed only by a return to the apostolic arrangement for the church. It was urged that human creeds and Confessions of Faith tended to promote division; the need was for a common standard of authority, and that standard could only be the New Testament. Called the Restoration Movement due to its call to restore the primitive church in organization and practice, the leaders of the movement decried denominationalism and insisted that people should be Christians only –not divided into sects or called by names not found in the scriptures. The particular movement I am talking about was not by any means the only Restoration Movement on this continent, much less around the world. But it proved to be the most influential, and will serve to top off our discussion of the history of mechanical instruments of music in divine worship. It appears this movement, so far as America is concerned, began in the New England states, under leaders such as Elias Smith and Dr. Abner Jones, both Baptists, who widely published their Restorationist views. In the south, the name of James O'Kelley, a Methodist, figures among the first of those who were teaching the same principles. All of these men forsook their party names and led their adherents to call themselves simply Christians.

Before too many years passed, two other names came to the fore, worn by men destined to be referred to in the histories of frontier religion as the most outstanding figures of the entire movement. Although they were not its earliest leaders, they proved to be the ones whose guidance is most remembered. Barton Warren Stone, of Kentucky, came out of the Presbyterian Church; in fact, left that denomination on the eve of being expelled for his teaching that the

Confession of Faith should be abandoned, and that the Lord's people should wear only the name Christian. Alexander Campbell was an immigrant from Ireland, via Scotland, following his father, Thomas, to Pennsylvania. The Campbells settled a little later in Virginia, and remained in the same place after it was separated to form West Virginia. (Alexander Campbell was elected to the Constitutional Convention that met in Richmond). The Campbells and Stone later joined forces upon discovering the similarity of their views. Joined by another Scottish immigrant, a Presbyterian like Stone and the Campbells, Walter Scott, the four became the most important influences in the "Quest for a Christian America," as historian David Edwin Harrell called the movement. All of the "big four" were conscientiously opposed to the use of instrumental music in the church, and none of the approximately ten thousand congregations they are estimated to have started used the instrument.

We do not know for certain when or where the first congregation began to sing to the accompaniment of instrumental music. Likely, several small, obscure churches were doing such in the 1850s. The first one of which we know was in Midway, KY under the pastorate of Dr. L.L. Pinkerton. Pinkerton was far more liberal than most in the Disciples/Christian Church/Church of Christ (the names were used variously and interchangeably); if he were around today we would hardly call him an evangelical. At any rate, he brought a melodeon into the meeting house and introduced its use. One of the elders came during the night and removed it. Another was put in. The church divided over the issue. Through the 1860s more and more congregations introduced the instrument, and in just about every place a sizeable minority, usually the most active and scripturally grounded members who had founded the churches, were forced to leave or accept the instrument in defiance of their conscientious convictions.

Space and time will permit only one example. In 1867, the Christian Church in St. Louis, MO purchased a building from the Episcopalian Church. The building had a built-in \$3,000 organ. Naturally many members wanted to use it, but a minority opposed its use. Frightful fusses and bad feelings arose. Four well-known preachers, two of

whom were editors of gospel papers circulated widely among the Disciples (Isaac Errett of *Christian Standard* and Robert Graham of *Apostolic Times*) came to try to settle things. The instrument was kept quiet until 1870, when a majority voted to use it. A large contingent left the congregation and formed a new one. This story could be repeated with varying details through the remainder of the century. In the end a majority of the churches accepted the instrument, but that majority has itself split more than once. The smaller number, who came to be almost exclusively known as churches of Christ has itself divided (or actually were never in full agreement) over other issues. On the whole, divisions, internal fights, whatever, has not kept these non-instrumental congregations from enjoying a growth that in most years has outstripped that of the instrumental music congregations; which proves nothing, of course, about who is right, or even if there is a right or wrong on this issue.

Ladies and gentlemen, this paper is intended as the brief and partial study of one issue in the vast history of Christianity. It will be considered by most as a relatively minor issue. The thing that makes it worth my efforts and, hopefully, worthy of your attention, is the obvious fact that most of the time, in whatever religious connection we may consider, where the musical instrument has gone, strife and division have ensued. Is there a connection? And should it matter? I await your comments.