

# Why Our Worship Is Acapella

There are eight passages in the New Testament that mention worship in the church. None of them reveal anything other than the human voice.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them (Acts 16:25).

I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also (1 Corinthians 14:15).

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:18–19).

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises (James 5:13; cf. Rom. 15:9, Heb. 2:12, 13:15).

It is true that the Bible never says, “Thou shalt not use a musical instrument in worship.” While some commandments are very broad (such as, “Go into all the world and preach...”) some commandments are specific (such as, “...and preach the gospel”). Specific commands tend to rule out other options. When God said to Noah, “make for yourself an ark of gopher wood” (Genesis 6:14), he would not have approved of Noah using any other wood in its construction. God did not have to say, “Thou shalt not use oak, pine, ash, maple,” and so on through every species of tree. Since God told Noah what to use, He automatically excluded the rest. And no human reasoning—“the oak trees were closer to the workshop,” or, “maple looks nicer when cut,”—would have excused Noah’s disobedience. We are comfortable with similar logic when it comes to things like the emblems for the Lord’s Supper, the day of the week on which to lay by in store, and from which tribe Moses said to appoint priests (Heb. 7:14).

We therefore understand that the silence of God is prohibitive, rather than permissive. When we consider what kind of music God wants in church, we do have God’s specific command to sing. We do not have God’s command to offer anything else. God does not have to say, “No,” to the piano, the clarinet, the guitar, and the bells—they are all excluded already. Simply stated, therefore, we only use acappella singing in our services because we seek to worship according to the New Testament. Since the New Testament leaves it out, we are confident that it is right

and safe to leave it out, also. If we included instruments into our worship services, we would have to do so without God's authority.

Let us learn "not to exceed what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6), for here we are always safe and sure. "Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God" (2 John 9).

## **Church History**

Though extra-Biblical tradition is virtually meaningless for discovering the will of God, it is interesting to point out that members of the churches of Christ are not the first ones arguing against instrumental music.

Though the Jews were accustomed to instrumental music in the temple services, as shown in the Old Testament (Psalm 147:7, etc.), there is no mention of it in the New Testament. This is a striking omission! Ancient documents suggest that the early church worshiped with acappella music.

Instruments of any kind—bells, pipes, organs, strings—are unknown in churches until at least the fifth century, and they were not commonly used in Catholic churches until the eighth century, though they were met with opposition until the twelfth century. Many historians attribute the introduction of instrumental music into church services to Pope Vitalian I (657–672).

Most of the Protestant churches abandoned the practice of instrumental music. And when instruments threatened to make their way back into these Protestant churches, many of the most recognizable names in religious history vigorously opposed them, including John Calvin, John Wesley, Martin Luther, Charles Spurgeon, and Adam Clarke. This last, a respected scholar, said,

I am an old man, and an old minister; and I here declare that I never knew them productive of any good in the worship of God; and have had reason to believe that they were productive of much evil. Music as a science I esteem and admire; but instruments of music in the house of God I abominate and abhor. This is the abuse of music; and here I register my protest against all such corruptions in the worship of the Author of Christianity" (quoted in Caldwell, Ephesians, p. 257).

In fact, the term "acappella" comes from the Italian, and means "in chapel style." Unaccompanied vocal music is the original; using instruments is the innovation!

## **Edification, not Performance**

To look at the issue from a more positive angle, a study of Eph. 5:18–19 and Col. 3:16 will reveal God’s purpose in commanding acappella music. The emphasis is on the message spoken to one another, and total participation. I’m not sure that an instrument could be as edifying.

## **Two Challenges**

There are two arguments often advanced in support of instrumental music in the church: it’s in the Old Testament, and it’s in heaven.

Remember, please, that the Law is not a source of authority for Christians. We are under a new covenant (Heb. 8:6-13, Col. 3:14). If someone is to demand the return of musical instruments into worship on the basis of the Old Testament, he must also demand the return of animal sacrifices, special priestly garments and headpieces, keeping the Sabbath, traveling to Jerusalem three times a year, and burning incense.

I’m more moved by the fact that harps are depicted in Heaven (Rev. 15:2). But then again, Heaven is not the church. The highly figurative descriptions of worship in the spiritual realm of heaven are special and those experiences don’t necessarily carry over (like Matt. 22:30). Remember that burning incense and a flaming altar are pictured worship scenes in Revelation, too (8:3).

## **Is It That Big A Deal?**

That’s for God to decide. But, I often recall that God expressed His anger toward Nadab and Abihu for the teensy sin of using the wrong incense in their firepans (Lev. 10:1-3, cf. Ex. 30:34-38).

Instrumental music is a form of worship “which He has not commanded.” Let us not tempt the anger of God by overstepping the specific commandments He has given. —John Guzzetta