

# INSTRUMENTS IN WORSHIP



Has God Authorized the  
Use of Mechanical Instruments in Worship?

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by: Brent Kercheville

## **Can We Rock?**

### **Musical Instruments In Worship**

It seems to be assumed today that worship must have musical instruments played in worship. I am not aware of many churches that do not incorporate some sort of instrumental music, whether traditional (organs and pianos) or contemporary (rock band style). The general assumption seems to be that God does not care how we worship him so long as we are offering worship. I have heard the arguments against mechanical instruments ever since I was a child, growing up in the pews of churches that did not practice such. I found the arguments to be significantly lacking for the development of my faith. The best argument I could understand was that we simply do not read about the use of instruments in the New Testament. However, this argument was weakened because we read about instruments in worship in the Old Testament. So how could it be that we would come to the New Testament and these instruments would suddenly stop in the worship? In this lesson I want to examine what the scriptures say on the matter and what has caused me to draw a conclusion that my faith rests on. I believe this study will build your faith as well.

### **The Authority of God**

We do not have time for a lengthy study of the authority of God in this lesson. But it is important to consider that we need authority from God for the practices we do in our worship of him. This message was taught very early, in the very first act of worship under the Law in Leviticus 10 when the priests, Nadab and Abihu, did not offer proper worship and were struck dead by God. Why can't we make the Lord's Supper to consist of hamburgers and Dr. Pepper? The reason is obvious: because those items are not what God specified. Why can't we make the Lord's day Tuesday? The reason again is obvious: because that is not the day God specified. So we must look for authorization by God for how we worship him when it comes to music.

### **The History of Musical Instruments in Worship in the OT**

We begin with the first public/corporate worship with an instrument in the days of Moses & the tabernacle: Numbers 10:1-10. The only musical instrument used in the public worship of the tabernacle was the trumpet.

**The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Make two silver trumpets. Of hammered work you shall make them, and you shall use them for summoning the congregation and for breaking camp. 3 And when both are blown, all the congregation shall gather themselves to you at the entrance of the tent of meeting. 4 But if they blow only one, then the chiefs, the heads of the tribes of Israel, shall gather themselves to you. 5 When you blow an alarm, the camps that are on the east side shall set out. 6 And when you blow an alarm the second time, the camps that are on the south side shall set out. An alarm is to be blown whenever they are to set out. 7 But when the assembly is to be gathered together, you shall blow a long blast, but you shall not sound an alarm. 8 And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets. The trumpets shall be to you for a perpetual statute throughout your generations. 9 And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the LORD your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies. 10 On the day of your gladness also, and at your appointed feasts and at the beginnings of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings.**

## **They shall be a reminder of you before your God: I am the LORD your God.” (Numbers 10:1–10 ESV)**

The trumpet, including the number of trumpets (two), was the only authorized use of an instrument in tabernacle worship. Further, notice that the priests were the only people authorized to use the trumpets (10:8). The exact occasion in which the trumpets were used was also commanded: during the appointed feasts (10:10). It was not until the days of King David, 500 years later, that any other musical instruments were authorized to be added into the public worship. As with all the other elements of the Tabernacle worship, the use of instruments were regulated by divine command. The ancient Egyptians were well known for their wide variety of musical instruments and the guilds of professional musicians. These instruments played a central role in the worship of the Egyptian gods. However, Moses was not at liberty to use an Egyptian trumpet or instrument. God even designated how the trumpet was to be made. (Cf. Acts 7:20 “Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians.”)

### **Change In The Days of David**

**1 Chronicles 25.** We see the directions given for the use of instruments in the temple worship. The various sons are listed for the various instruments and under whose direction they belonged. Where did this come from? Did David make this up on his own? Did David decide that he wanted instrumental worship and made changes to the tasks of the priests to include this?

**1 Chronicles 28:11-13, 19.** Notice here that David was given detailed instructions concerning all the details of building the temple just as Moses had been given all the details in the building of the tabernacle. These details including the designation of Levitical singers and those men specified to play on instruments. But notice verse 19 carefully. David did not make up these rules for worship. David declares that, “All this he made clear to me in writing from the hand of the Lord, all the work to be done according to the plan.” The use of musical instruments was never a matter of liberty for men to do as they pleased. The Lord not only placed the instrument in the worship, but even designated the specific instruments to be used. God gave the instructions for the temple worship. There were never any other instruments added into worship throughout the entire Old Testament period.

**2 Chronicles 29:25-27.** The setting for this incident is the days of King Hezekiah when he restored temple worship after years of neglect. Hezekiah does not simply start a new band. God had commanded David to establish the musical instruments and the Levites who were to play them in the worship. It is interesting did not presume to add instruments without any authority from God. The text notes: “for the commandment was from the Lord through his prophets.” Hezekiah limited the musical instruments to only those divinely authorized by God to David. Note, “And the Levites stood with the musical instruments of David.” Also, notice the mention of the “priests with the trumpets.” Hezekiah realized both the authority of God through Moses for the trumpets and the authority of God through David for the other instruments. Next, as with David, even this great king did not institute the musical instruments on his own accord. He did so because “the command was from the Lord.”

### **The Restoration Principle in Regard to David**

It is interesting that after the days of David Israel suffered numerous apostasies. But notice what happened every time a man of God decided bring worship back in line with God’s instructions.

**2 Chronicles 23:18** When Jehoida led a restoration after the death of Athalia, he restored the Levitical priests to their proper functions "according to the order of David."

**2 Chronicles 29:25-29** We have already noted how Hezekiah restored the Levites to their proper position in singing and playing instruments "according to the command of David, and of Gad the seer, and Nathan the prophet."

**2 Chronicles 35:4, 5** Again, after an apostasy, Josiah (380 years after David) restored worship according to the command of David.

**Ezra 3:10** After the return out of Babylonian captivity, Zerubbabel restored temple worship "according to the ordinance of David."

**Nehemiah 12:24, 35, 45-46** Now 600 years after David, Nehemiah still goes back to the authority of David by the prophets and restored worship according to those commands. Notice the words, "The trumpets and the musical instruments of David the man of God." In all of these incidents, every time worship was restored to following God, no one ever assumed that they had authority to order worship in any other way than the way God had instructed Moses and David. Even when they came out of Babylon, they did not use the instruments of Babylon, but only the instruments of David.

Now I want to remind you of one thing. In Leviticus 10:1-3, when Nadab and Abihu offered "common" fire, they were destroyed. God specified the kind of fire and they were killed when they did not use it because it was not "holy." Everything concerning the instrument in the Law of Moses was also specified and when there was apostasy, it was all restored to the exact way that God had originally prescribed it. To do otherwise would have been sin.

### **Musical Instruments in the New Testament**

When we come to the New Testament, we must ask the same questions that were asked by Hezekiah, Josiah, and Nehemiah. Who gives the standard for worship? Where will we seek our authority for musical instruments? Is it David? Is it Moses? Is there authority for musical instruments in worship? If so, what specific instruments are authorized and who is to play them? Is it to be the priests and Levites as David was commanded? The book of Hebrews and book of Galatians clearly warning the Christians not to go back to the commands of the Law of Moses. The Hebrew writer argues strongly that the Levitical priesthood and the physical temple has been abolished:

**"For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also." (Hebrews 7:12)**

**"In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." (Hebrews 8:13)**

**"By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holiest of all is not yet opened as long as the first tabernacle is still standing..." (Hebrews 9:8)**

From these passages we learn that since the priesthood has changed from Aaron to Christ, the law has also changed. The first covenant (the Law of Moses) was obsolete and vanished away. Salvation and the way into heaven were not opened while the first tabernacle was still standing. Therefore, with the Levitical priesthood gone, the old law changed, and the tabernacle no longer standing, there is nothing revealed in the Old Testament concerning the use of musical instruments that is applicable today. To turn

to David as authority for musical instruments requires us have a physical priesthood from the tribe of Levi because that was what God commanded David.

Just as Moses was directly commanded by God (Numbers 10:1-10) for priests to use two silver trumpets for certain, specified occasions, and just as David was directly commanded by God (2 Chronicles 29:25-27) for certain Levites to use certain instruments on certain occasions (1 Chronicles 16:1-6), we need to search the New Testament for the same kind of authority. Just as Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29:25-29), Josiah (2 Chronicles 35:4-5), Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:10), and Nehemiah (12:24,35,45-46) restored the worship to what God commanded David, we must also restore our worship to what is commanded in the New Testament.

However, the New Testament does not provide a command for using musical instruments in worship. Further, we have no instructions on which instruments to use, who can use the instruments, nor when the instruments are to be played. The silence on these matters should be glaring to us. Only by the command of God were instruments added in the Old Testament, along with careful explanations of who can play, what instruments were to be played, and when the instruments were to be played. We lack information and commandment for all these things in the New Testament.

Consider further, in the lists of spiritual gifts (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12), there is no gift concerning musical instruments. Yet those were gifts given by God under the Old Testament system. If musical instruments of the temple were to continue, why do we not find the apostles instituting their use or any New Testament church practicing it? Why is there no mention of any spiritual gift for musical instruments in the New Testament? While in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit spoke profusely and very specifically about the use of instruments, the Holy Spirit remained absolutely silent in the New Testament regarding instruments.

Finally, the instruments of David were never separated from the temple or the sacrificial system. Therefore, as John Calvin said, "Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law." John Calvin correctly observed that returning to instrumental music is returning to the Old Testament system of worship. We do not look to the Law of Moses, for the Law was only a shadow of the things to come in Christ (Hebrews 10:1; 8:5). We are under Christ and his Law (Hebrews 10:8-10). To continue to use mechanical instruments in Christian worship is to return to the Law of Moses, to the Levitical priesthood, and to animal sacrifices which cannot take away our sins (Hebrews 10:1-4). We have been set free in Christ and must not submit ourselves to the shadows and the enslavement found in the Law of Moses (Galatians 5:1-4; 4:21-31; 3:10-14).

### **Historical Notes**

The history of worship by Christians is without instruments. The first time musical instruments were introduced **and** accepted in Christian worship in 670 AD when the pope brought an organ into a Roman Catholic church in Rome. But this did not happen without criticism throughout the centuries. Thomas Aquinas said in 1260 AD, "The church does not use musical instruments such as the harp or lyre in praising God, in case she should seem to fall back into Judaism. Instruments usually move the soul to more pleasure than create inner moral goodness." The point was that words teach us, the music does not. Organs did not gain prominence in worship until the 15th and 16th centuries. It was at this point that other instruments also began to be introduced into Christian worship. In the 16th century during the

Protestant Reformation, instrumental music became an issue among the Reformers because they were appealing to return to apostolic authority.

Listen to Erasmus, from the 16th century: "Modern church music is so constructed that the congregation cannot hear one distinct word. The choristers themselves do not understand what they are singing, but to priests and monks it constitutes the whole of religion. Why will they not listen to Paul? There was no such music in Paul's time." The point is that the use of musical instruments have been an issue in all the churches from the very introduction of them into the worship hundreds of years after the first century.

### **Conclusion**

We simply have no authority to turn to in the scriptures for us as a congregation to introduce mechanical instruments into our worship. The authority for instruments was given directly to Moses and David which belonged to the worship of the Law of Moses. Hebrews 7-10 teaches us that we are not under that covenant but under the covenant of Christ where forgiveness of sins is obtained. We cannot look to the Mosaic Law for worship rules any more than we can look to the Mosaic Law to establish the system for animal sacrifices. Further, the authority given to Moses and David did not authorize the use of instruments by the congregation of Israel. It authorized the use of instruments only by the priests under Moses and under David (note that Asaph was a Levite in 1 Chronicles 6:39).

Therefore, not only do we lack any authority from God for instrumental worship in the New Testament, we also lack any example of instrumental worship in the New Testament. We must not impose our desires over God's law but follow the authority for worship God has given. Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 now become instructive to us where Paul says that when we come together we are "addressing one another in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with our hearts." Paul says we use our words, not playing a mechanical instrument, but playing the instrument of our heart to the Lord. This has been the long practice of God's people for 2000 years and only the last hundred to two hundred years has the mechanical instrument become accepted in churches. But God has not authorized this addition.