Instruments in Worship:

Not a Matter of Circumstance

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Introduction

"But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God *is* a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship *him* in spirit and in truth."[1] This most categorical scriptural statement on divine worship was given by the mouth of Jesus himself upon interacting with the samaritan woman at Jacob's well. According to these words, our heavenly Father is well pleased to draw a people to himself that is characterized for their worship, and it is his desire and delight to graciously accept worship from such a people.[2]

The church, as God's peculiar people, created and gathered together for his worship, has received not only a general rule to render some manner of worship, but rather specific positive and negative commands in the sacred Scriptures concerning the practice of God-pleasing worship. One of the main tenets defended by the great reformers of the church was the restoration of scripture-regulated worship.[3] This principle is reflected in the literature of the period as well as in the subsequent documents and confessions of the reformed churches, and is the foundation for the Westminster understanding of worship. The Westminster Confession of Faith states, in its first chapter and sixth paragraph, that:

> The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as

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1. John 4:23–24 AV.

2. Matthew Henry, "An Exposition, With Practical Observations, of the Gospel According to St. John," in *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Genesis to Revelation*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1961), 1525.

3. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 3.

> are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.[4]

Based on the sufficiency and perspicuity of the inspired Scriptures, the authors of the Confession limit the scope of human duty toward God to the contents of his self-revealed Word, understanding that some level of spiritually-illumined discernment and judgement is to be used, since Scriptures do not always descend in practical matters into details.[5] For this very reason, the Confession also grants that there are some circumstantial matters not specifically regulated by scriptural rules. The application of this definition to worship will be henceforward referred to as the "regulative principle of worship."

This research seeks to deal with the application of the regulative principle to the issue of the use of musical instruments in worship. In accordance with the biblically-grounded historical practice of the church, the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America states that musical instruments are not to be employed in worship in the context of the new covenant administration.[6] Most other christian bodies nowadays disagree with this position or prefer not to rule on this matter, often using as an argument the confessional warrant of "good and necessary consequences" and "circumstances."[7]

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4. "The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America: In Parallel Columns," in *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown & Covenant, 2021), A-9, 10.

5. Archibald A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (East Peoria, IL: Banner of Truth, 2017), 39.

6. "The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America," A-63.

7. *Ibid*., A-9.

However, a careful examination of the biblical teaching on worship music will show that the use of musical instruments do not fall under the category of circumstantial matters, but rather have been abolished from divine worship, like all other ceremonies, and sacrifices, and figures that pointed ahead to the spiritual realities unfolded in the new administration of the covenant of grace. Therefore, this research will defend that the use of musical instruments in worship cannot be regarded as a matter or circumstance, because of its typological and thus temporary character in relation to covenant history.

Not Good, But Typological

When Moses received the instructions for the building and service of the tabernacle, no mention is made of singing over an instrumental accompaniment. The only instruments that were to be made were the two silver trumpets, which were heavily associated with the military life of the people, but also were to be blown during the offering of sacrifices in the tabernacle. The blowing of the trumpets is connected to the ideas of convocation, guidance, victory, gladness, and memorial.[8] Prior to the building of the temple, there is no biblical command for or example of the use of such instruments to accompany the singing.

Once David received divine instructions concerning the temple, instruments were finally introduced into public worship. David himself had provided a specific set of God-appointed instruments for the temple. David himself declares that he had received special instructions concerning the pattern of the temple,[9] and later — during the reformations of Hezekiah — the author of Chronicles specifies that the instruments were a part of that revelation, clarifying that

8. Numb. 10:1–10 AV.

9. 1 Chron. 28:11–21 AV.

the commandment of David which is often referred to was merely a transmission of a commandment originally from the Lord.[10] The instruments there listed are harps, psalteries, and cymbals, which are clearly more suitable for song accompaniment. Three actions are associated with the playing of those instruments: to praise, to prophesy, and to give thanks; all of which relate closely to singing.[11] And, as intimately connected to temple worship as those instruments were, they were consequently not carried over by the jews into synagogue worship.[12]

At this point, it is important to stress that the transition in the usage of music instruments — from the context of the tabernacle to the one of the temple — could have only be warranted by God himself, by his express command. The use of both the silver trumpets along with the tabernacle sacrifices and the instruments of David in Solomon's temple necessitated directions from God in order to be sanctioned. Scriptures make the point clear that neither Moses nor David would have had authority to establish such practices, both of which were actually divinely appointed. This shows us that — at the very least in old-testament times — the Lord had a great concern for the regulation of the use of instruments in his worship.

Also, the Old Testament shows that there is an inseparable connection between the sacred use of instruments and the sacrificial system: there was a specific set of sanctioned instruments,[13] which were to be played at the tabernacle/temple[14] by an appointed order of levites[15] during the

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10. 2 Chron. 29:25 AV.

11. 1 Chron. 25:1–3 AV.

12. John L. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Richmond, VA: Whittet & Shepperson, 1888), 38–40.

13. Numb. 10:2; 1 Chron. 23:5; 2 Chron. 7:6 AV.

14. Numb. 10:3; Ps. 57:8–9 AV.

15. Numb. 10:8; 1 Chron. 25:1–7 AV.

offering of sacrifices.[16] Therefore, musical instruments are not good nor necessary in and of themselves, but only as far as they supported the faith of the old-covenant church in her infant state, pointing ahead to the revelation of the Son of God in the fulness of the time,[17] and as any other old-testament ceremonial practice, it must be regarded as typological — and thus fulfilled in Christ.

Although it is often difficult to define the exact antitype or spiritual reality represented for each and every detail of the old-testament ceremonies and regulations, Girardeau suggests that "the instrumental music of the temple-worship was typical of the joy and triumph of God's believing people to result from the plentiful effusion of the Holy Ghost in New Testament times."[18] That the down-pouring of Holy Ghost had been prophesied in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New there is no doubt.[19] And the spiritual significance of the instruments as mentioned above — convocation, guidance, victory, gladness, memorial, praise, prophecy, thanksgiving — matches well the particular works of the Spirit of God.[20] In the new covenant administration, the indwelling of the Holy Ghost fulfills and communicates all that the instruments signified and more, providing for a more mature church a more spiritual manner of worship.[21]

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16. Numb. 10:10; 2 Chron. 7:4–6; 29:27–28 AV.

17. Gal. 3:23–4:5 AV.

18. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, 60.

19. Isa. 59:21; Ezek. 36:27; Joel 2:28–29; Acts 2:16 AV.

20. Ezek. 36:27; Zech. 4:6; John 14:26; 16:13–14; Acts 2:38–39; 13:52; Rom. 8:14; 1 Co. 6:19–20; Gal. 5:16–26; Phil. 3:3; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 2:13–14; 2 Pet. 1:21; 1 John 5:4 AV.

21. John 4:23–24; 1 Co. 13:11; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 5:18–19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 9:9–10; 13:15; Jas. 5:13 AV.

Not Necessary, But Temporary

Furthermore, the use of music instruments may not be regarded as a necessary consequence, given that the singing of praises described in the pages of the New Testament does not imply at all the use of accompaniment. Rather, in new-testament worship, the heart is the only instrument said to have its spiritual strings plucked.[22] Accompanied singing has never been the definitive goal for biblical worship; but instruments have been employed temporarily in temple worship with the typological purpose described above. Dr. Prutow rightly concludes that "instrumental music is not integral to Biblical worship but, when introduced, it is incidental, typical, and temporary."[23]

The historical practice of the church supports the position of a cappella singing. Borrowing from the liturgy of the synagogue, "the Fathers of the early Church were virtually unanimous in their hostility toward musical instruments."[24] The patristic understanding of the mentions to the instruments in the psalms was figurative of spiritual realities fulfilled in Christ.[25] The trumpet, for instance, was often associated to the gospel proclamation.[26] The church fathers explained that the use of instruments in the Old Testament was part of the childish elements that were given the church before the fulness of the gospel.[27]

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22. Eph. 5:19 AV.

23. Dennis J. Prutow, *Public Worship 101: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Worship, the Elements of Worship, Exclusive Psalmody, and A Cappella Psalmody* (Pittsburgh, PA: RPTS Press, 2013), 477–486.

24. James William McKinnon, "The Church Fathers and Musical Instruments" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1965), i.

25. Prutow, *Public Worship 101*, 409–410.

26. *Ibid*., 410–412.

27. *Ibid*., 408.

The introduction of musical organs in the church was an innovation of the Middle Ages,[28] along with the growing romish pomp and opulence, complicated liturgies, and scholastic theology, that were typical of the period; and it was not until the twelfth or thirteenth century that the use of organs became more widely accepted.[29] This evidence alone demonstrates how unessential the musical accompaniment is to the liturgy of the church, having been avoided for over one millennium, and only finding a place within it during a time of spiritual declension, liturgical corruption, and theological confusion.

Furthermore, the great reformers of the church — in their attempt to return to the more biblical view of worship — condemned the use of organs as unscriptural, using similar arguments to those of the church fathers. For instance, see Calvin commenting on Psalm 33:

> There is a distinction, however, to be observed here, that we may not indiscriminately consider as applicable to ourselves, every thing which was formerly enjoined upon the Jews. I have no doubt that playing upon cymbals, touching the harp and viol, and all that king of music, which is so frequently mentioned in the Psalms, was a part of the education; that is to say, the puerile instruction of the law: I speak of the stated service of the temple. For even now, if believers choose to cheer themselves with musical instruments, they should, I think, make it their object not to dissever their cheerfulness from the praises of God. But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, 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. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to him.[30]

Calvin's frequent statements against the liturgical use of instrumental music — specially in his commentaries on the Psalms — reflect the most accepted view among the non-lutheran branches at the time of the reformation. However, Girardeau retells how the various reformed

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28. Prutow, *Public Worship 101*, 419.

29. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, 160–161.

30. John Calvin, "Commentary on the Book of Psalms," vol. 1, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 4, trans. Rev. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 538–539.

churches fell back into the use of unwarranted instrumental accompaniment,[31] getting to the point where in his days most churches would adopt this practice, which — according to the patristic and reformed teachings — is judaizing.

Not Common, But Added

The Westminster Confession of Faith acknowledges that the Scriptures do not get into minutia, so that some matters are open to judgement. It is fundamental for the church to be able to properly identify which points are essential and which one are not. See the confessional statement again:

> . . . we acknowledge. . . that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.[32]

Note that there are two qualifiers attached to "some circumstances," namely:

1) ". . . concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church," and

2) "common to human actions and societies. . . ."

This is to say that, in order for a matter to be considered circumstantial, it must match both criteria, so it may be dealt with accordingly: that is, "ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence. . ." etc.

That accompanied singing is a matter concerning the worship of God is crystal clear, thus the first qualifier is met. However, the second qualifier may require further elaboration. In order to affirm the confessional point, one must understand the intended meaning of the term "common to human actions and societies."

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31. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, 172–179.

32. "The Westminster Confession of Faith and The Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America," A-9, 10.

Girardeau rightly contends that the confessional language refers to circumstances that are common to societies of all sorts — not exclusively religious. The author refers to "time and place, costume and posture, sitting or standing,"[33] all of which are not expressly set in Scripture, and are common to the ordering of any group or meeting of persons. Since the matter of instrumental accompaniment is quite peculiar, it cannot fit the confessional criteria of commonality, and therefore cannot be regarded as circumstantial.

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated above that there were explicit commands in the Old Testament for the temporary and typological use of instruments in temple worship. If there was such a commandment in the old economy, there must have been instruction on whether instrumental music should be maintained or abrogated. And indeed the latter is the case. Also, the Westminster Confession, as a subordinate standard, cannot take precedence over Scriptures. Therefore, even if Girardeau was mistaken in his definition, the testimony of the Scriptures would still rule instrumental music out of the divine worship.

Conclusion

"By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of *our* lips giving thanks to his name."[34] By the mediation of the Christ, God's people is accepted before his holy throne, reconciled through the blood of his atoning sacrifice. Christ's sacrifice drastically affected our manner of worship, granting us much greater access to the Father with the assistance of the Spirit. The "time of reformation"[35] is come, and it is time for God's church

33. Girardeau, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, 138–139.

34. Heb. 13:15 AV.

35. Heb. 9:10 AV.

to put aside all the childish elements of the ceremonial law and embrace the true spiritual worship mediated by our High Priest Jesus.

In this research, the regulative principle of worship as defined in the Westminster Confession of Faith was applied to the issue of instrumental music in worship. The categories of "good and necessary consequence" and "some circumstances" were examined in relation to the topic, by evaluating the biblical evidence and the available non-canonical literature.

Instead of mere consequences, it was demonstrated that instruments had actually been required in the old economy, and served a typological function. It was further argued that musical instruments had a temporary characteristic, having been fulfilled in the ministry of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Ghost. Furthermore, it was proved by definition that the category of instrumental accompaniment cannot be regarded as "common to human actions and societies," and thus may not be labeled as being of a circumstantial character by the Confession.

"Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty."[36] Worship in spirit and in truth is simple worship, pleasing to God and to his people. In Christ, the church is now called to enjoy the liberty from the rudiments and ceremonies of the past, and to engage in single-hearted spiritual worship.

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36. 2 Co. 3:17 AV.

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