



Freed-Hardeman "Contemporary Discussion"

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Session Two: "Is It Permissible to Use Musical Instruments in Worship?"

One thing we need to make clear is that our differences are NOT a matter of one side accepting biblical authority and the other side denying it. When we're talking about the independent Christian churches and the cappella churches of Christ, both groups strongly affirm the inspiration and authority of Scripture. This is an area where we can find common ground. Our differences lie in how we apply biblical authority in some particular cases. We want to worship the Lord "in spirit and truth" just as much as you do.

I like to use the "desert island" principle. What would you believe if you lived on a desert island and the Bible was the only book you owned? What would you think was acceptable and proper for faith and practice if no one ever taught you any particular theological system or indoctrinated you in a particular tradition, and you simply read the Bible alone and did your best to follow what it said? Would you conclude it's a sin to use musical instruments as an aid to worship God?

Using this "desert island" approach, I want to explain why, as a Bible-believing Christian, I conclude that musical instruments are allowable. To be honest, I'm at a significant disadvantage on this point, because this is a topic Ralph has studied for years. In all my years of ministry this is the first time I've ever found it necessary to put together a biblical teaching on the subject of instrumental or non-instrumental music, because it's never really been an issue that jumped out at me from the Scriptures. And with the exception of those brought up in a non-instrumental background, it simply hasn't been an issue for most people I've encountered.

But in anticipation of this morning's discussion, I wrote down 10 reasons why I think it's permissible to use musical instruments in the public worship assemblies of the church.

1. In the Old Testament, the Lord didn't merely "permit" the use of musical instruments as aids to worship. He commanded their use.

1 Chronicles 16:4-6

2 Chronicles 5:12-14, 7:1-12, 29:25-30

Psalms 150:1-6

David's harp, Asaph's cymbals, and Benaiah's trumpet were not the focus of worship, the Lord was; but His servants used these tools to praise Him. Second Chronicles 5:13 is especially noteworthy, for it says, *"The trumpeters and singers joined in unison, as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voice in praise to the Lord and sang: 'He is good; His love endures forever.'" For those of us who believe it's permissible to use instruments in worship, this verse captures the sincere and unified praise we want to offer the Lord.*

2. In the Old Testament, the Lord didn't merely "permit" the use of musical instruments as aids to worship. He blessed their use.

Second Chronicles 5:14 adds an important point about the dedication of the temple. After the instrumentalists and the singers joined together in united praise to the Lord, the next verse says, "Then the temple of the Lord was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God."

God's "glory" in the form of a cloud was an expression of God's joy, pleasure, approval, and delight. God was making known His presence in a very intense and powerful way. The people not only honored the Lord as they played instruments and sang together, but they did so with God's full and hearty approval. The Lord didn't just put up with the use of musical instruments; He smiled upon it and expressed great delight and pleasure in the way His people praised Him through a combination of singing and instrumental accompaniment.

Using my "desert island" principle, since I read this in my Old Testament, where I would find any evidence in the New Testament that God now frowns upon using musical instruments as an aid to worship? It seems to me that there's a burden of proof on my non-instrumental friends to show where the New Testament plainly disallows something God so plainly and warmly blessed in the past.

3. Messianic prophecy anticipated that musical praise would continue in the coming kingdom.

The Jewish people associated singing with expressions of joy and thanksgiving (Psalm 126:1-6). So it's not a surprise to read in Psalm 87 how God's people will respond with music when the Lord establishes His messianic kingdom (Psalm 87:5-7).

Psalm 87 talks about God's love for Mount Zion. It foretells how one day Gentiles would flock into the kingdom of God. There's even a hymn based on verse 3: "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken." Verses 3, 5, 6.

In light of the New Testament, we know this Psalm is talking about the messianic kingdom—the new covenant people. Hebrews 12:22 says, "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God."

In the *King James Version*, Psalm 87:7 predicts that in the messianic kingdom, "the singers as well as the players on instruments shall be there." The Jewish people sometimes had some trouble understanding Messianic prophecies about the nature of God's kingdom, but this one shouldn't have given them any trouble. They were used to the idea that God could be praised with musical instruments.

The force of this is pretty strong, unless you deny the messianic implications of Psalm 87. If I were alone on my "desert island," Psalm 87:7 would imply to me that instrumental music is not only permissible but to be expected in the Messianic kingdom—that is, assuming the Bible I happen to have on that desert island is the *King James Version*!

The *New International Version* says it differently. It translates Psalm 87:7, "As they make music they will sing . . ." It doesn't use the word "instruments," but it still distinguishes between "making music" and "singing."

I checked with one of our Hebrew scholars at CCU, who informed me that the word the King James uses for "players on instruments" actually means "to whirl, dance, or writhe." But again, I figure we're on common ground here because most of us in the Christian churches aren't big on "whirling, dancing, or writhing" in public worship assemblies either.

My point is simply this. If I had no presupposition to defend against instrumental music, when I read Psalm 87 and Hebrews 12, I wouldn't find it surprising that instrumental music would be permitted by God in the church.

4. In the Gospels, Jesus never directly addressed the instrumental/non-instrumental question one way or the other.

He had a lot to say about the heart of true worship. In the Sermon on the Mount, He unmasked the hypocritical practices of the Pharisees who dishonored God with their outward acts of righteousness. In Mark 7:6-8, He condemned empty, heartless, ritualistic worship, and He

warned very sternly not to elevate the teachings of men to the level of the Word of God.

In John chapter 4, He talked with the woman at the well and explained to her that God wants true worshipers who "worship Him in Spirit and truth." But He didn't say that this has anything to do with using musical instruments, one way or another.

At the Last Supper, Jesus sang a hymn with His disciples, which no doubt was a cappella. But the Gospels have very little to say about Jesus' participation in music or anything He taught about music. Jesus taught daily in the temple (Matthew 26:55), but He never condemned or prohibited the use of instruments there, nor did He cast out the musicians along with the merchants and money-changers.

By itself, this doesn't prove that musical instruments are acceptable or unacceptable. But if this is something to divide over—if this truly is a matter of such consequence that it can break our fellowship—surely the Lord would have directly addressed it when He talked about worship. The Great Commission tells us to teach all things Jesus commanded us. But in the Gospels Jesus gave no commands about singing or playing instruments. Jesus died for us. He taught us to love one another. Since Jesus said nothing about musical styles, it's hard for me to accept that the Lord intends for our differences about music to separate us from one another.

5. The use or non-use of musical instruments is not an issue in the book of Acts.

Many other themes dominate the book of Acts: the dramatic advance of the gospel . . . the power of God overcoming the schemes of the devil . . . lost people coming to the Lord in faith, repentance, and baptism . . . new outposts of God's kingdom being established in the urban centers of the Roman empire . . . people from different ethnic and cultural groups finding common ground in their Savior and Lord. That's what I see in the book of Acts. It's a book of great adventure about people whose lives were transformed by the Holy Spirit into world-changers for the Lord.

Music isn't a theme one way or another. We know Paul and Silas sang in prison (Acts 16:25), and the disciples met every day "in the temple courts" (Acts 2:46), where they would have heard musical instruments. But where does the book of Acts lay down any kind of pattern about how music is to be used in a worship assembly? For that matter, where does the New Testament specifically authorize congregational singing in any form?

Acts 2:42 lists what I like to call the early church's "four-fold devotion." "They devoted themselves to (continued steadfastly in)" the apostles' doctrine or teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. And we can find common ground in these four areas.

We agree that we ought to teach the apostles' doctrine . . . but must our teaching be read directly from the Bible (remember, in those days the Bibles were scrolls) or is it OK to use written notes? The book of Acts doesn't say whether it's permissible to use a pulpit or lectern, or Power Point, or a sound system to amplify our voices as we teach.

We agree that we ought to engage in fellowship . . . *koinonia*, sharing our common life together in Christ. These first-century disciples served one another. They fed widows, cared for the sick, and helped the poor. Today we have new tools to enhance our fellowship. We can use e-mail to send prayer requests. We can hop on a plane and travel across the world to encourage God's family in another nation.

We agree that we ought to share regularly in the breaking of bread—the Lord's Supper. We may differ about whether to use one cup or many, whether to use matzo crackers or a loaf of unleavened bread, but we observe the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day. We serve the Lord's Supper to both men and to women. (The New Testament doesn't specifically give us any example of women partaking of the Lord's Supper, but we conclude based on the overall teaching of the Scripture that women as well as men are God's children and are welcome at His table.)

And we agree that we ought to join together in prayer. But what exactly were these prayers like? Nowhere does the Bible say to pray with our hands folded and our eyes closed, but most of us do this.

Acts 2:42 may be the closest thing we have in the New Testament to an outline of what our assemblies should include on the Lord's Day, and yet this verse doesn't mention music at all.

Music, with or without instrumental accompaniment, is simply not a major issue one way or another in the book of Acts.

6. The New Testament teaches that followers of Christ should sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord, using a variety of musical forms to express our praise.

Ephesians 5:19

Colossians 3:16

Hebrews 13:15

James 5:13

Several things we should notice:

- These verses neither prescribe nor prohibit the use of musical instruments to accompany the singing. Last night I ate dinner at President Sewell's house. When I say I "ate dinner," would it disturb you to learn that I also drank a glass of iced tea? No, because eating is usually accompanied by drinking. Paul tells us to sing—that's the positive command. Does this necessarily exclude that the singing could be accompanied by an instrument? Or by clapping, or toe-tapping, or a

voice that's not singing words but making sounds like a musical instrument?

- These verses are talking about what we do in our hearts. They do not command or authorize congregational singing.
- These verses show that God approves some variety when it comes to musical forms. The mention of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" implies variety, with no one style of musical form explicitly singled out as the one that's divinely preferred over all the others.
- In context these verses are not prescribing what Christians are to do in a church meeting house at 10:30 on Sunday morning. I believe they are talking about a lifestyle of worship.
- In Ephesians chapter 5, for example, Paul mentions singing right after he tells us to make the most of every opportunity, and to be filled with the Spirit, and not to get drunk on wine, and then he goes on to talk about how husbands and wives are to treat each other. "Singing and making music in your heart" is not just something we should do at church on Sunday—it's a lifestyle choice we make to praise God day in, day out.
- In James, the context is about what to do when you're sick, when you're happy, when you have sin to confess. It's talking about the kinds of issues and challenges Christians face in our daily lives.
- And it's interesting that we're actually commanded to sing Psalms in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3. But what if we decide to sing Psalms 149 and 150? Psalm 150. It seems very odd that we should be commanded to sing these psalms, but we can't do what they say.

7. The New Testament mentions that harps are present in heaven (Revelation 5:8, 15:2, 3).

This is further evidence that musical instruments are not by their very nature offensive to the Lord. The book of Revelation portrays angels standing before the throne of God giving praise to God with musical instruments (Revelation 5:8). And it portrays the saints standing before God offering praise with musical instruments (Revelation 14:1-3; 15:2, 3).

Again, if I were just reading my Bible on a desert island and made no prior assumptions about musical instruments, this would seem very natural. Instruments were approved by God in the Old Testament; they are not condemned in the New Testament; and they appear in the description of heaven. A friend of mine pointed out that this is "not just 'when you die' heaven, or 'at the end of the age' heaven, but this worship is happening in the heavenlies right now! Why not here on earth, too?" The Bible says to set our minds and hearts on heaven (Colossians 3:1, 2).

8. The New Testament concept of spiritual gifts fits with the idea of using musical instruments in the church.

Back in the Old Testament, God filled a man named Bezalel “with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts”—he could make things out of gold, silver, bronze, and wood, and the Lord blessed him and many others with gifts they used to construct the tabernacle (Exodus 31:1-5).

All of us agree that under the new covenant God blesses His people with gifts and talents we should use for His glory and for the up-building of the church.

First Peter 4:10 says, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” God’s impassioned approval was given in the Old Testament on those who used their hands to offer Him worship and service, and this included those who played musical instruments. If people are gifted to use a musical instrument for the glory of God, what New Testament teaching disallows them to do this in the assembly of the church?

Recently I visited a church where an artist painted a beautiful picture as part of the worship service. This young man used his talent for the Lord, and it was done for the upbuilding of the church. Would you disallow this artist to use his gift because the New Testament doesn’t specifically authorize painting in church?

9. The New Testament says nothing about singing in four-part harmony like we do today.

History does not support the conclusion that the musical styles we employ today are the same as the musical styles used in New Testament times. Church historian Dr. James North points out that the music of the early church, like most other ancient music, was monophonic—that is, it consisted of the melody line only, without harmony or counterpoint. This is sometimes called “plainsong” or a “chant.” And the tunes used in ancient music were often improvised or memorized (taught by rote) instead of prescribed by notation.

Do we have any New Testament evidence that the apostles would approve of using four-part harmony any more than they would approve of instrumental accompaniment? After all, Paul said to make “melody” in our hearts, not harmony. Why should we accept multiple parts being sung together, but rule out the use of musical instruments? To me, this seems subjective and arbitrary.

I also find it inconsistent and arbitrary that my a cappella friends find it permissible to use a pitch-pipe as an aid to worship. If it’s permissible to use a pitch-pipe to get the song started on the right key, why is a piano or a guitar not permissible to help keep the song on the right key? If one note is allowed, why not a hundred?

10. (*The core of the problem*) To label the use of musical instruments sinful is to “speak” where the Bible is “silent.”

We clearly have a different approach to interpreting and applying the “silences” of Scripture. My a cappella brothers object that the New Testament doesn’t “authorize,” command or prescribe that a congregation should sing together with musical instruments, but neither does the New Testament mention meeting in air conditioned buildings, baptizing someone in a heated indoor baptistry, sitting on pews, using printed Bibles in book form, using pulpits to hold the preacher’s notes, or singing words from hymnals written by human authors. Yet, most believers agree it’s permissible to use these items as aids to worship even though they are not specifically commanded in the New Testament. If we insist on prohibiting musical instruments based on the argument from silence, then it leads down a road of legalism in which we add our own opinions, preferences, and prohibitions to the plain teaching of Scripture.

There are serious hermeneutical issues underlying our disagreements. We need to distinguish between what is SPECIFICALLY TAUGHT in the Scriptures, and what is SINCERELY DEDUCTED.

Thomas Campbell wrote in the *Declaration and Address* that “nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith, nor required of them in terms of communion, but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them in the word of God.”

He wrote that “although inferences and deductions from Scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God’s holy word, yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so.”

I interpret the silence of the New Testament about musical instruments not as a rule for the church, but as a matter of godly discretion based on our conscience. I take the New Testament’s silence about the instruments to mean individual believers and congregations are free to decide how best to honor the Lord in our expressions of musical praise, within the boundaries of clear biblical doctrine and respecting what is most expedient for the progress of the gospel (1 Corinthians 10:23, 24).

I respect those who choose not to use musical instruments in worship, although I don’t agree with their perspective on this issue. I respect you if you have come to this position after careful study, and it reflects your conscientious belief. However, I also believe that we tend to bring our own presuppositions to the Bible, rather than simply coming to Scripture with an objective and unbiased reading of Scripture alone.

I believe the church should embrace and encourage a cappella singing. It has many advantages. It’s simple, it’s beautiful, it emphasizes the words rather than the music

itself. It's a great way to express the unity of the congregation. But you could also say some great things about the way my mother-in-law has a God-given ability to play the piano by ear in a way that lifts others up in praise to God. It's very subjective about what is more edifying. I don't see any reason based on clear biblical authority to label the use of musical instruments as sinful. It is certainly not a reason to divide the church or to refuse fellowship with another baptized believer in Christ. The principles described in Romans chapter 14 can help us deal with our differences about these issues in a manner that honors the Lord, respects conscientiously-held opinions, and leads to mutual edification in the church.

We in the Christian church feel like you are making rules for us to follow where the Bible allows liberty. This is a very serious matter, because Jesus warned us not to put manmade rules on the same level as the Word of God.

Plus, the Churches of Christ are not uniform and consistent in what you are asking us to give up on the basis of silence. If I give up the instrument, then what else will you ask me to give up for the sake of unity? You haven't agreed among yourselves.

Some of you also would ask us to give up using multiple communion cups during the Lord's Supper. Some of you would ask us to give up our Sunday School classes because they aren't specifically authorized by the New Testament. Shouldn't you all acquiesce to your more conservative brethren for the sake of unity? It appears to me that you are drawing lines yourselves which you are unwilling to sacrifice for the sake of unity; you are just drawing the lines at a different place than we do in the Christian church.

You're asking us to give up instruments—but you're also asking us give up our convictions about our freedom to use the instruments, which we have arrived at by our own study of the Scriptures.

You're asking us to give up our convictions about freedom in Christ, which are more precious to us than any of our arguments for or against musical instruments.

You're asking us to give up things that many of us truly believe are useful and valid tools for reaching a lost world for Christ, and your insistence that we should conform to your opinion on this issue is itself creating an unnecessary stumbling-block to the accomplishment of the Great Commission.

To summarize, if I were on a desert island reading my Bible, and only my Bible, I would conclude:

- God commanded the use of musical instruments in the Old Testament, and He blessed their use with a special sign of His presence.
- The Jewish people used the Psalms to celebrate God's presence with joyful songs, and Psalm 87 hints that the same kind of musical praise will be used when the Messiah comes.
- Jesus talked about worshiping "in spirit and truth," but He had very little to say specifically about music—His emphasis was on the heart of the worshiper.
- Elsewhere, the New Testament urges us to sing with a variety of musical forms, and it includes musical instruments in its description of heaven.
- The New Testament tells us not to misuse our freedom, but to safeguard it, and to accept one another just as Christ accepted us.

Would I find absolute proof that musical instruments should be used in our corporate worship gatherings? No. Nor would I find any proof that we should sing together in four-part harmony. At most I would conclude this is a matter of Christian liberty, and our different opinions about musical instruments should not be made of test of fellowship.