

Musical Attitudes in the Church of Christ

He stationed the Levites in the temple of the Lord with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet; this was commanded by the Lord through his prophets. (2 Chron 29:25)

When John Grisham was doing research for his book, *The Last Juror*, he attended church services at every denomination in several Mississippi counties. His experiences are woven into the story line of the novel. He summarized worship services at the church of Christ as (1) totally devoid of emotion; (2) a belief in not using musical instruments; (3) the belief that they were the only ones going to heaven. While Mr. Grisham may not be an authority on church doctrine, his observations were disturbing nonetheless.

This dissertation focuses on the practice of using instrumental music in Christian worship. My background allows me some degree of certainty on the issue, based on how I interpret the scriptures. I was baptized and preached in the Church of Christ (non-instrumental) for several decades. I joined the Christian Church (instrumental) circa 2005, remaining with them about 10 years. I'm also a musician.

Extremism is a form of prejudice. Those who adhere to one extreme or the other, do so, not so much out of biblical prescription, but out of stubborn belief. What they see as hard-core faith is no more than rank legalism.

Statements such as "instrumental music is an offense to God," or "it's a sin," or other such comments demonstrate a *carte blanche* indictment on something the bible neither condemns nor condones. The church of Christ has condemned IM in worship due to legalistic interpretations. They have turned their belief into a "teaching of Christ." (2 John 9) Any member not in total agreement with their position is in danger of disfellowship for "not abiding in the teaching of Christ." (2 John 9)

NOTE

The Church of Christ not only sees instruments in worship as an offense, they also condemn *acappella* soloists and choirs, seeing them as a form of entertainment pointing to the congregation rather than corporate singing that points to Christ.

Feeling Good...Is it Wrong?

Instrumental music has been with us since the beginning (Gen 4:21). Every nation in history has cultivated it. The Jews were prolific musicians according to Josephus and other historical and biblical documents. As such, the use of music in religion, marriage, death, and other celebratory life events is as much a part of our humanity as other traditions. Music is a reflection of the inner person, an expression of desire and emotion. It is no wonder then that those who embrace a cold and dispassionate worship service also seek to suppress any expression of emotion through the use of instruments.

When I've asked CoC members about using pitch pipes,¹ hard-core anti-instrumentalists have told me that they can be legitimately used by song leaders, while more liberal members were shocked that I would even

¹ A harmonica-like device used to find the correct note in a piece of music.

consider such a thing. This inconsistency within the body underscores a lack of unity on the issue, if nothing else. To my weaker brethren: pitch pipes are not musical instruments. Just because they squeak isn't a reason for God to strike the building with lightning bolts.

The Simplicity of Jesus' Teachings

When our Lord collided with the Jewish religious community, it was because they misunderstood God's word and failed to understand the principles behind it. The reason for their errors was because of their convoluted interpretations. This is why our Lord says, "You have heard it said..." referring to certain scribal interpretations. This mentality still exists today, where men have applied their feeble understandings in order to deduce God's will. Consequently, they have misunderstood His will, set it aside, and teach their own traditions.

Jesus taught that those who worship God need to do it "in spirit and in truth." (John 4:23) In Gary E. Gilley's excellent book, *This Little Church Went To Market: The Church in the Age of Entertainment*,² he shows how many are attracted to a church's musical programs rather than to the truth of God's word. Such is the weakness of our human nature.

Jim Jonas wrote that the church of Christ's position came about partly due to financial reasons. Because many congregations were made up of poor farmers and such, they saw musical instruments as a waste of money.³ But why would the CoC be the only group to reach such a conclusion? Did not the other "poor farmers" attend services at Baptist, Methodist, and other denominations? Seeing that most homes in the 19th Century had a piano (replaced today by big screen televisions), the opportunity for donating an instrument, either at death or kindness, circumvented the need for such "wasteful" spending.

Today, however, churches with large congregations have the financial weight to buy amplifiers, PA systems, drums, and keyboards. It's common to see big churches invest serious money into such equipment, some even owning studios boasting the latest in high-tech digital recording equipment. In light of what the bible says about stewardship and taking care of the poor, it's hard to justify this degree of largess.

NOTE

A church's decision to spend thousands of dollars on a piano may seem unforgivable to some, but a view towards God's magnificence should be more refined. If you're going to do something for the Almighty, you give your best. Having an untrained musician beating out chords on a broken down piano bought from the Goodwill does little to glorify the Almighty. A look at the tabernacle and temples built by Moses and Solomon clearly show that only the best of materials were used and fashioned by seasoned artisans. This is why donating second-hand articles to the local thrift store should NOT be considered a service to God. If you want to follow biblical example, donate brand-new items.

Coping With Change

When the organ first arrived in Bach's day, churches called it an "instrument of the devil." Today, there is conflict in many churches over musical styles. The younger generation wants hip-hop, hard rock or other cultural influences in their gospel music. Older churchgoers see music in worship as being necessarily traditional. In today's effort to attract younger folks, churches with synthesizers and electric guitars draw the

² Available on [Amazon](#).

³ *A Report on Churches of Christ from World War II to the Present*, p. 8

crowds. People don't want to hear the funereal sound of organ music. The youth of today see Christianity as a celebration of new life. Even so, I doubt if heaven will have either pipe organs or synthesizers.

Is Instrumental Music Authorized by the Bible?

The go-to verse that all CoC members are told to consult when the issue of IM (instrumental music) comes up is Ephesians 5:19-20 and its sister verse in Colossians. We will examine them. But before we go there, it must be addressed that the brotherhood has embarrassed itself when it comes to scriptural understanding of the issue. Instead of being a "support and pillar of the truth," (1 Tim 3:15) they've taken a non-truth—an issue that God is silent on—and made a lot of hullabaloo out of it. They've written reams of material on a subject that the Holy Spirit has largely left alone. They have turned God's silence into a matter of faith. Instead of being "imitators of God" (Eph 5:1), and keeping silent, libraries worth of sermons have been churned out on the issue.⁴

Those who argue that "it's not authorized" are only miming what they've heard from the pulpit and have not studied the issue for themselves. After all, what comes from the pulpit has heaven's blessing. How dare we study the issue for ourselves and thus prove the preacher wrong! We have forgotten, brothers, that being "in Christ" is not about rules and regulations, but *attitude*. It is about a relationship. Rampant legalism runs through the brotherhood like the Plague, not only concerning IM, but on other issues as well. Seeking to use the NT as another law book, where each and every act has to be "authorized," they've fallen into the same trap as the scribes and Pharisees, who misinterpreted the scriptures (Matt 5:27-43) and were thus self-condemned.

On Matters of Importance, God Has Made It Abundantly Clear

The CoC loves to use Noah to prove our necessity in adhering to God's instructions. The obedience to His instructions must be absolute and they must be exact. When God told Noah to build an ark, He gave specific instructions as to its design. There was no room for doubt as far as what God required. This same principle is seen in the NT. Note:

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21) NIV

These words leave no doubt in the reader's mind as to what displeases God and brings condemnation. Let's turn the same scripture around, using instrumental music:

The use of instrumental music in worship to God is strictly forbidden. I warn you, as I did before, that those who engage in it will not inherit the kingdom of God.

If IM was such a heinous sin, as some claim, God would have made it as plain as He did concerning the sins listed in Galatians. Contrary to what some preach, God doesn't micro-manage what is to go on in the worship service. There are *general* guidelines. For example, the Jewish synagogue was never authorized by Jehovah in

⁴ One CoC preacher sent me an email, calling me a hypocrite for adding to the ink and paper wasted on this subject.

the OT, but came about during the Babylonian captivity. Yet Jesus freely entered and taught there. Neither Him or Paul condemned synagogue worship as an “unauthorized” act of worship.

The same is true for the Lord’s Supper. Jesus based this sacred and precious ritual on a “passing of the cups,” which was something the Jews added to the Passover. You don’t see Jesus refusing to use a man-made tradition on which to establish the Lord’s Supper. Unfortunately, the scribes and Pharisees, who nit-picked how everything was to be done in Jesus’ day, are still alive and well in the church today.

Twisting the Scriptures—Ephesians 5:19

One of the few passages church members point to when addressing music is Ephesians 5:19, where Paul writes, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.” (NIV) According to the CoC doctrine, singing *necessarily infers* that no instruments are to be used. But is this a legitimate interpretation? Is this verse and the one in Colossians even referring to the worship hour?

Verse 15 says, “Be very careful then, on how you live...” Verse 18 says “don’t be drunk on wine.” Living and staying sober have nothing to do with public worship. In fact, the whole context begins in 4:25, and deals with how a Christian is to conduct one’s self in everyday life, none of which are worship-related. Yet when we get to 5:19, we relegate this verse to the worship hour. This is not “rightly handling the word of truth,” and violates basic bible exegesis.

Faulty Hermeneutics

Because of rampant division and denominational-ism, men of good intentions in the previous century devised methods of interpretation based on certain rules found nowhere in the bible. Although these rules were designed to counteract rampant false doctrine, others have used them to support all kinds of erroneous notions. These methods of interpretation—*hermeneutics*—are

- (1) Silence of the scripture
- (2) Command by apostolic example
- (3) Necessary inference.

There is no exact science for interpreting the scriptures. The bible contains facts, which then reveal truth. Yet truth is much more than a bunch of facts strung together. Cecil Hook, a graduate of Abilene Bible College and member of the church of Christ notes:

Our problem of interpretation begins with a legal concept of God's revelation and requirements for us. We have been more concerned about pleasing God by rituals than in establishing a personal relationship with him. Legalism demands patternism, for if there is law, there must be a pattern to follow in order to fulfil it. Then, when we fail to conform to the pattern, we must restore that pattern. So, our infamous formula of legalism, patternism, and restorationism **has resulted from our approach to interpretation** (emphasis mine). These have always been divisive and will always be so. The legalistic formula of command, example, and inference has been bent and twisted to justify each diverse course taken by those who try to follow it.

A more fundamental issue with this trinity of rules is this: *Where did these rules come from?* Certainly not the bible. Who said that everything had to pass these rules? If such arbitrary rules are not based in scripture, how can we demand that what we practice can *only* be deduced from these rules?

Hypocritical Attitudes

When I first began attending services in the CoC, I heard preachers stand at pulpits and say, “our brothers in the Christian Church are going to hell for using a piano!” (The Christian Church formally split away from the Church of Christ in 1906 over the issue of instrumental music.⁵) Yet the same folks who condemn others seem to have no problem listening to worldly music of questionable taste. They do this with a clear conscience because they’ve been taught to see the worship service *as more important in God’s eyes than daily living*. This was the sin of the Jews in Old Testament times.

Ninety percent of the NT emphasizes daily living, while only a very few scriptures concern worship practices. This was how Israel got into trouble with God. Believing that by satisfying the legalistic requirements of the temple, they were free to do whatever they wanted in their daily lives.

Listen, you leaders of Israel, you men of Sodom and Gomorrah, as I call you now. Listen to the Lord. Hear what he is telling you! "I am sick of your sacrifices. Don't bring me any more of them. I don't want your fat rams; I don't want to see the blood from your offerings. Who wants your sacrifices when you have no sorrow for your sins? The incense you bring me is a stench in my nostrils. Your holy celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath, and your special days for fasting—even your most pious meetings—all are frauds! I want nothing more to do with them. I hate them all; I can't stand the sight of them. From now on, when you pray with your hands stretched out to heaven, I won't look or listen. Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. For your hands are those of murderers; they are covered with the blood of your innocent victims. (Isaiah 1:10-15) TLB

It amazes me that folks come to Sunday morning service, check off the “five acts of worship,”⁶ and then sloop at the same troughs the unsaved of the world use throughout the rest of the week.

A case in point is when I used a scripture narration on CD during a sermon. The commercial recording had very soft strains of synthesizer music in the background. One member ran out of the service as if God was going to strike us all dead. Others claimed that I was offering up worship to God using instrumental music. Instead of focusing on the narration, they only heard the background music. In their eyes, God did not honor that worship.

Biblical Acknowledgment of Musical Instruments

If God took such a dim view of musical instruments, He wouldn’t have made positive reference to them in the book of Revelation. In describing the fall of the Great Harlot, one of the punishments against her was the absence of music, not its use! (Rev 18:22) Even if the harps and trumpets found in Revelation are merely

⁵ Officially recognized in the Bureau of Census for that year.

⁶ The CoC’s unofficial-but-strict list of Sunday morning observances are: prayer, sermon, Lord’s Supper, giving, and singing. I’ve actually seen folks sneak into the service just in time for the Lord’s Supper, toss some money into the offering plate (which comes on the heels of the communion), sing the song before the sermon, and listen to 5 minutes of preaching, at which time, they bow out due to some issue that demands their immediate attention. Because they technically complied with the “official five acts of worship,” they think this meets the legalistic requirements of the New Testament. Where did they get this nonsense? Look in the mirror, preacher.

symbols, they still contradict the notion that IM is a sin, or that it leads to other sins. Would God have used “sinful” metaphors in describing spiritual blessings outlined in Revelation?

A prevalent belief within the CoC is that God never authorized it in the Old Testament. The OT says otherwise. Note:

[Hezekiah] stationed the Levites in the temple of the Lord with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet; **this was commanded by the Lord through his prophets.** (2 Chron 29:25)

A preacher I know made this claim during a Sunday night service, saying, God never authorized the use of instruments in the worship. A woman stood up and had him read 2 Chronicles 29:25. His response: “I think David was still wrong for doing it.” This shows how blind ideology can affect a person's ability to reason. To this preacher, the church of Christ's *tradition* was more accurate than the word of God! (Mark 7:3-8)

In fact, Solomon called them the “*Lord's* musical instruments, which King David had made for praising the Lord” (2 Chron 7:6). At the end of the chapter, God speaks to Solomon, saying, “I have chosen this place for Myself as a temple for sacrifices.” (2 Chron 7:12) You don't see God saying, “Get rid of the instruments.” I'm sure if some preachers had been there, they would have advised Him otherwise.

Scripture records that the Levites were “all skilled in playing musical instruments.” (2 Chron 34:12) If the practice was so prevalent and yet so wrong, why didn't God say something? *Because His concern was for obedience to His Law.*

The CoC is quick to point out that we no longer live under the OT. Yet they use the OT to reinforce a false assumption that God never authorized it, when in fact He did. The OT shows how God struck people dead for disobedience, but disobedience to what? *To clearly stated instructions, not something on which He was silent.*

If the use of instruments was a “violation,” why are there eight Psalms that begin with, “for the director of music—with stringed instruments”? Should not have Holy Spirit avoided this potentially dangerous and misleading language!

Various feasts never authorized by God, the synagogue form of worship, even the Lord's Supper, were all founded on human traditions. Yet in none of these do we find condemnation, lack of authority, necessary inference, etc. *Because they are non-essential issues.*

Summary

Concerning any who would boast of being intelligent, Paul wrote, “If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by Him.” (1 Cor 8:2ff)

While many regard the anti-music doctrine as a pious badge of honor, it is merely an empty belief that promotes little by its adherence and teaching. Brotherly love is the important thing—which is what God sees—rather than interpreting rules and regulations supposedly making up the law of Christ.

A more basic fear is within the brotherhood is that if it adopts IM, the CoC will lose its identity. We try so hard *not* to look like other denominations that we end up forgetting what Christianity is all about. Instead of

trying to please God through active service towards our brothers and sisters, we stare forward in our pews, self-righteously convinced that our “authorized acts” and clinically defined worship will get us into heaven. In reality, we are nothing but rank legalists following in the footsteps of the Pharisees for whom Jesus reserved His harshest language.

As the older generation dies out, today’s churches of Christ in the eastern U.S. are adopting musical instruments. Numbers continue to dwindle in congregations throughout the west. Today’s youth have little use for legalism. They hunger for truth and are looking for salvation from their sins, not regimented rule following. They want a joy-filled, Spirit-filled relationship with Jesus Christ.

That's what the church should be providing for a lost world. This is our Light, glorifying God before a lost world. (Matt 5:16)

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