

Instrumental Music in Religious Worship

By Rev. John M'Donald

[Ed. Note: This 19th century tract was originally published in Scotland by the Reformed Presbyterian Synod. John M'Donald (1843-1933) was a minister in that church. Here he presupposes what is today called the *Regulative Principle of Worship*.]

On the very threshold of the discussion of this question we must affirm one fundamental principle of our common Presbyterianism — that God has Himself appointed the manner in which sinful men should approach and worship Him, and no man is entitled to introduce a single element into Christian worship for which he has not a divine warrant. God, as a king, has a right to appoint the manner in which His subjects shall enter His presence. Queen Victoria herself, and rightly, demands as much. And since God has appointed the way in which He shall be approached, our appeal always must be “to the law and to the testimony.” The question, therefore, we have now to consider is — Is instrumental music in religious worship scriptural? And we give the broad answer, speaking with regard to the New Testament Church, that we have no scriptural warrant for the organ in our Christian sanctuaries.

Let us take the tabernacle first. Do we find any allusion in the Mosaic record to instrumental music in the service of God? We do. Moses was commanded to make two silver trumpets, and we apprehend that in these silver trumpets we have the germ of that instrumental service afterward so fully developed in the temple. These trumpets, however, were always to be used at special seasons, and every allusion in the Scriptures to those instruments in the tabernacle worship is invariably bound up with the ceremonial observances which God appointed. Instrumental music, either singly or conjointly with the music of the voice, in God's praise, apart from sacrificial offerings, we never find. The invariable rule was, “Ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings.” [Numbers 10:10] Take away the burnt offerings, and remove the altars of incense, and you take away all the need for the silver trumpets of Moses.

We now approach the temple. Here we find instrumental music in the richest abundance. It does not much affect the question whether David from his great love for music and skill in the art was prompted, with God's permission, to introduce the cymbal and the harp, or whether he received a direct command from God to arrange those splendid concerts of temple worship with which his name will ever be associated. We are not disposed to question for one moment that the use of instruments was scriptural under the Old Testament economy. And we must say it does appear plausible when we are told that if the use of instruments was enjoined under the law, and if it is fully employed as a symbolic description of the worship of God in heaven, it cannot justly be excluded from the dispensation that comes between and as it were unites the two. If it was right under David, how is it wrong in these times of gospel liberty?

In opening up this question we answer that the temple, which was the grand center of Jewish symbolism, has been swept away, not merely by the destructive might of the armies of Rome, but by the verdict of Jesus, who declared by his apostle that though it had been glorious it had no glory by reason of the glory that excelleth [2 Corinthians 3:10]. The temple, as the embodiment of Judaism, had a glory all its own — the glory of exalted song and stupendous melody among the rest; but it all fades away before the surpassing glory of the gospel. And our position is, that without the specific warrant of Christ or his apostles, we have no right to drag the elements of temple worship into the sanctuaries of the gospel dispensation. “The priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change of the law” [Hebrews 7:12].

We ask our readers to note the following facts which they will find verified in Old Testament history. Instrumental music in religious worship was employed by command of God only in the temple — we have not a single recorded instance of its being employed either in the synagogue or in the homes of the people; it was always rendered by a special class — the priests and Levites; and it was always rendered in connection with the offering of sacrifices to God. If our readers will consult 2 Chronicles 29:25, they will find these statements fully borne out by that single passage. From all this it is most manifest that instrumental music was one element in an elaborate ceremonial and symbolic worship. We never find it by itself in isolated independence. And those therefore who plead for any one of the usages of the tabernacle or temple, without a divine warrant, plead for too much. If we admit instrumental music into our churches either as worship or as an aid to devotion, on this ground, the same argument will ultimately crowd in upon our simple worship all the “beggarly elements” of an abrogated ceremonialism.

Let our reader enter a Romish chapel. A basin of water stands at the entrance; at the further end of the chapel is an altar, behind that altar a crucifix, or a picture of Jesus or the Virgin Mary, and beside the altar a priest. Suppose we take an intelligent Romanist by the hand, and ask him a few questions. “Friend, why this basin at the door?” “Good reason for this; have you forgotten the laver at the tabernacle door?” “But why that altar and the official in priestly robes?” “Good reason for this, too; our mass is a sacrifice, and we need an altar and priest, as they had in the temple.” “But why that statuary there, and that painting of Jesus?” “Why, indeed! have you forgotten the statuary in the holy place, and all the devotional helps that Solomon had carved within his magnificent temple?” And not to go farther, if our readers wish to hear music — not the product of a puny organ or an ordinary harmonium — then let them go to a Romish cathedral or to Rome itself. All these things Popery has; they are part of her strength, her glory; and if we are, like her, to borrow this one element from Judaism, there is no reason why we may not borrow all. Then farewell to the grand simplicity of our gospel worship.

Is it nothing at all to the question in hand that neither the Master nor his Apostles in any recorded case ever introduced or patronized instrumental music in the primitive church? The only allusion the Apostle of the Gentiles makes to the subject is one of contempt, when he declares that if his life lacked charity, it be as “sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.”

We know there are those who will tell us that we who throw out instruments retain the very Psalms sung in the temple, and in some of which singers and players are called on to praise God

with instruments of music. This is true. We admit it, and return the compliment. That is, we retort that many who thus argue retain the instruments and throw out the Psalms; and who makes the better choice? We have Christ's example and an Apostle's command as our warrant for using the Psalms; for the introduction of the organ we have neither the one nor the other.

We have endeavored thus to go over the scriptural ground. Of the historical ground, it is enough to say that for seven centuries the church knew nothing of an instrument until a Pope of Rome introduced it; the Reformers — Luther, Calvin, Knox, Henderson — gave their testimony against it; even in the English church 300 years ago and more, when the Convocation met to decide the forms of worship, it was only by the casting vote of the president that the organ obtained a footing south of the Tweed; and from Reformation times in Presbyterian Scotland until recent years a worship pure and simple, but none the less sublime, has been the worship of that country.

Before concluding, we must allude to another aspect of this question. We are told instrumental music is a great improvement in the sanctuary, and also a help to the congregation in rendering more skillfully the worship of praise. Let us look at these two pleas. In what respect, then, is it an improvement? Does it make the praise more acceptable to God? No. Does it produce devotional feelings in the worshipper? We deny the very possibility. Devotional feelings cannot be produced but by conveying spiritual devotional thoughts to the soul, and these are not producible by the pipes of an organ. What then is the improvement? It resolves itself into this — many like it, and therefore they must have it. But if our instrumentalists are not selfish they will grant others a corresponding liberty to introduce improvements.

Here, then, is a brother who has an improvement to suggest. What may it be? The religious drama. God, he tells us, has endowed man with great dramatic genius, and the Bible furnishes grand scope for dramatic talent: what an improvement it would be to exchange the drowsy monotony of a sermon for the rousing appeals from the stage of a religious theater. Here comes another brother with improvement number three. He tells us of the marvelous grace of the human form; he speaks in ecstasy of the wonderful evolutions of which the body is capable; and he reminds us that it is as natural for some to dance as for others to play: why therefore should not the dance be performed on our religious stage, while the organ pipes and the timbrels keep time to the dancers' graceful movements? Improvement number four — But where are they to end? The cry will still be “they come;” and they will end in “improving” the pure worship of the sanctuary off the face of the earth.

[Ed. Note. This was probably meant to demonstrate the absurd level the author expects this principle of innovation to go. How interesting that dance and drama are now commonly advocated and practiced in churches in our day.]

It comes to this — the fancies of men are no reason for altering or supplementing the divinely-prescribed form of worship. With regard to the second plea, we have briefly to reply, that if any congregation needs the help of the organ, then that congregation has yet part of its religious duty to learn, and it is not on the Sabbath that that should be attended to. Moreover, we do

not believe in the absolute necessity of the organ for leading large congregations. In Beecher's and Talmage's churches in Brooklyn, in both of which were magnificent instruments, the singing was no better than it ought to be; in Spurgeon's tabernacle in London, where there was no organ, a volume of praise ascended from a mighty concourse of worshippers as one stupendous voice of devotional melody. It was said that the grandest music in Europe was to be heard in the imperial choir at St. Petersburg, where no instrument save the human voice was ever heard. Let music critics test these facts, and we fear not for the result.

In conclusion, we plead for the purity and simplicity of our sanctuary worship; we plead for the legacy of unadulterated ordinances bequeathed to us by Christ himself; we plead for the apostolic injunction without emendation or change — “By him let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to his name” [Hebrews 13:15].