

# Sound in the Faith

by Bob Pulliam

## Lesson 6

### Worship in Song



Memory Verses: John 8:31; II Timothy 2:15 (KJV); Ephesians 1:22f;  
Ephesians 5:19

**M**ost people enjoy the musical portion of the worship service more than any other. There may be different causes for this, when different people are asked about their reasons. I believe one of the most basic reasons is the fact that all are permitted to participate in a vocal way. This joint participation has an effect on each of us. It helps us feel more involved, and personally significant.

But not every church does the same thing when it comes to the musical portion of worship. Some have an overpowering pipe organ that makes the building rumble. Others have a piano. Still others have an orchestra. In some churches the singing is done by a choir, and no one else participates. To get into the choir, you have to pass an audition. In other churches, there is a choir that performs some of the selections; but the congregation does the rest. At times you'll find carefully orchestrated performances; and at times you'll find the service to be absolute pandemonium.

Do the scriptures say anything about the music God wants us to use in worshipping Him? Indeed they do. And, because this subject is so strange to many, we have dedicated an entire lesson to it.

#### *Music in the Old Testament...*

The Old Testament is commonly cited for modern practices in religion. This is true concerning music used to worship God. We read of David playing the harp to praise God (Ps 144:9). Since he was a man after God's own heart, it must be alright for us to do so also. We also read of those who gave thanks to God, and prophesied using the harp (I Chr 25:3). Naturally, we want to believe we are authorized to do so, if they were. And indeed they were. God had commanded mechanical instruments of music (II Chr 29:25). But is that the same as commanding *us*?

It is important to realize that we are not under the same law that David, or the Israelites, lived under. The law of Moses, including the ten commandments, were given *only* to the Israelites (Dt 5:1-5). And, even if we were Israelites, that law is no longer binding. Paul called the law a schoolmaster (or guardian), that kept the Israelites in line (Gal 3:24). But he also said that the Jews were no longer under that schoolmaster (v25). In other words, the Old Testament law was no longer in effect. Elsewhere, Paul said that the law had been nailed to the cross (Col 2:14).

For most people who turn back to the Old Testament for authority, it never occurs to them that they are being inconsistent. If we turn to the Old Testament to authorize mechanical instruments; tithing; or a separate priesthood, then we also have blood sacrifices to contend with. We all realize that blood sacrifices would be wrong now; even though they were essential in the Old Testament. Is it possible that other things that were right in the Old Testament might be wrong now? It is a very distinct possibility. So we must be careful how we appeal to the scriptures for authority. If we are not appealing to the law under which we live, then we are making an unlawful appeal.

What we must do now is examine the New Testament for what our practice should be.

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### *Question Set Number One*

- 1) What is the most basic reason for most people to enjoy the musical portion of worship more than any other?
- 2) What effect does joint participation have?
- 3) What are some of the various things other churches do for music?
- 4) What is commonly cited for modern practices?
- 5) Had God commanded the use of mechanical instrument in the OT?
- 6) Who was the law of Moses (Old Testament) given to?
- 7) What two ways did Paul speak of the O.T. no longer being in effect?
  - a)
  - b)
- 8) If we turn to the O.T. to authorize some things, we authorize what?

### *Mechanical Instruments in the New Testament...*

Since the use of instrumental music is so prevalent in the religious world, we should look for its authorization in the New Testament. We obviously won't find a piano or organ; but perhaps we can find a harp or two...

Only five passages can be found with a harp in them. The first is in I Corinthians 14:7. But Paul was not talking about what the disciples did in worshiping God. He was simply using a harp and a flute to create an illustration for speaking in tongues that could be understood. The remaining four passages are in the book of Revelation. The first three of these are representing praise before God in heaven, and have nothing to do with the worship of the church (Rev 5:8; 14:2; 15:2). The last is a reference to all the things that will not be done or heard in the fallen city called Babylon the Great (Rev 18:22). So, what we have found is that instruments are mentioned in the New Testament; but none give authority for the practice of the church.

### *We are to Sing Psalms...*

We need to examine another aspect of scripture commonly cited as authority for mechanical instruments in worshiping God. We are commanded to sing psalms in the New Testament (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). The assumption is that the only way to sing a psalm is to have the accompaniment of a harp. But surely none of us really believe that you ***have to sing*** to the accompaniment of a harp to sing a psalm. How many churches have you seen using an actual harp? This argument is nothing more than an assumption set forth to allow any kind of musical instrument.

However, there is an aspect of this argument that we should examine more carefully. In Ephesians 5:19, Paul uses a word in the Greek that some insist refers to instrumental music. That verse says, "*speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord*". The words "*make melody*" are from a single Greek word that some insist refers to playing the harp. It is true that this word referred to plucking the harp in the centuries before the New Testament; but it also was used of plucking out the hair.<sup>1</sup> The use of Greek reference works must be undertaken with care. Words change meaning over time, and Greek lexicons give meanings from five or six centuries of use and variation. Every lexicon in my library, for example,

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<sup>1</sup> (J.H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1978), p675)

traces some portion of this word's evolution through time. And each of them ends up with a definition in New Testament times that is confined to singing without the use of an instrument. For example, Thayer says, "*in the N. T. to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song*".<sup>2</sup> This is why the translators of the various New Testament English versions do not render this word as "*play*". Not only is it not an accurate translation of the word; but it would not make sense. The end of the verse would become, "*singing and playing in the heart to the Lord*". It certainly doesn't give authority for mechanical instruments of music when we change the words around. The best you could make out of the passage is that the heart is to be the instrument played in our worship. And that is one instrument that I believe we all could agree on.

In addition, we are looking at a command in this passage. If Paul refers to a mechanical instrument of music in this verse, then it is being commanded. The end result would be a worship service that required some form of instrumental music to be pleasing unto God. But that's not all! This command is being given to all of the members of the church. They are to be "*speaking to one another in psalms, hymns,...*" and if they are also to be playing, then *every* member of the church would have to play an instrument while the singing took place. Absurd? Yes it is. But we tend to make absurdities out of Bible texts when we argue beyond the intention of inspired truth.

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### *Question Set Number Two*

- 1) Most of the passages using "harp" in the N.T. are found in \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) The first three of those passages represent what?
- 3) N.T. passages referring to instruments do not give what?
- 4) What do some assume about singing psalms?
- 5) Some insist that the words "making melody" in Ephesians 5:19 mean what?
- 6) Early uses did refer to plucking the harp, and what else?
- 7) What do words do over time?
- 8) In N.T. times, the definition of this word is confined to what?

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<sup>2</sup> (*ibid.*)

- 9) If the words “making melody” did refer to an instrument, what would that instrument be?
- 10) If Paul commanded instrumental music, who has to play?
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### *God Didn't Say Not To...*

Some people fall into the trap of justifying practices by saying, “God didn't say not to do it!” This is an attempt to authorize something on the assumption that God specifically tells us everything we are not to engage in. Try to imagine how large a book would have to be to catalogue everything it's author wanted to be prohibited. In contrast, telling us exactly what He wants is how God has provided a simple, and compact message.

To illustrate, let's imagine all of the things we might otherwise put on the Lord's table for communion. Rather than use the bread and fruit of the vine, we might set out donuts and chocolate milk. Most people would not tolerate such an irreverent portrayal of Jesus' body and blood. But *God didn't say not to use donuts and chocolate milk*. Is there a difference? This may sound absurd, but there are some religious groups who are doing this very thing. They are making a common meal out of the Lord's supper. And they would say, “God didn't say not to...”.

The truth be known, God authorizes in a very logical, sensible way. Noah is a very good example of this. He was told to build an ark of Gopher wood (Gen 6:13f). God didn't tell Noah what not to make the ark out of. He didn't have to start listing trees that Noah couldn't use. All God had to do was tell Noah what He did want. Noah could use expedients to accomplish this. Axes to cut down trees; saws to trim the lumber; hammers to drive pegs; etc... But these do not change God's command to build out of Gopher wood. Gopher wood was the building material that Noah was to use. By the same token, sing is God's command for musical worship in the New Testament. This is the type of music we are to render unto God. There are only two kinds to choose from. Vocal and instrumental are the choices. If God had simply said to make music in worship, then the choice would have been left up to us. There would be two kinds to choose from. Just as Noah could have chosen the kind of wood, if God had simply told him to make an ark out of wood. When God specifies the kind, He has excluded every other choice we might otherwise make. And God said to *sing*. God has specified the kind of music that He wants in

worship. The instrument, therefore, is an addition to God's command.

As we spoke of Noah having expedients to use (axes, saws, etc...), we also have expedients for obeying God's command to sing. Song books, a song leader, pitch pipe or tuning fork, are all expedients. They do not substitute or add to God's command to sing. They merely facilitate carrying out that command. The pitch pipe does confuse some people from time to time, however. Since a musical note is blown (played), they wonder if it isn't a case of instrumental music being played. A couple of observations should be made here. The most noteworthy (pardon the pun) is the fact that one single note does not constitute music. It may have a few musical qualities; but it is not music. In addition, it is not blown during the activity of worship. Many things go on during a worship service that are not considered a part of worship. Babies cry, but we do not consider that worship. If a cell phone is forgotten, and goes off, we do not consider that a part of the service, or worship. If the preacher has a habit of jingling his keys while he preaches, we do not think he is playing a song to the glory of God. The pitch pipe, or tuning fork, is used to attain a proper pitch so every part can reach the notes written in the song. That note is not an activity of worship

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### *Question Set Number Three*

- 1) What do some say to justify practices?
- 2) This assumes that God specifically tells us what?
  
- 3) What did God tell Noah to do?
- 4) What did God not tell Noah?
- 5) Examples of expedients Noah could use?...
- 6) These did not change God's command to use Gopher wood, which was the commanded \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) God's command to sing for musical worship "is the \_\_\_\_\_ of music".
- 8) How many kinds of music are there to choose from, and what are they?
- 9) The choice of how we obeyed would be ours if God had said what?
  
- 10) What are some expedients for singing?
- 11) List a few things that go on in worship that are not a part of the worship being offered...
- 12) What is the purpose of the pitch instrument?

## *Speaking to One Another...*

Many people (including religious scholars) miss the importance of the way Paul commanded the Ephesians to sing. They were to be “*speaking to one another...*” (Eph 5:19). This is the emphasis in what is being accomplished when we worship God in song. In obeying, we are speaking to one another. To “*speak*” is to give utterance to words that have meaning. We are expressing ourselves to each other. And this means that we need to think about the words being sung, as we sing them. As we shall see further on, Paul told the Colossians, “*teaching and admonishing one another*”. There is a sermon going on in every song we sing. And our hearts should express that message with great intent. Every disciple should participate in the song service.

Later in this verse, Paul says that we are to be “*making melody in the heart*”. Worship to God must originate in the heart. Just going through the motions is not worship. To worship God, we must have an attitude that would adore and exalt Him above all others. We must exert our intellect, will, and emotions to accomplish that. When you sing songs during the worship service, make the words of the song your own. Let them be the expression of your heart. And if the words do not express truth, then you shouldn't sing them. Paul worded this command a little differently when he wrote to the Colossians: “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*” (Col 3:16) We are to let the word of Christ (truth) dwell in us richly as we sing.

What if you can't carry a tune? The singing commanded in scripture has nothing to do with musical skill. Pick one note and sing it all the way through if you have to. You may not sound as esthetically pleasing as the world would judge; but the heart is what really matters here. You also don't have to sing that note so the next county can hear you; but you should be audible. Otherwise, you are not obeying the command to sing.

If you want to learn a particular vocal part, try to sit in front of someone with a good voice who sings that part. But don't get so involved in learning the part that you don't worship with your heart. Never lose sight of the fact that the message of the song is of prime importance.

However, let's not go to the extreme of concluding that the musical aspect is of little or no importance. In all we do as disciples, we should always strive to give of our best to our Master. To lazily slop a song out and imagine it was pleasing is a disgrace. We ought to do our best to hit the notes correctly, instead of just casting vocal chords toward them. We ought to try to sing together, rather than making the tempo an every-man-for-himself proposition.

Our worship to God should also be done decently, and in order (I Cor 14:40). Paul told the Corinthians that God is not the author of confusion (I Cor 14:33). When you see and hear all out pandemonium in modern religious services, they may think it is the result of having the Spirit; but it is actually an emotional outburst that violates the will of God.

We should do our best to make the worship service a meaningful expression of our love toward God, and a means of edifying one another. Here are a few suggestions for every church that wants to make the most of the sound of it's song service:

- Pay attention to the leader. Remember, he is **leading!** I can't tell you how many times I've heard people, who were members for many years, complain about the songs being slow, knowing that they keep their eyes buried in their books. Keep up with the leader.
- Don't let your voice get lazy. This is a bad habit - but it's easier than actually trying. Reach to hit the notes as best you can.
- The more gaps in seating there are, the more lag time between groups out of sync with the leader. The closer you are to the leader, the better you can follow.

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### *Question Set Number Four*

- 1) What were the Ephesians to do to one another when they sang?
- 2) What do we need to do as we sing the words?
- 3) What did Paul tell the Colossians they were to do when they sang?
  
- 4) What is going on in every song we sing?
- 5) What should every disciple do?
- 6) Where must worship to God originate?
- 7) What three things must we exert to worship God?
  - a)
  - b)
  - c)
- 8) What is to dwell in us richly?
- 9) If I cannot carry a tune, then I shouldn't sing. T F
- 10) What should we strive for, in all we do as disciples?
- 11) Worship to God should be done how?
- 12) What is God not the author of?