

# A Cappella in the Assembly

## Introduction

One of the things that guests notice immediately is the absence of musical instruments in our praises to God. We sing a cappella which is an Italian word meaning in *chapel style*. The word “a cappella” describes the type of music that was used in worship “in the chapel” or “in church” in contrast to instruments.

## Should we continue to sing a cappella in our assemblies?

To answer this question we must first ask, How do we determine what we do in the assembly? In other words, what are the biblical expressions of assembly worship? If you do not know how to worship God in the assembly, and you went to the Bible to find out, what would you find? You would find the following:

- a. Singing (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14:15)
- b. The Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:17f; Acts 2:42)
- c. Prayer (1 Cor 14:15; 1 Tim 2:8; Acts 2:42)
- d. Preaching/Teaching (1 Cor 14:26; Acts 2:42; 1 Tim 4:13)
- e. Public Reading of Scripture (1 Tim 4:13)
- f. Contribution (1 Cor 16:1-2; 2 Cor 8-9)
- g. Confession (James 5:16 “one another”)
- h. “Amen” (1 Cor 14:16)

These are the expressions of worship from Scripture. This is our guide for worship in the assembly today. We should worship and edify one another with these expressions. This guide/pattern should be considered both positively and negatively. Positively it tells us what we can do in the assembly. Negatively it implies what we cannot do. But to be a guide, it must direct and limit. And if it does not limit while it directs, then it is not much of a guide. Therefore, to answer the question whether or not we should continue to sing a cappella, we ask this question: When the Bible instructs us to sing, does it instruct us to sing with instruments? Or does it instruct us to sing a cappella?

I want to approach this question in two ways: (1) by considering the record of history and (2) by considering the singing vocabulary in the NT

**What is the practice of the early church?** The church had a choice. Instruments were used in the worship at the temple.

<sup>5</sup> *Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise the LORD with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose.*” (1 Chron 23:5)

Instruments employed were cymbals, harps, psalteries and trumpets on certain occasions. Many of the early Christians, especially from Palestine, would have been well aware of the use of instruments in temple worship. Instruments were used in pagan worship services to their gods. Consider this quote from the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Music”:

Jingling, banging and rattling accompanied heathen cults, and the frenzying shawms of a dozen ecstatic rites intoxicated the masses. Amid this euphoric farewell feast of a dying civilization, the voices of nonconformists were emerging from places of Jewish and early Christian worship; Philo of Alexandria had already emphasized the ethical qualities of music, spurning the 'effeminate' art of his Gentile surroundings. Similarly, early synagogue song intentionally foregoes artistic perfection, renounces the playing of instruments, and attaches itself entirely to 'the word'—the text of the Bible.

But the early church did not use the instrument. Consider the following quotes:

George W. Steward, *Music in Church Worship*, p. 214:

In the early Christian church there was, however, a strong feeling against the use of instruments in divine worship. Some have thought to account for this by the secrecy which the Christians had to adopt for their gatherings for worship, on account of the persecution to which they were exposed. But if that had been the reason, it would have silenced the voice of song as well. Yet in spite of the persecution which made the infant church hide her head 'mid ignomy, death, and tombs,' vocal music seems to have been a regular part of the ritual.

Theodore M. Finny, *A History of Music*, p. 43:

The early Christians refused to have anything to do with the instrumental music which they might have inherited from the ancient world. By limiting their musical tradition, which much later was to be the matrix out of which modern music grew, they unconsciously made more difficult the process by which an independent self-sufficient musical art could develop. In other words, music was destined to be bound to language for a good many centuries.

Curt Sachs, *Our Musical Heritage*, p. 43:

All ancient Christian music was vocal. 'We need one instrument: the peaceful word of adoration, not harps or drums or pipes or trumpets,' said Clement of Alexandria around 200 A.D.

The early church had a choice and chose not to use the instrument. The early church was guided by the apostles in its actions. The apostles were inspired men who taught and guided the church according to God's will. The apostles instructed and guided the early church to sing a cappella and not to use the instruments in the assemblies. Surely the question was asked: Why not use an instrument? At some point that question was answered so strongly that the early church was completely united in its opposition to instruments. Most likely only apostolic teaching could have produced such a consistent and unified opposition to the use of instruments in the assembly. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the apostles instructed the early church against the use of instruments. At the very least, the

early church understood the apostolic command to sing (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) as a command to sing a cappella. How else could we explain the absence of the instrument in the historical record? Therefore, the non-use of the instrument was God's will for his church then, and if that was God's will then it is also God's will today.

**Vocabulary.** The words for “sing” in the New Testament:

1. “*ado*” – sing as in Col 3:16; Eph 5:19.
2. “*humneo*” – sing a hymn as in Heb 2:12; Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26, Acts 16:25. Scholarship agrees that both of these words mean “to sing.” These two words have no instrumental connotations. These two words mean simply “to sing.”
3. “*Psallo*” – make melody or sing” (Rom 15:9; James 5:13; 1 Cor 14:15; Eph 5:19). It is only with the word “*psallo*” as it is used in Eph 5:19 that some have argued for the definition of “play on an instrument.” Scholarship agrees that all other uses of *psallo* (and *ado* and *humneo*) mean simply to sing.

**Key Scriptures.**

1. Col 3:16

<sup>16</sup> *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing (ado) psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Col 3:16)*

2. Eph 5:19

<sup>19</sup> *Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing (ado) and make music (psallo) in your heart to the Lord, (Eph 5:19)*

Definitions of *psallo*:

- (1) Newman – “sing, sing a hymn of praise, sing praise.”
- (2) Thayer – “to twang the strings of a musical instrument ...to play a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song.”
- (3) Robinson – “in the Septuagint and the N.T. to sing, to chant, as accompanying stringed instruments.
- (4) Sophocles – “to chant, sing religious hymns.”
- (5) Moulton and Milligan – “play on a harp, but not in the N.T. as in James 5:13, = ‘sing a hymn.’”
- (6) Bauer (German trans.) – extol by singing praises, to sing praises.
- (7) Bauer (English trans. by Arndt and Gingrich) – “sing, sing praise. The
- (8) Theological Dictionary of the New Testament – “*ado*. To sing...to sing of... There is no distinction from *psallo* in Eph 5:19”

**Observations**

Six of the eight agree that in the N.T. *psallo* means to sing (not sing with an instrument). Two of the eight make a distinction between how psallo is used in the N.T. and in other sources. This is because the meaning of the word psallo changed meaning over a period of

time. Earlier the word meant to pluck the strings of an instrument, but by N.T. times (especially in koine Greek, i.e. common Greek as opposed to classical Greek), the word lost instrumental connotations and meant simply to sing. Compare the English word “lyric.” It once meant a lyre (musical instrument). Now it refers to the words of a song.

Two of the eight can be shown to be promoting their own bias: Robinson and Arndt/Gingrich. Robinson is a dogmatic source who does not hesitate to claim more than the evidence allows when such claims are necessary to defend a denominational practice. He does the same thing with the word baptizo. The definition given by Arndt/Gingrich, however, is more troubling. The Arndt/Gingrich lexicon is generally held in high regard. But when they translated Bauer’s entry for psallo, they changed it to include the meaning of sing to the accompaniment of an instrument. This change was unjustified and a mistake.

Following the death of Dr. Arndt, publishers of the English version of the Bauer lexicon contracted with Dr. Frederick Danker to work with Dr. Gingrich on possible revisions to the lexicon in question. Upon learning that such a revision was planned, Dr. Hugo McCord corresponded with Dr. Danker as follows:

Your book, Multi-Purpose Tool, has been of great help to me.

Continually I stand amazed at the scholarship in the Arndt-Gingrich lexicon. It is my understanding that under the direction of Dr. Gingrich you are now revising that lexicon. On the word psallo, since Thayer, Green, Abbott-Smith, etc., limit the New Testament meaning to sing praises, I would appreciate the reasoning that brought Doctors Arndt and Gingrich to insert “to the accompaniment of the harp” in relationship to Romans 15:19; and 1 Corinthians 14:15. Further, why is the phrase excluded in relationship to James 5:13.

Dr. Danker replied as follows:

It was so kind of you to take the time to make your inquiry regarding the word psallo. I see by comparison with Bauer’s first edition that the editors of A.-G. have incorporated the obvious Old Testament meaning into the metaphorical usage and we will be sure to correct it in the revision. I doubt whether the archaeologists can establish the use of the harp in early Christian services.

We shall be thankful for any further corrections or improvements you may be able to suggest for our lexicon. The same would apply to Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study.

The revision of the Arndt/Gingrich lexicon gives this definition of psallo:

... This process continued until psallo in Modern Greek means “sing” exclusively... with no reference to instrumental accompaniment...

## Conclusion

The singing vocabulary of the New Testament means simply to sing. None of the singing words include the thought of singing with an instrument. All of the words simply mean to sing. Obviously, when the New Testament writers chose words for singing, they

chose words that meant simply to sing. They could have chosen other words that meant sing with an instrument, but they did not. They chose to use only words that meant to sing. Can we not conclude that their choice of words indicated their understanding of the kind of music appropriate for the assembly—a cappella? If the Holy Spirit intended to make no distinction between singing and singing with an instrument, why did the Holy Spirit guide the writers to use only words that meant to sing? Can we not conclude that a distinction was intended?

The early church certainly understood the New Testament writers to mean a distinction between singing and singing with an instrument by the words used. Because of the words used, the early church understood that only singing was commanded (authorized), they also understood that instruments were not to be used in the assembly.

Should not the understanding of the early church regarding the use of instruments in the assembly also be our understanding? If not, why not?

## **Conclusions to Study**

The early church had a choice. History says they chose not to use the instrument. The Holy Spirit also chose words that meant to sing.

A cappella singing is right. A cappella singing is commanded by scripture. Instrumental singing is not commanded or endorsed by scripture. The evidence of history and vocabulary argues against the use of the instrument in the assembly. Should we continue to sing a cappella? Yes. When the Bible instructs us to sing, it instructs us to sing a cappella.

**Delivered by Dane Boyles to the Leander Church of Christ at Crystal Falls on August 28, 2005.**