

Instrumental Music and the Hermeneutic of Silence

A Term Paper

Presented to Ed Myers

Harding University

Searcy, Arkansas

As a Requirement in

Course _____

Seminar in Christian Doctrine

by

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_____ 2003

THE EARLY PERSPECTIVE

*The question concerning the use of instrumental music in the public worship of the Christian church is not one to be settled by Scriptural Authority.*¹

This study of instrumental music in the worship of the church begins in agreement with W. K. Pendleton on the point stated above. The use of the instrument was not originally a question of biblical authority the first century church, nor was it so for the early fathers of the Restoration Movement, as Pendleton's statement evidences.² A brief survey of the history of Restoration thought on the issue will demonstrate that a hermeneutic based upon the silence of Scripture was developed after the fact, so to speak, in order to justify non-instrumental practices. Thus, the argument from silence is highly questionable not only methodologically but also historically. This paper will discuss a number of questions surrounding the theology of church music in order to determine the validity of instrumental music in the worship of the church.

Clement of Alexandria is often quoted in Restorationist discussions about instrumental music in the church because of his extensive discourse on the instrument in the life of the Christian. There are two difficulties as one begins to deal with the most often-cited text in his *Instructor*, entitled "How to Conduct Ourselves at Feasts."³ The first is determining whether or not Clement is at any point referencing "Christian worship to God," as M. C. Kurfees puts it in his well-known work. Reading through the few pages Kurfees has transcribed, it is almost inconceivable that he introduced the passage with the claim that it does *not* refer to the worship of God. In the text, Clement quotes extensively from the Bible with words such as, "Let every

breath praise the Lord,” and Clement’s own words are such as, “let our songs be hymns to God.” It seems Kurfees intended to communicate that there is no evidence of the Christian *assembly* in Clement’s text. Yet, the issue is complicated by the second difficulty.

A particular sentence in the text, which is otherwise wholly condemning of the use of the instrument in worship, reads, “And if you wish to sing and make melody to the harp and the lyre, there is not blame.” This is typically dealt with in two ways. One, it is dismissed as an interpolation.⁴ Two, it is held that this passage in particular refers to extra-assembly practices, a view consistent with Kurfees’ position that individual worship is at issue. Everett Ferguson takes this view, stating, “one can sing even psalms to an instrument at home.”⁵ This implies that the rest of the text refers to feasts at which there was Christian assembly worship. Suffice it to say that worship of God, be it individual or corporate, is under discussion.

The point we wish to highlight here is that for Clement, the argument against instrumental worship is not based upon a lack of biblical authorization. It is instead rooted in a desire to disassociate from carnal, sensuous, pagan styles of worship. Any number of his comments might be quoted to demonstrate this, but a few are sufficient:

For if people occupy their time with pipes, and psalteries, and choirs, and dances, and Egyptian clapping of hands, and such disorderly frivolities, they become quite immodest and intractable....

For, in truth, such instruments are to be banished from the temperate banquet being more suitable to beasts than to men, and the more rational portion of mankind.

Chromatic harmonies are therefore to be abandoned to immodest revels, and to florid and meretricious music.⁶

Kurfees does well to note that Clement, along with the rest of the Church Fathers, was not inspired. Nonetheless, is helpful to see one basis for early Church practice.

Ferguson, however, is quick to deny any such reasoning on the part of the early church. He reasons that if instruments were rejected because of their association with pagan religion, songs should have been rejected also.⁷ This is a surprising *non sequitur* coming from Ferguson. To follow such logic would mean Christians were incapable of separating the necessary from the unnecessary in their endeavor to set themselves apart from the world. Paul said that he would stop eating meat for the sake of his brother; he did not say that he would stop eating all together. Ferguson is correct in emphasizing the theology of rational worship, for Clement does this as well, but doing without the instrument served to accentuate worship's rationality. It had nothing to do with biblical authority.

It is a great leap from Clement in the second century to the Restoration Movement in the mid-nineteenth century, but at this late date the issue arose again for non-instrumentalists. In order to understand the evolution of the issue among the Restoration fathers, it is helpful to begin with Alexander Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*. The first broaching of the subject occurred in 1851, when one Mr. G. wrote a letter to the editor. Campbell's reply is well known, and clearly demonstrates the state of the argument.

And that all persons who have no spiritual discernment, taste, or relish for their spiritual meditations, consolations and sympathies of renewed hearts, should call for such aid [as the instrument], is but natural

So to those who have no real devotion or spirituality in them, and whose animal nature flags under the oppression of church service, I think with Mr. G., that instrumental music would be not only a desideratum, but an essential prerequisite to fire up their souls to even animal devotion. But I presume to all spiritually minded Christians, such aids would be as a cow bell in a concert.⁸

The lack of biblical reference is highly conspicuous for a man so well known for his emphasis on the study of Scripture. The similarities between Campbell's reply and Clement's words cited

above are striking. At this point, there was simply no hermeneutical procedure regarding instrumental music in the Restoration Movement. It had been a non-issue.

Six years passed before the instrument was discussed again in the *Millennial Harbinger*. It was at this time that Pendleton made the statement that introduced our study. In it he articulated the sentiment of the day, and went on to express what would be the crux of the matter for many years to come.⁹ His position was that if organs would be an aid to worship, then they should be employed, but that if “they silence the melody of the heart in the greater number, and destroy and sensualize the Spiritual praises of the Lord’s people, then away with them.” He went on to say that either might be the case depending on the musical taste of the congregation and that, “We claim no right to answer anyone who may not think with us and would condemn both ourself and him, could either of us make it a matter of strife or division in the church of the living God.”¹⁰

Unity was centrally important for the Restoration Movement, which held that through understanding the New Testament Church by way of the commands, examples and necessary inferences (CEI) in Scripture, a unifying pattern could be established.¹¹ The non-instrumental churches were working on the basis of historical example, but they had no direct biblical example to apply, and as of yet they had not deemed it necessary to determine the practice’s biblical authority. Wendell Willis observes correctly, “The argument against instrumental music often was grounded on the effect upon the church and its worship.” He quotes from this time period numerous key advocates of non-instrumentalism that expressed such arguments, including Isaac Errett and J. W. McGarvey.

Tension was building, and the pressure to maintain unity was mounting in proportion. It was to this end that the argument from silence was formulated. Larry Jonas notes, “Brethren had not used scripture, but only prejudice up to this point in order to keep the instrument out.” He goes on to say, “the instruments had been decided against for cultural and emotional reasons already and now scriptural subtleties must be invented to condemn them.”¹²

THE DEVELOPING HERMENEUTIC

*We notice a growing heat under the discussion of this subject — but let us keep cool; we will commit less sin against logic and music both, and be much surer of victory. A man can make heresy out of any subject, and almost any side of it, by a sinful violence in his advocacy of it.*¹³

It was Alexander Campbell’s father, Thomas, who introduced the slogan “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent” into the Restoration Movement.¹⁴ Although his phrasing pointed to the notion of prohibitive silence, and although there was a great deal of historical precedent for prohibitive silence from the early Reformers on, the argument about instrumental music in the Restoration Movement had been functioning on the basis of an essentially positive CEI hermeneutic. In other words, silence had been permissive: “in matters of opinion, liberty.” Yet, J. E. Choate and William Woodson emphasize the significance of Thomas Campbell’s motto for understanding instrumental music in the Restoration Movement.¹⁵ It created the early foundation for the argument from silence and eventually became the focal point of much strife in the movement.

Choate and Woodson understand J. W. McGarvey to be the person who “set forth the primary premise to exclude the instrument of music from the worship--‘the silence of the Scriptures.’”¹⁶ It was in fact A. S. Hayden’s critique of McGarvey’s argument that made the third address of the instrument in the *Millennial Harbinger*, eight years after the last one.¹⁷ Hayden

was a non-instrumentalist himself, but he knew that the soundness of the argument from silence was questionable. As he put it, “This sophistry is an example under the class, ‘*non causa por causa,*’ or the assignation of a false reason.”¹⁸ The reader may better judge the accuracy of that critique after a brief exploration of the turmoil surrounding the Scripture associated with our topic.

The dispute, boiled down to its simplest form, concerns the Greek words *psallo* (ψάλλω, Ephesians 5:19) and *psalmos* (ψαλμός, Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). At one time *psallo* meant “to play a stringed instrument with the fingers,” and later came to mean, “to sing to a harp.” The noun congnate, *psalmos*, equally once meant, “the sound of the cithara or harp,” and later meant, “a song sung to a harp, a psalm.” The point of dissent is whether or not the words had undergone yet another evolution and come to mean in New Testament times “to sing” and “a hymn” respectively. Extensive work has been done to show that they might indeed have been used thusly in the New Testament.¹⁹ Ferguson concludes, “The history of *psallo*’s usage indicates a purely vocal reference in the New Testament.”²⁰ Although Burgess has shown impressive evidence for the other side of the argument,²¹ it serves us here to agree with Ferguson and avoid a potentially eternal dispute.

It is important to see that this word study became central to the issue, because, in order to argue from silence, there has to be silence. Now, recall that the argument from silence developed among Stone-Campbell churches out of a desire for unity. It was much easier to demand a New Testament pattern in all matters than to risk division over expediency and preference in matters that were not biblically specified. Therefore, in the absence of a Scriptural precept, silence became prohibitive.²² In other words, “In matters of opinion, liberty” transformed into, “In

matters of uncertainty, prohibition” where assembly issues were concerned. Pendleton’s desire for unity through tolerance in what had previously been a matter of opinion was overshadowed by a new pursuit of unity through uniformity. Of course, the real irony is that it was the demand for conformity to a nonexistent pattern (i.e., a “silent” pattern) that divided a unity movement.

There are two basic problems with the argument from silence. The first is simply the inconsistency of its application. “Sometimes Scriptural silence signified lack of authorization, while at other times silence on an issue placed it within the realm of opinion or liberty.”²³

Woodrow cites various items that Campbell saw as expediencies, such as meetinghouses and the format of church services. He also notes that Campbell approved of both capital punishment and slavery on the grounds that no Scripture inhibits their practice.²⁴ Campbell is quoted as saying that unity is contingent “upon having a ‘thus saith the Lord,’ either in express terms, or in approved precedent, ‘for every item of faith and article of religious practice.’”²⁵ At the same time:

To ask for a positive precept for everything in the detail of duties growing out of the various and numerous exigencies of the Christian church and the world, would be quite as irrational and unscriptural as to ask for an immutable wardrobe or a uniform standard of apparel for all persons and ages in the Christian church.²⁶

Woodrow goes on to other Restoration personalities, recording various inconsistencies in their usages of prohibitive silence and expediency. It takes very little reasoning to see that it is, in fact, impossible to consistently apply the hermeneutic of silence. If someone says, “Instrumental music is prohibited because there is no command or example for it; all we know is that we are to sing,” a second person might say, “But there is no command or example for a church building; all we know is that we are to assemble together.” The first person might say, “Yes but...,” and at that point the argument from silence is no longer at issue. Those two items,

or any others, are on equal ground as long as silence is the standard. There is always some reason, conscious or unconscious, for doing what we do.

The Second and most serious problem is the understanding of Scripture that bore the silence hermeneutic to begin with. In its desire to return to first century Christianity, the Restoration Movement came to view the New Testament as a “how to” book and eventually a law book. The “pattern” of the New Testament emphasized so much by the Campbells evolved into a law system that created very legalistic mentalities. We do not propose here that it was their intention to do so, but that is in fact what happened. Woodrow wryly states, “Perhaps our history of fragmentation suggests that the pattern concept of Scripture may not be consonant with the New Testament itself.”²⁷

It is the contention of this study that the New Testament is not comparable with a law genre. This says nothing about commands regarding morality, which have to do with holiness. Rather, the point is that the theological substance of the New Testament provides enough guidance to work through our freedom from a law-like hermeneutic. To say that instrumental music is wrong because we cannot know that it is pleasing to God²⁸ misses the truth that we know God is pleased for us to praise and honor him. To say that permissive silence is untenable because it allows for no end of evil²⁹ misses the truth that it allows for no end of good. At this point it seems that the real questions revolve around the theology of Christian worship.

THEOLOGICAL POINTS

Returning to the theological idea of rational worship mentioned above, we note that it is tied up with the edification of the church. Ferguson contends that building up requires verbalization such as “speaking to one another” and “teaching and admonishing.”³⁰

Worship of such a nature proceeds from the reasoning faculty in man and can be expressed in word. Similarly, what is spiritual corresponds to the spirit in man. Worship characterized in this way can neither proceed from nor appeal to the lower nature of man, but is not thereby simply ‘intellectual’ worship. Vocal expressions of prayer and hymns are naturally suited for the expression of worship, which comes from the highest nature of man.³¹

This raises a question: Why sing at all? If the point is the rationality of worship, then why set the words to music? What is the point of melody and harmony, pitch and tone? It is certainly not rational. Struggling with this question, Kurfees states, “The spiritual compositions which we have seen Christians may sing in the worship of God are set to music because the music impresses the thought.”³² Instrumental music certainly serves the same function.

One wonders what Ferguson means when he says “the highest nature of man.” If he means the nature of man that reflects the image of God, the creative nature, then we agree that there is something undeniably spiritual about musical expression, be it vocal or instrumental. The theological distinction between vocal music that accompanies words and instrumental music that accompanies words is hardly clear. Both could be viewed as either dumb noise or the expression of man’s deepest feelings.

Perhaps the most pertinent question would be, “Is instrumental music acceptable to God?” Jimmy Jividen says, “Instrumental music was very much a part of the temple worship. Its use today is a step backward from spiritual worship to sacramentalism of temple ceremonies.” It would be interesting to hear what David would say to Mr. Jividen concerning the spirituality of his worship. In any event, name calling (“unspiritual” or “sacramentalist”) hardly diminishes the spirituality of true worship, with or without instruments. Furthermore, as Hayden pointed out those many years ago, instrumental worship is not associated with, or part of, the Law.³³

Actually, Moses is silent on instrumental music. Apparently the Israelites, King David included, had the audacity to contrive that practice, and managed to please God in the doing.

Reading through Psalms, it seems fairly evident that, at least then, the instrument was acceptable, even an honor, to God. If God has not changed, and we cannot categorically dismiss the instrument with the Temple, it stands to reason that the instrument is still acceptable to God.

A second factor in answering this question is Revelation. Kurfees admits:

. . . if God sees proper to have such instruments of music in His worship in heaven, nobody, of course, should object to it, and no loyal child of God would object to it. Neither would such a child of God object to it in His worship here on earth, if He should see proper to have it there.³⁴

His argument is that the images are figurative and that God does not actually have harps in heaven. We readily concede to that probability. The point, though, is not about literal instruments in heaven. Rather, it is that God would not have given John imagery, even to represent something else, that would not be acceptable to him. To deny this premise would be on par with the expectation that a temple prostitute would be used to symbolize selfless devotion. It does not follow. The fact of the matter is that the goodness of the saints' praise is embodied in the imagery of the instrument.

CONCLUSION

Instrumental music was not intended to be judged on the grounds of Scriptural authority. The oft-used argument from silence is not only invalid on this account, but also on account of its own lack of merit. The issue of instrumental music should be viewed in light of our relationship with God in Christ rather than through the lens of a New Testament law system. The Temple and its system of sacrifice have been done away with, but the instrument was never a part of that.

Christians are certainly as free as the Israelites to use our musical creativity to honor God. This is no less spiritual or rational than the rise and fall of vocal melodies and harmonies. Let us make melody in our hearts then, and whatever we do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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ENDNOTES

¹ W. K. Pendleton, "Queries," *Millennial Harbinger* (1857): 458-9.

² Not that such a hermeneutic was nonexistent before the resurgence among Stone-Campbell Restorationists this paper deals with. Indeed, C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes have demonstrated in *Discovering Our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ*, for example, that much of Stone-Campbell ancestry was deeply, if inconsistently, interested in a strict hermeneutic of positive commands and examples.

³ Clement of Alexandria, "How to Conduct Ourselves at Feasts," *Instructor*, book 2, chapter 5; quoted by M. C. Kurfees, *Instrumental Music in the Worship* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1975), 127-31.

⁴ M. C. Kurfees, *Instrumental Music in the Worship* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1975), 125.

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, The Way of Life Series 125 (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1972), 22.

⁶ Clement quoted by Kurfees, 127-31

⁷ Ferguson, 79; see also, Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 273.

⁸ Alexander Campbell, "Instrumental Music," *Millennial Harbinger* (1951): 581-82.

⁹ Wendell L. Willis, "The Sociological Factors in the Music-In Worship Controversy," *Restoration Quarterly* 38 no. 4 (1996): 200-01.

¹⁰ Pendleton (1857): 459-60.

¹¹ Woody Woodrow, "The Silence of Scripture and the Restoration Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* 28 no. 1 (1986): 27-8.

¹² Tom Burgess, *Documents on Instrumental Music* (Portland: Scripture Supply House, 1966), 127-28.

¹³ W. K. Pendleton, "Instrumental Music in Churches," *Millennial Harbinger* (1865): 40.

¹⁴ Woodrow, 29.

¹⁵ J. E. Choate and William Woodson, *Sounding Brass and Clanging Cymbals* (Henderson, Tennessee: Freed-Hardeman University, 1990), 126-27.

¹⁶ Choate and Woodson, 24-25

¹⁷ A. S. Hayden, "Instrumental Music Churches." *Millennial Harbinger* (1865): 38-40.

¹⁸ Hayden, 39.

¹⁹ Kurfees, 6-70.

²⁰ Ferguson, *A Cappella*, 18.

²¹ Burgess, 13-115.

²² Woodrow, 29.

²³ Woodrow, 31.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (reprint ed., Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1980), 20; quoted in Woodrow, 28.

²⁶ Alexander Campbell, "Church Organization – No. III," *Millennial Harbinger*, ser. 3, vol. 6 (1849): 269-270; quoted in Woodrow, 31.

²⁷ Woodrow, ?.

²⁸ Jack P. Lewis, "Reformation Thought," *Gospel Advocate* 138 (1996): 19.

²⁹ Jimmy Jividen, "The Bible Doctrine of Silence" *Gospel Advocate* 138 (1996): 14.

³⁰ Ferguson, *A Cappella*, 91.

³¹ Ferguson, *A Cappella*, 90.

³² Kurfees, 83.

³³ Hayden, 40.

³⁴ Kurfees, ?.