



Why Do Churches of Christ Not Use Instrumental Music?

Allen Webster

Churches of Christ love music. Singing is a prominent—and favorite—part of each service. Most congregations dedicate a Sunday night each month to learn new songs and to sing old favorites. Annual singings can draw thousands of people. Many Christians sing daily as they go about their tasks (James 5:13).

One prominent feature of music in churches of Christ is that it is unaccompanied by mechanical instruments. While a cappella singing is not unique to churches of Christ (more than 300 million in several religious groups sing exclusively a cappella), it does differ from many churches. Perhaps you are curious as to why. If so, read on.

Churches of Christ do not sing a cappella because we dislike other kinds of music. Most of us have as many songs on iPods as the next person. We do not lack financial means to purchase instruments or capable musicians to play them. We are not just trying to be different or stubbornly upholding a longstanding tradition.

Why, then, do we sing a cappella?

The practice is predicated on following the New Testament instead of the Old.

The church is a New Testament institution, purchased on the cross and established on Pentecost (Matthew 16:18; Acts 2:1-47; 20:28). Its rule of faith and practice is the covenant Jesus delivered by the Spirit (New Testament), not the Law delivered to Moses at Sinai (Old Testament).

The New Testament records this transition:

- Hear Christ, not Moses (Matthew 17:5).
- Preach gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).
- Judged by Christ's words (John 12:48).
- Loosed/delivered from the law (Romans 7:1-7).
- "Christ is the end of the law" (Romans 10:4).
- "Engraven in stones" law abolished (2 Corinthians 3:7-14).
- Separating wall removed (Ephesians 2:14).
- Old nailed to cross (Colossians 2:14).
- Change in priesthood required change in law (Hebrews 7:12; 9:11).
- New effective after Christ's death (Hebrews 9:16-17).
- Christ came to take away the first law to establish second (Hebrews 10:9).

A new law changed humanity's response to God. Christians no longer offer animals, keep the Passover, observe Sabbaths and new moons, or avoid pork and catfish (cf. Colossians 2:14-17). Worship is not conducted by a special class of priests; blood is not sprinkled on a mercy seat; and unusual ceremonies involving goats, red heifers, and burnt animals are not required.

In the changeover, God omitted such things as burning incense, golden vessels, colorful tapestries, dancing before the Lord, bitter herbs, and instruments. He kept unleavened bread, the fruit of the vine, prayers, and singing.

Incidental? Hardly. God always meticulously planned worship (Exodus 25-40; Leviticus 1-27). He spent more than six thousand years completing His plan for the church (Ephesians 3:11; Galatians 4:4-5) so nothing was left to happenstance.

The Old Testament is written for our learning but not for our law (Romans 15:4). Going back to the Old Testament for study is helpful in understanding many things, but going back to the Old Testament for any practice obligates one to keep all its ordinances (Galatians 5:1-3; James 2:10).

The practice comes from our understanding of worship and priesthood.

Os Guinness observed, "The modern world has scrambled things so badly that today we worship our work, we work at our play, and we play at our worship."

Churches of Christ aim never to "play at worship." Worship is the most important thing humans do. It is a privilege to worship—more specifically, to be one from whom God accepts worship. In the Old Testament, believers offered sacrifices through priests. In the New, all Christians are priests—a kingdom of priests (Revelation 1:6). As a holy priesthood we offer spiritual sacrifices to Him who called us out of darkness (1 Peter 2:5, 9).

Every faithful member can participate in worship. Congregational singing reflects this. Instrumentals, choirs, and solos hinder all-member participation.

Regardless of a congregation's size, worship always has an audience of one. A God who has everything is in the market for little, but He seeks worship (John 4:23-24). In those few minutes, we have God's undivided attention. It is when we say thanks for His "unspeakable gift" (2 Corinthians 9:15) and put a smile on the face of the one who puts a song in our hearts.

The voice is a wonderful gift. You could say God gave each of us a musical instrument to use in His worship. We may not think we have a good voice, but God looks at (listens to) our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). A sincere song from a faithful child pleases Him. The relevant question is not, "Do we have a voice?" but "Do we have a song?" God loves to hear His children sing.

How one approaches God in worship is of fundamental importance. Individually and congregationally, worship is either accepted or refused by God. We must not assume that God automatically accepts anything we offer. He doesn't. God has always rejected worship He did not like (Genesis 4:4-7; Isaiah 1:13). He does not like vain worship (Matthew 15:9), which (in the context) ritualistically continues human traditions; ignorant worship (Acts 17:20-23), which results from not seeking God's Word on the subject; and will-worship (Colossians 2:23), which offers what we want instead of what He wills.

True worship is done in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Individually, God only accepts worship "in spirit"—that which comes from proper attitudes, such as reverence, thanksgiving, and humility (Hebrews 13:15). We must examine ourselves before worshipping (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Collectively, God only accepts “in truth” worship, which means according to His Word (John 17:17). We have no authority to put words in God’s mouth, or to ignore words from His mouth (Matthew 4:4; Revelation 22:18-19). Man is not at liberty to select a worship form that appeals to him. The danger for any church is to make worship entertainment oriented. The important thing is not what draws a crowd but what pleases God. Loving God supremely means acquiescing to His will (Matthew 7:21; 22:37-38; 23:23; John 7:17).

The practice grows out of our desire to reproduce the original church today.



The church of Christ sang a cappella in the days of the apostles, so the church of Christ sings a cappella today. It really is as simple as that.

Churches of Christ today strive to be identical to the church in the New Testament (Romans 16:16). Before we practice anything, we verify that it was practiced by the first century church. Thus “proving all things,” we hold “fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21; cf. Jeremiah 6:16). It is the safest approach one can take in religion—the way that is right and cannot be wrong.

No scholar (of whom I am aware) says early Christians used instruments. No Bible verse records it. The phrase *a cappella*, which now means “without instrumental accompaniment,” originally meant “as in church.” Instruments were available and widely used in pagan worship and theaters, as well as the Jewish temple, but they were not used by the church.

Standard reference works and music textbooks confirm this. Emil Nauman wrote in *The History of Music*: “There can be no doubt that originally the music of the divine service was everywhere entirely of a vocal nature” (Vol. 1, p. 177). *Wycliffe Bible Dictionary* says, “There is no record in the New Testament of the use of instruments in the musical worship of the Christian church.” The *Catholic Encyclopedia* reads, “The first Christians were of too spiritual a fiber to substitute lifeless instruments for or to use them to accompany the human voice.”

More than five hundred years passed before instruments were used. *Chambers Encyclopedia* notes, “The organ is said to have been introduced into church music by Pope Vitalian in 666 ad.”

At first, the organ was played only before and after the “liturgy” (worship service). Years later, it was moved into the service proper. Then it caused such controversy that in ad 1054 it led to a split between Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. (Orthodox Churches, with few exceptions, continue to use vocal music only to this day.) Most Protestant churches did not use instruments until the 1800s. In the time of the Reformation, churches opposed instruments in stronger language than we would likely use today. Martin Luther, founder of the Lutheran Church, called the instrument “an ensign of Baal” (*McClintock and Strong’s Cyclopedias*, from Luther, Martin,

Realencyklopädie Für Protestantische Theologie und Kirche). John Calvin, founder of the Presbyterian Church, wrote, “Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law” (*Comments on Psalm 33*). John Wesley (1703-1791), founder of the Methodist Church, said: “I have no objection to instruments of music, in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen” (quoted by his personal friend, Adam Clark in *Clark's Commentary*, Vol. IV, p. 686). Adam Clarke (1762-1832), prominent Methodist scholar, wrote: “Music as a science, I esteem and admire: but instruments of music in the house of God I abominate and abhor” (*Comments on Amos 6*). Charles Spurgeon, widely-recognized as the greatest Baptist preacher, wrote in his comments on Psalm 42: “We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it” (*Treasury of David*, Volume 1, 272). He never allowed instruments in his ten-thousand-seat Metropolitan Tabernacle in London.

These quotations are not given as authority, and certainly not to offend, but simply to show that church history is firmly on the side of a cappella singing.

The practice stems from our conviction that we must add nothing to the Scriptures.

Churches of Christ believe strongly in having divine authority (a scripture) for all we teach and practice. We do this because the Bible says, “Whosoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17). “Whosoever” and “all” are comprehensive words. To do a thing “in Jesus’ name” means to do it by His authority. The Bible warns against venturing beyond “that which is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6) or adding anything to the Bible (Revelation 22:18-19). We must not go out of bounds (2 John 1:9).

What are the bounds regarding worship? The New Testament does not say much about music in the early church. The one time music is used (Luke 15:25), is not even talking about worship, but about the party held for the returning prodigal. A few verses mention pipes and harps (e.g., Matthew 11:17; 1 Corinthians 14; Revelation 14-15), but none in the context of church worship. Singing, however, is mentioned seven times in that context (Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; James 5:13).

Singing is definitely “in bounds.”

- It is commanded (Ephesians 5:19).
- There are examples of Christians singing (Acts 16:25; 1 Corinthians 14:15).
- It is in the principle of offering God the fruit of our lips (Hebrews 13:15).

On the other hand, the New Testament is silent on playing songs for God. It is not commanded nor is there any example of the early church using it.

We pray that God will give all of us wisdom as we continue our spiritual journey toward eternity (James 1:2-4).

All who love the Lord share a delight in His praise. Truly may God in all things “be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:11).