

JESUS' CHURCH: WORSHIP (2)

Most of the previous lesson concentrated on four expressions of worship: the Lord's Supper, teaching and preaching God's Word, prayer, and giving. In this lesson, we will discuss a fifth expression in more detail: singing.

Singing has always been a natural expression of worship. In the Old Testament, David said, "I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the Lord" (Psalm 27:6c). In the New Testament, singing is also an indispensable expression of worship.

Singing should be included in our private devotions. James wrote, "Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises" (James 5:13b). Some of us remember parents or grandparents singing hymns as they did their work.

God has also decreed that singing should be part of our public worship. Hebrews 2:12b says, "In the midst of the congregation I will sing Your praise."¹ Paul commanded the Christians in Ephesus to speak "to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19a). He also told the church in Colossae to teach and admonish one another "with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Colossians 3:16). When Paul laid down guidelines for public worship assemblies in 1 Corinthians 14, he indicated that Christians are to "sing with the spirit and . . . with the mind also" (1 Corinthians 14:15).

In this lesson, the emphasis will be on public worship. The principles included here may be applied to private worship as well.

WHAT GOD WANTS

A listing of New Testament passages on singing would include Mark 14:26, where Jesus and

His disciples sang a hymn before going out to the Mount of Olives.² It would also include Acts 16:25, where "Paul and Silas were . . . singing hymns of praise to God" at midnight. I like these verses because they tell me that Jesus and His followers loved to sing as I do. The list would also include passages just mentioned, plus others:³

. . . as it is written, "Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, and I will sing to Your name" (Romans 15:9).

. . . I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also (1 Corinthians 14:15).

. . . "I will proclaim Your name to My brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing Your praise" (Hebrews 2:12).

Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises (James 5:13).

Two passages that summarize what we need to know about singing in worship are Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. The two verses are similar:

Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19).

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

These verses teach us that God wants everyone to sing. The command to sing is not ad-

dressed to a select few. It is not limited to those with beautiful voices. The instructions were addressed to the congregations as a whole. God does not want anyone to sit and listen; He wants everyone to sing.⁴ An individual may or may not have a talent for singing, but he can still (as an Old Testament writer put it) “make a joyful noise” to the Lord (Psalm 95:1; KJV).⁵

These passages also tell us what kind of songs God wants His people to use in worship: “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” It is hard to distinguish between the three categories,⁶ but the key word is “spiritual”: The songs used in worship should appeal to the spirit rather than the flesh.⁷

Further, the two verses indicate that our songs are to have direction: Sometimes, they will be directed outward: “speaking to *one another*”; “teaching and admonishing *one another*.” At other times, they will be directed upward: “singing and making melody with your heart *to the Lord*”; “singing with thankfulness in your hearts *to God*.”

Many songs are songs of exhortation, directed to fellow Christians or to those who need to accept Christ:

Trust and obey, for there’s no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.⁸

To the work! to the work! We are servants of
God,
Let us follow the path that our Master has
trod; . . .⁹

Stand up, stand up for Jesus!
Ye soldiers of the cross; . . .¹⁰

Other songs are songs of praise and thanksgiving, directed to God and Jesus:

My faith looks up to Thee,
Thou Lamb of Calvary, . . .¹¹

Be with me, Lord—
I cannot live without Thee, . . .¹²

We praise Thee, O God, for the Son of Thy love,
For Jesus who died, and is now gone above.¹³

Finally, these passages emphasize that Christians are not just to sing with their lips; they are to “make melody” *in their hearts* “to the Lord,” “singing with thankfulness *in [their] hearts* to God.” Worshipers need to think about the words

they are singing. They need to “sing with the spirit and . . . with the mind also” (1 Corinthians 14:15). Singing that does not come from the heart rises no higher than the ceiling.

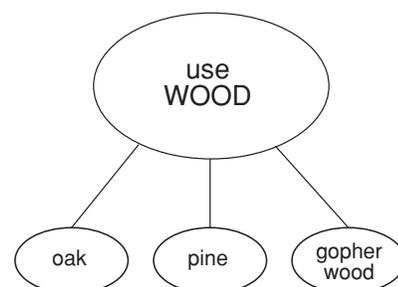
WHAT GOD DOES NOT WANT

You may have noticed, in the passages we have studied, that the only “instruments” mentioned were the human voice and the heart. There has been no reference to mechanical instruments of music.¹⁴ Read the New Testament through, and you will not find instruments used in the worship of the Lord’s church.¹⁵ Harps and other instruments of music were used in Old Testament worship (Psalm 150, for example), but they were absent from Christian worship in New Testament times.¹⁶

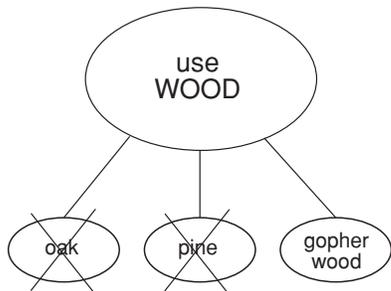
As far as we know, early Christians were never told, “You shall not use instruments of music in worship.” Why, then, were instruments excluded from Christian worship? This decision can be made on the same basis that hamburgers and Coca-Cola® are not found on the Lord’s Table: When God tells us exactly what He wants, that eliminates everything else in the same category.

This is sometimes called “the principle of exclusion.” You may have never heard the expression “the principle of exclusion,” but you use this principle every day: If you hire someone to paint a fence white, it is not necessary for you to say, “Don’t paint it red . . . or blue . . . or green . . . or black.” When you specify what you want and say, “Paint it *white*,” that automatically excludes every other color.

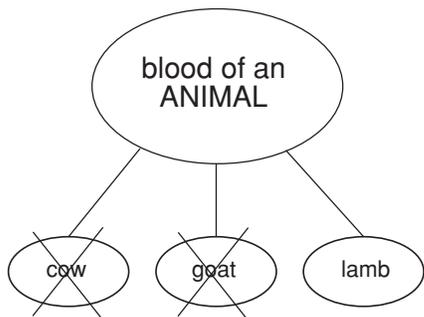
The Bible is full of examples of the principle of exclusion. Noah was told to build an ark (Genesis 6:14). If he had been told, “Build it of wood,” he could have used any kind of wood: oak, pine, gopher wood, or whatever he wanted.



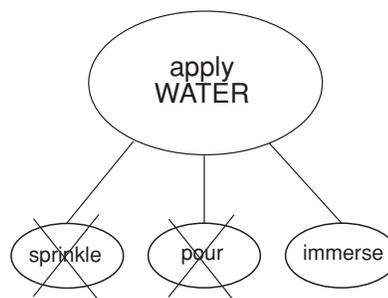
Instead, God was specific in His instructions: He told Noah to build it of gopher wood (Genesis 6:14).¹⁷ The Lord did not have to say, “Don’t build it of oak . . . or of pine . . . or of any other kind of wood.” When He specified gopher wood, that excluded every other kind of wood.



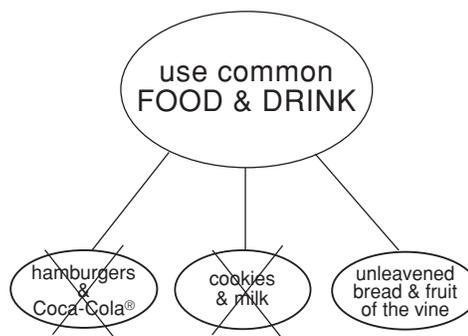
Shortly before the children of Israel escaped from Egypt, they were told to put blood on the doorposts of their houses so that death would not visit their homes (Exodus 12:7, 13). If God had said, “Use the blood of an animal,” they could have chosen the kind of animal to slaughter: a cow, a goat, a lamb, or whatever. God, however, specifically told them to use the blood of a lamb (Exodus 12:3, 7). God did not say, “Don’t put the blood of a cow or a goat or some other animal on the door post.” When He said “a lamb,” that eliminated every other kind of animal.



God has commanded us to be baptized (Acts 2:38). Regarding this commandment, if the Lord had said, “Apply water to the one being baptized,” we could apply the water in any manner our imagination might devise. We could sprinkle water on people; we could pour water on people; we could immerse people in water—but, as we have seen, scriptural baptism is immersion. The New Testament does not have to say, “You shall not sprinkle or pour water and call it baptism.” When immersion is specified, that eliminates sprinkling and pouring.



When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, if He had said, “Use a common food to represent My body and a common drink to represent My blood,” the church would be at liberty to decide what food and drink to use. Some might like hamburgers and Coca-Cola®. Others might prefer cookies and milk. As we have seen, though, the elements used by Jesus and early Christians were unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine. Those who desire to please the Lord do not have to be told, “Don’t use hamburgers and Coke®. Don’t use cookies and milk.” They are content to stay with what God has revealed.



Can you see that it would be wrong to *substitute* hamburgers and Coke® for the unleavened bread and fruit of the vine? Can you see that it would be wrong to *add* hamburgers and Coke® to the table of the Lord?¹⁸ In my experience, if an individual cannot see that it would be blasphemous to add hamburgers and Coke® to the Lord’s Supper, he will never see the harm in adding instrumental music to the singing.

You have probably anticipated how the principle of exclusion applies to the subject of singing in worship: If God had said, “Make music when you worship,” the church could sing, play instruments, or combine the two—but God specified what He wanted. He said,

... sing ... (Romans 15:9).

... sing ... (1 Corinthians 14:15).

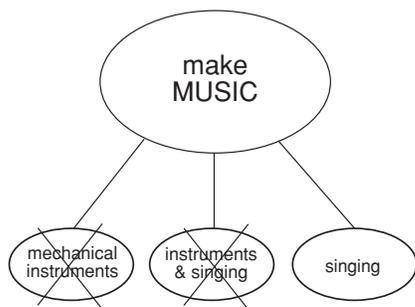
... singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19).

... singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

... sing ... (Hebrews 2:12).

... Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing ... (James 5:13).

God does not have to say, "Don't use mechanical instruments of music in Christian worship." When He specified singing, that eliminated every other kind of music.



Early Christians evidently understood the principle of exclusion—for they eliminated from their worship the instruments that had been used in Old Testament worship. Scholars in general agree that Christian worship was a cappella¹⁹ for centuries until the Catholic Church introduced the organ into its worship hundreds of years later.²⁰

CONCLUSION

The church needs to have both the right acts and the right attitudes in singing, as in all expressions of worship. Members must first be concerned about doing exactly what God has commanded. Their hearts should be set on worshiping God in a manner that is pleasing to Him (Ephesians 5:10). I may *think* that this or that expression of worship will please God, but the only way I can *know* what pleases Him is by reading what He has revealed in His Word.

As they sing, Christians' hearts must be set on praising God (Acts 2:47; Romans 14:11; 15:11; Philippians 1:11; Hebrews 13:15). They must sing "with thankfulness in [their] hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16). They must "sing with the spirit, and . . . with the understanding also" (1 Corinthians 14:15; KJV).

By being concerned with both the "what"

and the "how," true worshipers can worship God "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24). ❖

¹The writer was quoting an Old Testament passage, Psalm 22:22.

²See also Matthew 26:30.

³The list might also include passages on praising God with the lips, such as Hebrews 13:15. Be sure to read all of these passages in context.

⁴Occasions may arise when it is impossible for someone to sing (he may have laryngitis), but these are the exception rather than the rule.

⁵Read Psalm 95:1, and you will see that making "a joyful noise" refers to singing with exuberance.

⁶Some think that "psalms" are songs of praises and "hymns" are more stately songs, while "spiritual songs" have more enthusiasm. We are probably not intended to make major distinctions between the three terms. They are just three ways of looking at the same concept of worshiping in song.

⁷Whether a song appeals to the spirit or the flesh is often a matter of judgment, but the basic principle is that God wants His people to sing *spiritual* songs.

⁸J. H. Sammis, "Trust and Obey," *Songs of Faith and Praise*, ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).

⁹Fanny J. Crosby, "To the Work," *Songs of the Church*, ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1977).

¹⁰George Duffield, "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus," *Songs of Faith and Praise*, ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).

¹¹Ray Palmer, "My Faith Looks Up to Thee," *Songs of Faith and Praise*, ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).

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¹³William P. Mackay, "We Praise Thee, O God," *Songs of Faith and Praise*, ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).

¹⁴The phrase "mechanical instruments of music" is long and awkward. To save time and space, from this point on in this lesson, when I refer to "instruments," I mean "mechanical instruments of music."

¹⁵You will occasionally find mechanical instruments mentioned in the New Testament, but not in the context of Christian worship. Instruments are mentioned in illustrations (as in 1 Corinthians 13:1) and are part of the symbolism of Revelation (along with the burning of incense, as in Revelation 5:8). There is, however, no mention of mechanical instruments being used in the worship of the Lord's church.

¹⁶Scholars in general agree on this. Christians in the second and third centuries wrote strongly against instrumental music in worship.

¹⁷Today we are not sure what "gopher wood" was, but that is unimportant. What is important is that *Noah* knew what kind of wood God wanted.

¹⁸The sin of adding to God's revelation is as serious as the sin of substitution (see Revelation 22:18, 19).

¹⁹"A cappella" literally means "chapel style." The term is used today to refer to music that is exclusively vocal.

²⁰Abortive efforts were made to introduce the instrument in the 600s and 700s, but the instrument was not introduced to stay until after A.D. 1250.