

Arguments Against Musical Instruments in Public Worship

Based on R.L. Dabney's "Against Musical Instruments in Public Worship" (1849)¹

During the mid-to-late 1800s, American Presbyterian and Baptists churches were beginning to introduce organs and other musical instruments into the public worship of God. These instruments were associated with Roman Catholic worship during the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation, and many of the churches that came out of the Reformation had long ago abandoned their use in public worship.

Writing in 1849, Presbyterian theologian R.L. Dabney defended this prohibition of musical instruments in the public worship of God. Dabney reminded the Presbyterians of his day that historically only small minorities of professing Christians have held to the truths they professed to hold sacred, while the arrogant majorities have sneered at them. This was the case in the days of the Protestant Reformers, in the days of Athanasius, of the Apostles, and of Jesus Himself.

Those who sought to introduce musical instruments into the churches in the 1800s accused the godly pastors of past generations of being "old fogeys" and lacking cultural refinement, while esteeming themselves as having superior intelligence, learning, and refinement. Yet, such thinking was not only arrogant and prideful but simply showed their ignorance of the past. The leaders of the Protestant Reformation and their descendants surpassed all who have succeeded them in elegant classical scholarship, in logical ability, and in theological learning. The era of the Reformation came at the time of the great Renaissance, an age which saw church art at its greatest, as seen in architecture, painting and music. The leaders of the Protestant Reformation were graduates of the first Universities in Europe, most of them upper class by birth, many of them noblemen, denizens of courts, of elegant accomplishments and manners, not a few of them exquisite poets and musicians. Notwithstanding all this, they unanimously rejected the Roman Catholic Church's music, not because they were old-fashioned narrow-minded men without taste but rather because a refined taste concurred with their learning and logic to condemn it.

At the heart of Presbyterianism lies a vital truth which no Presbyterian can discard without squarely deserting the historic principles of Presbyterianism. He who contends with this first rule of Presbyterianism might as well set out at once on a journey to Rome. That first principle of Presbyterianism is what has been called the regulative principle of worship: God is to be worshipped *only* in the ways appointed in His word. Every act of public worship not positively commanded by God is thereby forbidden.

Christ and His apostles ordained the musical worship of the new covenant without any sort of musical instrument, enjoining only the singing with the voice of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Hence such instruments are excluded from Christian worship. Such

¹ Electronically retrieved 18 April 2009 at www.spurgeon.org/~phil/dabney/organs.htm. From the *Watchman and Observer*, Richmond, VA, February 22, 1849, Vol. 4, No. 28. Princeton theologian A.A. Hodge called Robert L. Dabney "the best teacher of theology in the United States, if not in the world." Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield said Dabney was "the most conspicuous figure and the leading theological guide of the Southern Presbyterian Church, the most prolific theological writer that Church has as yet produced, and for a period of over forty years one of the most distinguished and probably the most impressive teacher of its candidates for the ministry." R.L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985).

has been the creed of all churches in all ages, except of the Roman Catholic communion after it had reached the zenith of its corruption at the end of the thirteenth century and of its prelatial (episcopal—bishop-led) imitators.

Many claim that instrumental music is authorized for worship today because it was authorized by Scripture in the Old Testament. Yet, such people fail to realize that such worship was abolished by the coming of Christ.

Instrumental worship, like human priests and their vestments [priestly garments], showbread, incense, and bloody sacrifice, were all limited to the local and temporary worship of the tabernacle and later the temple. When the Antitype [Jesus] has come, the types must be abolished. As the temple-priests and animal sacrifices typified Christ and His sacrifice on Calvary, so the musical instruments of David in the temple service only typified the joy of the Holy Spirit as poured out at Pentecost.

When the advocates of using musical instruments in worship quote passages from the psalms to defend their practice, these shallow reasoners are reminded that the same sort of argument would draw back human priests and blood sacrifices into our Christian churches. For these Psalms exclaim with the same emphasis: “Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar” (Ps. 118:27). Why do Christians not build altars in front of their pulpits and drag the struggling lamps up their nicely carpeted aisles and have their throats cut there for the edification of the refined audience. Why they respond that the sacrifices, being types and peculiar to the temple service, were necessarily abolished by the coming of Christ. Very good. So were the horns, cymbals, harps and organs only peculiar to the temple-service, a part of its types, and so necessarily abolished when the temple was removed.

Modern Christians are deeply confused regarding what constitutes true worship. It is not enough to show that a particular practice is not essentially sinful or forbidden by Scripture. The burden of proof rests on the advocates of musical instruments to prove that God ordained it positively for our age under the new covenant. They must prove affirmatively that God has appointed and required their use in His New Testament worship, or they are transgressors of God’s true worship.

Doubtless the objection in every opponent’s mind is that this is merely a “trivial and non-essential” matter. I am not surprised to hear this claim made by the majority of people in our day, as I am aware that our age of public education is really a very ignorant one. But it is a matter of grief to find pastors so oblivious of the first lessons of Presbyterian and Protestant church history. The historical fact is that every damnable corruption which has cursed the church of Jesus Christ since its inception has been viewed by the masses as a “trivial and non-essential” matter.

Throughout the ages, churches have added human devices and traditions to the modes of worship ordained by Christ for the new covenant age. These human devices and traditions, which seemed ever so pretty and appropriate, were invented by the best of men and women and ministers with the very best of motives, and many of them were borrowed from the temple worship of the Jews. In this manner the whole apparatus of will-worship (humanly-invented worship) and superstition which bloomed into Roman Catholicism and idolatry came into being, which introduced vestments [religious clerical clothing], pictures in churches, incense, the observance of the martyrs’ anniversary

days, holy days, all of which were additions to the pure and simple worship taught in the New Testament.

Some may object, “Why, all these pretty inventions were innocent. The very best of people used them. They were so appropriate, so artistic! Where could the harm be?” History answers the question: They disobeyed God and introduced popery (Roman Catholicism), a result quite unforeseen by the good souls who began the mischief! Yes, but those who have begun the parallel mischief in our Presbyterian Church cannot plead the same excuse, for they are forewarned by a tremendous history.

That a denomination like the Presbyterian Church, which professes to be anti-prelatic [against episcopal hierarchical government] and anti-ritualistic [against ritual and outward ceremonies], should throw down the bulwarks of their argument against these errors by this recent innovation appears little short of lunacy. Prelatists [episcopalians] undertake every step of the argument which these Presbyterians use for their organs and musical instruments, advancing these same arguments in a parallel manner to defend the re-introduction of the Passover or Easter, of Pentecost, of human priests and priestly vestments, and of holy oil, into the gospel church. They claim that God’s appointment of them in the old covenant proves them to be innocent. They claim that Christians have a right to add to the worship ordained in the New Testament whatever they think appropriate, provided it is innocent and especially are such additions lawful if borrowed from the Old Testament. The episcopalians justify these other additions into God’s worship by employing the same logic that Presbyterians today use to justify their use of musical instruments in the public worship of God. If the New Testament church has priests, these priests must have sacrifice. Consistency will finally lead consistent Presbyterians who follow this line of argument to the real, bodily presence and the Mass.

There are several additional arguments that can be made against the use of organs and other musical instruments in the public worship of God:

First, sound prudence and discretion argue against the use of musical instruments in Christian churches. The money cost of these instruments, with the damaging debts incurred for them, is a sufficient objection. The money they cost, if spent in mission work, would do infinitely more good to souls and honor to God. I ask solemnly, is it right to expend so much of God’s money, which is needed for rescuing perishing souls, on an object merely non-essential and at best only a luxury? How can the Christian conscience, in measuring the worth of souls and God’s glory, spend tens of thousands of dollars or even much more on musical instruments and paid musicians, instead of spending the money to further the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the preaching and teaching of the whole counsel of God?

Second, instruments in churches are integral parts of a system which has led to many church feuds and worship wars. How many pastoral relations have they helped to disrupt? Congregations, choirs, and different generations of professing Christians, fight and even separate over traditional versus contemporary music. The Church spends countless hours and millions of dollars developing numerous different “styles” of worship to cater to every taste and desire—classical, jazz, oldies, high church, low church, light rock, hard rock, heavy metal, punk rock, ska, country, metrical psalms, old hymns, new hymns, praise songs—the possibilities are seemingly endless.

Musical instruments, especially organs and drums, tend to choke congregational singing and thus rob the body of God's people of their God-given right to praise Him in His sanctuary. We never see spirited congregational singing in churches where there are organs. The use of musical instruments almost always helps to foster anti-scriptural styles of church music, debauching to the taste, and obstructive, instead of assisting, to true devotional feelings. Church music is thus degraded from that didactic [teaching], lyrical eloquence, which is its Biblical conception, to those senseless sounds expressly condemned by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

The artistic world shows that stringed instruments (e.g., pianos, guitars, violins, harps) are much more conducive to singing. In contrast, the organ is the worst of all possible musical instruments to aid in singing with understanding. The organ is fatally unfit for all the true purposes of musical worship and lyrical expression. Therefore, the organ fits the idolatrous purposes of Roman Catholicism. In selecting so regularly Rome's special instrument of idolatry, 20th century Protestants and Presbyterians either displayed their return to Rome or evidenced a vulgar artistic ignorance. Through the introduction of organs and other musical instruments into Christian worship, late 19th and early 20th century Presbyterians practically turned the holy places of God into fifth-rate Sunday theaters.

A third evil associated with the use of organs and similar instruments in Christian worship is that oftentimes an inexperienced private individual must be employed as an organist, or some teacher of music or theatrical musician must be hired. And thus one of the most solemn parts of the worship of a spiritual God is committed chiefly to the guidance of a professional hireling, who commonly is a wicked man!

What are the differences between Roman Catholic and historic Protestant worship and music?

Roman Catholic worship is **addressed to the senses, and the imagination through the senses**. According to the Papists' [the followers of the Pope's] own theory of God's worship, the mass is a grand Action. It is all in an unknown language; but this does not matter. He asserts that even though there were not an articulate word pronounced in any language, the solemn **drama** would convey its instructions to the heart, through the bowing down, the pantomime, the adoration of the priests, and the varying harmonies of the music. Their theory of church music is the same. The hymns are in an unknown language: if the worshipper heard every syllable articulated, he would not understand the ideas that are sung, nor does it matter that he should. So Roman Catholic worship appeals to the carnal senses [touch, taste, see, hear, feel], the imagination, and employs drama, pantomime, and other such techniques.

Instrumental music has no place in a Christian church. What religious use or sense is there in that part of the music which is accompanied by no words? None. It has no business in the church. Just as reasonably might the preacher preface each impressive paragraph in his sermon with a minute or two of pantomimic gesture.

Protestant religious music is, or ought to be, essentially different. **We appeal to the understanding** and to those intelligent emotions, which are produced by the understanding of the heart. **We sing articulate, intelligent words, in a familiar language**, conveying to every hearer, instructive ideas and elevating sentiments. The *articulation* of words sung is the very essence and soul of our musical worship.

The Bible represents religious music as the vehicle of religious instruction and implies the necessity of distinct articulation. "I will sing with the spirit, and I will *sing with the understanding* also . . ." (1 Cor. 14:15-16). "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, *teaching* and *admonishing* one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16). These passages fully sustain the assertion that religious music, to be Scriptural, *must contain intelligible articulate words*, conveying some pious instruction or emotion.

Worship must be an act of *personal homage* to God or it is a hypocrisy and offense. The rule is that we must "glorify God in our bodies and spirits, which are His" (1 Cor. 6:20). The whole human person, with all its faculties, appropriately takes part in His worship, for they are all redeemed by Him and consecrated to Him. Hence our voices should, at suitable times, accompany our minds and hearts.

All true worship is rational. The truth intelligently known and intelligibly uttered is the only instrument and language of true worship.

Sinful men, fallen and blinded, are ever ready to mistake the sensuous impressions for and confound them with spiritual affections. Blinded men are ever prone to imagine that they have religious feelings, because they have sensuous, animal feelings, which may arise in conjunction with religious places, words, sights, or sounds. This pernicious mistake has sealed up millions of self-deceived souls for hell.

True Protestants recognize no other instrument of sanctification than the one Christ assigned, which is THE TRUTH, God's all-sufficient Word. Sadly, the Protestant churches which employ organs and other musical instruments are aiding and encouraging millions of their members to adopt this pagan mistake. Like the foolish Papists [followers of the Pope], they are deluded into the fancy that their hearts are better because certain sensuous, animalistic emotions are aroused by an organ, drums, or a guitar, in a place called a church, and in a proceeding called worship.

Here, then, is the rationale of God's policy in limiting His musical worship to melodies of the *human voice*. The hymns sung by the human voice can utter didactic truth with the impressiveness of right articulation and emphasis, and thus the pious singers can do what God commands, teaching one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

What is true singing like? True Christian singing in public worship looks like this: The whole congregation sing heartily, uniting their voices in the praise of God. All together rise up, "making melody in their hearts to God" and mingling their voices in one tide of expressive, living, gushing melody, sending the blood thrilling through the heart. The billowy harmony bears the enraptured soul towards heaven. Such were the strains with which the Presbyterian church in our land honored God in earlier days. Such were the songs that swept on the wailing winds, over the moors of Scotland, when the purest of God's people there braved death to worship Him. Such were the songs with which the Republicans of England shook the hearts of their foes, when they drew near to the battle, with "the high praises of God in their mouths, and a two edged sword in their hands," to execute vengeance upon the heathen and judgments upon the people." Such we believe were the songs of praise sent up to God from that upper chamber, where the primitive church met to worship. —And wherever they shall be heard, they will elevate

the devout, convince the sinful, and make the careless solemn, more effectually than any of the borrowed methodologies of a worldly church.

It is always urged: "*we must have an organ to keep pace with other churches in attracting a congregation, and in retaining the young and thoughtless.*" (Of course, few would argue today that we need an organ, lest we lose the youth from our churches. But they might argue that we must have a praise band with guitars and drums.) Has it come then to this, that the chaste spouse of Christ is reduced to borrow the adulterous adornment of the "scarlet whore," in order to receive the unholy admiration of the ungodly? The Apostles never devised such methods in order to bring sinners to the church of Jesus Christ. They were taught to go after them, into the highways and hedges, with the wooings of mercy and love; to allure them by the beauty of holiness; to urge them by the terrors of God's law.

If we are authorized to add to God's worship forms purely of human device in order to make it more palatable to sinners, what corruptions will be not adopted? The Popish [Roman Catholic] church of South America attracts multitudes of worshippers, by gross theatrical representations and drama. According to this mode of operations, which has introduced organs into our churches, a Presbyterian Church in South America might find it necessary to imitate idolatrous Papists [Roman Catholics], and convert God's house into a play-house, a theater. We believe that all such human devices and humanly-contrived tools which aim to make the church popular in the world's eyes are inconsistent with the genius of the Presbyterian Church, derogatory of her honor, and blasting to her interests. The glory and strength of historic Presbyterianism was that she sought to commend herself by her firm devotion to truth, by the purity of her discipline, the preeminence of her ministry, and the justice of her church government. If she will cleave to these traits and rest on them in humble faith in her divine Head, she will prosper. But when once she descends from the high vantage ground of intellectual, theological, and moral superiority, to barter for popularity by employing the human devices and doubtful arts used by Roman Catholics and other Arminians, her *prestige* will be gone. Other churches are better adapted to win in *that* race, and will surely outrun her. The Presbyterian church will have lost her distinctive identity, and she will decline into ruin.

For God's Christian church, the non-appointment of musical accompaniment *was its prohibition*. Time will prove, we fear by a second corruption of evangelical religion and by the ruin of myriads more of nominally Christian souls, how much wiser are the teachings of the Bible than that of the men and women clamoring for the introduction of musical instruments into Presbyterian and Protestant churches. This innovation is merely the result of an advancing *wave of worldliness* and *ritualism* in the evangelical churches. These Christians are not wiser but simply more flesh-pleasing and fashionable. Nothing is needed but the passing of enough years for this drift, of which this music is a part, to send back great masses of our people into the bosom of Rome and her sister churches.