

SINGING: BIBLICAL AUTHORITY, LITERARY, HISTORICAL, AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

By Bob Young

Introduction

I received a question from a brother in Latin America.

Brother, God bless you,

I want to ask your opinion. Currently in a forum called "Debates of Churches of Christ," the use of instrumental music in worship is being discussed. There is a brother who supports its use, since according to his thesis, "There is no example written in the New Testament nor in any document of the first century what shows any church worshiping without instruments; and the only example is Revelation 15:2-4 where the redeemed worship with harps." Therefore, according to this, it is permitted to use musical instruments in worship.

I would like to have your point of view, brother. Thank you.

This article is my response.

Four Considerations

There are four major areas to be considered.

Authority: how to establish biblical authority. If a person does not understand how to study and understand the Bible, thus how to interpret the Bible, such a person does not have a solid basis for how to establish biblical authority. This includes various factors. One of major importance is to understand genres; another is to distinguish literal and figurative language including the use of metaphors. To refer to Revelation 15 as an example or model for the church uses an apocalyptic text out of context and ignores both the genre and the nature of apocalyptic language.

Literary: including grammar and linguistics. Many specious arguments have been developed based on misunderstandings or misapplications of grammar and linguistics. Careful word studies and analysis of grammatical constructions is essential. Some arguments are based on words that do not even appear in the Greek text.

Historical. In the current discussion, few have noted in detail the differences between Old Testament worship and New Testament worship. The example of the early church is a valid consideration but why limit it to the first century, to no more than a decade after the death of the last apostle? Is there no historical value in the practice of the church in the second century? Surely there is.

Practical. A fourth area of consideration is the practical, how did or does the church do together what the assembly, communion, shared experience was designed to do? How do the NT descriptions of the church inform the intended practice?

Historical Considerations Detailed

Your question has to do with the historical, so that is what I will address.

What can be seen in the following quotes is this. Ignatius, in the early years of the second century, refers to congregational singing, which according to Pliny (died 113), was done with a leader and congregational response. The practice was to recite "forms of words" likely as a chant, following the general practice of the synagogue. Tertullian, later in the second century or very early third century writes of chanting the psalms. The focus was on words recited, sung,

chanted, and it is highly unlikely and almost impossible to understand what part an instrumental accompaniment would have had in the responsive singing or the free melody and free meter chanting. In the practice of the day, chanting psalms was done a cappella, as it was also in the synagogue.

- Ignatius (died, 107) refers to a harp but only as comparison, attuned to God as strings to a harp. That is the only way instruments are referred to in the earliest Christians writers.
 - Congregational unity is the point, and the participation of the whole congregation in singing to God through Christ.
- Pliny, 61-113
 - "...they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ"
 - Explanation: Possible translation, they recited a form of words among themselves, more likely chant, alternate verses indicates congregational response with a leader and repeated recitations
- Tertullian, 160-225
 - "...during the regular services of the Lord's day in the church...when the scriptures are read, or the psalms are chanted, or sermons are preached, or prayers are sent up..."
 - Explanation: Chanting psalms, according to the practice of the synagogue, was always a cappella
- Clement of Alexandria, VII, 5, 150-215
 - "Always giving thanks in all things to God through righteous hearing and divine reading, true inquiry, holy oblation, blessed prayer, praising, hymning, blessing, singing..."

Conclusion

If someone wants to justify the use of the instrument in the assembly or the worship today, one should do it keeping in mind the four areas of study that are mentioned above. The practice of the early church through at least three centuries was to sing without instruments.

The use of the instrument is not inherent in the pertinent texts of the New Testament, and therefore the burden of proof falls upon those who want to justify the use of the instrument, not on those who try to follow the teachings of the New Testament and the practice of the early church through several centuries.