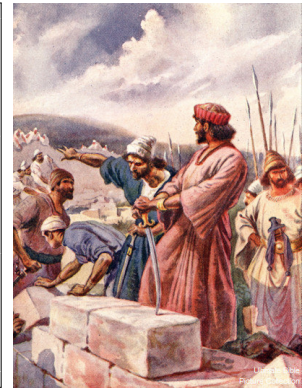


The Sword and The Trowel

They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded (Nehemiah 4:17-18)

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Music in the New Testament Church

According to historian Earl I. West, the church at Midway, Kentucky owns the distinction - if it is a distinction - of being the first of the congregations on record to adopt the use of the instrument (The Search for the Ancient Order, I, 312).

This refers, of course, to the use of instrumental music in worship by congregations connected to the Restoration Movement in America.

What caused the instrument's introduction? Aside from lack of respect for divine authority, L.L. Pinkerton, the preacher at Midway, identified the cause thus:

The introduction of the instrument owed its inception to the deplorable singing the congregation did. This singing had degenerated into screeching and brawling that would, as Pinkerton said, "scare even the rats from worship" (Ibid, p. 311).

This comical, but instructive example should lead us to examine our own music in worship. Is it what it should be?

The objective of this lesson will be to answer the question: What is the pattern for music in the New Testament church? We shall uncover the answer to the inquiry under three headings: the pattern discovered, the pattern studied and the pattern applied.

The Pattern Discovered

In nine New Testament verses the blueprint for music in the church is revealed. The first two of these verses relate an event that occurred shortly before the Lord's church was established and the New Testament became effective, but they also unveil the worship in

music of the Lord and His apostles connected with the institution of the New Testament ordinance of the Lord's Supper. Therefore, I shall include them with the other seven. Each passage follows, as it appears in the King James Version of the Bible, with the words that reveal the kind of music authorized stressed.

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30).

"Sung a hymn" describes the music.

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives (Mk. 14:26).

Again, it specifies "they had sung a hymn."

And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God; and the prisoners heard them (Acts 16:25).

They "sang praises."

And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name (Rom. 15:9).

Do what? "Sing unto thy name."

What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also (I Cor. 14:15).

Paul's example is to "sing with the spirit" and to "sing with the understanding."

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is

excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Eph. 5:18, 19).

The key words are "speaking to yourselves in psalms," "hymns," "spiritual songs," "singing," and "making melody in your heart."

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

The apostle employs the terms "teaching and admonishing one another in psalms," "hymns," "spiritual songs," and "singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee (Heb. 2:12).

"I sing praise."

Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms (Jas. 5:13).

"Sing psalms."

The Pattern Studied

Three Greek terms are all translated by the English verb "sing." They are humneo, psallo and ado.

The verb humneo is found in Matthew 26:30 ("sung an hymn"), Mark 14:26 ("sang an hymn"), Acts 16:25 ("sang praises") and Hebrews 2:12 ("will I sing praise unto"). It is the verb form of the noun humnos, which denotes "a song of praise addressed to

God” (W.E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, II, 241, see also J.H. Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 637).

Psalm is employed in Romans 15:9 (“sing”), 1 Corinthians 14:15 (“I will sing . . . I will sing”), Ephesians 5:19 (“making melody”) and James 5:13 (“let him sing praise”). This word means in the N. T. to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song (Thayer, p. 675, so Vine, III, 58).

We find also in Ephesians 5:19 (“singing”) and Colossians 3:16 (“singing”). It “is used always of praise to God” (Vine, IV, 35), “to sing, chant . . . to the praise of any one” (Thayer, p. 13).

The English word “psalms” is a transliteration of the Greek psalmoi. The apostle employed this term in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Thayer defines it thus: a striking, twanging . . . spec. a striking the chords of a musical instrument . . .; hence a pious song (p. 675).

Does this word imply the use of an instrument? According to the New Testament, psalms were spoken (Lk. 20:42, 43) and written (Lk. 24:44). Must one employ a piano or organ to speak or write? Of their use in the worship of the New Testament church, the Spirit commands, “speaking to yourselves in psalms” (Eph. 5:19). They are to be spoken, not played. Their purpose is “teaching and admonishing” (Col. 3:16). What teaching is done by the guitar’s twang? What admonishing is done by the cymbal’s crash? Undoubtedly, in the Old Testament pattern of worship psalms were sung to the accompaniment of instrumental music. But in the music of the New Testament church, psalms are to be rendered “with grace in your hearts” not “with a fiddle under your chin.”

The term “hymns” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) transliterates the Greek humnos and “denotes a song of praise addressed to God” (Vine, II, 241).

“Spiritual songs” (ode pneumatikos; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) are songs of which the burden is the things revealed by the Spirit (Vine, IV, 65), i.e., songs which teach biblical concepts.

The Pattern Applied

As is established in another lesson, the truths taught in these passages which we have studied constitute a divinely ordained, binding pattern for music in the New Testament church. We can properly apply these facts to the worship of the church today in three categories.

Type of Music

As is established without variation in every passage relevant to the subject. God had specified the kind of music to be used when his church venerates His Holy Name, i.e., vocal music (singing). By the very nature of biblical authority, what God does not authorize in serve to Him is necessarily excluded from that ministry by the simple fact it is not authorized (2 Jn. 9). The only kind of music Christ has allowed for his church to employ is vocal. All other kinds are eliminated by the exclusive nature of scriptural authority.

The sole kind of music other than vocal (singing) is instrumental (playing). The exclusive nature of New Testament authority strictly prohibits the Lord’s church from employing instrumental music in worship. It is moral and right for Christians to play any musical instrument, from a comb and tissue paper to an organ, in the home for social purposes. It is unscriptural and wrong for the church of the Lord to employ any music other than singing in worship to God.

Type of Song

The New Testament specifies that the church should use “psalms,” “hymns,” and “spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:18, 19; Col. 3:16) to glorify and venerate the Father. Each of these kinds of songs is spiritual, not secular, in nature. It is moral and right for Christians to play and sing any decent song, from “You Ain’t Nothin’ But a Houn’ Dog” to “Rhapsody in Blue” in the home for social purposes. It is unscriptural and wrong for the church of Christ to use any type of song other than “psalms,” “hymns” and “spiritual songs” in veneration of the Godhead.

Purposes of Music

The New Testament teaches two purposes for music employed by the church of God. What music is to accomplish is the praise of God (Acts 16:23; Heb. 2:12) and the teaching of men (Col. 3:16). It is as vital that scriptural truth be taught in our songs as it is in our sermons and class lessons. It is moral and right for Christians to employ choruses, quartets, groups and solos for entertainment and pleasure as functions of homes and schools. It is unscriptural and wrong for the New Testament church to use music for the carnal appeal of entertainment in the worship of God (Rom. 8:5).

Conclusion

The New Testament reveals a binding pattern for the music of the church of the Lord. That pattern has three particulars. The type of music to be employed is vocal, not instrumental; the kind of songs to be used are “psalms,” “hymns” and “spiritual songs,” not secular; and the purposes of music in the New Testament church are the praise of God and the teaching of men, not entertainment. Let us strive earnestly to make our worship in music pleasing to God in every way, so that he will be glorified and we will be edified. Let each ask himself, “Am I doing my part?”

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