

MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

It is not at all unusual, when one with whom I am having a discussion discovers that I am a member of the church of Christ, for him to respond with something like, "Oh, you are the people who don't use music." This response is likely not meant in disrespect, but it rather indicates an image which we have in the eyes of those who do not understand.

Yes, we do use music. In fact, the majority of us enjoy very much the pleasure, contentment, and joy resulting from wholesome music. Many of us have learned to skillfully play a variety of musical instruments. We also feel that the human voice is capable of singing in a way far superior to any man-made instrument, and we thrill to the beauty and harmony of voices blended in praise to our God.

But the proper understanding is that we do not employ use of mechanical instruments of music in our assemblies of the church. It might be of interest to note that several other religious groups also share our views about praising God with only the human voice. Among these are Greek Orthodox churches (among the largest in number) and Primitive Baptist churches (among the more conservative of the Baptists).

Singing plays a most important role in assemblies of the Lord's church. With it God is praised and we are uplifted. Perhaps singing might be likened in a service of the church to flowers in the field or forest. It beautifies and makes pleasant the atmosphere which prevails when Christians assemble. Our hearts rejoice when thus prompted to reflect upon our heavenly Father and His abundant blessings. Our voices gladly proclaim His presence in our lives and our thanksgiving for it.

While some of these same qualities can also be found in playing musical instruments, we find no example in the Scriptures that early Christians ever engaged in playing instruments in their assemblies. It was not a matter of such instruments not being available, for instruments had for centuries been very common. Reference is made to the harp and organ in verse 21 of the fourth chapter of Genesis. Timbrels and dances were used by Miriam and other Israelite women in Exodus 15 (about 1496 B.C.), and David used a harp to refresh Saul in 1 Samuel 16:23 (around 1060 B.C.). In 2 Samuel 6:5 we are informed, "*And David* After Judah's return from Babylonian captivity (517 B.C.), Nehemiah mentions certain men following Ezra "*with the musical instruments of David the man of God*" (Neh. 12:36).

But the Old Testament is not a pattern for the Christian age. During the periods which it records, especially the era of Israel which preceded the establishment of Christianity, God's people known as Israel constituted a nation which was both civil and spiritual. They acknowledged God and recognized His direction in spiritual matters. But being also a civil nation among other civil nations, they occupied a position not in harmony with what was later to be the spirit of

Christianity. During that period the Israelites offered animal sacrifices, burned incense, could have more than one wife, executed criminals, exacted physical punishment, and observed national boundaries. It was during that period that instruments of music were used. None of those practices were observed by the church of the first century, for such practices belonged to an earlier, incomplete era designed to prepare for a more perfect one to follow (Hebrews 8:7-13; 10:1-9).

The Lord's church is a spiritual kingdom existing within and among civil nations throughout the world, but it has no authority to function in a civil capacity as did old Israel. It has a different relationship and a different purpose. It is noteworthy, then, that practices such as those just mentioned were never recorded among early Christians. It is also noteworthy that instruments of music were never mentioned as part of the assemblies of the early church.

But music is mentioned as part of the early Christians' lives. Paul wrote, "*I will ...SING unto thy name*" (Rom. 15:9), "*I will SING with the spirit, and I will SING with the understanding also*" (1 Cor. 14:15), "*In psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, SINGING and making melody in your heart to the Lord*" (Eph. 5:19), and "*In psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, SINGING with grace in your hearts to the Lord*" (Col. 3:16). The writer of Hebrews quoted Psalms 22:22 in saying, "*In the midst of the church will I SING praise unto thee*" (2:12). In James 5:13 disciples are exhorted, "*Is any merry? let him SING psalms.*" It will be evident, of course, that each passage refers to SINGING, not use of instruments.

The striking fact is that even though instruments of music were available and could have been used -- they weren't. It is our purpose to constitute in this century a church identical to that of the first century. This is accomplished by following their God-approved practices and by avoiding that which God has not authorized.

-Article by Harry Cobb appearing in "The Harvester" February 2003 No 206

The article can be found at:

<http://www.churches-of-christ.org/Archives03/Harvester2-03.htm#MUSIC>