

Musical Instruments in the Worship Service (2)

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In the previous article we discussed Biblical principles regarding the worship service of the Christian church. It is time to move on to the question: What exactly is the role of singing and music in worship? *Singing* is clearly commanded in Scripture. Col. 3:16 – “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” What exactly the apostle means with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is an issue that we will bypass for now. That the Christian congregation is expected to sing is clear.

What does the Bible say about the use of *musical instruments* in Christian worship? Here the opinions diverge. In the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition there are some who do not allow musical instruments in Christian worship. An example is the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA). The RPCNA’s Directory of Public Worship stipulates that only Psalms are to be sung (no hymns) and that they “are to be sung without the accompaniment of instruments, since these are not authorized for New Testament worship.”¹ Interestingly, the RPCNA does allow the use of choirs in worship, even though choirs are not authorized in the New Testament either!

The main argument against using instruments during worship is that the New Testament does not authorize it (the so-called regulative principle of worship is at play here). What shall we say in response? It is true that the New Testament does not explicitly prescribe the use of musical instruments. On the other hand, the New Testament does not explicitly forbid it either. One could argue that the many calls in the Psalms to praise the Lord with the harp and the lyre and the tambourine have abiding significance, even in the new covenant. One could also point to the fact that there is exuberant worship in heaven (as mentioned in the book of Revelation). Since the NT neither demands nor forbids the use of musical instruments, it appears that this matter is left in the freedom of the churches.

The early Christian church followed the example of the Jewish synagogue. There was singing and chanting but no musical instruments were used. As a result, for hundreds of years the Church did not allow musical instruments in worship. Even today the Eastern Orthodox tradition does not allow musical instruments (although they do use choirs and solo-singing). The Western church started to allow the use of instruments during the late Middle Ages. By the time Luther and Calvin came around, the use of musical instruments was still a relatively new phenomenon.

Calvin

¹ Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, section F-2.

Calvin wanted to go back to the early church. He believed that it is wrong to use musical instruments in worship. He had various reasons for his position. First, he believed the musical instruments were part of the Old Testament dispensation, when the church was still immature. Now that the church is mature, the whole congregation (not just the Levites) must participate in singing the Psalms. Instruments, however, are not needed anymore. Second, he believed that musical instruments do not fit in the simple and intelligible worship style which the Lord prefers. Playing musical instruments is like speaking in tongues, Calvin said. You hear the sound but you do not understand the message. Third, Calvin was afraid that music would become a distraction. He criticized the Roman Catholic Church for allowing “organs and many other similar ludicrous things” in worship.²

In other words, as Reformed people we have a slight problem. We love Calvin and we love organs, but in this case we cannot have both. We either have to dump Calvin or we have to dump the organ. It’s your choice...

Of course, we have already made that choice. In our tradition we have moved closer to Martin Luther who had a more positive view of music than Calvin, seeing it as a gift of God that is to be used in worship. Indeed, Calvin’s arguments against the use of musical instruments do not convince.³ To answer his first objection, it is clear that sacrifices have been abolished in the new covenant because of the sacrifice of Christ. But this in itself does not prove that musical instruments have been abolished as well. Second, to compare musical instruments with speaking in tongues is a strange argument. Speaking in tongues disrupts the service. Musical accompaniment merely serves the singing. Third, music can be a distraction indeed. Calvin has a point here. But it is not necessarily the case. Calvin’s reluctance to allow musical instruments in the church should probably be explained as a reaction against the deformation of worship which he witnessed in the Roman Catholic Church of his time.⁴ I would like to think that Calvin, had he been able to see how musical instruments can support the singing of the congregation, would have taken a more positive attitude to using musical instruments.

Concluding principles

In our Reformed tradition we have come to hold a position that is more open to the use of musical instruments. It may be summarized as follows: First, the use of musical instruments is *not essential* to worship. While congregational *singing* is commanded explicitly, the New Testament does not prescribe the use of musical instruments. Thus, if we wanted sing *a capella* all the time, that would be okay. Singing in four-part harmony (without instruments being used) would be an excellent alternative.

² Calvin’s commentary on 1 Samuel 18

³ For a broader discussion: See my articles “Church music in Calvin’s tradition,” *Clarion* 58 (2009), 589-591, 621-623.

⁴ Two helpful articles on this matter: John Barber, “Luther and Calvin on Music and Worship.” *Reformed Perspectives Magazine*, Vol. 8, nr. 26 (2006). W. David O. Taylor, “John Calvin and Musical Instruments: A Critical Investigation.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 48 (2013): 248-269.

Second, the use of musical instruments in worship is *legitimate*. In the old covenant musical instruments were used for the temple service. The book of Revelation mentions the use of musical instruments as part of heavenly worship. While the NT does not demand the use of musical instruments, it does not exclude it either. I cannot see it otherwise than that the Lord has left this matter to the discretion of the church.

Third, the use of musical instruments in worship can be very *beneficial* if it supports the singing of the congregation. In other words, while there is no place for solo performances, musical instruments do have the potential “to benefit the liturgy immensely.”⁵

Pointers for church musicians

Let me conclude with some pointers for church musicians. To begin with, church musicians have a wonderful calling. They are called to support the liturgy of the worship service and to enhance the covenantal fellowship between the Lord and his people by playing appropriate music. It is therefore essential that church accompanists should understand the character of the worship service.

Second, church musicians should understand that their role is to serve and to support the liturgy, whether it is by accompanying the singing of the congregation or by playing before and after the service. The music should not draw undue attention to itself. Our worship should be congregation-centered, not player-centered.

Third, church musicians can set the tone for worship by playing in ways that are fitting for the specific moment in the liturgy. Before the start of the worship service, instrumental music can help get the congregation in the right mood for worship. I would recommend a meditative kind of music (not too wild). After the worship service, as the congregation departs, it will be fitting to play some more upbeat music.

During the collection, instrumental music can set a tone that is appropriate for the action of offering our gifts. Since the collection usually happens after the sermon, instrumental music can be appropriately used to help the congregation meditate some more on the message that was preached. One of the best ways to do this is to play a variation on a well-known Psalm or hymn that relates to the message. Some accompanists are very good at this!

Finally, church musicians can also support the worship experience by setting a tone that is fitting for the Psalm or hymn that the congregation is singing. To be able to do this, accompanists will have to prepare and reflect on the Psalms and hymns that are in the liturgy. What kind of Psalm or hymn is this: a lament, a confession of sin, a song of praise? The accompaniment for each song should be fitting and facilitate the congregation’s singing. To mention a few examples: At the beginning and the end of the service, the minister will often choose a song of praise. At other points in the service, for example after the reading of the Law,

⁵ I have benefited from reading the article by Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Choir & Organ – Their Place in Reformed Liturgy.” <http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/choir-organ-their-place-in-reformed-liturgy-nicholas-wolterstorff>

he may select a song of penitence. Whatever the choices are, the accompanist needs to set the tone that is fitting. Psalm 51 needs a different kind of accompaniment than Psalm 150. This can be a challenge, especially when the mood in the Psalm changes from one stanza to the next (example: Psalm 25, stanza 3 to 4). Sometimes the message even changes halfway through the stanza (for example, in Psalm 73:7 and 86:4).

Questions

During the conference in Burlington the question was asked whether it is okay to have a soloist sing a suitable song during the time of the collection. I have attended church services where this was done well. I can also think of other occasions where unfortunately it became a performance. While I admit that it can be done appropriately, I feel that we should not open the door to this kind of thing. Let the singing and music in the worship service remain congregation-centered. Thankfully, there are many other occasions where talented singers and musicians can sing or play their instruments to the glory of the Lord!

Another question is whether it is helpful to have a praise band leading the congregation in singing. The idea would be that you have a band on stage (keyboard, guitars, drums) and a one or more soloists who “lead the singing.” Again, I have seen this being done well. My wife and I regularly attend Light Night evenings in the Cornerstone church building in Hamilton. The music and the singing are beautiful. I have noticed that sometimes people find it easy to sing along with the band, other times many seem to be struggling and prefer simply to listen. I have come to the conclusion that having a good worship band leading the singing is fitting for a praise & worship evening but not for a worship service where the emphasis should be on congregational singing. Both the visual aspects (having a band on stage) and the auditory aspects (soloists leading the singing) lead almost automatically to the idea of this being a performance. See also the reference made earlier to the article “Why Men Have Stopped Singing in Church.”

I hasten to add that an ensemble of musical instruments can accompany congregational singing very well. A small ensemble of musicians (for example, a piano, an acoustic guitar amplified through the sound system, and a flute or a violin) can do a wonderful job in accompanying the singing of the congregation. A trumpet can be used on festive occasions, with invigorating effect. When the ensemble is small they do not need to occupy a lot of space on stage, which helps to avoid the impression that the musicians are giving a performance. It would be good if our churches in general would become more open to the idea of allowing small ensembles to accompany congregational singing, especially on festive days such as Christmas, profession of faith, etc.

At the same time, I hope that the church organ will maintain (perhaps I should say, regain) its place of honour in our worship services. The church organ as such is not “more Biblical” than other instruments, but from a liturgical perspective it cannot be denied that the organ is very suitable to carry congregational singing. Unfortunately, the organ is such a powerful instrument that it can also drown out the singing of the congregation. But if it is

played well, the organ is a great instrument for the accompaniment of congregational singing. With its deep 16 foot stops, the organ lays a foundation under congregational singing that allows everyone (also the men) to sing with confidence. If I'm not mistaken, we have come through a period that our young people were not interested to play organ because somehow that was not "cool." I am thankful to see signs that we are outgrowing this phase, and I'm hoping that playing organ will once again become something that our young people want to do.