

Musical Instruments in Divine Worship

When Used - Why Used - Why Discontinued

William J. McKnight, D. D.

Pastor of First Reformed Presbyterian Church, Boston

It is useless to discuss a topic like this without coming to an agreement, at the very outset, with regard to the point of departure. What is about to be said assumes that fallen man has no right to introduce anything of his own contriving into any programme which the only wise God has taken measures to place before him for his enlightenment and guidance. Presumably what God does is perfect. To add to His arrangement is to mar it. To subtract from it is to leave it defective. Of course, if God has a programme and I have a different one, and I use mine in preference to His, I can only do it by "laying aside the commandment of God", thus "making the Word of God of none effect" through my substitution. That behavior like this is dishonoring to God, and contrary to the teaching of Scripture, this leaflet takes for granted. It ought to be conceded,

we think, that in the building of God, not made with hands, on which we are laborers, it will not do for us to be able to say, "The specifications do not forbid us to insert a window here, a doorway there, and a staircase yonder"; but contrariwise, we must be able to say, "We are doing nothing but what the blue-prints explicitly make provision for". If the building is God's, He surely ought to be accorded the right of superintending its construction. At least, we assume as much as this, from this point on.

Music in the Temple

The classic passage, which in a single stroke sets before us the whole matter and the significance of it, is as follows: "And he set the Levites in the house of the Lord, with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet: for so was the commandment of the Lord by His prophets. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt offering upon the altar. And when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also with the trumpets, and with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded: and all this con-

tinued until the burnt offering was finished" (II Chronicles 29: 25-28).

For the sake of clear thinking, let us itemize the facts. (1) The building spoken of is the temple, "the house of the Lord". (2) The musical instruments mentioned are cymbals, psalteries and harps. (3) The men who are to use them are the Levites. (4) It was all divinely authorized, "for so was the commandment of the Lord by His prophets". (5) They were used at the altar of burnt offering. (6) The precise moment at which the Levites began to sing and to play was "when the burnt offering began". (7) They continued to play while the sacrifice was being consumed. (8) They ceased to play "when the burnt offering was finished." (9) Distinct from the musical instruments were the trumpets. (10) They were blown by the priests.

Turning now to the significance of it all, it will be worth our while to dwell for a moment or so on some of the more salient features of this elaborate service. Central to everything, of course, was the atonement. Both the tabernacle and the temple were constructed so as to body forth the life and work of a Redeemer to come. The sacrifice on the altar objectified the crucifixion. The trumpets blown by the priests announced the glad tidings of salvation to a lost and helpless world. The an-

nouncement took its dimensions from the sacrifice, for they began, continued and ended together. The announcement was to be neither wider nor narrower than the fact—a circumstance, by the way, which present day modernism would do well to reflect upon. The purpose of the instruments in the hands of the Levites—this will become more and more evident as we proceed—was to indicate that through the atonement alone could genuine joy and blessedness ever reach the human soul and become its permanent possession. Accordingly, “when the burnt offering began, the song of the Lord began also . . . with the instruments ordained by David king of Israel. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, . . . and all this continued until the burnt offering was finished”. The arrangement was instinct with meaning. Blessedness is commensurate with the atonement. It comes into being through the suffering Saviour on Calvary’s cross. No man since the fall has ever obtained it from any other source. To bring this truth out into the light was the province of the musical instruments.

Of necessity, however, such a service was overburdened with the physical and mechanical. The structure itself, the furniture, the implements, mere materiality in tangible and sensuous forms, were everywhere in evidence. With the

best that could be said of them the altar, the animals sacrificed, the sprinkled blood, the vestments, the trumpets, the musical instruments, were but “weak and beggarly” rudiments. Furthermore being material in their nature, they were pinned down to one spot. Only the few could see, and hear, and enjoy; and even they, only once in a while.

The Synagogue Worship

As for the synagogue, the following quotations from Oesterley and Box, the joint authors of a work entitled **The Religion and Worship of the Synagogue**, will serve to put the matter fairly before us. “A striking feature about the synagogue is the absence of anything in the nature of pictures or pictorial emblems. Nothing in the nature of images, portraits, or statues representing living beings, whether real or imaginary, is to be seen.” “Another noticeable feature is the absence of instrumental music”. “Notwithstanding all distance, ‘God is near in every kind of nearness’. For though the distance between heaven and earth is so infinitely great, yet ‘when a man comes to the synagogue and prays, God listens to him, for the petitioner is like a man who talks into the ear of his friend’.” Here, then, the soul faces God; the sensuous is excluded; spirit speaks with Spirit; to pray and “read the duty of

the sacrifices" is "equivalent" to being present at the altar. "The daily offering of prayer, praise and thanksgiving morning and afternoon in the synagogue is a spiritual counterpart and fulfilment of the old daily sacrifice in the temple. In this way the words of the prophet Hosea are in spirit fulfilled: We shall render as bullocks (the offering of) our lips (Hos. 14: 2)." "Long before the destruction of Jerusalem, and the consequent cessation of the sacrificial system, the synagogue had come into existence, and firmly established itself wherever Jewish communities flourished. It met a widespread religious need, owing to the centralization of the sacrificial worship in Jerusalem. While only a limited number of Jews could be present at any one time in the central sanctuary, and assist in the offering of the sacrifice, no such disability would apply to the services of the synagogue It appears that not the whole division of Israelites on duty, but only a deputation from it, was actually present at any given time in the temple; the others, who had been left behind, assembled in the local synagogues (at the time when the sacrifice was actually offered in the temple) and engaged in prayer and the reading of Scripture."

In other words, in the synagogue worship the temple worship was disencumbered of its material and carnal im-

pediments. The daily worship in the synagogue was "the spiritual counterpart" of the "daily sacrifice in the temple". The worship in the two institutions was conducted at the same hours of the day. The one, as to its means of expression, was of an external cast and character; the other was inward, a thing of the soul, impalpable, wholly independent of anything made with hands. Moreover, specific provision was made to make it so. Quite a number of Psalms were written for this very purpose. They mention the cymbals, the psalteries and the harps. They are moulded according to the lineaments of the worship ordained for the temple at the offering of the sacrifices. Here a wide and attractive field of study opens up, though of course it cannot be entered within the limits of a tract like this. Still, a few things should be said. Take this: "Then will I go unto the altar of God, unto God my exceeding joy: yea, upon the harp will I praise thee, O God my God" (Ps. 43: 4). The sacrifice on "the altar" signifying the promised atonement, "the harp" in the hand of the Levite symbolizing present or existing joy and typifying the "joy unspeakable and full of glory" awaiting the believer when he should be able to look back upon the crucified, risen and exalted Messiah, who "had offered one sacrifice.

for sins for ever"—surely the picture presented in that one short verse is both complete and sublime. Or take this: "It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High: to show forth thy lovingkindness in the morning, and thy faithfulness every night, upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the psaltery; upon the harp with a solemn sound. For thou, Lord, hast made me glad through thy work" (Ps. 92: 1-4). Obviously it is the same picture painted on the background of the morning and evening sacrifice. See also Psalms 33, 81, 98, 144, 149, 150. They all take their imagery from the altar of burnt offering. As much as this, once the attention is called to it, is self-evident.

These Psalms, however,—and this is the notable thing,—were prepared not so much for the worship in the temple as for the worship in the synagogues. The few that could get to the temple could see with their eyes and hear with their ears. For them it was largely a physical affair. They saw the atonement enacted in a sort of sacred pantomime. But what about the hundreds of thousands who never got to the temple? How were they to get a glimpse of this sacrificial exhibition of infinite justice and infinite love? And those who did manage to attend the festivals, were they to witness the

solemn scene but three times a year? and then only in an outward, carnal fashion? The Psalms in question were intended to furnish the mind with a "spiritual counterpart" of the things transacted in the temple at the altar of burnt offering. By them the worshippers in the synagogues to the end of the earth were supplied with a spiritual photograph of redeeming love; for at the same time that one of these Psalms was being sung in the temple, and the instruments were being played by the Levites, it was also being sung in the synagogues throughout the world without the use of instruments. That is to say, the Psalms that speak of the instruments were primarily and chiefly designed for an institution in which no instruments were used. They mention the instruments in order to supply the worshipper with an exclusively spiritual conception of the atonement, particularly with a view to its outcome in blessedness; and they do it in a way unsurpassably adapted to make the whole matter plain and comprehensible seeing that in the temple the immaterial reality—the only thing the Psalms have to do with—was at the same time anchored to a series of facts and performances so crude and elemental that they could be seen with the eyes, and heard with the ears, and effected with the hands. In the temple they offered

the bullocks; in the synagogue they rendered as bullocks the offering of their lips. In short, the synagogue worship had no fleshly or carnal elements and no typical elements; it was purely an exercise of the soul in contact with life's ultimate realities.

The New Testament's Attitude

Though seldom noticed, the connecting link here is unique. It is incidental, yet all the more telling on that account. During the conversation between Christ and the woman at the well the woman took occasion to refer to "this mountain", which of course was Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had had a temple. She had in mind the temple-worship on Mount Gerizim and the temple-worship "in Jerusalem". "Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father" (John 4: 21). Notice, the hour is coming—it could not arrive until after His death on the cross—but the hour is coming, He says, when temple-worship, whether it be Samaritan or Jewish, shall be abolished. Necessarily the physical and material arrangements, which had never been anything but shadows "of good things to come", would be summarily removed, once the "good things" themselves, which they had been ordained to fore-

cast, had become a reality. A material thing, established to be a type, carries within itself, from its very nature, the principle of its own extermination. Having served its purpose, its next duty is to die. And so Christ says, in effect, the time is not far distant when piles of stone and timber and all that belongs to them, no matter how magnificently built or beautifully ornamented, shall have completed their work and finished their course and become effete and functionless. It is the same as though He had said, "When I die, their day is done".

So much for the temple, but what of the synagogue? For answer, all we need to do is to read again. "But the hour cometh, and now is", says our Lord, "when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth." Mark especially those three little words—"and now is". The synagogue had been in existence for centuries. Men were worshipping in them every day. Synagogue-worship had been a thing of the past, was a thing of the present, and was to be a thing of the future. And as we have seen, it was exclusively spiritual. The real worshipper, then, says Christ—for we

must always keep in mind that the word "true", in John's use of it, never means what is true as over against what is false, but the reality as opposed to the shadow—the real, the genuine, the true worshipper is the person who worships the Father "in spirit", 'in the realm of' the purely and essentially spiritual, as over against 'the realm of' sensuous and visible rudiments; and "in truth", 'in the realm of' reality, as over against 'the realm of' the type and shadow. The temple with its implements and types was to be abolished; the synagogue with its freedom from these was to be continued. And the reason for it all is that "God is a Spirit". Naturally "a Spirit" seeks the fellowship of spirits, unimpeded by any barriers made with hands. The Greek here is more emphatic by far than the translation. That word "must" is not a mere auxiliary; it is a finite verb. We get the real force of the statement if we render it on this wise—"And that they who worship Him should worship Him in spirit and in truth is a necessity". The pronouncement is the stamp of approval placed by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself on the exclusively spiritual worship of the synagogue. Nor does He stop with approval; He makes it imperative; the synagogue-worship is prescribed as being definitely and uncondi-

tionally obligatory.

Moreover, this teaching of Christ is assumed and implicitly built upon throughout the New Testament. For example, the Epistle to the Hebrews, written primarily for the Jews in Jerusalem, may be regarded, from one point of view, as God's own justification of Himself for disannulling the temple-worship and deciding to destroy the city. In one place (Heb. 10: 25) the entire situation is condensed into a single verse. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching". The Greek word for 'assembling together' has the word 'synagogue' in it. It means an assembly organized 'upon the principle of' the synagogue—in other words, a synagogue where Jesus of Nazareth had been accepted as the Messiah. The Writer is urging them not to be slack in attending the worship at the Christian synagogues, especially inasmuch as they can see the day of catastrophe right at hand both for the temple and for the city. The sensuous institution is on the verge of destruction, he says; cling all the more closely, then, to the exclusively spiritual one.

A similar situation is disclosed in Ephesians 5: 19 and Colossians 3: 16. For the present we shall deal with but

so much of these verses as will be found to bear on the point in question. Paul exhorts these Churches to sing "psalms". But a "psalm", as the original word portrays, is a song set to the accompaniment of a harp. We can imagine how some one might be inclined to say, "Would you mind telling us, Paul, just how we are to sing psalms, songs set to the accompaniment of the harp, in Churches modelled after the pattern of the synagogue, where no harps are ever used?" Now there is no figure of speech in either of the other two words--"hymns" and "songs". The only word that might be misunderstood at the time was the word "psalms". It seemed to involve a contradiction. So Paul comes back to it, for "making melody" is, literally, "playing the harp"—the participial form of the word "psalm". And remember here that in the temple it was the Levites who "sang" and who played "with the instruments of David". Evidently Paul has this very picture before his mind—"singing and playing the harp in your heart unto the Lord", or as in Colossians, "singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord". In fact, Paul's language is so striking that one can almost see his thought in the act of making the transition from the temple-worship to the synagogue-worship, where the worshippers, singing with the joy,

the music, the melody, the grace of God, in the soul, transform the temple with all it typified into a pure spiritual possession of the inner man.

One more outstanding passage calls for consideration, namely, Hebrews 13: 15. After referring to the "altar" and the sacrifices, the Writer says, "By Him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name." The temple's day of destruction was "approaching", when there should "not be left one stone upon another". Yet "ye", says Peter, "as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2: 5). There was to be no break. The "weak and beggarly" was going to the wall. Levite and priest were to recede and make way for a "kingdom of priests". Instruments and trumpets were to give place to "the fruit of the lips".

Thus everywhere throughout the New Testament, no matter what may be the subject under consideration, it is always presupposed and tacitly assumed by the writers that the temple-worship is to be abolished, and that the synagogue-worship is to be universal. And since there is no intimation anywhere that the spirituality of the synagogue-worship was in any wise to be

modified by the retention of instruments or anything else that belonged to the sacrificial service at the altar of burnt offering, such retention leaves us no option but to regard it as an intrusion.

God, then, has supplied the New Testament church with His blue-prints. They call for an exclusively spiritual worship. Why should men presume to mar the architectural conception of the only wise God? Even the Lord Jesus Himself was not at liberty to meddle, even to the extent of a single word, with the specifications. Is that not enough? "I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, He gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak"; and again, "As the Father gave me commandment, even so I do" (John 12: 49; 14: 31).

WITNESS COMMITTEE

Glenshaw, Pa.