

THE BATTLE CREEK BULLETIN

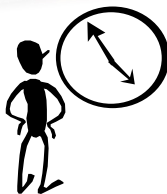
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Time of Assembly

Sunday:

Bible Study 4:00 p.m.

Worship 5:00 p.m.

Wednesday:

Bible Study 7:00 p. m.

Learning From the History of the Instrumental Music Controversy Among Brethren

By Mark Roberts

Could one issue really divide brethren who claimed allegiance to the idea of just going by the Bible, doing Bible things in Bible ways, and following the Bible alone? As the Civil War finally came to its end and life began to return to normal in the United States some brethren actually said “No.” Brethren could not be rent asunder. Brethren had stuck together through difficulties over the war, slavery and even the missionary society issue, all without serious breaches in the ranks. Nothing would divide brethren, many concluded. However, even as the Civil War was ending a new and frightening issue loomed on the horizon. This issue would rend churches apart, divide brother from brother, and ultimately create two entirely different religious groups. That issue was the instrumental music issue.

Learning from that division is extremely helpful as we once again face the instrumental music question, and once again churches are dividing over it. Once again brethren are asking does [Ephesians 5:19](#) mean what it seems to say, that we must sing, or did that mean we could sing and play on instruments if we desire? In the last 1800's pitched battles were fought over whether the use of the instrument was right or wrong, a matter of personal preference or a matter of conviction and sin. The instrument came to be the defining issue of two very different ways of looking at Christianity and Scripture. Much can be learned from understanding the history of the instrumental music issue among brethren. This article, from a sermon I preached on this matter, attempts to survey how the instrumental music issue divided brethren long ago and what can be understood from that today.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ISSUE

Much of the history of this issue is bound up in a preacher named Benjamin Franklin. He was one of the leading figures in the debate and discussion. He began a new paper, the *American Christian Review*, in January 1856. By Jan 1858 it was a weekly, and it became the dominant paper among brethren. He used ACR to stead-

fastly oppose instruments. Franklin wrote that there might be occasions where an instrument would be permissible “If a church intends being a fashionable society, a mere place of amusement and secular entertainment, and abandoning all idea of religion and worship, instrumental music would be a very pleasant and agreeable part of such entertainment.” (ACR, Jan 31, 1860, page 19). At the time this viewpoint seemed to be the prevailing view. In the spring of 1868 Ben Franklin estimated there were 10,000 congregations and not over 50 were using the instrument.

It would not last. More and more churches began to use the instrument. The first church on record to use it was in Midway Kentucky where an L.L. Pinkerton preached. He said the singing was so bad it would “scare even the rats from worship.” A melodeon was procured and even though one of the elders came in one night and stole it but another was brought in! In 1867 the church in St. Louis bought their building from the Episcopalians, and included in the transaction was a \$3000 organ. There was much bickering about it for years, but it was finally used. More and more brethren were hearing “there’s nothing wrong with it” or “it’s not a matter of sin and salvation.” Thus more and more churches began to adopt it.

As the issue grew hotter, more and more men begin to write and discuss it. Alexander Campbell noted “I presume to all spiritually minded Christians, such aids would be as a cowbell in a concert” (*Millennial Harbinger*, Series IV, Vol. 1, page 581). J.W. McGarvey was a new man on the scene. He had written a commentary on Acts that was widely received and he was viewed as a powerful Bible scholar. McGarvey opposed instruments as did Moses Lard. Lard wrote “the question of instrumental music in the church of Christ involves a great and sacred principle ... That principle is the right of men to introduce innovations into the prescribed worship of God. This right we utterly deny” (*Lard’s Quarterly*, Vol. IV, No. 4).

However, others rose to defend the instrument. The champion of the instrument was Isaac Erret and the paper *Christian Standard*. Erret wrote “We may as well state now, that we intend to counsel against the use of instrumental music in our churches. Our object is to persuade brethren who favor such use to hold their preferences in abeyance for the sake of harmony ... it is wrong to make this difference a test of fellowship or an occasion of stumbling.” (*Christian Standard*, May 7, 1870, page 148). Notice Erret didn’t oppose it as sinful, but because it would cause trouble. Of course, such an approach rarely brings unity because it casts those who oppose the instrument as nothing but troublemakers who are trying to [put] their own narrow-minded opinion on everyone. So more trouble came, more churches put in organs and division became inevitable.

PRINCIPLES THAT ARE CLEAR FROM THIS HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

First, there is no question that the instrument was the innovation. The situation was not that every church had instrumental music, someone decided that was wrong, tried to purge them all out. At one time, no church used instrumental music, not even denominational churches. John Spencer Curwen noted in his *Studies in Worship Music* (1880) “Men still living can remember the time when organs were very seldom found outside the Church of England. The Methodist, Independents, and Baptists rarely had them and by the Presbyterians were stoutly opposed. But since these bodies began to introduce organs, the adoption of them has been unchecked. Even the Presbyterians are giving away, and if we read the future by the past, we can hardly doubt that in a few years, unaccompanied singing will very seldom be heard. Yet, even in the church of England it-

self, organs did not obtain admission without much opposition” (page 179). Instrumentalists attacked their brethren as trouble makers but of course, that was simply not the case. Non-instrumental brethren had every right to object to such treatment, and should continue to do so today!

Second, instrumental music didn’t have to divide anyone. There never needed to be any division over this issue. Everyone agreed singing was right. Why not do just that instead of forcing division by asking brethren to violate their consciences? Even if some thought instrumental music was okay no division would occur as long as they didn’t force it on others. Brethren could work together and should have continued together. Division is wrong and not pleasing to the Lord ([John 17:17](#); [I Corinthians 1:10ff](#)). Unity should have been more important than one’s particular taste in music! Ben Franklin wrote “We can remain on safe ground, the common ground and the ground on which we have stood in peace and war - on what is written” (Ben Franklin, ACR, May 24, 1870, page 164). Yet few instrumental brethren were willing to let the issue lay or let those old “fuddy-duddies” who wouldn’t sing with an organ keep the organ out. Over and over churches brought it in, forcing brethren who conscientiously could not worship with one to leave. Joe T. Poe wrote from Texas “The old church in Huntsville has put the organ in and some of its best members out.” This very same attitude prevails in many places today. The Richland Hills church of Christ has introduced a instrumental music service on Saturday nights, urging members who disagree to attend the non-instrumental services on Sundays. But can one remain at Richland Hills, giving his money to support the work of that church when it practices and teaches what one believes to be error? Richland Hills has forced brethren to choose silence and complacency or their conscientious view of how to worship! Rick Atchley makes clear in his three sermons justifying instrumental music that if you want to leave over this matter then that is just fine. Why does Richland Hills let what even Rick Atchley is an optional matter drive members away?

Third, and critically important, no one ever produced Bible authority for the organ. From the discussion about the missionary society had come the idea that if the Bible didn’t expressly say “thou shalt not” then you could. Alexander Campbell and others had asked “Where does the Bible forbid the Missionary Society?” and that had convinced many. Now that false doctrine birthed another generation of apostasy, as now many asked “Where does the Bible say we can’t have an organ?” H.T. Anderson: “There is no law against instrumental music in churches; therefore, those who use it are not transgressors” (*Christian Standard*, June 12, 1869, page 186.) Again and again instrumentalists said it was just a matter of preference. One brother, E.M. Schrock wrote to Ben Franklin and said “If you prefer to worship without an organ, it is none of my business; and if I wish to use an organ, it is none of your business.” Franklin replied “But suppose we both meet in the same congregation, how can this rule be carried out? Can you worship with it and we without it? No sir; if you worship with it, we must worship with it!” (ACR, Jan 1, 1878, page 4).

THE KEY ISSUE: SILENCE OF SCRIPTURE

Advocates of instruments argued that if the Bible didn’t specifically condemn something it was okay. That made the case for organs sound easy - “Just show me one verse that says ‘Thou shalt not have a piano or organ.’” Errett and his cronies, like Rick Atchley and others today, knew there was no such passage. However, what they failed to reckon with is that biblical silence never authorizes us to do anything.

How much of this “silence means it is okay” do people really want? Just think about it for a moment. Not only is there no passage saying “No piano” there is no passage that says “No steak on the Lord’s Table.” There is no passage that says “Thou shalt not have an abortion.” If we’re going to play this “Only an explicit condemnation means we can’t” game where is it going to end? In truth, the New Testament is not the Old Testament. In the New Testament there really aren’t that many specific prohibitions, not very many “thou shalt nots.” If we can do what we want if there is no verse specifically saying “Don’t do that” there will be precious little that isn’t done!

The Bible takes a different view. Notice the commands to build the ark given to Noah in [Genesis 6:13-14](#). God did not spell out what not to use. God said to use gopher wood and the discussion was ended. In [Matthew 26:26](#) does Jesus have to say “No steak, no ice cream?” Of course not. He specifies and that ends it. Why then doesn’t the same work in [Ephesians 5:19](#)? Why doesn’t singing, acapella music, exclude every other kind of music, including instrumental?

In this connection, please note Hebrews 7:14: “*For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests*” (ESV). The Hebrew writer’s main argument here is that there must be a change in the priesthood if Jesus is a priest because Jesus isn’t from the tribe from which priests could come. But wait - where is the Scripture saying “Thou shalt not have priests from the tribe of Judah?” Such a verse does not exist. All the Bible says is “Priests are to be from Levi.” But the Hebrew writer says the fact that the Moses “said nothing” (i.e. was silent) about priests from any other tribe forbade anyone from those tribes from being priest! Silence prohibits, says [Hebrews 7:14](#)!

By the way, such thinking is not peculiar to churches of Christ, nor does one have to come from a “church of Christ background” to understand this principle. L. Girardeau, professor at Columbia Seminary and a Presbyterian wrote about his convictions on the music issue in 1888: “A divine warrant is necessary for every element of doctrine, government and worship in the church; that is, whatsoever in these spheres is not commanded in the Scriptures, either expressly or by good and necessary consequence from their statements, is forbidden” [*Instrumental Music the Public Worship of the Church*]. Even Presbyterians understood this vital principle at one time!

The painful truth is that Errett and those like him found a convenient dodge to do what they wanted, but many men saw right through them. David Lipscomb wrote “We do not think anyone has ever claimed authority from the Scriptures to use the organ in worship. They only claim it is not condemned We have no knowledge of what is well-pleasing to God, in worship, save as God has revealed it to us. The New Testament is at once the rule and limit of our faith and worship to God. This is the distinctive difference between us and other religious bodies. Others accept the NT as their rule of faith, but do not make it the limit of their faith” (*Gospel Advocate*, Sept. 11, 1873, page 854). Those that favored the instrument simply never asked the right question: how can we know this pleases God? They should have been asking “How we can we do just what God told us to do?” Instead they added to the word of God - and division resulted.

By the close of the 1800’s that division was clear. Churches using instruments began to call themselves “Christian churches” or “Disciples of Christ.” Non-instrumental churches held on to the old name “church of Christ.” That division was formally recognized in the religious census of 1906, in which the government counted churches of Christ and Christian churches as separate and distinct religious bodies. There was now permanent division among people who had, at least at one time, claimed they wanted to be true to the NT pattern for Christianity.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE HISTORY OF THE MUSIC QUESTION?

Even a brief look at the writings of those times reveals several key points. First, much of the instrumental music problem then, like today, was driven by a desire to look like other churches. In a letter to the Ecclesiastical Reformer in February 1851 one wrote “We are far in the rear of Protestants on the subject of church music. I hope therefore, that you will give your views on this much neglected subject.” The feeling by many was the world was changing, and plain old singing might be fine for frontier backwoods churches, but not in big sophisticated cities. J.W. McGarvey noted “By the cry of progress and conformity, it is making its way over the heads and hearts of many of our best brethren and sisters” (*Millennial Harbinger*, April 1868, page 216). Stunning proof of this was provided in June of 1881. The church in East Cleveland wanted to dedicate a new organ costing \$200 and so asked Isaac Erret to come and preach the service. When he couldn’t come the pastors of several denominational churches were invited and a professional organist from the First Methodist church was hired!

Secondly, affluence and wealth among congregations had a serious affect. Instrumental music appealed to more the affluent urban churches in the north. Many times the reason churches in the south didn’t have an instrument is because they were too poor due to the Civil War. In the north folks wanted to keep up with their religious neighbors and had the money to do so. Today many churches of Christ have the money to fund “praise bands” and so they are purchasing what it takes to keep up with their religious neighbors.

Finally, at the root of it all was an ignorance of the Bible. For example, one man argued that an organ was permissible if it was a “little organ!” Brethren simply were not taught how to use the Bible and were not taught important principles about Bible authority and silence not authorizing. The Missionary Society men had opened the door with their error and sure enough, more error walked right on through! Today many members of churches of Christ have never heard a sermon on Bible authority, what to do when the Bible is silent on something, or how to discern what God wants for His church. They are easily misled by emotional sermons that characterize non-instrumental brethren has folks who think they can earn salvation and who know nothing of grace. The sad lack of teaching on the vital matters of the worship God accepts and how to use the New Testament to find out what the pattern for the church’s worship really is has led to a bitter harvest of confusion and now apostasy.

CONCLUSIONS

What was considered to be a dead issue by many has resurrected itself again. The same justifications for instrumental music are offered today as were in the late 1800’s. Those justifications work no better today than they did back then. Each and everyone of us needs to ask “What does God’s Word say about music in the worship of Almighty God?” When that question is asked, and sincerely answered, [Ephesians 5:19](#) will continue to guide our efforts to worship the Lord: “*addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.*” May the Lord bless us to simply do only what His Word has authorized: make melody with our hearts to the Lord!

