

Instrumental Music in Worship

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The controversy over instrumental music in the worship of the church, that has torn apart the Restoration Movement, is one I have been familiar with since childhood, having grown up in Plymouth Brethren assemblies. The Brethren are similar to the most conservative churches of Christ in practice, including: a *cappella* singing, weekly communion, leadership by a plurality of elders, no paid ministers, women wearing head coverings, one loaf and one cup, opposition to institutionalism, and critical of “the denominations.” I still have fond memories of their *a cappella* singing, and feel quite comfortable in that atmosphere of worship even today, whether with the Brethren, or with the churches of Christ.

Yet, being a musician myself, I have personally found the use of the “mechanical instrument” a meaningful form of expressing praise to God, even without singing. I have spent many hours at the piano, or playing the guitar, lifting my heart to God without uttering a word, making melody with both my hands and my heart to the Lord.

I do not think the use of instruments should divide Christians. However, what I or others like or dislike is ultimately irrelevant. Worship is not about what pleases us, or our personal tastes. It is about God, and His revealed will. And those of us who want to please Him, are bound by His revealed will.

Those on both sides of the keyboard have the potential to be “brothers in error” and displeasing to God. Non-instrumentalists may be guilty of creating division over something that God approves, and wrongly judging others that are simply exercising their liberty in Christ. Instrumentalists may be guilty of offering “worship” that displeases God, and having a cavalier attitude about offending a “weaker brother.” It is therefore important that we dialogue about this issue, and try to reach a consensus on what is proper and what is not with regard to the use of the “mechanical instrument.” This paper is meant to put forward my personal thoughts for your consideration. Those on either side of the keyboard are welcome to respond to the points raised.

The Standard of “Authorization”

The fact is, the New Testament does not specifically address the issue of musical instruments in an overt manner. The only potential mention of musical instruments in local church worship comes from the word “psalm” and its related verb. We will deal with this issue later. For now, let us consider the important issue of “authorization.”

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For the sake of argument, let's suppose that the word "psalm" and its related verb do not imply the use of musical instruments, but only singing. If that is so, it is fair to say that the New Testament is "silent" on the issue of instruments in the local church. This raises a couple of important questions:

- Is the New Testament our only source for what pleases God in worship?
- Is continuity with earlier revelation important?
- Should "silence" be viewed as permission or prohibition?

These questions are important and must be answered in ways that are demonstrably biblical and logical.

There is no question that the Old Testament portrays the use of musical instruments in worship in a favorable light. Many Psalms mention specific musical instruments, along with several direct commands to play such instruments in worship. The most obvious is the last Psalm.

Psalm 150:3-6 NKJV

3 Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; Praise Him with the lute and harp!

4 Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes!

5 Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with clashing cymbals!

6 Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!

One may argue that such commands were given to the nation of Israel, not to the "Church." True enough. But, the Apostle Paul encouraged the Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians to use "psalms" in their worship along with "hymns" and "spiritual songs." The thing that distinguished "psalms" from a *cappella* music was the inclusion of musical instruments. At least, that was the case when the psalms of David were composed.

One problem that arises for non-instrumentalists is how one would sing certain "psalms" like the one above, which include singing out loud specific commands to worship with these instruments! What would go through the minds of such Christians in worship, singing these words in a *cappella* fashion: "*Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet; Praise Him with the lute and harp! Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes! Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with clashing cymbals!*" If their singing was entirely a *cappella*, this certainly would create a paradox for them that does not seem to be addressed in the New Testament.

I am not arguing we should actually do everything that is mentioned in the Psalms, since a few psalms mention animal sacrifices as well. For example:

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Psalm 66:13-15 NKJV

13 I will go into Your house with burnt offerings; I will pay You my vows,

14 Which my lips have uttered and my mouth has spoken when I was in trouble.

15 I will offer You burnt sacrifices of fat animals, with the sweet aroma of rams; I will offer bulls with goats.

Yet, it should not go unnoticed that these are not commands. In the Psalms, the Holy Spirit did “command” certain sacrifices. But they are the same “sacrifices” the New Testament commands.

Psalm 4:5 NKJV

5 Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the LORD.

Psalm 107:22 NKJV

22 Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing.

One thing we can agree upon from the Psalms is that God approved of instrumental worship in the past. The question is, does He now? That answer is resolved for us in the book of Revelation.

Rev 14:1-5 NKJV

1 Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads.

2 And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps.

3 They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth.

4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.

5 And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

Rev 15:2-3

2 And I saw something like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God.

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3 They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb,...

Those mentioned as worshipping God with musical instruments in both of the above passages are “Christians.” Those in Revelation 15 prevailed against the “Beast.” Regardless of one’s eschatology, the “Beast” persecutes Christians some time in this present age. We can state emphatically that God is worshipped with musical instruments by both Israel and the Church, both Jew and Gentile, in the previous age and in the present age. It is right to conclude that God approves of instrumental worship in principle.

That leaves only one possibility for those who claim instruments are forbidden. That is, it is forbidden simply because it is not explicitly “authorized” for use in a Christian church. Silence absolutely demands prohibition.

Those who hold the view that everything without explicit authorization is forbidden will acknowledge that New Testament “authorization” can take the form of either direct commands or precedent.

We have no right to apply an arbitrary standard to the Scriptures that we have not exegetically derived from the Scriptures. If “silence” equals “prohibition,” it must be a principle established from the Scriptures, and consistent with the Scriptures. Conversely, if “silence” equals “permission,” this principle also must be established from Scripture.

My view is that making “silence” mean anything more than “silence” is a fallacy. Why? The New Testament is silent on many things, good, bad, and neutral. The Bible was never meant to be exhaustive, dealing with every eventuality. It does not address hymnals, Power Point, air conditioning, or PA systems. It does not deal with the use of “offering plates” vs. “offering bags.” It does not mention whether our wine in communion must be totally alcohol free or not. Rather, the Bible is a guide, establishing principles that can guide all decision making by mature believers (Phil. 3:15). Therefore, the New Testament does not need to deal with every eventuality, only with guiding principles.

The “Strange Fire” of Nadab and Abihu

In attempting to establish “silence” as prohibition in principle, some have appealed to the case of Nadab and Abihu who offered “strange fire” before the Lord, (Lev. 10:1-3). The exact nature of the offence of Nadab and Abihu is not stated in the text. Were they guilty of taking “silence” as permission? Or were they guilty of disobedience to direct commandments of God? Compare the following verses.

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Lev 10:1 KJV

10:1 And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which **he commanded them not**.

Deut 17:3 KJV

3 And hath gone and served other gods, and worshipped them, either the sun, or moon, or any of the host of heaven, which **I have not commanded**;

In both of these verses, the Greek of the LXX reads, “ου προσεταξεν” (commanded not). Does this mean God did not mention it? Or does it mean God forbid it? The exact wording permits either interpretation. In the case of Deut 17:3, the issue of “silence” is certainly not at stake, since God had clearly forbidden the worship of celestial bodies just a few chapters before (Deut 4:15-19).

The sin of Nadab and Abihu was not being presumptuous about something about which God was “silent,” but rather total disregard for God’s commands. Here is what God commanded regarding offering incense “before the Lord.” It was to be done by Aaron, only on the Day of Atonement, and the fire in the censer must be taken from the altar of incense.

Lev. 16:11-14 KJV

11 And Aaron shall bring the bullock of the sin offering, which is for himself, and shall make an atonement for himself, and for his house, and shall kill the bullock of the sin offering which is for himself:

12 And he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the LORD, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the veil:

13 And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony, **that he die not**:

14 And he shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it with his finger upon the mercy seat eastward; and before the mercy seat shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times.

That the sin of Nadab and Abihu was intentional, and did not stem from being presumptuous where God had been silent, is clearly demonstrated by the penalties for priests who had sinned in ignorance, contrasted with the penalty for sinning willingly. For sins committed in ignorance, the punishment was relatively light.

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Lev. 4:1-3 NKJV

1 Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

*2 "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'If a person sins **unintentionally** against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which ought not to be done, and does any of them,*

*3 **if the anointed priest sins**, bringing guilt on the people, then let him offer to the LORD for his sin which he has sinned a young bull without blemish as a sin offering.*

Yet, if a priest disobeyed the specific commands of the Lord, he received the death penalty, (Lev. 10:6-7). Did Nadab and Abihu sin in "ignorance?" Moses' response to Aaron when his sons were struck dead makes it clear they sinned intentionally, disregarding what God had said. When Moses reminded Aaron what God had commanded, "Aaron held his peace."

We can therefore conclude that the incident of Nadab and Abihu had nothing to do with interpreting "silence" as permission, nor does it demonstrate that "silence" is prohibition, since it does not deal with "silence" at all, but willful disobedience.

Did David Sin by Introducing Instrumental Worship?

David introduced both the use of musical instruments in worship, and Temple worship. The Law of Moses was utterly "silent" on the subject of instruments in worship or a permanent Temple. Yet, God reacted favorably to David's addition to what He had commanded Moses. He had not specifically forbidden musical instruments. He had thus far been silent on the topic. In David's case, "silence" was permission, given the reverent attitude of his heart. David did not transgress a direct command, but regarded "silence" as permission in this case.

In fact, in the very first incident of instrumental worship, God struck someone dead, just as He had done with Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons.

1 Chron 13:7-10 NKJV

7 So they carried the ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinadab, and Uzza and Ahio drove the cart.

8 Then David and all Israel played music before God with all their might, with singing, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on cymbals, and with trumpets.

9 And when they came to Chidon's threshing floor, Uzza put out his hand to hold the ark, for the oxen stumbled.

10 Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzza, and He struck him because he put his hand to the ark; and he died there before God.

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David did not have “authorization” to remove the Ark of the Covenant from the Tabernacle of Moses to Jerusalem. He did not have “authorization” to use “mechanical instruments” in worship in the process. He had no permission to build the “Tabernacle of David” to house the Ark temporarily. Nor did he have “authorization” to appoint the Levites as musicians and choirs, to worship before the “Tabernacle of David” daily, (1 Chron. 16:37-42). God was so pleased with David’s devotion on this occasion, He established with him the “Davidic Covenant,” the promise of “the Christ” from his seed (1 Chron. 17). David’s son, Solomon, incorporated David’s instrumental music into the new Temple he constructed, and they were used in the dedication of the Temple. God again demonstrated His approval in dramatic fashion (2 Chron. 5:11-14). As with David, this act of worship with musical instruments was immediately followed by God’s confirming the Davidic Covenant with Solomon (2 Chron. 7:12-18).

I am not arguing that “silence” is necessarily “permission.” Rather, I am arguing that “silence” is not necessarily “prohibition,” by providing a clear example of the addition of instruments about which God had previously been silent.

No doubt, some will argue that what David did was itself “authorization” on the grounds that he was a “prophet” (Acts 2:30). Yet, God did not tell David to move the Ark to Jerusalem, to use the priests as musicians and choirs, or construct the “Tabernacle of David.”

With regard to building the Temple, God clearly acknowledged that this came from David’s own desire, and not from His command. But God authorized it after David proposed it, (1 Chron. 17:1-6).

With Moses, God gave exact instructions for every part of the tabernacle and priesthood. With David, God permitted much greater latitude. He was “silent” with regard to music. Yet it sprang from David’s own heart of worship. And he organized an orchestra and choir consisting of priests to be systematically used for worship.

In other cases, David took “liberties” he should not have, as with the “numbering of Israel” (1 Chron. 21), for which he was judged severely. If what David did is to be taken as establishing the “authority” of God Himself, then what about his disobedience? The difference in these two cases is clearly the motives of his heart, the former being genuine worship of God, the later being doubting God’s promise to fight for Israel. David’s actions were not infallible. Only His “prophecies” were infallible because He was guided by the Spirit in the Psalms that he composed.

I believe a fair reading of all the above evidence indicates several important points on which we should all be able to agree.

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- Generally, God is pleased with instrumental worship, if motives are pure.
- God is not arbitrary in what pleases Him. He does not change His nature.
- There is consistency between David's worship and Christians' in heaven.
- More is required besides "silence" to establish "prohibition."

The Meaning of the Greek Verb, "Ψαλλω" (psallo)

Those opposed to instrumental music have taken great pains to try to show that the verb, "ψαλλω," evolved dramatically from its Old Testament usage by the time the New Testament was written. We do not have the space to do an exhaustive study of this verb. But, we do need to point out a few important points.

Let's consider the first mention of this verb in the Greek Old Testament. It occurs in the following verse, (my translation).

Judges 5:3 LXX

*3 Hear, ye kings, and listen, mighty rulers: I will sing [ασομαι] to the Lord; I will **play** [ψαλλω] to the God of Israel.*

The terms "sing" and "play" do not appear have the same sense, or the statement would be redundant. It appears from the first mention of this verb, that it is to be distinguished from "singing."

The next time we find this verb is in 2 Samuel 16, where it occurs 4 times. Each time it refers to David's playing his harp for Saul. This passage clearly defines "ψαλλω" as the playing of a musical instrument. Whether the voice accompanies the instrument or not is insignificant.

1Samuel 16:16 LXX

*16 Let now thy servants speak before thee, and let them seek for our lord a man skilled to **play** on the harp; and it shall come to pass when an evil spirit comes upon thee and he shall **play** on his harp, that thou shalt be well, and he shall refresh thee.*

*17 And Saul said to his servants, Look now out for me a man **playing** skillfully, and bring him to me.*

*23 And it came to pass when the evil spirit was upon Saul, that David took his harp, and **played** with his hand: and Saul was refreshed, and it was well with him, and the evil spirit departed from him.*

As we progress in the book of Samuel, we find the use of "ψαλλω" to be consistent. Chapter 19 has the next occurrence.

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1 Samuel 19:9 LXX

*9 And an evil spirit from God was upon Saul, and he was resting in his house, and a spear was in his hand, and David was **playing** on the harp with his hands.*

The seventy Jewish scribes produced the Septuagint¹ (LXX) only about 200 years before Christ. And their choice of the verb “ψαλλω” to reflect the sense of the Hebrew term for playing a stringed instrument was based on its current usage in Greek, only about 250 years before Paul used the same verb in the New Testament. To the Jewish translators of the Septuagint, “ψαλλω” clearly meant plucking the strings of a musical instrument, because they used this term to translate the Hebrew where it is abundantly clear that the human voice was not involved at all, but only the hands!

Consequently, we must date this meaning for “ψαλλω,” not from David’s day, a thousand years before Christ, but much closer to the New Testament era, at the time the LXX was produced. This allows for much less evolution in its meaning by the time Paul used the term in the New Testament. We would not expect a word to change dramatically in just 250 years.

We next come to a passage that is very revealing, because it was quoted in Romans 15 by the Apostle Paul, and applied to the Gentile Christian Church. This passage was part of a song written by David after God delivered him from Saul.

2 Samuel 22:50 LXX

*50 Therefore will I confess to thee, O Lord, among the Gentiles, and **ψαλλω** to thy name.*

In light of the previous usage of “ψαλλω,” particularly in 2 Samuel, it is all but required that we understand the same verb in this verse in the same way. That is, it meant to play a stringed instrument when written, not sing *a cappella*. The Apostle Paul quoted this verse as follows:

Rom 15:7-9

7 Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.

8 Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers,

*9 and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: “For this reason I will confess to You **among the Gentiles**, and **ψαλλω** to Your name.”*

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Non-instrumentalists are faced with a very awkward situation here, particularly in light of the fact that most of Paul's quotes of the Old Testament are from the Greek Septuagint. The fact is, Paul interpreted 2 Samuel 22 as a prophecy related to the Gentile Christian Church. In doing so, the sense of "ψαλλω," as it was intended in 2 Samuel 22, must be understood in Paul's quotation in Romans 15. One would either have to argue that the sense of the verb changed between 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel, or else Paul was mistaken in his application of David's song to the Gentiles in the New Testament. Neither of these leaves the interpreter looking objective.

The next occurrence (and last one before the Psalms) is found in 2 Kings, the context being the reign of Jehoshaphat, long after David's and Solomon's death. The seventy Jewish scribes who produced the Septuagint continued using "ψαλλω" for the playing of a musical instrument.

2 Kings 3:15 LXX

*15 And now fetch me a harper. And it came to pass, as the harper **harped** [ψαλλω], that the hand of the Lord came upon him.*

The rest of the occurrences of "ψαλλω" in the LXX are found in the Psalms. In each case, the playing of an instrument fits well with the context, even though most translations frequently render "ψαλλω" as "sing." That sense is being imposed on the text. Not once does context imply the sense of singing without the instrument. However, frequently the context has in view playing the instrument without singing. The following cases absolutely require the playing of an instrument, because the instruments are named. (In a few of these cases where instruments are named, the English translators have "sing" instead of "play." We have changed those to "play" so that you can see that it makes better sense in the context.)

Psalms 33:2-3

*2 Praise the Lord on the harp; **play** to him on a psaltery of ten strings.
3 Sing to him a new song; **play** skillfully with a loud noise.*

Psalms 68:25

*25 The princes went first, next before the players on instruments, in the midst of damsels **playing** on timbrels.*

Psalms 71:22-23

*22 I will also therefore give thanks to thee, O God, because of thy truth, on an instrument of psalmody: I will **play** to thee on the harp, O Holy One of Israel.*

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23 My lips shall rejoice when I **play** to thee; and my soul, which thou hast redeemed.

Psalm 98:5

5 **Play** to the Lord with a harp, with a harp, and the voice of a psalm.

Psalm 144:9

9 O God, I will sing a new song to thee: I will **play** to thee on a psaltery of ten strings.

Psalm 147:7

7 Begin the song with thanksgiving to the Lord; **play** praises on the harp to our God:

Psalm 149:3

3 Let them praise his name in the dance: let them **play** praises to him with timbrel and psaltery.

Not a single occurrence of “*ψαλλω*,” in the entire Old Testament, requires that the instrument be absent! In every single case, the playing of an instrument (with or without the voice) works just fine in the context. And in a considerable number, the musical instrument is absolutely demanded. Hence, to “play” a stringed instrument is a required sense of this word as it is used in the LXX. Singing is not required, even though it may also be implied in some passage.

The most extensive Greek lexicon available, the ten volume work of Gerhard Kittel,² summed up the usage of “*ψαλλω*” in the Septuagint as follows:

“*Ψαλλω* occurs some 40 times in the LXX ... The meaning is ‘to play a stringed instrument’, 1 Sam 16:16,17,23; 19:9, 2 Kings 3:15. In these instances playing is not accompanied by song. ... When the original [Hebrew] is *pi* the influence of this [Hebrew] verb possibly extends the meaning [to include singing]. But often the obvious sense is to ‘play,’ especially when an instrument is mentioned, Psalm 33:2; 70:22, 97:5, 143:9, 146:7, but also Psalm 26:6; 56:8; 100:1; 104:2; 107:2, where singing and playing go together, also Psalm 17:50; 56:10; (cf. v. 9); 107:4 (cf. v. 3). Elsewhere the idea of praise by song as well as stringed instrument is suggested. Hence one must take into account a shift of meaning in the LXX in other passages in which the idea of playing is not evident. In many places the thought of ‘to play’ to Yahweh (in His honor) is a natural one, and this could be introduced into other passages, especially when the Greek equivalent contains especially the idea of playing.”³ [Bracketed words – mine]

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Here Kittle's conclusion is that the strong sense of "to play" contained in the Greek "ψαλλω" may actually overpower any suggested shift in the Hebrew closest equivalent. Whatever shift may have occurred in meaning was only the possible inclusion of singing along with playing, and not that singing replaced the sense of playing an instrument.

The usual claim by non-instrumentalists is that "ψαλλω" evolved in its meaning so dramatically that by the time the New Testament was written, it meant "to sing" exclusively. In support of its non-instrumental use, reference is sometimes made to Kittle's examples of usage in secular Greek. The usual examples concern "plucking" other things besides musical instruments. Therefore, the argument is made that a musical instrument was no longer implied by the verb, but evolved into "singing."

In addition to Kittle's summary of LXX usage, his summary of secular Greek usage was "to pluck the string, to cause it to spring." It was used in secular works for shooting an arrow from a "bow," "to play a stringed instrument," and to "pluck strings with the fingers." Kittle cited the case of Alexander as typical: "When Alexander skillfully plays a stringed instrument at a feast his father approaches him: 'Are you not ashamed to **play** so well?'" That the literal sense of "ψαλλω" normally implied the use of a musical instrument is shown by Kittle's quote from De Parasito, 17, "...one cannot play the flute without a flute nor ψαλλω without a lyre." ⁴

While Kittle provided a few secular cases where "ψαλλω" was used in non-instrumental actions, he did not conclude that "ψαλλω" had changed its meaning from such usage. And he did not provide any cases where "ψαλλω" meant only "to sing" without instruments! Rather, these exceptions to the rule are non-literal examples (metaphors). And in these few extra-biblical examples, the thing plucked was always supplied by the context. This does not answer the question of what the basic meaning would be if the thing "plucked" was not supplied by the context (its implied inherent meaning).

Take the English verb "strum" for example. This is a term that is very similar to the Greek verb "ψαλλω," and inherently implies a stringed instrument as its direct object (even when not stated). Yet, it could easily be used metaphorically, as in "strum the heart," or perhaps in other similar metaphors. That is the usual construction of this type of metaphor, using a verb (strum) that implies a certain direct object (a stringed instrument), but with an unexpected direct object instead, (the heart). The purpose of such a metaphor is to draw a parallel between the two, the literal sense implied by the verb (strumming a stringed instrument), the other stated by the unexpected direct object (the heart). The

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meaning of such a metaphor would be to do to the heart what one does to a stringed instrument, extract a melody.

It is possible that “ψαλλω” was used by Paul as a metaphor in Eph. 5:19, “... *singing and **making melody** in your heart to the Lord.*” The reason this may be a metaphor is because the typical construction of this type of metaphor is used, that of supplying a direct object or prepositional phrase that is not normally associated with the literal sense of that verb. If we were to translate “ψαλλω” here as “strumming” instead of “making melody,” the meaning becomes clearer: “...*singing and **strumming** in your heart to the Lord.*” Would using “ψαλλω” as a metaphor here (strumming in the heart) mean that the word “strum” must from now on only refer to “strumming the heart?” Must the verb (strum) have changed its literal meaning simply because it was used as a metaphor here? Of course not! If the word “strum” appears in another context, and no unusual direct object (or prepositional phrase) is supplied, (such as heart), we would default to its inherent, literal, musical sense.

Additionally, “ψαλλω” may not be a metaphor in this verse at all, but may actually be a reference to playing an instrument. It depends on how one views the preposition in the phrase, “in your heart.” The Greek word is “εν.” It is often used spatially in the sense of “in” (within), or often it is used instrumentally, “with.” There is really no way to determine conclusively which Paul intended. Both are equally legitimate interpretations. Perhaps he was vague on purpose. In any case, if he used the preposition instrumentally, then he meant “singing and playing **with** your heart to the Lord.” In that case, the prepositional phrase is not used as the object of “playing,” but rather adverbially. That is, as you play and sing, do it “with the heart.” This is the preferred meaning in my opinion, based upon my study of the related noun “ψαλμος” (psalm) that also appears in this passage. We will discuss this noun next.

We also have James 5:13. “*Is any merry? let him “ψαλλω” (strum).* One can take this verse literally, thereby playing an instrument, or metaphorically, if you supply a direct object. Yet, the simplest meaning would be to take it literally.

The Meaning of the Noun, “Ψαλμος” (psalmos)

The noun, “ψαλμος” (psalm) appears in 1 Cor. 14:26, Eph. 5:19, and Col. 3:16, in reference to Christian worship.

1 Cor 14:26-27 NKJV

*How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a **psalm**, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.*

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The Corinthians would naturally understand the noun “psalm” in the way it was used in their Bible, the Septuagint (LXX). Our definition should come from that source where “ψαλμος” is clearly defined, and repeatedly used. The first occurrence of “ψαλμος” in the Septuagint is the following passage:

1 Samuel 16:18

*18 And one of his servants answered and said, Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethleemite, **and he understands playing** [on the harp], and the man is prudent, and a warrior, and wise in speech, and the man is handsome, and the Lord is with him.*

The bold portion above reads in the Greek, “και αυτον ειδοτα ψαλμον” (“and he understands playing”). It is quite clear from this passage that the idea of plucking the strings is inherent in the meaning of the noun itself, even though the instrument plucked is not supplied by the context. The words “on the harp” are not in the Greek text, but are supplied by the translators because the word “ψαλμος” itself implies a musical instrument when taken literally. The entire sense of “ψαλμος” in this verse means the plucking of the strings of an instrument without any other information supplied by the context.

The “law of first mention” is something not easily dismissed. It establishes precedent that cannot be ignored by subsequent usage of this term, but should be incorporated into subsequent usage. If we interpret 1 Cor. 14:26 based on this definition, it is clear that Paul authorized those who had a “playing” (of an instrument, or instrumental piece of music) to offer that praise in the worship of the congregation. But, let’s continue and see whether this term is modified by later usage. The second and third occurrences of this term are found in the following verses.

Job 21:11b-12 LXX

*“... taking up the psaltery and harp; and they rejoice at the voice of a **song** [ψαλμου].”*

Job 30:31 LXX

*“My harp also has been turned into mourning, and my **song** [ψαλμος] into my weeping.”*

In both cases, the word “ψαλμος” could easily be rendered “playing” (that is the act of playing the instrument named). There is no reason to impose a new idea that the context does not require. So far, the term is consistent with its first usage.

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The next time we find this Greek word is in the book of Psalms. The majority of occurrences appear in the titles of the various psalms, “a **psalm** of David.” But, there are a few places where the word is found within the lyrics of individual psalms. Here are all occurrences of “ψαλμος” in the lyrics of the psalms.

Psalm 71:22 LXX

*22 I will also therefore give thanks to thee, O God, because of thy truth, on an instrument of psalmody: I will sing **psalms** to thee on the harp, O Holy One of Israel.*

Psalm 81:2 LXX

*2 Take a **psalm**, and produce the timbrel, the pleasant psaltery with the harp.*

Psalm 95:2 LXX

*2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise to him with **psalms**.*

Psalm 98:5 LXX

*5 Sing to the Lord with a harp, with a harp, and the voice of a **psalm**.*

In every occurrence of this term in the text of the Psalms, specific musical instruments are named to be used in playing that particular “psalm.” The only exception is Psalm 95:2. Yet, in this case, the word translated “joyful noise” can mean either to shout, or “to ring loudly, to clang.” The word used in the Hebrew text means to sound the signal for war, which was the blowing of the shofar.

The rest of the occurrences in the LXX are as follows. It is used in Isaiah 66:20, Lam. 3:14, 5:14, and Zech. 6:14, all referring to musical compositions (as with the titles of the various psalms). Finally, it appears in the following verse.

Amos 5:23 LXX

*23 Remove from me the sound of thy songs, I will not hear the **music of thine instruments**.*

The English translator of this verse rendered the noun “ψαλμος” as “music of thine instruments.” In every case, “ψαλμος” either refers to the act of playing a musical instrument, or to a musical composition intended to be accompanied by instruments. And this is the sense given by all the Greek lexicons as well.

Early Christian Understanding of “Ψαλμος”

Someone might ask whether contemporary usage of the term in New Testament times might have overshadowed the use in the Septuagint, as non-

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instrumentalists claim of the verb “ψαλλω.” There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest a major shift in usage over time. And such a suggestion ignores the fact that Christians tend to define theological terms, not by current culture, but by Biblical precedent. In the case of the early Christians, that precedent would be the Septuagint.

Hippolytus, bishop of Rome in the early third century, wrote a commentary on the book of Psalms. In this commentary he explained the contemporary Christian understanding of these terms 200 years after Paul. He began his commentary with these words:

*“The book of Psalms contains new doctrine after the law which was given by Moses; and thus it is the second book of doctrine after the Scripture of Moses. After the death then, of Moses and Joshua, and after the judges, David arose, one deemed worthy to be called the father of the Savior, and **he was the first to give the Hebrews a new style of psalmody, by which he did away with the ordinances established by Moses with respect to sacrifice, and introduced a new mode of the worship of God by hymns and acclamations; and many other things also beyond the law of Moses he taught through his whole ministry.**”* ⁵

Hippolytus saw David as an innovator, and his unique contributions as being disconnected from the Law of Moses. Hippolytus commented on the title of the book of Psalms as follows:

*“This book of Psalms before us has also been called by the prophet the “Psalter,” because, as they say, **the psalter** alone among musical instruments gives back the sound from above when the brass is struck, and not from beneath, after the manner of others. In order, therefore, that those who understand it may be zealous to carry out the analogy of such an appellation, and may also look above, from which direction its melody comes — for this reason he has styled it the Psalter. For it is entirely the voice and utterance of the most Holy Spirit.”* ⁶

Hippolytus went on to define the meaning of the term “ψαλλμος” as it appears in the various titles of the Psalms.

“As there are “psalms,” and “songs,” and “psalms of song,” and “songs of psalmody,” it remains that we discuss the difference between these. We think, then, that the “psalms” are those which are simply played to an instrument, without the accompaniment of the voice, and (which are composed) for the musical melody of the instrument; and that those are called “songs” which are rendered by the voice in concert with the music;

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and that they are called “psalms of song” when the voice takes the lead, while the appropriate sound is also made to accompany it, rendered harmoniously by the instruments; and “songs of psalmody,” when the instrument takes the lead, while the voice has the second place, and accompanies the music of the strings. And thus much as to the letter of what is signified by these terms.”⁷

The Septuagint always used the noun “ψαλμος” with regard to the act of “playing” a musical instrument, or to instrumental compositions. The early Christians (as evidenced by Hippolytus) understood the term, when used of compositions (specific “psalms”), to always imply instrumental accompaniment. This is consistent with LXX usage.

How then are we to understand this term in the New Testament? The answer is obvious. We must understand it in the way that the original audiences to whom Paul wrote would have understood it. And the basis for their understanding was unquestionably its usage in the Septuagint, which is proven by Hippolytus’ treatment of the subject a short time after the New Testament was written. We therefore dogmatically assert that the definition of “ψαλμος,” as understood by the early Christians, was:

- The playing of a musical instrument, or
- A composition to be sung with instrumental accompaniment

With this definition in mind, let’s consider the New Testament passages that use this term.

“Ψαλμος” in the New Testament

The most important passage where this noun occurs is within the context of New Testament Church worship.

1 Cor 14:26-27 NKJV

*How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a **psalm**, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.*

In this passage, several possible acts may be performed in the worship service. A “psalm” is to be “done for edification.” How exactly is a psalm “done?” The answer is evident if we substitute our definition derived from the LXX and early Christian usage. The “ψαλμος” is to be performed according to its intended purpose – the playing of a musical instrument, with or without the voice. Below we have inserted this meaning, derived from Old Testament precedent, in the place of the noun, “psalm.”

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1 Cor 14:26-27 NKJV

How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a [playing of a musical instrument, or a song arranged for musical accompaniment], has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

Paul either meant playing and singing any musical piece, or, performing one of the psalms from the book of Psalms, with musical accompaniment (if indicated by that Psalm). Forbidding the use of the “mechanical instrument” when it is clearly inherent in the meaning of the word, is utterly contrary to how the Corinthians would have understood the term based on its usage in the LXX. It would certainly be possible to sing such a composition in a *cappella* fashion even though it was originally arranged for instrumental accompaniment. And nothing would forbid doing that if one could not play an instrument. However, that would be an unnatural way of performing a Psalm, since by nature it is an instrumental composition (as opposed to “hymns” and “spiritual songs” not written for accompaniment).

Notice that this particular passage concerns only a solo performance. Both the person in view (each of you) and “psalm” are singular. This passage does not address a *cappella* singing by the congregation, but a solo instrumental performance (with or without voice). Taken as meaning “a playing of an instrument,” it may be purely an instrumental piece. Also notice that it is a conditional statement, assuming that someone has a “psalm” or a “tongue,” etc., and not commanding anyone in particular to do this. The argument that not everyone has musical ability and therefore cannot obey the command is not an issue, because nothing is commanded except that things be done orderly, when someone has a psalm or the other things mentioned.

We will consider the next two passages together, since they say essentially the same thing.

Eph 5:18-20 NKJV

18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit,

*19 speaking to one another in **psalms** and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,*

20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Col 3:16-17 NKJV

*16 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.*

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17 And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

The sense of these passages is obvious, given our prior established definition. Some argue that since these are commands, and that not everyone can play a musical instrument, they cannot refer to songs with musical accompaniment. However, that Paul listed three kinds of songs, only one of which requires musical accompaniment, allows for people to do whichever they are able to do.

Some argue that the verb “singing” in Col. 3:16 implies that these psalms were done *a cappella* only. Yet, that is simply not the case. All of the Psalms, written specifically for instrumental accompaniment, had lyrics which cannot be “played” but can only be sung. The unique feature of “psalms” is that they had musical accompaniment to the lyrics, which may not necessarily have been the case with hymns and spiritual songs. Further, David himself spoke of “singing” his instrumental compositions. How is “*I will **sing psalms** to thee on the harp*” (Psalm 71:22) any different than “*admonishing one another with psalms ... singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*”? How does “singing” in either of these exclude instruments? If “singing” does not exclude the instrument in Psalm 71:22, neither does “singing” exclude the instrument in Colossians 3:16.

Non-instrumentalists will no doubt claim that “*ψαλμος*” in the New Testament refers exclusively to the lyrics of recorded psalms in the book of Psalms. That may or may not be true. It is just as legitimate to say that it included contemporary musical instrumental arrangements, since Paul's language did not reference the “Book of Psalms” (as in Luke 20:42 & Acts 1:20). The generic nature of his use of “psalms,” within the same breath as “hymns” and “spiritual songs” (which are also generic kinds of songs rather than specific collections of songs) strongly supports this idea. But, even if we give our *a cappella* brethren the benefit of the doubt, they are still arguing that Paul intended for Christians to use the “Psalms” in a way that was contrary to their design (as an arrangement for both voice and instrument), and even contrary to the lyrics themselves which frequently command the use of specific musical instruments. Yet, apparently Paul failed to tell Christians to avoid the implied use of the “mechanical instrument” in their performing of the psalms.

Paul's “silence” cannot be rightly construed to mean prohibiting the natural understanding of the term “*ψαλμος*” (with musical accompaniment). When instrumental accompaniment is implied by the term, and explicitly commanded in the very lyrics sung, yet Paul was “silent” about condemning it, we are right to view his silence as not only “permission,” but even encouragement to use the Psalms in the way they were intended.

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Some Final Observations

I am compelled to ask a few probing questions of our non-instrumentalist brothers.

1. Why is it acceptable to use the Old Testament to establish the alleged precedent that God rejects any and all additions to His prescribed worship (as allegedly illustrated by Nadab and Abihu offering “strange fire”), yet it is not equally valid to use the Old Testament to establish precedent that God approves of the use of musical instruments in worship (as a general principle)?

2. How does the passing away of the Mosaic Covenant in any way affect David's introduction of instrumental music long after Moses was dead? David's instrumental music had absolutely nothing to do with the “Old Covenant” that was made obsolete by the coming of the “New Covenant.” The introduction of instrumental music in worship was clearly connected to the Davidic Covenant, not to the Mosaic Covenant. The Davidic Covenant is the promise of the coming of Christ the King! To do away with instrumental music associated with the Davidic Covenant, and promise of Christ, on the grounds that the “Old Covenant” has been replaced is absolutely untenable! Both the Abrahamic Covenant and the Davidic Covenants are portrayed in the New Testament as unfolding in the work of Christ and the New Covenant! Paul pointed out in Galatians 3 that the coming of the Law, and its subsequent obsolescence, had nothing to do with the validity of the Abrahamic Covenant that was established 430 years earlier, and could by no means make it void. How then could David's introduction of musical instruments be overturned by the obsolescence of the Mosaic Covenant? Impossible!

One Final Consideration

As pointed out above, the occasion of the introduction of instruments in worship was David's bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, to be temporarily housed in the tent (“tabernacle”) he constructed for that purpose (contrary to the Law of Moses). Once the Ark was deposited in the “Tabernacle of David,” the king ordered that instrumental and choir worship of God be performed there daily (1 Chron. 16). This “Tabernacle of David” is mentioned in a prophecy of its restoration in Amos 9:11-12. Those intent on forbidding instrumental worship should ponder how this passage was quoted in the New Testament, with reference to Gentile Christians.

Acts 15:14-17 NKJV

14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

16'After! this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up;

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17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things.'

Notes:

1. The "Septuagint" is a Greek translation of the Old Testament, made about 200BC in Alexandria by seventy Jewish scribes. This translation was used by the Early Church, and frequently quoted by the Apostles in the New Testament. It is usually designated by the Roman numerals, "LXX." Its importance to understanding New Testament Greek words cannot be overstated, because the early Christians defined theological terms by how it was used in their own Bible, the LXX.

2. The 'Theological Dictionary of the New Testament' by Gerhard Kittel is the most comprehensive Greek lexicon available. It contains 10 volumes of roughly 600 pages each, printed in very small type. It is considered an exhaustive study of Greek New Testament words, as they appear in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), the New Testament, and secular Greek literature, both Classical Greek (before Christ) and koine Greek (contemporary Greek in Apostolic times). Most other editors of Greek lexicons reference Kittel as the most complete authoritative source on the meaning of Greek words.

3. Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. VIII, pp. 493-494

4. *ibid.* pp. 490-491

5. Hippolytus, Commentary on the Psalms, ch. 1

6. *ibid* ch. 2

7. *ibid* ch. 7