



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

## Sermon Notes

### Does the New Testament *Forbid* Mechanical Instruments in New Testament Worship?

Series Theme: Is the Bible Binding Today?

#### Introduction

1. Ten years ago (March 2008), Jack Lewis wrote a series of articles for an issue of *Truth for Today* on the theme, "The Question of Instrumental Music in Worship."<sup>1</sup> He told about a conversation he once had with the dean of Lincoln [Illinois] Theological Seminary.
  - a. The dean said that, if instrumentalists and non-instrumentalists were to be united it would have to be done by preachers under age 50. Lewis said the man's conclusion made sense because "our preachers and teachers have stopped talking on the subject . . . ."
  - b. "A multitude of people in the church have not seriously weighed the issue. The old arguments presented in support of the instrument seem new and unanswered to them. . . ." (Lewis, 7).
  - c. Time does not permit elaboration on reports from Lewis and others since about churches in our fellowship who have adopted an instrumental service sometime during their weekly schedule; in some cases, this includes a service on the Lord's day.
2. It is apparent that we cannot ignore this question, but need to be ready to make a defense regarding our conviction (1 Pet 3.15). But we must give a better answer than we sometimes hear. Some statements are true, but offer inadequate reasons.
  - a. "We don't use them because we do not read about instruments in the NT."
  - b. Worse is this statement: "That's just what our church does (or believes)."

#### Body

- I. Some Matters of Foundation.
  - A. I am stipulating the following since time does not permit elaboration here.<sup>2</sup>
    1. Every NT reference to the music of Jesus and his followers specifies singing (Matt 26.30; Acts 16.25; Rom 15.9; 1 Cor 14.15, 26; Eph 5.19; Col 3.16; Heb 2.12; 13.15; Jas 5.13).
    2. Leading thinkers throughout church history consistently rejected mechanical instrumental music and advocated *a cappella* music<sup>3</sup> (including early church history, the Middle Ages, the early and late Reformation, and restoration leaders in America).<sup>4</sup>
    3. Churches of Christ are not the only group/people in contemporary society who advocate that *a cappella* singing is the only kind of worship music authorized in the New Testament.
    4. In all biblical covenants, God stipulated how his people were to approach him in worship (cf. Deut 4, 12; Heb 8.6-13; 10.16-17; 12.28-29; also Heb 1.4; 2.1-3, 12; 13.15; Phil 2.9-11)
    5. The arguments offered by advocates of mechanical instruments are not new.

- B. We need to clarify what we means by saying the NT “forbids” mechanical instruments.
  - 1. We do not find an explicit statement that says, “you shall *not* use mechanical instruments.”
  - 2. But, we also do not find statements that say, “you shall not commit computer fraud,” or “you shall not disobey your state’s traffic laws,” etc.
  - 3. Often, explicit expectations imply other requirements.
    - a) Even though ancient people did not have firearms, we know that “do not murder” implies that the intentional taking of an innocent human life with a gun is murder.
    - b) Explicit statements about theft and obedience to governing authorities have binding implications with regard to the use of computers or driving our cars.
  - 4. Thesis: when the NT specifies singing in worship, it implies that other music-making methods are not authorized.

## II. Living Under the Authority of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

- A. In the new covenant, we live under the authority of Jesus (Matt 28.18; cf. Phil 2.9-11; Col 1.18).<sup>6</sup>
- B. NT preachers invoked Jesus’ name (authority) to offer salvation *and* teach the church to live.
  - 1. Examples.
    - a) Offering salvation (and miracle authentication): Acts 2.38; 3.6; 4.10; etc.
    - b) Living as the covenant people: Colossians 3.17.<sup>7</sup>
  - 2. Comparing Acts 4.10 and Colossians 3.17.
    - a) “By” (Acts) and “in” translate the same Greek preposition (ἐν, *en*).
    - b) Acts 4.10 uses more words to describe Jesus.
    - c) Colossians 3.17 includes the title “Lord” (κύριος, *kurios*).
    - d) The article “the” is understood in the Greek of Colossians 3.17.
    - e) The only real difference: Peter spoke to non-Christians about his right to heal a man (and preach Jesus); Paul spoke to Christians about the practice of the faith.
  - 3. A closer look at Colossians 3.17, a comprehensive statement for living the faith.
    - a) “Whatever” is equal to “all” (Greek πᾶς, *pas*).
    - b) “You do” = “you might contemplate to do” (the Greek subjunctive mood).
    - c) “In word or deed” - comprehensive.
    - d) “Do everything” - repetition (Greek πᾶς, *pas*).
    - e) “In the name of the Lord Jesus” — he said it; that settles it.
  - 4. Conclusions from Colossians 3.17 as regards our subject.
    - a) Worship is included under the authority umbrella (cf. the explicit reference in 3.16).
    - b) But the principle is not limited to worship (and therefore not, as the impression has sometimes been, only applicable to the music issue).
    - c) All of life is to be lived “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” i.e., by his authority.
    - d) To do otherwise is to be presumptuous.

## III. Understanding How Jesus’ Authority is Applied.

- A. Three illustrations to show the restrictive and liberating nature of authority.
  - 1. When we write/use a check/card, we authorize our bank to pay someone in our name.
  - 2. When we have a prescription filled, we are using the authority principle.
    - a) If penicillin is prescribed, we should not receive prozac.
    - b) If the prescription is generic, any brand of penicillin can be used.
    - c) Our doctor does not have to tell the pharmacist *not* to give us all the other drugs he has in his inventory.

3. If we take our car for a complete tune-up, we expect the authority principle to be used.
  - a) If we ask for a complete tune-up, we do not have to explicitly say anything about checking the spark plugs; that is implied.
  - b) Neither must we direct the mechanic not to repair the transmission.
- B. The same principle is at work in the New Testament.
  1. We see restrictive authority in the call to baptize by immersion, not pour or sprinkle.
    - a) The Greek word βαπτίζω (*baptizō*) means “immerse” (and other words were available).
    - b) NT examples were by immersion (cf. Acts 8.38).
    - c) Romans 6.3-4 explains the theological significance of immersion.
    - d) Since immersion is specified, other methods are excluded.
  2. Liberating authority is seen in what the text says about the church’s gatherings.
    - a) Christians are to come together on the first day of the week to praise and edify (Heb 10.25; 1 Cor 11.23-26; 14.1-40; Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2).
    - b) But certain matters about our assemblies are not specified: When? How long? Before or after Bible classes (Bible classes?)? Where?
    - c) The lack of a specific command about these questions means we have liberty in our practice of them; whether we meet at 10 or 2, we are still under Jesus’ authority.
  3. We apply the same principle to the kind of music we use when we come together.
    - a) In the New Testament period, the church sang, even though other options existed.
    - b) That specificity rules out (“forbids”) other options; we are *authorized* to sing.
- C. Some say that those of us who make the above argument are imposing a human interpretation method on the text. Hebrews 7.11-14 shows a Bible writer using the same argument.
  1. In context, the writer is showing that Jesus can successfully identify with us because he is the perfect priest/mediator (Heb 4.14-16; 5.1-3).
    - a) He is like Melchizedek, the king who blessed Abraham in Genesis 14.18-20b.
    - b) As a priest like Melchizedek, Jesus is better than the Mosaic priests.
  2. In 7.11-14, he takes steps to show Jesus’ priestly superiority.
    - a) He again says that a new priesthood was needed because the old priesthood lacked perfection (v. 11).
    - b) He stresses that a new priesthood demands a new law since the old law did not envision a priest like Jesus (v. 12).
    - c) He emphasizes that this must happen because Jesus would not have been permitted to serve as a priest under the Mosaic covenant (vv. 13-14).
  3. He establishes the point by an appeal to what was authorized.
    - a) Jesus was a descendant of Judah, not Levi.
    - b) “. . . in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests” (v. 14).
    - c) Therefore, a different priesthood was required to allow Jesus to serve as a priest.
  4. Notice the two kinds of authority in this text.
    - a) Liberating: any male member of the family of Aaron could serve as a priest (although one was disqualified from performing duties if he had a blemish; cf. Lev 21.21).
    - b) Restrictive: no member of any other tribe could be as a priest; the law did not explicitly list all the other tribes, but understood they were excluded by specifying Levi.

### Conclusion

1. In 1948 [70 years ago], G. C. Brewer wrote, "We do not use instrumental music in worship because there is no authority for it in the New Testament. . . ."<sup>8</sup>
2. In 1987 [31 years ago], Jack Lewis wrote, "There are no new arguments to present on the music question; the ground has been thoroughly plowed and replowed without convincing most instrumentalists. However, here as elsewhere in life there is always a new king arising who does not know Joseph [Acts 7.17-19]. This fact keeps us redoing what we have done many times before. In my opinion we now have a generation who do not know the lessons of the past. They need to be taught the issues on the music question."<sup>9</sup>
3. Amen and amen. Let us recommit ourselves to better teaching on this and other subjects.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The issue is available online at <http://www.biblecourses.com>. Select "Study Materials," then "Search," then "By Author," and then search for Jack P. Lewis in the dropdown menu. The articles are downloadable pdf files. (Note: in the same issue, but available under his name on the web site, is an article by Dale Manor, "An Open Letter to Those Seeking God's Will About Music in Worship." This article was also published in the August 2004 issue on "Authority.")

<sup>2</sup> In other materials I have prepared on this subject, I have discussed all of these issues.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Lewis discussed each of these in separate articles in the *Truth for Today* issue cited above. Two questions must be answered in light of this consistent testimony. [1] Instruments were widely used in other religions, including Jewish temple worship; why did the earliest Christians so firmly resist their use? [2] Why were so many who sought to reform and purify the church's doctrine so firm in their resistance?

<sup>4</sup> The consistent historical rejection of instruments must be sufficiently explained, as Everett Ferguson has shown: "My observation is that our brethren who support the use of instrumental music in worship have not faced the full force of the historical evidence against their position. The evidence of church history confirms the reading of the New Testament that is found among noninstrumental churches of Christ. The historical argument is quite strong against early Christian use of instrumental music in church. What do I mean by a historical argument? If something was present in the New Testament church, there should be some trace of it later in the practice of the church. If it is not to be found in the early centuries after the New Testament, there should be some clear and convincing explanation of why it disappeared or was discontinued. Where the early historical evidence is full – in this case virtually universal, uniform, and unanimous – about the church's practice, there is a strong presumption about apostolic practice and the New Testament teaching. The absence of the instrument in early Christian assemblies (as shown by the extracanonical evidence) creates a negative presumption about its presence in the New Testament. Instrumental music was abundantly available in the religious practice of the pagan cults and was brought to consciousness by reading the Old Testament and remembering the temple ritual of the Jews. Where something was available and every assumption would seem to favor Christian adoption of the practice and yet there is complete evidence of the rejection in the post-apostolic period, there is every reason to look to a deliberate choice made in the apostolic age. A person must have a very good explanation in order to think that instruments were authorized in the New Testament but were not used by Christians for many centuries after the New Testament" (Everett Ferguson, Jack P. Lewis, and Earl West, *The Instrumental Music Issue*, ed. Bill Flatt [Gospel Advocate, 1984], 98-99; also cited in Thomas C. Alexander, *Music in Worship: A New Examination of the Old Issue* [Gospel Advocate, 2010], 78-79).

<sup>5</sup> For elaboration, see my series on "Authority," *Truth for Today*, August 2004 ([www.biblecourses.com](http://www.biblecourses.com)).

<sup>6</sup> Time does not permit elaboration on the process by which Jesus' authority extends to the New Testament writings and then to modern people. See my 2004 *Truth for Today* article, "From Jesus' Mind to Ours."

<sup>7</sup> Additional references in this regard: Salvation/miracles - Acts 4.29, 30; 8.14-16; 9.27; 10.46-48; 16.16-18; 19.4-5; 1 Cor 1.11-15; 6.9-11; Living as the covenant people: 1 Cor 1.10; 5.4; Eph 5.20; 2 Thess 3.6.

<sup>8</sup> G. C. Brewer, *A Medley on the Music Question or a Potpourri of Philology* (Gospel Advocate, 1948), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, in *The Instrumental Music Issue*, 14.