

# IN RESPONSE - A CAPPELLA SINGING IN WORSHIP, PART ONE

by Dennis Prutow

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We now come to the final phase of our study of worship. We began with a simple definition. Worship is giving God His due. Worship is giving honor, glory, and reverence to the One who carries the greatest weight in our lives, the Triune God. This worship is guided by the Word of God. We must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). This means we must be empowered by the Holy Spirit in our worship. In addition, we must follow the dictates of our only Sovereign, His truth, as we enter into worship. Our liturgies, as we have seen, are not of our own making. They are God's design. He prescribes the content of our worship.

We have seen that worship involves giving back to God what He has given to us. This is true with regard to the use of Psalms in worship. When Paul refers to "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," in Colossians 3:16, he refers to the Psalms of the Old Testament. The same principle applies when we come to the use of instruments in worship.

A cappella singing is singing without instrumental accompaniment. The word a cappella actually refers to singing "as in chapel." In other words, a cappella singing is the type of singing traditionally and historically sung in chapel, in the religious service. How far we have come. Thankfully there is a revival of a cappella singing occurring within both the popular culture and within the church.

To begin our discussion, let's ask a simple question. When did Israel begin to use instruments in worship? Who authorized the use of instruments? Our answer comes in 2 Chronicles 29:23-28.

Then they brought the male goats of the sin offering before the king and the assembly, and they laid their hands on them. And the priests slaughtered them and purged the altar with their blood to atone for all Israel, for the king ordered the burnt offering and the sin offering for all Israel. He then stationed the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with harps, and with lyres, according to the command of David and of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for the command was from the Lord through His prophets. And

the Levites stood with the musical instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. Then Hezekiah gave the order to offer the burnt offering on the altar. When the burnt offering began, the song to the Lord also began with the trumpets, accompanied by the instruments of David, king of Israel. While the whole assembly worshipped, the singers also sang and the trumpets sounded; all this continued until the burnt offering was finished.

Note two things. First, beyond doubt, God ordered the use of instruments in the Old Testament ceremonies and sacrifices. The word came from God through David, Nathan and Gad.

Second, the use of instruments was part of the worship offered in conjunction with the sacrifices. When the offering began, the music with accompaniment also began. There is little doubt the two, the offering and singing with instruments, go together. When the offering was finished, the music ceased. This confirms the notion the two were inextricably bound together. We therefore maintain, although authorized by God, the use of instrumental music in the worship of Israel *was* a part of the *ceremonial worship* commanded by Him.

What of this ceremonial worship? Does it continue? This is what the Westminster Confession of Faith says.

Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances; partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly of divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the new testament (19.3).

Yes, we affirm with the Confession all the ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament. Hebrews 10:5-9 argues the case for us.

Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "Sacrifice and offering Thou hast not desired, But a body Thou hast prepared for Me; in whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin

Thou hast taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come (in the roll of the book it is written of Me) to do Thy will, O God.'" After saying above, "Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin Thou hast not desired, nor hast Thou taken pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the Law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Thy will." He takes away the first in order to establish the second.

What does Christ take away? Christ takes away the sacrifices and ceremonies of the Old Testament law. What does Christ establish? He establishes His own sacrifice as preeminent. His sacrifice alone offers propitiation for the sins of His people. The Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowed the fulfillment found in Christ. "He takes away the first in order to establish the second." The Old Testament sacrificial system must be done away to establish the once for all sacrifice of Christ. Note this, however; since the Old Testament ceremonial law of the sacrifices is done away, this includes the use of instruments in worship. The two go hand in hand.

But if the two go hand in hand, why do we continue to *sing* as outlined in 2 Chronicles 29? The answer is simple. We continue to sing Psalms because Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit commands us to do so *in the New Testament*.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

This is, in brief, the classic argument for a cappella singing in worship. Does the use of instruments conform to the requirement to worship in spirit? Does the use of instruments add to our ability to worship in truth? For what practical reasons do we so strongly affirm a cappella singing in worship? We will look into these questions in our next lesson.

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# IN RESPONSE - A CAPPELLA SINGING IN WORSHIP, PART TWO

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For what practical reasons do we so strongly affirm a cappella singing in worship? First of all, if God so orders our worship, there must be great practical benefit. Commentators like Calvin and Spurgeon are clear on the issue. Let's look at a few of their comments.

Charles Spurgeon favored a cappella singing for the very reason just elicited. A biographer, Arnold Dalimore, notes with regard to the Metropolitan Tabernacle, "There was no organ and no choir. A precentor set the pitch of each hymn with a tuning fork and led the singing with his own voice."<sup>1</sup> Most Baptist people, let alone the majority of Christendom, are aghast. Spurgeon practiced what he taught.

Psalm 33:2 commands, "Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; Sing praises to Him with a harp of ten strings." Spurgeon comments:

Men need all the help they can get to stir them up to praise. This is the lesson gathered from the use of musical instruments under the old dispensation. Israel was at school, and used childish things to help her to learn; but in these days, when Jesus gives us spiritual manhood, we can make melody without strings and pipes. We do not believe these things expedient in worship, lest they should mar its simplicity . . .<sup>2</sup>

Psalm 57:8 exclaims, "Awake, my glory; Awake, harp and lyre, I will awaken the dawn!" Spurgeon explains,

As to these instruments in the worship of God, they were doubtless allowed to David, and to the church in his time. They were agreeable to the state of that church and people, who were led very much by their senses; and whose infant and less discerning condition made it needful for the natural man to have something to fasten upon and be entertained in the worship of God and to sweeten and take

off from the labour and burden of that service.<sup>3</sup>

This comment reminds me of a Christian friend who told me regular attendance at worship was work for him. He rather likes staying at home on a Lord's Day morning. In such cases, when worship is a burden and labor, entertainment lightens the load. We are inundated with such entertainment in the evangelical world. Does this indicate we are growing in the wrong direction? Are we becoming an infant church rather than a mature church? "God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances" (WCF, 19.3). Many prefer to be a *church under age*.

Psalm 71:22 asserts, "I will also praise Thee with a harp, Even Thy truth, O my God; To Thee I will sing praises with the lyre, O Thou Holy One of Israel." Spurgeon quotes Samuel Mather approvingly with regard to the psalter and harp.

There was a typical signification in them; and upon this account they are not only rejected and condemned by the whole army of Protestant divines, as for instance, by Zuinglius, Calvin, Peter Martyr, Zepperus, Paraeus, Willet, Ainsworth, Ames, Calderwood, and Cotton; who do, with one mouth, testify against them, most of them affirming that they are part of the abrogated legal pedagogy; so that we might as well recall the incense, tapers, sacrifices, new moons, circumcision, and all the other shadows of the law into use again. But Aquinas himself also, though a popish schoolman, pleads against them upon the same account, *quia aliquid figurabant*, and saith, the Church in his time did not use them, *ne videatur judaizare*, lest they should seem to judaize.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps there was a day in the church when the whole army of divines held to a cappella singing in worship. Today we can hardly find this classic and historic form of worship in the church. The judaizing tendency now prevails. It is the majority position.

Psalm 92, "A Psalm, a Song for the Sabbath day," tells us,

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, And to sing praises to Thy name, O Most High; To declare Thy loving-kindness in the morning, And Thy faithfulness by night, With the ten-stringed lute, and with the harp; With resounding music upon the lyre (Psalm 92:1-3).

These remarks appear in Spurgeon's notes on Psalm 92:3.<sup>5</sup> Regarding a comments of Eusebius,

Whatever may be thought of this gloss, one thing is pretty evident from it, that *instrumental music* was not in use in the church of Christ in the time of Eusebius, which was near the middle of the *fourth century*.

Again on verse three, Chrysostom says, "Instrumental music was only permitted to the Jews, as sacrifice was, for the heaviness and grossness of their souls. God condescended to their weakness, because they were lately drawn off from idols; but now instead of organs, we may use our own bodies to praise him withall."

Finally, Spurgeon quotes Andrew Fuller, Instrumental music, the more I think of it, appears with increasing evidence to be utterly unsuited to the genius of the gospel dispensation. There was a glare, if I may so express it, which characterized even the divine appointments of Judaism. An august temple, ornamented with gold and silver, and precious stones, golden candlesticks, golden altars, priests in rich attire, trumpets, cymbals, harps; all of which were adapted to an age and dispensation when the church was in a state of infancy. But when the substance is come, it is time that the shadows flee away.

Has the church moved in the direction of the more sensual and less spiritual?

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Dalimore, *Spurgeon* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David* (Newark: Cornerstone Publishing Company, n.d.), vol. II, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 313.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, pp. 271-272.

# IN RESPONSE - A CAPPELLA SINGING IN WORSHIP, PART THREE

by Dennis Prutow

Continuing our look at a cappella singing in worship, we turn to the comments of John Calvin on the same Psalm portions just reviewed. Psalm 33:2 commands, "Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; Sing praises to Him with a harp of ten strings." Calvin comments,

I have no doubt that playing upon cymbals, touching the harp and viol, and all that kind of music which is so frequently mentioned in the Psalms, was a part of the education; that is to say, the puerile [juvenile] instruction of the law: I speak of the stated services of the temple. For even now, if believers choose to cheer themselves with musical instruments, they should, I think, make it their object to not to dissever their cheerfulness from the praises of God. But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law.<sup>1</sup>

As we see, Calvin makes the same points set forth by Spurgeon. This is the historic Reformed position regarding instrumental music in worship.

Psalm 57:8 exclaims, "Awake, my glory; Awake, harp and lyre, I will awaken the dawn!" Calvin explains regarding David, "He assigns the first place to the heart, the second to declaration with the mouth, the third to such accompaniments as stimulate to greater ardour in the service."<sup>2</sup>

From the previous comment, we know Calvin held instrumental music was for the old dispensation and not the new. These accompaniments suited that older dispensation when the church needed to be stimulated to greater ardour in worship. Do those who are possessed of the Holy Spirit need external stimulation to stir them up to the praise of God? I have watched and listened as a professional musician played the piano or the synthesizer during times of prayer. Why? The reason later offered to justify such

activity is that it assists our prayers. Does Jesus Christ need the assistance of instrumental music in His role as intercessor? I think not!

Is the same principle operative in our singing? Look at Hebrews 13:15. "Through Him [Jesus Christ] then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name." Our sacrifice of praise is not that of bulls and goats and cymbals and trumpets. Our sacrifice is the fruit of lips singing praise to God. Those lips are powered by a heart filled with the holy Spirit.

Psalm 71:22 asserts, "I will also praise Thee with a harp, Even Thy truth, O my God; To Thee I will sing praises with the lyre, O Thou Holy One of Israel." Calvin rehearses the familiar argument.

In speaking of employing *the psaltery* and *the harp* in this exercise, he alludes to the generally prevailing custom of that time. To sing the praises of God upon the harp and psaltery unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law, and of the service of God under the dispensation of shadows and figures; but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving. We are not, indeed, forbidden to use, in private, musical instruments, but they are banished out of the churches by the plain command of the Holy Spirit . . .<sup>3</sup>

The final portion selected for comments is Psalm 92:1-4. It tells us,

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, And to sing praises to Thy name, O Most High; To declare Thy loving-kindness in the morning, And Thy faithfulness by night, With the ten-stringed lute, and with the harp; With resounding music upon the lyre. For Thou, O Lord, hast made me glad by what Thou hast done, I will sing for joy at the works of Thy hands (Psalm 92:1-4).

Calvin elaborates on his position in his commentary on this Psalm.

In the fourth verse, he more immediately addresses the Levites, who were appointed to the office of singers, and calls upon them to employ their in-

struments of music—not as if this were in itself necessary, only it was useful as an elementary aid to the people of God in these ancient times. We are not to conceive that God enjoined the harp as feeling a delight like ourselves in mere melody of sounds; but the Jews, who were yet under age, were astricted to the use of such childish elements. The intention of them was to stimulate the worshippers, and stir them up more actively to the celebration of the praise of God with the heart. We are to remember that the worship of God was never understood to consist in such outward services, which were only necessary to help forward a people, as yet weak and rude in knowledge, in the spiritual worship of God. A difference is to be observed in this respect between his people under the Old and under the New Testament; for now that Christ has appeared, and the Church has reached full age, it were only to bury the light of the Gospel, should we introduce the shadows of a departed dispensation. From this, it appears that the Papists, as I shall have occasion to show elsewhere, in employing instrumental music, cannot be said so much to imitate the practice of God's ancient people, as to ape it in a senseless and absurd manner, exhibiting a silly delight in that worship of the Old Testament which was figurative, and terminated with the Gospel.

Modern evangelicalism is little different. We want to ape the old dispensation in the new. We press backward rather than forward. We need to be stimulated to the praise of God by instrumentation. We are childish in our approach to the Almighty. We play more to the sensual than to the spiritual. According to Calvin and Spurgeon, instruments in worship do not add to our worship in spirit. They detract. They certainly do not add our ability to worship in truth. Yet Jesus exhorts us to worship in spirit and truth.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. I, p. 539.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 366.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 98.

# IN RESPONSE - A CAPPELLA SINGING IN WORSHIP, PART FOUR

by Dennis Prutow

To conclude our study, I answer some typical questions. I received them when doing this study with young people.

1. Hebrews 10 indicates the sacrifices of the Old Testament were taken away to establish the sacrifice of Christ. However, we do not find a specific command in the Bible to abstain from the use of musical instruments in worship.

Answer: We must remember the three aspects of law in the Old Testament, Civil, Ceremonial, and Moral. The Civil Law and the Ceremonial Law are taken away. The Moral Law remains. The requirements of the Civil Law and of the Ceremonial Law no longer apply. Since this is the case, we need no specific command to refrain from the use of musical instruments in worship. When the ceremonial law is abrogated so is the use of musical instruments in worship.

2. What about the use of instruments seen in the book of Revelation? Why do the angels and saints have harps in passages like Revelation 14:2, "And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps"; and Revelation 15:2, "And I saw, as it were, a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had come off victorious from the beast and from his image and from the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God."

Answer: In the first case we have similes. Compare Revelation 1:5 and 6:1. In the book of Revelation harps *represent* voices of praise. In the second case, "The harps of God which they hold in their hands form a further symbol of their victory. The harps are expressions of praise and worship to God (5:8, 14:2)."<sup>1</sup> In Revelation 5:8, the bowls of incense *represent* prayers; the harps *represent* praise. As we do not use incense in our worship, so we do not use instruments.

3. How are we to interpret the titles in many psalms which are inspired instructions regarding how the psalms are to be sung? Examples are Psalms 12 and 55.

Answer: Because the Ceremonial Law has been abrogated, set aside, and since the use of instruments in worship is a part of the Ceremonial Law, *these directions no longer apply*. In a similar way, the directions in the Old Testament on *how* to punish adulterers and homosexuals no longer apply. In like manner, in the New Testament the directions given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 regarding tongues and prophecy do not apply to us because biblical tongues have ceased (1 Corinthians 13:8).

4. But how do we handle the directions in the psalms themselves which command us to worship with the use of various instruments? Doesn't Psalm 92:3 command us to use the lute and harp and lyre in worship? Doesn't Psalm 150 command us to worship with trumpet, harp, lyre, pipe, and cymbals?

Answers: [1] Same as #3. [2] If we take the commands to be applicable to us today, to be faithful to Scripture, we *must use* all the instruments and not simply an organ or piano. [3] Because the instruments are part of the Ceremonial Law, they are symbolical and typical. They *picture* or *portray* praise. [4] Psalm 150 also commands us to praise God with "dancing." We do not dance in our worship because dancing is a *picture* of joy in praise. We have little trouble singing about this because *we understand the picture*. In the same way, we should have little trouble singing about the instruments *if we understand the picture they portray*. [5] Psalm 141:2 speaks of incense as does Revelation 5:8. We recognize this incense as *symbolic, it pictures prayer*. We have little trouble singing about incense and not using incense because we understand the picture, the symbolism. [6] In the same way we should have little trouble singing about the instruments of praise because we should understand the picture of the praise painted by them.

5. If instruments were used to *facilitate* worship under the Old Testament dispensation, what is wrong with using instruments to *facilitate* our glorifying of God today?

Answer: God directs us *not* to use instruments through the setting aside of the Old Testament Ceremonial Law. He is telling us the work of the Spirit in us facili-

tates our worship *not* instruments. We tend to *think* the use of instruments assist our worship. Remember John 4:23-24. Are we actually more spiritual in our worship when we use instruments?

We are not more spiritual if these instruments actually appeal more to the sensual than to the spiritual. For example, when we use exactly the same instrumental forms in country music and so called sacred music the listeners react in exactly the same ways in both cases. They have the same visceral responses evoking the same dancing, raising of hand hands and veneration of the singers. Is spirituality then enhanced? I think not. I agree with Calvin and Spurgeon at this point.

6. If we are to glorify God and enjoy Him forever and if instrumental music exists for our enjoyment, why can't we use instruments in worship as a part of our enjoyment of God?

Answers: [1] Same as #5. We must ask the question: Do I want to use instruments in worship because it is God's will or my will? [2] We must distinguish types of joy. The joy of an athletic contest or a musical concert is a joy related to our senses. God gives us various gifts. We can genuinely enjoy, find pleasure in, reading a good book, playing the piano, listening to a concert. Our emotions can be deeply affected in such circumstances. [3] The enjoyment of God is a much higher form of joy. Jonathan Edwards said the enjoyment of God in heaven would be mind to mind. There will be a direct apprehension of God. We will be flooded with bliss. We have tokens of this joy in this life. Does instrumental music facilitate *this* joy?

Does instrumental music add to our ability to worship in spirit? Does instrumental music add to our ability to worship in truth? I think the answer must be No. Too often, we think it does because we confuse the Holy Spirit with a chemical called adrenaline produced by our bodies. For more on this latter point, see my booklet, "The Affects of Adrenaline Addiction on Worship and Spirituality."

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<sup>1</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 204-205.