

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”—A TOP 5 ARTICLE OF 2021

The Most Important Instrument on Sunday Morning

by Bob Kauflin

The ending of the Psalter explodes with instrumental praise. Lutes, harps, tambourines, strings, and pipes are all called into service of God’s glory. In our day, it’s pianos, electric and acoustic guitars, brass, strings, wind instruments, synths, organs, and multiple kinds of percussion. All can be employed in responding to God’s word, worthiness, and works.

One might almost think that means the more instruments, the better the worship — but that can’t be true. Not every church has the people or resources to utilize multiple instruments. Some make do with a single piano or guitar. Some don’t even have that. But one instrument is common to every church, big or small. And happily, it’s the instrument God is most concerned about on Sunday mornings: the voice of the congregation. That reality doesn’t negate the valuable contribution other instruments can make to our singing. But we’re to see them as useful, not crucial. They’re meant to complement and support our voices, not replace them.

We Lift Our Voices

Psalm 150 notwithstanding, Scriptures that reference using voices to praise God far outweigh those that reference using instruments — about 7 to 1. That’s not conclusive, but it certainly points us in a direction. As to the Psalms, it’s worth noting God didn’t give us a backing instrumental track to accompany them. He only provided lyrics. Of course, many Psalms contain musical annotations, as well as commands to play instruments. But God is evidently more concerned about the words we use to praise him than the music we set them to.

While the New Testament references flutes, trumpets, and harps (Matt. 11:17; 1 Cor. 14:7–8; 1 Thess. 4:16; Rev. 5:8; 14:2; 15:2), the unquestionable emphasis when we gather as God’s people is on singing (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26; Acts 16:25; 1 Cor. 14:15, 26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; James 5:13). It’s hard to “teach and admonish one another” with instruments alone. Everyone in the church — pastors, leaders, tech teams, and of course, those who sing — can contribute to prioritizing the congregation’s voice. Here are some ideas on how we can work together towards that end, first for church members.

For Church Members

You may not be involved in the formal music ministry of your church, but you still play a vital role, in at least four ways.

Prepare. Good instrumentalists plan, practice, and rehearse for Sunday mornings. As a member of the congregation, you may not do vocal warm-ups on the way to church, but you can prepare your heart. Rather than waiting for the music on Sunday to move you to worship, spend time Saturday night or before the meeting reflecting on the lavish mercy God has shown us in Christ. In the midst of our rebellion, God graciously sent his Son to receive the punishment we deserved, so that we could be forgiven, justified, and adopted into God’s family. Every promise of God is assured for us in Jesus Christ. How can we not want to sing?

Participate. It may be obvious, but the congregation will be heard more clearly if everyone sings. It would be odd if the members of a band held their instruments and never played a note. In a similar way, it makes no sense when we stand silently in the midst of a singing congregation. I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord. (Psalm 40:9) Look around. Engage with others by occasionally making eye contact as you sing. Acknowledge that you’re doing this together and you’re glad about it!

Receive. Often on a Sunday, I'll stop singing for a moment and let the sound of others proclaiming God's truth wash over my soul. When God instructs us about music in the church, we're told to "address one another" and to "teach and admonish one another" (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). That's right in line with what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians about doing everything to build up those around us (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:5, 12, 26). Listening to others sing around me is a powerful means of grace and edification. It's not uncommon to think of "getting lost" in the sound of synth pads and ambient guitar patches during a service. But that's foreign to the New Testament. We're called to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, not musical experiences.

Encourage. Take time to commend your music leaders and musicians. Thank them for a particular song they chose. Tell them how God has used the songs they lead to help you think more clearly about God and strengthen your faith. Express your appreciation for those around you who sing loudly, boldly, joyfully, and faithfully. Especially encourage those who display God's grace by singing songs of faith, trust, and joy in the midst of sorrows and trials.

For Everyone's Good

Making the congregation's voice the main instrument in our gatherings benefits us in at least five ways.

First, it enables us to flesh out the commands of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. We understand better that we are not only singing to God, but to each other. We become more aware that we're being counseled by those around us.

Second, appreciating the value of the congregation's voice makes our meetings less about performance and more about participation. Less about being impressed and more about being involved. It helps us see that musicians are one part of the body, not separate from it. We are all being led by our great high priest, Jesus, who perfects all our offerings of praise to the Father (1 Peter 2:5).

Third, highlighting the role of the congregation increases our awareness of what each of us brings to build up the church. Typically, when someone asks, "How was worship?" they're referring to what the musicians did. Ignoring for a moment that "worship" means much more than singing on Sundays, congregational worship is primarily about what the congregation does, not the musical leaders. So the quality of "worship" is determined by the enthusiasm, participation, engagement, and expression of the people.

Fourth, prioritizing the congregation's sound makes our songs less dependent on fantastic musicians and more dependent on faith-filled hearts. We can be grateful for churches that have amazing instrumentalists that serve their churches with excellence every week. But let's be honest. The vast majority of churches have average musicians. Hopefully getting better all the time, but still not professionals. But that doesn't have to affect the sound of individuals whose eyes and hearts have been opened to the glories of the Savior.

Finally, seeing the congregation as the main instrument on Sundays expresses our unity more clearly. There is no dividing line between the musicians and the people, or the pastors and people. We are the body of Christ, made one through his blood, joined together in the Spirit, called to "live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together [we] may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6).

May it be increasingly so in our churches, for the glory of the Lamb whose song we'll be singing through endless ages.