



POSITION PAPER: ACAPELLA/INSTRUMENTAL WORSHIP CLEAR CREEK CHURCH OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

The acapella and instrumental worship position paper is born out of the Clear Creek Church of Christ's commitment to biblical truth and our love for God, our church and the surrounding community. The Bible is filled with references to the use of music by God's people – both vocal and instrumental – because music is a powerful human expression. Yet, many churches are divided on the issue of music in the corporate assembly.

This position paper is intended to clarify what we believe about corporate acapella and instrumental worship, provide teaching and doctrinal parameters, and to serve as a tool for continued congregational unity. It is divided into three sections:

1. Our corporate worship position
2. Why it is biblically permissible
3. Why it is missionally profitable

I. OUR CORPORATE WORSHIP POSITION

We believe the Bible, both Old and New Testament, is true, useful, authoritative and sufficient. We submit to its authority as the final arbiter on all issues. (Deuteronomy 4:1-2; Psalm 119:11, 89, 105; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 22:29; John 5:39; 16:13- 15; 17:17; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Psalm 119:2; 2 Peter 1:19-21)

As a result of a multi-year Bible study that began in 2012, we conclude that God accepts and honors both acapella (voices-only) worship and instrumental worship in the corporate assembly so long as the worship is offered from sincere hearts. We come to this position because of our devotion to God's Word and desire to obey Him. This position is not new. For many years we have incorporated instrumental praise on Sundays - both before and after worship and during our worship through video, communion reflection time and so on.

We believe there is space at Clear Creek for an acapella-only worship and an instrumental worship. This is called the Both/And position. We are convinced that Both/And is biblically permissible and missionally profitable for our church to follow Jesus' commission to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

II. WHY IT IS BIBLICALLY PERMISSIBLE

The Both/And position makes the best sense of Old Testament commands, the New Testament church and our future eternity with God in heaven in the following ways:

First, God commands instrumental worship in the Old Testament. He commands Israel to worship Him with their voices and with instruments at the Temple dedication – blessing them as they sing and play instruments as "with one voice." (2 Chronicles 5:13-14). Also, many Psalms command God's people to praise Him with instruments (Psalm 33:1-3, 81:1-5, 92:1-3, 150).

Finally, the Old Testament Messianic prophecies anticipate instrumental praise will continue at Jesus' return (Psalms 45:6-8). God does not allow or suggest instrumental praise. He commands it.

Two questions some raise regarding Old Testament instrumental worship:

1. Is instrumental praise another form of the "strange fire" that Nadab and Abihu used in Leviticus 10? In Leviticus, God prescribed the specific ways Temple and Tabernacle worship was to be conducted. But the sons of the High Priest willfully disobeyed and God killed them for it (Leviticus 10:1-2). The obvious difference is Nadab and Abihu did something God clearly condemned whereas God commanded and blessed instrumental praise in the Old Testament.
2. Why does God seem to reject instrumental praise in Amos 6:4-7? Verse 8 tells us that God abhors the sinfulness of the worshipers. The Israelites wrongly believed they could offer praise with their mouth or instruments as a substitute for giving God their whole lives. The issue in Amos 6 is not *how* they worshiped, but their *hearts* in worship. Isaiah 1:11-17 reminds us that God rejects every external action that is offered as a substitute for repentance and obedience.

Second, Jesus never addresses instrumental worship in the New Testament. He had numerous opportunities to condemn instrumental praise, since he taught in the Temple where instrumental worship was practiced (Luke 19:47). Yet, he never does. Jesus is silent on the matter and his silence is significant. In the Old Testament, God explicitly commands - not merely suggested - instrumental praise. If God no longer permits it in the New Testament, then we would expect Jesus to explicitly condemn its ongoing practice. This is especially true if instrumental worship in the church age is such an offense to God that it condemns one to hell as many in the Churches of Christ have historically believed. Yet, Jesus never addresses it.

In fact, the only time Jesus refers to instrumental music is in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The older brother heard "music" coming from the party that his father threw for the returned, prodigal son (Luke 15:25). The Greek word Jesus used for music is "symphonia" (συμφωνία) from which we get the word symphony. This point cannot be overstated. The only time Jesus mentions instrumental music is when he describes the heavenly party God throws when a sinner is saved. If God condemned it, then why did Jesus include it?

Third, the New Testament authors do not condemn instrumental worship. If God condemns instrumental praise in the corporate assembly, then we would expect His Holy Spirit to inspire the New Testament authors to address it. But, like Jesus, they do not. The book of Acts, which chronicles the history of the early church, is silent on the matter. None of the New Testament authors such as James, John, Peter and Paul mention it, let alone, condemn it. When Paul instructs the Corinthian church how to conduct an orderly worship assembly in 1 Corinthians 14, he says nothing about how they are to sing such as whether it must be acapella-only or instrumental.

Fourth, Paul, as a New Testament writer, does not condemn instrumental worship in Ephesians 5:19 or Colossians 3:16. The acapella-only position rests, in part, on Paul's command to "sing" in these texts. Yet, we must remember the following:

1. Omission does not necessarily equal condemnation. After all, Romans 10:9 says, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Baptism is not mentioned, but we do not take the omission of baptism to be a condemnation of baptism. Therefore, the command to "sing" does not necessarily mean to only sing.
2. Paul's words in both passages are to instruct the individual believer's personal, everyday conduct. He is not addressing the corporate assembly in either passage. Therefore, however we take his meaning, we must apply it to how we live Monday through Saturday not just Sunday.
3. Paul uses the Greek word "psallo" (ψάλλω) for "to sing." Its original and dominant meaning during the New Testament period was "to play" or "to pluck" a stringed instrument. "To play" and "to pluck" was also the primary meaning of psallo in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament that the New Testament authors read) and throughout the writing of the New Testament. Some, however, argue the meaning of "psallo" had changed by the first century to exclusively mean "make music with one's voice." The bulk of scholarship disagrees. For example, the Jewish historian Josephus wrote in the first century of some who "psallied on the harp" (Antiq., 6:8,2), in which "psallo" could not mean, "sing." First century Greek philosophers Strabo (Geography, 1:23; 14:2,26) and Plutarch (Life of Pericles, 1:5) and the second century Roman satirist Lucian (Vocabulary, psalmos) all refer to psallo as "to play." Moulton and Milligan in their book Vocabulary, psalmos cite a second century inscription in which psalmos signifies a song sung with a harp. Therefore, Paul would have understood psallo to mean "to play" or "to pluck" when he wrote to the Ephesian and Colossian churches.
4. Paul commanded Christians to do two things: "Sing (aidō / ᾄδω) and make music (psallo / ψάλλω) from your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19). If in Paul's time psallo's exclusive meaning was "to sing" and aidō meant the same thing, then Paul redundantly commanded Christians to "singing [aidontes] and singing [psallontes]." Rather, Paul was commanding both singing and playing.

Paul's emphasis in these two texts is on the worshiper's *heart* throughout the week and less on *how* the worshiper praises God on Sunday.

Fifth, the New Testament indicates instrumental worship in heaven. Revelation 15:2 says that the saints of heaven hold harps "given them by God" and that they then sang a new song to Jesus (Revelation 5:8-9). It seems inconsistent to believe God condemns instrumental praise in the New Testament while anticipating instrumental praise in heaven.

Some acapella-only supporters suggest that, since the book of Revelation uses apocalyptic language (symbolic language) to describe the indescribable, the image of harps is merely symbolic. And, therefore, the argument follows that there will not be real harps in heaven. Even if harps are symbolic, then we must ask the question: "Why would God use the symbol of harps - something those arguments claim He condemns on earth - to symbolize something He commands in heaven?"

This leads to the questions of biblical silence and church history.

First, how should churches behave in worship when Jesus, Paul and the other New Testament authors do not give specific direction?¹ This is commonly called the question of biblical silence. Some Christians follow the regulative principle, which teaches that we may only do what the Bible explicitly commands or models. In this view, silence equals restriction. Others follow the normative principle, which teaches that Christians are free to do whatever the Bible does not forbid. Thus, silence equals freedom.

We believe the normative principle, or freedom position, better agrees with Paul's words that "*All Scripture,*" including the Old Testament, "*is God breathed and useful...*" (2 Timothy 3:16) God's silence in the New Testament does not mean He is fully silent on the issue. We seek to honor God by considering everything He has revealed including in the Old Testament.

We also hold the freedom position because we wish to live consistently. Virtually no church, including acapella-only, fully lives by the regulative, or restriction, principle. After all, the Bible neither commands nor models the use of dedicated church buildings, Sunday school, hymnals, individual communion, full-time paid staff, and a mid-week worship gathering let alone the use of modern amenities such as air conditioning, electric lights and sound systems. Yet, most acapella-only churches embrace some or all of these non-commanded innovations. It seems inconsistent to us for a church to espouse the regulative/restrictive position without rejecting all innovations.

Second, what about church history? The church was acapella-only until the 10th-12th centuries. Scholars offer different reasons. Some suggest the early church wanted to distinguish itself from the debauched instrumental worship of pagan religions. Others believe that, like today's persecuted church, the early Christians could not use instruments (or sing, in some cases) for fear of being caught. Still others suggest the reason was financial. Whatever the reason, we must remember that church history is not our ultimate authority – the Bible is.

In conclusion, if God's attitude toward instrumental worship changed from the Old Testament to the New Testament, then you would expect a clear passage condemning its use, a clear passage commanding acapella praise only, or a passage announcing the end of instrumental worship. Yet, none exist. Therefore, we believe that God, through Scripture, honors and permits Both/And worship when offered from sincere worshippers.

III. WHY IT IS MISSIONALLY PROFITABLE

We have held this biblical conviction and communicated it to the church following our first study in 2012. Yet, just because the Bible permits something does not mean it is always profitable for a church. So, why become a Both/And church? We believe it is a profitable tool for accomplishing the mission Jesus gave us.

In Luke 19:10, Jesus said he came to "*seek and to save the lost.*" He then commissioned his followers to do the same in Matthew 28:19-20. Years later, the apostle Paul wrote that he was so consumed with the mission of God that he willingly became "*all things to all people so that by all possible means*" he might save some (1 Corinthians 9:22). In other words, he would do whatever it took, short of sinning, to fulfill Jesus' mission. He recognized that different methods reach different people.

¹ See the Biblical Interpretation position paper for more on how we understand the issue of biblical silence.

We believe Both/And is not only biblically permissible, but it is missionally profitable in the following ways:

First, Both/And worship can remove an unnecessary distraction for sharing the Gospel.

One of the first questions unchurched guests often ask us is why we do not have “music” (instruments) during our service. Notice that they do not ask *mission-focused* questions such as how to be saved or where to serve. They ask a *method-focused* question. The method of acapella-only worship has distracted some from the Gospel message. This is not okay. Embracing Both/And removes the unnecessary distraction so people may hear the Gospel.

Second, Both/And helps us to be known by what we are for rather than what we are against. We want to be known primarily for Jesus. He is our message. It is difficult to help introduce people to Jesus when they avoid His church. Embracing Both/And is missionally strategic. It further communicates that Clear Creek embraces all of God’s biblically authorized freedoms.

Third, Both/And gives members of our disciple-making network options for making disciples. Part of our strategy for reaching Chattanooga is to plant a growing network of like-minded, disciple-making churches and groups such as City Collective and UCM. Each church and group seeks to reach a unique segment of our city. Embracing Both/And frees each network partner to use the worship tool that best connects with their mission field.

Fourth, Both/And draws in future generations. Jesus went out of his way to draw in young people (Matthew 19:13-14; Mark 9:36-37). We want to be like him. Our children and students are the future elders, deacons and ministers of God’s church. Yet, increasingly, those raised at Clear Creek have left after high school in search of churches with more expressive, instrumental worship. While we acknowledge that the Church is larger than the Churches of Christ, we don’t want the next generation to have to choose between the church of their youth and the worship that speaks to their souls. We believe Both/And is missionally necessary to continue connecting with them.

Fifth, Both/And engages the gifts of the church. “Every good and perfect gift” comes from God including the ability to play an instrument (James 1:17). Yet, many have wrongly believed they may use their gift everywhere except for praising God. We want to use every member’s God-given gifts at Clear Creek. Embracing Both/And celebrates the gifts God gives while blessing the rest of the congregation.

Sixth, Both/And honors members and guests who prefer instrumental worship. We are called to “Honor one another above” ourselves. (Romans 12:10) We honor members who cherish the beauty and simplicity of acapella worship. Likewise, to honor everyone in our church means that we make space for members and guests who long to worship Jesus with instruments.

CONCLUSION

Our deepest desire is to honor Jesus in everything we do by being biblically faithful and missionally focused. This is why we embrace Both/And worship at Clear Creek Church of Christ. We are committed to joining God in reaching our city. Like Paul, we will do whatever it takes, short of sinning, to see one more person find life in Christ. We believe embracing Both/And is one more tool that, in God’s hands, will help us draw more people to Jesus.