



Commentary on Ephesians 5:19 by Burton Coffman

All Scriptures and comments are based on the **New King James Version**, unless otherwise noted.

Verse 19

Speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.
(**Ephesians 5:19**)

Speaking one to another ...

This reference is probably to the custom of Christians "singing by turns a hymn to Christ, as to a god."^[18] "By turns" is also rendered "antiphonally"; but from **1 Corinthians 14:26**, the custom was actually that of singing by turns.

Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs ...

Although these can be differentiated, there is no need to do so. The teaching declares that not all songs are acceptable in the worship of God, but only those with spiritual value.

Regarding the question whether or not the public assemblies or worship services of the Christians are referred to here, it seems best to construe the passage as having exactly that application. To make it applicable to all types of gatherings would be to prohibit a Christian from singing any kind of music except sacred music, a prohibition that does not appear in the passage at all. With Lipscomb and many others it is viewed here as instruction regarding the public worship of the Christians.^[19]

Singing ...

The meaning of this term is to produce music vocally; and regardless of ancient meanings attributed to the word [*@psallo*], rendered "making melody" used here in conjunction with it, no translator has ever rendered this verb any other way. God's command for Christians is that they should sing, and if playing instruments of music is an acceptable part of divine worship, it is difficult to understand why it would not have been so stated in this place. Arguments from the ancient meaning of [*@psallo*] are, as F. F. Bruce declared, "irrelevant to the question of instrumental music, one way or the other."^[20]

WHY INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN THE WORSHIP OF GOD IS REJECTED

1. There is nothing strange or unusual about some Christians rejecting mechanical music as in any manner appropriate or permissible in Christian worship. The entire Protestant world maintains exactly the same religious position with reference to use of the Rosary of the Virgin Mary, the sign of the cross, the burning of sacred incense, the sprinkling of holy water, the sacrifice of the mass, prayers for souls in purgatory, the lighting of holy candles ... and a hundred other innovative additions to Christianity, as being not taught in the New Testament. The identically same arguments which support the non-use of such devices as those here cited are valid

when applied to the use of mechanical instruments of music in God's worship. The burden of proof therefore rests upon those who reject some of the historical church's innovations, but do not reject them all. To many devout souls, it appears mandatory to reject all innovations (**Matthew 15:9**). No one has ever denied that the use of mechanical instruments in worship was unknown to the New Testament age and that the first historical appearance of them in Christian worship came during the eighth century.

2. It is accepted by many that the use of musical instruments in the Old Testament was an innovative change from David and that the change was not approved by the Lord. This, of course, is vigorously denied by some; but their denials are refuted by the truth that the Orthodox Hebrew Communion through the centuries has clung to the non-use of mechanical instruments, maintaining that God did not approve of them; and they know the teaching of the Old Testament on that point better than any modern scholars.
3. Mechanical music as worship of God is antithetical, by nature, to spiritual religion. From times immemorial, many centuries before Christ came, instruments of music were conspicuously associated with pagan worship (**Daniel 3:7**); and for the first six and one-half centuries of the Christian faith on earth, they were just as conspicuously omitted from Christian worship. Although Paul did not have such things in mind when he declared that "God is not worshipped with men's hands," the text truly applies to this question (**Acts 17:25**, KJV). The introduction of mechanical instruments into the worship of Christ involves the service and skills of technical and profession craftsmen who tend to emphasize "art" more and more, and "worship" less and less, resulting usually in the professionalizing of the "singers" as well as the players; and anyone who has ever known the internal workings of a big city church choir can testify to the blight that inevitably follows. There was never anything on earth more "unspiritual."

There are many other persuasive and convincing things to be said on this question, but the above are cited here because they were determinative in the thinking of this writer, at a time when he was a member of a "choir" and struggling with this question himself.

— Burton Coffman

[18] Pliny's Letter to the Emperor Trajan, 112 A.D. Henry Bettenson, Documents of the Christian Church (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 6.

[19] David Lipscomb, New Testament Commentaries, Ephesians (Nashville: The Gospel Advocate Company, 1937), p. 106.

[20] F. F. Bruce, op. cit., p. 107.