

# **Biblical New Testament Worship of God by Congregational A Cappella Singing vs. the Phenomena of Instruments & Praise Teams**

## **Resources and Observations**

Updated November 4, 2014

The following observations and references are organized in three sections. Some of the resources are available online, several on our church website: [www.winnipegchurch.ca](http://www.winnipegchurch.ca)

- 1 Scripture Observations: Old and New Testament**
- 2 Literature**
- 3 Personal Reflections**

### **1 Scripture Observations: Old and New Testament**

#### **Old Testament**

The idea of skilled dedicated singers distinct from the congregation of worshippers, and the use of instruments, appears in *Old Covenant* worship. Interestingly but perhaps not surprisingly based on their periods in history and the emphasis of the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, these references occur during the times of the kings and the period after God's Exile of His people to Babylon. Several well-known translations refer to appointed singers, one to musicians. In either case, the *Old Covenant* reference is to a separate group leading in worship as distinct from the congregation:

שִׁיר *shiyr*

Singers: KJV, ASV, NASB, ESV,

Musicians: NIV

#### **1 Kings 10:12**

The king made of the almug trees supports for the house of the Lord and for the king's house, also lyres and harps **for the singers**; such almug trees have not come in again nor have they been seen to this day.

#### **1 Chronicles 15:16**

Then David spoke to the chiefs of the Levites **to appoint their relatives the singers**, with instruments of music, harps, lyres, loud-sounding cymbals, to raise sounds of joy.

#### **Ezra 2:70**

Now the priests and the Levites, some of the people, **the singers**, the gatekeepers and the temple servants lived in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

#### **Nehemiah 7:1**

Now when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and **the singers and the Levites were appointed**.

## **New Testament**

Several key terms are evident in New Testament worship in song, “ones” and “hearts” in relation to God: “**one voice**,” “**one mind**,” and “**one another**,” “**in your hearts to God**” and “**with your heart to the Lord**.” Interestingly in the New Testament church there appear to be no references to an appointed group of singers. Rather, the precedents are for a total small group or assembly singing together, as in Jesus and the disciples at the Passover, Paul and Silas in Philippi, and the congregations in Colossae and Ephesus. The obvious emphasis is on total involvement of all those present and the emanation of praise to God from the heart.

The human voice is the perfect “instrument” and the New Testament worship neither requires nor authorizes mechanical instruments. There are no New Testament references to instruments being used in the church’s worship of God aside from the perfect instrument of the human voice. (Speaking of the New Testament church of Christ on earth vs. the eternal matters appearing beyond time in the Book of Revelation.)

The Old Testament instructions on worship stressed separation from God and the division of priests from people with God dwelling apart in His physical temple. The New Testament stresses the unity of God’s people, one priesthood of all believers, and His Spirit dwelling within human hearts from where worship in spirit and truth flows.

### **Matthew 26:30; 2.Mark 14:26**

After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

### **Acts 2:46-47**

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

### **Acts 16:25**

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them;

### **Romans 15:6**

...so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Colossians 3:16**

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

### **Ephesians 5:18-21**

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to

God, even the Father; and be subject to *one another* in the fear of Christ.

## **2 Literature**

Over the past decade I had the opportunity to do a significant amount of reading and teaching on the history and debates on the a cappella voices in worship vs. instrumental music issue. While this can be a different matter than praise teams in a *cappella* churches of Christ (there are denominational praise teams using instruments), there are significant related theological matters of importance. One resource that is particularly helpful is the section on “A Theology of Singing” within “Singing,” pages 268-273, in:

Ferguson, Everett. *Churches of Christ: An Ecclesiology for Today*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996.

In this section, “A Theology of Singing,” pages Ferguson highlights these important dimensions of the teaching of a cappella congregational singing as:

- 1) *preaching Christ*
- 2) *confession of faith*
- 3) expressing the *indwelling Spirit* and *word of Christ*
- 4) *spiritual sacrifice*
- 5) sharing in *heavenly, eschatological* praise
- 6) *mutual edification*
- 7) *the unity of the church*
- 8) involves the *whole person*
- 9) *deep religious emotion*

The essence of Ferguson’s points about a cappella congregational singing as being in line with the mind of God, what is due Him, and what is pleasing to Him are very helpful.

Two other books that have helpful material about singing in the early church and the ancient pagan world are:

Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

193-195 has a section on music and hymns in the Roman world that include information about the use of children’s choruses and instruments in pagan worship and sacrifice.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries*.

***Gospel Advocate*** The following Theme editions of the *Gospel Advocate* have some helpful relevant articles:

“The How, What, When and Where of Worship.” 151:3 (March 2009).

“Hymnology and Theology.” 151:4 (April 2009).

“Christ’s Victory in Song.” 153:4 (April 2011).  
“Sing: The Music of Worship.” 153:8 (August 2011).  
“Fine Tuning Worship.” 154:3 (March 2012).

While not as closely related, this edition has some interesting insights on the pressures on the church to conform to society:

“The Emerging Church Movement.” 150:11 (November 2008).

### ***Christian Studies***

I found some of the following articles very helpful.

Fortunately, you can access all these articles online at

<http://austingrad.edu/resources/christian-studies-publication>

#### **Christian Studies Number 13**

David Worley "Sing Where the Bible Sings"  
R. Mark Shipp "Trivializing the Holy"  
Jeffrey Peterson "How Shall the Seeker Say Amen?"  
Gary Holloway "The Pleasures of Worship"  
Allan J. McNicol "Contemporary Trends in Hymnody"  
Michael R. Weed "Worship and Ethics"

#### **Number 19**

Michael R. Weed "Consecrated Pragmatism: Trends in Modern Worship"  
R. Mark Shipp "Congregational Song is in Trouble: What Makes a Good Hymn?"  
Wendell Willis "The Changing Sound of (Worship) Music"  
Allan J. McNicol / Patricia B. McNicol "Our Musical Preferences Do Matter: Appropriate Music in the Assembly"  
Philip Camp "Singing and Worship From the Perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church"

#### **Number 23**

Alexander Campbell "Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs"

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Willis, Wendell. *When You Come Together: The Theology and Practice of Congregational Worship*. Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2010.  
ISBN:978-0-9666326-6-8

White, James F. *A Brief History of Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.  
Chapter 1, “Worship in the Churches of the New Testament Era,”  
pp. 36-38, “Church Music.”

Chapter 1, “Worship in the Churches of the Early Christian Centuries,”  
pp. 70-71, “Church Music.”

You might find White’s two sections interesting. If you don’t have access to this book, I can send you a pdf copy of these sections. Like Ferguson, he highlights some of the historical tensions between the purity of Christian worship of God vs. paganism.

White observes, “Early Christian music was sung in unison. Many early Christian writers consider this singing ‘with one voice’ as itself a testimony to the unity of the members of the body of Christ” (70).

This fits well with the teachings of the New Testament Scriptures noted above.

### **3 Personal Reflections**

I grew up in a denomination with polished professional, semi-professional and serious amateur singers in choirs, with instruments and a frequently loud entertainment focus. There is no doubt that these forms of praise teams tend to make the congregational worshipers into more passive spectators, an audience, instead of mutual edifiers engaging with one another in one voice praising God. In many of the hymns the instrument was so loud it was almost impossible to hear the congregation singing. Virtually all mega denominational churches here have an entertainment focus.

It has been my observation over the last three decades through long and often intense times with church members longing for unscriptural innovations that once they adopt one, other departures soon follow. Churches and individuals often adopt a package of unbiblical practices that ultimately can threaten their eternal salvation.

On the most positive note, congregational singing that praises God with one voice in worship is edifying, fully adequate and satisfying, and beautiful and in harmony with God and His will.

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For edification:

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[www.ccchs.ca](http://www.ccchs.ca)  
[www.directoryofchurches.com](http://www.directoryofchurches.com)  
[paul@paulbirston.com](mailto:paul@paulbirston.com)

[www.gospelherald.org](http://www.gospelherald.org)  
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