

# Psallo & the Piano

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## INTRODUCTION

- A. A preacher once told me that the church where he was working was broken into late one night.
  - 1. The alarm system notified both him & the police department.
  - 2. When the preacher arrived at the building, the sheriff had already arrived and was looking around.
  - 3. The sheriff looked at the preacher and said, “It doesn’t look like they took anything but your piano!”
- B. Indeed, we in the churches of Christ, stand out among the religious world for our use of *a cappella* music.
  - 1. People will occasionally look at us & say, “What’s the big deal? It’s just a nice aid to our singing?”
  - 2. My family believed that for many years.
    - a. My dad was reared in the independent Christian Church & he attended Kentucky Christian College to learn how to preach.
    - b. Dad started seeing some problems in that group, but the piano wasn’t one of them.
      - 1) Because of those problems, Mom & Dad began attending a congregation of the church.
      - 2) Yet, Mom & Dad basically taught us three boys in our earliest years that the piano wasn’t a big deal & it didn’t make any difference if you used it or not.
    - c. Of course, anytime a truly honest person looks at Scripture, he’ll be convicted by the living Word of God.
      - 1) Dad continued to study, and it became as clear to him—as it always has been—that instrumental music is unauthorized & sinful.
      - 2) I am thankful unto God that Dad continued that honest pursuit of truth, learned the truth, & taught us three boys the truth!
  - 3. Because Mom & Dad were raising me in the church but my grandparents were in another religious group, I wanted to be absolutely certain about who was right & wrong.
    - a. Therefore, instrumental music in the church’s worship has been a subject of serious study for me.
    - b. I have read numerous “proofs” to support instrumental music. Tonight, I wish us to take a serious look at one so-called “proof”—the use of the Greek term ψάλλω.

## THE USAGE OF ψάλλω

- A. This Greek term occurs five times in the New Testament.
  - 1. “I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing (ψάλλω) to your name” (Rom 15:9).
  - 2. “I will sing praise (ψάλλω) with my spirit, but I will sing (ψάλλω) with my mind also” (1 Cor 14:15).
  - 3. “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody (ψάλλω) to the Lord with your heart” (Eph 5:18-19).
  - 4. “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise (ψάλλω)” (Js 5:13).
- B. In classical Greek, the term ψάλλω referred to the touching of a string.
  - 1. Aeschylus (525-456 BC), the well-known Greek playwright, used ψάλλω for the plucking of a hair. Five hundred years before Jesus, this would have been the word you used to tell your son not to pull his baby sister’s hair.
  - 2. Euripides (480-460 BC) used the term to mean the “twanging” of a bowstring.
  - 3. ψάλλω was also used to reference the “twitching” of a carpenter’s line so that it would leave a mark.
  - 4. Plutarch did use the term to refer to the “plucking” on the strings of an instrument. In fact, the term came to mean the touching of the fingers to the strings of an instrument, rather than using a pick.
- C. Therefore, one of the main argument proponents of instrumental music in worship have used in the term ψάλλω.
  - 1. The argument is that since ψάλλω often referred to the playing of a stringed instrument and both Paul and James use the word, instrumental music must be acceptable to God.
  - 2. But, just how valid is that argument?

## FALLICIES OF THE ARGUMENT

- A. There are a multitude of fallacies in this argument.
- B. First, if ψάλλω in the New Testament means to play a stringed instrument, instrumental music is ***required*** before God.
  - 1. Notice that James uses this Greek verb to refer to the reaction of the cheerful. If I’m in my car and cheerful, I cannot sing unless I have an instrument to play along with my singing.

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2. Tammy sings to Wil every night before he goes to sleep. If ψάλλω means to play a stringed instrument, Tammy is sinning by not using a stringed instrument when she sings to him.
  3. I'm confident that if ψάλλω meant to sing with a stringed instrument, we could find someone here who could play the harp or guitar or whatever we planned to use. But, if ψάλλω required instrumental music, what would a congregation do that was small & had no one who could play a stringed instrument.
  4. Most of those who advocate that ψάλλω means to play a stringed instrument assert that the term only ***allows*** instrumental music, not that it's required.
    - a. Notice, for example, what one "scholar" in the independent Christian Church had to say: "*Psalmos* (or its cognate verb *psallo*) is used to mean instrumental music, or a song played to musical accompaniment in the Greek Old Testament. . . . For this reason and others we believe that Paul's use of the term *psalm* shows that God approves the use of instrumental music in our teaching and admonishing. However, they do not establish that such music must be used at all times."
    - b. How can it not? If ψάλλω means to play an instrument, God has commanded it, & we refuse to do so, we are sinning against God! It can be no other way.
- C. Second, if ψάλλω means to play a stringed instrument in the New Testament, we each one must play a stringed instrument.
1. Notice Ephesians 5:19 again: We are to be "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody (ψάλλω) to the Lord with your heart."
  2. The term is a plural participle in the original.
    - a. Therefore, each one of us would need to play a stringed instrument.
    - b. God would be commanding something based upon musical talent.
  3. I tried to play the trombone in the school band.
    - a. Dad had played the trombone & I wanted to be just like my dad.
    - b. I was horrible! I have no musical talent whatsoever.
  4. But, if God is commanding that I play a stringed instrument, he's requiring that I use that non-existent talent for his glory.
    - a. Of course, God requires nothing that I cannot do.
    - b. In the Parable of the Talents, we read that the master gave "to each according to his ability" (Mt 25:15).
    - c. But, if God is requiring that I play a stringed instrument, he isn't giving me a requirement according to my ability but far beyond it.
- D. Third, if ψάλλω authorizes instrumental music, it only authorizes ***stringed instruments***.
1. The word means to touch the strings. Therefore, any wind instrument is out; I couldn't use drums or a tambourine; I could not use an electronic keyboard. I could only use a stringed instrument.
  2. Furthermore, the piano would be out.
    - a. Yes, I know that the piano has strings, but you do not touch them when you're playing. You hit keys that move hammers that touch the strings. ψάλλω means to touch the finger to the string.
    - b. If I were using a guitar, I couldn't use a pick. I'd literally have to touch the strings.
- E. Fourth, those who affirm that ψάλλω authorizes instrumental music overlook the fact that words change.
1. F. F. Bruce, a well-known evangelical scholar of the late 20th century, wrote, "Words are not static things. They change their meaning with the passage of time."
  2. We all know that words change meaning.
    - a. Those of you who use the KJV understand that "conversation" in the 1600's meant "manner of life" & today it means "manner of speaking."
    - b. If you watch the Flintstones, you'll have a "gay ol' time." I seriously doubt that those lyrics would be written that way today.
    - c. I'm a major Stephen King fan. I just finished reading *'salem's Lot*—written in the early 1970's. There is a word King uses repeatedly in the book that was a common, everyday word then, but the word has a somewhat vulgar meaning today. King never uses it in the vulgar sense, but in the everyday use of the 1970's.
  3. The term ψάλλω drastically changed its meaning over the course of time.
    - a. E. A. Sophocles' *Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods (From B.C. 146 to A.D. 1100)* defines ψάλλω as "chant, sing religious hymns."
    - b. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament completed about 250 years before Jesus, had a major influence on the development of ψάλλω in the New Testament's usage of the term.
      - 1) There are places in the Greek Old Testament where ψάλλω certainly means to sing on a stringed instrument.
        - a) "Whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand" (1 Sm 16:23).
        - b) "Then a harmful spirit from the LORD came upon Saul, as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand. And David was playing the lyre" (1 Sm 19:9).

- c) It is important to notice that in both of those passages the instrument is mentioned in the context. It's not just that there was playing, but the author informs us precisely what the instrument was upon which the playing took place.
- 2) But, there are other places in the Septuagint where ψάλλω clearly refers to vocal music.
  - a) "My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises (ψάλλω) to you; my soul also, which you have redeemed. And my tongue will talk of your righteous help all the day long" (Ps 71:23-24). The idea here is clearly vocal music, for the text speaks of lips shouting for joy & the tongue talking of God's righteousness.
  - b) "Sing to him, sing praises (ψάλλω) to him; tell of all his wondrous works!" (Ps 105:2). The idea in this verse is clearly vocal praise, for the psalmist says that one is to "tell of all" God's works.
  - c) Some might say that these two references do not demonstrate that ψάλλω carried a vocal connotation in these passages.
    - 1) After all, one might say, "Someone could shout for joy with the lips while he played on an instrument."
    - 2) However, such a claim overlooks the use of Hebrew parallelism.
      - i. In Hebrew poetry, the second line often repeats the exact same idea in slightly different words.
      - ii. For example, notice Psalm 1:2: "His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." Delighting in the law of the LORD is the same thing as meditating on that law day & night.
      - iii. Therefore, in Psalm 71 shouting to the Lord for joy is the same thing as singing praises to God; in Psalm 105, singing praise to God is the same thing as telling of his wondrous works.
      - iv. Since one cannot shout to the Lord with ones lips by using an instrument & one cannot tell of God's wondrous works by using an instrument, ψάλλω refers purely to vocal praise in these two Psalms.
- 3) I apologize, but I need to get a little technical to make a very important point. The Greek construction in the Septuagint is quite important for New Testament usage.
  - a) When ψάλλω is used to refer to instrumental music, the typical construction is to use the preposition ἐν (with/on) and put the instrument played in the dative case. That is, for example, the construction at 1 Sm 19:9 where David plays upon his lyre to calm Saul's evil spirit.
  - b) However, when the Lord is mentioned as the one to whom the music is directed, the Lord is mentioned in the dative case without the preposition ἐν.
  - c) That becomes important as one looks at Ephesians 5:19.
    - 1) If Paul intended ψάλλω to mean "to play," he has specified the instrument upon which the playing is to be done—the human heart.
    - 2) Paul's use of ψάλλω cannot be used to advocate instrumental music in light of the term's use in the Septuagint.
- 4) Early Christians used ψάλλω to refer to vocal praise.
  - a) Clement of Alexandria, who lived at the end of the second century uses a quite extensive musical vocabulary.
    - 1) Clement often uses ψάλλω to introduce quotations from the Psalms. We would translate his words as "The Holy Spirit (or David) sings . . ." or "The Holy Spirit (or David) says in the Psalms . . ."
    - 2) Especially illustrative is Clement's is this line from Clement: "This word sings (ψάλλω) through David concerning our Lord, saying . . ."
  - b) In the third century, Origen wrote this in regard to 1 Corinthians 14:15: "For neither can our understanding pray, unless previously the Spirit prays, hearkening as it were to it, nor likewise can it sing (ψάλλω) and hymn the Father in Christ with rhythm, melody, measure and harmony, unless the Spirit . . . first praise and hymn him." Our understanding cannot play on a musical instrument.
  - c) Why would the early Christians use ψάλλω to refer to vocal praise if the New Testament meaning was to play a stringed instrument?
    - 1) Someone might say, "Justin, the word simply changed meaning. These folks wrote 150-250 years after the time of the apostles & words can change meaning in less time than that."
    - 2) That's true. However, do we Christians not typically use words in their biblical meaning?
      - i. For example, when I mention "baptism," I'm not talking about sprinkling some water on a baby's head. I'm not even talking about adult immersion to join the church. When I say the word "baptism," I am speaking—as the Bible does—of the immersion of a believing adult for the remission of sins. Nothing else is really baptism.

- ii. If ψάλλω in the New Testament, certainly those closest to the time of the apostles would have known that & would have not written of ψάλλω as meaning vocal praise.
- 5) Those who know Greek best declare that ψάλλω means vocal praise in the New Testament.
  - 1) W. E. Vine who produced the well-known *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, said, “The word psallo originally meant to play a stringed instrument with the fingers, or to sing with the accompaniment of a harp. Later, however, and in the New Testament, it came to signify simply to praise without the accompaniment of an instrument.”
  - 2) Ralph Earle who wrote *Word Meanings in the New Testament*, says, “‘Making melody’ is one word in Greek, psallontes. The verb psallo meant first to strike the strings of a harp or lyre. Then it meant to ‘strike up a tune.’ Finally it was used in the sense ‘to sing.’”
- F. The argument that ψάλλω includes instrumental music also ignores the history of the early church.
  - 1. It is an undeniable fact that the earliest Christians did not use instrumental music. All church historians recognize this fact.
  - 2. If ψάλλω meant to sing with accompaniment in the New Testament, why did the early Christians disobey that command?
- G. Obviously, ψάλλω does not have any reference to using instrumental music in the New Testament.
  - 1. There is, in fact, absolutely no authority for the use of instrumental music in the worship of the church.
  - 2. Let us resolve to honor God the way he has directed!