

Instrumental Music in worship and Ephesians 5:19

The Bible plainly teaches that we must worship God in spirit and in truth. (John 4:24.) To worship God in truth is to worship God in harmony with his word, for all of God's word is truth. (Psalm 33:4; 119:160; John 17:17.) It is evident, then, that if we are to worship God it must be in harmony with his word. With this in mind let us examine Ephesians 5:19 in order to determine what God would have us to do in worship.

The Context

Ephesians 5:19 is not, by itself, a complete sentence or thought, but is rather a part of verses 18-21, which form a complete sentence and thought.

In verse 18 Paul commanded the Christians in Ephesus to "be not drunk with wine ... but be filled with the Spirit." These two commands, one negative and one positive, appear as follows in the Greek New Testament:

(1) *Me methuskesthe* (literally "not be you drunk") is a present passive imperative verb, second person plural.

(2) *Plerousthe* (literally "be you filled") is also a present passive imperative verb, second person plural.

These two commands/verbs form the basis for the remaining construction and thought of this passage. They are followed by five successive participles:

(1) *Lalountes* (speaking, v. 19), a present active participle (imperative sense), nominative, masculine, second person plural.

(2) *Adontes* (singing, v. 19), also a present active participle (imperative sense), nominative, masculine second person plural.

(3) *Psallontes* (making melody, v.19), also a present active participle (imperative sense), nominative, masculine, second person plural.

(4) *Eucharistountes* (giving thanks, v. 20), also a present active participle (imperative sense), nominative, masculine, second person plural.

(5) *Hupotassomenoi* (submitting yourselves, v. 21), a present passive participle (imperative sense), nominative, masculine second person plural.

The Construction

It is essential to note that both the leading verbs and the following five participles are all imperative. With regard to such, note the following statements by Greek grammarians and commentators:

(1) J. Gresham Machen says "The imperative mood is used in commands . . . Prohibition (the negative of a command) is expressed by present imperative with *me* or by the aorist subjunctive with *me*." (p. 180.)

(2) Ray Summers notes: "It (i.e., imperative mood-*jlá*) is the mood which expresses action which is to be realized by the exercise of the will of one person upon that of another." (p. 112.) He also notes that it is used in the following ways: (1) cohortative-positive command, (2) prohibitive-negative command, (3) entreaty, and (4) to grant permission. (p.113.)

(3) Ernest DeWitt Burton states: "The imperative mood is used in commands and exhortations . . . entreaties and petitions ... to express consent . . . to purpose an hypothesis." (p. 80, cf. also William Hershey Davis, p.170.)

(4) William Sanford Lasor says: "The imperative mood is the mood of commands and prohibitions, of exhortations entreaties and the like. Since a command is generally directed to the person or persons spoken to, it is usually in the 2nd person. *Metanoesate* /Repent' (Acts 2:38)." (B-148.)

(5) John Eadie, with reference to the use of the participles following the two leading verbs, says: "The participle (referring to *lalountes-jlá*) is connected in syntax with *plerousthe*, for this 'speaking' is the result of spiritual fulness." (in. loc., p. 399.)

In summary: (1) Ephesians 5:18-21 contains two present imperative verbs followed by five present imperative participles, thus indicating commands. (2) Both the verbs and the participles are second person plural, thus affecting all who come within the scope of this passage. (3) The verbs and the participles are syntactically related. (4) The

participles “carry out” the thoughts of the leading verbs by explaining how it is that the commands contained within those verbs are to be fulfilled. (5) The use of the imperative mood indicates that someone is seeking to bring the will of another into conformity with his own will. God, therefore, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of Paul, is seeking for us to bring our wills into conformity with his will concerning the subjects herein discussed.

Because the issue concerning instrumental music has almost without exception centered around the meaning of the term *psallontes* it is only fitting to focus our present discussion there.

Many of the efforts to determine the meaning of *psallontes* have, according to the average student, involved complicated and confusing linguistic, lexical, and etymological studies. It seems, however, in light of the information presented, that another, perhaps simpler, tack is also feasible.

The general discussion concerning the meaning of this term has centered around the acts of “singing” and “playing.” These two acts, either singly, or in some combination, have been set forth as the only possibilities for the true meaning of *psallontes*. It must be the case, therefore, that the meaning of *psallontes* is either: (1) singing only or (2) playing only, or (3) singing and playing, or (4) singing or playing. No other possible combinations exist. The meaning must be one of these four.

We can begin our considerations by ruling out two of the possibilities. First, *psallontes* can not possibly mean playing only. The reasoning for such is as follows:

(1) The present imperative second person plural construction of the verbs and participles in this passage demand that whatever actions are under consideration must be performed by all parties under consideration. (2) To contend that playing only is the meaning of *psallontes* is inconsistent with the meaning of *lalountes*, which demands speaking, and *adontes*, which demands singing. (3) Furthermore, I know of no one who even contends for such a claim, nor do I know of any one who attempts to implement the practice of such. No “instrumental church” demands that all of its members play musical instruments in worship.

Second, *psallontes* cannot possibly mean singing and playing. The

reasoning is as follows: (1) Unless all participants are playing organs or pianos or any other instrument which allows the user to be free to sing at the same time as play, then this meaning is absurd. It is physically impossible to both play and sing, at the same time, any musical instrument which requires the use of the mouth. Louis Armstrong, great musician though he was, stopped singing to play, and stopped playing to sing. If *psallontes* means that both singing and playing is necessary, then it is imperative that all participants in worship learn to play some instrument which allows such activity. (2) This contention is made even more absurd when we realize that the command to *psallontes* was made to the first century church. Where is the passage (either biblical or secular) which demonstrates that all of the early Christians worshipped by both singing and playing, thus fulfilling the meaning of *psallontes*? (3) Furthermore, I know of no one who demands the practice of singing and playing by all in the Lord's church today.

The only remaining alternatives of the original four are singing only and singing or playing. Let us consider singing or playing first.

The command to sing or play, if such were the meaning of *psallontes* in Ephesians 5:19, would entail the following: (1) It would be an imperative command, as indicated by the lead verbs as well as by the participles which follow. (2) It would be applicable to all those who come under the scope of Ephesians 5:19, for both the lead verbs and the participles are second person plural. (3) It would involve a choice of either singing or playing by all parties involved. If this were the meaning of *psallontes*, then each participant in worship would be free to choose either singing or playing.

The problem comes, however, when we realize that the occurrence of *psallontes* is not isolated from the lead verbs and the other four participles. Note some of the difficulties involved in contending that *psallontes* means sing or play.

(1) How is it possible for every person to either sing or play, thus following the will of the Lord (if such is the meaning of *psallontes*), when they are also commanded to speak (*lalountes*) and to sing (*adontes*)? If someone (in following the alleged meaning of *psallontes* as permitting either singing or playing) decided to play, how could that person play without singing and be pleasing to God when the imperative participles *lalountes* and *adontes* demand speaking and singing?

(2) Furthermore, how can the actions of one who decides to play conform with the actions of those who decide to sing? If the terms under consideration are second person plural, thus applying to all who come within the scope of Ephesians 5:19, then how are they all obeying the commands of the Lord if some are performing one action and some another?

(3) In examining this passage, why is it the case that some will contend that *psallontes* carries with it the meaning of "this or that" and not contend that one or more of the other four participles also means "this or that?" Can *lalountes* (speaking) mean "speaking or something else?" Can *adontes* (singing) mean "singing or something else?" If *psallontes* can have an either/or meaning, surely other imperative participles can! Yet no one contends for an either/or meaning for any other participle in this passage.

(4) This special pleading is most unusual. Where is there another example of an imperative verb or participle carrying with it the command to do "either this or that?" "Repentance" and "baptism" in Acts 2:38 are both imperative verbs. Where is the person that will contend that "repentance" and "baptism" have either/or meanings?

(5) Not only is the contention that *psallontes* involves an either/or command without precedent in the New Testament, it is also most unusual that it involves a choice of two actions which are qualitatively different. Singing and playing are not varying degrees of the same action. Singing is not playing and playing is not singing. They are distinctly different. Why would God give an either/or command in the first place? And, if he did, why would he give a choice between two entirely different actions?

(6) If *psallontes* carries with it an either/or meaning in Ephesians 5:19, does it carry the same meaning in Romans 15:9, 1 Corinthians 14:15 (where it occurs twice), or James 5:13? Did Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:15 really intend "I will sing or play with the spirit, and I will sing or play with the understanding?" I think not.

(7) Furthermore, *psallontes* is said to be done "in your heart." Playing does not occur in the heart, but the action required by *psallontes* must.

Only one possibility remains. The participle *psallontes* can mean nothing else but to sing only. "Singing only" is in harmony

with *lalountes* (speaking) and *adontes* (singing), both of which demand all involved to use their voices in praise to God, thus being filled with the Spirit.

Conclusion

If we must act in harmony with Bible authority in worship, then it is possible to know and obey God's commands that relate to worship.

If God has commanded us to *psallontes*, then we must be able to understand God's intention ... else God expects us to do something that we can not know, and therefore, can not do.

Of the four possibilities discussed with reference to the meaning of *psallontes*, only one, singing only, is possible.

Let us therefore sing, "making melody" in our hearts by following God's commands to worship without the use of mechanical instruments of music.

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