

Can Instrumental Music Save Us?

Introduction. “Where have all the young people gone?” It’s the heart-wrenching question too many older saints are asking. The story is familiar: Children are “raised in the church” — they go to Bible class and assemblies, listen to sermons, and are baptized. But after high school, some of them (now young adults) leave to attend a denomination or other religious group, while some turn their backs on religion entirely.

A study published by Abilene Christian University reported that, “Forty-five percent of all teenagers raised in churches of Christ end their affiliation sometime after high school graduation”. The study also noted nearly one third loses faith in Christ altogether. What is to be done to retain young people?

I. *The Trend*

- A. In recent years, some preachers, professors, and elders among “mainstream” churches of Christ have actively promoted introducing instrumental music into worship as an effort toward youth retention. They have argued that a cappella singing doesn’t connect with young Christians, and churches could keep their youth while attracting others by blending instrumental music with the “tradition” of vocal music.
- B. For example, Danny Corbitt wrote a book advocating instrumental music in worship entitled *Missing More Than Music*. In it, he recounts his time as a youth leader, missionary, and minister for churches of Christ.
 1. Throughout his ministry years, he was never convicted about a cappella praise. He writes, “God reminded me that I could only call people to what I was certain that he had said. So, I never taught a cappella; I avoided the topic as much as possible ... We sang a cappella, but I couldn’t teach on it” (p. 4). When a denominational campus minister asked him his views on instrumental music, Corbitt told him he “didn’t understand our arguments” (p. 5). He found students in his campus ministry equally unconvinced about a cappella praise.
 2. Corbitt argues that the opposition of churches of Christ to instrumental music in worship is largely responsible for youth leaving the church. He wrote, “Whether or not you agree with our opposition to instruments and choruses, you should know that most of our students who go away to college are not convinced ... I had to take into account the role of views like our opposition to choruses and instruments in the exodus of the students from our churches. Right now, you may think that whatever I believe about instruments and choruses is wrong, but we must ask why our sons and daughters are most likely to leave our churches.”
- C. Another preacher justifies his congregation’s adopting instrumental music in worship as a strategy to retain and appeal to the youth.
 1. His congregation already provided instrumental music in a variety of settings for their youth, and it was time to bring it into the assembly, lest the youth leave for another church or leave the Lord altogether. The only way to save the a cappella “tradition” for the future was to go instrumental now.

2. He wrote, “I believe the best way to preserve an a cappella tradition for future generations is to offer both a cappella and instrumental worship in a creative blend. There are several reasons for this conclusion ... Our children experience instrumental praise in their programming. Our teens enjoy praise concerts at their gatherings. When they leave home they are finding it increasingly difficult to connect in churches that are exclusively a cappella. Some studies suggest as high as 80 percent of our children who graduate from high school are now choosing other churches to attend if they attend at all” (Ken Young, study presented at Fourth Avenue Church of Christ, Franklin, TN, April 27, 2008).
- D. In fact, youth appeal has been a major defense for “mainstream” churches of Christ adding instrumental music. Oak Hills Church in San Antonio was one of the first congregations to do so (2003). They launched a new Sunday evening service featuring instruments that was “geared toward young adults”.

II. Their Argument and Answer

- A. Instrumentalists among churches of Christ contend that in order to save the youth (at least to retain them), churches must develop services “geared toward young adults,” which apparently necessitates the inclusion of praise-rock bands in worship.
 1. Who isn’t concerned when young adults turn away from their Creator and their spiritual family? It’s painful.
 2. So instrumentalists among churches of Christ persuade undiscerning or emotionally distraught Christians that altering the corporate worship and adding instrumental music will safeguard the youth. People will do just about anything for their kids — even revise their worship.
- B. Though the Instrumentalists have been pushing their views for years, their agenda is not logical, and it doesn’t follow the Bible.
 1. First, it doesn’t follow logically that adding instrumental music will ultimately keep the youth.
 - a) In 2008, the Pew Research Center interviewed 35,000 adults to gain a picture of the American religious landscape. They found, “More than one-quarter of American adults have left the faith of their childhood for another religion or no religion at all — factoring in moves from one stream or denomination of Protestantism to another, the number rises to 44 percent ... the 44 percent figure is ‘a very conservative estimate,’ and more research is planned to determine the causes.” These findings mirror the Abilene Christian University study done among churches of Christ.
 - b) If every religious group in the U.S. is losing nearly half of their youth, how’s it reasonable to conclude instrumental music is the answer that will turn the tide for churches of Christ? At least 44% of the youth among our denominational neighbors is leaving too; yet, the denominations have been using instrumental music for 150 years!
 - c) Music in worship could be a factor in a Christian’s decision to leave the faith, but it’s not the sole reason they are likely to leave. If it were, the

denominations would have nothing like the loss rate they are experiencing.

2. Second, it doesn't follow biblically that adding instrumental music will benefit the youth.
 - a) The Old Testament chronicles many generations of Israelites. One generation would be faithful to God; the next would depart from God to serve idols. God would send prophets to work with the wayward people, and these men were never instructed to take those elements of cultural entertainment (or pagan rites) that the youth found exciting and add them into tabernacle worship in order to retain straying Israelites.
 - b) Instead, the prophets cried out, "Repent!" God didn't prize innovation in worship — He prized faithfulness.

III. In Defense of A Cappella Praise

- A. Today, Christians need to realize that if God's worship is profaned in order to attract or keep our youth, our youth simply become involved in the errors of vain and false worship (Matthew 15:7-9).
 1. It must be determined from the New Testament what music pleases God, and then stand there. If the youth decide to leave, regrettably, that's their choice.
 2. But for congregations to capitulate to our entertainment-driven culture's ideal of desirable worship is a grievous error.
- B. God revealed the music He wanted for godly worship. He said "sing" in the New Testament, and He said it a number of times (1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).
 1. He didn't say, "Play instruments". And there's no example of Jesus or any of the apostles ever doing so for worship.
 2. Although musical instruments were available in the first century (they were used in the worship of both the Jews and Greeks), the early church didn't use them. Instrumental music was introduced into the worship of the church several centuries after its inception.
- C. The early Christians sang to praise God, and they sang to encourage and edify one another (Hebrews 13:15; 10:24-25). That's what Christians (especially the youth) need to know.
 1. God gave them a voice with a purpose — a ministry — in the worship of the congregation. Their ministry is one of teaching and admonishing.
 2. They educate, exhort, and correct both themselves and the congregation with the "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" that they profess by singing to "one another" (Colossians 3:16).
 - a) I'm encouraged to hold fast with "Standing on the Promises of God".
 - b) I'm exhorted to self-control with "Angry Words, O Let Them Never".
 - c) I'm edified in my relationship with God with "Alleluia".
- D. Nearly every denomination once believed as we do. Most worshipers today don't realize that the church of which they are a member at one time opposed instrumental music in worship. Many well-known religious scholars vigorously protested their use: Philip Schaff, Edwin Dickinson, Thomas Aquinas, John

Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, David Benedict, John Girardeau, John Wesley, and Martin Luther all have outstanding quotes on the errors of instrumental music.

Conclusion. Far from being the cause of the “exodus”, a cappella collective singing should anchor young Christians in the Lord’s church. Understanding the biblical basis of the practice can be a significant factor in their future faithfulness. Instrumentalists cry that churches must add instrumental music for the sake of the youth, but brethren understand: a cappella praise glorifies and pleases God.

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