

Singing versus Playing Instruments In Worship

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

The argument to be examined is not whether singing was a part of New Testament worship (cf. I Cor. 14:26), but rather how singing is to be conducted. Using instruments continues to be an issue in many churches of Christ today. Let us examine Paul’s statement to the Ephesians, quoted above, to prove that New Testament singing in worship excludes playing instruments and includes the voice alone.

Ephesians 5:19 is written in the context of a prescribed way of life (i.e., a walk). Christians are told to “speak one to another in psalms...” The word “*speaking*” (*lalountes*) = “to talk, chat, prattle, babble... generally, to talk, say... to speak” (LS 463). The Greek *lalountes* is a verb in the present tense and is active (Friberg 598). Therefore, the command is to continue to actively speak to each other in the various prescribed songs. The words “*one to another*” are translated “*yourselves*” by NM 771. The Greek word is *eautois* = “of himself, herself, itself...” (LS 219). The Christian is to speak to others in “*psalms*” (*psalmos*) = “a twitching or twanging with the fingers, of a bow... mostly of musical strings: to sound of the harp... later, a song sung to the harp, a psalm” (LS 900). “Impulse, touch, of the chords of a stringed instrument; in NT a sacred song, psalm” (Moulton 441). This word is found at I Corinthians 14:26 in relation to the first day of the week worship service. Interestingly, the Greek word *psalmos* is a noun (Friberg 598). A noun is a person, place, or thing. The “thing” under consideration then is a song (whether that song is sung with an instrument or with the voice alone matters not as far as the Greek word is concerned). If the Greek word were a verb, then the action of playing an instrument or singing a song would be under consideration. Since the noun is under consideration, the subject is the song as opposed to the action of singing. Christians are to speak to each other in “*hymns*” (*humnos*) as well. *Humnos* = “a hymn, festive song or ode, in praise of gods or heroes” (LS 829). “A song; a hymn, song of praise to God” (Moulton 413). Again, the Greek word *humnos* is a noun (Friberg 598). The “thing” under consideration is the song or ode. Christians are to speak to each other in “*spiritual songs*” (*pneumatikos odes*) = “of spirit, spiritual” (LS 649). *Odes* = “a song, lay, ode, lyric poetry... song, singing” (LS 904). “An ode (a poem intended to be sung by a chorus at a public festival or as part of a drama), song, hymn” (Moulton 443). Once again, the Greek word *odes* is a noun (Friberg 598) with *pneumatikos* being the adjective that describes the noun. These songs are spiritual as opposed to carnal.

The command is to speak to one another in one of three kinds of songs (i.e., a psalm, hymn, or song [ode]). The Christian is to speak to other Christians by these songs. The implication as to the understandable nature and the teaching and admonishing qualities of these songs can be seen by looking to Colossians 3:16 where Paul stated, “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God.*” The Christian is to speak to others through these three modes of songs by means of “*singing*” (*ado*) = “to sing... then of any sound, to twang, of the bowstring... to whistle... to sing, chant... songs to be sung... to sing, praise” (LS 14). The Greek word *ado* is a verb in the active voice and present tense (same as “speaking”) (Friberg 598). At this point, we see that the Christian’s speaking to others in understandable words for the purpose of teaching and admonishing through songs is to be done by actively singing one of three types of songs (i.e., a psalm, hymn, or ode). I am to speak by singing these types of songs by “*making melody in my heart to the Lord.*” The word “*melody*” (*psallo*) = “to touch sharply, to pluck, pull, twitch... to twang the bow-string, to send a

shaft twanging from the bow... a carpenter's red line, which is twitched and then suddenly let go, so as to leave a mark... to play a stringed instrument with the fingers, not with the plectron... to sing to a harp, sing" (LS 899). "To move by a touch, to twitch; to touch, strike the strings or chords of an instrument; to play on a stringed instrument; to sing to music; in NT to sing praises" (Moulton 441). Again, this Greek word is a present tense active verb just as the words "*speaking*" and "*singing*" above (Friberg 598).

Note the connection between *psalmos* (psalms) and *psallo* (melody). Both of these words have to do with plucking strings and singing. Whether that plucking be a musical instrument or a carpenter's red line, or singing songs must be determined by the context in which the word is used. As noted above the psalms, hymns, and odes may be sung with an instrument or voice. So the Greek word *psallo* (melody) can mean to play an instrument or use the voice to sing. The "*melody*" of one of the three types of songs is accomplished by either singing or playing an instrument. The question to answer is whether singing with the voice alone, singing with an instrument alone, or singing with an instrument and voice is intended. Paul told us that it is the strings of the "*heart*" (i.e., the mind, will, and spirit of man) that is under consideration at Ephesians 5:19. The plucking of the strings is done "*with the heart* (mind)." A physical instrument is not under discussion here. The only instrument that we are commanded to sing with is the heart. I can only sing songs of psalms, hymns, or odes with the heart by my voice. The Bible heart has the ability to teach and admonish through psalms, hymns, and odes where as a musical instrument cannot (cf. Col. 3:16).