

## **The Impact of Psallo on the Instrumental Music Issue**

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In the New Testament example after example is given of early Christian worship assemblies. The worship of the brethren in the first century was simple, intimate, edifying and most of all, it was pleasing to God. Christians from every walk of life, some old and some young, some rich and some poor, some Jewish and some Greek would come together as one body and worship the one Lord. When examining these early worship assemblies as recorded in the pages of the New Testament, one will notice the absence of many of our modern day worship innovations including instruments of music.

Though not mentioned in one example of an early Christian assembly, there are those who still vie for the inclusion of the instrument in worship. The proponents of instrumental music in worship will often appeal to the Greek term *psallo*, and conclude its definition implicitly authorizes its inclusion. This article, however, will show otherwise from citations found in lexicons, commentaries, versions and grammars.

### **Lexicons and Dictionaries on *Psallo***

The term *psallo* is only employed five times by New Testament writers. It is translated as the English term “sing” (Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; James 5:13) and “making melody” in (Ephesians 5:19). The instrumental music advocates profess that the true definition of *psallo* is “to pluck” (Zodhiates 1491). It has been defined that “to *psallo*” would be similar to what a carpenter would do to a chalk line or a harpist to a harp. The problem with many definitions of ancient terms is they will often change meaning overtime. What a word meant during one period of time will often change and evolve as time goes on. This seems to be the case for *psallo* as well.

The Greek language at the time of the composition of the New Testament was not a new language. In fact, it “extends back about fifteen centuries before Christ. The era called the “classical” period was from around 900 B.C. (the time of Homer) to the conquests of Alexander the Great (c. 330 B.C.)” (Jackson). During this ancient period the word most likely originally meant “to touch”. In fact the biographer Plutarch in his life on Pericles, records Alexander playing an instrument and his father reproaches him saying “Are you not ashamed to play (*psallein*) so well” (Delling 490-1).

The issue under discussion is not what the original definition of *psallo* was, but instead, what was its meaning during the time of the writing of the New Testament. According the most lexicographers the word referred exclusively to non-instrumental vocal music in the New Testament. In fact, they will often contrast it with the instrumental usage of the term in the Old Testament. The following lexicons lend evidence to this definition. (Note: none of the authors quoted bellow are theologians within the churches of Christ to which this definition is usually attributed).

- (William Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary): “***psallo* means to sing**” (659).
- (New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology): “***psallo* has the sense to sing hymns of praise**” (Bartels 672).
- (The New Analytical Greek Lexicon): “**in the N.T to sing praises**” (Perschbscher 442).
- (Vines Expository Dictionary): “**in the NT, to sing a hymn, sing praise**” (402).
- (The Analytical Greek Lexicon): “**in the N.T, to sing praises**” (Moulton 401).
- (The Reader’s Greek New Testament): “***psallo*: I sing, sing praise**” (Goodrich 426).

- (A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament): “**in the NT, to sing a hymn, sing praises**” (Abbot-Smith 487).
- (Abridged Theological Dictionary of New Testament Theology): “**does not now denote literally playing on a stringed instrument**” (Kittel 1226).
- (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament): “**in the N.T, to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song**” (675).

### **Commentators on *Psallo***

Many commentators when discussing passages that contain the word *psallo* agree with the aforementioned definitions as well. Marvin Vincent in his Word Studies writes concerning the difference between the usage of the term in the Old Testament and New Testament along with the testimony of the early church fathers. This is found within his discussion of the phrase “I will sing” and *psallo* in 1 Corinthians 14:15. Vincent states:

Some think that the verb here has its original signification of singing with an instrument. This is the dominant sense in the Septuagint, and both Basil and Gregory of Nyssa define a psalm as implying instrumental accompaniment; and Clement of Alexandria, while forbidding the use of the flute in the agapae, permitted the harp. But neither Basil nor Ambrose nor Chrysostom, in their panegyrics upon music mention instrumental music, and Basil expressly condemns it. Bingham dismisses the matter summarily, and cites Justin Martyr as saying expressly that instrumental music was not used in the Christian Church. The verb is used here in the general sense of singing praise (269-70).

A.T Robertson writes concerning the same passage that “*Psallō* originally meant to play on strings, then to sing with an accompaniment (Eph 5:19), and here apparently to sing without regard to an instrument” (183).

The Word Biblical Commentary, a very thorough commentary on the Greek New Testament made this statement regarding the usage of *psallo* in Ephesians 5:19 “Although its original meaning involved plucking a stringed instrument, *psallo* here means to make music by singing (cf. also 1 Cor 14:15; Jas 5:13), so that there is no reference in this verse to instrumental accompaniment” (Lincoln 346). Many other commentaries on the New Testament agree with the aforementioned conclusions, however, space does not permit the citation of them all.

### **English Versions and *Psallo***

Another grand testimony toward *psallo* not carrying the definition of “to strum or play” in the New Testament are the many English translation in widespread use today. Most of the more literal English contain very little doctrinal bias and strive to give accurate translations in English of the original Greek and Hebrew words. All of what are considered more literal translations translate *psallo* in a way that conveys non-instrumental music. For example in 1 Corinthians 14:15 *psallo* is rendered “sing” in almost every English translation including the ASV, NASB, KJV, NKJV, ESV, HCSB and NIV. Most of the translators on all of these versions are part of religious groups which employ instruments in worship, yet they did not translate *psallo* as anything other than “sing”.

### **Greek Grammars and *Psallo***

In Ephesians 5:19 the apostle Paul stated “speaking to one another in psalms hymns and spiritual songs, singing and **making melody in your heart** to the Lord”. The participle “making

melody” (*psallontes*) is preceded by “in your heart” (*te kardia humon*). The phrase “in your heart” is in the Greek dative case. This type of case it has been identified and described as an “instrumental dative” (Dana 88). M.C Kurfees’ work on *psallo* gives a good explanation of the instrumental dative and how it relates to *psallo* as well as the term *baptizo*.

Water does not inhere in *baptizo*, nor does an instrument of music in *psallo*. When we meet with the word *baptizo* in Greek literature we have to learn from the context, or from some other source than the word itself, what the element is in which the action takes place. It may be water, it may be fire, it may be the Holy Spirit, it may be suffering, or it may be some other element, the element itself never inhering in the word. So precisely when we meet with the word *psallo*, the word itself does not indicate the object touched, or the instrument used. It may be the hair or beard, it may be a carpenter's line, it may be a bowstring, it may be a harp or other instrument of music, or, metaphorically, it may be the human heart. If we *psallo* with a bowstring, that is the instrument; if with a carpenter's line, that is the instrument; if with a harp, guitar, or organ, that is the instrument; and if with the human heart, that is the instrument (65).

Kurfees continues on to conclude:

Thus, the context of a word, or the time when, and sometimes the place where, it was used, is often the only means of determining its import; and, touching the New Testament usage and meaning of *psallo* in particular, it specifically says that Christians are to "*psallo with the heart*" (*ψαλλοντες τη καρδια υμων*, *making melody with your heart*, Eph. 5: 19). This is the only "*psalloing*" mentioned in its inspired pages, and therein incorporated as a part of Christian worship.

## **Conclusion**

There is abundant evidence in lexicons and dictionaries that the most accurate definition of *psallo* in the New Testament is to “sing praises”. Any definition that vies for the inclusion of instruments based upon term *psallo*, is to be rejected. Many scholarly commentaries on the Greek New Testament agree with the definition “to sing” as well as all most every English Bible in use today. Even if the original meaning of the word *psallo* was employed in passages such as Ephesians 5:19, the object of the “plucking” would be the strings of a believers heart. Worship is designed first and foremost to be pleasing to God. May we always offer up to Him the pleasing sacrifice of “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs...” all while “singing and making melody in our hearts...” (Ephesians 5:19).

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