

The Melody Within

By: David Burruss

Recently, someone reached out to me with several biblical questions. Some of this person's ideas were honestly pretty far out in left field. Still, one statement really stayed with me. I have heard it before, and because it keeps coming up, I think it is worth slowing down and talking through carefully. My hope is that this will help you think through it in a calm and biblical way.

The question was this. When Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 mention psalms, and the Greek word *psallō* historically meant striking or twanging the strings of an instrument, does that not imply that Christians should use instruments in worship? That is a fair question. It deserves more than a quick reaction or a dismissive answer. It deserves a thoughtful, text-first response.

So let's begin with the word itself. In Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19, Paul uses the verb *psallō*. In earlier classical Greek, *psallō* did mean to pluck or strike strings, often referring to playing a harp. That is well documented. However, by the time of Koine Greek, which is the language of the New Testament, the word had broadened and shifted in meaning. It was commonly used to mean singing praise. The instrument was no longer inherent in the word itself. Language changes over time. Words develop. The earlier meaning of a word does not automatically control how it is used centuries later.

What matters most is not how *psallō* was used in ancient poetry long before Christ, but how the Holy Spirit uses it in the New Testament. And this is where things become clear. In the New Testament, whenever *psallō* appears, no instrument is ever specified. Not once. There is no mention of harps, strings, or mechanical accompaniment in Christian assemblies.

Instead, Paul writes in Ephesians 5:19, "singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord". Notice where the melody is made. It is in the heart. Paul could have clarified by adding "with instruments" or "with harps," but he does not. He defines the location of the melody. It is internal. The instrument, if we may say it reverently, is the heart itself. That is not an accident. That is instruction.

When Paul also says in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs", the focus is clearly on mutual edification. Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs describe types of singing. They do not describe methods of accompaniment. The emphasis is on the word of Christ dwelling richly and believers teaching one another through song.

Some will point out that instruments were certainly used in Old Testament worship, and that is true. The Psalms speak often of praising God with harp and lyre and cymbals. But those instruments were connected to temple worship under the Law of Moses. They were authorized within the Levitical system and functioned alongside animal sacrifices and priestly service. That was part of the covenant God made with Israel.

The New Testament describes something different. First Peter 2:5 says that Christians are "a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." There is no physical temple today. There are no animal sacrifices. There is no Levitical priesthood. Our worship is spiritual in nature and governed by the teaching of Christ and His apostles.

If someone appeals to the Old Testament to authorize instruments in Christian worship, consistency becomes important. The same authority that established instrumental music also established incense, priestly garments, and sacrifices. Yet the New Testament does not carry those elements into the church. Instead, it gives clear instruction about singing and makes no mention of instrumental accompaniment.

And that silence is significant. The New Testament explicitly commands believers to sing. It instructs them to make melody in their hearts. It emphasizes gratitude, teaching, and mutual encouragement through song.

It never commands or authorizes instruments in the worship of the church. Jesus did not instruct His apostles to include them. The apostles did not instruct congregations to use them. Early Christian worship for centuries was characterized by a cappella singing.

This discussion is not about attacking anyone's sincerity. It is not about arguing over personal taste or musical preference. It is about letting the New Testament define its own terms and respecting the pattern given by inspired apostles. When God specifies what He desires, it is wise for us to stay within that instruction.

So does psallō authorize instruments in Christian worship? No, not in its New Testament context. When Paul uses the word in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, he spiritually redirects it. What once could describe literal strings is now centered in the inner man. The strings become the heart, the melody becomes praise to Christ, and the focus becomes teaching and admonishing one another as the word of Christ dwells richly among believers. The emphasis is not on producing sound with an external instrument, but on producing spiritual melody within. The New Testament does not ask, "What sounds good?" It consistently asks, "What did the Lord authorize?" and in these passages, the instruction is clear. Sing, and make melody in your heart to the Lord.

Worship is not about adding what sounds fuller or feels more powerful to us. It is about offering what the Lord has asked for. This is not about tradition versus preference, and it is not about defending what we happen to like. It is about letting the New Testament define its own terms and shape our practice accordingly. The church did not remove instruments as though something essential had been taken away. The apostles simply never brought them in. And there is something deeply moving about a congregation of believers lifting their voices together, hearts fully engaged, teaching and encouraging one another with truth. Sometimes the simplest sound, offered in obedience and sincerity, is the most beautiful of all.