

THE GLORIOUS CHURCH

SPECIAL STUDY II—MEANING OF “PSALLO” AND “PSALMOS” IN PAUL’S TIME

(This study is mostly taken from *Music in Christian Worship*, by Walter L. Straub, M.A., B.D., Litt. D.).

In Ephesians 5:19 we find the Greek verb “psallo” and the noun “psalmos.” We need to know exactly what these words meant when Paul wrote them, so that we will know our duty to God.

If “psallo” means “to play (music),” and “psalmos” means “instrumental music,” then it is not sinful to use instrumental music in our Christian life and worship, as some claim.

“Psallo” is found in the New Testament in Rom. 15:9, I Cor. 14:15, Eph. 5:19, and James 5:13. “Psalmos” is found in the New Testament in Luke 20:42, 24:44, Acts 1:20, Acts 13:33, I Cor. 14:26, Eph. 5:19, and Col. 3:16. In some of these references “psalmos” obviously refers to the book of Psalms or to individual psalms of David.

The following are actual examples of how the words “psallo” and “psalmos” were used by writers who lived near or during the time of Paul. These quotations clearly show the meaning of the words. Note carefully how these writers used the two words.

1. *Strabo*—(B.C. 24, I. 2, 3.) He was an eminent geographer and historian, often mentioned by Josephus and Lucian, and by Plutarch is called “The Philosopher.”

“Even as the musicians who teach how to play the harp (psallein) and the lyre, and the flute, lay claim to the same excellence.”

2. *Josephus* (Born A.D. 37)—Wrote the *History of the Jews* in twenty-four books, first in Hebrew, then later translated them personally into Greek. He was both a Greek and a Hebrew scholar, and a historian. He lived through the period in which the whole of the New Testament was written, with the possible

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exception of Revelation. His use of "psallo" shows its meaning at the period when he wrote.

Antiquities, VI, viii, 2; Pages 185-186. "So Samuel, when he had given him these admonitions, went away. But the Divine Power departed from Saul, and removed to David; who upon this removal of the Divine Spirit to him, began to prophesy. But as for Saul, some strange and demoniacal disorders came upon him, and brought upon him such suffocations as were ready to choke him; for which the physicians could find no other remedy but this, That if any person could charm those passions by singing (Gr., exadein) and playing (Gr., psalein, a form of "psallo") upon the harp, they advised them to inquire for such a one, and to observe when these demons came upon him and disturbed him, and to take care that such a person might stand over him, and play (psalein) upon the harp and recite hymns to him. Accordingly Saul did not delay, but commanded them to seek out such a man. And when a certain stander-by said that he had seen in the city of Bethlehem a son of Jesse, who was yet no more than a child in age, but comely and beautiful, and in other respects one that was deserving of great regard, who was skilful in playing (psalein) on the harp, and in singing (exadein) of hymns, (and an excellent soldier in war) he sent to Jesse, and desired him to take David away from the flocks, and send him to him, for he had a mind to see him, as having heard an advantageous character of his comeliness and his valour. So Jesse sent his son, and gave him presents to carry to Saul. And when he was come, Saul was pleased with him, and made him his armour-bearer, and had him in very great esteem; for he charmed his passion, and was the only physician against the trouble he had from the demons, whensoever it was that it came upon him, and this by reciting of hymns, and playing (psalein) upon the harp, and bringing Saul to his right mind again."

3. *Plutarch*. He was born at Chaeronea, in Boetia, A.D. 45 to 50. He pursued his studies at Athens, under Ammonius, a philosopher. Prior to A.D. 90 he visited Rome, where he delivered

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lectures. In his own writings are found references to himself as a young man talking of philosophy with Ammonius at the time of Nero's visit to Greece A.D. 67. He was a recognized Greek scholar and wrote in Greek. He died about A.D. 120.

When Plutarch made specific reference to vocal music, he never used the verb "psallo."

Nicias, p. 371, Referenced Edition III. "And at break of day he marched forth with all the procession to the god, and led the chorus, sumptuously ornamented, and singing their hymns (adonta) along over the bridge."

When Plutarch made reference to the instrument, "psallo" is uniformly used.

Pericles, p. 106, Ref. Edit. I. "It was not said amiss by Antisthenes, when the people told him that one Ismenias was an excellent piper, 'It may be so,' said he, 'but he is a wretched human being, otherwise he would not have been an excellent piper.' And King Philip, to the same purpose told his son Alexander, who once at a merry-meeting played a piece of music (psalanta) charmingly and skillfully, 'Are you not ashamed, son, to play (psallon) so well? For it is enough for a king or prince to find leisure some times to hear others sing, and he does the Muses quite honor enough when he pleases to be but present, while others engage in such exercises and trials of skill.'"

4. *Seutonius*. A.D. 125. A scholar, grammarian, critic, chronicler, and associate of emperors.

Titus 3. "The emperor was not unmusical, who sang, and played (psalleret) on the cithara pleasantly and skillfully."

5. *Appolonius Dyscolus*. A.D. 138. He was the most famous Greek grammarian at Alexandria. In his treatise on adverbs, he gave us an example that incidentally supplies the etymology of "psallo."

De Adverbis, Ed. B., Schneider; p. 161, 18, 571, 22.
"From the perfect passive come active nouns; e.g. from

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epsaltai (which means "It has been played") comes *psaltes* (a harp-player); from *lelutai* comes lutes."

6. *Justin Martyr*. A.D. 155—Justin was a distinguished Christian minister and scholar of the first half of the second century. He was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John.

Dialog with Trypho the Jew, 74. "As the Spirit urges those from all the earth who recognize this salutary mystery—i.e., the sufferings of Christ, through which he saved them—to sing (*adontas*) and play the harp (*psallontes*) continually."

7. *Lucian*. A.D. 160. Greek satirist and humorist. "It is impossible to 'psallein' without a lyre."

8. *Clement of Alexandria*. A.D. 190

Ant. Fathers, Vol. IV, p. 215-218, on "How to Conduct Ourselves at Feasts." "For, 'If thou shalt love the Lord thy God' and then 'thy neighbor,' let its first manifestation be toward God in thanksgiving and psalmody (*psalmodias*), and the second toward our neighbor in decorous fellowship. For says the apostle, 'Let the word of the Lord dwell in you richly,' - - - For the apostle adds, 'Teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, in psalms (*psalmois*) and hymns (*hymnos*) and spiritual songs (*odais*), singing (*aidontes*) with grace in your heart to God.' And again, 'Whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and his Father.' This is our thankful revelry. And even if you wish to sing (*aidein*) and play (*psallein*) to the harp or lyre, there is no blame. Thou shalt imitate the righteous Hebrew king in his thanksgiving to God. 'Rejoice in the Lord, ye righteous; praise is comely to the upright,' says the prophecy. 'Confess to the Lord on the harp; Play (*psalate*) to him on the psaltery (*psalterio*) of ten strings. Sing (*asate*) to him a new song (*asma*).'"

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9. *Basil the Great*. A.D. 364. Psalm 44

“For it is a song (ode) and not a psalm (psalmos), because it is rendered with musical expression by the voice alone.”

(Note—The leading idea of *psalmos* is vibration. Ever since the invention of instruments and music it was generally understood that the sound was caused by vibration. Therefore the lexicons and authors from the earliest times used *psalmos* as the word to define instrumental music.

In later years men learned that vocal sound was also caused by vibration. Therefore the lexicons written before this fact was learned never recognized vocal sounds as *psalmos*.

Note that Basil wrote before the discovery that vocal sounds are produced by vibration. In his recognition that *psalmos* is vibration, he naturally excluded vocal sound from the meaning of the word.

Thus, instead of our bringing in an instrument and adding it to the meaning of the word, we brought in our voice boxes.

10. *Gregory of Nyassa*. A.D. 370, *Magne*. I., p. 493

“The psalm (psalmos) is the melody produced on the musical instrument (the organ). The song (ode) is the utterance of the melody (melos) through the mouth with words. Hymn (humnos) is the praise offered to God for the good things that we possess. The psaltery (psalterion) is a musical instrument which emits the sound from the upper parts of the structure. The music made by the instrument is called Psalm (psalmos).”

11. *Chrysostom*. A.D. 386. He was the most famous of all the Greek Fathers. In literature he is styled “The Glorious Preacher.” He was noted for his scholarship and piety and eloquence.

Exposition in Ps. 41. “It is possible, even without the voice to psallein—the mind echoing (accompanying) within. For we play the lyre not to men, but to God, who is able to hear (our) hearts, and enter into the secrets of our minds.”

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If instrumental music is sinful, why would Paul have used a word that meant "to play" in all these writings we have quoted? Many similar quotations could be given.

It is obvious from the foregoing quotations that in the time of Paul *psallo* meant "to play," and *psalmos* meant instrumental music. Therefore, such music is well-pleasing to God.