

## Go on strike! When church musos should leave their instruments at home

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We know that singing in church is not only great, it's thoroughly biblical. God's people have always been a singing people &hellip; and we always will be! Many good things will not be carried over into the new kingdom &ndash; there won't be marriage in heaven, nor will there be any need for evangelism &ndash; but there will definitely still be singing (Revelation 5:13). Yet as I lugged my 45kg keyboard into church last weekend, I did pause for a second to wonder why I was bringing along my instrument to join in. It's amazing how quickly a sore back and tired arms can make you start thinking critically about this aspect of contemporary church practice.

The early church had little need for instruments. It seems that they sang together whenever and wherever they felt so moved, without accompaniment of any kind for a number of centuries after Christ (Foley, 67). In fact, one of the few times that a musical instrument is mentioned in the New Testament it is actually cited as an example of obscene obnoxiousness (1 Corinthians 13:1). Sorry drummers, I'm sure the apostle didn't mean it personally! Whether to bring our instruments with us to church has been far from a moot point since then &ndash; when reform is in the air, instrumentalists are often the first to meet the axe. In the 1550s the King and Archbishop repeatedly made moves to ban organs, thinking that music had become too lavish and probably a bit too Catholic as well (see Le Huray). And it's not just stuffy Anglicans. I'm told that such feeling remains a live issue in many older Presbyterian congregations today, where the regulative principle urges abstinence from any activity not commanded. And of course there is the well publicised "Ban the Band" incident in the late 90s in Watford's Soul Survivor church. This church was at the forefront of the new worship movement, until its leaders decided that its congregation had become "connoisseurs of worship instead of participants in it" and so banned instrumental music altogether (Ward, 171). But then again, take our instruments away and we westerners find it very difficult to sing. We have a culture of instrumentation. And far from purifying our music from the corrupting influence of "popular music", we need to work out a way of doing church which is culturally appropriate. For most congregations, singing means accompanied singing. And that's okay &ndash; we just need to recognise that great instrumental music is not what we are there to do. We're there to encourage each other. We're there to speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19). And just like a watertight roof and proper seating helps us concentrate on a sermon, so instruments help us sing and, so, build each other up. But as soon as our instruments get in the way of what we're there to do, we should leave them at home. Please don't misunderstand me &ndash; so many people think, wrongly I believe, that this means we should continually try to tame our music to keep it to the bare minimum we need to stay in tune. No way! Have lavish, beautiful, artful music as much as you can &ndash; we worship a God who loves beauty, after all. Music can be a great blessing; a cultural activity we can take captive to Christ and use to great effect for the kingdom. But if music is what divides your congregation, then please stop it &ndash; for the sake of the gospel. The one thing that Paul urges the Corinthian church to get right about their church meetings is not the length of the sermon, the number of prayers, the number of hymns &ndash; or, it seems, anything to do with content or form. The number one thing we need to nail about church is our goal: What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. (1 Corinthians 14:26). If the noise you are making in church is causing division then it doesn't matter how skilled you are, how right you are, or how old fashioned they are. If your instrument does not strengthen the church then as a fellow musician &ndash; someone who loves music, and treasures its place in church life &ndash; I urge you to leave it at home. Go on strike. For the sake of the gospel. On the road with Garage Hymnal we've sung with a lot of people, in a lot of different places. But the best and most encouraging singing I've ever had the joy of being part of was late one night at a Christian camp. The amps were off, the campsite curfew was crankily enforced, and despite the camp leaders' best efforts (I was one of them) we couldn't get those kids to shut up singing about Jesus. I'd love to sing with those kids every week &ndash; for a start I could leave my stupidly heavy keyboard at home. But for the moment, I guess the best way to serve my home church is to keep lifting.

References  
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