One of the first differences visitors of churches of Christ frequently notice is the lack of instrumental music in their worship. There was a time when it was assumed the churches were too poor to have a piano. Some today may think it is just a personal preference. Neither assumption is accurate. So what’s the deal with not having instrumental music?

The issue actually has very little to do with instrumental music at all and everything to do with the concept of discipleship. As believers in Jesus, we call Him Lord and dedicate our lives to Him. In addition, we recognize that He is the head of the Church (Col. 1:18). Since Jesus is the head, the Church is to submit to Him (Eph. 5:23).

Most every church will say the same things, but it is one thing to say it and quite another to do it. Consider the two sons Jesus spoke of who were given a command by their father (Mt. 21:28-31). One son said he would obey, but didn’t. Did that make him submissive to his father? Obviously not. The other son, said he wouldn’t, then changed his mind and obeyed. It should be self-evident that what we do is more important than what we claim.

So, if Jesus is the head of the Church, then the Church should listen to Him in regard to the positions that He gave to the churches. What if the churches decide to create their own positions? Suppose they create a Pope? Are they still following Jesus? Other groups decide to ignore the qualifications that God gave that elders “must” meet (I Tim. 3:1-1-7; Titus 1:5-9). When those qualifications are ignored, are they really submitting to Jesus, or just claiming to?

What does this have to do with instrumental music? We apply the same principle of following Jesus in regard to worship. How does the Bible teach us to worship? God could have asked us to play instruments. He has that right, and had he done so, we would cheerfully include instrumental music in our worship. However, that isn’t what He asked for. What he asked for is singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), so that’s what we do.

One might note that God has asked us to “pluck strings” if they look at the Greek in Ephesians 5:19, but what strings are we to play? A harp? A piano? What God’s word says is to “make melody (or pluck strings – JH) with your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). The instrument that God demands all of us to play is the heart. In other words, it isn’t enough to mindlessly sing songs, they must be words coming from our heart.

Others have observed that instrumental music was used in the Old Testament. And so it was, but we do not follow the Old Testament; we follow Jesus. The Old Testament also includes animal sacrifices, burning incense, stoning people, and much more that you will never find in the New Testament. So why is it that men want to bring instrumental music from the Old Testament and not the other things? It’s simple really. They like instrumental music, and we’re not blaming them for that. But should we do what we like or what God has asked of us?

So why do so many churches use instrumental music today? They can’t all be wrong, can they? It is undeniable that most churches today use instrumental music in their worship, but that has not always been the case. Many of the founders of today’s denominations did not approve of such worship. Consider what a few of them had to say on the subject:

John Calvin – "Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists therefore, have foolishly borrowed, this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostles is far more pleasing to him. Paul allows us to bless God in the public assembly of the saints, only in a known tongue (I Cor. 14:16) What shall we then say of chanting, which fills the ears with nothing but an empty sound?" (John Calvin, Commentary on Psalms 33)

Martin Luther – "The organ in the worship Is the insignia of Baal… The Roman Catholic borrowed it from the Jews." (Martin Luther, Mcclintock & Strong's Encyclopedia Volume VI, page 762)

Presbyterians – "Question 6. Is there any authority for instrumental music in the worship of God under the present dispensation? Answer. Not the least, only the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs was appointed by the apostles; not a syllable is said in the New Testament in favor of instrumental music nor was it ever introduced into the Church until after the eighth century, after the Catholics had corrupted the simplicity of the gospel by their carnal inventions. It was not allowed in the Synagogues, the parish churches of the Jews, but was confined to the Temple service and was abolished with the rites of that dispensation." (Questions on the Confession of Faith and Form of Government of The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, published by the Presbyterian Board of Publications, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1842, pg. 55.)

John Wesley – “I have no objection to instruments of music in our worship, provided they are neither seen nor heard." (John Wesley, founder of Methodism, quoted in Adam Clarke's Commentary, Vol. 4, p. 685)

It doesn’t matter what these men thought or what all the rest of the churches are doing. All that matters is what God has asked for in the Bible. We must decide whether we will follow our own desires, the traditions of men, or the will of God. We may not like where that leads us…but the body should go wherever the head leads.

What will you decide to do?