

Implications of the Greek Term *Psallo* for Church Music

By David Pyles

Though musical instruments are never mentioned in the Bible as being part of New Testament worship, many justify their use in the modern church by saying they are implicitly authorized by a Greek word used in connection with singing in the New Testament. We believe this argument is invalid, and will undertake to prove this in what follows.

The Greek word in question is the verb *psallo*. Controversy over this term also extends to the related noun *psalmos*. The controverted occurrences of these words are in: Rom 15:9; 1Cor 14:15, 26; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16 and Jas 5:13. Advocates of musical instruments in church worship commonly claim that the first means to sing a psalm or hymn with the accompaniment of musical instruments, and that the second refers to a composition to be sung in such manner. We believe these definitions would be correct for earlier forms of Greek, but they are not primary definitions in the common Greek of New Testament times, and are never the intended definitions in the New Testament itself. The meaning of *psallo* there is simply "to sing a hymn" or "to sing praises." The meaning of *psalmos* is simply "a psalm" or "a hymn." These conclusions are based upon several facts:

1) While many authorities on Greek offer definitions of *psallo* allowing the idea of musical accompaniment, the tendency of these authorities, especially the most reputable ones, is to affirm these are not the meanings in the New Testament Greek; rather, they say the term there simply means "to sing a hymn" or "to sing praises."

In his comments on 1Cor 14:15, A.T. Robertson, one of the most highly acclaimed Greek scholars, explains the meaning of *psallo* thus: "...originally meant to play on strings, then to sing with an accompaniment, and here apparently to sing without regard to an instrument." Hence, Robertson is of the opinion that the word does not imply instrumental music in the New Testament. He explains that the meaning of the word changed through time.

All authorities seem to agree that the earliest meaning of the word, hundreds of years before the New Testament era, was to "pluck, twitch or twang," as in "pluck" a hair, or "twang" a bowstring, or "twitch" a carpenter's line. At this early stage, the word had no special association with musical instruments. Then, as Robertson explains, the word evolved so that its meaning became to touch or play the strings of a musical instrument. Afterward, it meant to sing in accompaniment with such an instrument. But yet later, in the common Greek of the New Testament period, Robertson and other authorities affirm that the idea of an instrument had been dropped, so that the word simply meant to sing a hymn or to sing praises. The commonality in all definitions is the idea of vibrating a string or cord. Since the human voice is also created by such vibration, it is possible that the meaning of the term was transferred to the voice along these

lines. Whatever is the explanation of its etymology, there is absolutely no doubt that the term migrated in meaning.

Joseph H. Thayer, generally thought to be unsurpassed among New Testament Greek lexicographers, states that in the New Testament *psallo* means "to sing a hymn, to celebrate the praises of God in song." Hence, Thayer and Robertson, both eminent authorities, agree that *psallo* does not suggest musical accompaniment in the New Testament.

The same may be said of Vincent, who offers the following comments on *psallo* as used in two controverted passages:

Some think that the verb has here its original signification of singing with an instrument. This is its 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. – Comments on 1Cor 14:15

The word means, primarily, "to pluck or twitch." Hence, of the sharp "twang" on a bow-string or harp-string, and so "to play upon a stringed instrument." Our word "psalm," derived from this, is, properly, a tune played upon a stringed instrument. The verb, however, is used in the New Testament of singing praise generally. – Comments on Jas 5:13

Then concerning the noun *psalmos* as used in Col 3:16, Vincent says, "A psalm was originally a song accompanied by a stringed instrument... The idea of accompaniment passed away in usage, and the psalm, in New Testament phraseology, is an Old Testament psalm, or a composition having that character."

Several other Greek authorities also express the view that *psallo* in the New Testament simply means "to sing praises" or "to sing hymns." Vine says of it, "denotes, in the N.T., to sing a hymn, sing praise." Bagster says, "in N.T. to sing praises," and this same definition is given individually by Perschbacher, Green, Wigram, H.K. Moulton, and Mounce. J.H. Moulton and Milligan define it with, "in the N.T., as in Jas 5:13, sing a hymn." Abbott-Smith say of it, "in the N.T., to sing a hymn, sing praises." Bauer defines it to mean, "to extol by singing praises, to sing praises." Contopoulos says, "to sing, to celebrate." Kittel claims that *psallo* and the Greek word *ado* are synonyms, and defines the latter as "to sing."

Of the 30 New Testament Greek authorities we considered, only four (i.e. Lampe, Robinson, Donnegan, and Yonge) define *psallo* in such a way as would necessitate musical instruments.

The definite tendency was for the most reputable authorities to define the term as basically meaning "to sing."

2) While some lexicographers (i.e. Strong; Berry; Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich; Pickering; Groves; Parkhurst; Dunbar; Greenfield; Maltby; Hamilton) define the term to admit either a cappella or accompanied singing, we do not believe musical instruments in worship can be successfully defended by them. Even if accompanied singing were indeed among the definitions of this term, this would not of itself liberate us to interpret it so in the New Testament. Stated generally, if a term has more than one definition, we are not then at liberty to draw any conclusion that could be conveyed under the various definitions of the term. Such a hermeneutic would wreak havoc on the most fundamental aspects of theology.

For example, the word "all" in biblical usage can mean "without exception" or it can mean "of every manner or kind." When interpreting 1Tim 2:6, the difference between these definitions translates into the vast difference between universal atonement and particular atonement. Who will say that both doctrines should be admissible because both are implied under the alternate definitions of "all"? Next, consider the expression "fallen from grace" in Gal 5:4. Under the various definitions of "grace," this expression could mean to fall from eternal grace, or to fall from temporal grace, or to fall from the truth of grace. Who will say that all these ideas should be admissible since all are implied under the various ways in which "grace" could be interpreted? Also, consider the biblical term "world," which when applied to people can mean all people in the world, or it can mean people from every division of the world. Practically no one, regardless of their theological leaning, would accept the idea that both meanings are admissible in verses such as Jn 3:16 or Jn 6:33.

It is universally understood that when a term has multiple possible meanings, one must examine context, other scriptures, history, etc. to determine which meaning is intended, and that conclusions implied by all other meanings of the term are to be rejected as false. When this proper approach is applied to *psallo* and *psalmos*, we believe the invariable conclusion is that these terms cannot be used to support instrumental music in New Testament worship. There is not the slightest evidence that Christ or the Apostles ever used musical instruments, nor did they ever authorize their use. There is no evidence that the New Testament church ever used them, and, as will be shown shortly, there is irrefutable evidence that they were deliberately excluded from church worship for many centuries after the Apostles. Further, the meaning of *psallo* in New Testament usage may be inferred by comparing two parallel passages:

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. – Eph 5:18,19

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. – Col 3:16

We believe any objective analyst comparing these two verses would conclude that “*making melody in your heart*” means exactly the same thing as “*singing with grace in your heart.*” Now the expression “*making melody*” is translated from *psallo*, but the word “*singing*” is translated from *ado*. Hence, these two terms are used as synonyms in the New Testament, as is confirmed by Kittel; however, there is no ambiguity as to the meaning of *ado*. Thayer says of it, "common in Greek of every period... 'to sing, chant'." That is, regardless of the Greek era one chooses to examine, the meaning of this word is consistently to sing or chant, without any reference to musical instruments. Further, the Greek authorities, though giving varied meanings for *psallo*, are in unanimous agreement on *ado*. Finally, observe that these scriptures describe only two contributories to music in worship; namely, the voice and the heart.

Therefore, when one applies the usual methods of discerning between alternate definitions of a word (i.e. context, other scriptures, resolution of the ambiguous with the apparent, historical interpretation, etc.), the meaning of *psallo* in the New Testament is plainly seen as being "to sing hymns or praises."

3) There is considerable evidence that *psallo* had no instrumental connotation even in other common Greek literature of the New Testament period. This is seen in the work of a Greek scholar named E.A. Sophocles, a native Grecian, and a professor of Greek language at Harvard University for 38 years. Sophocles was the author of A Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods (from B.C. 146 to A.D. 1100). He examined 594 Greek authors (255 secular, 339 ecclesiastical) in the development of his lexicon. After this extensive survey, he defined *psallo* as meaning "to chant, sing religious hymns." He defined *psalmos* to simply mean "a psalm." Hence, he found no association of these terms with musical instruments in the common Greek of the considered period.

As indicated by the title, one purpose of the lexicon of Sophocles was to isolate the common Greek of the Roman and Byzantine period from the Greek of previous times. All scholars agree that the Greek language of the New Testament significantly differs from the so-called "classical" Greek that is associated with the period prior to around 322 B.C. The Greek of the New Testament is generally called *koine* (i.e. "common") Greek, and is so named because it was the common language of Greek-speaking people after the classical era. In the Preface of the lexicon of Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich (pg xi), the following explanation is given regarding the differences between classical and *koine* Greek:

The earliest Christian literature... is made up of a number of writings which were composed in the Greek language. It is not the Greek of more ancient times, least of all that of the Golden Age of Athens which is now taught in the institutions of higher learning and occupies the most prominent place in the dictionaries used in them. A comparison reveals, on the contrary, differences in phonology and morphology, in syntax and style, and, not the least of all, in the vocabulary as well.

Of course, the transition from one form of Greek to another was gradual, and varying in degree from one place to the other. Further, there were some Greek authors who imitated the Greek of former eras. Such factors must be taken into account when ascertaining the etymology of Greek words. In the Preface of the acclaimed lexicon of Liddell and Scott (pg vi), the following remarks are made concerning these facts:

It will be understood, however, that the age of a word does not wholly depend on that of its author. For, first, many Greek books have been lost; secondly, a word of Attic stamp, first occurring in Lucian, Alciphron, or later imitators of Attic Greek, may be considered as virtually older than those found in the vernacular writers of the Alexandrian age. Further, the language changed differently in different places at the same time; as in the cases of Demosthenes and Aristotle, whom we have been compelled to place in different Epochs. And even at the same place, as at Athens, there were naturally two parties, one clinging to old usages, the other fond of what was new. The Greek of Thucydides and Lysias may be compared in illustration of this remark.

Hence, Liddell and Scott observe that certain Greek authors wrote using a non-contemporary form of their language. Sophocles, in recognition of these same considerations, did not cite such authors as Josephus, Plutarch, and Lucian, who, though living within the time frame of his lexicon, wrote using classical Greek rather than *koine* Greek. This fact partly accounts for his conclusion that *psallo* and *psalmos* had no reference to musical instruments in the era he examined. There were indeed some instances where Greek authors living in the time frame of his work used these terms in such a way as to imply or admit instrumentation, but their writings were considered as imitating the older classical Greek, which differs significantly from the *koine* Greek of the New Testament.

Some interesting correspondence relating to this subject is recorded in Bales (pgs 114-116). Bales observes that the lexicon of Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich is a translation and revision by Arndt and Gingrich of a lexicon originally written by Bauer. Bauer defined *psallo* with, "to extol by singing praises, to sing praises." However, Arndt and Gingrich changed this to, "in accordance with O.T. usage, sing (to the accompaniment of a harp), sing praise... sing praise in spiritual ecstasy and in full possession of one's mental faculties." Hence, the revised definition, while not demanding musical accompaniment, nonetheless added this possibility to what Bauer had originally written. When questioned about this change, Gingrich replied, "In our translation of Bauer's lexicon, Dr Arndt and I gave the meaning... that the singing could be with or without accompaniment. It seems to me that you cannot exclude the possibility of accompaniment in the New Testament passages, since *psallo* still means 'play on the harp' in Lucian, who wrote in the second century A.D." This reply is strange because we have already quoted Liddell and Scott as saying that Lucian imitated the Attic Greek (i.e. the dialect of Athens in the latter part of the classical era), and that his writings were therefore anachronistic, and we quoted Arndt and

Gingrich themselves as saying of New Testament Greek, "It is not the Greek of more ancient times, least of all that of the Golden Age of Athens..."

Naturally, the findings of Sophocles would come as no small disappointment to those who would seek to justify musical instruments on the basis of these Greek words. In connection with this thought, Kurfees (pgs 58,59) makes the following interesting observation:

Before leaving the lexicons, it is deemed proper to state, in this connection, that a number of unavailing attempts have been made, by overzealous advocates of instrumental music, to break the force of the great lexicons of Sophocles and Thayer on the meaning of *psallo*. George P. Slade, whose tract on the meaning of this Greek verb was published thirty years ago, soon after the appearance of Sophocles' great work, made an attempt to elicit from the learned author of the lexicon, who was then still living, something that would break or modify the force of what the lexicon says on this word; but the attempt met with a signal failure. For some reason, Brother Slade withheld from his tract his note of inquiry, and gave out only a part of the noted linguist's reply, which was as follows:

Cambridge, February 1, 1880.

Rev. G.P. Slade.

Dear Sir: My lexicon is intended for those who wish to read the authors of the Roman and Byzantine periods of the language. It presupposes a good knowledge of the preceding periods (Alexandrian, Athenian, Ionic)... Yours truly, E.A. SOPHOCLES.

The dots at the close of the foregoing note indicate that something is omitted, but it may be safely assumed that Brother Slade omitted nothing that would favor the use of instrumental music in the worship. Hence, as the matter stands, the reply of the eminent Harvard Professor gave forth nothing in support of any other meaning of *psallo* than that given in his lexicon.

4) The modern Greek definitions of *psallo* and *psalmos* have no connection with instrumentation whatsoever. According to Divry's dictionary of modern Greek, *psallo* means "I sing, I chant," and *psalmos* means "a psalm, a chant, or a hymn." The same dictionary defines the related term *psalta* to mean "in a singing voice."

Hence, the work of Sophocles indicates that the words *psallo* and *psalmos* have basically retained the same meanings from the Roman era to modern times.

5) It has been claimed by some that *psallo* must imply musical accompaniment because when Paul quotes from Ps 18:49 in Rom 15:9, the Hebrew word *zamar* is replaced with *psallo* in the Greek, yet the Hebrew word, it is claimed, implies musical accompaniment.

However, authorities on Old Testament Hebrew define *zamar* as admitting musical accompaniment but not as implying it. That is, the word can refer to singing either with or

without accompaniment, yet most authorities claim the primary definition is simply "to sing." The following is a list of such authorities along with the definitions they give for *zamar*:

- a. Brown, Driver and Briggs – make music in praise to God, 1) of singing to God, 2) of playing musical instruments.
- b. Gesenius – 1) to sing, 2) to play on a musical instrument (or to sing so accompanied), 3) to dance.
- c. Harris, Archer and Waltke – sing, sing praise, make music.
- d. Girdlestone – to sing praise to God.
- e. Wilson – to sing in set composition of words and music; to sing praises, psalms.
- f. Pick – to sound, sing praises.
- g. Zodhiates – to play; to make music; to sing, sing praises; to celebrate.

Since *zamar* primarily means "to sing," the fact that this word in Ps 18:49 was translated as *psallo* in Rom 15:9 only strengthens the case that *psallo* means "to sing."

6) The evolution of *psallo* from its earlier meaning to sing with accompaniment to its New Testament definition of simply "to sing" is clearly seen in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament generally thought to have been written around 250 B.C. Three Hebrew words were translated *psallo* in the Septuagint. These were *nagan* and *zamar* and *shir*. The first means to play an instrument, but does not imply singing. The second means to play an instrument, or to sing with or without an instrument. The third simply means to sing. Now if *psallo* had retained its earliest definition of "pluck, twitch or twang," or had it evolved no further than its later definition of singing to an instrument, then it could not have served as a translation for all three of these Hebrew words. Therefore, as of around 250 B.C., the word had evolved to the point that it included the idea of a cappella singing. This shows that the idea of musical instruments was not inherent to the term as of that time. Since the term was sometimes applied to a cappella singing, one could not conclude that it had reference to musical instruments in the Septuagint unless the context indicated such. Of course, the New Testament would not be written until about 300 years later, when, according to Sophocles and other authorities, the suggestion of musical instruments had been dropped, and the word simply referred to vocal singing.

The word also had the meaning of "to sing" or "to sing praise" in the Psalms of Solomon, a collection of Jewish hymns from the first century B.C., likely written by the Pharisees.

7) The King James translators and other ancient translators chose to translate *psallo* and *psalmos* in such a way as to convey the idea of vocal music only. If the providence of God has had anything to do with communicating the word of God to English-speaking people, then we should be reasonable in assuming this providence has been exerted with greatest degree in the translation of the Bible itself. We believe there is much evidence to support this assumption. If we are to place such confidence in the work of the translators, then we are bound to affirm with high confidence that *psallo* and *psalmos* do not convey the idea of musical instruments in the New Testament.

But even if we were to allow that the translators were influenced by personal prejudices in their work, this would only strengthen the case against associating these terms with musical instruments. All of the translators were of the Church of England (some were of the Puritan faction) whose general practice was to use musical instruments. Therefore, if any charge of predisposition could be successfully made against the translators, it is clear that the evidence against a translation suggesting musical instruments was more than they could deny.

Other ancient translations followed the same policy, including the translations of Luther, Wickliffe and Tyndale.

8) What can be said of the King James translators in this regard also applies to modern scholarship. In none of the most popular revised versions (i.e. New International, Revised Standard, American Standard, New King James) are these words ever translated to suggest the idea of instrumental accompaniment, and this is in spite of the fact that practically all of the modern translators were of denominations using musical instruments; therefore, had they been predisposed one way or the other, it would have been toward translating these words so as to admit or imply accompaniment. Since they did not, it may be reasonably inferred that the evidence was not cooperative with their predispositions.

9) The meanings of words in any particular era may be inferred both from the way in which the words were used and by the way in which they were interpreted. The historical evidence resoundingly indicates that the early Christians, many of whom were conversant in the Greek language, did not understand *psallo* and *psalms* as admitting musical instruments. The number of historians attesting to the fact that music in the early church was exclusively vocal, and that musical instruments were prohibited, is prodigious. The following is but a sample:

There can be no doubt that originally the music of the divine service was every where entirely of a vocal nature. (Emil Nauman, The History of Music, Vol. 1, p. 177)

We have no real knowledge of the exact character of the music which formed a part of the religious devotion of the first Christian congregations. It was, however, purely vocal. Instrumental music was excluded, at first, as having been used by the Romans at their depraved festivities; and everything reminding them of heathen worship could not be endured by the new religionists. (Frederic Louis Ritter, History of Music from the Christian Era to the Present Time, p. 28)

In view of the controversies over the use of instrumental music in worship, which have been so violent in the British and American Protestant churches, it is an interesting question whether instruments were employed by the primitive Christians. We know that instruments performed an important function in the Hebrew temple service and in the ceremonies of the Greeks. At this point, however, a break was made with all previous practice, and although the lyre and flute were sometimes employed by the Greek converts, as a general rule the use of

instruments in worship was condemned. Many of the fathers, speaking of religious song, make no mention of instruments; others, like Clement of Alexandria and St. Chrysostom, refer to them only to denounce them. Clement says: "Only one instrument do we use, viz. the word of peace wherewith we honor God, no longer the old psaltery, trumpet, drum, and flute." Chrysostom exclaims: "David formerly sang in psalms, also we sing today with him; he had a lyre with lifeless strings, the church has a lyre with living strings. Our tongues are the strings of the lyre, with a different tone, indeed, but with a more accordant piety." St. Ambrose expresses his scorn for those who would play the lyre and psaltery instead of singing hymns and psalms; and St. Augustine adjures believers not to turn their hearts to theatrical instruments. The religious guides of the early Christians felt that there would be an incongruity, and even profanity, in the use of the sensuous nerve-exciting effects of instrumental sound in their mystical, spiritual worship. Their high, religious and moral enthusiasm needed no aid from external stimulus; the pure vocal utterance was the more proper expression of their faith. (Edward Dickinson, Music in the History of the Western Church, p. 54,55)

One of the features which distinguishes the Christian religion from almost all others is its quietness; it aims to repress the outward signs of inward feeling. Savage instinct, and the religion of Greece also, had employed the rhythmic dance and all kinds of gesticulatory notions to express the inner feelings... The early Christians discouraged all outward signs of excitement, and from the very beginning, in the music they used, reproduced the spirit of their religion – an inward quietude. All the music employed in their early services was vocal. (Frank Landon Humphreys, Evolution of Church Music, p. 42)

Both sexes joined in singing, but instruments of every kind were prohibited for a long time. (Thomas Tapper, Essentials of Music History, p. 34)

The general introduction of instrumental music can certainly not be assigned to a date earlier than the 5th and 6th centuries; yea, even Gregory the Great, who towards the end of the 6th century added greatly to the existing church music, absolutely prohibited the use of instruments. Several centuries later the introduction of the organ in sacred service gave the place to instruments as accompaniments for Christian song, and from that time to this they have been freely used with few exceptions. The first organ is believed to have been used in the Church service in the 13th century. (McClintock and Strong, Cyclopaedia of Biblical Literature, Vol 6, p. 759)

10) Further, it is a well-established fact that Baptist churches opposed musical instruments until modern times. This should say something of what the Holy Spirit intends by the words *psallo* and *psalmos*. If true churches have been in error on this point for centuries, then it is difficult to

see how the church could be the “*pillar and ground of the truth,*” (1Tim 3:15). While we readily affirm that the Bible, not church history, should be the standard by which all doctrines and practices are judged, it is nonetheless true that the historically held position of sound Christians should contribute to our understanding in questions of Bible interpretation. After Paul stated his position regarding length of hair, he then affirmed, “*But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God,*” (1Cor 11:16). He therefore appealed to the guidance of tradition in sound churches. Upon this same principle, we believe the following quotes should speak with some authority on the issue at hand:

For years the Baptists fought the introduction of instrumental music into the churches... Installation of the organ brought serious difficulties in many churches. (Wm. B. Posey, The Baptist Church In The Lower Mississippi Valley)

The history of the church during the first three centuries affords many instances of primitive Christians engaging in singing, but no mention, (that I recollect) is made of instruments. (If my memory does not deceive me) it originated in the dark ages of popery, when almost every other superstition was introduced. At present, it is most used where the least regard is paid to primitive simplicity. (Andrew Fuller, Complete works of Andrew Fuller, Vol 3, p. 520)

David appears to have had a peculiarly tender remembrance of the singing of the pilgrims, and assuredly it is the most delightful part of worship and that which comes nearest to the adoration of heaven. What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettiness of a quartet, bellows, and pipes. We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it. (Charles Spurgeon, Commentary on Psalm 42)

In my earliest intercourse among this people, congregational singing generally prevailed among them... This instrument (i.e. the organ), which from time immemorial has been associated with cathedral pomp and prelatical power, and has always been the peculiar favorite of great national churches, at length found its way into Baptist sanctuaries, and the first one ever employed by the denomination in this country, and probably in any other, might have been standing in the singing gallery of the Old Baptist meeting house in Pawtucket, about forty years ago, where I then officiated as pastor (1840)... Staunch old Baptists in former times would as soon tolerated the Pope of Rome in their pulpits as an organ in their galleries, and yet the instrument has gradually found its way among them... How far this modern organ fever will extend among our people, and whether it will on the whole work a RE-formation or DE-formation in their singing service, time will more fully develop. (Benedict, Fifty Years Among the Baptists, pgs. 204-207)

We believe that in view of these many facts, musical instruments in church worship cannot be defended by *psalmo* and *psalmos*. Such a defense reverts to a form of Greek which scholars

unanimously affirm is not the Greek of the New Testament, and it interprets Greek words in ways which scriptural context and historical interpretation will not support. An examination of the available evidence as to the meanings of these terms in the New Testament, particularly an examination of the New Testament itself, gives sufficient evidence that we may say with confidence that these terms make no suggestion of instrumental accompaniment.

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