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Under the Oversight of the ELDERS
FOREST HILL CHURCH OF CHRIST
Bobby Liddell, Editor

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HAND-CLAPPING IN WORSHIP (I)

Curtis A. Cates

INTRODUCTION

The last several decades, there has been a growing clamor among churches of Christ for change, for a departure from the practices and beliefs of the “older, flawed generation.” One hears such statements as, “The youths of the present generation are not going to go along with the older ways.” One preacher stated that his children would not stay with the church in which he grew up. The sad truth is, neither the father nor his children stayed with the New Testament church. Brother Hugo McCord wrote,

Times have changed. As a lad, I was taught that the singing of hymns, whether by a congregation or by a college [chorus] is not a performance, and is not to be applauded. I was taught that such singing is a worship experience, and listeners should be quiet.

Some sincere Christians today have not been so taught. They like what they have heard, and they clap their hands to compliment the singers. Sometimes they stand while the singing is going on, swaying their bodies back and forth, and loudly exclaim, “Praise the Lord!” (McCord, p. 7).

Sister Irene Taylor wrote, “In recent years, a growing trend has arisen which is distasteful. It is the practice of clapping at the end of the lesson. It is recognized that many have joined in this practice innocently” (Taylor, p. 22). G. K. Wallace observed,

As brother Big enters the pulpit the young people who have been trained in a youth seminar begin to weave, wave, clap, and sing, “We love you Brother Big.” These cheerleaders inflate the ego of the “great” preacher and he smiles and bows as he receives the reverence to him paid by his well-groomed devotees (Wallace, p. 364).

Roy Deaver wrote, “Some congregations of the Lord’s church have started clapping at the announcement of one or ones who have been baptized” (Deaver, p. 7).

It is becoming more and more common to find members of the Lord’s church engaging in hand clapping in worship services. This is very popular at youth rallies and devotionals put on by brethren who would rather roll in the aisles than to worship “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24) (Miller, p. 15).

It is not just the “older generation” in churches of Christ who oppose hand clapping in times of reverence; countless ones in the “younger generation” also are in opposition to applause in worship. In addition, many denominational preachers oppose it. For example, one denominational preacher chastised the congregation for applauding, telling them, “The applause tends to break the meditation we are seeking to produce. At a time when our hearts and minds are to be focused on Christ, clapping tends to pull us away from that”

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(Brown, p. 10). A Lutheran, John Brug, condemned clapping and cheering in “worship,” stating that clapping and cheering indicate the service has been turned into “drama performances.”

“If the music and drama in the church are intended to present the Word rather than perform a show, it would seem most appropriate that we respond to them as we would any other presentation of the Gospel. ...people who experience the concert or drama as worship and as an occasion for meditation, consider applause a disruption of the mood and spirit of worship. A glorious anthem takes our mood soaring to a contemplation of heaven, but jarring applause brings us crashing down to the earth” (Lockwood, p. 3).

This practice was evidently started in the Lord’s church in earlier youth devotionals. Condemned even by many sectarian preachers and churches, it is revealing that in Memphis there are members of a certain denomination who refer to the largest congregation of that denomination in the city as “Six Flags Over Jesus,” because of their theatrical performances. Brian Kenyon correctly observes,

In evaluating this, or any other practice in a worship assembly, one must realize that the “newness” of a practice in and of itself, does not make it right or wrong (cf. songs placed on an overhead projector). The scripturalness of hand clapping in worship (like any other practice in worship) is really quite simple to determine (cf. Col. 3:17)—the problem is that many refuse to accept God’s word (Kenyon, p. 11).

“Change that violates Biblical principles is wrong” (Gilpin, p. 2). “Today, many attacks are being levied against the sacredness of worship. The divine reverence of worship to God is being subjected to every imagination man can devise” (Whitten, p. 515). One of these is hand clapping. We love our young people, and they have a tremendous potential as a significant influence for good. I am thankful that in my youth, I had much encouragement and guidance from older saints. However, I was never given the idea truth is determined by what young people wanted and expected. The question therefore is this: Is clapping authorized?

APPLAUSE

Referring to “Emily Post, whose name for many years was synonymous with etiquette,” brother Bobby Duncan stated that it is “a fact that, until recent years, it was considered in bad taste to applaud any religious activity.” In fact, he stated that most would admit “clapping the hands in worship does not in any way add to the dignity and solemnity of the occasion? It does not do

to God; we honor Him by doing what He has told us to do in worship, and He has not told us to clap” (Duncan, p. 2).

Eddy Gilpin asks, “How is handclapping used in modern worship settings?” It is used “mainly in two forms—accompaniment to the singing and for demonstration of approval or appreciation (applause).” He gives “a simple definition of applause...’to express approval of, as by clapping the hands’” (Gilpin, pp. 16, 7). Webster’s defines “applaud” [from *ad-*, + to *plaudere*, to strike] as “to show approval (of) by clapping the hands, etc. to praise; approve” (*Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, p. 35).

In secular affairs, such hand clapping is perfectly acceptable; however, when it is done in the worship, an appropriate question is, “Who is being applauded?” I recently heard a sectarian preacher say to his audience, “Let’s give God a hand!” Has God authorized such display in His honor? The answer is No, as will be seen. Or, on the other hand, are those who lead in worship being applauded? “...is it acceptable to express one’s approval of an individual (i.e. the preacher) or a group (i.e. those serving at the Lord’s table) with applause?” (Gilpin, p. 9). Is there a difference between a secular performance, or program, and worship to God?

WORSHIP

The object of man’s worship is the God of heaven. He is a “jealous God,” and He seeks and demands our worship; if we fail to worship Him, we “shall surely perish” (Exo. 20:5; John 4:23-24; Deu. 8:19). He is the only true God; He is holy, He is our Creator, He is Love, and He deserves to be worshiped (Cates, *Worship*), pp. 22-24). A special dignity is to characterize worship to God. “We are not engaged in the performing arts (or should not be) when we assemble to sing praises to him, to study from his Holy Word. ...It is regrettable that some have introduced clapping into our Bible classes and assembled hour of worship. Such removes the dignity and solemnity of the occasion. Such is not pleasing to God or the serious worshipper” (Taylor, p. 22). “A circus atmosphere is not conducive to worship” (Colley, p. 594).

We worship God; He is the audience.

Our worship is directed heavenward, and that is why we don’t applaud each other. ...We come together as the body of Christ to worship, honor, venerate, serve, and reverence the God of heaven through Jesus. We don’t gather with tooting, banging, strumming, and bell-ringing to amuse one another. ...If applause takes the mind off of Jesus when partaking of the Lord’s Supper, why wouldn’t it do the same thing any other time during worship? We need to maintain jealousy the simplicity and dignity of worship in spirit and truth” (Brown, p. 10).

Have some forgotten that “worship” means to bow down, to kiss the hand toward, to do obeisance, to prostrate, to reverence, to show deep respect, to attribute worth toward God (Cates, *Worship*, p. 16)? Have some forgotten that worship is not a performance? Are the preacher, the song leader, the prayer leader, those who pass the Lord’s Supper emblems, are those of us who sing, partake of the Lord’s Supper, give of our means, et al., performers? Did Paul get it right when he said, “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5)? Is it really the case that we have to super-animate our worship in the twenty-first century to attract and keep people, including the young? It seems that our Lord said the drawing power is the message of the cross and the power is in the Word (John 12:32; Rom. 1:16).

GOD-PRESCRIBED WORSHIP

Scriptural worship is composed of certain specified, specific, prescribed activities, or avenues, through which the Christian draws near to and communes in heart and spirit with his Creator; he worships “in spirit [from the heart] and in truth” [according to the Word of God (John 17:17)] (John 4:24). Every act, or avenue, of worship [singing, prayer, Lord’s Supper, teaching/preaching, giving] appeals to the spirit or mind of the worshipper, thus attuning one’s heart to God. He does not worship God with machinery or with some other contrivance, such as hand clapping. “And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name [by the authority (Acts 4:7)] of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). Jesus stated that there is a law of worship; we are “under law to Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21; cf. Rom. 8:1-2; Gal. 6:2; Jam. 1:25; cf. Isa. 2:2-3).

God did not prescribe the doctrines of men to guide Christian worship. “There are only two possible sources of authority—from God or from mankind (Mt. 21:23-27)” (Kenyon, p. 11). Inasmuch as hand clapping in worship is from man, therefore it is not authorized from heaven. Whosoever departs from the truth and does not abide in Christ’s doctrine does not have God (2 John 9-11; cf. Gal. 1:6-9). Brother Duncan stated, “It will be admitted by all that we can abide in the doctrine of Christ without ever having a round of applause in any of our worship assemblies” (Duncan, p. 2). McCord wrote, “...worship is ‘vain’ when based on ‘the commandments of men’ (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:9).” They “indeed have an appearance of wisdom, in self-made worship,” but they “are of no value” (Col. 2:23) (McCord, p. 7). To follow fables and commandments of men is to “turn away from the truth” (Tit. 1:14) and is to do things indecently and disorderly (1 Cor. 14:40).

God did not prescribe the Old Testament to guide Christian worship. Many people have endeavored to defend certain practices in worship because they were done in the Old Testament. However, Paul wrote, “Wherefore, my brethren, ye also were made dead to the law [of Moses] through the body of Christ; that ye should be joined to another, even to him who was raised from the dead, that we might bring forth fruit unto God” (Rom. 7:4). Roy Deaver wrote,

What God authorized in the Old Testament in worship is now off limits, having been nailed “to the cross” (Col. 2:14). Abrogated at Calvary would be sacrificing bulls (Psa. 51:19), burning incense (Ex. 30:1), playing instruments of music (Psa. 33:2; 71:22), dancing (Psa. 149:3), shouting (Psa. 5:11), and clapping hands in worship to God (Psa. 47:1).

Instead of our listening to Moses or Elijah or Simon Peter, God spoke forcibly from a mountaintop about Jesus, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear ye him” (Matt. 17:5) (McCord, p. 7).

“Our religious practices come from the authority of the *New Testament only*” (Miller, p. 16).

When one examines the New Testament, however, he finds an entirely different situation. Worship is a spiritual exercise that leaves behind the more “carnal” features of the former regime (cf. Heb. 9:10; 13:15)” (Jackson, p. 2).

(Continued Next Month)

A Message To All MSOP Alumni With E-mail

Mike McDaniel
Alumni Liaison

On August 13, I sent an edition of the *Laborers Together Newsletter* by e-mail attachment to all of our alumni for whom I have e-mail addresses. Did you receive it? If you did not, it may be that we do not have your current e-mail address in the office database and in my address book. If I have an old e-mail address for you, your undelivered e-mails are returned.

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