

SINGING AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Noah Hackworth

THE AUTHORITY OF GOD

One of the distinctive features of the Christian System, as Alexander Campbell called it, is that it is authoritative. Authority means “The right to command and to enforce obedience; the right to act” (cf., John 1:11-12). God, because he is the Sovereign of the universe as well as the Creator of mankind, has the undeniable “right to command and enforce” obedience, which he does through love (cf., John 14:15). Whatever, then, is done in homage paid to God through the ascended Christ, must be authorized by him. **“And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him”** (Col. 3:17). Belgian writer S. Van Mierlo explains:

Modern theologians condemn “authoritarian religions” and will not permit any authority outside of man to be imposed on men. But they themselves end up with this kind of religion. For if all Scripture is not inspired of God, if it is in large measure made up of documents of doubtful value, brought together by unknown authors, how is the believer not versed in criticism going to make up his mind? How will he understand where the Bible is simply giving the human opinions of certain august personages? So each man has to consult the theologians to find out what texts he can have confidence in and how he is supposed to regard them. But since these critics often differ among themselves, he will have to decide on one among them. Thus the selected one will become the voice of authority. So it turns out that while the authority of God is rejected, that of man is accepted.... (315).

The problem with many is that they do not understand the concept of authority. If one is walking down the hall and sees a sign on a door that says, “Authorized Personnel,” what does it mean? If one is driving down the street and sees a driveway with a sign in it that says “Authorized Vehicles,” what does it mean? There is not one person in this assembly who does not know how to react in these kinds of situations. An individual would automatically know whether he could pass through the door or enter the driveway. To fail to understand the implications of authority makes it more difficult to understand when something is authorized by God and when it is not.

THE AUTHORITY OF SILENCE

According to the Sacred Text there were certain well-defined occasions upon which silence was definitely imposed (Hab. 2:20; 1 Cor. 14:28; 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12). Why, then, should we think it a strange thing to recognize its authority? That we do not truly respect the authority of the Bible unless we respect its silence is a contention that does not admit of doubt. In fact, we are forbidden by apostolic instruction (1 Cor. 4:6; 2 John 9) to “go beyond that which is written” or “beyond

the teaching of Christ.” To do so is to deprive ourselves of any semblance of authority for what we say or do (cf., Col: 3:17). And should this be the case, to whom shall we give account for our actions? A perversion of this principle is the assumption that the silence of the Bible grants the right to proceed with the action or activity. Not so! Attitudes toward the silence of the Scriptures are effectively demonstrated by Martin Luther (1483-1546) and Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1564). Luther wanted “to retain in the church all that was not expressly contradicted in the scriptures, while Zwingli wanted to abolish all that could not be proved by scripture” (Cox 60). As far as Luther was concerned, “he saw at a glance where his rule of interpretation on other subjects must inevitably lead him on this point” (Shepherd 115). In the case of Zwingli, he, “...reduced the church to extreme simplicity; pictures and statues were removed from the churches...organs were banished...” (Shepherd 123). Subsequent to his arrival in America (ca. 1807), Thomas Campbell, near the end of a speech, reportedly said, “That rule, my highly respected hearers, is this, that where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent” (Hailey 52). In a description of the attitudes that would characterize the advocates of the Great Restoration Movement, Robert Richardson, in *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, said:

Thus, the silence of the Bible was to be, respected equally with its revelations, which were by Divine authority declared to be able to “make the man of God perfect and thoroughly furnished unto every good word.” Anything more, than “the whole counsel of God” would be a dangerous deficiency. Simply, reverentially, confidingly, they would speak of Bible things in Bible words, adding nothing thereto and omitting nothing given by inspiration (237).

GOD AUTHORIZES SINGING

At this point we have only one thing to prove: God authorizes singing. Remembering that one way to establish biblical authority is by direct statement, we submit the following passages which authorize singing:

Matthew 26:30 - **“they had sung a hymn”**

Mark 14:26 - **“they had sung a hymn”**

Acts 16:25 - **“and singing hymns”**

Romans 15:9 - **“sing unto thy name”**

1 Corinthians 14:15 - **“sing with the spirit”**

Ephesians 5:19 - **“singing and making melody”**

Colossians 3:16 - **“singing with grace”**

Hebrews 2:12 - **“will I sing thy praise”**

Hebrews 13:15 - **“the fruit of lips”**

James 5:13 - **“let him sing praise”**

Surely no one will deny that these passages authorize singing. And at least two of them show that it is a command. And remember, where there is a command there is the authority. First, Ephesians 5:18-19, **“but be filled with the Spirit;**

speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." The grammatical make-up of this passage is extremely important.

...For the active participle in connexion with an imperative, either declares the manner in which the imperative shall be obeyed or explains the meaning of the command. To this I have not found an exception: for example, "Cleanse the house, sweeping it." "Cleanse the garment, washing it," shews the manner in which the command is to be obeyed, or explains the meaning of it... This rule has passed through a fiery trial. I have only been more fully convinced of its generality and value. There is no rule in English syntax more general in its application. I would only add that the participle does not always express everything in the command; but it always points out something emphatically in the intention of the imperative, and without which the injunction cannot be suitably and fully performed (Campbell 202-203).

This is an imperative sentence hence it carries the force of a command. The subject of the sentence is "you" (understood). The command is "**be filled.**" The sense is: you be filled with the spirit. "**Speaking,**" "**singing,**" and "**making melody**" are participles which show how the imperative is to be obeyed. The participles expressed by the imperative are a part of the command; hence, "**singing**" is a part of the command, "**be filled,**" as expressed by the passage (Wallace 270).

Next, Colossians 3:16, "**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God.**" "The imperative in this verse is 'let' with the subject 'you' understood—(you let)—followed by the participles 'teaching' and 'admonishing' and 'singing' which limit the subject of the imperative verb 'let'" (Wallace 270). Contradicting those who charge that there is no command for singing in the New Testament are these two powerful passages: Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:18-19. They go "unanswered" by the advocates of instrumental music in worship. To attempt to avoid the thrust of the Colossian and Ephesian passages regarding singing is to do nothing less than a failing effort to "strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel" (Mat. 23:24—ASV). Shades of twentieth-century Phariseeism!

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING

The only ones known to this writer who deny that congregational singing is authorized in the New Testament are the ones who advocate instrumental music in the worship of God; and they apparently have been doing so for many years. However, their opposition to congregational singing has seemingly been rather obscure until more recent times. But regarding singing there are only two ways it can be done; either individually or collectively. Either one sings "solo" or accompanied by others. But why would one want to sing alone unless he is alone?

If singing is authorized by the New Testament, and it is, (shown above) and one is authorized to do it why aren't two? And if two why not an entire congregation? But that we may leave nothing to the imagination, let's see if the New Testament authorizes congregational singing.

It must be remembered that the church is commanded to assemble (Heb. 10:25), and the only way this point can be denied is to deny that Hebrews 10:25 is a command. Next, this command applied to all New Testament congregations.

Next, both First and Second Corinthians were written to **“the church of God which is at Corinth”** (cf., 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 2:1). The church at Corinth, consisting of those who were **“sanctified”** and **“called to be saints,”** was in the habit of **“gathering together”** (1 Cor. 5:4) or **“coming together”** (11:17-20; 14:23-26; 16:2). And it is a matter of fact that in the assemblies of the Corinthian church a number of things were done including the singing of psalms. **“What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also”** (14:15). Where were the psalms sung? In the church! Next, both the Ephesian and Colossian Epistles were written to the respective churches. The former consisted of the saints at Ephesus and the faithful in Christ Jesus (1:1); the latter consisted of the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse (1:2). Did these churches ever “meet or come together?” If not, how would they have followed apostolic instruction to lay by in store or eat the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week? But what else did they do? Ephesians 5:19 says they were to **“sing and make melody in their hearts.”** Colossians 3:16 says they were to **“sing with grace in their hearts to the Lord.”** When did they do this? When the congregations were dispersed and every saint had gone to his own house? Ridiculous! They sang when they were together in worship. And no man can prove otherwise. Added to this is the fact that **“speaking one to another”** and **“admonishing one another”** are reciprocal and demand an assembly. “Each other” in both passages translates a pronoun (*eautois*) which is reflexive in nature, hence requiring “a response.” In order for the Colossians and the Ephesians to carry out Paul's instructions concerning these matters the saint in these respective places would have to assemble together. M.C. Kurfees states:

This clearly and definitely presents one of the divine purposes of the music appointed for Christian worship. It is to be music that instructs, music which communicates ideas from one to another, and which admonishes those engaged to right living. Nothing must interfere with this divine purpose. Any music which fails at this point, and to whatever extent it thus fails, is not pleasing to God, not being embraced within, not plainly excluded from, the scope of the divine command (82-83).

William Barclay adds:

It is interesting here to see that from the beginning the Church was a singing Church. The church inherited that from the Jews, for Philo tells us

that often the Jews would spend the whole night in hymns and songs. One of the first descriptions of a church service which we possess is that of Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia, who sent a report of the activities of the Christians to Trajan the Roman Emperor. In that report he said, "They meet at dawn to sing a hymn to Christ as God." The gratitude of the Church has always gone up to God in Christian praise and Christian song (191).

Next, Hebrews 2:12 says, **"I will declare thy name unto my brethren, In the midst of the congregation will I sing thy praise."** This is a quotation from Psalm 22:22, and refers to Christ. It affirms an action on his part in the midst of his brethren, no doubt in the synagogue. As others have observed, Jesus frequented the synagogue. He preached in them. Why then is it difficult to understand that he obviously sang with his brethren in them also? "This, therefore, proves what the apostle intended—that the Messiah was among them as his brethren; that he spoke to them as such; and that he mingled in their devotions as one of their number" (Barnes 68).

Last, Hebrews 13:15, **"Through him then let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to his name."** The two questions to be asked concerning this passage are: (1) by whom were the instructions of this passage carried out? and, (2) when? The most reasonable answer is: they were carried out by the recipients of the Hebrews epistle wherever and whenever they assembled (cf., 10:25). There is no valid reason for thinking otherwise. Lyman Coleman says:

The prevailing mode of singing during the first three centuries was congregational. The whole congregation united their voices in the sacred song of praise, in strains suited to their ability. Their music, if such it could be called, was, of a kind of recitative chant. The charm of their sacred music was not in the harmony of sweet sounds, but in the melody of the heart... But, however this may be, the most ancient and most common mode of singing was confessedly for the whole assembly; men, women and children blend their voices in their songs of praise in the great congregation. Such is the testimony of Hilary, of Augustin and—Chrysostom. "Formerly all came together and united in their song, as is still our custom." "Men and women, the aged and the young, were distinguished only by their skill in singing, for the spirit which led the voice of each one blended all in one harmonious melody" (41).

THE CASE AGAINST INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC IN WORSHIP

What is the apparent reason for denying that the New Testament authorizes congregational singing? Those who do so do not deny that the early church assembled (Heb. 10:25); that it had the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:7); that it had preaching (Acts 20:7); or that it took up a collection (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 16:2); but that it sang "as a corporate body" (congregationally) is emphatically denied. Why?

The reason seems to be the desire to retain the mechanical instrument in worship. The argument runs like this: even though the New Testament does not authorize congregational singing (a contention lacking in proof) it is still acceptable. So even if instrumental music is unauthorized it is also acceptable.

The only problem is that the argument is false. Instrumental music is not authorized in the New Testament, but congregational singing is (previously shown). Gospel preachers have debated this issue many times, and in many cases circles have been drawn on the blackboard and the instrument advocates have been asked (challenged) to put the passage of scripture that authorizes instrumental music in worship inside the circle; to this very day, all the circles have gone empty. Why? Because no such scripture exists. Moses E. Lard says:

Now in the light of the foregoing principles what defense can be urged for the introduction into some of our congregations of instrumental music? The answer which thunders into my ear from every page of the New Testament is, none. Did Christ ever appoint it? Did any one of the primitive churches ever use it? Never. In what light then must we view him who attempts to introduce it into the churches of Christ of the present day? I answer, as an insulter of the authority of Christ, and as a defiant and impious innovator on the simplicity and purity of the ancient worship (331).

WHAT ABOUT HAND CLAPPING, HUMMING, CHOIRS, VOCAL BANDS, AND OTHER SPECIAL EFFECTS?

Regarding the above-mentioned things my first question is, why? Why such things should be included in a worship service of the Lord's church is a question of no little importance, one that is being pondered by concerned brethren all over the country. The "why" of such things indicates to many brethren the introduction of "special effects" calculated to enhance worship. The entertainment world (movies, concerts, comedy) puts a great deal of emphasis on special effects, and some of the Lord's people are beginning to do the same thing. Somehow the feeling that worship must be entertaining has gotten into the minds of good people. Some have found themselves "going to church more, but enjoying it less"; so efforts are being put forth to add the "missing thing," not only in worship but in everyday life. Pentecostalism, here we come!

Choirs and choral groups. Many years ago in a congregation of the church in Northern California, at a singing service, one of the congregations in the area was represented by a choral group. They approached the front of the auditorium with long, black, flowing robes. They numbered about a dozen and were led by a very talented individual. They began singing a song that had to do with the crucifixion of Christ, a song that solicited strong emotions from the start. The group members began "humming" while the leader fell to his knees, clasped his hands, lifted his eyes toward the ceiling and began "moaning" and "wailing." He became so emotional that his eyes "rolled up in his head." It was quite a spectacle. Fortunately, the hosting congregation had the good judgment not to tolerate such a "dramatic

presentation.” In fact, all group singing was discontinued. What was the motivation behind such a performance? Nothing but the addition of “special effects” designed to play on the emotions of the audience. Since when do we need such things to “enhance” worship? Such artistic displays only appeal to the sensual part of us, but brethren, choirs do not provide for reciprocation. How can we afford to let someone else do our singing for us? Can we really afford to fall for such maneuvers?

Humming, Vocal Bands, Hand Clapping. What is wrong with humming? Well, for one thing it is not singing. Singing and humming are two different acts. The former is authorized (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), the latter isn’t. Singing consists of words that are spoken in order that those who are participating may be “taught” and “admonished.” Humming cannot fulfill this obligation. What will be next? Once the door is opened, all sorts of “deviations” and “variations” will become grievous problems for which there will be no easy solution. Vocal bands are unnecessary sounds added to the worship service for effect. But if the advocates of such “additions” do not really believe in instrumental music in worship, and they say they do not, why try to get as close to the sound of an instrument as possible? People will be listening more to the “vocal sounds” rather than concentrating on what is being said.

Brethren, it doesn’t make sense! A vocal band has as much relation to New Testament worship as the North Pole does to a goose nest. Some of us still haven’t learned not to go beyond the things that are written (cf., 1 Cor. 4:6). It comes back to what the Word actually authorizes and our attitude toward it. The precedent for instruction from the written Word is given by Jesus Himself:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

As for the clapping of the hands in worship, it offers absolutely nothing conducive to worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). There is nothing more powerful and more convincing than congregational singing that is designed to motivate the Christian and persuade the sinner. Are we trying to please men or God? This is the most important question.

ENDNOTES

- Barclay, William. *The Letters To The Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1959.
- Barnes, Albert. *Barnes On The New Testament, Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, SD: Baker, 1955.
- Campbell, Alexander. *Christianity Restored*. Rosemead: Old Paths Book Club, 1959.

Coleman, Lyman. *Ancient Christianity Exemplified*, 329-330. Quoted by J.W. Shepherd, *Church, Falling Away and Restoration*. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1961.

Cox, John D. *Church History*. Murfreesboro, TN: DeHoff Publications, 1951.

Hailey, Homer. *Attitudes and Consequences*. Rosemead: Old Paths Book Club, 1952.

Kurfees, M. C. *Instrumental Music In The Worship*. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1950.

Lard, Moses E. *Lard's Quarterly*. Vol. 1. Rosemead: Old Paths Book Club, 1952.

Mierlo, S. Van. *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture*. Quoted by Rene Pache. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1969.

Richardson, Robert. *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*. Vol. 1. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1956.

Shepherd, J. W. *The Church, The Falling Away, and The Restoration*. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1961.

Wallace, Jr., Foy E. *Bulwarks of the Faith*, Part Two. Oklahoma City, OK: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Publications, 1951.~