

My Thoughts on “A Christian Affirmation: 2005 #4

The Affirmation concerning which I am writing opposes our relaxation of “our commitment to practices that have been characteristic of our churches.” Specifically, it refers to our rejection of instrumental accompaniment in favor of a cappella singing. No one, to my knowledge, demands the use of instruments as essential. The question is not whether a cappella singing is acceptable but whether one who rejects the use of those instruments is justified in rejecting their users as brothers in Christ. Is the brother who uses no instruments justified in dividing God’s people over the issue? We have tried to blame the user as causing division but he does not make it a dividing issue.

This involves a determination of what is acceptable as an expression of worship rather than just about the use of instrumental accompaniment. In our previous essay, the full-life aspect of dedication to God as a living sacrifice was set forth. That blurs the distinction of what can be done for it frees us from the concept of a segment of our lives being worship and the remainder being secular. Consider this illustration.

Interpretive dancing is a meaningful art form for many. Uncouth as I am, I confess, it means little more than aerobics to me. Dance art lovers may gather in a theater. There a person or troupe may portray in dance and pantomime a character who disdains God and right living until some tragedy causes him to change course, seek God, and fall down in submission to him – the gospel proclaimed in art form. Would the dancers be glorifying God or be presumptuously sacrilegious? I think you will have to agree that they could be glorifying God if their hearts are right. Now, let’s let them do the same performance before an assembly of disciples, either in or out of a church edifice. Does it cease to be edifying and become damning? Must you condemn the dancers and reject them as fellow-disciples? It is time for honesty!

In my *Free As Sons*, Chapter 4, “The Sacrifices of Cain and Abel,” I asserted that I did not recall an instance in the Bible record where God rejected the sincere expression of worship of any righteous person, even though his particular acts of devotion were not commanded of God. I have repeated similar statements since, and in the more than fifteen years since the original statement, I recall only instance of someone trying to prove my assertion in error!

Wasn’t Cain rejected because of his wrong offering? No, Cain’s offering was rejected because of his evil heart (1 John 3:11-12). There is no indication that he was instructed to offer anything differently. He tried to worship God while hating his brother.

In various ages we see persons offering unspecified acts of worship that were accepted. All people of all ages have been granted *the privilege of praise*. God has expected, and accepted, sincere worship even from those who had no direct or written revelation. He has looked upon the heart of the worshipper more than the technique of his praise. Men have been permitted to worship in methods that expressed the feeling of the worshipper's heart so long as it accomplished the purpose of praise while avoiding sacramental and idolatrous concepts and the veneration of objects. Let us look at some Biblical precedents that give basis to this premise. We usually overlook or misapply these.

When it is stated that, in the time of Enosh, "*men began to call upon the name of the Lord*" (Gen. 4:26), and when Abram "*built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord*" (Gen. 12:8), there is no indication that they did this in response to a command or specification of God.

Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, made an altar of it, and poured an offering of oil on it in spontaneous worship without "authority" from God (Gen. 28:18).

Without instruction from the Law of Moses, the Jews had added wine to the Passover (Luke 22:14-18; Matt. 26:26-28), dancing before the Lord (2 Sam. 6:12f; Psalms 149:3), and the entire synagogue service. They were not condemned for those unauthorized activities of worship. They were privileged to serve/worship in those ways.

Nadab and Abihu were killed for offering strange fire, but they had been given complete instructions which they defied. In the other examples above, except for Cain, there was sincere effort to honor God rather than to defy him (Lev. 10:1f; 16:12). Wholesale abandonment of God's specified law, rather than an innocent infraction in worship brought Uzzah's death when he touched the Ark (2 Sam. 6:3).

Israel, in the time of Samuel, "*gathered together at Mizpah, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord*" (1 Sam. 7:6) as an act of homage. Even though the action was unspecified, it brought no disapproval from God.

In Chapter 1 of *Romans*, Paul declared that the Gentiles were without excuse because, having known God as revealed in nature, they "*did not honor him as God or give thanks to him. . .*" (v. 21), "*and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator*" (v. 25). How could they have properly honored God, given thanks of praise to him, and worshipped and served the Creator since they had no revealed law? *God has given all men, even the uninstructed, the privilege of praise and worship!*

Paul commended the Athenians, declaring, "*For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you*" (Acts 17:23). Although their understanding of God's nature was very limited and they knew not any code of laws from him, they had the privilege of worship. Paul did not condemn their devotion to the "unknown god" but enlarged on their understanding about his identity.

In the New Covenant writings we see numerous "unauthorized" actions of worship which were undemanded, unrehearsed, spontaneous, and extravagant; yet they met with approval. Although these were not done in Christian assemblies, they were expressions of approved worship and they illustrate the principle of acceptable worship.

The Wise Men offered birthday gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus without instructions to do so (Matt. 2:1-11). It was their privilege to praise through that means. Mary was neither rebuked for anointing Jesus without authorization nor considered presumptuous in using ointment without instruction to do so (John 12:1f).

The sinful woman was not commanded to wash Jesus' feet with tears nor to use her hair as a towel (Luke 7:36-50). She was exercising her privilege of spontaneous worship.

According to the rules we have made, Paul sinned in cutting his hair in a ritual relating to a vow (Acts 21:23-26) and when he purified himself ritually and arranged for an offering in accordance to the Law of Moses. We would also have to censor the Judean disciples who "are all zealous for the law" (Acts 21:23-26) and disciples who tithe, circumcise, and observe days now. With the sacrifice of Jesus, God did not suddenly come to hate the worship rituals of the law but Jesus emphasized continued law-keeping (Matt. 5:17-20), though not for justification. Neither should we assume that, when Jesus died, God began to hate praise which was accompanied by instruments, which thing he had accepted for centuries, else he would have warned against that practice.

We have contended that the silence of the new covenant writers on the subject of instrumental accompaniment is evidence that God does not want us to use it. However, since singing was commonly accompanied in all societies, and since the Jews had used it under the law, the failure to mention it would only seem to indicate that it was of no matter with God. So, can we rightly make a cappella singing an essential to unity?

In view of these examples, can we not say definitely that God has given the privilege of praise to all men at all times? Can we not agree that men offered acceptable worship without specific command or instruction in various instances? In view of our whole-life offering, have we not been authorized to glorify him in all things that we do and also granted the privilege of using methods which utilize our talents in expressing it -- through spiritually oriented art, drama, songs, literature, jewelry, plaques, bumper stickers, signs, and architecture? (More in Free To Speak, Chapter 14, "Instrumental Music".)

This is no argument that we should use instruments. My preference is still in favor of a cappella congregational singing. What I am saying, however, is that I cannot make it an essential to unity. I am divisive when I reject others for their singing with instruments. I am not compelled to meet and sing where instruments are employed. It is not meeting separately that is divisive, but the rejection of brothers is divisive. Unity is between individuals, not religious organizations. That rejection is done, not by those who use instruments, but by those who do not. So, it is in order to revise our spiritual diet to include generous servings of humble pie.

You may read the affirmation at www.christianaffirmation.org More to come. []

(Cecil Hook: June 2005)

Talkin' Texas: When visiting in Austin, be sure to see "The Story of Texas" in the rather new Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum near the Capitol. It is fantastic.