

HOW IS GOD WORSHIPED?

(The Question of Authority)

A preacher friend recently wrote of being disturbed by the number of congregations who encourage hand-clapping offered as worship to God. His observation resulted in a lively discussion that revealed fundamental errors in the religious thinking of our day. The discussion in question involved 13 Facebook users. Though some of the writers didn't express it – or even recognize it – all of the arguments posted, both those for and those against clapping, were directly related to a single, simple question: what is the authoritative standard rule in worshiping God?

Fundamental Error in Interpretation

One writer argued that the practice should not be so “disturbing” because there is no scripture saying, “Thou shalt not clap during church services.” This argument was at the center of the 16th century Reformation Movement. It is much older even than that. Martin Luther held the idea that anything not forbidden is approved, while Huldrych Zwingli insisted that anything not authorized is forbidden. But 2,000 years earlier Jerusalem was rejected by God, in part, for doing things that God had not commanded them to do (Jeremiah 7:29-31). Even children sent to the store for milk and bread understand that they are not authorized to buy candy with the change. Mom didn't have to say, “Don't get candy and gum.” It was enough to say, “Buy bread and milk.” Bread and milk she wanted; bread and milk she authorized. Nothing more.

If the “he-didn't-say-don't” argument is valid reasoning, then anything a person might want to do is approved by God if it is not specifically prohibited in the Bible. If applied to its logical conclusion this argument would have places of worship filled with the fragrant aroma of Prince Albert pipe tobacco and the joyful noises of tripped-out dope heads. If not, why not? There is no expressed prohibition of tobacco or drugs in the Bible.

Trusting what isn't in the Bible cannot approve any person's actions or beliefs. Only “by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” shall a person live in peace with God (Matt. 4:4).

Willful Innovations, or God-authorized Elements?

One excellent question, often asked as if it authorizes modern innovations, concerns the use of such things as songbooks, microphones, communion trays and electric lights. Admittedly these things are not specifically named in the Bible. But think about it: does a thing have to be named in the Bible in order to be pleasing to, or authorized by, God? Is your name in the Bible? In the same vein, does a thing have to be listed by name in order to be displeasing or unauthorized? What about sleeping in worship and snoring loudly? Could that be the way we may worship God acceptably?

Books, mics, trays and lights are not offered as worship to God, so they really don't compare to the question of hand-clapping. They are incidental to the practice that is the purpose of the assembly. You may use a seat while you worship, but your seat isn't worship. Nor would you prefer to worship without it. It is incidental to the worship; it is not offered as worship. So with the songbook, microphone and lights. These are expedients. They make it possible for us to worship without the distractions of discomfort or inconvenience.

But another says, “God knows how much I love Him, and He knows that my clapping is an expression of that love.” The truth is that “The Lord knoweth them that are his” (II Tim. 2:19; *cp.* John 10:14; Num. 16:5), and those who love Him keep His commandments (John 14:15). When and where did He command hand-clapping for the worship of His church? But let's not be distracted from the question. It isn't what God may know or not know; it's what God accepts or doesn't accept. He requires that we

“pray according to His will” (I John 4:15), “sing with the understanding” (I Cor. 14:15) and “worship in ... truth” (John 4:24). What is the will of God? What has He given us to understand? What truth has He revealed regarding our conduct in worship?

What is the authoritative standard rule in worshipping God?

It is argued that God is worth our applause, and a great deal more. While this is surely true, worship is not a question of what God is worth, but of what God has said He wants as worship. Children give parents gifts that please the parents, but mature people think of what the recipient wants or needs. This argument for clapping is putting man’s will above the will of God.

Deciding by Love

In religious controversies we often hear someone argue that, before we try to make authoritative statements, we should try to master the greatest commandment: love. Without doubt, the Christian must love his brother (I John 4:19-21). But do we have to be equal to Jesus as “master” of “love” before we can understand or obey anything He said? If so, then why did He command us to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12)? If I can understand and strive to obey that command before I grow to love as masterfully as He, then perhaps I can understand and obey something else He said. Maybe I can even understand His commands regarding worship, and obey them because I love Him.

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

Putting feelings and desires before the word of God is failing to take into account the source, purpose and nature of the Bible. It is authoritative over all men, and will be the standard of judgment of all, whether or not men acknowledge that authority.

Others, however, have sincere respect for the Bible, yet come to wrong conclusions because they do not “rightly divide” (II Tim. 2:15, KJV), or “handle aright” (ASV), the word of God. The basic principles of handling the Bible correctly include [1] recognizing the difference between narrative and command,[2] understanding that the New Testament is God’s law over all mankind today, and the Old Testament is not binding upon anyone, and [3] understanding that authority is indicated by {a} explicit statements, {b} the implications of those statements, and {c} the example of those whose actions were approved by God.

What God authorized as worship under the Old Testament law for Israel cannot be our standard. What He describes as worship in Heaven cannot be our standard. Today He requires – and accepts – only the Lord’s supper (I Cor. 11:23-26), Bible study (Acts 20:7), prayer (Acts 12:12), singing (Eph. 5:19) and giving (I Cor. 16:1-2). “Whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil” (Matt. 5:37).-*Al Parr*