

A Testimony of a Changed Mind by MARION OWENS

I grew up in the Church of Christ, a group which has traditionally insisted that church music must be a cappella. For most of my life I believed that teaching and often defended it. In recent years, however, I have changed my mind on the subject. For sake of any who may be interested, I have chosen to explain the change in my thinking.

In order to understand the basis for the insistence on a cappella one needs to be aware of some foundational principles which guide Church of Christ thinking. A couple of statements often heard are, “We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent” and “We do Bible things in Bible ways and call Bible things by Bible names.” These statements reflect a determination to be as true to Bible teaching as possible, which is certainly a laudable goal. But a look at the facts shows that by no means are these principles followed consistently. Ironically, there is a strong tendency to “speak where the Bible is silent” ...as we will demonstrate.

Speaking where the Bible is Silent

I have heard many sermons which stress the necessity for 5 acts of worship during our services: praying, giving, communion, singing, and teaching (preaching). These are supposedly required by the scriptures. But can this be found in the scriptures? Consider these facts:

- There is NO biblical requirement to have a “worship service.”
- There are NO instructions for HOW to conduct a worship service.
- NOT ONE of these acts is ever referred to as “worship” in the New Testament.
- The ONLY action referred to as worship in the New Testament is found in Romans 12:1, to give our bodies as living sacrifices.

In view of these facts it is obvious that there has been a lot of “speaking where the Bible is silent.” And there is more. (Is this to say that these are NOT worship.....or that it is wrong to do these things? Not at all! The truth is that the silence of the scriptures on these matters leaves Christians a great deal of freedom of action, so long as no specific commands are disobeyed.)

Command, Example, Necessary Inference

Much of Church of Christ teaching is based on the premise that we are to be guided by command, example, or necessary inference (hereafter referred to a CENI). On the surface this may sound reasonable enough, but when one sees the lengths to which this principle is used to insist on certain practices---or to condemn other practices---he realizes the flaws that exist. These flaws become very evident when one sees the inconsistent application of the premise.

The argument is made that the Bible gives us instructions for how to have a worship service (which it does NOT). Since there is no command, example, or necessary inference that instruments should be used in worship, it is therefore not “authorized” (a favorite term among CENI advocates). (The CENI mindset has been used by various splinter groups to oppose a wide variety of practices such as supporting orphan homes from the church treasury, or having Sunday School, etc. The inconsistencies are almost laughable; they are not hesitant to use church money to pay the electric bill, which is hardly something mentioned in the scriptures!)

The CENI argument has been elevated to virtually the level of scriptural authority, but there is nothing scriptural about it! No one applies it consistently. Just imagine what it would be like if we could do only those things which are specifically mentioned in the scriptures! (We would make the Amish look super-modern).

The command to sing

Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 are the two passages consistently quoted by the a cappella advocates. But indeed they play fast and loose with the truth. Ephesians 5:19 says, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord.” What does this verse really say? It is obvious that it refers to person to person communication (to “one another”). It refers to personal interaction as Christians see each other from time to time. This says nothing about congregational singing. **IN FACT THE SCRIPTURES NEVER MENTION CONGREGATIONAL SINGING!** To argue that singing in a congregational setting fulfills these instructions is to distort their obvious meaning.

Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” This is a close parallel to the Ephesians passage and again stresses the “one another” aspect of the singing. It might be argued that there is teaching and admonishing through congregational singing. That is, of course, true, but there is nothing in these passages to indicate that large group singing is what Paul had in mind.

The Real Issue

There is no argument concerning whether or not we should sing. Everyone concedes that we should sing. The question is whether or not God has restricted us in what may accompany our singing. **FACT: GOD GAVE NO RESTRICTIONS WHATEVER IN WHAT MAY ACCOMPANY SINGING! NONE....ZERO...ZIP!** All restrictions on the subject have come from man! (Through the years I have observed a variety of demands by sincere CENI-inspired brethren. One brother thought it was wrong to pat ones foot. Many have opposed the clapping of hands....and on and on. When one allows human opinions to over-ride the silence of the scriptures, all kinds of nonsense can develop. What about intermittent humming and whistling while singing...is that wrong? What about tapping one's fingers audibly? There is no end to the absurdities that can develop.)

Early Church Example

I often heard (and made) the argument that the early church did not use instruments in worship and that indicates that use of instruments is not something which early Christians felt was appropriate. But this argument deserves a closer look. The earliest church was very Jewish in its convictions and actions. The earliest version of Christianity was basically a belief in Jesus superimposed on Judaism. (If we really wanted to follow seriously the example of the early church we would be doing things much differently than what we do now!) But consider this: the Jews of the first century lived under the same Law of Moses that had been in force since the days of Moses. It is obvious that the Jews had frequently used instruments in worship throughout their history....and that God did not disapprove. So why were the Jews not using instruments in the first century services? It would not have been because they thought it was a violation of God's law.

I posed this question to a brother who grew up in the Jewish religion. His answer made sense. Use of the instruments was largely a matter of joy and happiness. The heavy domination of Roman rule had drained the Jewish people of their joy, and there was no taste at all for such expressions of joy and celebration. To conclude that the early church did not worship with instruments because it was not "authorized" is an altogether baseless assumption. The tone of the early church meetings was, to a large extent, a reflection of the tone of the contemporary Jewish meetings.

Concluding Thoughts

It is very difficult for a person to turn loose of convictions which he has held for most of his life. I know; my convictions "died hard." But as one studies the scriptures he realizes how many people in the Bible had to do exactly that as they were confronted with truth. Anyone who is determined to please God MUST keep an openness to truth, regardless of the consequences to his pride. Below are some very clear facts. I would encourage the reader to consider these facts carefully, pray for guidance, and use his intelligence and good judgment to arrive at conclusions which the facts warrant.

1. The New Testament gives NO command to have a worship service, nor does it provide any instructions for how to conduct such a service.
2. The commands to sing stress person-to-person communication, with NOTHING at all mentioned about group singing.
3. There is NO mention at all about what may---or may not---accompany singing.
4. The New Testament gives no instruction about what is to be considered "acts of worship", obviously leaving much to our personal judgment.
5. The Law of Moses provided hundreds of instructions about how to do things, including various items of worship BUT...it gave no instructions to worship using instruments. YET it is clear that God accepted this worship...even though it was NOT SPECIFICALLY AUTHORIZED.
6. God accepted worship with instruments under the Law of Moses. Revelation pictures

God being worshiped with harps in heaven. So it is obvious that there is nothing intrinsically ungodly about worship with instruments.

THINK ABOUT IT: does it make sense that God would allow worship with instruments under the Mosaic law.....and allow it in heaven....but make it a sin during the Christian era.....AND NEGLECT TO TELL US ABOUT IT.....And expect us to figure it out by a series of assumptions???

This just makes no sense at all!

Personal thoughts: At age 80 I can look back over many years of study and reflection. I can review the stages by which I was able to escape the shackles of traditionalism, taking a fresh look at the facts and accepting the conclusions to which they led me. It is amazing the insights one can gain when he does not feel duty-bound to reach only conclusions which are consistent with the dogma which he has long supported.

One particular insight has been especially helpful to me; that is a recognition of an important distinction between the approach of the Law of Moses and the approach of the Law of Christ. The former was basically a system of “micro-managing,” with hundreds of detailed instructions related to all kinds of matters. By contrast, the law of Christ, while it does include a few details, is basically “macro” in nature. It deals primarily in grand principles which relate to the heart. Someone has put it like this: “Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself....and then do whatever you feel like doing. The point is that when one's heart is right he will successfully find the right way.

It seems to me that this may have been what Paul was implying when he stated that all things were lawful for him, although not all things were expedient. If Christians want to meet on Sundays, have communion, sing, pray, contribute, and teach---that is fully acceptable...not because the Bible tells us to do this, but---ironically---because the Bible does not tell us to do this! When the Bible gives us general instructions, such as to worship and serve God....but does not tell us specifically how to do it...it is left to us to use our best knowledge and understanding to do what we believe is appropriate. None of us has the right to sit in judgment on others as to how they conduct their worship service, including the kind of music used, unless we can point out a violation of specific Bible teachings.

I have no quarrel with those who have a cappella music in their services. They are perfectly free to make this choice. But they are NOT free to condemn those who choose to use instrumental music. God is the one who decides what things are sinful; if he does not call something sin---what right do any of us have to call it sin? I hope the reader will give careful thought to these ideas. – Marion Owens.

An added thought by Ray Downen. Anyone who cares to look carefully into why David had instrumentalists trained to play in the temple will find that this was done by order of a prophet of God. The decision to use musical instruments in God's temple was made by God Himself and delivered to David by a prophet of God. **2 Chronicles 29:25** * He stationed the Levites in the temple of the Lord with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and **Nathan** the **prophet**; this was commanded by the Lord through his **prophets**.