

God Has Spoken

Tract Series

“Curse God and Die”?

(Hand-clapping as Worship: A Principle Applied)

by A. L. Parr

The words of Jobs wife to her godly husband when he suffered at the hands of Satan (Job 2:9) ought sufficiently to illustrate to every reader that the mere fact that words are written in the Bible does not make them authoritative over man today. How may we determine which words are authoritative? It is the single most important question in the debate over hand-clapping in the worship of the church.

So, how do we determine authority in worship? Should we regard the Bible as our rule book - and if so, how do we determine which words in it are meant to direct our worship? One debater rightly wrote, “Individuals like Cain, Nadab and Abihu learned the hard way that doing only what God authorizes is essential. We can do as we please if we desire, but that does not mean that God is well-pleased.”

My Good Will and the Mind of God

“Good intentions” is a defense often tendered for anything desired, but not found written in the Bible. We hear, “You can’t judge me; I’m doing this for God.” But may we suppose that God will or must accept everything we designate as “for Him”? The Bible describes in detail numerous examples of the falsity of such a

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds
(Hebrews 1:1-2)

belief. Uzzah joined Cain and the sons of Aaron in learning the hard way when the oxen stumbled and he touched the ark (I Chronicles 13:6-10).

One points out that God didn't mind hand-clapping "from the man after His own heart (Psalm 47:1) – I don't believe He minds it today either." How can we know – or "believe" – what God "minds"? The debater's use of "believe" is common in our society today. It means, "I choose to hold it as a truth." No evidence supports such "belief"; it is no more than an opinion that a person chooses to think of as truth. Is man's salvation from Hell based upon such thinking?

Another argues, "I don't think God would mind that at all." Who is man to decide what "God would mind"? The apostle Paul rightly observed that no man can know the mind of another, yet he declared that he and the other apostles of Jesus had the mind of God (I Corinthians 2:11-13) by virtue of God's having told them exactly what He wanted them to teach that men should believe and do. We know what God "minds" only by what He has told us, and that is known only by what is found in the Bible.

How the Bible Teaches by What it Says

Sometimes we practice something for so long that it comes to seem normal and right – even as something that has "always" been true. In such a case we can become quite defensive for what we believe. One said, "I would clap for my God anywhere for all he has done for me." But would he do that if God spoke from Heaven and told him not to do so? Would we do that if God spoke from Heaven and told us that He wants us to do something else instead? God has spoken so from Heaven (Hebrews 1:1-3), and all who would come to the Father in the name of the Son simply must observe all that He has commanded (John 14:6; Matthew 28:18-20).

So, how do we observe what Jesus commanded? Some readers have a bit of confusion over the use of the words. One argues that

“the command to worship authorizes clapping.” This might be true if “worship” were defined in terms of man’s good intentions, and if God had not specified the actions of worship.

It is important to understand that “clapping” is not implied in the command to worship. “Worship” does not mean to have good thoughts or do good deeds. The New Testament Greek word most often represented by the English “worship” literally means to “kiss the hand toward.” The word is non-specific, and therefore might allow what ever is in man’s good intentions, except for the fact that the command to worship is accompanied by specifics. What is authorized in worship are those specifics and everything necessary to their accomplishment.

Jesus commanded His apostles to teach what He had commanded them (Matthew 28:20). This is all that we are authorized to teach and practice (Titus 2:1; I Peter 4:11; Colossians 3:17). Hand-clapping is not authorized in the New Testament of Jesus Christ. Authorization is seen in command and example, and in the implications of each. A rational person commanded to go to the store knows that, in the absence of specific limitations to the contrary, he may use any means of his choosing (car, horse, bicycle, etc.) to convey himself to the store. Knowing that the apostles are guided by the Holy Spirit into “all truth” (John 16:13), we know that what they said and did is right. Their meeting on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7) is our approved example to do the same.

When the Lord commands the eating of the Lord’s supper (Matthew 26:26-29), He authorizes the necessity of some container for the unleavened bread and the grape juice. When He commands the teaching and learning of His word (Acts 20:7), he authorizes a place – but doesn’t specify the nature of the place – for such Bible study. When He commands our prayer (I Thessalonians 5:17; Acts 12:12), He authorizes our choice between praying silently and speaking aloud. When He commands singing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), He authorizes our use of books so that we may all sing the same words by the same tune. When He commands our

giving (I Corinthians 16:1-2), He authorizes, by implication, the use of plates, baskets, bags or boxes for collecting the contributions.

Clapping is not implied in the command (or, for that matter, the description) of worship. It is not necessary for the accomplishment of anything that is commanded, nor does it in any way expedite the accomplishment of those commands. Clapping is thus not authorized.

Why the Conflict?

If we accept that the Bible is the law of God, then we are obligated to show where in it God authorized clapping. If we deny that the Bible is from God and intended by Him as the final authority, then we are obligated to show the evidence to support that position. Either way the question of hand-clapping in worship comes down to the question whether God is the authority, or man is.

And that's why we debate the point. Some accept the Bible as God's authoritative word – and know how to “handle aright the word of truth” (II Timothy 2:15) – and some choose rather to allow man to be his own authority in matters of his relationship with God.

“There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death (Proverbs 14:12). “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).

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