

SAME SONG, DIFFERENT CENTURY  
by Jeff A. Jenkins

Just a cursory glance at the articles being published in brotherhood papers, church bulletins, and even personal blogs we can quickly discern that worship is now one of the most controversial issues in the church of our day. Add to that, the numerous “conversations” occurring at lectureships, seminars, and “unity meetings,” even a casual observer would conclude that this discussion concerning worship is of great importance. It has been suggested more than once that what the church faces today is “worship warfare.” And at the heart of these “worship wars,” is the question concerning instrumental music. The very thought of the words “worship” and “war” should lead us to very sincere and sober biblical reflection.

So, once again we are faced with the need to study what God’s Word teaches about worship. A number of questions come to mind. Does God regulate our worship to Him in any way? Is our worship to God a matter of personal preference? Can one worship God in any way he chooses, as long as his heart is right? Should we be concerned about how others worship? And most importantly, for our study, “does instrumental music matter to God?”

The reason for this current study is that many preachers, professors, elders, and other members of churches of Christ have become convinced that instrumental music does not matter to God. In fact, a very popular preacher among us recently wrote the following words, “So here’s my take on instrumental music: God doesn’t much care. Most of the old arguments were lame, built on shoddy hermeneutics.” In this statement, the author makes two assertions without any Biblical support. In fact, there is not one scripture mentioned or alluded to in his entire article. My question would be are the thousands of readers who frequent this blog supposed to believe this statement without any Biblical support, just because the writer says so? How does he know that God doesn’t care much about instrumental music? Does he have any Biblical backing for this bold statement?

Through the ages of time, God has made it clear that He cares deeply about how men worship Him. The biblical evidence is clear that God also cares about the details of that worship. Before we make the bold assertion that it doesn’t matter how we worship God we should carefully consider the biblical material. Cain learned that it matters how one worships God. (Genesis 3) If we could ask Nadab and Abihu if how one worships matters to God we would hear a resounding yes. (Leviticus 10:1-2) By studying the biblical evidence, we see that many others in scripture learned that obedience matters to God.

It seems even more bold and arrogant to say that the “old arguments” were lame, and that they are built on “shoddy hermeneutics.” There are thousands of wonderful, loving, highly educated brethren who stand in complete opposition to this statement. I think

about many men who have advanced degrees from prestigious schools of higher learning who would be highly offended to learn that their teaching was based on “shoddy hermeneutics.” Men such as Dr. J.W. McGarvey, Dr. David Lipscomb, Dr. Hugo McCord, Dr. Raymond Kelcy, Dr. Jimmy Jividen, Dr. Everett Ferguson, Dr. Neil Lightfoot, Dr. Stafford North, Dr., Dr. G. K. Wallace, Dr. Ira North, Dr. Batsell Baxter, Dr. Furman Kearley, Dr. Rex Turner, Sr., Dr. William Woodson and many other scholars have taught that instrumental music matters to God. These men are hardly the kind of men who would build their teachings on “shoddy hermeneutics!”

The statement in the next paragraph of the article presents even more confusion. The author states, “Nevertheless, those in the a cappella tradition don’t need to be ashamed of it. There is a rich tradition in the church that runs through the centuries of singing without instruments.” Those who are now advocating that instrumental music doesn’t matter to God have convinced themselves, and they are attempting to convince their followers that acappella music is a tradition peculiar to churches of Christ. They have tried to hide the fact that from the day the church was established on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2; it was hundreds of years before any instrument was ever used in a worship service. Many well-know denominational preachers, including Spurgeon, Clark, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley were strongly opposed to the use of instrumental music in worship. The Greek Orthodox Church has rejected instrumental music, along with the selling of indulgences, the authority of the pope, and sprinkling babies for hundreds of years. The fact is instrumental music was an addition to the worship that occurred hundreds of years after the establishment of the church. Recorded history teaches us that there were churches of Christ meeting in America in the late 1700’s and there is no record of instruments being used by churches of Christ until the mid 1800’s. Acappella music is not just a tradition, but instrumental music is most definitely an addition. Acappella music carries with it not only solid Biblical support, but also year’s of scholarship from faithful teachers of the Word. As brother Everett Ferguson has said, the burden of proof is on those who want to bring in the tradition.

I would suggest that if we have been guilty of dividing the body of Christ for the past one hundred years over something that doesn’t matter to God, we should be ashamed. The Bible says that God hates those who sow discord among brethren (Proverbs 6:14). In addition, we should be ashamed before God if we have been guilty of shoddy hermeneutics. We are told that we must “study” to show ourselves approved before God (2 Timothy 2:15). We are also commanded to “prove all things” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Paul taught that we should be ashamed if we do not handle the Word of God correctly (2 Timothy 2:15). Therefore, to flippantly say that we have been guilty of “shoddy hermeneutics” without giving one bit of proof for that type of accusation is an affront to thousands of faithful students of God’s Word.

How we interpret the Scriptures is of paramount importance when it comes to our worshipping God. If we are going to worship God in a way that is acceptable to Him we must not only have the right heart, we must also worship as He has commanded (John

4:24). The Bible is clear that Christians are to sing spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). In fact, every time music is mentioned in the New Testament in reference to the worship of the Church only singing is mentioned. (Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; Hebrews 13:15; James 5:13) When we sing in worship, we are doing exactly what God has authorized. When we worship God with the use of instrumental music, we are doing so without any authority from God. God did not give us a general command that we are to make music. He specified that we are to sing when we worship Him. In addition, vocal music is the only type of music that God has authorized us to use when we worship Him.

The author of the aforementioned article continues his assault on the church by saying, “Preserving this a cappella heritage isn’t nearly as important to me as it is to others. It’s nothing I’m going to fight a younger generation on. If they decide to set it aside for the sake of the mission, I’ll be with them. (Sad, perhaps, but still with them.)” Those of us who believe and teach that instrumental music matters to God are not just attempting to preserve a heritage. We are interested in continuing to call men back to the Bible. To encourage worship in both spirit and in truth (John 4:24). It is a smokescreen to infer that the younger generation is ready to fight so that they might have instrumental music. There are thousands who are a part of the younger generation who are not in agreement with those among us who advocate that we are simply holding on to a tradition. These faithful, dedicated Christians along with the thousands of more mature Christians are committed to speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).