

INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC AND COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Collateral damage is the harm that comes in warfare when a destructive action exceeds the intended boundaries of the target area. During World War II and every other war the United States has entered, military leaders have tried not to destroy such things as ancient cathedrals, works of art, schools, hospitals and civilian neighborhoods. Sometimes, however, mistakes happen and a bomb designed to destroy a munitions plant accomplishes its purpose; but in the process, ancient landmarks, innocent men, women and children suffer destruction from the explosion. This is collateral damage. No one desired these consequences, but the bomb's effect went beyond what was intended.

A husband and wife decide after years of fighting that they will end their marriage. Divorce, like a nuclear warhead, is fired at the relationship. The marriage dies. Unfortunately, there is collateral damage. William J. Bennett, social critic, quotes Karl Zinsmeister of the American Enterprise Institute, who describes this damage, saying, "There is a mountain of scientific evidence showing that when families disintegrate, children often end up with intellectual, physical and emotional scars that persist for life. . . . We talk about the drug crisis, the education crisis, and the problem of teen pregnancy and juvenile crime. But all these ills trace back predominantly to one source: broken families." These "ills" are collateral damage.

Collateral damage can also happen within the Lord's church. We are hearing reports about congregations that have added instrumental music to their worship assembly. The largest church in our brotherhood recently announced that it would launch a Saturday evening service that will include both the Lord's Supper and instrumental music. These decisions are bad enough within themselves, but the potential for collateral damage may be even greater.

I am filled with sadness that a few churches are adding instrumental music to their worship because there is not a shred of authorization for it on the pages of the New Testament, our written authority for the church's faith and practice, and not a shred of historical evidence for its use for centuries following the death of the apostles and the end of the New Testament period.

For the sake of argument, let us grant the sincerity of the brothers and sisters who are pushing this agenda. Not being a prophet, I don't know whether or not they are sincere. What I do know is that, judging from the past, their actions are provoking collateral damage that spiritual descendants will be cleaning up a hundred years from now.

First, their actions are dividing our spiritual family. For my entire lifetime, I have believed in the overall plea of churches of Christ to restore New Testament Christianity and to attempt to be like the church Jesus Christ envisioned when he laid down his life to purchase it.

For my entire lifetime, we have been able to assume with virtually no exceptions, at least in the South, that we could worship biblically with any group that called itself a church of Christ. We could expect to find such a group doing in their assembly what the early church did in its assembly: singing, praying, studying the Scriptures, partaking of the Lord's Supper and giving to the cause of Christ. These activities are both biblical and ecumenical. By adding mechanical instruments to worship, a few congregations have fractured this unity from within our own ranks.

Second, those adding instrumental music are contributing to the spiritual division of families that once were united. Parents could attend worship with their adult children, and those children could go to church with their parents; and all could worship with a clear conscience. Today, the addition of instrumental music threatens the unity that so many families have loved and cherished through the years.

Third, their actions are endangering work in foreign mission fields. I just returned from a country where the winds of change in American churches have been exported. They are sweeping through congregations 5,000 miles away and creating church splits, mutual distrust among fellow workers, and a certain despair among the faithful. How tragic!

Paul warned against division and other forms of damage to the church when he said, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple." (NIV) May we always weigh carefully the consequences of our actions and never inflict harm of any kind on God's temple which is the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

--- Howard W. Norton