

God Has Spoken
Tract Series

Does Hand-clapping Worship God?

In visiting with churches across the country recently I noticed that, in many places, some people have come among us encouraging us to practice the clapping of hands to express joy or agreement when we worship God. The word “worship” is defined in terms of giving honor and devotion. Sometimes we intend to give honor to someone, and learn that we have actually offended the person instead. For example, your favorite fruit may be pomegranate, and you may wish to honor your friend by giving something that is important to you. But if your friend does not care at all for pomegranate, your offering would not be accepted as an honor, but perhaps even an insult. What are God’s preferences? He has told us how to worship Him, so we may look into His book, the Bible, to learn what He will accept as worship.

Fundamental Error in Interpretation

The most often heard response when objections are raised to clapping is that there is no scripture saying, “You shall not clap during church assemblies.” If this 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 fragrances of tobacco, alcohol and narcotics. If not, why not? There is no expressed prohibition of tobacco or drugs in the Bible. Jerusalem

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)

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 bread understand that they are not authorized to buy candy with the change. Mom didn't have to say, "Don't get candy." It was enough to say, "Buy bread." Bread she wanted; bread she authorized. Nothing more.

Trusting what isn't in the Bible cannot approve any person's actions or beliefs. Only "by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" shall a person live in peace with God (Matthew 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, saying that the promises apply to you personally? 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, microphones, 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 chair or rug 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 with a minimum of distractions of discomfort or inconvenience. But every act of worship may be offered without hand clapping, and nothing is lost.

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 knows them that are his” (II Timothy 2:19; *cp.* John 10:14; Numbers 16:5), and those who love Him keep His commandments (John 14:15). When and where did He command hand-

What is the authoritative standard rule in worshipping God?

clapping for the worship of His church? But let’s not be distracted from the question. The determining factor is not what God may know or not know; it is 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 Corinthians 14:15) and “worship in spirit and 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?

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 children, but mature people think of what the recipient wants or needs. This argument for clapping is putting man’s will above the interest or will of God.

In some cultures hand-clapping actually signifies disapproval. In any case, it is an expression of human emotion. We applaud singers and actors. When we clap hands after a baptism, or an appreciated sermon, are we not equating these spiritual, divinely commanded activities with human entertainment? God has not authorized such expressions. These occasions require a more dignified response.

Deciding by Love

In religious controversies we often hear someone argue that we should not debate with one another, but should love one another. Without doubt, the Christian must love his brother (I John 4:19-21), but love does not mean refusing to correct a loved one when he is wrong. If, while walking to a meeting with friends, my brother turns into a street that leads to a dangerous neighborhood, do I “love him

too much” to correct him? No, it is because I love him that I correct him. If I see a brother or sister spiritually traveling a road that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14), should I not urgently call him back because I love him? Paul wrote “if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

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 handle” the word of God (II Timothy 2:15). The basic principles of correctly handling the Bible include [1] recognizing the difference between narrative and command, [2] understanding that the Old Testament is no longer binding upon anyone, but the New Testament is God’s law over all mankind today, 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 Corinthians 11:23-26), Bible study (Acts 20:7), prayer (Acts 12:12), singing (Ephesians 5:19) and giving (I Corinthians 16:1-2). “Whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil” (Matt. 5:37).
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