



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 13, Issue 1

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

November 2011

THE WINDS OF CHANGE

The World Wars were a watershed in social life, particularly in the United States. After World War I women gained the right to vote in federal elections in the United States. They broke out of older molds of style and behavior. After women became a major part of the work force during World War II there was no going back to the “barefoot and pregnant” mentality. While equality has not yet been attained in all areas, women have made even greater strides in the past fifty years. It is no wonder that many churches have struggled in recent years with the role of women in the church. Many churches have chosen to allow women to participate in the public assemblies, and even hold the office of bishop, often to threats of loss of membership. This has been true in those groups most commonly called liberal, as well as those commonly considered conservative.

For hundreds of years the public worship of the church was characterized by a capella singing. In fact, the term for singing without instrumental accompaniment simply means “as done in the chapel.” After about 500 years, some congregations began to incorporate the use of instruments into the assembly. In a recent interview a singer whose music is played on Christian music radio stations said that she had been asked to participate in a television show in which a capella singing groups compete for a prize. She stated that it was a new experience for her because she had never sung without instrumental accompaniment. From never using the instruments to people never having sung in the assembly without them is quite a change. The use of the instrument has become that pervasive in modern churches.

This article is not intended to debate the issue of women’s roles in the church or whether a congregation should use musical instruments or not. It will not solve the question of whether women are allowed to sing in the assembly, or lead prayers or preach. It will not determine whether a woman can be an elder/bishop or a deacon (although any congregation that allows women to hold those positions must necessarily argue in favor of same-gender marriages). It will not solve the question of the use of instrumental music within the assembly of the church. The intent of this article is simply to look at some of the arguments used in favor of these practices, and to determine the validity of those particular arguments.

Orthodoxy

Those who oppose certain practices within the churches usually do so based on a specific reading of the scripture. That is, when a scripture says “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak,” (1 Cor 14:34) many people choose to take that at face value. There are both good and bad aspects to such a view.

Sometimes taking a scripture at face value may ignore the context. If one were to take some of the passages of the Revelation as written, we should expect that at one point the whole world did or will subject themselves to a literal ten-headed beast. Even those who literalize much of the Revelation will consider that to be a symbol, and not take the verses strictly as written.

At other times there is no reason to take a passage other than the way it was written. When the scriptures all specifically talk about the “fruit of the vine” in the context of the Lord’s Supper, is there any valid reason to substitute plain water? As the old saying goes, it says what it means and it means what it says. That is not to say that in that example one may not argue about whether that which is to be drunk is fermented or not. Even when a scripture is specific about certain things it may be silent about collateral issues.

Long ago some in the churches of Christ formulated a way of determining orthodoxy. They said we should look for “direct command, approved apostolic example, or necessary inference.” In recent years that hermeneutic has come under attack. Even cases of a direct command are being questioned; much more what constitutes apostolic example or necessary inference. And

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(Normally Minutes With Messiah contains three articles per month. This month there will be only one article. The editor considers this to be of significant importance at this time and chooses to address it in one article rather than spreading it over two or more months.)

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yet, if we have no standard by which to interpret the Bible, why even attempt to believe in the Bible? If a direct command of Jesus or the apostles is insufficient authority to do something, what is? It is true that certain additional criteria must be applied to determine the authority of apostolic example, but if the apostles clearly opposed a practice, on what basis may we accept such a practice? The clear (and necessary) inference when Paul told the Corinthian church to correct a man who was sleeping with his father's wife (1 Cor 5) is that incest, even with a stepmother, is wrong. Only the most hardened would say that it was wrong for that man only, but acceptable for anyone else in the church. Where differences occur, they are usually based on what one considers a necessary inference. If God told Noah to make the ark out of "gopher wood" is it a necessary inference that any other type of wood should be considered improper? On the other hand, if "to break bread" has multiple meanings, is it a necessary inference that Acts 20:7 refers to an assembly for the purpose of taking the Lord's Supper? For it to qualify as a necessary inference, no other cases may be allowed, no other interpretations make any sense. And there is the problem. What may make perfect sense to one person, and that person not be able to see how anybody else could interpret it differently, may not always be a

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necessary inference. It may be that the one making the inference has blinded himself to other, equally valid, possibilities.

There have to be standards of interpretation. The question must be raised with any of those standards whether they are valid in all, or specific, instances. When a reason is given for doing something, especially if that involves violating what appears to be a direct command, that reason should be examined closely as to its validity. So it is with certain reasons given for some practices long held to be in violation of the scriptures. It may be that the newer arguments will stand. Frequently long-established practice is so because it meets the standards.

The Culture Argument

One of the most common reasons given for setting aside long-held practices is "that was for that culture, but times have changed." Although the church disdained the

use of musical instruments for centuries, those who wish to use them today will claim that it was part of their culture not to use instruments. Those who allow women to preach may argue that women were inferior citizens in Roman culture, but we are much more enlightened today. This appears to be the common "out" for anyone wishing to do anything. So is the argument valid in some cases? In all cases? In specific cases?

There is no doubt that some things have a cultural aspect. Many people will point out, for instance, that in a day of sandals or walking barefoot it was common and necessary to offer the hospitality of washing a visitor's feet. Some would say that this was merely a cultural thing, and that when Jesus commanded his disciples to wash each other's feet (Jn 13:14) he was meaning that we should practice hospitality, but since we now wear enclosed shoes and ride everywhere washing feet is no longer a necessity. Others say that it was a direct command, and the culture should not be considered. Certainly culture should be considered when looking at apostolic example. Does the fact that Paul travelled by sailboat imply that we cannot use steam powered water craft when going to teach others? It is clear to most that wind power is not binding on us today. The mode of travel was unimportant, and based on what was available at that time.

The danger with the argument that certain things were purely cultural is that you can use it to justify any change you wish to make. Early churches were governed independently, but Roman culture was hierarchical so some felt the church should be, as well. As a result we have bishops over several churches and one man or group of men over them. The opposition to homosexual acts was a cultural thing, but in our modern culture it is considered discriminatory to do so; therefore the church should turn a blind eye to that particular sin.

Some argue that the opposition to women speaking in the assembly was purely cultural. Does that argument hold up in the specific? What was Paul's justification for the restriction? "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve." (1 Tim 2:11-13) Paul clearly states that this is not an issue of the culture of his time. Women are to learn in silence because of Adam and Eve, and not even because Eve sinned first. The only way this command can be changed because of a change in culture would be if God were to create the world again, and this time create woman first. As long as we believe the book of Genesis belongs in the Bible, just so long is the culture that demands silence. As one preacher put it, until the advent of painless childbirth and until weeds and thorns stop growing, the culture has not changed.

Goose and Gander

There is an old saying that what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Some people apply this to interpretation of the Bible. The argument goes that if something can be done by an individual it can be done by the church; if it can be done in the home it can be done in the church. Therefore, if a person can play the piano at home to help learn a hymn, then we can use instruments in the public assembly. If a woman can speak in a home Bible study or lead a prayer at home, then she can do so in the public assembly.

Conservative churches have been arguing against this idea for years. Just because an individual has the obligation to support widows and orphans, they say, does not mean that a church may use funds from its treasury for the same purpose. Just because one individual may eat meat does not mean that there can be no vegetarians in the church. There are certain things that are permitted to individuals that are not binding on the church as a whole. There may be things done in a family setting that may not be beneficial or proper for the church in public assembly.

Paul very specifically made this point. He says a woman can speak in the home, whereas (or because) she cannot speak in the public assembly.

“Let your women keep silence in the assemblies: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but to be under obedience, as the law also says. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the assembly.” (1 Corinthians 14:34-35)

Paul clearly makes a distinction between what can be done in an assembly of the church and what can be done privately in the home. This distinction, used here specifically about women speaking, can be extended to other areas as well. There are some things allowed at home that are specifically forbidden in the public assembly. Of course, in this specific instance this raises the question of whether a woman can speak in a Bible study that is not an integral part of the “worship assembly” (a term not found or implied in the Bible), but that is not within the scope of this article.

Is the opposite true? Can what is authorized for the church as a congregation necessarily be the practice of individuals? The churches of Christ partake of the Lord’s Supper weekly. For many years, some churches have adopted a practice of taking the elements of the Lord’s Supper to those who are shut in and unable to assemble with the church. This usually involves a quick prayer or two, the one person taking the bread and fruit of the vine, and then either the one bringing it remains to socialize or leaves. Paul said the church would “come together” to eat the Lord’s Supper. (1 Cor 11:20-22) Does this preclude the practice of taking the Lord’s Supper elements outside the “together” assembly of the church? Is going to an individual’s home to take them the elements of the Lord’s

Supper an assembly done in the Lord’s name (by his authority)? If so, if one wants to do anything else that is not normally part of the public assembly, does the individual have to go outside, knock on the door, and come in again to make a clear distinction between the taking of the Lord’s Supper and a visit for other reasons? It sounds like legalistic hair splitting, and it may be. Nevertheless, there is a difference between what can be done together in the assembly and what can be done privately in the home.

The idea that what happens in worship in the home is authorized in the public assembly is a slippery slope down which most congregations seeking to follow only the Bible hesitate to go. It opens the door to many questionable practices. Perhaps one of the most dangerous is the idea that if there is no difference between family worship and the public assembly of the church, the assembly becomes unnecessary. If what happens in a

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family worship is the same as the public life of the church, it would become easy to believe that one could worship God as easily with just the family. That, of course, ignores the fact that the public assembly is for much more than worship, but it could be a logical conclusion. If enough people came to that conclusion it would weaken both them and the church, locally and as a whole.

It will bring in more people

If it gets people through the doors to the church building can it be wrong? Sometimes this is the stated motive behind some changes in the way a congregation does things. At other times this appears to be an unspoken motive. Congregations want members. Sometimes they want paying members. Sometimes they want volume of members. Occasionally they actually want to be able to teach the gospel to more people. So how does this stand up as an argument for certain actions?

First of all, getting people through the door of a church building is a weak argument for anything. It is extremely rare that a person is actually significantly influenced in their choice to follow God by anything they see or hear in an assembly of the church. It is far more likely that they will be influenced by the life and teaching of individual Christians interacting in their lives. More people are converted by someone knocking on their door and offering a home Bible study than are won by asking

them to the assembly, but even that is not a very effective method of teaching. What convinces a person of the existence of a loving God who forgives sin is a loving example on a regular basis, not a once-a-week pass in the lobby of a building.

While there can be nothing wrong in getting people through the door, it can be counterproductive depending on how they were brought in. If a person comes because they were invited to play basketball, once the basketball is ended, likely so is their interest. If one is brought through the door by popular teaching, they are likely to be driven away if they find that teaching is contrary to what is taught in the Bible (or else they have found a congregation that does not care what is found in the Bible).

Would we not get more kids to come to worship, and keep our own kids, if we used musical instruments like they are hearing on the radio? Yes we would, if all we wanted was to offer free concerts. If the motive is numbers, then that is a perfectly good way to get numbers. However, if one wants to teach that what the Bible says is more important than numbers, then to change a congregation's teaching about the use of musical instruments will actually do more harm than good. Allowing women to preach or lead prayers, after teaching against it for many years, will initially lose more members than it will gain new ones, and those that are brought in will be those who have less of a concern for what the Bible really teaches than for social acceptability.

There have been churches in the past few years that gained huge numbers, but ended up taking stands exactly opposite what they had previously taught, just to keep the numbers. There have been large churches of Christ that might as well have changed the sign to read Baptist Church, all seemingly because of numbers.

The reason to get people into the assembly should not be to try to convert them; it is not likely to happen. It should not be so that the size of the congregation will grow; it will grow at the cost of doctrine. It should be because people have learned the truth and been brought to Christ by friends, neighbors, and coworkers, and those people are now looking for a congregation that teaches the word of God. The numbers will come as a result of living and teaching the Bible. The numbers that are important are the numbers of people who begin a new life in Christ and so find the life in a congregation to be important to learning and growth. The numbers that are unimportant are the numbers of people who come through the doors because of entertainment or socially acceptable doctrine. Face facts. Even Jesus said that being socially acceptable was not necessarily acceptable to God. "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." (Matt 7:13-14)

Anywhere in this article that the ideas of instrumental music or women speaking in the public assembly are mentioned, you may substitute almost any practice of the church. The point is not whether those particular practices are right or wrong, but whether the arguments used for them are right or wrong. These particular issues are used as examples because they seem to be the issues that are affecting churches of Christ today. It would have been as valid to use the issues of abortion, gay rights, baptism, or involvement in politics. In a few years the issues may differ, but the arguments will be the same. Across the board, the culture argument or the numbers argument or the comparison of congregations to individuals or homes are arguments that generally are weak at best. Sometimes they are downright dangerous.

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