



WORSHIP IN THE CHURCH

QUESTIONS REGARDING HANDCLAPPING WHILE SINGING

Dave Miller

Q: Is clapping one's hands while singing a spiritual song equivalent to instrumental music?

A: Yes. No logical difference exists between slapping one's hand on a drum (which is clearly instrumental music), and slapping one's hand against another hand. In fact, both actions are skin on skin.

Q: Is clapping while singing the same as tapping one's foot while singing?

A: No. The two differ in both intent and kind. Tapping the foot is more of an unconscious, noiseless, unobtrusive (hidden) action in which the worshipper is attempting to synchronize himself with the other worshippers. His tapping is not intended to be a part of his musical expression/worship. Handclapping, however, stands on its own as an inherent mode of musical expression when it occurs in concert with singing, in precisely the same way that a mechanical instrument constitutes a parallel but separate mode of musical expression. Clapping supplements vocal sound/music with non-vocal sound/music. Logically, if a person has God's approval to slap hands together while singing, another person has the same approval to stomp his feet on the floor, while another has the right to slap his thighs, while another can flick his cheek to make a tonal sound, and still another may snap his fingers. All of these actions share in common the use of body parts for musical purposes. But God has specified the precise musical expression He desires: the human voice, mouthing meaning-laden, spiritual words, accompanied by the instrument of the human mind/heart, in concert with other worshippers who do the same thing (Ephesians 5:19). To go beyond this is to "go beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6), "add to His words" (Proverbs 30:6), and "run ahead" (2 John 9—NIV).

Q: Should clapping be equated with instrumental music, though it does not interfere with singing?

A: Yes. While it is true that the person who plays an instrument that occupies his mouth (e.g., blowing a trumpet) cannot, while he is blowing, sing as required by God, and while it is true that clapping does not interfere with the use of the mouth in singing, nevertheless, both clapping and instrumental music are condemned on other grounds. Playing any instrument that does not occupy the mouth does not interfere with singing either. Yet, all instrumental music is still unscriptural—since it is unauthorized and represents an alternate method of musical expression from the one God enjoined (i.e., vocal music). Likewise, clapping hands, though it does not interfere with the mouth's singing, represents an alternate method of rhythmical/musical expression than the one God specified.

Q: Isn't clapping while singing the same as the song director waving his arm as he leads the singing?

A: No. Again, they differ both in purpose and kind. The song leader's moving arm serves the sole purpose of keeping the worshippers together as they sing—in direct compliance with the "decent and in order" principle of scriptural worship (1 Corinthians 14:33,40). Clapping is not intended to keep worshippers together, or even to keep a single worshipper on beat. Culturally, clapping stands has its own means of musical expression—just like musical instruments. Waving the arm in song direction is not intended to be an act of worship offered to God in itself. It is only one necessary means of achieving the ordained act of worship (in this case, singing). It is parallel to the use of a songbook or announcing the song number. Clapping, like an instrument, is its own form of worship

offering. Both handclapping and musical instruments may supplement or accompany vocal music, but both constitute rhythmical/musical expression in their own right.

Q: Is clapping parallel to eating meat—something that is scripturally permissible but should be omitted if it "offends" a brother?

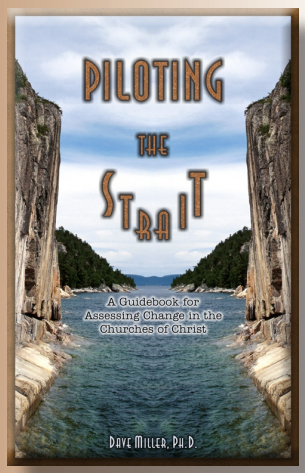
A: No. The principles of Romans 14 pertain to matters that are religiously neutral. Whether to eat meat or not is an optional matter in God's sight. If a person thinks it is sinful to eat meat, he should refrain—not because doing so is a violation of God's law—but because he thinks it is sinful, and to eat meat would violate his conscience, which would be sinful. That brother needs to be taught God's truth on the matter so that he grows to the point that he is able to eat meat without it bothering his conscience. Romans 14 has no application to either clapping or instrumental music. Both actions are sinful (whether they violate a person's conscience or not) since they are unauthorized and represent alternative forms of musical expression. Adults and children who are in the habit of clapping their hands as they sing have no doubt developed that practice simply out of being in places where it is done. Few, if any, began the practice because they were studying their Bible one day and suddenly came to the conclusion that God wants them to clap as they sing. More likely, in imitation of the denominations (who are not known for their sober regard for textual analysis and seeking God's authority for what they do), someone in churches of Christ began clapping in a youth setting or worship service, others joined in, and over time, it became commonplace. What God would have wanted done is for a wise, caring, perceptive, knowledgeable shepherd to have taught the misguided practitioners what the Bible teaches about "true worshippers" and worship "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). They needed someone to care enough to explain to them that worship of God must be done "acceptably with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28—NIV).

Q: Is clapping permissible as long as it is a spontaneous, genuine, unplanned outpouring of a grateful heart directed to God?

A: No. Worship in God's sight has never been left to the worshipper to define or create. For a preacher to insist that in the aftermath of his near death experience in the hospital in which he "flatlined," he had a right while worshipping in the assembly to clap his hands out of deep emotion and gratitude for God, is an outrageous, inexcusable, biblically and logically indefensible claim—based on emotion. Such an "argument" suggests that a worshipper may logically do anything in worship to God—as long as it pours forth from a grateful, sincere heart. In other words, human emotions and subjective inclinations become the standard of authority for determining whether worship is acceptable to God. This viewpoint lies behind all denominational, charismatic worship actions—from blowing whistles or dancing in the aisles, to shrieking or rolling on the floor. Such actions should never be dignified by equating them with pure, New Testament worship. Marshall Keeble well remarked that when people get the Bible into their minds, you will find them abandoning such emotional displays, and they will approach worship "seated, clothed, and in their right mind." The fact remains that ALL worship to God must be previously approved and santioned by Him—or it is vain worship (Matthew 15:9; Colossians 3:17).

For more on innovations in worship, see *Piloting the Strait*, a guidebook for assessing change in the church.

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