

A Case for Retaining *A Cappella* Singing in Churches of Christ

1. I'm tempted to say that if you've really been looking forward to this class, you may not belong here. If you saw the topic "The Case for *A Cappella* Singing" announced in the Lectures program and your pulse beat faster; if you thought either, "Well, it's about time!" or "How dare they raise that question?" — then you should probably head around the corner to Smothers Theatre and catch Randy Harris on "How to Disagree About Doctrine." Randy's outlining there a framework in which the kind of conversation we're trying to have here needs to take place. I would encourage you to order copies of Randy's classes to listen to later.
2. A second preliminary: The question that John Wilson and Victor Knowles and I have been asked to consider today is *not* the most important question faced by churches in the Restoration tradition. I'd like to begin by mentioning three questions that seem more important to me:
 - a. The questionable state of our doctrines of God and salvation. The problem is apparent every time we hear a prayer thanking the Father for offering his blood so that we could be spared the punishment for our sins. Every time we hear that, we who teach in the church are indicted as having failed to communicate the fundamentals of the Gospel as it's taught in Scripture. In Romans, for example, Paul couldn't be clearer that God sent his *Son* whose death saves us from *sin* and *therefore* from eternal death, and that he saves us by *transforming* us as members of the body of Christ.
 - b. Our practice of the Lord's Supper, which in many of our churches is not the focal point and climax of our worship and not the joyous celebration of the wedding feast of the Lamb, but rather the discharge of a penitential obligation, which we handle as expeditiously as possible.
 - c. The moral obligations of membership in our churches: as a result of our baptism and our fellowship at the table of the Lord, what are our responsibilities to God, to one another and to the world, especially to those who cannot help themselves? What structures of accountability are needed in our churches to encourage us to meet those responsibilities?
3. All of those questions (and no doubt others as well) are more basic and ultimately more important than the question whether our churches will continue to worship *a cappella* or will use instruments. Nonetheless the question whether Churches of Christ will continue to worship *a cappella* is one of the most *urgent* questions our churches face (urgent, from the Latin word meaning "to press hard, urge"). It's a pressing question, and one that deserves some attention.
 - a. *A cappella* has been a key element of our churches' identity throughout the twentieth century, an identifying mark recognized by both insiders and outsiders. (For much of 20th century, to outsiders Churches of Christ were

either “the people who worship without music/instruments” or “the people who think they’re the only ones going to heaven” — and some insiders thought that one reason why we were the only ones going to heaven had something to do with the absence of instruments in our worship.)

- b. Historical importance: division from our brothers and sisters in Christian Churches, rightly regretted by many today; healing that rift might seem to require the adoption of instruments by Churches of Christ. (About the division that exists between instrumental Christian Churches and *a cappella* Churches of Christ, Jeff Walling said most everything that needs saying in a couple of sentences in his theme lecture Wednesday night; the conversations going on are conversations between brothers and sisters who worship God differently, and who think it best to worship God differently. The question is how we recognize one another as members of the body of Christ while also learning to disagree productively about the best way to honor him in corporate worship.)
 - c. There is a practical importance to the question, as it has the potential to introduce further division into a communion born of a desire to increase Christian unity.
 - d. For most churches the question is inescapable. Certainly it will be faced by every urban/suburban church within the next decade, if that long. It bears reflection for that reason alone.
4. Yet it’s also a difficult question for us: We come to this discussion carrying some baggage that’s liable to weigh us down. If we examine our assumptions, I believe we’ll find that we’re burdened by four specific items of luggage, and if we’re really going to take this issue up, we need to recognize them, and drop them:
- a. Bag #1 is labeled “Sectarianism.” For much of the last century, we operated under the assumption that any time we take up any doctrinal question, what is at stake is our ability to remain in fellowship with those who come to a different conclusion (and, ultimately, the salvation of the party in error).
 - b. Bag #2 bears the label Legalism. We have operated on the assumption that the NT is akin to the IRS Code, and we have cast our divine Judge in the role of cosmic Auditor; when judgment comes, God will put on his green eyeshades and go to work looking for a technicality on which to deny us eternal life. That is far from the New Testament gospel of a God who has gone to all lengths to save his errant creatures, even giving up his Son for us.
 - c. The third piece of baggage: the burden of bad arguments. This is related to legalism, but I think it’s broader. Our churches bring to this discussion a

history of having made some really bad arguments for the practice of *a cappella* singing. Mike Cope has said that as a child he knew that instrumental music was wrong; he wasn't really sure why, but he knew it had "something do with gopher wood." Nadab and Abihu are better known in our fellowship than anywhere else in Christendom, and that's not an unmixed blessing. (The most intriguing suggestion of this type I ever heard is that the instrument was introduced into the worship of the church in AD 666; the preacher didn't draw the lesson, but it seemed clear who was responsible for the use of instruments in worship.) This history of bad argument for the practice of *a cappella* singing means that when we talk about the music of the church with one another, we have to overcome embarrassment that we're discussing this subject at all or that it is in fact an issue for us.

- d. #4 is the newest piece in our ensemble, which we've only picked up within the last decade or two: I call it Ecclesiological Indifferentism. This is the assumption that it really doesn't matter too much what the church does when we come together; having wearied of Sectarianism and Legalism as the basis for our life together, we swing to the opposite pendulum and, when something previously not done in our worship is proposed, our tendency is to answer, "Why not?"
5. What we need to do is leave those bags at the door and consider the question of the music that the church offers God in a broader context. As Christians of the Restoration tradition, the starting point we should be able to agree on is a willingness to be taught by the New Testament about the function of music in the corporate life of the church; that is the intuition at the heart of the Restorationist way of being Christian. This is not to say that first century churches were perfect, as a glance at 1 Corinthians or Galatians will show they were not; rather, the aims of the apostles and apostolic teachers documented in the NT ought to be our aims, as well; when Restorationists set about to "do church," we begin by taking the time to find out what *their* aims were, and how the forms of Christian life and worship they established were intended to accomplish those aims. So when we turn to the NT to learn about the singing of the church, what do we find?
 - a. From Colossians 3:16–17 we learn that singing is an element of the church's teaching ministry, an instrument by which the word of God takes up residence in the church in a rich and full and deep way. This is still true, as we learn more of our theology from what is sung in church than from what is said: how often do we find ourselves in the shower on Monday morning repeating over and over sentences from the sermon? Contrast that with how often we find ourselves singing the words of a song that the church offered to God 24 hours before. The point isn't limited to Churches of Christ; I've heard it made most forcefully by a Presbyterian teaching in a Presbyterian seminary. The specific functions ascribed to the church's singing are teaching and admonishing one another

(in the horizontal dimension), praising God and giving him thanks (in the vertical dimension).

- b. The ethical importance of the church's song is underscored in the parallel passage in Eph. 5:15–20. Here we find an emphasis on moral conduct, an indication that the songs of the church teach us not only what to believe but also how to live as people who understand the will of the Lord (v. 17). The passage also gives attention to the *setting* in which the church sings when Paul instructs us, “Do not be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (v. 18). Paul contrasts drunkenness with inspiration because the church's singing takes place around the table of the Lord. The first-century church celebrated the Lord's supper as a meal — an actual meal, not merely a symbolic one. The meal opened with bread broken in memory of Christ, then came the main course, and then a cup shared in memory of Christ concluded the meal. (We can see this most clearly in 1 Cor. 11:25, which offers Jesus' last supper as a model for the Lord's supper; first Jesus broke bread, then he blessed the cup “after supping,” i.e., after the main course, which in this Passover feast was lamb.) But the worship gathering didn't end when the meal ended; it continued in a second phase, which ancients called a “symposium,” literally, a drinking party, and Paul describes this phase of the early Christian worship service as he continues in 1 Cor. chaps. 12–14 (and especially chap. 14). Wine was greatly watered down compared with our table wines, but it was still possible to get drunk, as we recall from 1 Cor. 11:21, hence the concern expressed in Ephesians. (The book to read on this is by Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*; Dennis is a Disciple and a fine scholar who's however been led astray by the Jesus Seminar, so in this book most of what he says about Paul is right and most of what he says about Jesus is wrong.) The singing of the church, then, is one means by which the church, gathered around the table, proclaims the death of the risen Lord until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). Paul expresses concern that our singing be a clear witness to the Lord who has redeemed us and that it clearly manifest the presence of the Spirit bestowed on us by Christ (Eph. 5:18).
- c. In 1 Cor. 14, Paul devotes a great deal of space to the church's worship in song and the spoken word and gives us a rich perspective on what this worship is supposed to accomplish.
- 1) The most important word in the chapter is the word “edify,” describing the effect the words that the church sings and speaks are to have on the Christians who participate (vv. 4, 17). The word is drawn from the field of construction; it refers to building up, strengthening, fortifying a structure. In its application to the life of the church by Paul, it doesn't refer primarily to the production of certain feelings in worshipers (as we sometimes use the word

“edify” to mean) but rather to our being “built up” in faith, hope, and love; “fortify” would be a better English equivalent for the function of singing Paul has in mind.

- 2) That doesn’t mean our singing is divorced from our emotions. Paul is very clear that when we sing both our understanding and our “spirit,” i.e., our feelings, are engaged (14:15; and compare James 5:13). Paul doesn’t understand human nature the way Mr. Spock does or see understanding and feeling as opposed to one another. (On this point Mr. Spock is really a stand-in for Immanuel Kant, who thought our duties, which reason shows us, are fundamentally alien to our happiness.) Rather, our feelings are engaged when we understand the Gospel and the extent of what God has done for us in Christ. (We might compare Paul’s doxology after he has concluded his exposition of the Gospel in Romans 11:33–36. The doxology doesn’t confess Paul’s defeat at being able to understand what God has done in Christ but rather expresses the wonder that we rightly feel when we understand the magnitude of what God has done, “consigning all to sin so that he might have mercy on all,” Romans 11:32.)
 - 3) In vv. 16–17 we see a concern for clarity in the meaning of the church’s song, expressed in Paul’s concern for the reactions of an unbeliever to our singing. We also note in these verses that there’s no real difference between the church’s singing and the church’s prayer, which in the early centuries was chanted. The music of the church is the church engaged in corporate prayer.
 - 4) The concern for clarity continues in vv. 23–25, in which Paul expresses the concern that the words spoken and sung in the church’s worship clearly state the need that the Gospel meets. These words are to manifest the presence not of any god but of the Creator and Redeemer God of Israel, for the words that Paul envisions an unbeliever responding to the worship with are drawn from Isaiah 45:14: “Truly God is among you.”
- e. The NT presents Christian singing as “a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15). Throughout NT references to the church’s singing we find a priority given to verbal expression as a means of articulating the church’s faith and challenging the church to live in conformity with its confession. (The question of music would then be the question of its appropriateness as a vehicle for the teaching and admonition and praise expressed in the words.) We should also note that in the context of a religious banquet the early church’s *a cappella* singing was culturally distinctive: the first century writer Plutarch comments that “The flute cannot be banished from the

[banquet] table even by those who want to; it is as necessary to our libations as the garland, and it imparts a godly character to religious song” (*Table-Talk* 712f–713a, cited by Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, pp. 35–37). We should thus hesitate before concluding that we need to change the musical form of our worship in order to resemble more closely what potential converts are familiar with; if we take the NT church as a model, there is a good case for doing just the opposite.

- f. Passages often regarded by scholars as quotations from early Christian hymns (e.g., Phil 2:5–11; Col 1:15–18; John 1:1–18) are among the weightiest statements in the New Testament concerning Christ and his significance. It is instructive to compare our repertoire of songs and see how they measure up.
 - g. The church’s song is presented as uniting the church in praise of God (Romans 15:5–6), thus anticipating the eschatological worship around the throne in Revelation 4–5. It is a great irony that music has been an occasion for division in the history of our Restoration movement, as it threatens to be presently in Churches of Christ.
6. Music in our popular culture serves very different purposes than the music of the early church.
- a. My questions for my kids when listening to the radio:
 - 1) What does that say?
 - 2) What does that mean?
 - 3) Is that a good thing?
 - b. Mistaken use of social-science data on the response to music by *consumers* to assess the use of music by *participants* in our worship assemblies; unlike music on the radio, the use of music described in the NT requires our action.
 - c. Practical value of *a cappella*: encourages the singing of the congregation (if you’ve attended many Lutheran or Presbyterian or Episcopal services, you know what I’m talking about; cf. Thomas Day’s book *Why Catholics Can’t Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste*)
7. Intentionality and deliberateness are needed to sustain the kind of music ministry the NT describes in the kind of culture we live in.
- a) If we take our cues from the NT, the most important question we can ask about the church’s hymnody is how well it teaches us the Christian faith, how adequately it equips us to live the Christian life.
 - b) One man’s impression is that we’re not doing all that well: neglect of songs that sustain the church in the faith. Put it this way: it’s a real loss to the church if “This Is How We Overcome” isn’t a supplement to “A Mighty Fortress” but a replacement for it.

- c) I want to be very clear: I'm not saying that there was a golden age for the church and now we've lost it and have to return to 1950 to get it back. My grandmother's favorite song was "Mansions Over the Hilltop," and as much as I loved her it was no great primer in Christianity. So it may be that we've *never* done all that well in this department; that's no reason not to try to do better.
- d) Some songs we now appear to sing principally because they give us an occasion to clap or raise our hands. That's really nothing new: At the church where I grew up, we sang some songs only because they had a bass lead. (Or at least that's why I enjoyed singing them once my voice had changed.) If that's how it is, it's one indication that that we haven't yet thought through the ministry of music in theological terms. If the decision whether to continue as a *cappella* churches supplies an occasion for that, it will have been worth all the trouble.
- e) A hard question for our colleges and universities: where are the Institutes of Congregational Singing that would provide the resources needed for a contemporary *a cappella* tradition to flourish? (Information technology means that the work of such an institute can be made available to churches at much lower cost than producing a new hymnbook. Pepperdine's conference celebrating the *a cappella* sacred music in our churches and in others is an encouraging sign, but it would be ironic if this celebration of the *a cappella* practice turned out to be a wake.)
8. The issue does have some importance for us as a fellowship because it raises broader questions about the life of the church: the question of *a cappella* singing is our churches' way into a set of questions that all churches in the modern Western world face.
- a. What are the criteria by which we assess the life of the church? What yardsticks do we use to determine whether it's going well at church or whether it's going badly?
- 1) Far as I can see, we use three or four criteria: 1) attendance; 2) budget; 3) spirit among members (discord? enthusiasm?); 4) good works (my impression is that this one is a distant fourth place). Hard to find attendance, budget, or enthusiasm in NT; clearest standard we get is the sort that Paul states in Rom 8:3–4. (In Acts, Luke is interested in how many people have been touched by the Spirit of God and does mention numbers in which people were added. It's pretty straightforward that if the transformation of 5 people is cause for rejoicing, the transformation of 10 is cause for more. But it's only lives genuinely transformed by the Spirit of God that provide occasion for the eschatological joy Luke speaks of, and there may not be a one-to-one correlation with the numbers present for worship on a Sunday morning.)
 - 2) The most important criterion in the NT is what kind of lives do the people who attend the church live? That's the logic of the book of Romans: Chaps. 12–14 aren't an appendix tacked on, they're the

climax of the argument; the moral lives that God's Spirit empowers the Roman Christians to live are the answer to the problems of life in gentile society that Paul catalogues in 1:18–32, and at the center of the book, Paul tells us that the purpose of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection was to create a community that can fulfill the just requirement of God's law (8:3–4).

- 3) When people explain why they go to church at this place or that, they give lots of different reasons. I can't recall ever hearing anybody say, I go to this church because I find it makes me a better person — a more devoted husband or wife parent, more patient, less envious, more generous. But for Paul the most important thing our presence at church does is put us in contact with the transforming Spirit of God.
- b. How far should the church go in accommodating contemporary Western culture to attract people to the life of the church?
- 1) Day before I left Austin, heard a local talk radio host describing an evening he spent with his wife at the roller derby (which is apparently being retooled for the new century): he and his wife were evidently fascinated and exhilarated by the athletic display, the staged violence, the rock soundtrack, the rivalry between cities, the beer.
 - 2) Should a church consider sponsoring a roller derby night? (The guy I listened to indicated that the place was packed and the crowds were loving it.) Now you might laugh, but: What if you eliminated the beer? What if you played Christian rock instead of secular rock? What if you toned down the mock violence and insisted that contestants model good sportsmanship? What if you had storylines that showed that cheaters never win?
 - 3) My hunch is that however we modify roller derby, we're going to come to the conclusion that it's just not a fit with the spirit of the gospel. The point: In many respects, the culture around us is what people need to be delivered *from*. We need to be taught different ways of living, different ways of evaluating our lives than we learn from ads and movies and TV programs and novelists who get favorable reviews in the NY Times. There are ways in which it is *essential* that Christian lives be different than the lives on offer in our culture. I don't see it's a great loss for us if the things we do when we come together signal that difference; even if the signals aren't absolutely essential, there's real value in the distinctiveness — a sign that says, "This group isn't just like any other group you're involved with; different things are valued here than are valued elsewhere." We ought to consider
- c. How do we deal with the attitudes we find in our kids?

- 1) We should recognize that in part their attitude is a reflection of what we've taught them or haven't taught them. If we have never told them, "Our church worships the way we do because we think that's the best way to teach one another and to honor God," we shouldn't be at all that surprised to find that they have no real attachment to the way we worship.
 - 2) We should recognize that the Christian music industry is here to stay, for good and for bad.
 - a. The Christian music industry is an *industry* and like any industry is focused on selling a product (hence the premium on new songs) and appealing to the broadest possible market. I don't doubt at all that the Christian music industry employs many devout people who want nothing more than to build faith. But that's not the primary goal *of the industry*. Built in to the business (as with any business) is the need to move product, and that means attention to 1) quality of performance; 2) accessibility and appeal of songs to as wide a spectrum of Christian listeners as they can manage.
 - b. The top priority of the Christian music industry is not the capacity of the music it sells to edify the church.
 - c. The Christian music industry certainly represents a better entertainment alternative to much secular music (although I've got to say that I've not heard a piece of contemporary Christian music that competes with "Cats in the Cradle" or some of Simon and Garfunkel in evoking the awe-full mystery of life and our responsibility to receive it as a gift not of our own making).
 - 3) If we in fact think that *a cappella* singing is the best way for the church to honor God in corporate worship, we'd better be telling our kids that. I talked to an 11-year old recently who attends the same Christian school as my kids; he knew that I teach the NT and he wanted to talk to me about worship. As he stated his concerns, I listened to this eleven-year-old tell me how the church never worshiped with instruments until 800 AD, how the human voice is the most appropriate instrument to use for praising God, how worshiping without instruments makes the song service less of a performance and more of a group activity. I don't know who had taught him this, but that's the kind of thing we need to be teaching kids if we want to preserve this practice. And we need to do that without neglecting the weightier matters, such as those I mentioned at the beginning.
9. How do we survive this conversation as a fellowship? I think Romans chap. 14 gives us our best guidance in Scripture, but that's another topic. Let's pray that God will allow us to find unity in Christ our Lord even when we differ about the best way to serve him.