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January 23, 2004

Posted: 1/23/04

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By Craig Bird

Associated Baptist Press

SAN ANTONIO (ABP)—The raging debate over worship music has surfaced in a most unlikely place—within the Churches of Christ, which bear the historical distinction of shunning all musical instruments in worship.

Over the past two years, at least five major congregations associated with the Churches of Christ have added instruments to some worship services, according to the Christian Chronicle, a 60-year-old Church of Christ newspaper.

The highest-profile case involves Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, a 3,800-member congregation led by pastor and best-selling author Max Lucado.

No one is willing to predict whether these breaks from tradition signal the start of a sweeping change or are “isolated tragedies”—the description favored by Hardin University professor Flavil Yeakley.

But they do illustrate the ages-old tension between making the gospel

message “user friendly” and defending the purity of “the truth once delivered to the saints.”

More than a century ago, Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians fought the issue of instrumental worship to a resolution, remodeling their sanctuaries to accommodate organs and pianos.

Since the Jesus Movement of the 1960s, guitars, drums and amplifiers likewise have gained acceptance in many Protestant churches, as Christians adapted musical styles to the marketplace.

The Churches of Christ, claiming about 2 million adherents, is by far the largest fellowship prohibiting man-made instruments. But other smaller groups, such as Primitive Baptists, have resisted as well.

The doctrine is based on the conviction that all congregational practices and structures should meticulously emulate the patterns of the New Testament, which reports nothing of musical instruments in worship.

For the same reason, Churches of Christ shun denominational labels. There is no formal structure or authority to the Churches of Christ beyond the local congregation, and even the capitalized “C” is avoided in the name—Churches of Christ—assigned by religious demographers.

Because of the decentralized nature of the Churches of Christ, there is no way to measure the extent of the pro-instrumental trend.

But the discussion is widespread enough that the issue is being re-examined with an intensity not seen in more than 100 years.

Breaking with tradition

The website for Lucado's Oak Hills Church deals openly with the topic. A cappella singing is still “our primary source” of music at worship

assemblies, the website notes, but there are “ample opportunities for instrumental worship as well, such as at our Peak of the Week prayer services.”

“The use of instrumental accompaniment is not a doctrinal issue at Oak Hills, but it is part of our religious heritage that we have chosen to preserve,” the site notes.

Oak Hills and the Body of Christ at Amarillo South in Amarillo no longer identify themselves as Churches of Christ, according to the Christian Chronicle,

Other Churches of Christ that have added instruments, according to the newspaper, are the Northwest Church of Christ in Seattle, which added a Saturday evening instrumental service; Southlake Church of Christ, in the Dallas-Forth Worth area, which added a Sunday morning instrumental service; and Farmers Branch Church of Christ, also near Dallas, which added a Saturday night instrumental service.

All five report substantial growth in attendance and say the change was driven by the need for evangelism.

Reaching the culture

Indeed, the desire to reach out to a music-saturated culture is at the heart of the debate.

One new Church of Christ, still in its formative stages, recently asked a Baptist music professor to lead the congregation in a Bible study on instrumental worship.

Paul Richardson, professor of music at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., declined to name the church. But the professor said “at least part” of the congregation “was open to examining its traditions in light of biblical

and historical scholarship.”

Prescribed or permitted

Since the New Testament gives little instruction in worship, Richardson said, the basic theological issue is: “How do we handle what we don't know?”

One extreme position is to do only what is explicitly allowed by Scripture. At the other end is the view that whatever isn't specifically forbidden in the New Testament is permitted—although always with the limitation imposed by other doctrines.

Richardson said most Christians “find our lives, our ethics and our worship in the category of 'adiaphora,'" the Greek term for things neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture, and “about which we must make decisions according to the best light given us.”

The absence of instruments in the early church may have been influenced, ironically, by Greek philosophy. The Greeks argued that emotions stirred by music could be dangerous.

In later centuries, Richardson said, instruments became part of the Roman Catholic Church “about the same time as instruments became widely accepted by society at large.”

During the Reformation, clear divisions began to emerge. Some groups influenced by Martin Luther retained the instruments.

Those influenced by John Calvin placed strict limits on music in worship. Still others, influenced by Ulrich Zwingli, disallowed music of any sort.

Baptist traditions

Calvin's influence was greatest among Baptists and later the Churches of Christ. He placed three restrictions on music in worship: scriptural songs only (mostly the psalms), human voices only, and unison singing only.

“Most Churches of Christ and Primitive Baptists long ago gave up the restrictions on text and part-singing but cling to the one against instruments,” Richardson pointed out.

Baptist groups traveled differing routes. For example, Seventh-day Baptists, strict sabbatarians who know a thing or two about defending a minority position against steep odds, were early promoters of hymn singing, despite criticism from other Baptists.

At various times in Baptist history, instrumental worship was rejected because it was practiced by the Church of England, which persecuted the free-church followers like the Baptists.

Organs often were rejected—and later violins—because they were used to provide worldly entertainment.

All those historical precedents support one of Richardson's theories: “We are all Amish.”

“We all have some idealized culture that we find more faithful to the living of the gospel as we understand it,” he elaborated.

“That culture is typically one in which we never lived, though we have sought to preserve it in some way to 'protect' the faith.”

Yet, he argued, Christian discipleship includes the need “to present the gospel faithfully in the culture in which we live without binding it to the culture.”

Keeping theology first

In every area of Christian living, Richardson suggested, there is a need to look at any issue from three approaches-theology, aesthetics and pragmatics. But they should be addressed in that order, he advised, giving theology first priority.

“Much of the debate in the 'worship wars' is the result of starting the discussion with aesthetics or pragmatics instead of theology,” he asserted.

“If the New Testament shows us anything, it is that the church organizes itself and carries out its mission in a variety of ways, more or less appropriate to its culture.

“About the only unity that can be found in the churches of the New Testament is the confession 'Jesus is Lord.' And that was plenty to bring them into conflict with their surrounding cultures.

“The New Testament tells us very little about worship,” Richardson added, “and what is there is descriptive rather than prescriptive.

“However, it tells us a great deal about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the destination of all things, the Christian life and how we should treat others, both in and out of the faith.

“This should be the way in which the New Testament shapes our practice of worship.”

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