

373 “decently and in order”

Last week we reflected on the significant role held by music, singing and dancing in human behaviour, making the point that these activities give an accurate picture of the true spiritual realities underlying all that is going on.

This brings us on to the often-vexed question today of what forms this Christian “music”, in its broadest sense, should actually take within corporate Christian worship. These days local Christian fellowships often identify themselves, and are identified by others, by the nature of the music they offer in their worship – with verdicts ranging perhaps from “dull-and-boring” to “trendy-and-cool”!

At one end of the spectrum we have what could be termed the “cathedral tradition”: elaborate, well-established, greatly-revered sacred music, sung exquisitely by professional robed choirs, with skilled organ accompaniment, in a glorious setting. The emphases here are on the sheer glory of God; on the expanse of the “apostolic, catholic Church” through the centuries and across the continents; and on our calling to give to Almighty God our very best in worship, hence the soaring buildings, music and hymnody.

In such an environment the individual worshipper is shown to be a very small cog within a very big wheel. The “children of Israel” experienced just this same individual smallness in the tabernacle, the temple and the synagogue, thus learning a similar lesson: “God matters first, and then we as a people matter, and then I matter, as an individual within the greater whole”.

This “smallness” of the individual believer can bring problems: that he or she, in attending such grand cathedral-type occasions, can end up as only observing fine performances, while never actually and personally encountering Almighty God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in worship, prayer and personal discipleship. This lack of personal encounter may go unnoticed over the years, being lost in the liturgical grandeur of the proceedings, so those vital words in Galatians 2.20b are obscured, “(Christ), the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” – the ultimate assurance that I, too, matter to the Lord, as me.

In the New Testament time of transition from the Covenant of Law to the Covenant of Grace, Christian worship comes over in early Acts as being fairly chaotic in those early days! There is no surprise here for these

were glorious Spirit-blessed days with thousands coming to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Messiah (egs., Acts 2.41; 4.4). We notice that the earliest of our Christian brothers and sisters still went to the temple for worship, teaching and fellowship (eg., Acts 2.46; 3.1ff), which soon led to trouble (eg., 4.1-21). At the same time, in the midst of all the wonderful excitement, the new Christ-believers were baptised (2.41), and then met in private homes, “as they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, (meaning simple fellowship meals together, rather than constant observance of “the Lord’s Supper”), and in prayers” (2.42).

As the years passed, and Gentiles were also included within the “ekklesia”, the “called-out ones”, “the Church”, the gatherings for Christian worship faced real difficulties and questions. As a result the Holy Spirit gave them, and us, through Paul, crucial guidance as to right conduct of Christian worship. We find this especially in the first letter to the ekklesia at Corinth – a wild Greek city whose small Christian community was now filled, alongside Jewish believers, with enthusiastic, recently-loose-living Gentile believers in Christ who had little clue as to what faith in Christ, and worship of Almighty God, actually involved.

Thus in I Corinthians Chapters 10 – 14 we are taught, among much else, about the Lord’s Supper, the spiritual gifts and roles within “the body”, the primacy of love, and the careful use of the spiritual gifts during times of worship, with the final summing-up being a simple – “Let all things be done decently and in order” (14.40).

To uphold apostolic doctrine within this context of decency and order, gradually there developed, under the authority of the original “apostles”, a “three-fold ministry” of deacon, elder or presbyter, and “episkopos” (egs., I Timothy 1.3-4,18-19a; 3.1-13; 4.6,11-16; 5.17-22 / Acts 11.30; 14.23; 15.2 / Titus 1.5-9). From those early days have come the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Non-Conformist and House Churches, each with their own structures and styles of worship, music and singing.

In our next Reflection God willing, having considered this time the long-established “cathedral style” and the early church scene, we can look at other parts of Christ’s Church in seeking to understand more of what Jesus’ prayer of John 17, “that they may all be one” (vv. 11,21-23), is to involve in practice in these confused and confusing times.

Come what may, the Lord's words in such matters are still our guide:
"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship [him] in spirit
and in truth" (John 4.24).

Please God, may we all know, in our personal and corporate
discipleship, just what those words really mean.

© 2020 Faithful Sheep Ministries – www.fsmins.org