



The Good News

November 10th, 2019

Volume 19, Issue 44

Amen and Handclapping

By Jerry Fite, first published Feb. 10, 2016

What does “handclapping” mean in our society? It conveys many meanings. Sometimes it manifests personal approval of what we see or hear. Other times it expresses simply courtesy, regardless if we approve of what we hear or not. We see this reason for applause when the President gives his State of the Union speech before both houses of Congress. Even those on the other side of the isle will usually politely clap their hands when he enters the hall. Handclapping also expresses one’s recognition of a person’s skill, talent or performance. It communicates the idea “you have done well.” Sometimes people clap their hands out of joy or excitement. When people are thrilled with a performance, clapping one’s hands serves as an emotional release.

So, when people want to introduce the practice of handclapping in public worship, what meaning are they wanting to convey? Does God authorize handclapping, with any of these meanings, in worship of the church? Some have said yes, because handclapping is just like saying “amen”. If saying “amen” is allowed, then one should not prohibit people today to clap their hands in worship.

Examining the word “amen”, we learn it is a transliteration of the Hebrew word which conveys the meaning of “firm”. An Israelite would say “amen” to confirm or identify himself with a particular verbal declaration. One might not like the consequences of the declaration, but would affirm that it is binding. This is seen in the woman saying “amen” when she is to drink the “water of bitterness”, which was about to determine her guilt or

innocence of the sin of adultery. “And this water that causeth the curse shall go into thy bowels, and make thy body to swell, and thy thigh to fall away. And the woman shall say, ‘Amen, Amen’” (Numbers 5:22). One would say “amen” to the words or deeds of God, recognizing their truthfulness and confirming the binding nature of these truths (cf. Deuteronomy 27:15- 16). With this recognition, one saying “amen” identifies himself with “let it be so”, because he knows, “so it will be” (I Corinthians 14:16, I Peter 4:11, etc).

There is a stark contrast between “handclapping” and saying “amen”. Handclapping is giving our approval and recognition of a performer’s talent expressing our personal excitement and joy. Scripturally, “amen” focuses not on the person but on the message and identifies one with the truthfulness and binding nature of the word. Since handclapping in the Old Testament expresses joy (2 Kings 11:12), some say it should be allowed in New Testament worship. Handclapping was also connected with triumphant joy (Psalm 47:1). It was sometimes connected with expressing derision in triumph over another (Nahum 3:19, Ezekiel 25:6). If handclapping in the Old Testament is authority for what we can do today, does it not also allow us to stomp our feet, boo and hiss at the “preacher” when we do not like his “performance”?

“Handclapping” places an emphasis upon “liking a performance” instead of “agreeing” with a true and binding message. Which scriptural response of “joy” would truly honor a baptism: “liking a performance”, or “agreeing” with the obedience to the Gospel?