

GLAD TIDINGS

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

Vol. IX

November 5, 2000

No. 45

“Amen” and “handclapping”

By: Jerry Fite

What does “handclapping” mean in our society? It conveys many meanings. It sometimes shows **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 into 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.

When we examine the word, “amen”, we learn that it is a transliteration of a 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 Cor. 14:16, I Pet. 4:11, etc.).

There is a stark contrast between “handclapping” and the saying of “amen”. Handclapping is giving our **approval** and **recognition** of a *performer’s* talent expressing our own 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 (Psm. 47:1). It was sometimes used in connection 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” injects into our worship meanings that saying “amen” never covers. It places emphasis upon liking a performance instead of agreeing with a true and binding message.