

## HOW DO WE DEAL WITH DIFFERENT CULTURES AND CUSTOMS?

Bro. Waddey: One of the things that I see in Africa is the habit of clapping hands as they sing. I have tried to find a Biblical position that would forbid such, but so far have not been able to come up with something. Can you help? Rudy

Dear Bro. Rudy: When I visited among various nations and tribes of people, I always tried to observe and understand their culture and customs and only in cases that seemed to me to be clearly contrary to God's will did I offer words of correction. I listened to the older missionaries on the field and learned much from their insights. Such travels helped me understand how pervasive is the influence of our own culture on our thinking as a church. I frequently try to help my audience understand this by imagining themselves cast in such a place as you describe for an extended period of time, and ask them what would they do? How they would react?

There are some things that would be considered wrong in one culture but not in another. I recall seeing in Africa the people bathing in public streams...naked. Of course they had no other place to bath and in their own minds they had made provisions for modesty...men at one place in the stream, the women at another. While I could not condemn them for doing the best they could under the circumstances, such would be judged flagrant and daring conduct here. People had to do what they had to do. Here we have no such excuse and the practice is actually criminal.

In the conduct of the worship assembly there can be many variations of method when disciples are worshiping God in spirit and in truth according to the light of the New Testament. I have observed the hand-clapping you mentioned. The impression on my mind was that these babes in Christ were like children singing and expressing their exuberance by clapping their hands. While I do not equate their practice with those who want to add instruments of music...I do think we should teach them that singing and clapping of hands are two different things. One can clap hands and not sing, or sing and not clap hands, or do both simultaneously. In this sense it is similar to instrumental music and worship. If we patiently teach them to "make melody with their hearts" (Eph. 5:19), rather than with their hands...they will eventually learn that such is not only unnecessary, but it is not what God has instructed us to offer him. It is true that in the Psalms we read that the Hebrews were exhorted to "clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with the voice of triumph" (Ps. 47:1) but this seems to be an exhortation to celebrate the victory God had given them rather than a call to worship. Celebratory dancing was also practiced along with their singing in the Mosaic age (Ps. 149:3), the same reasoning would apply to it as well. Since we are under the covenant of Christ, rather than that of Moses, the fact that such was practiced by the Hebrews has no authority for our Christian worship.

What we are experiencing here at home among our churches seems to me to be of a different genre. We have people who are not newly won from primitive tribal paganism. People who are educated, refined and many of them longtime disciples are clamoring for hand-clapping and other practices. They have long worshiped Jehovah in spirit and truth (John 4:24), but they now yearn for something new and different in worship. They lust after the instruments and entertainment of their denominational neighbors and are determined to have it. They wish to clap their hands and sway to the strains of stimulating music...not because they have found such instruction in God's Word but because "they just want to do so." Such brethren are not like little children who in their exuberance clap their hands, rather they are like rebellious teens that despise and reject any rules, customs or conventions their seniors expect them to honor.

One last thought, here in America, the question of clapping of hands while singing or applauding for a baptism is but one of a cluster of changes being promoted. As a general rule when a congregation adopts or allows this practice, the other innovations will not be far behind...such things as women moving into public leadership roles in the church, instrumental music and fellowship with denominational bodies will certainly follow. Such is the nature of apostasy. Like cancer the one deadly cell will eventually grow and consume the whole body.

JHW