

# THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers  
Volume 98-16

Dear Reader

We have tried to keep each Newsletter to a single subject. But in this issue we will take up two short subjects that pertain to the functioning of the local assembly — deacons and music in the local assembly.

## DEACONS

In the previous Newsletter we studied *elders*. The only other “office” or “official position” in the local assembly is that of the *deacon*. The Greek word *diakonos* is the normal word for *servant* or *minister* without distinction as to whether the person is a civil servant (Rom.13:4), a domestic servant, the Lord Himself (Rom.15:8; Gal.2:17), a servant of the Lord, a servant of Satan (2 Cor.11:15) ... or a servant of the local assembly. It has become popular to denote servants of the local assembly as *deacons*, although there is no scripture for this distinction. The setting up of this class, apart from other servants, has led to another unscriptural class distinction. But there is nothing wrong with the use of the word *deacon* as long as we understand its Scriptural significance and don’t set up a class distinction by calling someone “deacon.”

The qualifications for “deacons” are given in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Using several translations we will paraphrase those requirements below.

- grave or dignified — not flighty
- not double-tongued — is consistent in what is said
- not drunk — not addicted, out of control of “self”
- not desiring dishonest gain — not money hungry
- holding the truth with a good conscience
- proven — not a spiritual novice
- beyond reproach
- husband of one wife
- leading or managing their children and their “whole estate” well
- the *women* are to be dignified, respected, not malicious gossipers, temperate, faithful

Note that the KJV-based translations use “their wives” in verse 11 without any manuscript authority to do so. It is an *interpretation*, not a translation. While “the women” *could* mean the wives of the male deacons, it may well mean *deaconesses*. We will see that one woman was a servant of the assembly.

## Scriptural Deacons

“I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a *servant of the church* (assembly) in Cenchrea ...” (Rom.16:1). “... to all the saints ... who are in Philippi, with the bishops (overseers or elders) and *deacons*” (Phil.1:1).

These are the only clear references to ones who evidently were “officially” servants of the local assembly. The only other probable reference to deacons as servants of the assembly is in Acts 6:1-6, although the word *diakonos* is not used there. Some of the Jewish brethren felt they were being neglected in the distribution of practical necessities. The twelve apostles then summoned the disciples — the brethren in the Jerusalem assemblies — and told them to seek out, to choose *from within the assemblies* seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (v.3), to “serve tables.” These seven men were to handle the practical matters of the assemblies, freeing the apostles to preach the Word of God wherever the Lord led them. The *assemblies* did the choosing (Acts 6:5), but the apostles approved their choice, there being no *written* qualifications yet given. The assemblies had well understood the apostles’ verbal qualifications given in v.3.

“Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch .... they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles” (Acts 15:22, 33). Here is another set of “chosen men” sent simply as servants of the Jerusalem assembly to deliver a letter. This is deacon’s work, although the appointment was only for a short duration assignment.

### **Practical Matters in the Local Assembly**

Every assembly has practical needs. A person may be appointed to handle the finances, to keep the books, to act as treasurer. Someone may be appointed to make the announcements, to write letters, to be the correspondent or the correspondent’s helper. Someone might be appointed to care for the building or the kitchen. Someone might be appointed to send flowers to the sick. These are a few possibilities for deacon-work — for being an appointed *servant of the assembly*. No authority is conferred by such appointment, although the assembly may give the appointed person the right to spend certain funds and make practical decisions. Even for this work, the qualifications are tough, as we have seen. The few Scriptures we have would indicate that the more *public* appointments are given to the man. For those who “serve well,” God says they “obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim.3:13).

### **THE ROLE AND PLACE OF MUSIC IN THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY**

Whole books have been written about so-called religious music, but after a few introductory remarks we want to confine ourselves to music as part of the functioning of the local assembly.

There are close to 300 references in the Bible to hymns, singing and music. Psalms is a book of songs: many of these songs call for vengeance and thus are not suited for our present Church-age. Only about a dozen of those 300 references are in the New Testament, and only about half of those have direct reference to the functioning of the *assembly*. In the Old Testament, songs often were sung with musical accompaniment, often too with dancing, as expressions of the heart’s praise to God. But we don’t want to get our instruction for music in the local assembly from Old Testament example because the whole system for worship has changed.

Under the old economy there were many forms and ceremonies, with trumpet-calls, etc. In Israel man in the flesh was put to the test and everything, including the most beautiful music, that would appeal to the natural man’s “religiousness” was allowed, to prove that “the natural man does *not* receive the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor.2:14). But, as the Lord told the Samaritan woman in John 4:22-24, the time had come when true worshipers *must* worship the Father “in spirit and truth.” This worship was to be from one’s innermost being (in spirit) and according to the revelation of *Christianity* (in truth). A new order of things was being introduced (Phil.3:3)! R.K. Campbell says, “As God is a Spirit, spiritual worship is all that He accepts. Spiritual worship is in contrast to religious forms and ceremonies .... This sets aside all human form, imposing ceremonies and rituals produced by human will.”

### **The Power of Music**

Music has great power over the human will and over human physiology. Music can soothe or rile or control. See for example Daniel 3:5-7. Nebuchadnezzar built a great image and then demanded that everyone fall down and worship it. That was to happen when they heard “the horn, flute, harp, lyre and psaltery, with all kinds of music.” That power to control minds and body has been seen in soldiers marching to war with the playing of bagpipes or other instruments. It is seen today in the multitude of rock concerts where “normal” young people quickly become out of control, and often drugs, alcohol and sex flow freely, without inhibition, as normal restraint is lost due to the music. Much today that is called “Christian” music rely on that same beat and repetition of one or more Christian-sounding phrases to give “pleasure” to the old nature, with very little left that is really Christian. We need to remember that instrumental music began with the descendants

of Cain (Gen.4:16-24) and continues to be a tool of Satan to enslave peoples' souls. We need to guard against the introduction of anything merely to entertain the old nature and to corrupt the Word of God into the local assembly (or anywhere else). M. Costella (*Foundation*, 1-2, 97) writes, "The praise, glory and honor found in the words of the hymns are meant to honor and glorify God; they are not meant to make us physically aroused or excited."

### **Singing with the Understanding**

1 Corinthians 14 is a great chapter on the functioning of the local assembly. Verse 15 says, "I will pray with the spirit and I will also pray with the *understanding*. I will *sing* with the spirit and I also will *sing* with the *understanding*." See also verses 14 and 19. The Greek word for *understanding* is *nous* (mind) and has the thought of "the faculties of perception and understanding, and feeling, judging, determining" (Vine). When we sing a hymn, we are to *intelligently* understand what is sung, and discern or determine whether it is Scriptural. We are not to sing a song just because it is popular or because we love the tune. The *spirit* is to be active in the singing — that part of us which allows us to intelligently analyze before God everything that we do, including the songs we sing. We would surely agree that we shouldn't pray an *unscriptural* prayer. Well, the same should be true with our songs/hymns. We shouldn't sing an unscriptural hymn.

Many hymns — both older and new — simply do not give a Scriptural message. Yet, with the power of music, we learn at least some of our theology from those songs and thus find ourselves believing wrong doctrine or at least doctrine that is not for the Church, but for Israel of the past or future. It is not "rightly dividing" or "handling accurately the Word of Truth" (2 Tim.2:15). For example there is quite a collection of popular Christian songs that over and over again emphasize that the King is coming. Yes, our Lord is *the* King of kings, and He is coming to reign over the world of a future time. But not over us! He is the "King of *nations*" (Rev.15:3, JND, NASB). *We* are going to reign *with* Him as a bride to her Bridegroom (Rev.19-20). Many of those hymns might be very appropriate for believers after the Rapture, but should be used with great care, if at all, now in the Church-dispensation. But, is it not true that if we find a hymn or Sunday School song that is unscriptural, but we like the tune, we are careless about removing it from our normally-sung songs?

### **Individual Singing in the New Testament**

Acts 16:25 says that "at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them." Paul and Silas had been severely beaten and had their feet in stocks, in the inner prison. It was dark, cold and dirty. Yet their hearts overflowed in song *to God*. Do *we* sing hymns because we like a catchy tune or because a certain phrase catches our fancy, or is it because we want to praise God? Their singing was a great testimony to the prisoners, for when God opened the doors and removed everyone's chains, all the prisoners stayed in the jail instead of escaping. Those hymns were used by God in the events that led to the salvation of the Philippian jailor. When we are happy in the Lord we *should* sing praises to Him (Jas.5:13).

### **Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16**

These two verses are all that remain that *directly* give us information on singing in the assembly. I say "in the assembly" because both verses are in letters addressed to local assemblies. These verses say, "... but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, making melody *in your heart* to the Lord" (Eph.5:18-19). "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another, in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs *singing* with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col.3:16).

These two verses indicate that, along with the needed teaching ministry in the assembly, there should be singing. We will not try to define the differences between the types of songs mentioned: surely they cover

the wide ground of what brings worship, praise, thanksgiving and honor to the Lord Jesus and to God the Father. As we sought to emphasize above, how necessary that these songs be *spiritual* — that they really do honor the Lord. Hymns that don't "rightly divide" or "handle accurately" (2 Tim.2:15) the Word of Truth are not hymns the *Holy Spirit* would have us sing! They aren't hymns that would indicate that we were allowing the Word to richly dwell in us!

### **Musical Accompaniment**

Almost universally in religious gatherings today, the singing is accompanied by piano or organ, or even by guitar or other small musical instrument. Indeed, many "churches" spend huge sums of money to purchase and maintain magnificent pipe organs, and hire a university-trained organist, along with a music director. These "churches" understand the power of music to attract and hold an audience, whether the audience is saved or unsaved, or is being spiritually fed or not. Few of us would deny that we love to hear our favorite hymns sung by thousand-voice choirs, accompanied by such magnificent musical instruments. No tape or CD could be commercially sold to the general "Christian" community without musical accompaniment. We are not finding fault with musical instruments or accompaniment as such. Many of us use piano or organ at home and for Sunday School and some other meetings. And — to *our* ears — the singing improves!

Increasingly there is pressure to bring such musical accompaniment into the *assembly* meetings (as defined in Newsletter 98-12), as opposed to simply singing. The argument often goes that we need to improve our singing as a testimony to those who hear it. Again, to our ears, the singing would improve! But would our *spiritual appreciation* of the Lord, as expressed in the words sung, improve, or would we simply be distracted — our souls made happier while our spirits were not as close to the Lord? We started this article by quoting R.K. Campbell on John 4. *The whole principle of assembly worship and praise is that no human "means" are used. It is our spirits in communion with the Lord by "spiritual means"* (1 Cor.2:13, JND). J.N. Darby (Letters, Vol.3, 1881, pg.476) wrote, "Judaism did take up *nature* to see if they could have a religion of it, only to prove it could not be .... We ... belong to another world .... but [music] only spoils any worship as bringing in the pleasure of *sense* in what ought to be of the Spirit of God."

People will tell us that the "making melody" of Ephesians 5:19 comes from the Greek *psallo* and has the thought of *singing with the harp*. I've read other works that trace the use of *psallo* down through church-history and the writers deny that the early Church as recorded in the New Testament used *psallo* to support instrumental accompaniment. I have no way to determine what was used when, but I *can* determine that Ephesians 5:19 says I am to make the melody *in my heart*! It is not by *external* means, but by being filled with the Spirit! Go back and read the verse! Therefore, we firmly believe that the doctrine of assembly practice is that *no musical accompaniment should be used in assembly meetings*, and to do so says that the Lord and the Holy Spirit aren't enough, and that we are more interested in how *we* sound to *our* ears, than to the *Lord's* ears.

In Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26, after the Lord had taught His disciples and as they were about to go to the Mount of Olives and the Lord then go to the cross, they "sung a hymn." What a beautiful way to end their meeting together. There is no thought there of any musical accompaniment! How out of place it would have been!

### **Appropriate Hymns**

If we are to sing with the understanding and be led by the Holy Spirit, we will give out *appropriate* hymns and attempt to sing them like we really are happy about what we are singing. Hymns for a gospel meeting won't stress Christian experience. A gospel hymn wouldn't be given out just as one was going to break the bread or during our time of worshiping the Lord. Likewise, at that time, when we are about to break the bread, remembering the Lord in relation to His *death*, we wouldn't give out a hymn of *our* Christian

experience or one having the Lord *arisen* and glorified. Not every verse of a hymn may be appropriate for the occasion. This is a practical side of *understanding* that we all need to be exercised about.

RPD

## **Letters TO THE EDITOR**

“In the second paragraph of Volume 97-10 there is a sentence wherein it appears that your thoughts proceeded faster than your ability to put them into words. That sentence reads, ‘He is the second Man from heaven.’ That makes it sound as though there were more than one Man who ‘came from heaven.’ Jesus, while He is the Second Man, is the only One from heaven. It appears to me that the sentence could have been better worded, ‘He is the second Man, the Man from heaven.’” Aldridge Johnson, Elk River MN

*Thank you very much for your letter and recommended correction. We agree, and recommend that our readers make the addition on their copies. If we need to make more copies we will make the correction. We note that the KJV and NKJV use “the second Man, the Lord from heaven,” while the JND uses “the Second Man, out of heaven.” The NASB says, “the second Man is from heaven.”*