



ASK THE PASTOR

EPISODE 1 – FEB 1, 2023

Q: Clap your hands?

“How does clapping and shouting to the Lord fit in with the regulative principle of worship? Doesn’t the Bible command us to clap and shout to the Lord?”

Answer:

- To some extent, physical/audible responses reflect the background culture of the congregation. Every congregation (and denomination) has its own historical/cultural background that will be reflected in worship.
- We also should recognize that gathered regular worship in the Old Testament seems to have de-emphasized emotional and physical outbursts. New Testament worship was centered on prayer, Bible teaching, and the sacraments (Acts 2:42). 1st Cor. 14:40 says, “all things should be done decently and in order,” in order to promote the teaching and learning of the Bible.
- In my opinion, the “shout” and “clap” references in the Old Testament relate not so much to the regular gathered worship of the people, but to the special feast celebrations (for which the relevant psalms may have been written.) So like “dancing before the Lord” (2 Sam. 6:14), these were biblically approved (and encouraged) actions for the feasts but not directly relevant to weekly gathered worship.
- Where clapping and shouting is practiced, there must be an effort to maintain order (which would seem to be a challenge). James Boice re: “Amen” Phil Burford – “At least he always shouts “Amen” at the right place in the sermon!”

Begotten vs. Proceeding

Q: Why do we say that God the Son was eternally “begotten” of the Father, but the Holy Spirit eternally “proceeds” from the Father and the Son?”

Answer:

- This is technical language developed during the Nicene controversy so that we could clarify what we mean and do not mean. Both terms are meant to be sparse, reflecting the little that biblical revelation shows on the inter-trinitarian relations.
- Jesus is said to have been “begotten” to reflect the Father-Son dynamic built into the biblical revelation of the First and Second Persons of the Godhead.
- The Spirit is said to “proceed,” because we do not have the Father-Son dynamic when it comes to the Third Person. This term is intentionally vague, indicating that the Spirit “goes forth” from the Father and the Son but not saying that he was created by them.
- Bonus! – The Eastern church denies that the Spirit proceeds *from the Son (filioque)*, the result of which is the marginalization of the Son’s redeeming work as necessary for eternal life (and thus marginalizing the gospel).

Why the Apostles' Creed

Q: Why do we use the Apostles' Creed, when it is newer than the Nicene Creed, does not have the same ecumenicity, lacks the careful trinitarian clarity of Nicea, and some churches (like ours) leave out "he descended into hell"?

Answer:

- It was appended to the Westminster Confession "because it is a brief sum of Christian faith, agreeable to the Word of God, and anciently received in the churches of Christ."
- The 2nd century church employed credal recitations (usually necessary for baptism) to combat heresy and embed the most essential tenets of Christian belief.
- The Apostles Creed developed until its present form in the 5th century.
- "He descended into hell" is the last addition, probably occurring in the 5th century. Augustine never mentions it. We do not include it because: 1) it is not clearly biblical; and 2) there is not clear agreement on what it means (and we should only confess that which we intelligently believe).

Decisions re: sinful conduct of family members

Q: Suppose my father unbiblically divorces my mother and then marries another woman. Should I attend the wedding? Should I refuse to spend time with him unless he repents?

Answer:

- Christians will always want to avoid endorsing sinful actions/behaviors. When it is a close family member, we will want to state our objection clearly and call him/her to repent.
- Decisions about attending weddings, inviting to Christmas, etc., will require prayerful discernment. In principle, we want to affirm our love and personal acceptance while not affirming the on-going transgression. We also have to consider the feelings of the victim as it relates to our response.
- Usually, I recommend that Christians not attend weddings that involve blatant sin, since attendance is itself a form of approval. I also counsel that the affect of our actions on the victim should take precedence over the feelings of the perpetrator. Gross, persistent sin unavoidably damages relationships.
- In those cases where Christians conclude that we should withdraw fellowship, we should conduct ourselves with kindness and grace and seek to communicate our on-going love.

Decisions about Family Planning

Question: “How should families go about making decisions related to procreation: how many children, birth control, etc.”

Answer:

- The Bible says: “Children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward” (Ps. 127:3). This creates a decidedly “pro-child” attitude among Christians.
- Sharon and I practiced the “sovereignty of God birth control plan,” believing that God is the author of life and we can only have children he has ordained for us. We recommend this approach (and large families).
- However, have been entrusted with the “means of production” there is nothing sinful about deciding to limit the number of children. Numerous discernment approaches to this – vocational obligations; inability to provide for large family; harmful effects to the mother, etc. In short, there is no biblical prohibition to godly family planning.
- Birth control is a sub-set of the above answer, except that we consider abortifacients to be sinful. I.e., once the child is conceived he or she bears the image of God and his or her life must be treasured.

Should the Church have formal “modesty” standards?

Q: The question expressed concern about occasional expressions of feminine dress that exceeds appropriate lines of modesty. What should the church do?

Answer:

- The Session has discussed the matter and declined to publish detailed “modesty” standards. Instead, we have opted to speak privately to church members where there is a need.
- Why?
 - When there is extremely immodest dress, there should be a conversation that results in a change.
 - The subject inevitably involves a high degree of subjectivity. Where must the skirt line be? What is the acceptable length for shorts? Are leggings immodest? The Session believes that issuing precise instructions would likely go beyond Scripture. It is an example of “fencing the law” (in this case, the 7th commandment) that usually does as much harm as good.
 - The subject should be addressed in youth group and with parents.
- Advice:
 - If you have specific concerns, please feel free to discuss the matter with your elder(s).
 - Avoid giving direct reproof, especially to a youth.
 - Prayerfully seek to be patient with those who may seem less mature and sanctified.

Church Confidentiality?

Q: How does our church approach confidentiality when it comes to pastoral issues?

Answer:

- Prayer requests are only published with the approval/request of the church member.
- The Session practices a high degree of confidentiality when it comes to pastoral care issues.
- When a highly sensitive matter arises, the Session often appoints a committee of elders to investigate and recommend a response; in many cases even the other elders are not told the identities of the people involved.
- In general, elders' wives are not informed of pastoral issues in the church and on some occasions, instructions are given to the elders to make sure not to inform their wives.

Should pastors meet with women?

Q: Some pastors will not meet with a woman who has a concern. What is Second's approach?

Answer:

- Wives as well as husbands are church members and have the right of pastoral counsel.
- I practice the “Billy Graham” rule (also the “Mike Pence” rule). This does not get in the way of meeting individually with a woman.
- There should be no inhibition for women to seek pastoral counsel/prayer, although care needs to be exercised in the manner in which they meet.

Romans 3:30 – “By” vs. “Through” Faith

Q: “In Romans 3:30 what is the difference is between by faith and through faith?”

Answer:

- “God is one – who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.”
- In the Greek text, Paul uses *ek* first and *dia* second. It seems that the reason is purely stylistic. His point in the passage is that Gentiles and Jews are justified the same way, i.e. by/through faith.
- Theologically, we loosely distinguish between “by” and “through” in our soteriology. We are justified by grace through faith. The distinction is thus made between agency (grace) and mechanism (faith). However, this grammatical distinction in our theology is not practiced as such in the NT text.

Tree or Cross?

Q: “Is it significant that some scriptures talk about Christ hanging on a tree (Acts 5:30) rather than Christ hanging on a cross; and in Acts 10:39 and in I Peter 2:24 and Gal. 3:13?”

Answer:

- The distinction is not significant.
- “Hanging on a tree” is used to show Christ’s death on a cross as a fulfillment of Deuteronomy 21:22-23: “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, you hang him on a tree, . . . For a hanged man is cursed by God.” The point is that in fulfillment of these verses, Jesus died under the curse of God that we deserve.

How much faith pleases God?

Q: “Hebrews 11:6 states ‘without faith it is impossible to please Him.’ In Revelation 3:16, lukewarm faith is rejected. How do we know we have enough faith to please God?”

Answer:

- Each of these texts should be taken in context. The point of Hebrews 11 is to commend faith. Enoch’s translation is explained via faith, since otherwise he could not have pleased God. Rev. 3:16 condemns the lukewarm faith of a church.
- The unconverted have *no* faith; those with faith are saved. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Faith is the gift of God, marking out his elect. All those who believe are loved by God and enjoy his favor. We please him more as we grow in faith and base our actions on faith.

Do we pray only to the Father?

Question: “If God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are co-equal, do we pray only to the Father or to all?”

Answer:

- Being equally God, it is appropriate for prayer to be addressed to any member of the Trinity. (Prayer is a prerogative that all three divine Persons enjoy).
- There is a biblical order that will shape most Christian practice: *to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit*.
 - “For through him [Christ] we both [Jews and Gentile believers] have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18).
 - Jesus teaches us to pray to the Father (Mt. 6:9)
 - We pray in Jesus’ name because he is the only “mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5).
 - In general, we are taught that the Holy Spirit strengthens, enables, and interprets our prayers to the Father (Rom. 8:26-27).

Clear Conscience?

Q: What does 1 Timothy 3:9 mean in saying that deacons “must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience”?

Answer:

- “mystery of the faith” means essential Christian doctrine, which once was hidden but now has been revealed.
- “with a clear conscience” means that essential truths are sincerely held without reservation. It also could refer to a moral life that is consistent with Christian belief.
- William Barclay: “because there is such a close connection between what we believe and how we act, the effectiveness of their work as deacons depends upon their purity of doctrine.”

Jewish Festivals?

Q: We know some Christians who feel that Jewish customs such as Passover, Hanukkah, etc. will be continued in heaven and should be observed by Christian churches. Is this right?"

Answer:

- Jesus was careful to observe all the OT feasts, including those which began after biblical revelation stopped, including Hanukkah (Jn. 10:22) and maybe Purim (Jn. 5). This was appropriate in that he was a Jew under the Law.
- Hebrews 10:1-10 describes the Jewish ceremonial practices under the law as “a shadow” that has been fulfilled by the coming of Christ. Therefore, we do not observe the OT law, since “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb. 10:10).
- The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 specifically exempts Gentile believers from “the burden” of OT ceremonial requirements, so they cannot be normative either now or in the age to come.
- There is, however, an eschatological fulfillment of the Jewish feasts, not by their repetition in heaven but as heaven is the fulfillment of the blessings they prefigured.

Who is “the Prophet” of John 1:19-21

Q: The priests and Levites asked John the Baptist, “Are you the Prophet?” He answered No. What were they referring to?

Answer:

- The question related to Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses promised: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brother – it is to him you shall listen.”
- This was a reference to the Messiah in his prophetic office. It is *the* prophet in the sense of Hebrews 1:1. As such, the question asked to John the Baptist was another angle on asking if he was the promised Messiah.

How were the Exodus people hungry?

Q: When the Israelites left Egypt, they plundered the Egyptians. The Bible says they left with much livestock, both flocks and herds. My question is why did they complain about going hungry and why did God send down manna if they had all that livestock?

Answer:

- We have to assume that they had by then eaten it all. There were, after all, a couple of million Israelites or so.

Election and the Early Church

Q: Did the first century church, and up to the time of the Reformation, believe and teach Sovereign Election and Predestination?

Answer:

- The early church is a broad category, in which both truth and error will be found. Some refer to them as “the church infants,” since the development of confessional theology was in its infancy. Moreover, we know of serious errors that entered the church fairly early on (as the NT epistles bear testimony). Still, it is interesting to see what those who lived relatively close to the time of the apostles thought.
- The late 1st century and 2nd century church shows a high degree of belief in divine sovereignty and election:
 - First Clement (90 a.d.) speaks of election in a corporate sense, including this language:
“And so we, having been called through his will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves or through our own wisdom or understanding or piety, or works that we have done in holiness of heart, but through faith, by which the Almighty God has justified all who have existed from the beginning; to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.”
 - Ignatius (110 a.d.) refers to his readers as “the elect of God.”
 - Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians* says we are saved “not because of works, but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.”
 - The anonymous *Epistle of Barnabus* (last 1st/ early 2^d century) says that God “foresaw how the people whom he had prepared in his beloved would believe in all purity.”
- By the late 4th century, predestination had opponents and was a controversial matter (see Augustine vs. Pelagius). The Council of Ephesus (431 a.d.) ruled Pelagianism to be a heresy. Semi-Pelagianism continued until this day.

How do we know the Bible is true?

Q: How do we know the Bible to be true? Is it not full of errors and the outdated myths of primitive people ?

Answer:

- Ultimately, we know the Scriptures are true by the immediate testimony of the Holy Spirit in and to our hearts (WCF 1:5; Jn. 10:27).
- The precise fulfillment of prophecy is a powerful testimony to the truth of the Bible. The apostles frequently proved Christ's claims by the precision by which he fulfilled OT prophecy.
- The message of the Scriptures is radically different from the myths of ancient peoples. For instance, the incarnation is without precedent in the myths. There is no myth that teaches that God justifies sinners by the gift of his Son to make propiation on the cross.
- Claims that Genesis reads more or less like the *Enuma Elish* (Babylonian creation myth) are pure poppy-cock. (Obviously there are points of connection, since the events in Genesis actually happened.) There is nothing like the Joseph narrative in any pagan ancient literature!

Jesus increased in wisdom?

Q: 1. Luke 2:52 states that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." Since Jesus already had God's favor, how could that favor be increased?

Answer:

- There is much mystery in this verse. It relates to Jesus' humanity. As true man, he grew in wisdom and stature, even though he was never sinful.
- The statement that Jesus "increased in favor with God" can only refer to his human growth in wisdom, understanding, and therefore his godly and gracious living, which would have caused a correspondingly increasing pleasure to his heavenly Father.

Events yet to occur before Christ's Return?

Q: 2. I have heard you say that there is or are an event or events that need to happen before the second advent of Jesus the Christ. What do you believe those events to be?

Answer:

- I was referring to 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2, where Paul states that “the day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction.” This refers to the apostacy of the outward church and the coming of the final Antichrist.
- We always want to be careful to respect Jesus’ teaching that no one can know the timing of the Second Coming; moreover, we are told that Jesus’ coming is “soon” (Rev. 22:20). This creates an attitude of expectancy. However, yes, I believe that Paul clearly states that these events must happen before Christ returns.

Dogs in Heaven?

Q: Why do you believe that there will be dogs in heaven? Why won't my dog be in heaven? Why dogs and not cats?

Answer:

- The biblical teaches that there will be “a new heavens and a new earth” in the age to come after Christ (2 Pet. 3:13). Clearly, this final state will be physical and material.
- In his original creation, God not only made man and woman, but he also created the other creatures. Since Christ came to redeem and restore, it follows that the new earth will reclaim (and advance) what was seen in the original earth, and thus include glorified creatures. (Remember, the animals that we know are corrupted by the Fall, Rom. 8:22).
- My current dog will die. God did not place eternity in his heart (Eccl. 3:11). He does not have union with Christ through faith. So he will return to the earth without an eternal spirit.
- Cats are wicked, mean animals. So any restored version in the age to come would be unrecognizable as “cats.” Dogs, however, are nearly perfect already. So we will recognize them right away.