



# MY PILGRIMAGE

by Jack P. Lewis

I grew up in a small, rural Texas town with two church buildings of identical external architecture – white with a lovely steeple – about three blocks apart. One had stained glass windows; the other did not. The heated tension between the congregations had begun two or more generations earlier. My grandfather, who went to his reward before I was born, had given the land for one on the condition that if an instrument of music was ever used in the building, the land would revert to his heirs.

Although no Catholic church was in the town, the local trumpet player by request skillfully played “My Rosary” at many public functions, and female soloists chose “Ave Maria” and did it beautifully. Entertainment was one thing; worship was something else. There was no television; people visited back and forth at special services. All funerals were held in church buildings, and most sang with the instrument. The question of whether they were worshipping or doing something else did not seem to arise. What was right in

one building was wrong in another, or maybe it was worship in one and not in the other.

After college, I accepted the invitation to preach in Huntsville, Texas. The retired preacher for the instru-

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mental church (there was no recognized division in the area at that time between the Disciples and Independent Christians) was very highly regarded in the community. He was “Brother” to the whole town.

When he underwent an operation, I called on him.

Later, as we sat side by side collecting student preference cards in the registration line at the State College, the preacher for the contemporary instrumental church, to pass away time, raised the question of our differences. The Presbyterian preacher sitting with us, anticipating unpleasantness (which never developed), quickly departed. The preacher insisted that I was at fault for considering singing a part of worship. He believed that singing was not worship in the New Testament, and because it was not worship, he was free to use the instrument. He argued that in the Old Testament instrumental music had been commanded and commended. His proof text was 2 Chronicles 29:25. Being youthful and inexperienced, I had heard Amos 6:5 used erroneously, but I had not seen his passage before. The instrument was not worship; it was only an aid to worship, he insisted. The exchange was gentlemanly and without anger; but I did not (and still cannot) see how his argument – that instrumental music

was commanded and commended, but one was free to use it or not use it as he chose – made sense.

When I went to Harvard Divinity School, one of my fellow students was the son of a distinguished professor in an instrumental school. After graduation he had a distinguished career in the same institution, but when in school at Harvard, he preached for a Congregational church. I could not understand that. While in school, I was receiving student aid. The dean was insistent on chapel attendance. I went but did not sing. One morning the organ could not be shut off; it wheezed through the prayers, the scripture reading and the address, leaving me factiously wondering if it was an aid to worship.

### **The Change Generation**

Many years ago, I accepted an invitation to deliver academic lectures at one of the seminaries of the instrumental church. While I was there, the dean hospitably and graciously entertained me in his home. The Restoration Summits were relatively new. He used the occasion to ask me what my attitude was. Though never majoring on the subject, I had published articles on the question of singing and later did more,<sup>1</sup> but I did not expect him to have read them. I told him (speaking of his people) with the same kindness he had shown me, “I do not see how you can give it up; and I do not think we will accept it.”

He explained that in the Restoration Summits they wanted preachers to come who were under age 50. He said, “If unity is ever accomplished, they are the ones who will have to do it.” I could see right off that he was talking of preachers who grew up in the period when elders and preachers had neglected to teach about singing. He was talking of people who had never heard the arguments and likely would not have firm convictions on the question.

Some speak with pride of cooperative evangelistic efforts in which differences are not to be mentioned.<sup>2</sup> That instrumental people could engage in such cooperation is not surprising.

They have never thought that a capella singing is sinful. All along they have wanted acceptance while retaining their instrument. I have yet to see any widespread willingness on their part to give up the instrument for the sake of regaining the unity that existed before the instrument was introduced.

The *Holman Bible Dictionary*, in its article on “Baptism,” says, “Baptism is not a requirement of salvation, but it is a requirement of obedience.” Now if I could go along with that, it would open fellowship and unity with one of the largest religious groups in America. But in view of the fact that Scripture plainly says Christ “became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Hebrews 5:9 ESV) and also, “[W]hoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36), I have to ask how a requirement of obedience cannot also be a requirement of salvation. My mind just will not work in keeping with the Holman statement.

I have been in a Christian college, a state school, a Unitarian school, and a Jewish school, and I am indebted to all of them. I have tried to benefit from the ancient rabbis who exhorted one to learn from all his teachers. I have worked on scholarly religious projects in which every participant was of a different persuasion. I have found prayerful, upright, idealistic, sacrificial, deeply religious people in all of them. I also have met some pretty upstanding people not in any religious group. The Proverbs remind us that the ways of a person are clean in his own eyes (Proverbs 16:2). I try to listen to a rational presentation of Scripture teaching, but I have to act with what I can learn and understand as being pleasing in the sight of God. The will of God is not determined by the personality of those who are trying to serve him.

If I may be so obstinate as to run the risk of being a false prophet, I would predict that the movement now under full steam will not result in the unity its enthusiasts see it accomplishing. It will result in further fragmentation. There will be those who use the instrument; there will be those who sing

a capella, insisting that instrumental music in New Testament worship is wrong; and there will be a third group who call for unity by accepting those who worship with the instrument. Considering the stature and popularity of some pushing the movement, the third group is likely to be large. At first, they by preference may not use the instrument, but ultimately they will. Apart from the Greek Orthodox and the a capella people, singing in America (religious or secular) is always accompanied. As was true a century ago, church property will become involved; those who continue to insist that instrumental music is wrong will be blamed for the fragmentation.

### **The Boles Address**

At an early unity meeting in Indianapolis in 1939, H. Leo Boles of Nashville had an opportunity, not open since that time, to explain in clear terms why he and the rest of us cannot accept the instrument.

The address that Boles gave, but which the Restoration Summits have not been willing to hear, has been reprinted by Garland Elkins. It is titled, “The Way of Unity Between the ‘Christian Church’ and the Churches of Christ,” and is available through the Gospel Advocate bookstore. If one wants a review of the issues, here is a convenient place to find them. His arguments stand unanswered. Boles did not present new arguments; there are no new arguments. He just explained plainly and forthrightly in his way that the issue is one of Scriptural authority.

Boles, who claimed Raccoon John Smith as his grandfather, made clear that he was not an official delegate to that meeting. He represented no one except himself. He summarized what the two groups assembled shared in common. He quoted extensively from John Smith about what unity means. Smith recognized that deductions and inferences cannot give unity. He spoke of one faith, not of one opinion.

Boles dealt with the three problems that destroyed fellowship: the Missionary Society, the introduction of instrumental music, and the becom-

ing a denomination. He was emphatic, "[I]f there is to be unity with the 'Christian Church,' it must abandon the Missionary Society" (12). Boles claimed that his associates "sustain the same attitude toward it [the Society] now in their opposition to it as did the brethren who opposed it when it was organized" (13).

However, today, while short of having a national organization, some a capella congregations may have developed some pretty close second cousins. My impression has been that the Independent Christian Churches do not favor the Missionary Society. However, this question does not seem an issue in current discussion.

Boles saw two categories: things done by New Testament authorization and things done by expediency. He insisted that there are no other possibilities. He contended that if the Greek word *psallo* commands the use of instrumental music, then we must use it. We have to do whatever *psallo* means. He drew the conclusion that if use of instrumental music is merely a matter of opinion, then it is sinful to force it on God's people.

Boles quoted (giving the reference) an 1868 statement from J.W. McGarvey I had never seen before but with which I agree. McGarvey spoke of relentless war "against everything not expressly or by necessary implication authorized in the New Testament." He spoke of the matter as being his "unwavering conviction" (18).

A third section of Boles speech dealt with the Disciples' becoming a denomination. Perhaps the Independent Christian Church people see that as not describing them as most a capella people still do. Both, however, may take warning from those inside who insist that unintentionally and unconsciously it has happened to them.

Boles surveyed how division came, placing faith against opinion. He saw faith coming from the explicit word of God and opinion coming from human judgment. He deduced from Romans 14:23 that what is not of faith is sin, and he understood pushing opinions in practice to be rebellion. He contrasted walking by faith and walking by opinion (23ff).

Boles stated, "It is folly to plead for unity among God's people and at the same time plead for the right to impose opinions on others; it is contradictory in fact and principle to claim to walk by faith and at the same time claim the liberty to express our opinions and walk by them" (34).

The reader will find in Boles' speech a logically organized presentation unlike the emotional presentations that have become popular in our day. It is not designed to make people feel good.

Boles has numerous quotations from Restoration leaders, which those who are not history experts have probably not seen before. With the references their context can be checked.

The speech is a challenge to all, reminding us how different the church and the religious atmosphere is today from what it was in 1939 before World War II and two years before I got out of college. It should call both sides of the current discussion to reconsideration. □

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### Endnotes

1. "New Testament Authority for Music in Worship," *The Instrumental Music Issue* by Everett Ferguson, Jack P. Lewis and Earl West (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1987) 14-59. "A Series on the Silence of Scripture," *World Evangelist* Jan. 1987: 10-12. "A Series on the Silence of Scripture," *World Evangelist* Feb. 1987: 10, 12. "A Capella Worship in the Assembly," Harding University Graduate School of Religion Bulletin Jan. 1998: 1, 4. "Back to Basics: A Capella Singing," *Firm Foundation* March 2003: 1, 4-6. "New Testament Authority for Music in Worship," *Firm Foundation* Sept. 2005: 1, 5-20.
2. "Cooperative Evangelism," Harding University Graduate School of Religion Bulletin Jan. 1987: 1, 3.

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