

“A Conversation with Alan Highers”

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“Alan Highers isn’t opposed to unity within the body of Christ. But unity without careful exploration of what the Bible teaches about instrumental music will fail, he says.

“There are thousands within the brotherhood who cannot conscientiously worship with an instrument,’ says Highers, who preached his first sermon for a small, rural Church of Christ at age 16. ‘What kind of unity would it be if people who claimed to be united could not even worship together?’

“Nashville, Tenn.-based 21st Century Christian has produced a 51-minute video presentation of a lecture by Highers titled *What About Instrumental Music?* As several Church of Christ ministers are speaking across the nation about the need for increased unity with the instrumental Christian Churches, a cappella churches are purchasing the video to hear the arguments against instrumental music in worship, Highers says, adding that many are hearing these arguments for the first time.

“Born in Muskogee, Okla., Highers says he was fortunate to have parents who taught him the Bible from an early age. His love of justice led him to pursue a career in law. For nearly 30 years, he’s served as a member of the Tennessee judiciary—the past 24 as a judge on the Tennessee Court of Appeals. He is a past president of the Tennessee Judicial Conference.

“Highers’ life stretches beyond the bench and the pulpit. He has earned an advanced-class license for amateur radio and also is a licensed auctioneer. He’s also earned licenses to sell real estate and pilot a private plane. Since 1989 he has served as editor of *The Spiritual Sword*, a quarterly journal produced by church members.

“He has spoken at Christian university lectureships and for 15 years served as moderator for the Open Forum at the Freed-Hardeman Bible Lectureships in Henderson, Tenn.

“Highers lives in Henderson. He and his wife of 48 years, Sandra Bruce Highers, are members of the Henderson Church of Christ. They have two married daughters and four grandchildren.

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“This year marks the 100-year anniversary of the 1906 federal census recognizing a split between instrumental Christian Churches and a cappella Churches of Christ.

“Several events—including the Abilene Christian University Lectureship and the North American Christian Convention—have focused on unity efforts between the two groups.

“Do you support these efforts?”

“I cannot support the position taken at the latest ACU lectureship. I accept the historical position that ACU took during the first 75 years of its 100-year history. The late J.W. Roberts, a noted Greek professor at ACU, stated during the 1962 ACU lectures that ‘a group of people who insist on using the instrument without producing the Scripture authorizing its use, makes unity with those who conscientiously cannot do so an impossibility.’ I agree with Roberts.

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“There are thousands in the brotherhood who cannot conscientiously worship with an instrument. What kind of unity would it be if people who claimed to be united could not even worship together?

“Any unity that is merely decreed or pronounced between the two groups will be a charade, an artificial gloss, but certainly not the true unity envisioned in the Scriptures.”

“Do you consider the use of instrumental music in worship a fellowship issue and/or a salvation issue? Please explain.”

“Sin is a salvation issue. The question people should be discussing is whether it is a sin to bring instrumental music into the worship. Sin is what causes people to be lost (Romans 6:23).

“Why are the proponents of this unity effort unwilling to talk about the real cause of the division? They seem to want to call a big meeting and simply announce that there is unity. That will not work for most Churches of Christ. We have been trained to seek ‘book, chapter and verse.’

“It is going to require more than a lectureship and an official pronouncement by a university president to convince Bible-oriented people that we should unite with those who cannot give Scripture for their practice. How many lectures were given at ACU on what the Scriptures teach about instrumental music in worship?

“This is not what the proponents want to hear, but in my judgment there cannot be fellowship between the two groups unless this issue is fairly addressed.”

“What historical factors should Christians consider when deciding whether instrumental music is appropriate?”

“We should remember that churches of Christ historically subscribe to the restoration principle. We are seeking to restore the doctrine and practice of the church revealed in the scriptures. We want to be what people were in New Testament times.

“My question is this: How can we restore something that never was there? The New Testament and church historians are in agreement that there was no instrumental music in the worship of the early church. We, of all people, should respect that.”

“What role does the ‘silence of the scriptures’ play in deciding how to approach instrumental music?”

“We all appeal to the silence of the scriptures. The scriptures say nothing about sprinkling babies, praying to Mary, burning candles for the dead or using instrumental music in the worship of the church.

“Someone visited a Christian Church recently and picked up a tract titled *What the Bible Says About Infant Baptism*. He opened up the tract and found the inside pages were blank. Suppose the title had been *What the New Testament Says About Instrumental Music in Worship*. The inside still would have been the same—blank pages. If the absence of New Testament authority applies to one, it applies to the other.”

“Some are saying that our young people do not accept the arguments against instrumental music. Are you concerned about this?”

“Most of our young people have never even heard the arguments against instrumental music. Many of them have grown up without ever hearing a sermon on the subject. My experience has been that young people are very interested in the subject once it is presented to them. Some of them do not realize that instrumental music was not used in worship in the New Testament era or for several centuries thereafter, or that it was first introduced

primarily through Roman Catholicism, or that there are solid biblical grounds for opposing its use.

“Everett Ferguson and other historians have shown not only that instrumental music was not used in the first four centuries after Christ, but also that it was positively opposed by the early writers.”

“It is being said that many people are leaving the Church of Christ because they don’t have ‘brand loyalty.’ What do you think?”

“Fads come and go. Some people seek to be entertained. People are more susceptible to fads if they have not been taught and grounded.

“There is no more thrilling plea in the world than the call to be undenominational, New Testament Christians. When we all truly proclaimed that plea, people responded and the church grew.

“Today, some do not understand the appeal to speak where the Bible speaks and to be silent where the Bible is silent. They have not been taught. They have not heard it from the pulpit. In some places, people have been overwhelmed by a steady stream of criticism and ridicule directed toward the church. It is understandable that their loyalties would be displaced.

“When we return to the basics and focus once again on what makes us distinctive as churches of Christ, the church will grow and our young people will not forsake the way they have learned.”

[Editors Note: Lynn McMillion and Erik Tryggstad are the writers of this article which appeared on page 22.]