



The Burning Bush - Online article archive

Letter in reply to L Barker

I want to share this hasty response to the rather lengthy rebuke, just discovered, addressed to me by Mr Luke Barker in today's 'Belfast Newsletter'.

Dear Editor,

Mr Luke Barker's letter in today's 'News letter' is long in verbiage but not correspondingly overflowing with logic or indeed with Biblical exegesis!

In the past I have supported him in protests he has mounted but now I find that I am the target of his vociferous rebukes!

His is too long a letter to answer line by line but perhaps I could blow a hole or two in this apparently formidable edifice and thus show it is not quite as impressive as it might at first appear but rather is somewhat 'full of sound and fury' and to a large degree, 'signifying nothing' other than a few 'woof, woofs!'

1. Mr Barker says: "When a building is the common use of that congregation, and then government steps in to disrupt that assembly, it does mean that government has overstepped their God given mandate to punish the evil doer."

May I ask the question: If the police or the fire brigade arrive and demand the evacuation of the building because of a threat of some form, is that an overstepping of those agencies' mandate?

There is a parallel. It has been claimed by numerous medical agencies and authorities that there is a threat of catching and spreading the Coronavirus faced by those who gather in public buildings, including church buildings in the midst of this pandemic. The Stormont executive have required that such gatherings cease for a short time in order to try and control the rise of the infection rate.

That is not an overstepping of the government's mandate.

2. Mr Barker states: "New Testament Christianity is the literal gathering of God's people plus the full programme (I will spell it in the proper standard English way!) of what a NT Church should be (congregational singing, prayer, preaching, Lord's Table, baptism etc). Meeting online is not full NT worship. It falls short of that."

Now where does Mr Barker find that to be what the Lord directly instituted for His Church? It certainly became the practice of God's people when they gathered together that when possible the format they followed would be that singing, prayer and preaching. The observances of the sacraments were anything but universally commonly observed. That is still the case amongst Bible believers.

In the Acts of the Apostles, covering the period from just before the ascension of the Saviour to heaven until the imprisonment of Paul, a period of approximately 35 years, there is no mention of congregational singing. I have no doubt that there would have been singing by the groups of Christians gathered to worship but it would not appear that the Lord instituted it in the same manner as the sacraments were instituted. In all the exhortations and directions of the apostles, contained in the various epistles that make up the New Testament, there are only two references to singing of hymns.

They are: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord," Ephesians 5:19.

The other is: "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," Colossians 3:16.



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I would suggest that both these verses are directly referring to singing by individuals though I would have no doubt that they formed a basis of instituting congregational singing.

The truth is, much of what is deemed a 'true form of worship' has very properly evolved amongst the people of God, and the Lord has been pleased to bless such actions, rather than be traced back to a direct command of the Lord Jesus, any more than a morning and evening time of worship on the Lord's Day.

Who commanded that Christians be termed 'Baptists' or 'Presbyterians' or 'Protestants'? Such names evolved out of a necessity for distinction on certain theological matters. None of these names can claim 'divine authority'. They are but another of the developments and necessary changes embraced by the people of God.

Mr Barker is wrong when he suggests that "the full programme of what a NT Church should be is "congregational singing, prayer, preaching, Lord's Table".

In the New Testament, what we may learn of the practice of the early church did not have such a format at all.

Likely the simple gatherings of the Covenanters, in their times of distress, were more akin to the early gatherings of believers. That being so, the absence of one or more of these elements does not render the worship 'non New Testament!

I believe a continued examination of what Mr Barker wrote would show like discrepancies but I feel I have invested enough time on his 'thesis'!

Sincerely,

Rev Ivan Foster (Rtd)

Saturday 12 December 2020 (8.10 pm).