

Acappella and the Acappella Vocal Band

Dub McClish

The musical group, "Acappella" and its corollary, the "Acappella Vocal Band," have become extremely popular among brethren (especially "youth directors" and young people) in recent years. What is the origin of these groups? "Acappella" developed out of a quartet formed by Keith Lancaster (a native of Paris, TN) while he was a student at the now defunct Williamstown Bible College, Williamstown, VA, in about 1978. I heard this quartet in a concert in 1979 (they were good singers). One of the songs they sang was named "Acappella," and had just recently been written by Lancaster. It had an admittedly catchy tune with a jazzy, syncopated beat and featured a bass guitar-type sound (vocal, but not verbal) from the bass singer. It would appear that this song (now the theme song for the "Acappella" act) furnished the name for the group that evolved from that earlier Lancaster quartet. Likewise, the "Acappella Vocal Band" has evolved from the "Acappella" group itself. Although they are two separate groups and they generally perform separately, on occasion they also perform in concert together.

I wish I were able to endorse "Acappella" and encourage brethren young and old to attend their concerts and buy their records and tapes. Indeed, I am sentimentally inclined to do so because I have known Keith Lancaster for several years as a personable and talented young man. This would certainly be the popular thing to do, since they have such a following. In fact, with some, criticism of "Acappella" is almost equal to criticism of the Statue of Liberty or motherhood. It has become one of the newest "sacred cows" to a large number of brethren. The members of these groups seem to be clean-cut, morally upright young people, and I have no desire to appear in the role of a discourager of their self-proclaimed youthful zeal to serve God. However, I cannot conscientiously endorse them. Not only am I unable to encourage attendance at their concerts, I feel compelled to discourage those who would attend for the following reasons:

They are "flying under false colors."

While they describe themselves as "full-time ministers of music" and "Pure voices. Pure Gospel," and others describe them as "a full-time singing group committed

to taking the message of Christ to the world," they are really nothing more than a professional entertainment act making merchandise of the Gospel and the church. The fact that the official name of the parent company is "Acappella Ministries, Inc.," does not change this in the least. The "Acappella" group in concert by itself requires a \$2,500.00 guaranteed "honorarium" for each appearance, with a \$500 {non-refundable} deposit. The "Acappella Vocal Band" comes cheaper – only \$500 per concert during the summer ("if they are in the area anyway"), but \$1,200 per concert the rest of the year. This is what it costs a host group to have them perform. On top of that they gross several hundred additional dollars per concert from the sale of "tapes, records, T-shirts, etc." (the host group must agree to provide the "location and tables" for the sale of these items as a condition of their booking). No wonder they can afford two luxurious, customized Greyhound buses in which to tour.

Rather than serving Christ, I suggest that they are enriching themselves by fleecing a gullible brotherhood. If they want to make their living in the entertainment business, I will not fault them. They are free to do so (provided they leave Christ and the Gospel out of it). However, they are pretending to be somehow serving Christ, all the while simply engaging in the entertainment business, and are being paid handsomely by the brethren (and sometimes the denominations!) to do so. How have otherwise intelligent brethren allowed themselves to be thus deceived? Is this not proof that some brethren have such a serious case of "numbers" mania that they will do almost anything and pay almost any price (in dollars and/or compromise) to draw a crowd?

They are sending confusing signals.

As indicated above, "Acappella" is strictly an entertainment enterprise most often performing in "religious" settings (i.e., church buildings, at "youth rallies," on Christian college campuses, at youth camps, et al.), and employs songs with spiritual themes. These factors send forth confusing signals, especially to those who are young and immature (but also to many adults, I have found). Such blurs the distinction between secular and spiritual, entertainment and worship, recreation and devotion. "Acappella"

leaves the impression (in their advertising, on the phone, and on stage) that the entertainment they produce somehow provides edification for the soul. I deny it. They are providing entertainment for the body. Some are preaching the error that "everything we do is worship" and the "Acappella" concerts play right into their hands. The subtle lesson is taught that we ought to be entertained, have fun, and be made to feel good when we are assembled for spiritual activities (they also expect the same thing when the preacher gets up to preach).

"But the concerts are not periods of worship," some object. They can thus object all they please, but when said concerts are conducted in a spiritual setting (often the place where the church worships every Sunday), the name of Jesus is frequently mentioned, the songs have spiritual themes, and the performers claim to be "full-time ministers of music," I doubt that many impressionable youngsters will or can make the distinction. Besides, if the concerts are not "worship" (with which I heartily agree), such is a clear admission that they are mere entertainment. Those who respect sacred things (the names of God and Christ, Heaven, the Word of God, et al.) will not profane them or "take them in vain" as a vehicle of mere sensual entertainment.

Related to the above, their concerts appeal more to the flesh than to the spirit. By this I do not accuse them of using indecent lyrics or gestures. I simply mean that their appeal is to the emotions and feelings of those who hear them. They perform in such a way that some in their audiences are caused to sway, clap, and, according to one observer, even do a little "boogie." Others who have attended their concerts have likened them to Pentecostal meetings. Another observer has compared their concerts and the reaction of their audiences (dominated by young people) to the atmosphere of a rock music concert. Such activities are motivated by mere sensual and emotional rather than spiritual impulses. Yet, the whole premise of this singing group is that they are engaged in a "spiritual," a "Gospel" work.

The only "spiritual" connection I have been able to see in their work is their prostitution of spiritual songs and themes and the use of normally spiritual settings for their presentation of secular professional entertainment. If people want to pay

admission to be thus entertained (as they would for any concert by professional entertainers), that is one thing, but where is the Scriptural justification for the church to pay for it? It is bad enough that those claiming to be Christians would use spiritual things as a vehicle for entertainment and profit and that others claiming to be Christians would seek such entertainment, but for the church to pay for it compounds the error involved.

They are church splitters and disturbers.

"Acappella" founder and leader, Keith Lancaster, along with his father, LaRue, divided the East Wood St. church in Paris, Tennessee in December 1987. The division was not caused merely by "personality conflicts." The East Wood congregation was too conservative for them. The Lancaster-led group concluded that they would not be allowed to do some "things" there which they wanted to do and decided they would be unable to influence the elders to do what they wished. LaRue Lancaster, then a deacon at the East Wood church, abruptly resigned (to the other deacons, rather than to the elders, incidentally). They started their new group ("Paris Chapel") with neither the knowledge nor the blessing of the East Wood elders and took as many members with them as they could at the time (significantly, some of the Lancaster family did not agree with this unholy action at all and have remained at East Wood). LaRue Lancaster was appointed to serve as an elder at "Paris Chapel" soon after it was formed. This group has continued to disturb the peace of the East Wood congregation by trying to draw more and more members to their faction, both by letter and by personal contact.

The East Wood congregation rightly has no fellowship with this new congregation. Those who are a part of the "Acappella Ministries, Inc.," entertainment business, who live in Paris, and who are members of the church are part of this schismatic congregation. Instead of embracing and encouraging such brethren, Paul wrote that we should mark them and turn away from them (Rom. 16:17). Indeed, by their "smooth and fair speech [and songs] they beguile the hearts of the innocent" (v. 18). I am confident that most brethren have not been aware of the events just described (which can easily be verified by contacting the elders of the East Wood congregation). It

will be interesting to see if the knowledge of these events will make any difference to dedicated devotees of these entertainers. It certainly should.

They are doctrinally liberal.

The kind of men the "Acappella" church mentioned above has had for special meetings is indicative of their doctrinal liberalism. Soon after they began meeting, they brought in Jerry Jones for a "discipling seminar" (near the time he conducted a like seminar for a Christian Church in Knoxville, TN). They have since had Marvin Phillips for a weekend "Positive Living Rally" (for the uninformed, he has long been a supporter of the "Crossroads" brand of the "discipling" error, he has been a "prime mover" in the recent union efforts with the Christian Church since their inception, and he has recently taught courses in Kentucky Christian College [a Christian Church school]). "Acappella" has conducted concerts for denominational groups, thus encouraging them and joining in fellowship with them. They have helped Christian Churches promote their activities on more than one occasion. They were featured participants in the annual convention of the Independent Christian Church in 1987. This was held on the campus of Ozark Christian College in Joplin, MO (site of the infamous "Restoration Summit Meeting" of 1984). Jeff Walling (extremely popular "youth rally" speaker among liberal congregation.) was a featured speaker on that program (Walling and "Acappella" are well acquainted, often "performing" together and traveling in the same brotherhood circles). After "Acappella" performed, backed up by the instrumental sounds of the "Acappella Vocal Band," Walling said to the crowd, "And you thought we didn't have instruments." Such statements and actions can but leave the impression that the use of instruments with spiritual songs is a matter of no consequence, even a matter about which to joke!

I do not know how the Christian Church people got in contact with "Acappella" to hire their services, but it could have been through their advertisement in the interdenominational "youth ministry" magazine, *Group*, under the "Christian Concert Talent Scout Booking Directory." – They are listed along with several denominational individuals and groups who perform professionally. The magazine promises that those

listed will "provide that extra zing" for special concerts, retreats, or outreach events. The editorial comment further declares that "Acappella" is firmly committed to the "Unity in Diversity" heresy. They have no scruples about endorsing and joining in fellowship, with denominational groups. Whatever message they leave with their audiences (mostly young people, remember), it will not be one of doctrinal soundness and respect for Christ and His Word. They are as guilty of the errors they are endorsing as if they themselves were teaching and practicing them (2 John 9-11).

Their practice is unscriptural.

The "Acappella Vocal Band" not only sings, but some of its members make instrumental sounds with their voices (one of the members of the band "provides the group's rhythm and percussion" sounds). We are not authorized by Scripture to play any instrument, nor to whistle, hum, say "ah," or make a sound like an instrument in praise to God, musically. We are authorized to do one thing only – to sing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

Other musical sounds in praise to God are unauthorized and thus unscriptural, whether made with a human voice or with an instrument of metal, string, or wood. Further, we are to sing "with understanding" (1 Cor. 14:15b), that is, so that both we and those about us know the meaning of what we sing. Instrumental sounds, whether from the human voice or from a mechanical device, provide no "understanding." We are to sing so as to teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16). No spiritual teaching or admonishing is done by "Bar-um, bar-um, boom, boom, bar-um, bar-um," (some of the back-up sounds of the "Acappella Vocal Band"). Just about as much (and as little) teaching and admonishing is done by the so-called "tongues speakers" of Pentecostalism as by these nonsensical sounds – which is none whatsoever.

If "Acappella," as a professional organization, wants to provide secular entertainment with secular songs, using such sounds, I have no objection. However, they ought to be honest enough to quit pretending that what they are doing is either Scriptural or spiritual. It is neither, and it is a tragedy that the message our young people are getting is that it is both. They are subtly, but powerfully, teaching our young

people that **instrumental sounds** are acceptable with spiritual songs. When thus convinced it will be most difficult for them to be convinced that the use of **actual instruments** to accompany singing in worship is wrong.

There were those in the first century who misused and abused sacred things for financial gain. Paul warned of them in writing to Timothy:

If any man teacheth a different doctrine, and consenteth not to sound words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is puffed up, knowing nothing . . . whereof cometh . . . wranglings of men corrupted in mind and bereft of the truth, **supposing that godliness is a way of gain**" (1 Tim. 6:3-5, emph., DM).

I believe "Acappella" is using godliness as a way of gain by fleecing gullible brethren who pay their exorbitant fees. This is bad enough, but it is all made so much worse by the deceptions being foisted upon our young people. Unpopular though it may be to do so, I must oppose their destructive work.

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it was published in *The Edifier*, weekly bulletin of Pearl Street Church of Christ, Denton, TX, July 27, 1989, of which I was editor.]

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