

RIGHT or WRONG? Applause

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I've been reading a lot about whether it is right or wrong to applaud in church. Is this just a cultural issue, or is there something deeper?

The preaching of John Chrysostom 1,600 years ago troubled people of nobility but was cheered by the masses. Chrysostom's sermons often were interrupted by applause. On one occasion, he urged to his congregation to discontinue the practice. The worshippers, moved by his appeal, applauded!

A case can be made in favor of applause.

First, our spiritual ancestors brought their hands together to make noisy praise to God. "Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy" (Psalm 47:1). This imperative suggests ancient Israel invited clapping as a regular worship practice.

Second, healthy worship is dynamic. It is an opportunity to employ all our senses as a response to the grandeur and grace of God. Applause adds sound to worship. It stimulates our aural sense.

Third, applause is the primary way groups in our culture express affirmation and agreement. Applause is to some worshippers what a chorus of "amens" is to others. It allows the congregation to participate in worship and announces the congregation agrees with the substance of what is read, said or sung.

A case also can be made against the use of applause in worship.

First, clapping cheapens worship when it becomes a habitual or rote mimic of our popular culture. Worship is a sacred gathering, the dedication of

time for holy purposes. To interject regular applause into worship suggests Christians cannot set apart space and time for the holy without a kneejerk nod to our popular culture.

Second, applause is the method American audiences use to evaluate a performance. The repetitive practice of clapping for a well-sung solo or articulate personal testimony may suggest worship is a performance.

When our Sunday services are driven by practices such as applause, it is easy for the congregation to become the audience and worship leaders to become performers. When worship is at its best, the people in the pews are the actors and God is the audience.

Third, applause is not the only way to respond to what happens in a worship service. A more appropriate way to express gratitude for a skillfully rendered choral anthem or clear declaration of the gospel may be silence, not applause. Silence may capture the profound presence of a holy God better than putting our hands together. “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:20).

Applause in worship is not wrong. Neither is applause always right. Worship can never be stripped of cultural practices, but always they should add meaning to our efforts to honor God.

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