



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Is applause appropriate in worship?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

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"Clap your hands, all you peoples" (Psalm 47:1). For some people, the debate over applause in worship is silenced when this verse from the psalms is quoted. Unfortunately, the matter is really not that simple.

Applause vs. Clapping

In order to be clear about the discussion, we must begin by differentiating between applause and clapping. Rhythmic clapping is an essential element in certain music, especially music with roots in cultures other than northern European. As the church explores music from many cultures, we must be open to clapping in worship, whether by a choir or congregation. Clapping as a part of musical expression is different from applause.

Appropriate Applause in Worship

Liturgically, there are occasional moments when applause is an appropriate acclamation of the action just completed. In some congregations applause is used to welcome the newly baptized into the community of faith or to acknowledge the newly ordained. In some situations, it might be appropriate to greet a newly married couple with applause. When those providing service to the congregation (such as Sunday school teachers, choir or council members) are being installed or formally thanked within a worship service, applause from the congregation might be invited.

There are moments, particularly those filled with highly charged emotion, when spontaneous applause erupts from an assembly because there is just no other possible response. For example, at the funeral mass for Chicago's beloved Roman Catholic archbishop, Cardinal Bernardin, the congregation burst into applause several times during the homily. There simply was no other human way to express the natural feelings of the moment. Applause in worship as an outburst of emotion is quite common in some cultures. Applause that would be a common element in worship in many African American communities may not be received in the same way in many predominantly European Lutheran congregations. As American cultures learn to live, work and worship together, we must become more aware of and sensitive to one another's means of expression.

Concerns regarding Applause

In most congregations with European roots, however, this conversation usually focuses on applause that may follow a choir anthem, postlude, or sermon in the regular weekly worship service. In American culture, applause is most often understood as acknowledgment or acclamation of a performance. Therefore, it is very closely linked to entertainment. Americans tend to applaud after all performances, regardless of quality. At best, such applause may simply be a courtesy.

Some people suggest that applause in worship is really directed toward God and not the performers. Sometimes applause is therefore physically directed upward (adding another confusing dynamic concerning where God "is"). If this is done, worship planners must ask themselves if this is really clear to all worshipers, including visitors and children.

Consistency of practice is an important consideration. For example, if a congregation applauds following a children's choir anthem, are the children and parents really clear that the applause is directed to God? Our culture's emphasis on performance may be too strong to allow such subtlety. What happens when you applaud one week, but not the next?

When considering the impact of applause in worship, think not only about the recipients, but also for the congregation, the applauders. We live in an entertainment age. The liturgical church, with its emphasis on participation by all, offers a countercultural alternative to worship that is cast as entertainment by a few for the many. Worship planners need to look critically at our secular culture, constructively use what is good. In a secular setting, applause may not be a weakness. When transferred to worship, however, it may not function in the same positive way.

Education is crucial. Singers of all ages, instrumentalists and all musical leaders, must be reminded continually that their role in worship is to proclaim and praise God, not to entertain God's people in worship. Those who preach are proclaiming the Gospel, not entertaining. Worshipers, too, are to be reminded that they gather to worship, not to be entertained. Yet worshipers will often experience the powerful and sincere human desire to thank musicians and preachers for the service they provide to the church. After a particularly fine offering of music, worshipers may give thanks to God in silent prayer and personally thank the musician(s). Congregational leaders can plan congregational events that allow for such thanks to be given. This thanks could take the form of a yearly recognition within the liturgy itself or a thank you supper following worship. Monthly newsletters might include thank-you notes focusing on different aspects of parish life, such as choirs, altar guild, acolytes, or ushers. Sometimes worshipers are told not to applaud in worship but are not given appropriate opportunities to offer thanks. Providing such opportunities helps worship to remain worship and not entertainment.

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