

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WORSHIP

“Why are they clapping for us?” This girl, a member of our youth choir, was amazed. People in the congregation were applauding the performance of the choir. “Why are they clapping for us?” she asked the choir director. “We are singing for God.”

In all our worship God is the audience. God is the focus of all that we offer.

Church is challenging for modern consumers. The way things are laid out, it appears that the “performers” are up front and the “audience” is seated in the pews.

“Audience” means “a group of listeners or spectators”.

A “congregation” is “an assembly of persons met for worship and religious instruction”. Ministers and deacons and choristers and soloists are part of the congregation. Together, as an assembly met for worship, the congregation offers prayer, song, praise and other gifts to God.

Sunday worship in church is not primarily for evangelism or outreach. Our worship is directed to God. Certainly all present are invited to join in the worship of the assembled community of faith, but the object of our worship is not to evangelize, it is to praise God.

Neither is worship self-centered. It is not about what we receive, what we “get out of it”. It is our human response to God’s covenant promises and God’s great gift to us in Jesus Christ. “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” [Romans 12:1, NRSV]

When you come to worship you are presenting yourself to God. You are coming into the presence of the Ruler of the Universe, the Creator of the ends of the earth. Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” [John 15:16]. You are chosen by Christ and called into His church.

Your place in worship in the church is focused wonderfully in this passage from Colossians 3:14-17:

“And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Our worship together is a sign of Christ’s reconciling love. In it we know ourselves no longer as stranger and sojourners, but as “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the

Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”. [Ephesians 2:19-22]

In some Christian circles today, Spirit-led worship is equated with emotionalism. We pray that our worship is Spirit-led, but we also know and affirm that worship and emotionalism are not to be confused. Worship may often call forth emotional responses, some positive and some negative, perhaps; worship may even bring ecstasy. Jesus teaches that those who worship God must worship “in Spirit and in truth”. [John 4:24] Paul’s own example is instructive here: “I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit, but I will sing with the mind also.” [1 Corinthians 14:15]

Spirit-led Christian worship includes the preaching and teaching of God’s word, the sharing of the Word in the Lord’s Supper, the sign and seal of grace in baptism, the proclamation of the Gospel in various ways, acts of service, the offering of gifts, prayers of confession, thanksgiving, praise and lament, times of silence, and instrumental and vocal music.

There are other kinds of worship--family worship and the informal group worship we share on mission trips, for instance—but worship is not private or personal. There is a word for private and personal acts of piety: devotion. A devotion is “a religious exercise or practice other than the regular corporate worship of a congregation”. Personal devotion often takes the form of prayer, meditation and Scripture reading. This kind of devotional act should not be confused with worship and must be tested by congregational practices and teaching. This can be an important source of spiritual insight and strengthening but only when it is done in the spirit of Jesus’ own teaching about prayer when he has us pray “Our Father,” not “my Father”. As T. S. Eliot put it poetically, “Even the anchorite, praying alone in the desert, prays for the church, the body of Christ.”

God is the audience for all our worship. With that focus in mind, we must not that Spirit-led worship takes us into the presence of mystery. Such worship is not always comfortable. We do not always feel at home. Worship can judge us and move us to desire to change our lives. If we are in God’s presence, how can we not feel the weight of our sin and our need to turn and live in a more Christ like way?

Still, worship can bring joy. It does invite us into liturgical forms and into hymns and prayers and readings that have sustained millions over millennia. There is nothing wrong with enjoying worship, either. And worship can be edifying. There we can be encouraged and taught and we, by our presence and participation, also encourage other believers. It is good when brothers and sisters can dwell together in unity. It is good when we gather to praise and give thanks to God. It is good when we are fed at the Lord’s Table and when we feast on His Word. It is, as the old hymn says, “a foretaste of glory divine”.

[Please also see the web site article on What You Need to Know About Church Music in the Worship & Music section of our web site. ]