

On Applause

From time to time in Massanutten Church those attending worship applaud during the worship service. Some members of our congregation have expressed concern and the opinion that applause is not appropriate during worship. It is not customary; it seems “worldly”; it makes it seem that those being applauded have “performed” to please the congregation rather than offered their praise to God; it raises the possibility that those who lead in worship may come to expect the applause and be hurt if others were applauded and they are not. A variety of viewpoints have been considered recently by a Task Force appointed by the Worship Ministry to deal with Music in Worship and by the Worship Ministry also. What guidance do we have beyond our varying opinions?

We have guidance from the Bible and our Book of Order. Since applause almost always occurs in connection with music, instrumental or vocal, we should note that the Book of Order says, “In worship music is not to be for entertainment or artistic display.” (W 2.1004) This observation is made in the context of music being described as a form of prayer by the congregation. It also says, “In worship the church is to remember both its liberty in Christ and the biblical command to do all things in an orderly way. While Christian worship need not follow prescribed forms, careless or disorderly worship is both an offense to God and a stumbling block to the people. (W 1.4001) The Book of Order continues “The church has always experienced a tension between form and freedom in worship.....The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) acknowledges that all forms of worship are provisional and subject to reformation. In ordering worship the church is to seek openness to the creativity of the Holy Spirit, who guides the church toward worship which is orderly, yet spontaneous, consistent with God’s Word and open toward the newness of God’s future.” (W 3.1002)

These selections offer us the ideas that worship is our response to what God has done for us, that God is to guide that response by God’s Spirit, that all are to respond actively, that we are free to set our own forms for doing this but that the way we worship should be orderly and not careless remembering that worship is directed to God. It is hardly possible to say that our constitution judges applause to be either right or wrong.

Reference to such passages of Scripture as Psalm 47, Psalm 98; Isaiah 55:12, II Kings 11:12 indicate that clapping was used as an expression of joy and sometimes as an expression of contempt or mockery as in Lamentations 2:15. In our culture the meaning is positive and expresses approval but the setting is usually secular and applause is not common in “mainstream” American churches or in their European ecclesiastical ancestors.

In I Corinthians 11:17-14:40, where Paul is speaking of conduct when the church gathers for worship, his main emphasis seems to be that (1) all that is done in worship be done in love that bears all things, that does not insist on its own way, and seeks to build up one another (“let all things be done for building up”); (2) each Christian should make some contribution to the worship – a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue etc. “so that all may learn and all may be encouraged”; (3) all the things done are to be the exercise of gifts given by the Spirit and though these gifts vary from member to member, they are all given by the One Holy Spirit for upbuilding the whole group; (4) worshipers were expected to respond to each other’s offerings of

prayers, songs or thanksgivings by an “Amen” to indicate their assent to what was said or sung; (5) though each activity was prompted by the Spirit, the human spirit maintained control. And if one prophet was speaking and another was moved to say something the first was responsible for controlling the exercise of his gift by “yielding the floor.”

From our study and reflection on this matter, we suggest the following guidelines and recommendations regarding applause in worship services:

1. We recognize that in our culture applause is a way of “encouraging” others and we recognize the validity of this motive as a desire born of the Spirit which needs to find some expression in our worship. Since we no longer retain the scriptural custom of saying “Amen” or “Hallelujah” to encourage those who have expressed themselves in worship, we need some way to do this. There may be times when applause is the only adequate way for us to express the genuine feelings of enthusiasm for and endorsement of what has been said or sung or the joy or wonder or gratitude for the insight we have received. At such time applause may be prompted by the Spirit of God and we wish to make no “rule” that would limit our freedom to follow the leading of the Spirit. We, therefore, cannot believe it right to categorically forbid applause in worship services.
2. We also recognize that applause may be offered, and is usually offered in our culture, not to God but to human beings, and not for the content of what is said or sung as frequently as for the “performance” of the saying or singing. If applause is understood by others in this sense, it seems to many to be out of place in worship, for leaders in worship are not performing to please the congregation but offering to God, on behalf of the gathered people, their expressions of praise or prayer or proclamation. In this sense, applause may be understood as catering to vanity, competitiveness, and a misunderstanding of worship.
3. We recommend that we make love our aim (I Cor. 14:1) in this matter:
 - (a) that those inclined to applaud do so only when they feel led to do so by the Holy Spirit as a need to identify with truth set forth in words said or sung by others and to express to God their joy or enthusiasm derived from that truth, recognizing that for some worshipers applause, even so motivated, may be offensive.
 - (b) That those who are offended by applause because it seems to them worldly or out of place in worship trust their sisters and brothers not to express themselves in this manner unless they who applaud believe themselves to be genuinely led by the Spirit in so doing, in which case their expression of enthusiasm can be honored and accepted as their gift offered to God in worship, but others need not feel compelled to join in unless so moved..
 - (c) That in the exercise of such “mutual forbearance in love” applause will neither be forbidden nor become so commonplace as to be expected and sought after by those leading in worship, and the Holy Spirit will guide us in “maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.”

Note: This paper is revised and adapted from a report submitted by the Worship Committee and adopted by the Session of the First Presbyterian Church of Roanoke, VA a number of years ago when the issue of applause was under discussion there.