

Is Applause Proper in Worship and Service to God?

As the preacher steps to the pulpit the congregation applauds. A teenager is baptized and receives a stand oblation. A stirring song is sung which moves the congregation to such joy that they respond by clapping their hands. A child quotes a memory verse and adults commend it with clapping. To some this is merely a joyful way of expressing our delight in our religious devotion. To others this applauding is like something you would see at a basketball game or at theatrical performances.

Although applause is not dealt with in the New Testament, please note that the clapping of hands in worship and during times of devotion have been known to be a problem since the early days of the church. According to Schaff's *History of the Christian Church*: "The emperor (Constantine) diligently attended divine worship...And he even himself composed and delivered discourses to his court. ...General invitations were issued, and the citizens flocked in great crowds to the palace to hear the imperial preacher, who would in vain try to prevent their loud applause by pointing to heaven as the source of his wisdom" (vol. 3, p. 34). "Chrysostom mourns over the theatrical customs, such as loud clapping in applause, which the Christians at Antioch and Constantinople brought with them into the church" (p. 377). "...Chrysostom often raised his voice against this in Antioch and in Constantinople" (p. 473).

This demonstrates that the most enlightened and spiritually-minded men of the third through sixth centuries rejected it unanimously. Since these men are not religious authorities the answer to our inquiring must lie elsewhere. Are some making much to do about nothing? What does God want?

Applause Violates the Silence of the Scriptures

The New Testament is completely silent on the subject of hand-clapping and applause. Therefore, we must respect the thunderous silence of the Scriptures (1 Pet. 4:11) and not to go beyond what is written (1 Cor. 4:6). The story of Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, serve well as examples. These men were priests of God who served in the

Tabernacle as God had instructed. One day, for some reason unknown to us, they decided to use strange or profane fire to burn incense in worship to God instead of obtaining fire from the altar as God had instructed. "*Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified'"*" (Lev. 10:1-3).

The Hebrew writer used the argument that when God's Law says nothing it authorizes nothing. "*For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood*" (Heb. 7:14). The tribe of Judah was excluded from the priesthood. Not because God had said, "Thou shalt not have a priest from the tribe of Judah", but because He specified priest are to be of the tribe of Levi, thus automatically excluding priests from Judah.

Silence does not give consent. When the Bible says nothing there is a red light not a green light. If the silence of the New Testament authorizes applause then it also authorizes boos, hisses, jeers, stomping, etc.

Still some will argue, "Show me in the Bible where it says: 'Thou shalt not clap or applaud in worship.'" However, the burden of proof is clearly on the one who advocates applause in worship.

Applause Opens up New Testament Worship to Old Testament Practices

It is true that clapping was authorized in the Old Testament era. In 2 Kings 11:12 there was a clap of the hands at the anointing of a king. This however was not an act of worship. Yet, in Psalm 47:1-5 the Jews were clapping, shouting, and blowing the trumpet in praise to God who demonstrated that "He is a great King over all the earth" by defeating the enemies of Israel. In addition to these are metaphorical references to clapping connected to worship unto God. Rivers clap, men sing and play the harp (Ps. 98:8). Trees clap, mountains and hills sing (Is. 55:12).

The minute we start using the Old Testament to authorize our worship during New Testament times the floodgates are open wide to all that the Old Testament teaches with regard to worship. Could the same thinking that would allow applause also allow the instrument to be used with singing? David danced when

the ark was moved to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:14). Who would justify a dance around the Lord's Table? Whatever condemns the instrument or dance for us today, condemns applause. Why not open those gates a little wider and allow animal sacrifices, polygamy, and a separate priesthood? When the Jews who were converted to Christianity tried to bind circumcision upon the Gentile converts as well as other parts of the Law, Paul warned them saying they had "*fallen from grace*" (Gal. 5:3). When Jesus died, the Old Testament was nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14).

Applause is an Inexpedient Means of Expressing Joy

Applause in worship has been defended as an expedient way of expressing joy, that is, clapping is an aid in carrying out the command to be joyful. "Applause is to joy like a song book is to singing." Others say, clapping is like tapping the toe. Singing implies rhythm.

In order for something to be an aid or expedient it must not violate the Biblical rules of expediency. 1) First, it must be lawful (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). 2) Expedients must be an aid to a general command not an addition to God's Word (Rev. 22:18,19). 3) There is no room for an expedient when God has specified what He wants. If He commands us to "sing", than another type of music not specified is unlawful (Js. 5:13). Clapping is another form of music other than singing. Clapping is a form of percussion music. 4) Expedients must edify (1 Cor. 10:23-33). 5) Expedients must not offend the conscience of a brother (1 Cor. 10:32; Rom. 14:12-23). Applause does not meet these rules of expedience, but violates them.

To use clapping as an expedient opens the floodgates. Tibetan monks use a prayer wheel to aid in praying. Could we clap after or during a prayer? Should someone who wants to praise God with applause or whistling or shouting after he partakes of the bread, and again after he partakes of the fruit of the vine? Could one "hiss" or "boo" if an impenitent brother is withdrawn from? Why would anyone want to establish an example in the minds of our youth or others that could and would lead them down some wrong road in the future?

Applause Fails to Distinguish Between that which is Holy and that which is Common

God is holy, that is, separate from sin or separate from everyday or common use. God has

always required a distinction between the holy and the unholy, the sacred and the secular (common). *"And they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean"* (Ezek. 44:23). If I were to use the good china bowl to feed the dog, build a sand castle, drain the oil from the car, etc. my wife would have a fit and rightly so. The good china bowl is special and is honored by being placed in the dining room buffet and used only at the dinner table for special occasions. There are other cheap bowls or common containers that can be used for feeding the dog, draining the oil, etc. There are approved and holy ways to worship and serve God.

Applause Assumes God Likes what Man Likes

We cannot presume God likes what we like or what pleases us will please God. True worshipers please God and a true worship is one who worships in spirit and truth. *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth"* (John 4:23,24).

Applause Focuses on the Wrong Object

About 260 A.D. there was an elder of the church at Antioch named Paul of Samosata. He loved *"exorbitant praise and applause"* for what he did both within and without the assembly (Credibility of Gospel History, Vol. 2, p. 666f). Applause must have an object. Do you regularly stop what you are doing and just clap your hands together for an extended period of time just to praise God or to express your joy about something without a human object? When it comes to modern day applause in worship the object is not praising God, but praising men. Approval for someone's performance by clapping their hands for an extended period of time. The louder and the longer the applause, the more approval one shows.

The proper view of New Testament worship has God as the audience and those who assemble for worship on the stage. God is the only proper object of worship. Christ said, *"For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'"* (Matt. 4:10).

Applause Promotes Emotionalism and Egotism

Emotional feelings do not determine one's level of spirituality. Mere human emotions should

not be used to test whether one's worship is pleasing and acceptable to God. Anyone who argues: "my worship is acceptable to God because I feel good afterwards" is putting the cart before the horse. Feelings can often be deceptive. They may tell us what is in our hearts, but they cannot show us what is in the heart or mind of God. To know what is in the mind of God we have to study God's revelation, the Bible. The Bible reveals nothing about clapping as a pleasing mode of worship or a means of serving Him.

Our opposition to applause in worship and in service to God does not exclude feeling. By all means worship and serve God with the emotion of praise and joy in your heart, but not with the unscriptural clapping of hands.

Applause Promotes Performance as a Motive

When we clap for those who singing a song well, preach well or make a great comment we are encouraging them to be men pleasers. Obedience to God is not to be motivated by recognition from man (Matt. 6:1ff). Instead of applauding someone who preaches well, say "amen." Instead of clapping for a song well sung, tell them after worship services. If a great comment is made in Bible class say "amen" or tell them later.

- Daniel R. Vess

Is Applause Acceptable in Worship & Service Unto God?



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Sunday
 Bible Study.....9:30 am
 Worship Service.....10:30 am
 Worship Service.....5:00 pm

Wednesday
 Bible Study.....7:30 pm

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