

What's Wrong with Applauding in Church

By Laurence A. Wagley
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The faces of the Cherub Choir members shine as they finish their song. Before I know it, I am applauding with everyone else. What am I doing? I glance around to see if anyone is watching. (We liturgy professors take ourselves very seriously.) What are we to make of this increasingly popular practice of applauding in worship?

I realize applause is not necessarily one of the major issues of worship, but I think it does deserve some comment. (I realize, too, that one of my colleagues once made some restrained comments on another marginal item called the children's sermon and has yet to recover from the answering barrage.) Let's begin by considering some reasons that might be given in support of applause in church. We could point out that applause demonstrates life and vitality, which is better than boredom; that it provides the congregation with a means of participating in worship; that it contributes to an environment of caring and friendliness; and that it communicates support and approval. Let's look at these reasons.

Worship Leaders or Performers?

Even liturgy professors are in favor of life and vitality in worship. But applause is like a wet puppy—once let in the house it is difficult to control. Some aspects of vitality are not appropriate in a worship service. Also, vitality has a short shelf life: applause can become as perfunctory as any other ritual.

The goal of participation seems like a persuasive reason for welcoming applause. It is clear that applause has a cathartic effect at concerts, performances and sporting events. People want to participate, they need to participate, and they will participate. That's true in church too. But church should provide opportunities for participation that are less directly tied to encouraging performance. Congregations are not audiences, and leaders of worship are not performers. The role of the liturgist (and of the choir, organist, and ushers) is to enable the congregation to participate,

not to win people's approval. Members of the congregation may, on reflection, realize that certain things in the service were done very well. But if the worship leaders draw attention to themselves and seem to ask for applause, then they are not fulfilling their roles.

What if the congregation applauds a sermon? That means the sermon was pleasing to the congregation. Now, preachers need approval, but I think most would not welcome the implication that their sermons are preached to win people's approval. Instead, they think a sermon is successful if the people—far from judging the performance of the preacher—consider how pleasing their own lives are to God. Leaders of worship encourage people's participation in worship so that in that participation the people may respond to God.

Does applause help form a caring and friendly community? Perhaps. But when friendliness becomes an end in itself, the church has turned to idolatry. Friendliness should be a byproduct of the church at work and worship, not its primary goal. Applause may, in fact, have a negative effect, making us self-conscious about our performances. And too little applause may make us feel unappreciated.

Applause may communicate approval and support, and often an individual or a group needs that. People do come to church seeking a sense of worth, wanting to be loved. But applause is too cheap a response to those needs. If that kind of support is all that worship has to offer, then worship has been impoverished. The poor, those robbed of self-esteem, those who are oppressed—they, too, need approval and support, and the good news of God's love is their best hope. If they see concrete signs of the church's concern and are enfolded into the Christian community, they will feel supported in a way far beyond the effect of applause.

Toward God-Consciousness

Applause can also lead to a sense of competition. If we applaud the choir's anthem today, why didn't we applaud last Sunday? Do we applaud every Sunday, every event, every person? Do we withhold applause for a particularly good anthem so the choir will work harder?

The most likely occasion for applause—in response to children—may be the time when it does the most harm. Applause may lead children to learn

patterns of exhibitionism, competition, and self-centered behavior. There is also considerable evidence that by substituting appreciation for a cute baby for awareness of the presence of God, adults have undermined what is, in some communions, one of the holiest sacraments of the church, infant baptism.

Acts 14:8-18 records that the people of Lystra were so impressed with Paul and Barnabas that they did obeisance and wanted to offer sacrifices to them. When Paul and Barnabas understood what was happening, they ran among the people, assuring them that they were human beings "of like nature with you." "With these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them."

Preachers and liturgists seldom provoke such a response, but the applause we do receive, as well intentioned as it may be, is a sign of misunderstanding. Those who applaud may think they are being supportive and encouraging to one another, just as the people in Lystra who prostrated themselves before the disciples thought they were showing honor to people who deserved it. But, in this case, the good can be the enemy of the best. It is appropriate to show honor to one another but not at the cost of denying honor to God. To applaud a solo, a dance, or a sermon is to draw attention to the means rather than to the end. Encouraging self-consciousness rather than God-consciousness will finally destroy worship entirely, making us the First United Admiration Society rather than the church.

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