

On Expressions of Worship

Worship:

Perhaps there is no greater controversy facing the church of the 21st century than regarding the forms, environments and expressions of corporate worship. Opinions are both many and varied. For many individuals and certainly for churches themselves, the stakes are high and the dangers are great. Such controversies may well become the vehicles the evil one will use to make ineffective the church of his great Enemy.

With this in mind, it is important that the leadership of churches speak with clarity, authority and love. And since opinions will vary and since no one has a corner of the truth in such a way as to guarantee infallible insight into such debatable issues, the need of direction perhaps becomes more critical than the direction itself. In light of the above, I speak as the pastor of one church, simply sharing my own perspective in love.

Opposition will be present, but were that not the case, there would be no need for such a statement. So, Perimeter Church, here is your pastor's best description of a few of his sincere and heartfelt beliefs on this controversial matter.

The role of emotions:

Emotions, like other gifts of God's creation, are good, in and of themselves, but must be stewarded with great caution. Worship, as an expression of one's satisfaction with God, most often produces emotions, which when utilized appropriately become not only enjoyable but also useful. However, many use worship as some would use drugs—to experience a self-gratifying high. On the one hand to be fully satisfied with God in worship, and on the other hand to become self-absorbed with expressions of communicating with God in worship, are two totally different things.

To lose control of one's faculties, whether physical or emotional, is not a sign of heightened spirituality, but rather of spiritual immaturity. (I am not referring to a worshipful raising of hands.) Though such signs of immaturity are not wrong (even as a little child's harmless expressions of immaturity are not to be viewed as disobedience), they certainly are not to become the goals toward which we strive.

Emotions can be inappropriately stewarded either in one's neglect to utilize them or in one's abuse of them by making them the goal of one's worship experience. Were I to guess the thoughts of God regarding the issue of expressiveness in worship, I would assume He would look at His body at large (at least in America), with His greatest delight being in seeing His people more freed to express their satisfaction with Him with greater intensity, (yet not in violation or contradiction with the unique temperament and emotional make up of the individual).
an others first mentality:

But the issues facing God's church today go beyond the appropriate stewardship of emotions regarding one's personal expressions. As in most arenas of life, decisions we make for ourselves often impact others (sometimes even unknowingly).

As we gather to worship, the needs of others are always to take precedence over our own needs, and especially those whose needs are greater than our own. As Christians who are called to live with the mission of winning a lost world, it is important to show deference to the needs of non-believers around us in worship (as well as other believers). Dramatic expressions of worship, which bring self-attention or distract others during worship (mainly determined by the norm of the participants), must be self-monitored in the name of love. What may be distracting in the front row of a gathering may go unnoticed or not be distracting in the back of the same gathering. The important issue is that of considering “the needs of others as more important than one’s own.”

The rule of love becomes the guideline and the Spirit of Wisdom becomes the Guide. The mutual goals of effective outreach and healthy worship are not exclusive of one another, but do require a conscious awareness of both goals at all times. To fail to see one or the other, based on personal preferences or self-interest, is to fail to demonstrate the love of God.

Worship style:

The issue of “forms” of worship complicates the situation even further. For one person, one “form” or “style” of worship seems to evoke desirable emotions while for another person, a totally different “form” or “style” seems to be more pleasing. A large part of this has to do with preferred musical styles. Though many press hard to argue for one style being theologically superior to the other, the truth is that “preference” or “taste” is the real issue. It is not uncommon to hear that a particular choice of music or new rendition of a familiar song made someone mad, or at least unable to worship. I think this is no more true than the statement of a child that their sibling made them mad or forced them to hit the other. As in sibling rivalry, such responses to music style are decisions to allow one’s emotions to rule his actions. It is ironic that it is often those who have been churched the longest and who are supposedly the most mature believers who respond with such immaturity.

What an advantage to enter corporate worship with the knowledge that the very style or musical choices I dislike are the great delight of others, those whose interest I have chosen “to make more important than my own.”

The motivation to change one's church's worship:

There will always be those who take it upon themselves to change the worship of their church. The self-imposed goal to change the environment of worship by one’s own behavior during a corporate gathering is an inappropriate one. In addition to this, the communication to others in the church family of one’s own dissatisfaction with worship or choice of music, etc. serves only to open mental files of alertness, to give “new eyes” to friends so as to recruit others to one’s own perspective. It works nearly every time. But such a response serves only to bring disgrace to the same God who taught that the world would know His own by their love for one another and their unity as a family.

God calls His people to express their satisfaction with Him “in spirit and in truth.” The only true hindrance to such worship is found not in the environment, style or musical

choices of a worship service, but rather in the heart alone. Though there is certainly nothing wrong with the pleasure or personal alignment and agreement with one's church's environment, style or musical choices, it is ultimately finding pleasure in God which brings honor to Him.

the remedy to our differences:

By the grace of God, many are blessed to live in communities where the environment of worship at different churches takes on different flavors. Rather than carry inappropriate goals into worship or remain critical, it is better either to find a different church where the norm of the participants' expressions more closely resembles one's own, or to submit in love and to focus on the true heart of worship.

Regardless of whether the issue is choice of emotional expression or musical style, the remedy to such controversy always comes back to "love." When love is the highest goal, God is honored, because God is love and such love is our Savior's "greatest commandment." And though we all will continue to make wrong decisions and unwise judgments, we take hope in the promise that "love covers a multitude of sins."