

# God and Our Emotions

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## Once More, with Feeling

While much of the discussion regarding congregational worship deals with what the Bible says we are to do, God is equally concerned with what we feel when we gather to worship him.

I remember a couple that visited our church a number of years ago. Throughout the first portion of our meeting, they watched uncomfortably as others clapped, raised their hands, and even cried. At a guest reception after the service, I had the opportunity to ask them what their impressions were. They explained that while they appreciated our commitment to sound doctrine, they were taken aback by the free expression of emotion. The husband told me he had been taught for years that overt displays of emotion in public worship were inappropriate and unbiblical. He had been warned of the dangers of emotionalism—seeing worship as a means of obtaining “spiritual goose bumps,” or experiencing an emotional high.

Are displays of emotion in public praise unbiblical? Should a Christian feel moved when singing songs to God? If you do feel moved, should you hide it? How do we know whether or not feelings in worship are honoring God or simply gratifying a craving for personal experience? What part do emotions play in the worship of God? To answer these questions, we need to look at the place of emotions in Scripture. From there we'll look at what, if anything, our feelings reveal. Finally, we'll seek to establish some biblical guidelines for emotions in congregational worship.

Our attitude toward emotional expression can be influenced by a number of factors including our culture, family background, temperament, and what we've been taught. For instance, extroverts are often the product of outgoing parents. People from Western cultures tend to be more expressive than those from Eastern cultures. However, Scripture seems to allow for and even encourage many different kinds of emotions. Joy, fear, awe, sorrow, anger, and love all seem to merit God's approval at different times. We see in Jesus himself an example of varied and intense emotional expression. He wept. He

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rejoiced. He raged in righteous fury at those who turned God's house into a den of thieves. He also felt compassion for the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd.

Probably the most helpful biblical teaching on emotions in worship is the book of Psalms. There we find David and other writers pouring out their hearts to God in a way that many of us would find problematic, if not disconcerting. Talk about a range of emotions! One moment we overhear the worshiper pouring out his heart to God in despair, grief, and anger. The next moment, we find him in another place exuberantly celebrating the goodness and faithfulness of God through shouting, clapping, dancing, and loud singing. Given such evidence, it would be difficult to argue from Scripture that emotional expression is out of place in the worship of God. But we can still ask if these kinds of emotional expressions are meant only for an ancient Hebrew culture. It will help us to look at what emotions reveal and where they originate.

## Emotions: Their Source and Significance

Scripture is filled with emotional responses to God. "Delight yourself in the Lord!" is the Bible's command. How can we delight in something without being affected? And yet, if we don't understand how emotions function, we can easily be led into subjectivism and the pursuit of an elusive emotional high.

While emotions can seem unpredictable, they always have their source in our perception of reality. Feelings always follow what we believe to be fact. They are a barometer of what our hearts are focused on at any given moment, whether or not we're aware of it. We feel awe because we encounter something that transcends our understanding. No one has to remind us to feel sad when we hear about a child who has died unexpectedly, or when we must say goodbye to friends we may never see again. I may insist I'm not afraid as I step up to the microphone to sing a solo, but my quivering voice and racing heart reveal something else. In that respect, emotions are like a window into our hearts.

However, simply knowing an emotion is rooted in what I think doesn't tell me why I'm feeling it. Two people who seem to be experiencing the same emotion may be motivated by entirely different thoughts. The singer described above might be afraid of not hitting the high notes. Another vocalist might be singing for the first time after an operation and wondering if his voice will hold out. Still another might be fearing a shock from a wet microphone. In each case, fear has different causes.

So, to benefit from emotions in worship we must discover what thoughts are generating those emotions. To paraphrase Jonathan Edwards, emotions are no sign one way or the other that we are being affected by God. We can be moved by subtle lighting changes or

well-designed architecture. The skill of the musicians or the style of music can affect us. Of course, so can the biblical truths we are singing.

Of all the emotions we may experience during worship, those that most honor God are the ones that have their source in the truths we profess. As I sing a praise song or a hymn, my heart ought to be stirred most powerfully by the content of the lyrics and the awesome God they speak of. It doesn't do me much good to leave a meeting impressed exclusively by the music I have heard, or the atmosphere I have enjoyed. Why do I think the worship service was "good"? In what way has God grown bigger in my eyes? How has the Holy Spirit revealed an attribute of God to me in a fresh way? If we are convinced that our emotions are to be used for God's glory, then these are the types of questions we will be asking ourselves.

If we say we love God with all our hearts, that we desire him more than anything else, that we count all things as loss for the sake of knowing him, then surely our emotions will be affected during God-honoring worship.

## Emotions and Corporate Worship

The Bible portrays the worship of God as an activity that involves our emotions. Although the lively, expressive worship of an ancient Hebrew culture may look outwardly different in many respects from our worship today, there is no indication in Scripture that we should check our emotions at the door when we gather to worship God. Outward expressions may change; the truths that motivate them do not.

But what should that emotional expression look like? When do our emotions cease being an evidence of a worshipping heart and start becoming a hindrance or distraction? Also, what is the line between wholehearted worship and worshipping our emotions?

These are important questions for the people of God. Because we desire to do everything for God's glory, we must seek to understand how our emotions should function in corporate worship.

First, we must acknowledge that emotional engagement with God in worship is not an issue of temperament, but obedience to his Word. Half-hearted worship is no worship at all. Whether we consider ourselves outgoing, reclusive, or somewhere in between, God is to be desired above all things. As we encounter the truth about God in a fresh way, we are to respond accordingly, whether it be in delight, peace, awe, or comfort. When we are convicted by the Holy Spirit, we should be grieved. These are all natural responses that flow from a genuine relationship with the living God.

Second, emotional expression is not a matter of individuality, but of mutual edification. Although biblical worship can involve a wide range of emotional responses, we are guided and restrained by the scriptural injunction to behave toward other Christians only in ways that build them up: “Make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Ro 14:19). I lead worship in a church where emotional expression is rather free. At different points on any given Sunday you will find people clapping, dancing, bowing down, crying, or singing energetically. In such a context, if I am motivated by the kindness of God in sending his Son to redeem me, it wouldn’t be out of place for me to lift my hands as an expression of gratefulness and surrender. However, if I’m worshipping God among a group of people who come from a less expressive tradition, I will exercise self-control and seek to respond emotionally to God without distracting others. My understanding is that in showing love to my brother, I am showing love to God.

Finally, we should avoid pitting the proclamation of truth against an emotional response to that truth. God desires both. Our knowledge of God and his grace is meant to inspire a greater passion for him. Likewise, the experience of joy as we worship God provokes a thirst to know him better.

It should be obvious that not everyone will be affected in the same ways, nor will one person always respond emotionally to the same degree. But we must not let the fear of man, wrong teaching, or complacency keep us from loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. For the wonders of creation, for the miracle of the new birth, for the sacrifice of his only Son in our place, for the peace of his sovereign care, for the blessing of his Word—for all these and infinitely more, God deserves our highest, purest, strongest emotions.