

Letters, Questions, and Answers

Bob Kauflin¹

Displays of Emotion in Worship

The *Worship Matters* column began in 1999 at the request of a friend who felt it might be worthwhile for me to write a weekly column on issues related to worship. (I can only hope he was right.) In these columns I've sought to address musical, theological, and practical issues in a way that would serve worship leaders, worship team members, and anyone interested in the topic of worshipping God. I'm far from having everything worked out, but I hope my musings will inspire biblical study and a greater passion for our matchless Savior.

Recently I received an email asking me to address a specific topic. Below, we've reprinted (with minor edits) the question I received, along with my response.

Q: I have attended worship services at different churches, and when the music starts to play (and before any lyrics are sung) the people start hooting, and yelling, and yelping, and clapping, and jumping, and carrying on as though they were in a secular rock concert. It appears that this is just a fleshly, carnal response to music, and not any sort of spiritual worship.

I just don't get it. Am I missing something? Why are these people acting like godless teens at a rock concert? Could you please explain this phenomena to me?

Thanks in advance!

Your fellow pilgrim to a world of glory!

Jeff S., CT

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¹ Bob Kauflin is director of worship development for Sovereign Grace Ministries. Bob also writes on worship at his blog, *Worship Matters* (www.WorshipMatters.com).

A: Dear Jeff,

Thanks for voicing a legitimate question. The following would be my “read” on the situation you describe.

First of all, I want to be very hesitant to ascribe heart motives to someone based on external actions, since such actions can mean different things for different people. Someone whooping and hollering may be enthusiastic about the immediate opportunity to worship God in spirit and truth with God’s people. God is great and he has done awesome things! Psalm 47:1 describes an appropriate response: “Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!” However, someone else might be jumping up and down because they like the beat. Someone else might be responding to a culturally learned stimulus (“When the band cranks up, that’s my cue to go crazy”).

What’s happening? I don’t think we can give a definitive answer. However, I also don’t think we ought simply to leave it there. If I’m visiting such a church, I want to be quick to display charitable judgments and assume the best. On the other hand, if I’m responsible for such a meeting, it’s my obligation to make sure I do all I can to ensure that people are responding to objective truth and not simply to the musical expression itself. One way to do that is to sing songs that are theologically deep and biblically faithful. Another way is to focus people’s thoughts on biblical truth before worship and between songs. You can also make sure that corporate worship doesn’t always begin with a loud, energetic song. As we focus people on biblical truths about God and what he has done, I’ve found that emotional responses flow naturally and appropriately.

It would also help to know more about the theological diet and practice of a church before attempting to draw a conclusion in this area. If the songs they sing are generally lyrically shallow but musically strong, I’d say there’s a greater chance people are merely responding to the environment, and perhaps there’s not very much genuine worship taking place. However, if a church consistently sings songs with strongly God-centered, Christ-exalting lyrics, and the preaching is consistently exegetical and God-glorifying, I’d be much less prone to say that the congregation’s enthusiasm is connected in any meaningful way to secular rock concerts. As Jonathan Edwards, John Piper, and others have pointed out, it’s not the emotions themselves that determine their spiritual nature, but the motive and object underlying them.

Letters: Commercialization of Worship

Q: I’m struggling with what seems to be “commercialization” of worship music. Don’t get me wrong, I love the Lord, I love to worship, and I love the music that’s out there. But it seems to me that we’ve

“commercialized” worship music. The ads are on TV and everywhere. At what point do we stop being like the “world”? I myself lead worship and write music. I also use the resources that are available i.e., Hosanna, Vineyard, Song Discovery and WOW. It’s so nice to have the availability of so much music at our fingertips, and at the same time I’m wondering if we’ve gone too far in the “commercial” side of it. NO WAY am I trying to be critical.

A: I appreciate the humility that lies behind your thoughts. I think your questions are good ones, and very relevant for the current season we find ourselves in.

By itself, the popularity and accessibility of worship music—or the fact that Christians are using available resources to get the message out—are not necessarily signs that we are becoming like the world. Many, if not most, well-known modern worship songwriters are seeking to serve their local churches, not the marketplace.

I had the opportunity to attend the recent Gospel Music Association (GMA) convention in Nashville. While commercialization of worship music is alive and well, there were some encouraging signs. The entire body of Christ is benefiting from the outpouring of new songs and the emergence of new worship leaders. People who have attended GMA for years remarked how artists now seem less impressed with themselves, and genuinely intent on giving God glory. The current emphasis on songs for worship may have something to do with it. As one observer said, “It’s difficult to be an arrogant worshiper.”

At the same time, there are concerns. One artist after another seems to be jumping on the “worship bandwagon.” Michael W. Smith acknowledged with amazement that his recent CD, simply entitled “Worship,” is the fastest-selling CD he’s ever recorded. Who wants to argue with that kind of success? “Worship artist” has become a familiar label, and almost everyone is looking for “vertical songs” to fill out their sets or CDs. What’s going on? Do artists have a newfound passion to sing God’s praises? I think in many cases the answer is a resounding yes. But some may sing a different tune when “worship music” is no longer a hot commodity. It probably won’t be too long before the Christian music industry deems “worship” to be passé, as some other emphasis rushes in to fill the market’s insatiable desire for something new, fresh, and “now.”

I’m reminded of the parable Jesus told in Matthew 13 of the wheat and the tares. Evil grows up right alongside good. The modern worship industry is not perfectly righteous or completely evil. It’s a mixture. Some people are motivated by financial gain and want a slice of the pie. Others are continuing to do what they’ve always done—direct people’s hearts and minds toward the glory of God and the cross of Christ.

Let's not be too hasty with generalizations that claim all or none of this is of God. We can appreciate the favor worship music is currently enjoying, without idolizing the movement.

One thing's for sure: the "worship industry" may come and go, but the worship of Jesus Christ by his Church will last forever.

Letters: Lack of Expressiveness in Worship

Q: I am 17 and attend a Presbyterian Church. For the most part, outward worship isn't so much used as in other, more charismatic churches... This is where I'm confused. I've been to other churches, ones that DO jump around and whoop and holler, and for the most part I don't particularly doubt their sincerity... I don't understand why worship happens in one place a certain way and in another fashion in another. I know that a good deal of it has to do with what that particular church believes, but why does God send his Holy Spirit in one way to such and such a place, according to what people think?... I've prayed and asked for God to tell me what is and isn't appropriate in worship, to make my heart not concerned about what I look like to others or to search for empty praise from man, but let my heart be one after God's own heart. And still, with the change of atmosphere, so goes the change of my worship.

A: I recently answered another reader who was concerned about churches that "whoop and holler." It seems you carry the opposite concern—Christians that aren't expressive in their worship.

The Bible implies that worship is basically this: all I know of me rightly responding to all God has shown me of himself. So, in the broadest sense, worship involves all of life, reflected in the things we say, do, think, and desire. In the narrow sense, worship is made up of our individual and corporate expressions that reflect the infinite worth of God. We declare his praise. We proclaim his works. We extol his mercy. We remember his promises. The Bible spells out various forms those expressions can take. These include clapping, standing, singing, praying, kneeling, lifting hands, bowing down, dancing, etc. No one form is commanded all the time, or for every occasion.

Jesus says in John 4 that the Father seeks those who worship him in spirit and truth. That means at least two things. God desires our worship to be an internal reality, and not mere form. He also requires that our thoughts about him be based in the truth of Scripture, and not a product of our imaginations or preferences.

The fact is, it's not always clear from the outside whether someone is worshiping God or not. There have been times when, outwardly, my worship has appeared very expressive, yet my thoughts were dominated by what I might be having for lunch! Other times, I've sat quietly in a coffee shop, overwhelmed by God's mercy extended to me through the cross, yet so inexpressive that bystanders might think I was dozing off.

We never want to judge members of our church who don't exhibit the enthusiasm we do, nor assume they're disobeying the Holy Spirit. There are numerous reasons people don't clap in a service. It may be out of respect for others. It may be out of a desire to fit in or look "cool." It may be out of ignorance of scriptural example and commands. The point is, our emphasis on form should be secondary. Clearly exalting and declaring God's nature and actions should be primary.

In talking to those who are less expressive than I am in corporate worship, I encourage them to ask if there's any biblical form of worship they never exhibit. If so, they're neglecting an aspect of their relationship with God. In other words, I may not always lift my hands to express praise to God, but there should be some times when I do. I also have found that the more often I express praise to God in a scriptural way, the more natural it becomes.

I pray that God will give you patience and much joy as you continue to worship him with all your heart.

Letters: Intergenerational Worship (Part 1)

Q: How do you effectively lead an intergenerational body into meaningful worship? We have approximately 175 people, age 0 to 90. This church has been in existence for about 80 years, and many of the people have been here for 40+ years. We are striving to reach all ages, and have gone from a "traditional" worship style to more of a "contemporary" style. While most of the 40-and-under crowd love the praise choruses, they do not want to abandon hymns. Most of the older generation would love to focus only on hymns, keep a traditional choir, etc.

Those over 50:

- 1. Don't want to stand so long, but don't feel comfortable sitting if there are still many standing while we sing.*

2. *Don't like the fact that many of the choruses are repeated over and over (we have tried to cut down the repetition to two times through).*

The younger generation:

1. *Wants more music time in the worship service.*
2. *Feels that a choir is more of an "entertainment" package than a group of people leading us to the Throne.*
3. *Wants freedom in worship to stand or sit, as the Spirit leads.*

We are just beginning an in-depth study of the Scriptures on what the purpose of the Church is and how we will seek to fulfill that purpose, and we are fasting and praying as we begin this. As we go into our music time, my husband is talking a little about what true worship is, teaching that worship isn't about what we like or want to do but about being obedient to God.

I don't think this is a problem unique to our church. Splitting into two separate worship services isn't an option right now. We feel like that would just cause more of a division.

A: Especially since the 1970s, the questions of *what* to sing in church and *how* to sing it have caused congregations and pastors to reevaluate how God is to be worshiped on Sundays. How do we practically demonstrate the unity Christ made possible when we can't agree on musical styles?

You mentioned that doing two services isn't an option for you right now, and may deepen the division. I agree. I believe that when churches establish separate meetings to suit divergent musical preferences, in the long run it becomes counter-productive. Separating into groups of worshipers panders to our preferences and requires no heart change, consideration of others, or visible unity. It seems to disregard the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17:20–21, as well as Paul's prayer in Romans 15:5–6, "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

If our discussions of worship are dominated by issues of musical preferences, posture, repetition, and choirs, it's clear we lack a solid understanding of what God-honoring worship entails. Only as foundational misunderstandings about worship are adjusted will a church be able to experience what it means to be a worshiping community.

This is an important topic, and one that congregations will struggle with for years to come. Next time, I'll suggest four truths in which a church must be grounded in order to strengthen our unity amidst a diversity of generations and cultures.

Letters: Intergenerational Worship (Part 2)

I began answering a letter about a church with members of all ages...a church that has shifted from a more traditional musical approach to worship, to a more contemporary approach...a church that is having some trouble maintaining unity of spirit and purpose when it comes to styles of worship music. I also, very briefly, presented a case against establishing separate worship services that cater to differing musical styles.

Let me suggest four truths in which a church must be grounded in order to strengthen our unity amidst a diversity of generations and cultures.

First, we must emphasize the gospel—Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died according to the Scriptures and was raised to life on the third day. Author Jerry Bridges says we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day. Why? Because it is the gospel alone that makes us acceptable before God, and assures us of his favor (Heb 10:19–22). A firm foundation in the gospel produces a humble, grateful, secure people.

Second, we must diligently highlight the Word of God in our songs and in our worship of God. Churches often argue about musical preferences because there is so little objective biblical content in the songs they sing. Hymns are preferred more for sentimental reasons than God-glorifying ones. Repetition of choruses is driven by musical groove and emotional highs rather than scriptural truth. One indispensable element of corporate worship is faith, and faith is a response to God's Word (Ro 10:17). Author Harold Best says, "Discerning worship leaders must sense that when familiarity begins to turn into conditioned reflex, or the right worship atmosphere cannot be achieved unless certain music is used, they are responsible to correct the worshipers and lead them back into the way of faith." That way of faith is a response to the preaching, teaching, and singing of God's Word.

Third, we must teach our churches that true unity springs from our union with Christ, and is not rooted in common races, generations, or cultures. There is no longer Greek or Jew, slave or free, traditionalists or modernists. When we look to anything other than the gospel of Jesus Christ as the basis for our unity, we are no longer worshiping God in spirit and truth. This doesn't mean we only use musical styles that no one likes, or that we have to use every conceivable style and form to please everyone. But it does mean that the lyrical subject matter of a piece of worship music is far more important than the musical

style through which it is expressed. When we understand what worship is supposed to be, style becomes less important—content and focus become primary. Then, we can use different cultural styles without idolizing any of them. This has the added benefit of enabling people to respond to truth in many forms and styles.

Finally, it should be clear to congregations that “worship” is about all of life, not just a meeting. Hebrews 13:15–16 combines both aspects of worship. “Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” When we gather together each Sunday, we remember the truths that have been motivating us since the previous meeting. Our aim is to proclaim, cherish, and respond to truth, not simply to hear and sing music that appeals to us (although there’s nothing wrong with liking the music we use on Sundays, either).

In the end, musical styles and preferences are secondary. A commitment to God’s glory is primary. If you find your church struggling with these issues, I hope these thoughts will bring some light to the path that lies ahead. May God give much grace and wisdom to those who teach and lead worship in your church, as they seek to lead your congregation into a way of life that truly exalts our Savior, who is worthy of all honor.