

“Clapping in Church”

Dear Antwort Mann,

I recently visited another Lutheran church. At different times during the Service they had a choir, a soloist and someone play the flute. After each one “did their thing,” the congregation clapped for them. I thought it was kind of nice. How come other churches, including mine, don’t do that?

Signed,

“Clapper,”

Dear “Clapper,”

I am assuming you are speaking about the issue of clapping during the Divine Service, rather than during a children’s program or concert at church. There is a difference. It does need to be stated at the outset, though, that whether or not a congregation chooses to clap for “performers” during the Service, it is ultimately a matter of Christian liberty since the Scriptures don’t speak directly to the issue. But the practice does bring up some knotty questions.

What is the purpose for music in the Divine Service? Is it an aid for the congregation in its worship of the Triune God, or is it a “performance,” like a concert, whereby one then expresses their approval to the musician by clapping? Does clapping for musicians change the focus of those who gather in worship? Does the practice add to, or detract from the dignity of worship? Whose feelings will get hurt because they didn’t get applause or, at least, as much applause as someone else?

I’m going to step into a minefield here. When a congregation gets into the habit of clapping for various individuals and groups, it has moved from the primary focus of receiving Christ and His gifts - and returning to Him praise for those gifts - to receiving and focusing on the gifts of the performer that brings one pleasure, or make one feel a certain way. At that point, however unintentionally, the congregation has slipped into a form of idolatry! Now the one receiving attention and praise is not God, but some individual or group. Clapping during the Service is a modern innovation, and is evidence of an entertainment-saturated culture influencing the church.

But, there will be those who protest that we are simply making members who contribute to our worship feel appreciated for their service. Fine, but do so after the Service! Tell them your appreciation over coffee and donuts during Bible Class. While in worship, everything in the Service is geared (or should be) toward God, His Word, and His Sacraments.

Now, I’m not some heartless, old fuddy-duddy (Well, I *am*, but that’s beside the point!). I understand that when the little kids sing, we almost can’t help but clap for them, *they’re just so darn cute!* But when a congregation makes a regular practice of clapping, where does it stop? Do you clap for every individual or group that “performs?” What if the piece they do really stinks that day? And if you clap for the musicians, why not clap for the pastor, too? (“Way to go, Pastor! That was one great Collect you just prayed! Woo, Hoo!”). How about the ushers who did such a great job of taking up the offering? Or maybe we should clap for the acolyte who managed to light the candles correctly that day? Why is the service of a soloist, choir or instrumentalist more deserving of applause than someone else’s service during worship? See how this can become the devil’s playground for creating bad feelings, discord and dissension?

While we may be free to applaud during the Service (and, in some cases, appropriately so), it doesn't follow that the regular practice of clapping is appropriate in Christian worship (See St. Paul's comments in I Cor. 6:12). We are in danger, at a minimum, of unnecessarily cluttering up the Service and, at worst, making people the center of the worship rather than Christ and His gifts. The music employed in the Divine Service, and those who play/sing it is not for their glory, but the glory of Him who died for us and rose again: Jesus Christ.

"I will sing and make music to the LORD." Psalm 27:6

Best regards,

Der Antwort Mann