



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Praise the Lord
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you, and praise you name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable (Ps 145:1-3).

Last week we had our big Taste and See event here at Westminster. It was a wonderful time, celebrating all the ways God is doing great things in and through the church. Much of it happened downstairs with food and fellowship and all the displays and invitations to get involved, but worship was vibrant, too, and the music was especially good. The choir had a powerful anthem, Chris brought out the brass, Jim played beautifully on the organ, as he always does, and he ended with a jubilant postlude. It was a grand time, and the sheer exuberance of it made some people want to burst into praise and thanksgiving.

When the Spirit falls upon the church like that—and it happens rather frequently around here—the question always arises, what exactly do Presbyterians burst into? Do we applaud? Do we say “Amen”? Do we just sit quietly and keep all that joy bottled up inside? What do we do when the Spirit moves us in powerful ways? To clap or not to clap? That is the question. Or at least it’s part of the larger question: How do we really praise God together?

This is one of those areas where people have all sorts of opinions. Some of those opinions are pretty strong, and some of them are mutually exclusive, so not everyone’s preference can prevail. In some other contexts—politics comes to mind—people on opposite sides just dig in their heels and claim that their own views are the only ones possible for right-thinking people, and they charge others who see things differently with all kinds of foolishness and

evil intentions. The world often behaves that way, but this is the church. We don't do that here.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” Paul says. That “metamorphosis,” as he calls it in Greek, that transformation of the heart and mind, is the Holy Spirit’s work in each of us, to save and sanctify our souls. When people have different views on some things in church, we see it not as an occasion for self-righteous judgment but as a chance to practice a little charity.

There’s a great principle, at least as old as the Reformation, which says “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” It’s essential that we praise God, for reasons we’ll talk about in a minute. *How* exactly we praise God is not so essential. That can be different for different people, and it would be a sad irony if Christians conjured up conflict over the very means of praising God.

In some traditions, as in many African-American churches, the congregation joins in all through the service. They cheer the preacher on during the sermon, saying things like “That’s right” or “Amen,” by way of sharing in the message, and they add little acclamations to the pastor’s prayers. If they clap in church, it’s not because they’re applauding a performance; it’s because when the Spirit moves them, they think the obvious response is to say it out loud and show it. After all, the 47th psalm says “Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.”

There’s an opposite tradition, among the Quakers for example, where people might sit through an entire “meeting,” as they call their service, without anyone saying much of

anything. There's no sermon, no hymns, not much structure at all, except that everyone tries to listen to the Holy Spirit and seek the light of God's truth. If people feel moved to share a word, they do it, and if not, the Spirit still speaks quietly in the language of each individual heart.

So there is a whole continuum of ways for Christians to praise God, and Presbyterians and most "mainline" Protestants are somewhere in the middle. Traditionally, the service includes times for the congregation to participate—hymns, prayers, responsive readings, and sung responses like the Gloria and the Doxology—and times when the congregation mostly listens, as with sermons, pastoral prayers, and anthems. People whose sense of worship was formed in that tradition often feel that they praise God best with quiet reverence, except where the liturgy calls for them to participate. To those folks, clapping or speaking out loud feels disruptive or even disrespectful. When they object to clapping, it isn't just because they're the "frozen chosen," as some unkind critics claim. It's because they want to honor God in ways that seem to them most respectful.

In recent times some "mainline" and nondenominational churches have begun to clap during worship, and that raises questions for people with a more traditional perspective. For some, clapping in church is simply wrong; there's no need to discuss it, and they hope the minister will just tell everyone else to cut it out. Other people think that motivation matters, and they're willing to consider more demonstrative forms of praise if they really are about worshiping God.

If choirs and instrumentalists come to be seen like musicians at a concert, and the preacher starts to sound like an entertaining speaker at a lecture series, this hour on

Sunday begins to feel less like a congregation worshipping God and more like an audience applauding performers at a program. When that happens, the focus shifts from God to human beings, even though the whole point of worship is to be drawn out of ourselves and into the praise and love and service of God.

It's particularly tempting to lose sight of worship when children sing, especially young children. Little children are cute. They're adorable, and so they naturally draw attention to themselves. But when their singing, or anything else they do in the service, becomes an occasion for adoring them instead of adoring God, and we applaud and praise them for their performance, we're teaching them exactly the opposite of what they ought to be learning about worship. We're teaching them that even *this* is all about them, when what they need to learn most of all is that life in general, and especially our gathering for worship, is about looking beyond ourselves and learning to love and honor and trust in God.

People often ask what I think about all of this, so here is my opinion. My own view is that motivation makes all the difference. If something moves us to praise God out loud, it seems only natural to do that. The psalms are full of exhortations to praise God, and make a joyful noise to the Lord. I can't imagine that God objects to people being filled with joy in loving him and wanting to express it.

It seems to me that we should not applaud people during worship for their performance, and especially not children who are just learning what worship is, because worship should always be focused on God. At the same time, precisely because worship is all about God, if people are moved to praise the Lord out loud, why not rejoice with them and be glad that their heart has been so deeply

touched? Each of us then would be free to praise God in our own way, out loud or quietly as the Spirit moves us. And once again, in essentials there would be unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.

Having said all that, let's remind ourselves why we praise God in the first place. The 145th psalm alone gives us lots of reasons.

We praise God, first of all, because God is great, and his greatness is unsearchable. We praise human beings for their talents and accomplishments, and rightly so; but no human being can begin to compare with the glory and power and majesty of God. So we praise God because God is great.

We praise God, too, because God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We human beings are just the opposite: quick to anger and slow to forgive, gracious and merciful on occasion, but more often prone to judgment and condemnation. Yet God is always more willing to forgive than we are to confess our need of forgiveness, which makes God's grace all the more amazing. We praise God because God is gracious, even when we are not.

We praise God because God is faithful. Faithfulness is something we humans have to work hard to cultivate, and it's easy for us to slide into unfaithfulness, especially toward God. But God is always faithful. God holds up those who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down, even by the weight of their own sins and shortcomings. We praise God because God is faithful.

We praise God because God is just in all his ways,

and kind in all his doings. We often bend our notions of justice to suit our own interests, and we're tempted to let our occasional acts of kindness take the place of a deep commitment to justice for all people. But God is just, and God's day of reckoning will come sooner or later. In the meantime, God's kindness is such that we receive far more blessings than we could ever deserve, and so we praise God for his kindness as well as for his justice.

We praise God because God is near to all who call on him. God hears their cry, and saves them, and in the end God fulfills the deepest desires of all who love him. Those who know God well know that this is true. They thank God for all good things, because every good thing comes ultimately as a gift from God. Over time they learn to trust God, until their faith is no longer in the gifts but in the Giver, so that when hard times come they still have faith in the God they have come to know and love. People of deep faith praise God *for* all good things and *in* all bad things, knowing that God's gifts of courage and comfort and peace and strength come most powerfully to us when we need them the most.

So praise the Lord then, all you who know the Lord, and all who are coming to know him. Praise God now, and until that time when, as the psalmist says, "My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever."



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