

Clapping in Church

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Clapping during church services is becoming more and more popular in many of our churches. So your church is not unique in this respect. Clapping is mentioned in the Bible as an expression of social and religious feelings. The ideas associated with this gesture are not always the ones we associate it with in our culture.

Four Hebrew verbs are used to express the action of clapping (*macha'*, *nakah*, *saphak*, *taqa'*), and all of them contain, as would be expected, the idea of striking something or someone. They are used in conjunction with the noun "hand" (Heb. *kaf*) to communicate the action of clapping ("striking the hands"). The phrase is used in several different ways.

1. It is an expression of joy at the ascension of the king: This a social function of the gesture. When Joash was introduced as the legitimate heir to the throne those who were present clapped their hands and shouted, "Long live the king!" (2 Kgs. 11:2). A religious usage is found in Ps. 47:1 where the psalmist invites all peoples to clap their hands because the Lord is being proclaimed as King over the earth. In Ps 98:8 the people are exhorted to praise the Lord and the hills to clap their hands because the Lord is coming as King and Judge of the earth. Even nature should rejoice before the Lord.

2. It is an expression of joy on account of God's saving actions: The return of the people of God from their captivity in Babylon is described by Isaiah as an act of redemption. What the Lord will do for His exiled people is so wonderful and glorious that even nature will rejoice. In this context the prophet personifies the trees of the field and describes them as clapping their hands as a gesture of joy (Isa. 55:12).

3. It is an expression of disgust and anger: Balak was angry because Balaam blessed the

people of Israel instead of cursing them and he showed this emotion by clapping his hands (Num. 24:10). Ezekiel clapped his hands in disgust after seen the evil practiced in Judah (6:11). The Lord clapped his hands in anger and disgust as a reaction to dishonest gain and to the blood spilled out by His people in Jerusalem (22:13; 21:14, 17). This is a symbolic action on God's part that is followed by His judgment against unrepentant sinners.

4. *It is an expression of malicious glee:* This meaning is found exclusively in the context of defeated enemies. In the prophecy against Nineveh God announces that all those who will hear about it will clap their hands over the city and its misfortune (Nah. 3:19). The Ammonites clapped their hands and rejoiced with malice against Israel when it was being destroyed by the Babylonians (Ezek. 25:6). It is this same contempt and hostility that those passing by the ruins of Jerusalem expressed by clapping their hands (Lam. 2:15). This hand gesture was indeed a sign of hostility and derision.

There is no clear evidence that this gesture was part of the worship service in the Old and New Testaments. In fact, I did not find the phrase in the New Testament. Therefore, there does not seem to be any biblical parallel to what is taking place in our churches today. You may ask me, Why we do it? I am not sure there is an answer. I *suspect* that we incorporated clapping into our services from our cultural environment. Clapping is usually associated with the entertainment industry but has become very popular in evangelical televised religious services. Perhaps we copied it from them.

Leaving aside the issue of cultural influence, I suppose that what really matters is that each person be fully aware of the reasons why he or she claps in church. Motivation becomes extremely important in this context. Is it an expression of joy in the Lord and His saving power? Is it only a physical expression or a substitute for what used to be the audible "Amen! "? Or is it a recognition of the good performance of the singer or the preacher?

This time, as you can see, I have more questions than answers!