

The Role of Emotions in Worship - Austin stone

Music has the inherent ability to tap into our emotions. A sick beat or a beautiful melody can mysteriously draw otherwise dormant emotions to the surface. We all know what it feels like to climb into our car, turn up the radio, and feel a surge of emotion when our favorite song comes on.

[Worship leaders leverage their skills of music to surface emotions in order to knit them together with God's truth.](#) It's a training ground for our emotions to be properly aligned with what God says is good and right. But this kind of role for the worship leader didn't always exist.

In the garden, before sin darkened the scene, our emotions perfectly aligned with truth. No reconciliation or training was necessary. We were perfectly connected to God and felt toward Him exactly what we were designed to feel. But then Adam and Eve bit into a lie. Believing the lie that God was holding out on them produced a new feeling that guided Adam and Eve into betrayal. Their emotions, once perfectly aligned and guiding them into fellowship with God, now deceived them.

Since Adam and Eve, our emotions have become unfaithful and deceptive guides. We have lived with conflicting emotions, feeling they inform us of what is right, yet we daily experience the consequences of following our feelings.

Although deceptive guides, our emotions are gifted at helping us understand the present and helping us interpret what we experience. Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane is perhaps the best picture of our current relationship with emotions.

Let's step into the garden of Gethsemane with Jesus. As we kneel beside Jesus in the garden we find Him praying that the Father would provide a way other than the way of the cross. We see drops of sweat and blood cascading down His face as He pleads three times for another way. We feel His disappointment as He finds His disciples sleeping instead of praying. Finally, Jesus rises. Sweat-soaked and weary, He takes determined steps toward His betrayers and the cross.

What happened in this moment? What did Jesus feel? It seems that Jesus felt anxiety. If anxiety is simply defined as looking at what is ahead and feeling that it is overwhelming, then perhaps there was no more appropriate time in human history to have experienced anxiety. Jesus knew what the cross meant. Death. Separation from the Father. Bearing the weight of all the sin of the world.

Jesus's body and emotions painfully, yet accurately, told Him that moving forward would be overwhelming. But what did Jesus do? Though the feeling of anxiety accurately indicated what would come, He didn't allow it to guide Him. The Father's will was His guide and He followed, even though anxiety begged Him otherwise. This is what it means to not be anxious. It is not the absence of the feeling of anxiety, but rather the refusal to allow anxiety to rule and direct you in

what to do next. Jesus's feeling of anxiety was truthful, but, instead of causing Him to run from the Father, it pushed Him deeper into relationship with God through prayer.

What does all of this have to do with leading worship? Scripture tells us that before Jesus's garden of Gethsemane moment He sang a hymn with His disciples (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26). Jesus worshiped before He wrestled in the garden. He was emotionally strengthened and prepared for what was coming by singing and aligning His emotions with God's truth.

In many ways I believe your job is much the same. You are preparing God's people for daily garden of Gethsemane moments—daily experiences of being tempted to follow their emotions instead of God's truth. You are combating emotions defined by earthbound experiences with songs that draw out godly emotions and pair them with God-revealed truths. Our ability to reject emotions as our guides in the dust of life is tied to experiencing and remembering how sweet it is to worship the Lord in truth.

[If you were Jesus's worship leader, what song would you have selected to prepare Him for the garden of Gethsemane?](#) What type of music and what instruments would you use? What truths would fill the lyrics?

A biblical and theological approach to worship...

The Role of Emotions in Worship - by Kevin Hester

Emotions are part of who and what we are. They provide assistance as we interact with our environment. They help us analyze situations and communicate with others. But unchecked emotions can confuse reality and destroy effective interaction with others. While our emotions must be tightly controlled, without them we will not get anywhere. Emotions drive us and encourage us to do what reason says we must do. You might be surprised to learn the Bible speaks frequently about our emotions.

Biblical Principles on Emotions

We were created as emotional beings, which means that emotional life is one of God's creations. In Genesis 2, Adam's disappointment with not finding a helpmate is almost palpable, and we get a sense of overwhelming joy when he wakes from sleep and exclaims, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." It is for this reason that man was to "hold fast" to his wife.

Emotions Are Good. Since human emotions are an aspect of God's creation, they are good. Only after creating humanity did God look at all He had made and pronounce it very good. However, even good things can provide an avenue for sin when unchecked. The fall clearly impacted our interaction with our emotions, for in Genesis 4 we read the account of Cain's anger at his brother. This marks Scripture's beginning discussion of the human struggle with emotions. Sometimes they are inappropriate, as in the case of Cain's anger, but other times they are appropriate, as demonstrated by Cain's sorrow and fear in the face of judgment. Our task is to reason between the two.

Emotions Reveal Aspects of God and His Nature. There has been a great deal of theological discussion whether God feels emotively. Early theologians said no, arguing that for God to experience emotion would imply change. They argued that whatever constitutes the image of God in the human person certainly does not include emotion.

But if we stop there, we miss something important. Whether God experiences emotion or not, Scripture often chooses emotional terminology to reveal some aspect of God's character. For example, in Genesis 6:16 "the Lord grieved in his heart that he had made man." In Psalm 2 and Psalm 37, God laughs at the wicked; and in Numbers, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah we read of the Lord's anger burning against His people. The fact that Scripture uses such images to convey truth means our emotions are an avenue to understand aspects of God's character.

Emotions Must Be Controlled. No matter what we say about our emotions, it is clear they must be controlled. Though emotional creatures, we are not simply emotional; we also have will and intellect. These aspects must work together appropriately if we are to honor God. Mind, will, and emotions are interdependent. Emotions provide the mind with data for analysis and judgment; intellect provides emotions with direction and perspective. Ephesians 4:26 commands Christians to be angry but cautions us to avoid sin in our anger. The two imperatives demonstrate the constant mental wrestling with emotions.

Emotional Beings in Worship

Created to Worship. We were not only created emotional beings, we were also created for worship. The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers the question "what is the chief end of man?" with the dictum "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." In order for us to understand how best to make use of our emotions in worship, we must first understand worship.

Meaning of Worship. Two biblical words are translated worship in most English translations. The first refers to bowing before God and indicates recognition of His glory and authority. This tells us worship is about God and what I bring to Him. Worship must be God-centered. Worship is never about me. Worship is not about how I feel or what I get out of the service, but how I honor God in the service.

The second term indicates the service and ministry we offer to Him, and reminds us that worship must be active. There are no spectators in worship. Worship is not entertainment but a spiritual exercise before God.

Context of Worship. God commands the Church to worship, and worship is vital for the spiritual health of believers. Consider Hebrews 10: 24-25 in this regard. “And let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, not staying away from our meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

Purpose of Worship. The primary purpose of worship is to glorify God and express our love and thanksgiving for His redemption. This love should be extended horizontally as well as vertically. Corporate worship allows us to demonstrate love to one another, edify, and encourage one another in the Christian life. Worship both honors God and encourages and edifies fellow believers. Paul reminds us that when this is done correctly, in the right attitude, unbelievers will recognize God in the midst of His people, humble themselves before Him, and join us in worship.

Principle of Worship. If the primary purpose of worship is to glorify God, it follows that we glorify Him best when we worship Him the way He has commanded. God is not always pleased with our worship. Remember Cain’s offering that was unacceptable to God? Nadab and Abihu were consumed by fire for offering worship that God had not commanded. Ananias and Saphira were struck dead because they lied about their offering to the early Church. When writing to the Corinthians regarding their celebration of the Lord’s Supper, Paul pointed out that many of them were weak and sick and some had died because they had acted inappropriately.

In contrast, God is pleased when we worship according to His commands. As Scottish reformer John Knox said, "All worshipping, honoring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without His own express commandment, is idolatry." The Reformed tradition refers to this as the regulative principle. Only those things commanded by God in Scripture are appropriate in worship. Our task is to ask the Scriptures what God wants us to do in worship. At the same time, there is room for human thought in determining what pleasing worship is, just so long as that thought is in accordance with God’s Word.

Biblical Principles Relating to Emotion in Worship.

Called to Worship God with Heart, Mind, and Soul. The first and most basic principle of worship is that we should do it, and we should engage in worship with all we are and all we have. At least four times in Scripture, we are reminded to love God with all our hearts, our minds, and our souls. In each place, the directive occurs within context of worship. We are not simply allowed to engage our emotions in worship, we are called to do it. Each constituent

aspect of our being was designed for and is properly used in the worship of God. To worship God with our mind alone, our emotions alone, or our bodies alone is an abortive act that dishonors the One who so fearfully and wonderfully made us.

All Things Done Decently and in Order. At the same time, we are not allowed to give emotions free reign. Paul addressed a similar situation in 1 Corinthians 14, reminding us that God is a God of peace and order, and our worship services should reflect this. He reminds us it is only as we worship through our spirits and minds that we honor God. As we pray, sing, and proclaim God's Word, our emotions and minds are to be fully engaged.

It is only in this way that the unbeliever will recognize God's presence and be called to believe and worship with us. To do otherwise is to edify only ourselves, which is at worst idolatry and at best a forfeiture of one of the basic principles of corporate worship. By doing so, we may endanger not only our spiritual health but our lives as well (See I Corinthians 11:30).

Christian Liberty in Worship. Another reason we are not allowed unrestricted emotional release is the principle of Christian liberty. Christian liberty is less about what I get to do and more about what I could do but choose not to do because of my love and concern for others. To insist upon certain forms of emotional expression in a way that binds the consciences of other believers disobeys and disregards God's Word. In the gospel age, God alone has authority to bind our lives and worship.

This is what is meant by the regulative principle. This (and the fact that the purpose of worship is to honor God and edify our brothers and sisters in Christ) is why we should heed the advice of the apostle: All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good but the good of his neighbor.

Intentional Manipulation of Emotion in Worship Damages the Gospel. True worship is authentic worship, and any attempt at manipulation is not only contrary to Scripture but demeans the gospel. Paul made this point in 1 Thessalonians 2, when he reminded the church at Thessalonica that he presented the gospel to them without deception, flattery, or pretense, but out of love. He spoke to please God and not man. Whether singing the same lines over and over, or building terror in hearers during the invitation, artificial manipulation of emotions cannot be reconciled with Paul's image of a mother tenderly caring for her child.

Six Misconceptions Regarding Emotion in Worship

1. If You "Feel" Anything in Worship, It Is Fleshly and of the Devil. If you feel something in worship, it may be 'fleshly', but we are called to use all aspects of our nature to worship God. Emotions are not of the devil. God made them. That is not to say they cannot be used inappropriately. We have seen that they can, but when emotions are authentic, directed toward God, and manifest themselves in congruence with the regulative principle, God is honored by

them.

2. If I Don't Walk Away from Worship Feeling Good, I Haven't Worshiped. This concept is wrong on two counts. First, it demonstrates a level of individualism inconsistent with corporate worship. Worship is our service to God, not His service to us. Any benefit we receive from worship is a by-product and not the end goal. Second, whether or not I walk away from worship feeling good misses the point. Authentic, active, emotional worship only means that I will leave a worship service feeling.

There are many appropriate emotions for worship. Joy is certainly one, but there are others: reverence in the presence of our Creator and Redeemer; sorrow for sin and fear of our Judge; love for God and for one another; peace in our reconciliation, and anticipation of God's promises fulfilled. Engaging emotions in worship means feeling, not necessarily feeling good.

3. Display of Emotion in Worship Is Most Appropriate While Singing. Something about music speaks to us on a visceral level, drawing forth a deep emotional response. Our emotions, coupled with our minds and wills, ought to be engaged by singing, but sometimes it seems as though many people flip the switch to off when the pastor stands to preach, as people pray or as the offering plate is passed.

We are called to fully engage all aspects of our being in all parts of the divinely instituted worship service. Emotions are not just appropriate in singing. After all, Scripture speaks of "cheerful giving," of crying out with our emotions in prayer, and directs us with thanksgiving to make requests before God. The Bible is replete with emotional responses to hearing the Word of God, including: fear, joy, and thanksgiving.

4. Emotions Are Just About Feelings I Get and Not What I Do. Emotions are expressions of our hearts, but mere emotion without will and action is simply tinkling brass or a clanging gong. Notice James' instruction on worship. He asks in 5:13, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone among you cheerful? Let him sing praise." Notice the way James equates feeling with doing. Both he and Paul point out that emotions should motivate us to action in worshiping and praising God. The actions discussed here are, as all legitimate worship, directed toward God. These acts of emotional worship are not for self but for God, and in their viewing, for the edification of all believers. There is no room for individualism in corporate worship.

5. All Emotional Expression of Worship Across the World Will Be Homogenous. While all people experience emotions, expressions of emotion are often culturally driven. While the regulative principle outlines the content and context of worship with norms that are universal, we must realize that application of these principles may sometimes have a different tone or feel. All Christian worship services should have the same elements, but the expression of these elements may differ.

The binding principle here is that all cultures must honor God in a way that is decent, orderly, and peaceful. Unbelievers from that culture who happen upon the service should find nothing there that seems out of place or irreverent. No emotional expression that draws the focus away from God or His message of redemption is ever appropriate.

6. If That Person Were Really Worshiping, He Would Cry, Shout, Smile, Raise His Hands Like Me. Although all persons experience emotions, not all experience or display emotions the same way. Some of this is associated with culture and some with upbringing. Some emotions are difficult to detect. Our role in worship is to actively engage and not to judge others for appearances that may or may not be indicative of their hearts.

We must not bind the consciences of others by our own perceptions and experiences. Jesus condemned a judgmental character that defines spirituality by “what is or is not done” in the Sermon on the Mount. The principle of Christian liberty demands us to extend grace and acceptance to all brothers and sisters in Christ.

Conclusion

In the midst of today’s clamorous and discordant worship debates, consider a few clear points. God created us—emotions and all—with no greater purpose than to worship Him. Let us love and serve Him with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls, all our strength. Stop looking around in worship and start looking to God. It is not about us. It is about Him.