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Worship and Human Emotion

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Syd Hielema
Redeemer University

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Calvin Symposium on Worship 2011
Syd Hielemma Workshop B16
Worship and Human Emotion

1. We all have significant memories concerning worship and emotion.

2. Both the Christian faith and Western culture operate with strong (and contradictory) assumptions about the role and character of emotion.

3. Emotions are “creatures;” it’s helpful to understand them in terms of God’s work of creation and redemption (in response to the fall).
 - Part of our being fearfully and wonderfully made
 - Wired within us in different ways
 - Our emotions are wounded by both original sin and “life.”
 - They have been redeemed and are being sanctified

4. In light of the above, we can suggest guidelines for a healthy relationship between worship and emotion.
 - Emotional honesty (in tension with ‘emotional maturation’)
 - Respect for all principal ways emotions are wired within humans
 - Emotions are distinct from sentimentality and virtues
 - Through worship, emotions are (a) expressed, (b) transformed, and (c) disciplined.
 - There is a healing tension between personal and corporate emotion
 - Our emotions participate in our sanctification; they also ‘mature in Christ’ as we (a) overcome fear, (b) recognize how they respond to perception, (c) experience their breadth and depth

5. Different worship contexts have different emotional capacities

<i>Setting</i>	<i>Types of emotional capacity</i>
Solitude, personal worship	A time that is strictly between us and the Lord, we are free to release our emotions in any way that we wish.
Small group worship	If the group ethos invites honest transparency, we are free to share joys and sorrows and have others understand and walk alongside. “Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.”
Congregational worship	Worship invites emotional integrity and richness, but cannot take each individual into account. It seeks to create a space that is faithful, inviting and real, a communal steadiness from week to week.
Festival worship: conferences, retreats, temporary large group settings.	Often involves an element of providing inspiration and encouragement; allows participants to release hungers and experiences that have been ignored in the “weekly grind” of life, provides a type of release, re-visioning, shared joys and struggles, often includes an element of a “spiritual high.” Participating with many strangers enhances the sense of freedom.

(For an article on this concept, use “Festival Envy Reformed Worship” on google.)

6. Guidelines for worship leaders

- Do not fear emotion. Providing a calm place where emotion can be expressed and experienced is a rich blessing.
- Be inconspicuously real. Leading worship in a way that is emotionally honest but does not draw attention to oneself creates space for emotional freedom and issues an invitation to the worshipers to express their own emotions in worship.
- Avoid any hint of emotional legalism.
- Never manipulate emotion; manipulation is always dehumanizing and flows from an anxious desire to control, not love. We are inviters.
- Recover the discipline of incorporating thoughtful and articulate testimony within worship in a variety of ways: within the sermon, very briefly while introducing a liturgical element, as a separate liturgical element. Stories are one of the strongest “containers” for emotions. (Cf. *Tell it like it is*, Lillian Daniel)
- Make space for the full range of human emotion; gently and briefly naming situations in an emotion-opening manner makes such space.
- Resist the temptation to produce spiritual highs.
- Provide opportunities for emotional maturation and stretching.

What are one or two steps that I/we can take to walk with our worshiping community to greater emotional maturity in worship?